

# Agentive Capacities, Democratic Possibilities, and the Urban Poor: Rethinking Recent Popular Protests in West Africa

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**Abstract** This article revolves around the role of the urban poor or the “informal proletariat” in popular political protests in West Africa. It critically surveys instructive accounts of their participation in the 1990s movement for democracy in Lagos, youth politics in Dakar, and a recent insightful analysis of popular uprisings in various parts of the continent in the 2000s. Various aspirations for change anchor these accounts. Against this backdrop, I turn to everyday life and politics in zones of urban informality and juxtapose it to a discussion of the acclaimed Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku’s street performance towards the end of the Occupy Nigeria movement as a generative figure of protest. The scripts in which we read dispositions of the informal proletariat, their protest actions, relationship to state and power, and hopes for the coming community are central here. At stake I believe is our own ability to grasp agentive democratic possibilities for the future, which the protests and Atiku’s performance illuminate.

**Keywords** Informal proletariat · Popular protest · Agency · Democratic possibilities · West Africa · Jelili Atiku

## Introduction

Six years ago, massive protests against authoritarian regimes in North Africa inaugurated a new era in the region; popular sovereignty was on display in spectacular ways that had many across the world transfixed. Since the early 2000s, large popular protests have also taken place in other parts of the African continent that is no stranger to mass action. Popular urban unrest in the late colonial period played an important part in ending colonial rule. Subsequently the late 1980s and 1990s saw protests that successfully challenged single-party governments and military states in

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many parts of Africa. More recently, between 2005 and 2014, big and small, localized as well as widespread demonstrations and rallies have occurred in approximately 40 African countries (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 67–70).

In some states such as Senegal and Burkina Faso, popular protests have led authoritarian leaders to give up power. Protesters in other places such as Guinea, Ethiopia, and Angola among others have questioned the legitimacy of obdurate regimes, their development goals, demanded better social services, infrastructure, and opposed fuel and food price increases. At a time when 40 % of the continent lives in urban areas (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 70), cities and peri-urban areas have become critical sites of this ferment. Lagos, the most populous city of the continent, and its residents are an important part of my analysis in this article.

Thousands gathered in Lagos' city streets and at the Gawe Fahinmi Park in the weeks following the withdrawal of state fuel subsidies on January 1, 2012. The park was christened as Freedom Square as homage to Cairo's Tahrir Square (Egbunike 2015: 10). Lagos thus found its own place in the African and global moment of mass uprisings. In a country where many essential aspects of everyday life—from the possibility of cooked food, to running a light bulb in the dark—are contingent on availability of fuel, the withdrawal of the subsidy led to a national strike and “one of the largest mass protests in the country's history” (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 87) under the banner of the “Occupy Nigeria movement.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed these protests were so intense and large that they threatened to bring down the national government.<sup>2</sup> However, internal differences among protesting groups and state action saw the demonstrations in Nigeria dissipate quickly. In other cities of the continent too, for instance in Kampala and Addis, protesters have come out in large numbers in recent years to demonstrate against economic deprivation and political alienation; but they too have faced grave state repression and de-mobilization.

Various specificities characterize the African urban context; at the same time today, cities such as Lagos and Kampala resemble not just Dakar, Addis, and Luanda but also Mumbai, Mexico City, and Sao Paolo. In many representations, as Ananya Roy notes, these cities and the “ubiquitous slum” have come to signify the Third Worldism of the global south (2011: 224). Such “slums” are home to large populations rendered “surplus” in the wake of the debt crisis of the 1970s, structural readjustment programs, and dismantling of state services in the 1980s in Africa and Latin America. They are also home to many who have in fact been made “redundant” where capitalist accumulation is concerned (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009: 45).

<sup>1</sup> The ground for this upsurge was laid in the months preceding the withdrawal of the state subsidy for fuel. Debates around the removal of the subsidy had been building up and it seemed imminent; protests too started to take shape. At this time, “Occupy Nigeria” movement as a convergence of dissenting youth and citizens' associations began emerging particularly on social media. The movement exhorted its followers to forsake docility, to react to the state of governance in the country (much like the North Africans had done recently), and be ready to move and “occupy” state installations. Once the subsidy was removed, popular upsurge marked by fierce participation of the informal proletariat I discuss below followed. A powerful coalition of pro-democracy associations such as the *Save Nigeria Group* and labor unions intensified the movement but the coalition was short-lived. See Akor (2014) and Branch and Mampilly (2015: 100–110).

<sup>2</sup> While academic scholarship on the Occupy Nigeria movement is scant documentaries such as *Chop Cassava: Documenting Nigeria's Fuel Subsidy Protests* archive its various moments in considerable detail. I would especially like to thank George Agbo for the insights and information about the movement he shared with me. Agbo analyzes the Occupy Nigeria movement in his ongoing doctoral project and thesis *Photography, Facebook and Virtualisation of Resistance in Nigeria* to be submitted to the Department of History, University of the Western Cape. On the role of social media in the movement also see Egbunike (2015) and Egbunike and Olorunnisola (2015).

The failure of growth based development models to deliver adequate employment has meant that large number of people who migrate from rural to urban areas in search of livelihood have filled the ranks of the “surplus population” and been compelled to take recourse to “informal survivalism” (Davis 2004: 24) and the fast growing informal economy. According to recent estimates the informal economy accounts for 72 % of non-agricultural employment in Africa (Meagher 2010b:14).<sup>3</sup> It might then be correct to say that many of the tens of thousands who marched in Lagos, other Nigerian cities, and their suburbs during the Occupy Nigeria protests belonged to this urban informal world. Here, we might find petty traders and artisans, as well as bus conductors, school drop outs working as touts, parking guards, and others who the Senegalese state, for instance, refers to as “social marginals” (Diouf 1996: 230), and the privileged Nigerian public describes as “miscreants” or “hoodlums” (Momoh 2003: 183).

