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**‘Because we are the only ones in the community!’
Protest and daily life in poor South African
neighborhoods**

Jérôme Tournadre

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(épreuve auteur)

Abstract: This article is based on research conducted in various South African cities, in contact with organizations involved in demonstrating against poor living conditions. It aims to grasp these collectives outside of their interactions with the political sphere, by moving away from the traditional definitions of a “social movement.” The protesters are here examined in terms of their relationships with their immediate surroundings: the neighborhoods. The point is thus to emphasize the continuities that may exist between protest and daily life. Indeed, one may find elements in the ordinary and the everyday that shed light on some of the logics that structure mobilization and certain practices of protest.

Keywords: community, daily life, people’s movement, poor neighborhoods, social protest, South Africa

South Africa has, since the late 1990s, witnessed an almost continuous cycle of social protest against the lack of housing and the unaffordable access to water, electricity, and sanitation networks in many poor areas of the country. This article is based on research conducted from 2009 onward in various South African urban areas (Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Grahamstown) in contact with militants active in protest organizations: the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC), the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in Johannesburg, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) in Grahamstown, Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) in Cape Town, and so on. Some of those collectives have disappeared or grown weaker since the early 2010s, but for many years, they gave shape to social discontent in South Africa.¹

In what is ultimately a quite traditional way, this research is based on interviews² and observations. These included observations of public meetings and protest actions but also of apparently more innocuous moments. These can, for example, take the form of the hours spent to no real purpose in the premises used by organizations listening to the most varied conversations between activists and residents of the township or squatter camp, or accompanying activists as they resolved neighborhood conflicts. Each time, it is the protesting collective that I am observing—and its activists continue, even in the course of these activities, to assert their membership of this collective. But, as opposed to what I am able to gather the rest of the time, their words and their gaze are no longer turned toward political power. One might say that protest is no longer simply protest or, at least, that it seems to deviate from the standard definitions.

It is not my aim here to question these definitions. My attention will focus instead on an object—the social protest collectives in South Africa—that, in principle, conforms to the canons of the sociology of social movements: they embody a collective and concerted action

on behalf of a cause. These post-apartheid protests have been intensively studied since the early 2000s (Ballard et al. 2006; Dawson and Sinwell 2012; McKinley and Veriava 2005; Pithouse 2006) but more often through confrontation with the government or the state. Here, it will be a matter of moving away from this essentially “political” way of looking at things. Thus, the actors of institutionalized politics, notably the African National Congress (ANC), will be relatively absent from the following pages. My main hypothesis is indeed that we cannot see and understand any mobilization as a whole if we only focus on those moments “in which people gathered to make vigorous, visible, public claims, acted on those claims in one way or another, then turned to other business” (Tilly 1995: 32). Instead of the noisy head-to-head confrontations with political authorities, or the rumble of demands being voiced, I examine the relationship between protest and its actors on the one hand and a certain “ordinariness” on the other—more specifically, the ordinariness of their most immediate environment, that of neighborhoods where unemployment and an informal economy are the norm: the poorest areas of the townships and informal settlements. Indeed, an organized protest is not something that hovers above the ground: it is part of the fabric of “normal” (Auyero 2005: 128), or at least mundane or routine relations.

This fact is even more pronounced in the case of South Africa, as the poor neighborhoods are at once the stage on which demonstrations take place and the experiential site of the women and men taking part. Several links may then appear between the protest movement and the main temporality of the “ordinary,” the everyday. The idea that there may be something other than a discrepancy or a break between protest and everyday life may not be completely absent from research into social movements (Auyero 2004; Bayat 2007; Mansbridge 2013), but it seems to be regularly dismissed by a certain kind of common sense. It may, however, be in this relationship with the neighborhood, tucked away in certain folds of everyday life, or, in the words of Charles Tilly, in that “other business” with which

militants concern themselves when they are not protesting, that those items that may shed light on some of the logics that structure mobilization or certain practices of protest are embedded. This “reembedding” of protest in the “social” world should bring out less visible facets of organizations and militant activity. It should also enable us to verify that the dynamics of protest draw on elements that may lie within the ordinary relation to the political, within the infrapolitical—what is practiced outside the visible spectrum of what usually passes for political activity (Scott 1990)—but also on things that are neither fundamentally “politicized” nor “politicizing.”

