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Activism and sense of community in a South African township

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'I am a full-time activist'

Activism and sense of community in a South African township

Jérôme Tournadre

Translation : Andrew Stephen Brown

- 1 'I have a base, you know?' It's a late November afternoon, and Ayanda¹ and I are strolling down the long street that runs along the buildings of the social science departments of Rhodes University. A few minutes ago we were in one of the main pubs in the city. He ordered a pizza to go. I paid, without him having to ask me. As if it went without saying. I was almost surprised that he should choose this place which, to my eyes as a foreigner, embodies perhaps a little too well the White face of the city, with its clientele of students, families or single men who have come to drink a beer while watching a rugby match. Grahamstown is a place of some 80,000 residents, located in the middle of nothing but the veld, the grassy and shrubby savannah that is part of the country's identity. Almost one hundred and thirty kilometers of a monotonous road, set in a continuous landscape of thorns and bald hills, separate it from Port Elizabeth, the provincial capital. At the end of apartheid, the city was presented by some as the most segregated in South Africa (O'Meara & Greaves 1995). Liberal democracy does not seem to have fully remedied this. Nowadays, if the big cities like Cape Town or Johannesburg are highly segmented, Grahamstown is a veritable split site amassed over a few tens of square kilometers: in the west we find the heart of the colonial city, with its mixture of businesses, Cape Dutch houses, Elizabethan buildings and more modern and functional blocks; in the east, the 'African' part,² with its township and informal housing areas



where most of the poverty is observed, a poverty which also affects nearly 55% of Grahamstownians.

Fig. 1. Portrait of Ayanda, Port Elizabeth, 22 July 2012



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 2 Once out in the street, we resumed a conversation that may well have begun six years ago, at our first meeting. I wanted him to talk to me again about the conditions of his commitment:

'I have a base. My sister, for example, she lives in Cape Town. She's the one who buy me clothes and she sends them to me. There's also Paul [a white academic close to the UPM] who can help me. And you see, tonight, I'm going to eat the pizza you bought for me. It's my base, you see? I'm surrounded by people who care about me.'³

- 3 The 'base' evoked by Ayanda —these people around him who 'take care of [him]'— has allowed him to be a full-time activist within the movement of the jobless that he helped found in 2009: the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM). Every day sees him roaming the township to ensure the presence of such or such person at the community meeting scheduled for a few days later, writing press releases or, more simply, experiencing the ordinary rhythms of militant time by discussing anything and everything with his 'comrades'. The movement that fills his days, allowing him only Sundays to indulge in his passion for football, is one of those protest collectives that have contributed to the emergence of a social movement in the poor neighborhoods of post-apartheid South Africa (Ballard, Habib & Valodia 2006; Beinart & Dawson 2010; Tournadre 2018): the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Landless People's Movement and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee in Johannesburg, the Concerned Citizens' Group in Durban, the Anti-Eviction Campaign in the Western Cape Province, Abahlali baseMjondolo in KwaZulu

Natal, etc. These structures have often been able to give a voice and a face to the discontent which, in the early hours of the 21st century, spread to the most disadvantaged areas of the country. The reasons for this anger were quite simple: lack of housing; poor, non-existent or unaffordable access to basic services (water, electricity, health); and crime and unemployment. All these problems pointed to the failure of the promises of 'a better life for all'⁴ that had accompanied the establishment of a liberal democracy from the mid-1990s onwards. However, while the anger did not subside in the course of the 2010s, the main organizations that until then had embodied it gradually melted away. This has not been the case with the UPM in Grahamstown. Over ten years after its creation, its members continue to address their complaints to the authorities of this average-sized town in Eastern Cape, one of the poorest provinces in the country. They have demonstrated against the delays in the development of the lower-class neighborhoods, participated in the construction of barricades on the roads that run past the many local shanty-towns, organized sit-ins against the corruption of local elected officials, gone on marches to denounce the sexual violence gnawing away at the township, and dumped buckets of excrement in the atrium of the town hall to remind the mayor that, just a few miles away from the comfort of his office, the bucket system⁵ remains a reality for hundreds of those in his town.