### Informal Proletariat: Political Possibilities and Limits

The question of possibilities and limits haunts the world of informality in several accounts. Libertarians such as Hernando de Soto have celebrated urban informals as “heroic entrepreneurs” and the urban informal economy as “people’s economy” (cited in Ananya Roy 2011: 227). The opposite view emerges in many writings including the well-known urban theorist Mike Davis’ much read work, *Planet of Slums* (2004; 2006).<sup>4</sup> Here, apocryphal descriptions of the informal economy go hand in hand with bleak accounts of life in third-world cities. That said the considerable scholarship on historical trends and life in cities of the global south, which Davis mobilizes, also allows us to delineate the category of informal proletariat.

Drawing on William House’s work on Nairobi slums in the 1970s (1984) and Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman’s more recent assessment of structural adjustment programs in Latin American cities (2003), Davis distinguishes the various classes and social groups who make up the world of informality in cities of the global south. We meet, on the one hand, the informal petty bourgeois owners of small microenterprises and their world of precarious microaccumulation (2004: 24; 2006: 180) and, on the other hand, the informal proletariat. The informal proletariat, according to Davis, is not akin to the nineteenth century “labor reserve army” or Marx’s “lumpenproletariat” (2004: 22); growth patterns in many cities of the global south, which house the informal proletariat, do not approximate Marxian or Weberian visions of urbanization and industrialization (Davis 2004: 10). The possibility that their “surplus populations” may be incorporated into the world capitalist economy is, notes Davis, negligible. In Davis’ words therefore, informal proletariats may be seen as the “products of a true global residuum lacking the strategic economic power of socialized labor,

<sup>3</sup> Any serious consideration of the informal economy in Nigeria and West Africa more broadly would also have to turn to colonial and pre-colonial history of large-scale social networks that are at the heart of this economy. These networks were a part of indigenous business systems in the pre-colonial era; they were disrupted and subsequently informalized under colonial rule. Informal traders turned to manufacturing and small-scale informal manufacturing enterprises became an important part of this economy especially from the 1980s. It has flourished in some periods but has also been negatively impacted by global economic trends, restructuring policies, and state neglect. Kate Meagher’s body of work on this economy in Nigeria is especially helpful (2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b).

<sup>4</sup> See Roy 2011 for an insightful analysis of such accounts. In her work on the informal economy in Nigeria, Meagher notes how some accounts celebrate the vitality of its small-scale enterprises; others view them with considerable skepticism. Such enterprises then get read together with drug networks, internet, and other business frauds (2010: 5). See for instance the journalist Karl Maier’s 2000 book on Nigeria.

but massively concentrated in a shanty-town world encircling the fortified enclaves of the urban rich" (2004: 23).

While Davis does not dwell on the comparison between the lumpen and the informal proletariat, the contrast between them that he invokes calls for some elaboration. There is a small critical body of work that seeks to explicate the lumpenproletariat's complex place in Marx's oeuvre (Draper 1972, 1977; Hayes 1988; Hirst 1972; Mehlman 1977; Stallybrass 1990; Thoburn 2002); I believe more can be said about it especially in discussions on the place of heterogeneity and difference in Marx's understanding of class formation. For now, we might recall that according to Marx (1994), the lumpenproletariat are akin to a nebulous residue that settles at the bottom of the class order but is unable to recognize itself as a class (Draper 1972: 458). The lumpenproletariat cannot represent themselves, but must be represented (Barker 2009: 47).

As Davis reminds us, given the immense heterogeneity that characterizes the informal proletariat, some researchers might similarly question whether they can be regarded as an activist "class for itself" or even as a "class in itself." At the same time, writes Davis, "surely the informal proletariat bears 'radical chains' in the Marxist sense of having little or no vested interest in the preservation of the existing mode of production." They could, he suggests, be "incorporated into a global emancipatory project" (2004: 24). Davis thus does not cast the informal proletariat in the same pejorative light in which Marx and Engels (1989) viewed the lumpenproletariat; instead, he attributes critical political possibilities to them. Nevertheless, Davis also has his worries: he wonders if life in "megacities" would turn their informal proletariat into "pre-industrial urban mob(s) episodically explosive during consumption crises but, otherwise, easily managed by clientelism, populist spectacle and appeals to ethnic unity?" (2004: 24).

There are several assumptions, anxieties, ambivalences, and desires in this statement—about pre-industrial collectives, about the megacity, and about a global emancipatory project. Similar questions about potential for violence, clientlist relations, and identitarian projects, as well as emancipatory desires mark writings on the political role of the informal proletariat in West Africa that I examine. I do not seek to review that scholarship; instead, I weave selected writings together to analyze the contexts, tropes, and theories of emancipation, liberation, and democracy that enframe and inform their understanding of the protesters' political agency.<sup>5</sup> These contexts and narratives alert us to various political possibilities and violent limits of popular politics. At the same time, they lay the grounds for grasping another mode of imagining, enacting, and understanding protest.

I am referring to the performance by the acclaimed Nigerian performance artist, Jelili Atiku, who also marched in a market town near Lagos towards the end of the Occupy Nigeria movement (see Fig. 1). Atiku's demands, literally strung to his body, were akin to those of many others during the Occupy Nigeria protest; at the same time, Atiku's overburdened figure wrapped in cloth was distinct in compelling ways. In the first instance, his bound body and covered face was different from the common figure of the protester with raised arms, clenched fists, and excited or angry faces. Indeed, some social worlds in which Atiku, an internationally known middle-class

<sup>5</sup> See Laura Ahearn's comprehensive and perceptive review of the concept of agency that she broadly defines as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2010: 28). As the senior anthropologist Talal Asad has pointed out, the term's political iteration is especially associated with resistance, "history-making" and empowerment. Such associations that dominate public and academic discourse regard power as "external and repressive of the agent" that "subjects him or her" (2003). Agentive capacity is associated with overcoming power and opposing it. Drawing on Foucault's reading of power (1980: 138), Asad questions such understandings of agency and instead formulates an understanding that emphasizes the self's capacity to deploy power internally, remake oneself and hence its relationship to the outside world. This distinction will become particularly relevant in the latter part of this article. Also, see Saba Mahmood's work on religious piety and women in Egypt for an ethnographic elaboration of this understanding of agency (2005).



