

Entrenched provisionality Struggling for public electricity in postapartheid Johannesburg

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Abstract: This article explores practices of community-based energy justice activists in Johannesburg. Against the background of municipal corporatization of electricity delivery in the wake of the postapartheid state's neoliberal policy turn, residents of the urban periphery organize to ward off cost-recovery measures and illegally (re)connect to the grid. Informed by theories of critical urban studies on the South, this article situates activists' practices historically and discusses the limits of their strategic claims with a view to their inextricable relation to the state.

Keywords: activism, commons, energy, infrastructure, postapartheid, public goods, South Africa, urban goods

This article discusses community-based energy justice activism at the urban margins of Johannesburg in South Africa. The corporatization of municipalities' service delivery apparatus in the wake of macro-economic restructuring around the millennium led to the formation of an infrastructural activism against cost-recovery measures by the state-owned delivery company. Throughout the city's townships, self-proclaimed "struggle technicians" bypass meters with improvised electricity connections, refine and mainstream their skills to reconnect faulty customers who have been cut-off, and mobilize a local public in order to exert pressure on the postliberation government to decommodify electricity delivery.

In line with this theme section, I draw on my 2019 ethnographic research among activists in the country's biggest conglomeration of townships in Soweto, to discuss their interventions to recover and extend the urban poor's access

to the national grid as "publicizing" practices (Trémon in this issue)—that is to make certain claims on the state as a provider of a public good—involving the production of and education in strategies to bypass its technically mediated enclosure, as well as repoliticizing communities to mobilize support for their demand for free basic services.¹

Such bottom-up struggles for social goods emerge in opposition to forces of a capitalist market economy in which the state is usually complicit by facilitating exclusionary agendas, and thus governments often appear as natural opponents to citizens' initiatives. Yet, critical scholarship, that is, on the commons or commoning, has shown that the reality of such struggles often blurs clear separations between citizens' struggles and the state (Bodirsky 2018; Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Kalb 2017). In fact, as Anne-Christine Trémon in her introduction



to this theme section emphasizes, urban struggles against the enclosure of essential goods necessary to social reproduction often engage with the state in several ways. In the case of South Africa, the former liberation movement and now ruling party African National Congress (ANC) occupies an intricate position within postapartheid's political-economic order. Given South Africa's history of segregation, disparate urban development, and uneven patterns of distribution, access to various basic social goods such as electricity has been a central parameter for postapartheid politics since 1994. Yet, the state's commitment to material participation of all its citizens has shown paradoxical results as a neoliberal policy turn undermined government's nominally redistributive agenda. Massive infrastructure development has technically connected millions of households to the national grid but on the condition of charges the urban poor can hardly afford. As a consequence, the state appears as both opponent and addressee during this conflicting citizen-state relation.

In this article, I will critically discuss activists' initiatives with a view to this inextricable relation, which I argue to be causal to what I perceive as contradictive effect of their work. Activists' strategies, namely to engage directly with the infrastructural setup for electricity provision, as well as pursuing local mobilization and education are symptomatic of a shift in credibility during postapartheid away from representative liberal capitalist institutions into the polity of "popular politics" instead. The very practical appropriation of basic goods and realization of fundamental citizenship rights is characteristic to "alternative" socio-political realms of the marginalized everywhere (e.g., Bayat 2010; Holston 2009; Lemanski 2019). To many people in the world's socioeconomic periphery, unauthorized consumption of public goods (or what people perceive of as such) is a necessary and ubiquitous part of the multiple tactics they employ—be it in/formal, il/legal, confrontational, or cooperative—that allow access to state resources (see Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield 2011).

Moreover, in South Africa the direct engagement with the conduits of such goods is tied to the country's long-standing political history being inextricably bound up with infrastructure. The historic experience of apartheid's dual urban planning and allocation of goods to force patterns of uneven "separate development" provoked infrastructures' becoming as objects of popular resistance and continues to inform present struggle techniques (von Schnitzler 2016).

Besides this continuity in political practices, my findings can be read closely together with critical urban theory on peripheral urbanization and resistance against material and political neglect by precarious self-initiatives and social infrastructures of collaboration in Southern cities (e.g., Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield 2011; Caldeira 2015; Holston 1991; Holston and Caldeira 2008; Pieterse and Simone 2017; Silver and McFarlane 2019; Simone 2004). The contributions I build on emphasize how residents in popular neighborhoods mobilize local assets to navigate shortcomings at the political and economic margins they are forced to inhabit. Thereby, they co-produce social and technical networks semi-autonomous from what Teresa Caldeira calls "official logics," potentially generative to new modes of politics, to "new kinds of citizens, claims, circuits, and contestations" (Caldeira 2016: 4).