In the social structure of poor neighborhoods

South African social protest rarely ventures beyond the physical limits of the poorest areas in the townships or the alleys that twist between the shacks made of tin and the various recycled materials that comprise the informal settlements. For reasons that lie at the intersection of a geography inherited from apartheid and their own socioeconomic status, it is sometimes difficult for some residents to escape from these residential areas. The blame lies with the segregationist and racist policies that relegated nonwhites to the outskirts of towns, sometimes to a distance of dozens of miles from the centers, and with a democracy that has still not remedied this situation. The poorest inhabitants must thus rely on mediocre bus services or shared taxis whose cost often proves prohibitive.

Protest is anchored in these residential areas (formal and informal), and is taken up first and foremost in the organizational forms that protest has favored since the late 1990s. In most cases, these collectives adopt the model of umbrella organizations: a first stage, set up at the level of a city, an urban conglomeration, or a region, coordinates the activities of associations affiliated to it whose activity is detectable on the level of a township, a squatter camp, or a neighborhood. These affiliates are similar to groups of people formed around a

few very committed activists with a high degree of visibility in the community. Here we find a type of structure quite familiar to the women and men living in these modest or poor residential areas. The social fabric of these areas is sometimes traversed by various associations—collectives of retirees, committees of “concerned residents” or “crisis” committees, sports associations, vigilance committees, burial societies, neighborhood credit organizations (Bähre 2007)—that can be traced back to the late nineteenth century in certain black neighborhoods (Bundy 2000). This form of association enjoyed a revival in the 1970s thanks to the movement of civics³ that were instructed by the exiled leaders of the ANC to “make the townships ungovernable.” Contemporary protest organizations thus resort to relatively routine group models, when they do not directly take over from existing associations or groups. In Mandela Park (Cape Town), for instance, the Anti-Eviction Campaign set up in the first half of the 2000s was a carbon copy of the local vigilance committee that had officiated a few years previously. At the same time, in Isipingo, near Durban, one of the branches of the Concerned Citizens’ Forum was created by a teacher who reactivated the networks of the civic that had become moribund in his neighborhood. Sometimes, an overt effort was made by common consent to ensure that the new collective became part of this tradition and was included within the history of the territory, as suggested by the words of one of the founders of the SECC:

So we decided . . . let’s found the organization . . . and then we called it the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, because in Soweto, there was an organization during the struggle against apartheid . . . in the ’80s. It was called the Soweto Education Crisis Committee. It was very strong in putting together students and parents against apartheid. *[And the people from this organization came . . .]* No, no . . . just memory. **[He brings his right hand up to his temple, as if to suggest thinking.]** *[To make a*

link?] Yeah, yeah. It was the Soweto Education Crisis Committee . . . so we said, “We are the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee.” (interview, Durban, 7 July 2009)

So contemporary protest collectives emerge from a social structure that existed before them, and they may in principle derive some benefit from it. This situation very often means they can have access to resources known to be essential for moving into action (McAdam 1982): a meeting place, leaders versed in methods of organization, or, even more, a preexisting group of individuals. The latter element also appears to be central in the formation of contemporary protest organizations or, more precisely, in the composition of their original militant core. At Orange Farm, on the outskirts of Johannesburg, the gathering of residents in the Orange Farm Water Crisis Committee is orchestrated by women and men who have left the local branches of the ANC to denounce the inactivity of their leaders in the face of the water and power cuts that have become increasingly common since 1996. Mutual acquaintances also play an important subsequent role. Those who join organizations once they have been formed and comprise their social basis when they participate, more or less occasionally, in marches or rallies, often discover the group through a friend or neighbor who was already a member, or after accompanying a relative to one of the many public meetings led by activists.