**Fig. 1** “Nigerian Fetish”: performance by Jelili, Ejigbo, Lagos State. January 13, 2012. © Jelili Atiku. Photograph: Tajudeen Busari

artist, moves are very disparate from those that large sections of the Nigerian population inhabit. At the same time, new political modalities and understandings of change open up when we read his performance alongside other protesting figures and histories of the urban poor’s participation in popular politics. We are thus offered another way of enacting the promise of change and an alternative script to understand and grasp the possibilities of protest politics.

In order to appreciate the relevance of this script, we need to examine it in the light of other significant protests and the role of the informal proletariat in the region. I begin my analysis with the Nigerian political scientist, Abubakar Momoh’s detailed study of the “Area Boys and Girls” of Lagos who played an important role during the 1990s Campaign for Democracy (CD) against the Nigerian military regime.

## Informal Proletariat, Campaigns for Democracy and Youth Politics

Area Boys and Girls belong to that urban “surplus” population whose members are often regarded as “miscreants,” “hoodlums,” and the “lumpen proletariat”; Momoh also describes them as the city’s “street parliamentarians” (2003: 183).<sup>6</sup> Drug use, petty crimes, and violence are a notable part of their lives, and Momoh acknowledges it. At the same time, he offers rigorous empirically grounded arguments that counter stigmatizing narratives surrounding the

<sup>6</sup> The category of Area Boys is usually associated with young men. At the same time, young women also participate in the life that various researchers describe. Indeed, Momoh tells us that young women and girls made up 32.1 % of the sample group of “Area Boys and girls” he and his colleagues studied (2003: 186). He describes their life trajectories and how they came to join the Area Boys. However, he only gives us a sketchy description of their life and activities, especially the nature of their political participation in popular politics. In his writing about the Area Boys, girls sometimes appear within parentheses or in small alphabets. The masculine nature of this world and the absence of a full-bodied account of the place of young women in it is thus signaled. I invoke this issue later in the article as well.

Area Boys and Girls. Facts, figures, and biographies that Momoh mobilizes show that the Area Boys and Girls are part of many of the same networks of livelihood and modes of survival, which are central to the lives of numerous other informal proletariats in the city.

The structural adjustment program and resulting lack of employment opportunities and deprivations contributed as much to the emergence of Area Boys and Girls in Lagos as it did to the rise of informality in Nigeria more broadly. Alongside these changes emerged an alienating class politics and ideology that reserved “contempt and tokenism” for many on the losing end of these adjustments (Momoh 2003: 188). These changes also demanded an authoritarian disposition from the state that became more and more militaristic. Rule by decree, detention without trial and extra-judicial killings became commonplace. It is in this militarized context that Momoh locates the Area Boys and Girls own recourse to violence (2003: 190).

We thus encounter Area Boys and Girls who extort money or protect and defend traders for a fee. We also meet those who provoke public pandemonium to pilfer and loot goods. More inventively, some also “plant nails in roads to deflate tires of motorists in order to collect illegal tolls” (2003: 186). Many Area Boys simply do menial jobs, work as informal guards or as watchmen protecting lives and property. They wash cars, serve as bus conductors, touts in garages, janitors, and as vendors at public buildings (2000: 193). When we examine the history of this group of young people’s political involvement in the 1990s movement against the military regime, a complicated picture emerges.

Nineteen ninety-three saw the rise of the Campaign for Democracy that was seeking to reverse the annulment of the recent presidential elections and bring an end to decades of military rule. As Momoh tells us, organized groups of Area Boys joined it in large numbers, mobilized people, and participated in mass protests thereby playing an important role in the civil disobedience movement that the Campaign had initiated. In his words, “their actions went a long way to make the struggle very effective in Lagos” (2000: 198). In previous years, during the anti-Structural Adjustment Program protests too, Area Boys had effectively allied with students from the University of Lagos.

In both instances however serious incidents of Area Boys’ looting and burning accompanied other kinds of political action. They were clamped down on heavily and several lost their lives. During the 1993 Campaign for Democracy, politicians recruited Area Boys as bodyguards or to intimidate opponents often for a fee (Momoh 2000: 197–199). Subsequently, according to Momoh, they have been enlisted as ethnic militias and been mobilized by ethno-nationalist groups such as the Odua Peoples Congress and the Arewa People’s Congress (2003: 197).

The role of groups such as the Area Boys and Girls in the 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement remains to be researched; however, when we examine the Area Boys and Girls’ trajectory through the 1990s and the early 2000s, then we are reminded of all the concerns that Davis raised as he wondered about the historical agency of the informal proletariat. The Area Boys career in popular politics reveals participation in spectacular popular protests and crowd mobilization for a price, appeals to ethnic identities as well as episodes of intense violence. But in spite of all these details, Momoh begins and concludes one of his essays about the Area Boys and Girls by reminding us about the role that they can play in achieving a participatory democratic polity (2003: 197). He ends another essay on them by invoking the avenues that the Area Boys and Girls’ modes of life and action open up for envisioning and enacting an anti-statist “emancipatory” politics (2000: 200). He writes about their potential for “self-expression” and possibilities for “self-actualisation and liberation,” and drawing inspiration from the senior Congolese historian and political figure, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba (1993, 1994), Momoh reflects on the contribution that they can make towards deconstructing statist paradigms.

Mass organizations, movements, popular committees, and assemblies outside state structures and parties are some of the democratic spaces that Wamba dia Wamba envisaged when he spoke of an emancipatory politics for the African continent (1994: 258–9). Momoh suggests that groups such

as the Area Boys and Girls can facilitate their creation. But first, it is important to “decriminalize” and “re-humanize” them, acknowledge them as complete citizens, draw them away from their “spontaneous” and “fatalistic” character, and then align them with more reflexive movements (2000: 200).