Fig. 2. On the outskirts of the township, Rhini, Grahamstown, 13 July 2018



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 4 The UPM can indeed be linked to the extended family of poor people's movements (see Zorn 2013), these collective and concerted mobilizations of women and men whose lives seem to be mainly shaped away from the processes that organize production, consumption and, very often, official political representation in a society. The ranks of the Grahamstown unemployed people's movement thus include a number of individuals who no longer seem to be of interest to capital and its agents. Like others around the world, they have been sucked into a vast 'surplus' that does not meet the expectations and needs of current capitalism (see Li 2010; Chatterjee 2008; Smith 2011). They can be people in their twenties and thirties stuck in this 'crisis of social

reproduction' which afflicts the majority of their contemporaries⁶ (Hunter 2011; Hicel 2014) or adults in the prime of life on whom incomes sometimes rely on the informal economy or, more often, on benefit —if they are recognized as disabled or parents of minors.

- 5 The UPM's implantation in the local landscape makes it above all a community-based organization: a gathering of individuals emerging from the 'community' to defend it, represent it and take charge of its interests. Thus, like the groups of *piqueteros* in Argentina who, in the 1990s, blocked the roads in order to denounce privatizations while helping to create gardens, dispensaries and bakeries in their neighborhoods (Osterweil 2014: 478), the members of the UPM frequently extract themselves from the world of protest to commit themselves to different fronts of daily life in the township. They may, among other things, be required to collect and distribute food (as in the 2020 lockdown), to support the development of individual vegetable gardens, to organize workshops against domestic violence, etc. According to one of its young members, the collective is even a 'social service' in itself, sometimes operating in the almost intimate lives of the poorest Grahamstownians. This happens when UPM groups do their utmost to help bereaved families when the latter are unable to pay their funeral costs.

Fig. 3. In the township, Rhini, Grahamstown, 12 July 2018



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 6 Ayanda was my main informant during my stays in Grahamstown, between 2012 and 2018. He was the person, for example, who replied to the electronic message that I had sent to the address at the bottom of a leaflet relayed by the website of a friendly organization.⁷ The hours I spent at his side, following him in his various activities, gradually convinced me that any attempt to paint a *portrait of him as an activist* involved apprehending him through the network of relationships, institutions and experiences which structure ordinary social life in poor and working-class neighborhoods in South Africa and shape the 'community'. This postulate reminds us of an obvious fact that the noise of the demonstrations sometimes leads us to forget: far from being a free-floating

object, protest is rooted in frequently regular and repeated relations – relations that are sometimes described as ‘normal’ (Auyero 2005: 128). This is particularly true in the case of Ayanda and his comrades, since their commitment is deployed in a ‘regime of the near’. Sociologist Laurent Thévenot sees it as connected to the way in which ‘personal and local ties increasingly form the basis of social movements: these may be proximity to an endangered environment, one’s own body being affected by a harmful substance or a disease, or a deficient habitat’ (2006: 220). In fact, the cause of the UPM fits perfectly into the difficult living conditions which its members are exposed to. The social relations characterizing the space of struggle therefore overlap or regularly intersect with those which define the space of the everyday, the familiar and the ordinary, and vice versa. Ayanda is undoubtedly the most famous figure of the movement, in Grahamstown and beyond. He has also become one of the unofficial spokespersons of post-apartheid protest, one of those to whom the media turn when they are dealing with the ‘revolt of the poor’ or, more generally, of the ‘raw life’ (Ross 2009) led by several millions of South Africans thirty years after the end of apartheid. His notoriety is, however, less than that of Trevor Ngwane, the main leader of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee in Johannesburg, or Z’bu Zikode, president of Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban. These two men spent part of the 2010s acting as the ‘travelling ambassadors’ (Burawoy 2017: 24) of protest. His fear of flying may have prevented Ayanda from following this path, which would otherwise have led him to present the ‘South African case’ to activist audiences around the world. Over the 2000s and 2010s, post-apartheid South Africa became an iconic textbook case for many actors in what could be called the international anti-globalization galaxy. South African protest activists first started to crop up in the essays of Michael Hart and Antonio Negri (2004), Naomi Klein (2007) and many others, where their fight appeared as a striking illustration of the resistance to the ‘trickery’ of the globalized order. And it is true that these struggles ideally brought together individuals who had spent part of their lives fighting for their freedom and dignity before being betrayed by their former leaders and finally handed over to market logics. Thus, the protest movement in South Africa has, little by little, found its place in this mesh of interlacing networks that NGOs, intellectual and political friendships, and the solidarity between activists weave and foster on an international scale. It is in this way that Ayanda, in spite of his fear of flying, participated in the Marxism Festival in London in the early 2010s, at the invitation of an academic who also ran a small Trotskyist party. His travel and living expenses were borne by a British university, which also agreed to invite him to take part in a seminar organized by its department of African Studies.