Also Soweto's guerrilla technicians draw on socialization with situated practices of everyday life to manage undersupply and infrastructural deficiency. Beyond, they establish spaces relatively unobstructed by technical control and legal persecution of their illicit initiatives, as well as outside the (liberal) capitalist state's logic for conditional access to basic goods. To do so, they benefit from the limits of governability over the grid edge in the urban periphery—a strategy I conceive of as politics of peripheral entrenchment.

Yet, as Caldeira warns, residents' self-initiated constructions and infrastructural extensions characteristic of patterns of peripheral urbanization inherently contribute to the formation of "highly unequal and heterogeneous cities"

(2016: 4) as certain developments can hardly be provided for in sustainable ways if not by the state. Similarly I argue that activists face the challenge of an inherently contradictory outcome that I summarize as a protraction in the form of entrenched provisionality: while, to a certain extent, conditions of peripheral urbanization are being politically exploited to bypass the state's restrictive regulations for energy consumption, at the same time their self-initiative is limited to furthering the already fragmented, heterogeneous infrastructural landscape and will always feature a provisional temporality. As I will lay out, this contradiction derives from the very nature of the conflict over organizing postapartheid electricity delivery, according to which the civic interventions must be understood as not against but in close, indissociable articulation with the state (Kalb 2017). Eventually, having to negotiate public goods with postcolonial governments that have endorsed liberal state capitalism is evincing only limited room for emancipative politics (Trémon in her introduction to this issue).

In the first section of the article, I briefly retrace the making of the country's delivery landscape in terms of its scaled political economy across history, with an emphasis on how postapartheid governance underwent a policy turn toward conditionality that was widely received as renegeing on fundamental promises over the postapartheid project. The second section describes activist's repertoire of contention in order to challenge the state in a material as well as ideological arena. The article concludes with a reflection on the contradictory effect of activists' initiatives.

Electricity and political mobilization in South Africa

Soon after liberation in 1994 initial excitement over the "miracle" of democracy subsided and postapartheid South Africa witnessed the emergence and rapid proliferation of various social movements attending to the "unfinished busi-

ness of democratization" (Etzo 2010). Undissolved patterns of historically uneven development between racially zoned areas (Freund 2007) sparked fierce conflict between insurgent communities and their government over insufficient provisioning of housing, water, sanitation, and electricity.

As I will explain in the following, the historic experience of undersupply is important to both the ethical justification as well as the praxis for resistance regarding the organization of present energy justice struggles. Apartheid social and spatial engineering, as it manifested in the forceful expulsion of Black people and people of color from the inner cities due to the Group Areas Act promulgated in 1950 and several amendments the following years, and the establishment of townships for rudimentary accommodation of the labor force in service to racial capitalism led to the formation of highly disparate publics of infrastructural provisioning (Freund 2007; Hart 2013).

Different spatial arrangements of electrification evolved between different parts of South African cities and are therefore an expression of schemes of racial segregation in which infrastructure acquired a supportive role (Kirsch 2005: 197). Moreover, as various historiographies on electricity in South Africa show (Christie 1984; Conradie and Messerschmidt 2000; de Selincourt 1991; Eberhard 2005; Fine and Rustomjee 1996; Jaglin and Dubresson 2016; McDonald 2016), electric power has been unremittingly employed as an exceptionally political tool "by the state and by owners of property to serve their particular interest" (Christie 1984: 2). Moreover, it shaped the country's nation-building during and after the Cold War when the government fueled cultural narratives on aspiring to become a nuclear nation (Hecht 2011).

Hence, in this section I argue for an understanding of the contention around electricity access within such historic entanglements between energy and the consolidation of political power. In a vein similar to Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011), I argue (re)directing energy flows and the securing of its supply

forms part of the making and unmaking of politics throughout South African history and thus renders today's arrangements of provisioning as "symbolic of what it means to have dispensed with apartheid today" (Ngwane 2003: 47).

Apartheid: Politics of undersupply

The centralization of energy production and transmission started with the foundation of Eskom in 1922. The public electricity utility became the base for the National Party's minority rule effectively securing a "racial Keynesianism" (Gentle 2016) from 1949 onward, by massive subsidization of industrial and private "Whites only" consumption. However, it is important to note that non-industrial provision has been a secondary priority before and it remained Eskom's priority task to produce cheap energy and maintain low prices explicitly for the factories and mines around the Witwatersrand—an arrangement underpinned by high industry revenues in turn, granted, for example, by a stable gold price. This political-economic aspect to apartheid energy policy became ever more important during the 1970s when the regime had to secure financial independence in the face of growing international pressure and boycott campaigns against the regime. However, an extension for domestic use only occurred at the advent of the Union during the first half of the twentieth century and in the political climate of White Afrikaner nationalism (Fine and Rustomjee 1996; Hornberger 2008: 287; Jaglin and Dubresson 2016).