Momoh’s analysis thus offers some answers to Davis’ questions about the contribution that the informal proletariat like Area Boys and Girls can play to a global project of emancipation. My own interest is not in confirming or denying the possibilities that Momoh outlines; instead, as I observed earlier, I am recording the nature of political desires with which scholars of West Africa like Momoh regard collective action and sections of the urban poor who participate in them. I record these desires together with all the ambivalences and anxieties that the urban informals provoke. Together, they can help us grasp the ways in which we enframe the nature, possibilities, and limits of popular protests more broadly.

Another enriching account of popular political practices comes to us via Mamadou Diouf’s history of the *Set/Setal* movement in Senegal (1996, 2005) and the place of African youth in postcolonial public culture (2003). His essays on the movement help us further nuance our understanding of the agentive capacities of members of urban populations rendered surplus in West Africa especially since the 1970s. In this instance, forms of popular politics that the informal proletariat have engaged in need to be seen as part of broader youth politics, a theme that many scholars have researched and analyzed.<sup>7</sup>

The *Set/Setal* movement that emerged and coalesced in the late 1980s and through the 1990s has been composed of two different groups of young people: those who, as I noted above, the Senegalese state describes as maladjusted and deviant “social marginals” made up of “products of the rural exodus, rejects from the school system, traveling merchants and beggars” (Diouf 1996: 230), and the vast number of unemployed school leavers and students whose education has been severely disrupted by the breakdowns in the school and higher education system since the 1980s. Together, they have been part of groups that engaged in terrible violence on various occasions in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Diouf 1996: 238–242); at the same time, these youth have also gone on to produce a range of inventive practices in urban areas that have recast and re-made everything from the physical space of neighborhoods, their streets and walls, to the nature of local memory and heritage and, with them, democratic citizenship itself (Diouf 1996, 2005).

Here, it is important to note the particular tenor of Diouf’s analysis of the *Set/Setal* movement. He emphasizes ways in which the *Set/Setal*’s politics, repudiated and refused the trappings of not only state directed institutions but also other established ideologies, party programs, and modes of doing politics (1996: 242, 247).<sup>8</sup> As Diouf tells us, the Dakar youth resisted attempts at political co-optation and “encadrement” (1996: 244). In other words, they

<sup>7</sup> See Honwana and De Boeck’s important edited collection (2005) and Abbink and Van Kassel’s edited volume with the telling title *Vanguards or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa* (2005). In new research, Joschka Phillips, a doctoral candidate in the University of Basel, describes how youth gangs have been mobilized for protests by political parties in Conakry, Guinea, and contributed towards bringing down Lansana Conte’s government. Phillips suggests that if their economic condition and state of political alienation is not mitigated, then these gangs are likely to continue protesting even under the democratic dispensation (2013). Like Area Boys and Girls members of these youth gangs may be seen as a particular subset of the larger category of the informal proletariat.

<sup>8</sup> The repudiations underlying the *Set/Setal* movement are indeed manifold. As Diouf notes, “The (youth) revolt constituted a total refusal of the places assigned to youth not only by political power—first, single-party rule and then multiparty democracy—but also, and throughout the revolt by a tradition (of)...submission to elders....” (1996: 241). At the same time, it is important to note that religious traditions, especially Islam, both its syncretic and more fundamentalist aspects, have influenced various dimensions of the movement (Diouf 1996).

defied efforts to draw them into the ideological world and institutional life of the ruling as well as opposition parties. And while the youth found it difficult to distance themselves from the political left, they were also fragmented in its image (1996: 232). Consequently the students and “social marginals” emerged as a movement that was especially and unusually focused on the local.

From the late 1980s and early 1990s onwards, the local became the focus of regular clean up campaigns, collective responses to the infrastructural challenges of various neighborhoods such as maintenance of their streets, parks, electricity and water connections, as well as generation of new historical narratives developed and illuminated in wall paintings, songs, and neighborhood gatherings. Repudiation of familiar political practices and dominant ideologies facilitated a sociality and a politics marked by, in Diouf’s words, “the progressive dissolution of the logics of centralization and the submission of social actors to the powers of the state” (1996: 236). Anchored in religious idioms a new vision of public and political spaces outside state structures and parties was being lived out. Esthetic imprints that the young members of the Set/Setal movement have produced on the walls of Dakar’s neighborhoods vividly signified this refusal of old ideologies, institutions. This refusal went hand in hand with a sense of “obligation to express new concepts, new language,” embedded in “this struggle for life” (A. Diallo cited in Diouf 1996: 245).

At the same time, the local became the site of intense violence on two particular occasions—once against symbols of state authority and another time against the Mauritanian minority. I am referring here to the 1988 violence in urban areas especially directed at symbols of the state, and the 1990 violent attacks on Mauritians. In the backdrop of both episodes were contested elections (1983, 1988), unfavorable economic conditions, and a withdrawal of the state from health, education, and local governance. Diouf describes how in the wake of the 1988 campaign for presidential and legislative elections and verbal contraventions of the electoral code, violence became (among other things) an attempt to prevent electoral fraud.

To the tune of the oppositions’ slogan of *Sopi*, the youth “preached physical confrontation with the state.” For according to them, the state was a “regime of robbers divested of its historical legitimacy and its function as a principal actor in building of the nation” (Diouf 1996: 241). With the 1988 elections, opposition leaders became part of the new dispensation. However, youth were deeply disappointed with the position assigned to them. This time, their anger was re-directed towards “Moors” living in Dakar and terrible, vengeful violence followed.