These gatherings are interesting in several ways. Sometimes standing out in the cold or at dusk, on the edge of housing areas or in neighborhood community centers, they are open to all residents, who sometimes take young children along with them. Speech is supposed to be free; it circulates and focuses on very local problems. Activists also rarely denounce national leaders of the ANC; criticism is generally aimed at municipal representatives. The protesters, who see this as an opportunity to convince others of the need to join their cause, may occasionally recall the past “successes” of their organization: the installation by the

municipality of toilets in a squatter camp, the obtaining of a moratorium on the cutting off of electricity, and so on. Admittedly, at such moments, demands resurface; the betrayal of the hopes of 1994 is—albeit implicitly—denounced, local officials are criticized for being responsible for the underdevelopment of the area: in short, we here have, in principle, the traditional characteristics of a social movement. However, the most important factor is perhaps less what these practices and discourses *are* than what they are deemed to be, namely, incorporated into a political form fully controlled by the residents and in sync with their daily troubles—a politics that could almost be described as elementary, being in the vanguard of what is seen as “essential” and “fundamental.” This political form could more simply be described as “popular.”

Social protest and “popular politics”

Expressing your displeasure by throwing yourself into a *toyi-toyi*,⁴ going to meetings that have been called to discuss the problems threatening your area, participating in the election of community leaders, joining residents’ committees, and so on—these are all elements of this political form whose essence seems to lie in its being directly part and parcel of the daily life of the district. The very term “popular politics” certainly owes more to a process of intellectual and academic conceptualization than to the words of the women and men who are its primary actors and witnesses. It is also unlikely that the latter will systematically ascribe a political dimension to what they do every day (or almost). Some of their actions, such as going to a residents’ meeting, can even be performed without conviction, out of social conformity (Mariot 2011), or in the name of a habit whose foundations are hardly questioned: because it is self-evident or because “everyone does it.” However, beyond a few necessary practical precautions, there is in principle no doubt that this category—“popular politics”—brings together activities, moments, narratives, discourses, prescriptions, and representations

whose common factor is that they claim to regulate and govern local life. The set of these factors, indeed, is displayed as a harmonious encounter between the social and the political. For example, the SECC meetings held each week within the walls or in the court of the Careers Centre in Diepkloof (Soweto) regularly end with offers to share information or a technical or practical skill: one of the members of the audience, whether it be just a resident who has come to voice a complaint or an activist, can take this opportunity to offer classes in sewing or mechanics to those who, a few minutes earlier, were waxing indignant at the power cuts ordered by the paragovernmental company.

To put this all in context, we need to remember that “culture is historical before being ‘cultural’” (Bayart 1981: 57). Popular politics can indeed draw on a certain historical depth—the forms of neighborhood sociability that, from the late nineteenth century onward, appeared among black populations. The institutionalization of segregation and the formal prohibition on nonwhites participating in official political life further strengthened this and gave it a new shape in the middle of the twentieth century. Popular politics then became indistinguishable from the principle of “people’s power” and its logic of bypassing the institutions imposed by apartheid and crystallizing around specific beliefs, including the belief that it was shaped *by* and *for* the people. All of these elements are also the object of systematization and regular maintenance by groups posing as guardians of popular politics: community leaders, members of the many street committees and neighborhood and civics’ committees, or, these days, militant protesters. All these groups are constantly updating these activities, giving them new meaning and, even more, presenting them as the foundation of a political tradition perfectly and permanently assimilated by the inhabitants; this makes it quite unlike the “other” politics, the sort practiced in the world of liberal democracy.

In the early 1990s, the words of certain community leaders also emphasized the centrality of such a politics. On the eve of the first democratic local elections, they claimed

there was no need for local elections because civics already constituted a democratic form of local government (Friedman and Reitzes 1995). The border is, however, “indistinct” (Bayart 1981: 57) between a political form that is prized by the people of the townships and a political form promoted by the rulers who act as guarantors of the political order established in 1994. On the one hand, the latter (i.e., mainly ANC officials) often grew up in the townships and were partially socialized by what would comprise the specificity of popular politics. They also never fail to highlight this aspect of their political identity, especially when, in the name of “back to basics,” they fit certain of its elements into their own approaches to liberal democracy. Think, for example, of the organization of *imbizos*⁵ by the ANC governments since the beginning of the 2000s (Kassner 2014: 113–114). On the other hand, since the first half of the 1990s, we have witnessed the appropriation of certain swathes of popular politics by a political and administrative power that institutionalizes them. The same applies to its participatory dimension and its propensity to develop discussion areas, as evidenced by the proliferation of structures (community policing forum, development forum, RDP forum,⁶ ward committee, etc.) intended to enable a dialogue between rulers and ruled on the subject of local concerns (security, housing, etc.). Finally, we must not overlook the fact that the poorest South African populations, like their Indian counterparts investigated by Partha Chatterjee (2004: 40–41), may make a strategic use of the institutions of liberal democracy—as witnessed by the many occasions on which they resort to the courts to denounce their living conditions (Dugard 2010). The border between “popular politics” and the “official” one is therefore porous.