Whereas White zoned areas of the city became electrified, communities in the townships had to wait for private connections until the 1970s. In the case of Soweto, the city municipality started to extend electricity infrastructure from 1976 onward, in an attempt to calm resistance to apartheid law after the Soweto uprising the same year (Mandy 1984: 207–213). But the calculation proved wrong as urban unrest continued. Following the call by civic associations (colloquially called "civics")—the local drivers of the anti-apartheid struggle at the

time most of the ANC personnel was exiled—residents organized a series of boycotts against municipal service fees, rents, schools, public transport, and White-owned businesses (e.g., Pirie 1983). Despite achieving a significant degree of "ungovernability" in the township areas to evade constant control and enforcement by the regime's policing apparatus, the objective was to obtain more affordable rents and service charges. These boycotts successfully ended with the "Soweto accord" between the civics, regional authorities, and Eskom, which wrote off debt accrued during boycotts and introduced a model for discounted service consumption (Swilling and Shubane 1991).

From its foundation around the early 1900s, the evolution of Soweto has been shaped by a "continuous struggle over sites, housing and services" (Kirsch 2005: 196). Given the municipalities weak financial resources, the city council was never able to meet the demands of the Native Areas Act (1923) according to which they were obliged to accommodate all those to be resettled with enough formal housing units and basic water and sanitation supply (see Hart 2013: 213). Electricity was not part of it initially.

Accordingly, overcrowding and undersupply characterized urbanization of the townships (Crankshaw et al. 2000), and residents were forced to provide for themselves by their own structures: improvised houses, informal infrastructure extensions, neighborly support, and security structures provided by civics that organized into local street committees. Residents' self-organization has been proven effective and reliable to make ends meet. As Soweto grew, so did the number of backyard shacks, and for the lack of formal infrastructure, the informal electricity connections increased too. It has become common to build one or more backyard shacks from corrugated sheets or wood scraps in the yard of a main house, provide a connection from the house's main wire, and rent it to the many who struggle to find affordable accommodation. In the absence of formal electricity connections, especially in the most undersupplied areas of Soweto, such as Kliptown or in informal

settlements, it is also common to tap a publicly accessible source such as a transformer box or street light.

As one of my interlocutors, an anti-apartheid veteran and longtime grassroots organizer summarized:

we are used to take care for ourselves. We made our neighborhoods ungovernable [by apartheid state and police], we take matters into our own hands. Nobody ever cares for us but if there is money needed, they suddenly turn to us to cough up more and more. . . . When we had gangs here and the police didn't dare to move through our streets, it was us who took up a weapon and patrolled to protect our families. . . . It has always been like this.

This sense of self-initiative prevailed as residents felt the degree of governmental care did not sufficiently increase even after democratic transition, an energy justice activist confirms: “when you call Eskom, they don't come. People are used to take their ladders and climb up the pylons, they are used to dig and check the cables for themselves when something is wrong.”

Both the patterns of self-initiated urban development as well as residents' necessarily pragmatic sense for self-help resonate with two qualities of peripheral urbanization that came to be signified by what James Holston (1991) and what he and Teresa Caldeira (2008) termed “autoconstruction”: one concerns the designation of makeshift materiality, the other denominates an experimental praxis behind it. Thus, autoconstructing one's house step-by-step in urban peripheries—and the same applies to the unauthorized accessing of public goods by extending its delivery infrastructure—entails an appropriative intervention into urban spatiality. Nevertheless, as their practices and aspirations concerning urban housing typically revolve on a matrix of services usually to be provided by the state, residents enter into a complex relationship with the capitalist state by aligning with and at the same time undermining its formal logics of

distribution and provisioning. This is also the case for informal electricity consumption in Johannesburg.

Postapartheid: Remobilization for infrastructural justice

The reconfiguration of urban struggles around the issue of electricity relates to historic processes of dispossession because its emergence is owed to a felt continuity in deprivation of basic goods and profound disappointment with the ANC's efforts to adequately address it. Campaigning for the first democratic elections in 1994 (and during mobilization in the underground the preceding decades), the ANC vowed to dissolve spatial apartheid's legacy by guaranteeing all South Africans basic service provision. After they came to power in 1994, ANC launched their first socioeconomic policy framework, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which explicitly attended to social imbalances created by apartheid's infrastructural disparities. In fact, the project of liberation was articulated as a “techno-political project” (Dubbeld 2017) to an extent where “political authority and social expectations” happened to become “entwined with material infrastructure” (Robins and Redfield 2016: 145). Consequently, the first democratic government undertook a major grid expansion: in 1994, it was calculated that more than 20 million people had no access to electricity (RSA 1998: 21). As of February 2002, the government claimed to have connected 3.5 million additional people to the grid already (McDonald 2002: 162).