Thus like Momoh’s analysis, Diouf’s account of the Set/Setal movement reminds us of the contradictions that beguile popular politics and, with it, the role of the youth and the informal proletariat. Momoh envisioned a role for the Area Boys and Girls in a movement that might challenge liberal democratic models and the simplistic ways in which they reduce democracy to multiparty elections (Ake 1996: 30).<sup>9</sup> Diouf’s analysis suggests that such visions have been realized in Dakar in multiple ways through the efforts of popular local assemblies and associations that have sought to remake city streets and the conditions of social and political life more broadly. These changes have in turn been visible in Dakar’s walls. At the same time, both accounts vividly remind us of Davis’ worries about narrow ethnic unities and their violence that may take over the social worlds

<sup>9</sup> In a key section on the attitude of the global north to democracy in Africa in his last publication (1996), the eminent political studies scholar Claude Ake outlines the ways in which liberal democracy has become “inimical” to the idea of popular power and has indeed become “less democratic” with its focus on rule of law rather than popular sovereignty. Ake especially mentions Western social sciences’ role in so limiting our understanding of democracy. In his words, “under the pretext of clarifying the meaning of democracy, Western social science has constantly redefined it, to the detriment of its democratic values” (1996: 130). Ake, a severe critic of the Nigerian military regime was killed in 1996 in a plane crash under suspicious circumstances.



of urban informal proletariat. As we know from Momoh and Diouf's analyses, they did so in unfortunate ways in both Nigeria and Senegal.

## Violence, Political Society, and Hydraulic Tension

In the backdrop of Momoh and Diouf's writings, I now take a closer look at Branch and Mampilly's (2015) analysis of recent popular protests on the African continent including the Occupy Nigeria movement. The urban unemployed, underemployed youth, informal proletariat such as boda-boda drivers, mini bus conductors, and petty traders often living in shanties are some of the groups that Branch and Mampilly focus on. They locate these groups in the histories of urban centers on the continent, their forms of livelihood, fragmentation into legal and illegal, formal and informal, and the ferment that the informal population has participated in since the late colonial era (Burton 2005; Cooper 1996, 2002; Myers 2011). Branch and Mampilly thus make the case for centering this "urban underclass" in analytical accounts of popular protests.

They are cognizant that the urban underclass has largely been defined negatively and set off both against the traditional working class, the proletariat and zones of formal employment; they note the obfuscations contained in the term and how many political analysts often regard the groups that the term seeks to name as little more than "shapeless crowds" with no purpose and intent of their own (2015: 19-20).<sup>10</sup> The question of how the political agency and identity of this class may be redefined is thus crucial for them.

Here, they make the important point that the urban underclass' protest should not only be seen as a reaction to economic deprivation and uncertain livelihoods but as a response to the underclass' "political status" and its "relation to state power." This relationship, according to Branch and Mampilly, has been marked by an "alternation between...extralegality and illegality" (2015: 20). Their concern then is not with what Davis describes as incorporation of disincorporated labor into a larger emancipatory project (2004: 28) but with the underclass' own political location and imperatives. It is this dimension of the underclass' life that Branch and Mampilly try to capture when they turn to Partha Chatterjee's well-known elaboration of "political society" (2004) to supplement their analysis.

Chatterjee describes political society as the antithesis of the ideal typical domain of civil society. Members of the latter conform to a liberal constitutional visage of rights bearing citizens who possess the social capital necessary to undertake negotiations with the state, individually or as members of rule bound associations. In the sphere of political society are those who push and breach those rules to make themselves heard; they make loud, obtrusive, and often violent demands for welfare and well-being and/or strategically use illegality and coercion to make governmental claims on the state (Chatterjee 2004).

<sup>10</sup> The term urban underclass has had a longstanding purchase in sociological literature on poverty, especially black urban poverty as well as in media descriptions of life in inner city USA. Scholarly definitions vary but some themes and terms recur; thus, the term has often been invoked to refer to poor, badly educated young men from their mid teens to late 20s who have either remained unemployed for long periods of time and/or become entrepreneurs or criminals in the urban underground economy. In some descriptions, it has also included poor childbearing teenage women. In a large number of writings, race has been a key referent and in others class; and while one set of scholars has focused on the cultural dimensions of life of the urban poor, others have focused on the structural conditions. For an overview of this scholarship as well as the media discourse on the urban underclass, see Marks (1991) and Katz ed. (1993).

Branch and Mampilly note the heuristic value of such a distinction and translate it in the African context.<sup>11</sup> Legal rights and formal political arrangements, they observe, characterize the relationship between members of African civil society in urban areas (formal workers, students, members of trade unions, and professional associations) and the state. On the other hand, the urban underclass has historically been alienated from such formal legal and political relations with the state. Thus, they write,

The urban underclass...often had to depend on ad hoc, informal, and personalized negotiations with those in power in order to secure the conditions of its survival. The combination of state neglect and violence, informality and illegality, defined all arenas of urban life — work, livelihood, residence, social relations, culture and, of course, politics (2015: 21).

The urban underclass in Africa thus emerges in their reading as markedly distinct from civil society and akin to political society in India, which Chatterjee writes about. But there is, they note, one important distinction between Chatterjee's formulation and their mobilization of the term (2015: 218). Chatterjee's close engagement with the Indian context and the history of the Indian state especially inform his rendering of political society; its members, according to him, are constituted by and entwined with the state's powers to make and sustain claim-making groups as governmental categories dependent on entitlements and assistance. They include a range of people—from squatters seeking to build houses on government lands, caste groups making vociferous demands for affirmative action, to region-based communities seeking to carve out separate territorial and administrative units (Chatterjee 2004). However, Branch and Mampilly contend that the relationship of the urban underclass in Africa to the state is marked less by expectation of such entitlements and more by state neglect and violence (2015: 20-1, 218).

A penetrating governmental regime anchored in welfare networks, biopower, and not just sovereign power is emergent in some parts of southern Africa and elsewhere on the continent<sup>12</sup>; if we take these developments into consideration then we might qualify Branch and Mampilly's suggestion that the African state's dominant modality is one of violence and neglect. That said, their argument has critical purchase when we look at the history of the late colonial and authoritarian postcolonial states in places such as Zaire, Niger, Uganda, Nigeria, and Sudan. Those are indeed some of the places that Branch and Mampilly focus on when they write that negligent and repressive state power rather than its governmental force has conditioned the constitution of political society in Africa (2015: 21). That is the understanding of the urban underclass or political society's location and relationship to state power, which they proceed from.