Fig. 4. In the township, Extension 7, Grahamstown, 16 July 2018



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 7 Paradoxically, it is actually Ayanda's ability to play with boundaries that comes to mind when I have to describe him —physical and social boundaries, in this case. In fact, the choice of this pub should not have surprised me. As a child, Ayanda came to town quite often, unlike most of his classmates. He accompanied his mother, a domestic worker in the home of a White academic who was close to anti-apartheid organizations. He also likes to tell how, when he was barely a dozen years old, he left the township one day armed with his 'broken English' in order to buy a soccer ball in the city, when apartheid was still in force. Ayanda has obviously kept the self-assurance that some may interpret as a form of rudeness. He does not hesitate, for example, to make himself a cup of tea without being invited when he goes to the premises of the lawyers' association that the UPM regularly calls on. Then he goes straight into the lawyers' offices, even he is not always expected there. He concedes that he can be a bit of a 'bully', or 'bossy', when he wants to get something: 'When you're in the social movement, you've got to hassle.' At the risk of speaking on his behalf, I think that this ease of manner also demonstrates his conviction that his condition should not debar him from anything. Being poor *and* Black does not mean that you have to hold back. To a certain extent, the fact that he walks into these offices or those of the sociology department without being announced is also a way of challenging the social order or, more exactly, of showing a certain defiance.
- 8 One morning during my last stay, Ayanda asked me to accompany him to one of the city's cultural venues. As so often, he had veiled his intentions in a certain mystery, until I understood that he was actually hoping to meet the main person in charge of a local festival there. For some reason of which I am still unaware, this person had indeed promised to pay the sum of 500 rand —about 25€— to the movement. Back in the car, and after having left his contact information with the assistant of the man he was in the end unable to meet, Ayanda had told me that this capital should allow the UPM to register with the administration and thus have a status facilitating the collection of

donations and various sources of funding. The fact he had asked me for the same amount, and for the same reasons, a few days earlier, obviously did not seem to worry him. What may, at least at first, appear as a form of opportunism often arouses a certain mistrust among those who are its objects. On a number of occasions, links with individuals or institutions seem to have been disrupted by overly regular requests, whether for money or repeated and free access to certain goods (computer equipment, photocopiers, etc.). Perhaps I myself felt somewhat forced on the defensive when I was urged to invite two activists to France for the 'launching of [my] book' or, on another occasion, when the question was raised whether '[my] students [were] from the middle class' and, therefore, likely to 'fund a movement in South Africa'. I know that the expectation of some form of compensation was being expressed here: I owe my thanks to the movement for the help I have received in conducting my research. I have no doubt, however, that I also appear as the representative of a 'world of power and money, from which one can reap some advantages' (Cefaï 2003: 566). The diverse nature of these requests (giving a few rand to pay for the bus, buying small pieces of equipment for the office, 'lending' money to buy medicine, etc.) and their repetition over time suggest that every opportunity must be seized, even if it causes discomfort or arouses forms of exasperation among those who have to respond. Indeed, Ayanda and other UPM leaders devote a far from negligible part of their time to trying to obtain money. The movement's inclusion in activist networks and a certain amount of friendly or political support have allowed its members to get in touch with Western foundations or NGOs wishing to finance the conduct of development projects 'in communities'. Regularly, Ayanda also turns to individuals he knows to be likely supporters of the cause of the UPM. Emails are then sent out, describing the movement's latest disappointments, the cost of the actions envisaged and, inevitably, its compelling need for money. Some requests may obviously seem suspicious to people who are not familiar with life in the township. Some requests may obviously seem suspicious to people who are not familiar with life in the township. It is indeed sometimes difficult to know if they reflect the needs of the organization or those of the individuals who express them. There is nothing surprising about this, however, since activism in a poor people's movement like the UPM is constantly caught between these two worlds: that of the cause and that created by individual living conditions.