While ANC's electrification program accomplished remarkable technical achievements compared to the situation they found when they took over, to the detriment of the urban poor, efforts heavily relied on people's self-initiative and acquiescence regarding illegal connections. Extensions were not performed in locations less easy to access that would have needed expensive construction for infrastructural development. Consequently, informal dwellings remained unconnected and fell back on improvised self-

connections once again that—together with a number of Eskom’s organizational problems—contributed to significant energy losses and overloading. In places like Alexandra in the Northeast of Johannesburg, commonly referred to as “dark city,” it is calculated that only 4 percent of its almost 180,000 residents are formally registered to legally receive electricity (Lindque 2020). In such spaces, the continuing non-delivery by the state impelled residents’ self-initiative, often with the effect of reproducing uneven social power relations when skilled, networked individuals capitalized on the state’s absence for their own ends. The emergence of electricity patrons in informal settlements and the more marginalized areas of Soweto are such examples for a kind of enclosure from below: here, an exclusive network of skilled technicians and slumlords extend and maintain control over informal connections and became petty capitalists or “little Eskoms” as interlocutors referred to them.

Incipient disappointment over the omissions in democracy’s urban development in the townships preempted a turn of events during the late 1990s that resulted in a comprehensive rollback of the state. In line with globally predominant market fundamentalism, ANC’s policy instruments underwent crucial adjustments (Barchiesi 2004; Bond 2000). The macroeconomic Growth, Economic and Redistribution strategy (GEAR) was brought forward in 1996. Introducing a growth-led strategy that expected to increase social well-being by creating jobs, the ANC now decided to attract foreign investments that withdrew from the country during democratization by curbing state expenditures to balance key economic performance indicators. This shift from public investment to facilitating private accumulation was perceived of as hollowing out state-led developmentalism that initially raised popular expectations and enthusiasm for the postapartheid project (Bond 2000), with dire consequences for the socio-political situation of the urban poor and consequently for political remobilization in the postapartheid era.

In Johannesburg, the GEAR framework eventually gave way to iGoli2002 during the late 1990s. It meant a comprehensive plan for institutional and economic restructuring of the financially embattled municipality. This comprised privatization of municipal key assets and corporatization of its service delivery apparatus, for example by creating City Power, a municipally owned company for electricity distribution. As opposed to before, where Eskom sold its energy to municipalities directly at a subsidized price, City Power had to buy electricity for the municipality in a financially viable manner.

At the same time, as part of the GEAR framework, direct transfers from central to municipal governments had been severely reduced, narrowing down municipalities’ fiscal leeway. This resulted in local governments emerging as key sites of postapartheid contradictions: “local government has become the impossible terrain of official efforts to manage poverty and deprivation in a racially inflected capitalist society. . . . Ironically, attempts to render technical that which is inherently political are feeding and amplifying the proliferation of populist politics” (Hart 2013: 5). The contention for electricity access in Johannesburg is paradigmatic of this: since municipalities were struggling already to cover expenditures for subsidizing energy consumption at a relatively low price, this loss of revenue led to the local introduction of cost-recovery policies. As a result, customers previously benefiting from subsidized flat-rate prices were required to pay a much higher cost for services. Many were unable to afford it and were already in arrears with the municipal rates (Fiil-Flynn 2001; Khunou 2002; McDonald and Pape 2002).

Eventually, the embrace of common neoliberal paradigms in South African politics affected distribution, but also affected the production side of postapartheid energy governance. Already during late apartheid, it became clear that Eskom’s expensive business model of subsidized energy production to serve apartheid state and class building appeared not affordable anymore. Nevertheless, when negotiating the transition,

the ANC explicitly resisted plans to privatize Eskom and integrated the country's sole energy producer into their own ambitious state-led development programs. But by the time Thabo Mbeki took office as president in 1999, plans for dismantling Eskom had come back to the table, and the embattled power utility came under pressure to prove financially viable all of a sudden. To this end, the government commenced a corporatization according to the Eskom Conversion Act 13 in 2001, by transforming it from a statutory body into a self-sufficient public company (Eskom Holdings Limited) with the state as the single shareholder. Nearly bankrupt Eskom had to find sources of revenue to balance their deficient budget and turned to the fiscally trimmed municipalities to offset the company's losses.