To serve the community

In what is essentially a quite traditional way, organizations work primarily to stimulate and guide the mobilization of people in these poor areas of South Africa. An analysis of everyday

activism (Mansbridge 2013; Neveu 2011) allows us to glimpse another type of relationship with the district and its population. This relationship underlies things that are less visible, being less spectacular, than a political demonstration. What we have here is mainly a whole series of more or less significant services. The very principle of service is admittedly to be found at the heart of the practice of protest, primarily in the form of reconnecting to the network households that have not paid their water and electricity bills. In Soweto in the 2000s, activists regularly connected households to suit individual requests: the inhabitants directly contacted the committee of the organization or went to one of the public meetings organized by activists to tell people of their “disconnected” status. In response, “electrician-activists” rushed to their homes to try and remedy the problem using makeshift equipment. This involved accepting the risk inherent in the illegality of such a practice.

We still connect. We symbolize reconnection, you know? So everyone is connecting for themselves and not paying . . . When they're in trouble, they come to us: “Please, come and connect me” . . . They just want a cover. (interview with the organizer of the SECC, Durban, 7 July 2009)

The counterpart of this acceptance of risk is a certain politicization of everyday life. The boycotting of bills and wildcat reconnections are thus completely endowed with meaning by many of those taking part in the protest, who turn these actions into so many forms of direct, uniformly political resistance to the aggression of which the rulers are allegedly guilty.⁷

Beyond that, there are services, apparently harmless and very far removed from the slogans of protest, that contribute to establishing and maintaining a connection between the protest collectives and the population. Internet connections, telephone lines, and the information technology (IT) resources of an organization are sometimes made available to

neighbors or local residents who do not have them. In this context, my car, the car of a foreign researcher, clearly acquires in its turn the status of a “resource.” So, when I drive activists to the scene of a rally, I am regularly asked to allow one, two, or three people to get in even though I understand that they are external to the organization but among the (more or less vague) acquaintances of one of the activists; I then make a detour to drop them off at their homes or close to some shop or other. In a similar vein, activists can give occasional assistance to households unable to fill in an administrative document or perplexed by the technical details of water and electricity bills. This supposed practical knowledge definitely leads one young man from Soweto, for example, to visit the premises of the SECC in July 2009. He has recently been orphaned and is worried he won’t be able to benefit from the steps his parents originally took to obtain an RDP house, so he comes to check the situation with the militants. Militants regularly draw on their knowledge of the administrative machinery, as is suggested by one female activist from Johannesburg who notes how useful it might be to “gather information on the situation of people” in her neighborhood, information that will allow her to hone her “arguments to get [them] to come to the meetings.” She tells them they will be given the information they need to solve some of their problems (interview, Thembelihle, 14 May 2011).

Finally, we must not overlook what is at stake at such routine moments as the opening of the organization premises in the morning. Throughout the day, the duty activists welcome, over a cup of rooibos tea, residents who have come along for information or, more simply, for a bit of company. Beyond their contribution to the social bond, these moments also reveal what holds an organization together: they promote and maintain a form of commitment (Becker 1960) on the part of these activists to the cause and the organization that these individuals represent in these seemingly mundane interactions, so they are in fact invested with a highly valued social role. These tasks are also especially meaningful to many of them

as they carry a sense of integration that gives them a structure just as significant as anything a professional activity might endow them with. Conversely, the natural “daily round” of an unemployed person, the kind of life that regularly preceded commitment to the organization, is often associated with uselessness (“Before that, I stayed at home . . . I didn’t do anything”).