Fig. 5. Informal settlement, Papamani, Grahamstown, 27 avril 2016



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 9 The fact that Ayanda is relatively well-known in the movement does not lead to his being socially isolated in the poor and working-class districts of Grahamstown, either among his comrades or in the population at large. As he says himself, he struggles 'just like anyone'. More generally, this absence of social distance between UPM activists and the poor residents of the township authorizes the former to act as legitimate spokespersons for the latter: '[...] they identified us as people who stay with them in the township', he told me one day when we were discussing the way the movement had, by calling big public meetings, sought to calm the xenophobic violence that erupted in 2015.
- 10 His full-time activism, however, is by no means obvious. It is all the less so in a movement of the poor, where these activities coexist with practical priorities and issues of subsistence. To put it another way, activism comes at a cost, especially for the less well-off. When I asked him about the disengagement of one 'comrade', Ayanda summarized the limited choices to which any activist would be exposed in these words: 'Do I use these 20 rand to take the taxi to the office or do I use these 20 rand for bread?' The question obviously takes on its full meaning when we know that more than half of South Africans lived on less than 26 rand a day in the mid-2010s. The most committed, like him, get by year in, year out with meagre social allowances or rely on subsidies that an NGO or a Western foundation will agree to pay for a few weeks, or even a few months, most often under the guise of those familiar 'development projects'. When our paths met for the first time in the early 2010s, Ayanda had just turned 35 and lived in a misshapen house built on rough terrain and eaten away by weeds. As for being a house, it was mainly just the two rooms constitutive of a big shack, sturdy enough but little more than an assembly of sheet metal and various bits of recycled material. He later made his home on the other side of the street, in a building that was cramped but made of 'hard' materials —a kind of cement covered with pink plaster. However, the solution could only be temporary, as the building also housed one of his two sisters, as well as

his nephews and nieces. A few months later, Ayanda decided to rent another shack not far away. This is a sheet metal construction of approximately 70 square meters and divided into three dwellings. It is built on a plot vaguely surrounded by a rickety fence at the foot of which lies a pile of torn plastic bags, waste paper and fizzy drink bottles. The landlord is a kind of *rentier* in the informal economy; he collects rents from the five shacks that his mother built in the neighborhood several years ago. The part occupied by Ayanda consists of a room whose only window is obstructed by pieces of cardboard meant to replace the missing glass tiles. There is not enough space to accommodate much more than a bed and a chair. In the evening, Ayanda goes to eat at his sister's house. More often, he joins his girlfriend who lives in her brother's house, a block away. For lack of 'means,' Ayanda cannot live with her and their young child. His two older sons, whom he had with another wife, live at their aunt's house, with their cousins.

Fig. 6. Shack in which Ayanda rents a room, Fingo Village, Grahamstown, 19 July 2018.



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 11 Sometimes, Ayanda will spend a few hours at Mandisa's Tavern, often with some activists from the UPM. The place is in fact a vast courtyard surrounded by single-level buildings. By the end of the afternoon, the very broad pavement which borders it is filling with cars which are immediately surrounded by men offering to wash them or to keep an eye on them. Not far away, outside the entrance, several groups of women and men, young and not so young, are talking loudly, encouraged by the music whose volume will increase over the evening. Inside, everyone can watch a sports broadcast on a big screen, dance, have a beer or buy meat to grill on one of the three barbecues available. During these moments of relaxation, the 'struggle' is rarely mentioned in the conversations between 'comrades'. The talk is mainly of the football championship or more personal and everyday subjects. These moments of conviviality, admittedly rare, slip into the periphery of militant activity. They do not really disrupt it, since they help to bring coherence to the connections between political commitment and the other

dimensions of the lives of these women and men. These situations can potentially lead to dense bonds which foster loyalty to the institution or, at the very least, a form of solidarity 'mediated by loyalty to the people we meet' (Sawicki & Duriez 2003: 18).