<sup>11</sup> In the last few years, scholars writing about South Africa have especially found Chatterjee's distinction and his discussion of political society relevant for their context. See for instance Béné-Gbaïffou and Oldfield (2011), Reddy (2010). Also see Neocosmos (2011) who draws on Chatterjee to posit the notion of "uncivil society" as something that more adequately captures the place of popular politics in the African setting.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance new research on public housing and the encounter between state authorities and local networks of power in Angola, which shows how state-society relations are being re-made everyday on the ground (Croese 2015). While the literature on welfare networks in South Africa is vast, state action, and its collaborations in the campaign against AIDS is one significant area where the workings of biopower are highlighted vividly. See for instance Robins, Steven (2010). On the politics of redistribution and welfare regimes in Zambia see Ferguson (2015). On the modalities of politics that new practices of redistribution have brought about, see von Schnitzler (2014).

Consequently political society's own violence acquires a particular character in Branch and Mampilly's analysis—not as something to be viewed with worry and to be rechanneled and/or transcended in the interests of a bigger political project but as a language that articulates the aspirations for another political order. Fanon's seminal *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), and the ways in which he configured and understood the role of the lumpenproletariat in anti-colonial liberation, plays an important part in their account.<sup>13</sup> Contained therein, as the political anthropologist and theorist David Scott writes, is the "alienation-realization" paradigm of liberation (1999: 194). Scott notes that this paradigm is not the only way we might understand Fanon's deeply generative text but it is one of the powerful aspects of his work, which has come to mark many of its readings (1999: 201). The paradigm I believe also underlines Branch and Mampilly's understanding of Fanon and grounds their account of the urban underclass' role and violence during the protests.

Notions of repression, alienation, awakening, resistance, and realization tie this important paradigm together (Scott 1999: 201). Through such terms, notes Scott, this model of liberation counterpoises power and freedom in a "hydraulic" tension. It suggests that if the yoke of repressive power were lifted, the self would be free (1999: 206). Scott's description of this "narrative of liberation" brings home the ways in which it has guided not just Fanon and those who read him but has molded the modern understanding of resistance, empowerment, and agency itself.<sup>14</sup>

In Fanon's account of freedom from colonialism, the path to self-realization is ridden with violence. It is ridden with the colonizer's violence and of the colonized. Frequently quoted passages draw us to that instance in this narrative of liberation when the greater violence of the colonized can undo the violence of colonial rule (Fanon 1963: 48). This happens when, to use Scott's words, "the aggressivity and violence of the natives are rechanneled away from themselves and given a political, and specifically anti-colonial focus.... The criminal is turned into an activist; the lumpen becomes a militant" (1999: 202). Among such lumpenproletariats transformed into militants, wrote Fanon, "the insurrection will (then) find its urban spearhead" (1963: 81).

Branch and Mampilly describe how urban revolts have indeed found their spearheads in many postcolonial cities in Africa. Concerns about housing, food, and infrastructure or, what Davis calls, "consumption crises" (2004: 28) have triggered numerous protests. What has turned them into insurrections however has been something more. They interpret that something more by bringing Chatterjee together with their reading of Fanon. In other words, they interpret it in terms of the hydraulic tension between power and freedom or alienation and the possibilities of realization. Thus, they describe political society's impulse and imperative to overthrow the state.

<sup>13</sup> Branch and Mampilly recall that while Fanon used the Marxian category of the lumpenproletariat, he also noted its offensive connotations and emphasized the importance of widening and rethinking its meaning (2015: 19). Sociologist and a key figure of the British new left, Peter Worsley made a similar turn to the urban underclass together with and/or in lieu of the lumpenproletariat in his 1972 article on "Frantz Fanon and the Lumpenproletariat." Worsley used the terms underclass as well as subproletariat as he described a context where postcolonial locations across the world ranging from Lima to Calcutta to Saigon, Cairo, and apartheid era Johannesburg of the 1960s and 1970s presented a different yet similar spectacle of rapid urban expansion, influx from rural areas, and emergence of a group that is not absorbed in the industrial work force but does not become a recognizable proletariat. Worsley thus saw the subproletariat and the urban underclass as a "people in process" that, as Fanon noted, carried a "revolutionary potential" (1972: 211).

<sup>14</sup> See note 5 for my discussion of Talal Asad's work and another understanding of agency.

The imperative and impulse was at work during many protests against authoritarian states in the 1980s and 1990s; its workings, Branch and Mampilly write, can also be discerned in the 2000s in the protests against ineffectual democratic governments. They evoke Fanon's famous words: "The last shall be first and the first last" (1963: 37) that announced his aspirations for decolonization to grasp the aspirations contained in many of these protests. In some instances, according to Branch and Mampilly, protesters may envisage "nothing less than the overthrow of postcolonial power and its attendant grip on social, cultural, and economic life as a whole—to make the last the first as Fanon says" (2015: 81). They offer this argument about the protests without ignoring their complicated nature and without discounting the fact that the protesters have articulated a range of diverse and even conflicting demands.

Branch and Mampilly's description of not just the Occupy Nigeria protests of 2012 but also other popular protests in places such as Uganda and Ethiopia in the last 10 years resonate with this interpretation. They describe the ways in which raging hopes, passionate protests, and forceful spectacular demonstrations as well as violence of the urban underclass have played a crucial role in staging a general uprising in all three places. And so, as Branch and Mampilly tell us, in Nigeria members of this political society became central to the messianic Save Nigeria Group's calls for far-reaching change, overthrow of the government as well as its combative stances (2015:102-104). In Uganda, where youth unemployment is 80 %, members of political society have frequently taken to the streets even in the absence of a more widespread movement. During the 2011 "Walk to Work" protests, the streets of the capital city Kampala and other urban centers of Uganda became battlefields between stone pelting barricading members of its political society and a heavily militarized police force (Branch and Mampilly 2015:128-132).<sup>15</sup> Meantime in Ethiopia, anger and disillusionment of the unemployed youth, informal workers, shared taxi drivers, and conductors who made up its political society heightened the call for "total change" (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 153-163).