Such an approach, focused on militant activity that consists in more than just the high points of protest, also highlights positions and roles that are perhaps unexpected but directly related to the daily life of the neighborhood. This is illustrated by a certain number of initiatives aimed initially at making up for the failure of government power to have an impact on poor areas. These might involve Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) militants setting up a school designed to accommodate children whose parents cannot afford the registration fees in the official system, or members of AbM Western Cape creating a crèche. The same form of interventionism is made manifest when activists of the UPM in Grahamstown provide mediation between workers and their employers, organize information meetings on the deleterious effects of homemade alcohol, or, as in April 2014, try to get a couple to withdraw the complaint they have laid against their son’s girlfriend after a violent domestic dispute. Each time, the justification of such steps is obvious: “Because we are the only ones in the community” (conversation with the main leader of the UPM, Grahamstown, July 2012). Even if they appear “natural” to most people, these initiatives sometimes give rise to tensions between grassroots activists and the virtuosi of protest (Weber 1971). At the end of 2000, a meeting of the SECC, for example, saw a rift between those who expected the organization to initiate a number of activities in the township, such as the creation of a vegetable garden, and those who, defending projects aimed at intensifying the fight against “capitalism,” perceived in these requests a misuse of their cause on behalf of private purposes. These kinds of tensions reflect more generally the diversity of reasons for committing to such organizations. While leaders have in mind a political and ideological project in South Africa, some

“ordinary” militants have joined the post-apartheid social protest for reasons directly linked to everyday realities. They have often done so in order to obtain “assistance with service delivery issues” (Anciano 2012: 150–153). In May 2011, a woman of about 60, who was a SECC activist for two years, told me:

My electricity was cut off. I have no husband, so I went to see my neighbor. He said, “Why do you want to pay? If you’re disconnected, go and see the SECC.” I asked him, “What’s that?” And he told me to go to their meeting. And that’s what I did in the following days. (informal conversation, 13 May 2011, Soweto)

After these public meetings, the resident usually makes a request for reconnection. The positive response given there, the contact with activists who have come to repair the connection, the friendly pressure from acquaintances, and the assurance that the commitment need not be all that much of a bind (at most, the new member will need to attend a few meetings and join the ranks of the marches occasionally organized) are all likely to establish a continuity between reconnection (i.e., the service provided by the organization) and membership. One further factor could be added. Though it is not possible to determine with certainty whether the new activists are always aware of this when making their decision, entry into the organization does indeed seem to protect from evictions and disconnections.

Community-based organizations

Nevertheless, even before they are megaphones for social discontent, the SECC, the AEC, the UPM, or AbM must be seen as “community-based organizations.” This situation is transparently obvious in interviews when the reasons for a commitment to protest are discussed. So even when they have, in the past, experienced firsthand the world of political

parties and trade unions, activists claim to have kept well away from the infighting or the struggles “for positions” that punctuate the life of these institutions. Instead, they focus on the fact that, today as yesterday, their commitment is subordinate to the welfare of the “community” or the “poor”:

Obviously, before, I used to be part of the ANC. And so I went to the meetings, and so on . . . But they only talked about politics, you know? There was nothing about the community . . . Nothing for the community. I lost interest. Here [in Abahlali] things are different. We’re here for the community. What we do is on behalf of the community. (Interview, Cape Town, 20 May 2010)

The aim of SECC is to help poor people who can’t afford . . . who don’t know what to do about these bills of Eskom [the electricity company]. So we try to explain to them how things go. They’re using us . . . they’re using our strength . . . I was a member of the ANC from 1947 . . . until I left. In 2000. [*Why?*] Because they don’t care about us... about poor people. (interview, Johannesburg, 15 July 2009)

This subordination of commitment to the good of the community is even erected into a social norm of life in the neighborhood:

When we go to courts⁸... sometimes, we do ask the taxi association to take us to courts for free. [*And they accept?*] Yes, they do. We just challenge them as the Tembelihle Crisis Committee: “What are you doing for our community? You have to have something to give back to the community.” (interview with a TCC activist, Thembelihle, 22 April 2015)

Emphasizing the way commitment is subordinated to the good of the community is sometimes coupled with an affirmation of social responsibility that can result in the highlighting of forms of social and community entrepreneurship to which I will return:

The organization is trying to help people . . . We try to keep [young people] off the streets, away from crime . . . They are taught to get by. They're helped to get their driving licenses, you know? They're taught what skills they need, in business, in IT. We do that in meetings. And my idea is that the organization should open a youth center . . . You see, it's up to us to do that. (interview with an AbM activist, Cape Town, 19 May 2010)

This "sense" of responsibility seems to justify a certain expectation of something in return, especially in terms of loyalties:

Some [young people] come here . . . They want to go back to school. Then we try to assist them to make a choice of career. And also if there are any loans that they can get or bursaries we can also organize . . . We help them to find funding, so they can always associate with SECC. They say: "I was [in] dire straits and these are the people who helped me." So those are the methods that we are coming up with to help the youth . . . and strengthening the organization. (interview, Soweto, 11 May 2011)

We would certainly miss much of the meaning of these remarks if we saw them merely as a way of idealizing commitment. The "staging of identity" to which the activists interviewed are prone mainly reveals, with some precision, the "core categories" through which they

conceptualize their practices—categories that provide information on the construction of their public identity, on how they perceive their position in the township or squatter camp where they live in. But these words, and the actions associated with them, do not fully make sense unless they are related to a particular setting, one that is born of the unification of the physical, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of neighborhoods and captured by the everyday word “community.”

Movements of “ordinary people”?

If, during public meetings or in interviews, their leaders and activists regularly present them as “movements of the poor for the poor,” the collectives of protest are primarily presented as megaphones for the “community.” They thereby connect with a collective identity that goes beyond post-apartheid protest. Reference to the “community” is frequent in the media, central in administrative and political literature and, more generally, in the language of the producers of public discourse (i.e., mainly national and local elected figures); it also runs through the words of “ordinary people.” The term refers, first and foremost, to the population of an area with more or less defined contours, most often a neighborhood or street. Beyond that, the reference to the “community” is a creation of social meaning and a shaping of the social. It also presupposes the existence of the set of shared and embodied beliefs, meanings, and understandings (moral, emotional, cognitive) that James Jasper calls the group’s culture (1997: 44).

The community is primarily based on the shared awareness among the majority of the inhabitants of living in a separate and relatively consistent world. Such a perception of things—that of forming a whole within society—is not unfounded. It can feed on the sense of social and spatial relegation felt by these individuals, a sense that takes shape in a discourse based on the traditional opposition between “them and us” (Hoggart 1957: 62–85). “They”

are all those who do not live in these neighborhoods, in these communities; all those who have apparently benefited from the empowerment and development brought about by the end of apartheid; all those who, more simply, form “the rest of society.” This worldview is all the stronger as it is made objective in those physical boundaries that the emergence of liberal democracy has left untouched: those miles, already mentioned, that keep the townships and squatter camps apart from the residential neighborhoods and town centers—in other words, anything that keeps the poor away from areas of high-density employment, decent transport infrastructure, shopping centers, “good” schools, and, more generally, the conditions of a life considered “normal.” So it is also a dividing line present in the ordering of “routine social life” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 80) that is appropriated by activists, especially so as to accuse their opponents—the local and national professionals of politics—who have mostly deserted the poor areas of the townships and thus sit among those who “eat first” (Mandela Park Backyarders 2012).

To lay claim to this social identity makes it possible for protesters to gain access to a veritable cultural heritage that takes the form of a common history (that of the struggle against apartheid in particular), authentic values (a solidarity between neighbors that is presented as natural, a capacity to resist illegitimate rulers, a sense of resourcefulness, a certain idea of equality, etc.), shared living conditions (even though the townships are not socially homogeneous), and a wide range of “cultural materials” (narratives, symbols, clothing styles, and verbal or ritual styles) (Polleta and Jasper 2001: 285). Obviously we might suspect there is some strategic ploy behind the way the leaders of post-apartheid protest are trying to capture something that evades their grasp—a strategy that is revealed, for example, by the title of a workshop organized in Soweto in 2010: “How to become a leader in your community.” Does not this strategy also lie behind the constant efforts made by militants to convince everyone that there is no social distance between themselves and the

people they seek to mobilize? All, activists and residents, are—it is claimed—“in the same boat” (Mandela Park Backyarders 2012), in the words chosen by one of the collectives voicing their dissatisfaction. It is true that this perfect coincidence between identity and representation is not in itself an illusion. In the ranks of the protest organizations, we do meet “ordinary people,” to use the same terms as many of their leaders: jobless young people, long-term and mature unemployed people sometimes living off the informal economy, or even retirees who often have to provide for their children and grandchildren with nothing but their pensions. Certainly, the most active individuals, those who bear the most responsibility, those who are also asked to speak on behalf of the collective, generally have a higher level of education than the people who make up the social basis of the organization, even if their educational trajectory remains primarily marked by sacrifices or changes of direction imposed by financial contingencies.