- 12 Mandisa, the owner, is a woman in her sixties. Every evening, the apartment she has set up in one of the wings of the tavern becomes the meeting place for influential local personalities. Ayanda, who does not drink alcohol, has been a regular there since Jeff, a friend who works for the municipality, introduced him to the hostess. In the course of these evenings, he sometimes rubs shoulders with ANC local councillors whose incompetence and corruption he has denounced during the day at community meetings. In his view, this is part of his commitment: 'You shouldn't be aloof if you want to be influential.'
- 13 This cryptic admission should not lead one to think that, despite everything, an attempt is being made to win the good graces of local dignitaries of the ruling party. Admittedly, this type of situation can eventually provide an opportunity for it to diversify its networks. But this is not the point. On the one hand, if Ayanda regularly avails himself of his links with Mandisa, this is definitely because he perceives it as a token of recognition, demonstrating his own place in the local political landscape. On the other hand, the fact that he can cross paths with those whose policies he challenges on a daily basis simply demonstrates the diversity of positions adopted by the unemployed people's movement. Used to relatively high-profile and offensive actions —marches, sit-ins, occupations, etc.—, the UPM's main vocation is getting political decision-makers to consider the plight of the poorest. Negotiation and the search for dialogue with the municipality are therefore not always foreign to it. At other times, the collective has also sought to exercise the oversight over political power that is classically associated with 'civil society'. This was particularly the case when UPM members helped collect more than 20,000 signatures as part of a campaign to bring the municipality under supervision.⁸ The same logic would push them, a few months later and with the help of jurists, to get a judge to note the negligence of this same municipality and pronounce its dissolution.

Fig. 7. 'A better life for all', McDonald Street, Grahamstown, 21 april 2014



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 14 Ayanda was born in Grahamstown in the late 1970s, but spent a few years in Cape Town. He first studied management at a university of technology, while living in one of the many informal settlements that surround the Western Cape capital. It was also in this city that he found his first job. He was in charge of training and assessing the employees of one of the call centers of a catalogue company. According to him, however, he was often taken away from this assessment in order to defend employees threatened by the company's management. This attitude eventually led to his being summoned by the head of human resources on a Friday afternoon. The tense and stormy discussion he had with her, however, did not prepare him for what awaited him on his return the following Monday morning: dismissal, motivated by the accusations of physical aggression brought against him by this woman. He later found another job in a furniture store, but preferred to resign after a few months after again defending an employee.

Fig. 8. Ayanda in front of the house where he grew up, at the heart of the township, Grahamstown, 19 July 2018



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 15 These setbacks, which he links to the racism still lurking at the heart of post-apartheid society, came with other disappointments. Ayanda has always loved politics. As much as football. It would certainly be more accurate to say that he has always had a special love of political commitment. He often told me about the photo on which, at the age of seven, he appeared on the front lines of an anti-apartheid protest. The image made the front page of the Grahamstown newspaper in the 1980s, thirty years before the newspaper's editorial board named him 'Newsmaker of the year 2011.' While he consistently speaks in favour of concrete political action, which incidentally means that he can denigrate the action of political professionals and their 'empty promises,' Ayanda also loves ideas. I was very often able to observe him printing out highly theoretical political texts which I imagined he would read at night in his shack. At internal meetings, he will also sometimes quote Lenin or Trotsky. It is, however, Steve Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, assassinated in 1977 by the apartheid regime, whom he most greatly admires. The thinking of Biko, a celebrated martyr of political struggle, could certainly be compared to that of Franz Fanon and James H. Cone, one of the main theorists of Black Liberation Theology.⁹ Steve Biko elaborated a critique of White liberals opposed to apartheid. He judged them guilty of adopting, in reality, a 'master's perspective' seeking above all to 'integrate' Blacks into South African society (Biko 1987; Gibson 2011). Biko's thinking (and, more generally, that of the BCM) did not remain suspended in the sky of ideas, nor was it a secret confined to the intellectual elites of Black activists of the 1970s. It soon spread among Black youth, at university or in high schools, appearing as the most appropriate (i.e. most 'radical') response to the White state that drew its strength from the most violent repression. Biko's history is, furthermore, linked to Grahamstown. He was arrested at a police roadblock near the town in August 1977 before being imprisoned and tortured in Port Elizabeth. A few years earlier, in 1968, the National Union of South African

Students (NUSAS) had also organized its congress on the Rhodes University campus. The leaders of this multiracial and 'progressive' union had invited along their counterparts from the South African Students' Association (SASO), founded a few months ago and chaired by Steve Biko, then a medical student. As Blacks were forbidden by law from spending the night on campus, the SASO delegation was forced to fall back on the township. Biko and his friends settled in Saint Philip's Church. As luck would have it, Ayanda's shack was a few hundred metres from the red brick building of the church to which he had often steered our steps as we walked through the neighborhood. For a time, there was talk of the unemployed moving into the ruined building facing the church. The organization even received support from the Bishop, who however had to yield to the opposition from some of his flock who were close to the ANC.