As a consequence of governmental disposition for self-sufficiency and cost recovery, municipalities and Eskom reconciled their agendas by means of a disciplinary commodification (Ruiters 2007). To put an end to the practice of unaccounted informal connections, Eskom launched TV commercials that culturally framed illegal connectors as snake-headed villains being parasitic to the public's energy provision and coined the term *iziNyoka*.² This was followed by a rollout of prepaid meters in the Greater Johannesburg area from the early 2000s onward—a device “inscribed” with the logic of nonnegotiable conditionality as they immediately disconnect customers' electricity flow when the purchased amount is consumed (see von Schnitzler 2013: 688). The underlying rationality became one in which people's subjectivity was expected to change from entitled “citizens” or “beneficiaries” to self-responsible “consumers” (Khunou 2002: 71; von Schnitzler 2013). Since then, the ANC's politicians, for example, today's president Cyril Ramaphosa, regularly put forward the new dictum of the state's expectations: “[t]he days of boycotting payment are over. This is now the time to build. It is the time for all of us to make our own contribution” (Mokone 2019). Simultaneously, Eskom decided to take on the “Soweto debt” accruing

from historic payment boycotts during apartheid and issued lump sum amounts of arrears to Sowetans.³

One of my interlocutors commented:

they are experimenting in our backyards. We are like guinea pigs in their laboratory. And they keep saying “you have to pay now,” but how could we? Look at the unemployment here, but now they say “you got democracy, now come and pay” as we are actually able to, just because we are voting now. Voting gives no jobs, that is what we learned. They are only thinking of how to best make profits and don't care about us. These people don't know what it is like in the township, they forgot. And we are supposed to sit in the dark again.

This comment is explicative of the disappointment with where the trail of transition lead to for the many. To the detriment of (working) poor communities, the accommodation of several programs for fiscal austerity effectively translated into electricity becoming an inaccessible private good again. Communities in Soweto experienced waves of disconnections by prepaid meters and standby teams of technicians, metro police, and later, a special investigation unit for public theft, called Group Forensics Investigation Service (GFIS). During 2001 alone, the year of the Eskom Conversion Act's implementation, the cut-offs amounted to a peak of 20,000 a month (Egan and Wafer 2004: 6). It is against these cut-offs that new activist movements emerged. As Gillian Hart (2013) emphasizes, forceful cut-offs and the installation of meters by the postapartheid government are be widely perceived as a “direct violation” of a supposed redistributive consensus and yet “another round of dispossession” (2013: 107).

The politics of peripheral entrenchment

In direct opposition to the implementation of iGoli2002, a vibrant social movement called

Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) developed across the whole of Gauteng province and the Greater Johannesburg area in particular. Co-founded by Trevor Ngwane, an ANC councillor from Soweto at the time, who got suspended by the party for his public opposition to iGoli2002, the movement united a heterogeneous group of members and supporters of diverse political backgrounds, biographies, and ages (Buhlungu 2004; Egan and Wafer 2004: 55). Because the APF was known for its bottom-up politics and direct action antagonistic to the establishment represented by the ANC cadres, which significantly lost credibility after their support for GEAR and iGoli2002, the APF quickly gained foothold in the city's peripheral terrain (Ballard et al. 2006; Desai 2002). Their activism contributed a great deal to the repoliticization of electricity in South Africa's public discourse around the millennium. Although the APF ceased to exist only a few years later, it managed to fuse together the struggles of a few isolated local communities to evolve into small but persistent, durable political networks.

The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and their technicians is one such network I joined. This grassroots organization emerged as one of the main antagonists to post-apartheid energy governance and ever since has been a significant counterforce against the local impact of the government's policy turn. In the following, I will describe their practices with a view to their strategy's limitations and success in challenging the state to renegotiate electricity's status as a public good.

Founded and underpinned almost exclusively by elders and former struggle veterans, the movement drew from tactical experiences within "civics" and their organization into street committees during apartheid. They initiated committees in various parts of Soweto in order to reach out to communities and provide immediate self-help structures against cut-offs, smart meters, and constant price hikes. This includes office hours once a week in a community center close to Soweto's Eskom branch, as well as open community meetings to inform about Eskom

strategies, provide access to pro bono lawyers, and actively encourage people to join in and bridge meters or stop payments. One of their most effective responses to GEAR/iGoli2002 was "operation *khanyisa*" ("illuminate" in isi-Zulu), wherein the activists claimed to have re-connected more than 3,000 households during the first six months with the help of their own "emergency technicians" (Ngwane 2003: 47). During their heyday in the early 2000s, they were also able to organize a series of media effective protests wherein activists and supporting residents disassembled meters and dumped them in front of local politicians' houses or police stations. On one occasion, they disconnected the house of then mayor Amos Masondo (ANC).