Here, too calls for fundamental change were enacted violently on the streets and in intense battles with security personnel. As the state enacted its sovereign power, and the security crackdown intensified, "so did the popular violence, with barricades of burning tyres, petrol bombs, and destruction of government property" (2015: 164). Similar protests, crackdowns, and violence also took place in other urban centers of the country. Popular sovereignty was now pitched against the state's violence.

Importantly, Branch and Mampilly do not interpret this popular violence as an expression of incoherent rage but as political society's mode of enacting demand for total change in dense neighborhoods. "...Protest derived its meaning" they write, "from the popular political imagination from which they erupted, not from liberal notions of what a proper protest should look like." For instance in Addis, violence during the protests "was a performance of political agency, a direct attempt to uproot state power, within the 'moral economy' of the street and by those criminalized as 'dangerous hoodlums'" (2015: 164). These are some of the terms in which Branch and Mampilly, following Fanon, invoke the relationship between popular protests, violence and "total change". Violence emerges as a language of iterating hopes for and realizing that change.

<sup>15</sup> Opposition leaders' simple gesture of walking to work as a form of protest galvanized many sections of Ugandan society who came together in different urban centers, especially Kampala, to perform this dissenting gesture. Under conditions of high unemployment, inequality, infrastructural and social service disintegration, as well as police coercion and state corruption that have been especially palpable in urban areas, members of political society took to the streets with opposition figures. Dramatic battles between political society and the police ensued (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 121-131).

There is however something critical that must be noted here: namely the fact that possibilities of change, which such clashes herald, do not offer assurances about the political community that maybe forged in the future. Often, in that instance of violent clashes, neither states nor collectives who exercise violent sovereign power are accountable to those who do *not* make up a palpable and aggressive social force. Therefore, it becomes important to ask: which sections of the informal proletariat constitute an aggressive force? And, what about members of the urban underclass and political society who may not make up such a force?

In Momoh's account, we struggle to learn about the lifeworlds of "Area Girls." In other accounts of Area Boys who played a crucial role in the struggle against military rule, Area Girls are omitted altogether (Omitoogun 1994). On his part, Scott wonders about Fanon's colonized "natives," and asks, "Who exactly are the 'natives'? What is their gender? What is their ethnicity? What is their sexual orientation?" (1999: 204). In a similar vein, we might ask: If political society articulates its call for change in the language of violence, what does it say to women, and ethnic and sexual minorities among it? What kind of a political community and possibilities of action does it offer to them?<sup>16</sup>

Answers to such questions are hard to glean from the figures of protesters and the sites of their protest that Branch and Mampilly focus on. In the last concluding section, I reflect on why this is the case and the answers that other languages, sites, and modes of protest offer.

## Other Languages, Protests and Possibilities

As I discussed earlier, in their narrative of protests that have occurred in various parts of Africa in the 2000s, Branch and Mampilly configure the character and place of political society in relation to a negligent and repressive state power. The political possibilities that such protests herald and the role of political society appears in their analysis through the prism of the alienation-realization account of liberation where repressive power and freedom are posed against each other in a zero-sum game for a largely undifferentiated urban poor. But it is important to recall that various sections of political society have also fashioned the possibilities of their freedom in other ways.

We might recollect that the informal economy accounts for more than 70 % of non-agricultural employment in Africa. Large sections of its "surplus populations" or the "urban underclass" live and work there. And while survivalism is an important feature of this world, in Nigeria for instance, informal enterprises and manufacturing and trading networks have also emerged as a vibrant sector with their own "developmental accomplishments" (Meagher 2010b). This world of informality has also generated

<sup>16</sup> In recent work on the politics of the urban poor in South Africa as a Fanonian practice, Nigel Gibson (2011), and Richard Pithouse (2003) have discussed the nature of universal humanism in Fanon's writings. Their reflections also have an affinity with Ato Sekyi-Otu's (1996) reading of universalism in Fanon that Scott too discusses briefly. In this article, I am not seeking to obtain the most authentic interpretation of Fanon or debating whether he may be regarded as a universalist or not. My key concern here is about the internal differences within political society that are occluded in many discussions, which draw on the alienation-realization paradigm of resistance. Those who are so occluded include women, sexual and other minorities, and all those who do not take palpably aggressive adversarial positions against the state. Here, I am informed by Scott's worry that "the Fanonian story underwrites too much—or gives too much space to—the normalized centrality of a specific identity, even though an identity argued to have suffered particular injuries under colonial domination.... the Fanonian story licenses too unreflexive an idea of an essential native subject" (1999: 204–05).

certain political possibilities for those who inhabit it—in relation to state structures and institutional authority and in relation to each other.