Fig. 9. District of RDP houses, Extension 10, Grahamstown, 18 April 2014



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 16 Ayanda discovered the life story and thinking of Steve Biko in his early teens, when most of his friends still swore by the ANC leaders. This happened via one of his neighbors who was at that time very involved in the clandestine activities of the AZAPO, one of the main political groups associated with the Black Consciousness Movement. This same neighbor would be one of the founding members of the UPM a few years later. Ayanda quickly progressed through the AZAPO, where he soon assumed major responsibilities for its youth league. The marginalization of the party within parliamentary space inevitably stoked internal dissent. The political tendency to which Ayanda belonged criticized the way the management was slipping towards the center of the political spectrum. The opposition members were in a minority and had to leave the AZAPO, sometimes under physical threats from their former comrades. They initially sought to create a new political group that could claim to be the heir to the BCM. In a political field then dominated entirely by the opposition between the African

National Congress and the Democratic Alliance, any other political enterprise or attempt at dissent seemed destined to fail.

'It was quite a trauma in my life. None of us could imagine our life outside AZAPO. It was a trauma... it was one of the dramatic years of my life when it became clear we had to find a political home outside AZAPO. I felt soccer would do it good... 'cause I was frustrated. Nothing was going right.'¹⁰

- 17 Feeling weary, Ayanda entered Grahamstown, in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and devoted himself to amateur football. He took on provincial responsibilities and, most importantly, coached a team of young players from the township. Repeated discussions with other residents convinced him to help found a movement to express dissatisfaction with poor living conditions. Some of them joined the UPM after its foundation. Just like religion, football is often a refuge for many township residents (Withley, Hayden & Gould 2013). On weekends, it is also to these sports grounds, marked out on a plot in the heart of the township, that football fans or simply curious onlookers come to chat. They discuss the technique of a particular player, they ask after those who are absent, they talk about the week's events, etc.
- 18 A few years ago, Ayanda ran an op-ed in the local weekly,¹¹ highlighting the contrast between what football had to offer and 'the dreary lethargy of township life'. He also saw it as a way to 'challenge' fate in poor neighborhoods. So, while in other parts of the world it is certainly the dream of many amateur coaches that one of their players will be spotted by professionals, the expectations are a little different in South African slums. Most often they boil down to hoping that these young people will find the momentum to escape the rudimentary life that is all they can look forward to here. One October afternoon, as we watched teenage boys play on a football field with imaginary boundaries, in an icy wind, Athandile, another activist, recalled the importance of instilling 'rules' into these young people and the need to provide them with 'role models'. At the time he was devoting three evenings a week to supervising adolescents; he told me that his commitment, and that of his comrades, actually had but one purpose: to help the emergence of 'moral leaders' within communities. And that, he told me as Ayanda nodded approval, was as true in football teams as it was in the movement. For a while, a few activists also nursed the ambition of creating an 'out of school academy' based on football. It would have welcomed the children at the end of the afternoon in order to keep them away from petty crime or, more simply, from boredom. Their access to the pitch would have been conditional on their having completed their homework. The project gradually withered for lack of financial and land resources.
- 19 Finally, football also closely follows the contours of the post-apartheid universe of the governed. It reproduces the meanders of its injustices and its inequalities, and is imbued by the feeling of abandonment that the poorest say they experience:
- 'You've got the elite league... People with luxury cars. The elite league gets all the money and the grassroots soccer is neglected. The development structures are neglected. I mean... it's political. Football is also political.' (Interview with Ayanda. 22 April 2016)
- 'We must give young people a social conscience. They've got to understand why there are no soccer balls... why they have to share the soccer boots... why they don't play prestigious competitions [...] Football and social ills, the brokenness of our society... you cannot separate the two.'¹²