Beyond this, we can perceive within the ranks of the protesters a fairly accurate social portrait of a contemporary South Africa where, since the early 2000s, unemployment has involved nearly a quarter of the workforce (OECD 2016) and where poverty is certainly the most widely shared phenomenon. The majority of these activists also experience housing conditions no different from the publics they claim to represent: the members of Abahlali, in Cape Town and Durban, live in shacks, while the members of the SECC mostly live in rough neighborhoods that experienced waves of disconnections in the 2000s and must wait on the lists—sometimes for nearly 15 years—for RDP houses. This situation tends to legitimize the fact that post-apartheid social protest is set up, both by its leaders and by ordinary occasional militants, as a movement carried by “community members.” In addition to bolstering the statement (or claim) that they are rooted in the social landscape of their neighborhoods, this presentation of things helps activists to think of themselves as the “poor” who are resisting on behalf of their fellow poor. There is obviously a great deal at stake here insofar as any

institution—and the organizations of protest are no exception to this rule—largely draws “its ‘power’ from its ability to manage [the] identity constructions of [its members] with the help of more or less explicit models” (Dubar 1994: 227). And there is an explicit model of commitment that here imposes itself, and imposes conformity, as so many sources of legitimacy in the life of the neighborhood: the model, namely, of the community leader or community activist.

Social protest and community leadership

Community leadership and community activism contribute, through the activities they cover, to a reification of the community. They present it as an entity with its own agency and an ability to deal with its own ills. The social positions with which they are associated are usually the result of their being elected by the inhabitants of a street or neighborhood brought together in a committee, or of their heading an association or a locally influential group. Therefore, the community leader, for example, is the person to whom people turn to settle a dispute between neighbors, or to obtain information or support in taking steps vis-à-vis the administration. It is the leader’s door you knock at in the middle of the night when you urgently need a vehicle to take a woman in labor to the hospital (interview, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, 20 May 2010). It is also up to the leader to ensure that “everything is okay” with the neighbors in the aftermath of those torrential rains that regularly leave the poor areas in dire straits (interview, Johannesburg, 15 July 2009).

In the essay he wrote on Diepsloot, an area rocked by violent protests in 2008 and 2009, Anton Harber aptly describes the centrality of these individuals. This centrality is reflected in the time he accompanied a local woman, the secretary of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) branch, on her walk. The reader discovers the multiple demands made on the young woman as she walks through the township—the way

she is asked, for example, by a passerby to intervene with a mechanic who is refusing to return the battery from his vehicle to him (2011: 74). The community leader is therefore a mediator in the neighborhood, but can also be an active and regular intermediary between the public on the one hand and the political and administrative authorities on the other. Within protest organizations we find individuals whose profiles display quite clearly the main features of this rapid presentation or, at the very least, individuals who can claim the same “capital of autochthony” (i.e., a popular and local social capital based on both local neighborhood, kinship, and friendship relations and a local reputation) (Retière 2003). In interviews, several activists also claim to be “well known” in their neighborhoods, some even stating that this reputation was gained before they engaged in protest.

This is confirmed by an analysis of the women and men involved in current discontent, an analysis that highlights, among those who are most visible in their neighborhood, a propensity to engage in several local commitments and a recurring activity in forms of social and community entrepreneurship, that is to say, in actions involving a certain “self-sacrifice” that, in everyday life, are conducted on behalf of the interests of the community. In Durban, 10 years previously, the woman who would subsequently be one of the first female faces in the AbM helped to set up a self-managed crèche in the middle of the shacks in Kennedy Road. The recognition she derived from this initiative led, at the beginning of the next decade, to her being elected vice president of the camp’s Development Committee, the body responsible for dealing with problems faced by residents on a daily basis and for negotiating with the municipality.