However, after experiencing a decline in their mobilizing capacity on-demand reconnection and public advocacy for free basic services became activists' core activities. Programmatic instrumentalization of the widespread practice of informal connections is an important technique they apply to publicly subvert state policy and in order to de-criminalize the practice itself. It is framed as a self-performed necessity rather than theft, and a righteous appropriation of what is withheld from residents, as one of my interlocutors put it: "it's not like we steal anything. We are not *iziNyoka*. We just take what was promised to us by their constitution. [Elec-



FIGURE 1. Members of the SECC on a protest march against electricity price increases, 2019. Photo by author.

tricity] is a right not a privilege. And it is not much, we only take what we need. Look around, we don't have much, we don't waste. It's not us who keep the lights on day and night. That you will only find in the suburbs."

To normalize claims for provisioning electricity free of charge, activists not only maintain various media contacts but also publicly reconnect or bypass meters in red outfits and the movement's shirts to demonstrate fearlessness and transparency. In addition, they gain publicity to spark further engagement of neighbors. This deliberate visibility is also expressed in activists' conscious performance of an interim provider. As proof of their widespread impact, hundreds of written affidavits are stored in the movements' archive, issued by the struggle technicians in charge to confirm having reconnected a given household because of their inability to pay, taking over all legal consequences implied. Many of these affidavits are "authorized" with a stamp by local police stations. After all, "we are the people who are responsible. We care for basic work in the community," says an activist acting as chair on one of the committees. This mimetic formality by bureaucratic practices, as they indicate an alternative legal ethics, are not only meant to provoke but more importantly legitimize activists' actions in the realm of an economy of appearance they engage in with the state. The production of transparency and information becomes an important trade to be deployed on the battleground of citizen-state relationships (Hetherington 2011), especially when challenging a government like the ANC, that is widely held to be a corrupted and arbitrary example of a postcolonial sell-out among South Africans.

While the state, municipality, and Eskom have responded with a mix of police violence and arrests, focused disconnections targeting key leadership, and technological innovations to protect their infrastructure from being tapped into illegally, activists have resorted to politics of peripheral entrenchment to achieve their ultimate goal of free basic services accessible for all South Africans. Therein, they orga-

nize to deploy a peripheral condition inherited by the apartheid legacy, marked by alleged disorder, neglect, and long-standing acquiescence of self-initiative as potentially vital political resource to their own ends.

An important factor to that is the proven knowledge to rely on infrastructure's strategic vulnerability when challenging the state both during the apartheid and postapartheid eras. As cables can be picked up and flows deregulated and redirected, informal connections, in their socio-technical dimension, bear the political current of usurping governability and authoritative claims by the state and its agents. Understanding smart meters as "capillary ends of 'cost recovery'" (von Schnitzler 2008: 901), as developing engineers did, such ends can also be turned into an object of politically strategic subversion as maintaining control on the ground proves to be difficult to the authorities. Indeed, activists remain remarkably confident about a certain local supremacy and hand out notes with their names and phone numbers to those they reconnected or bypassed. Asked whether they fear being personally persecuted by the authorities perhaps, one of the reconnectors told me "when Eskom comes to check our meters, we tell them 'you better go or we will burn your car.' We have tasted tear gas before, we know how shots sound like. We are prepared. But they don't come because they know it's wrong what they do." In fact, my interlocutor's reliance on the community's backing seemed plausible. It was most emphatically expressed by communities locking manipulated transformer and distribution boxes with their own locks, leading to Eskom technicians' perplexed retreat. On other occasions they have been chasing disconnectors away, with involved SECC members "expropriating" tools for their own use. Others' have established word of mouth alarm systems or use WhatsApp to warn neighbors when Eskom cars are in sight. In few areas, this on-the-ground conflict has come to a point where authorities refrain from entering places considered "no-go areas," one officer of the GFIS unit admitted in an interview.