New research on the modes of organizing and the nature of collective actions and alliances that informals ranging from tailors to market vendors, to informal manufacturers of small commodities, to casual port workers and waste collectors, and cross border traders have been undertaking in various parts of the continent is helpful (Hansen and Vaa 2004; Brown 2006; Meagher 2010a, b; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000).<sup>17</sup> What we encounter here is both what Asef Bayat calls “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (1997)—the slow, often singular inroads into vacant plots of land to put up residential settlements, into street corners to peddle goods, and appropriation of electricity and water connections that individuals and families need—as well as collective and complex negotiations with local state authorities and symbolic protests of various kinds. While clientism persists, we also see formation of networks and associations that belie and go beyond the concept.<sup>18</sup> In various instances ethnic, religious, and regional identities of members of the informal economy who so come together guide their composition and influence these negotiations, formation of networks and figurative acts.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, in many instances, the over-determined spaces from which these actions are undertaken hinder rather than facilitate self-referential assertions of not just communitarian identities but even that overarching identity invoked through a category like “the people.”<sup>20</sup>

Without romanticizing this everyday life and politics of the urban informal or, what Ananya Roy calls “subaltern urbanism,” we can invoke them to mitigate some of the anxieties that Davis refers to when he writes about the corrosive effects of crises of consumption and clientist networks on the socio-political worlds of the informal proletariat. This everyday world also gives us occasion to discern the informal proletariat’s attempts to not simply overthrow state power but cast it in a mold that enhances their conditions of life. I would venture to say that in many spaces of political society

<sup>17</sup> I am especially indebted to a recent edited volume on popular agency of informal workers in the continent (Lindell 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Meagher illustrates the workings of the clientist logic among associations of informal manufacturers in Nigeria (2009). At the same time, as Lindell notes in her overview of politics of the informal in various parts of the continent, “there are other forms of political engagement and other kinds of association, linkage and alliance in which regular people in the informal economy engage and which cannot be captured by the vertical clientist and criminal network” (2010: 16).

<sup>19</sup> See Boampong (2010) and Brown and Lyons (2010) for analyses of ways in which contemporary labor recruitment practices and informal networks are mapped onto and evoke “traditional” structures and idioms. At the same time as, once again, Lindell (2010) remind us, not only are identities of those living and working in the informal world divided along multiple subject positions but new research also highlights formation of ‘inclusive’ rather than ‘particularistic’ identities as regional associations of informal workers and traders emerge and internationalist networks of informals become more active (p. 14). On these topics, see other essays in the collection especially those by Nchito and Hansen, and Mitullah (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Thoburn (2002) elaborates the politics of the minor that is inflected by multiple social relations and refuses or is unable to claim a clearly delineated coherent identity. This is the politics that Thoburn reads into the proletariat as a conceptual category that remains under elaborated in Marx. Comparing the world of the informal to Thoburn’s understanding of the proletariat is outside the scope of this essay; however, it is important to note that while Thoburn sees minoriness as an aspect of the proletariat, I see its possibilities in the world of the informal and articulated through Atiku’s performance. The postcolonial studies scholar Leela Gandhi (2011, 2014) also turns to Deleuze and Guattari and their book on Kafka and minor literature (1986) to elaborate the political possibilities generated from the position of the minor. In her words, “Minor-ness...or a commitment to remaining-small, consists in practices of reterritorialisation that are simply discontinuous with the telos of dominance, in other words, immune to the inducements of either hegemony or canonicity” (2011: 35).

this re-casting and re-making of state power is being sought, imagined, and done on an everyday basis.

The possibilities of such a relationship with the state and a plural political community are composed in Atiku's performative protest. According to Atiku, his protest followed the grammar of the Yoruba practice of Egungun masquerades.<sup>21</sup> His performance can also be viewed through the lens of other traditions of West African art and ritual, the modes of their addresses to power, and its reinvention.<sup>22</sup> My interpretation for this article emerged in conversation with Atiku about his understanding of his political self, his experience of the performance, the nature of its address to the state, and the crisis in that relationship he was seeking to articulate (see Fig. 2).

Egungun masquerades where the performer enacts spectacular dances as homage to ancestors' concealed powers in order to enhance the status of some and ensure the well-being of all are central to Atiku's vision of his performance. Atiku's protester acknowledges his suffering and the cramped space he has been confined to, but he is also a powerful figure in his own right. He is however not in an antagonist but an agonistic posture, which might be discerned when we pay attention to its details:

In Fig. 2, we see Atiku wrapped in green and white of the Nigerian flag wandering with hand-made signs emerging out of his heavily burdened body. Curious bystanders look on, some taking pictures from their cell phone cameras. Several market vendors, their helping hands, local transporters and young people with makeshift drums joined Atiku in his trudge down Ejigbo's streets. In scribbled up posters and songs they hailed the solidarity of 'the people.' The 27 posters jutting out of Atiku's body exhorted the Nigerian state to, among other things, "ensure stable power supply," "build our roads," "don't inflict more hardship on us," "improve governance and improve Nigeria," to "stop inflicting suffering on us," to "remove the problem of education," and "increase refining capacity."

Like many other participants in the Occupy Nigeria movement and votaries of republican as well as participatory democracy, Atiku also acknowledges the possibilities for recognition and self-realization it can offer and hails the idea of popular sovereignty. At the same time, his performance was not an aggressive assertion of it. Atiku evoked awe-inspiring Egungun spirits but his powerful protester did not raise arms and fists to become exceptional and attain dominance. His assemblage of signs and posters raised issues that make up the infrastructure of life, but his protest did not equate an act of political agency and resistance with assertion of sovereign power.<sup>23</sup> Atiku sought visibility and recognition in that instance of making the concerns of the last the first. At the same time, his protester remained faceless; he wore national colors but also refused sharp particularity and the possibility of excluding difference.

<sup>21</sup> Various strands of scholarship on "African Arts" describe Egungun as the tradition of masquerades that has been prevalent especially among the Oyo Yoruba where layers of cloth and other costumes are adorned to conceal the identity of the performer. See especially the special volume of the journal *African Arts* on Egungun (Drewal 1978). Atiku's ensemble of cloth and movements resemble the Egungun, its movements and practice of concealment. It is also notable that he called his performance "Nigerian Fetish." In a conversation, Atiku explained that he was seeking to reference the disparaging ways in which African ritual and religious forms have been described on the global stage; furthermore, he was looking to rework that term to now make an intervention in the modern political public space (Personal communiqué, October 18, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> For instance Atiku's performance may also be seen in the light of Hauka spirit possession rituals in Niger and their close relationship to political power. See Stoller (1995).

<sup>23</sup> Ajay Skaria's discussion of Gandhi's *satyagraha* and forms of non-sovereign political action (2011, 2014) enable my reading of Atiku here.





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