We will be able to grasp the extent of these local visibilities, constructed and maintained almost daily, by following in the footsteps of one of the leaders of protest in Grahamstown since 2009. This man, a former activist in the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO), was involved for many years in coaching amateur football teams—an activity that,

every weekend, involves dozens of young people in the townships of the city—and was employed between 2013 and 2015 by a nongovernmental organization (NGO) specializing in “local development.” As observed in July 2012 and April 2014 and 2016, he walks through the black neighborhoods of his city from morning to night, thus confirming his reputation. He spends most of his time ensuring that one or another person will attend a future meeting of the UPM, “recruits” for the organization when the opportunity arises, encounters community leaders, inquires after the fate of young people living in a municipal rubbish tip, asks his neighbors and acquaintances for the latest news, spends a great deal of time sitting at the edge of football fields observing the progress of the teenagers and sometimes talking politics. This intermingling—or, more probably, this muddling—of genders, roles, identities, interests, and networks again takes objective shape in sociocommunity initiatives, such as the plan for a football academy he is developing with another UPM activist who also holds a post in this association. Built in the middle of a township, on land that the two men hope to obtain from the municipality (a municipality they are in fact challenging because of its tardiness in fostering local development), the institution will, it is hoped, give children something to do after school. Meanwhile, this second activist, who is training a football team in the townships, is organizing vigils in the community. His young players are encouraged to take collective action: to ensure, through regular visits, that pensioners have adequate access to water, to grow vegetable gardens in backyards, to set up soup kitchens, and so on.

The protest activity of these individuals is thus part of a chain of involvement in and devotion to local causes, in both the diachronic and synchronic senses: these causes may be associative, civic, or political, as confirmed by the presence in the ranks of social protest of individuals who attended or are still attending local party branches. This situation obviously feeds into the specific social capital mentioned above, and it is, without a doubt, on this

capital that the capacity of these women and men to engage in their neighborhood, on an almost daily basis, has for the past few years rested.

Conclusion

This article has sought to bring out how the links—sometimes very continuous—between ordinary, everyday life and social protest shed some light on what is happening at the heart of the latter. This approach offers some answers to such key issues as how protest is sustained over time, who demonstrates, and how people demonstrate. In particular, we here discover elements that sometimes seem to be part of the private lives of activists but are in fact able to feed into the meaning, legitimacy, and maintenance of protest activity. Walking along the “edges” of protest also has the advantage of showing that the boundaries of this world are not always drawn with a firm hand. A close link with the life of poor neighborhoods gives a certain consistency to protest. Its legitimacy and, even more, its very existence appear related to its rootedness in the community, a genuine space for the reference points and social landmarks of militant collectives.

Jérôme Tournadre is CNRS research fellow at the Institut des Sciences sociales du politique (CNRS, UPL, Univ. Paris Nanterre, ENS Saclay).

E-mail: jetournadre@gmail.com

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Notes

¹ Half of South Africans live below the poverty line (StatsSA 2015).

² The data produced for this research were gathered between 2009 and 2016. The days spent alongside protest collectives—at their headquarters, while traveling to neighborhoods, or at demonstrations—allowed me to conduct some 50 semistructured interviews with militants. Some 15 interviews were also conducted with representatives of various groups that have regular contact with social activists: local elected officials, trade unionists, NGO officials, the committed intellectuals working with them, and one member of the government (who is also an official of the Communist Party). This helped me, step by step, to reconstruct the environment in which protest organizations operate.

⁴ The *toyi-toyi* mixes dance, political slogans, and songs of struggle and resistance.

⁵ *Imbizo* is a gathering where people discuss issues with leaders. It is a traditional political tool.

⁶ The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) aimed at repairing the injustices of apartheid through commitments to health, education, connecting homes to network services, and building housing.

⁷ However, in these acts there is a coexistence of elements that may well have a protest aspect but also involve just the need to subsist and get by on a daily basis for households that, like everyone else, need water and electricity for cooking, to light and heat their homes, and to wash.

⁸ The activists are often charged with “illegal gathering,” “public violence,” “malicious damage to property,” and so on.