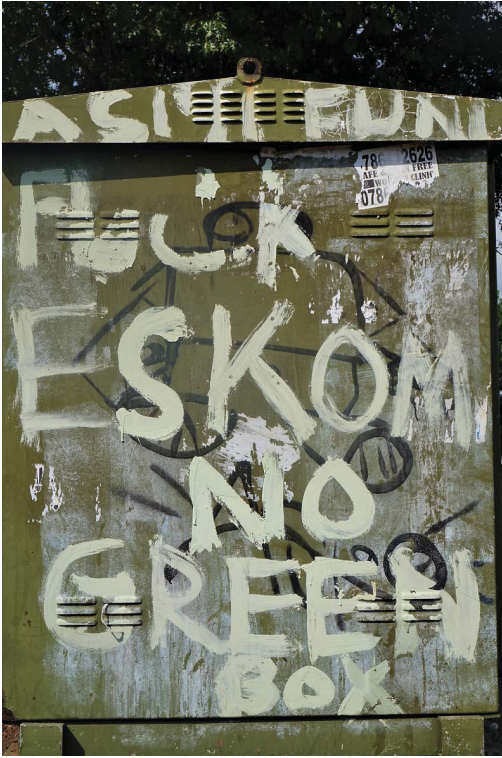


FIGURE 2. Residents’ graffiti on one of Eskom’s hacked transformer boxes: “We don’t want your meters, fuck off Eskom.” Soweto, 2019. Photo by author.

A complementary aspect to struggle technicians’ technical interventions to increase people’s access to electricity is political education in order to raise support and the degree of involvement among their communities. Activists explained:

our activism is a lot about knowledge. We are here to filter and discuss what we can know, what’s going on in the communities or in the media, what Eskom plans, who is corrupt and what can we do about it. And then we mainstream it back into the communities. People must be able to expose the cruelty they [Eskom and the ANC] are doing to our homes. It is important to dissect it, piece by piece. We will have to do more research on our own

poverty as it is planned elsewhere, by these devils in a suit, and we only see it when it confronts us.

Eventually, a long-standing member and anti-apartheid veteran said in reference to his struggle past, “we cannot rest yet.” This is an understanding of democracy as an ongoing project, requiring constant public vigilance of an engaged and informed public. In striking resemblance, pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1927) once argued in favor of participatory democratic practices and campaigned for the creation of viable and sustainable means of achieving the public interest against technocratic undermining. Sowetan energy activists recognized the importance of such an informed public in the contention for social goods as well, and their work of mainstreaming skills, knowledge, and techniques, as well as amplifying communities’ voices in public discourse during interviews or round table discussions with Eskom must be seen in light of this. The formation of a public, or practices of “publicizing” (see Trémon in this issue), became part of their strategy.

As I laid out in the preceding section, the foundation to this strategy is anchored in the historic experience of a community’s responses to apartheid’s disparate techno-political space-making. According to Dewey again, publics are called into being and predominantly shaped by the infrastructured flow of goods (Dewey 1927). As Stephen J. Collier, James Christopher Mizes, and Antina von Schnitzler (2016) paraphrase, “people are not joined together because they have ‘voluntarily chosen to be united’ through some original act of will. Rather, they are linked by ‘vast currents’ of circulation and complex interconnection. And it is not formal political organization but these ‘vast currents’” that initially call publics into being at all. Activists source common experiences and socialization with auxiliary practices to gain local support. They exploit them for political organization and attempt to turn a technical “infrastructural public” (Collier et al. 2016) into a political “counter-public” (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002), an arena

parallel to official spheres “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990: 67). In such an arena, redistributive politics and the postapartheid project are under popular revision.

South African grassroots organizations have been discussed in terms of their potentially transformative political agency in formulating and practicing alternative visions for peoples’ lives (see Ngwane 2021: xiii). Therein, vernacular imaginaries for provisioning, understandings of subjectivity, and political modes of democratic development and participation divergent from those of the state are being enacted (Pithouse 2006, 2014). The practice of *amakomiti* (Ngwane 2021), a colloquial term for communities’ political self-organization, is interpreted as offering a lived vision for democratic politics from below.

Against this background, critical (urban) scholarship and movement intellectuals tend to suggest that the periphery emerges as a space to quest for emancipatory possibilities, to think and act outside the idea that the state and the market are “exhaustive of our political possibilities” (Federici 2010: 1–2; Seekings 2000). And yet, as in the case of Sowetan energy activists, their engagements are led by explicitly statist aspirations. Their public emerges in conjunction to the state and claims regarding a social good’s accessibility are determined by the limited capacity to act and organize without the state. After all, their activism is not to be confused with an advocacy for community-organized energy management but rather a temporary, vicarious seizure from a market logic applied by the ANC state. Their actions are a means rather than an end in themselves and to be understood as an open indictment of the state’s failure to provide essential goods in a way that meets people’s living realities. In principle, they appreciate the state as a guarantor to secure redistribution and socio-spatial inclusion and are well aware that the sustainable and fair organization of energy supply beyond a certain scale makes govern-

mental institutions almost indispensable, it can only be accessed effectively through the state. Hence, activists’ hacking into the state’s provisioning grid does not aim to transform it, but is understood as a makeshift open accessing to bridge delivery gaps. The role of the state herein not only as antagonist but also as addressee cannot be neglected (see Pithouse 2014). Practically reconciling these two centrifugal forces of political-theoretical discourse is characteristic to the challenges of struggle technicians’ activism. They ultimately depend on the state’s responsiveness and attendance to their needs. While social movements literature often tends to presuppose such responsiveness (Amenta et al. 2010), at least under certain historic circumstances of the right “political opportunities” (Tarrow 1994), the case of the struggle technicians seems to suggest it cannot always be taken for granted.

As long as the government holds on to its policy of conditioning access to electricity and defending its usage from what to their logic is freeriding consumption, community activists are forced to make use of the few options they have to confront this dispossession and effectively achieve limited autonomy from the state’s seizure, while at the same time exert pressure on the state to meet their demands. Yet, their success is limited. As long as the state does not concede, they can only achieve a minimum bargain and arrive at a state of entrenched provisionality: while achieving a certain degree of autonomy from disciplinary commodification they unavoidably contribute to Johannesburg’s heterogeneous urbanization by enshrining the fragmented delivery landscape at their doorsteps. Beyond that, informal connections will always be unreliable and seasonal: their provisional temporality makes them vulnerable to technical failures like overload, access disagreements between informal providers and users, voltage fluctuations or defects during the cold and rainy months. And despite the assurances of movement technicians to be safe and professional, there is neither a guarantee nor compensation if something goes wrong. Against such objections, residents and activists simply argue

they would have nothing to lose and prepare to endure.

Conclusion

This article discussed community activists' repertoire of contention for energy justice in post-apartheid South Africa. In the wake of comprehensive corporatization programs around the millennium, when municipalities were forced to budget their spending, energy justice activists organized to reconnect their communities to the national grid. They strive to achieve unconditional access for all citizens, whether they are able to afford it or not. I argued that activists' engagement with the contentious topic of electricity must be related to the entanglement between political power and energy production during apartheid and after.

Therefore, I historically situated the making of South Africa's fragmented infrastructural landscape and argued that the reconfiguration of urban struggles around electricity and infrastructural inclusion from the late 1990s onward stems from unresolved patterns of disparate urbanization and correlating delivery apparatuses. The experience of and socialization by undersupplied township publics consequently informs recent and present struggles against the introduction and enforcement of neoliberal cost-recovery policies, price increases, and decreases in quality of service delivery.

Informed by critical urban theory on the global South, I demonstrated how activists' repertoire to challenge the ANC and its changed governance techniques draws from historic exceptionally "infrastructural" conflicts with the apartheid state and productively turned the material legacy of undersupply, disconnect, and political neglect, as well as the increased ungovernability of spatial developments at this urban periphery into a political strategy to carve out spaces of temporal autonomy from the state's energy governance that attempts to curtail accessibility.

Also, by accessing the grid with direct actions of mass illegality, they use the centralized

electricity infrastructure's vulnerability at the grid edge as political pressure points to force the state to meet their demands to supply free basic services to all South African citizens. Yet, I show how their strategy can only be of limited success. Since their claims can only be realized by the state and are for historical reasons expected to be provided by the postapartheid government that would show understanding for activists reasoning, they are dependent on a government that already fell for global neoliberal policy trends of the time in their first few years of rule. Hence, both ANC's state and Sowetan activists of the SECC ended up in a stand-off: the government choose to sit out and relies on its reputational capital from historic achievements to maintain its crumbling power base without having to compromise while activists entrench in their neighborhoods but they are not able to achieve more than perpetuated makeshift solutions of semi-professional connections. The fulfillment of affordable, sustainable access to electricity and other basic urban goods is on the part of the government.

By highlighting this, I aim to complicate the often-simplified antagonistic relationship of the state with its citizens and show how in this case activists who are striving for accessible urban goods orient their practices along explicitly statist expectations because self-organization, permanent appropriation, and co-governance of goods are neither aspired to nor do they seem manageable in this context. Rather, by actions of publicizing, activists attempt to build an informed, skilled, defiant, and growing counter-public to lay claims at the state and increase pressure to de-commodify basic delivery. This strategy however can only be of limited success as far as it depends on a state that has embraced key neoliberal capitalist paradigms to compromise and somehow meet their demands for free public electricity.

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Notes

1. As part of my PhD project, I conducted ethnographic research in Johannesburg between January and September 2019. Beyond participating in activists' day-to-day operations, I interviewed residents, police officers, municipality officials, unionists, and various members of Johannesburg's organized political left, especially the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and its umbrella organization United Front.
2. *isiZulu* for "snakes."
3. According to estimations, residents of Soweto owe an accumulated debt of 18 billion rand, approximately 1.5 billion Euros (BusinessTech 2019). This number is mathematically and ethically contested.

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