Fig. 10. Training on the plains around the township, Grahamstown, 21 April 2014



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 20 Ayanda's presence on the edges of the township's football fields and his well-known taste for commitment quickly led him to become a person who was listened to and, above all, influential in his neighborhood: a community leader. This is certainly one of the most common forms of 'the informal politics of representation in poor, urban neighborhoods of the Global South' (Piper & Bénit-Gbaffou 2014: 39). In South Africa and elsewhere, as in Brazil for example, this role is most often played by individuals who identify with 'particular life histories and characteristics' (Koster & de Vries 2012: 88). Thus, if they can assert themselves as favored interlocutors for institutions outside the community, whether these be political-administrative authorities or NGOs, these women and men must above all show an ability to solve the problems of other residents. A 'problem solver', that's what Ayanda is: he is regularly called upon to negotiate with the head of the neighborhood school who has refused to accept a child as a pupil, or else he is asked to help find a neighbor's TV antenna that has been stolen overnight, to resolve a family dispute or, more simply, to fill in a complicated administrative document. The UPM has a large number of these individuals in its ranks and the visibility of this collective in the local social landscape may well be deemed to rest on its ability to bring together these 'good reputations' or, more precisely, this 'personal capital of 'fame' and 'popularity' based on the fact of being known and recognized in person [...] and also on the possession of a certain number of specific qualifications [...]' (Bourdieu 1991: 194).

Fig. 11. Ayanda drumming up support at a community meeting, Papamani, Grahamstown, 27 April 2016



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 21 Over the first months of 2009, Ayanda's central role in the affairs and various debates animating his community involved him in many conversations and meetings sparked by the growing dissatisfaction of residents with municipal 'dysfunctions'.

'I attended some few meetings [organized by the municipality]. People said that something needed to be done... I stood up to make a point. A number of people knew my activism, so after the meeting...'

'They knew you?'

'Yes, some people knew me because of my activism at school. I have always been an activist in my community. So people recognized me. And I was a member of AZASM [Azanian Students' Movement] at high school... I have always been controversial [Laughs]. After the meeting, people came and we had a discussion: 'We have to do something because these people are taking us for granted.' We decided to form a movement. It made sense to me. The community needed a watchdog. I agreed immediately.'¹³

- 22 These women and men came from different neighborhoods. Some had known each other for many years, while others were meeting for the first time. They lived in shacks or in RDP houses, which they could see giving signs of inevitable decay, day by day. Some had been party activists; others had already headed the episodic demonstrations against poor living conditions of the democratic era. In this way, a first moment in the emergence of the Unemployed People's Movement in Grahamstown could be seen. The consolidation of this initial momentum took place in a few weeks, where family bonds, friendships and local political networks overlapped. In 2009, when the UPM was founded, Ayanda had just found a job as a casual worker. He unpacked goods after their delivery to one of the city supermarkets. He suddenly left it one day so that he could fully devote himself to the new organization: 'For once, I found life outside AZAPO. I had a political home. For once, I could do something that I love'. These few words give a

pretty clear idea of how Ayanda says he lives his activism: as a vocation, but also as a way of inhabiting the world in which altruism and self-sacrifice take precedence.

'In Extension 7, you could see that the community has confidence in Athandile. You could see that the community has confidence in Bheki [...] In Phaphamani, you could see that the community has confidence in Dumisa. In Fingo, you could see that the community has confidence in [me]... I think it comes from selflessness. If you look at Thabang... the kind of work he's doing in soccer [he coaches a team of young players] and everything... not getting paid... dedicating his life... everyday [...] You don't have to be elected. You are influential outside the formal structures. Thabang is not accountable to any formal structures. He does what he does because he's passionate about it. He's not tied to any formal structure and UPM is like that. I'm not tied to any formal structure for anything that I do in the community.'¹⁴

- 23 Everyone is obviously free to see this as mere self-assertion or a form of idealization of commitment. However, it reveals itself quite explicitly what one might call the 'sense of community': the conviction of belonging to that *whole* whose unity and coherence rest mainly on the principles of reciprocity and interdependence. While it is not a question of seeing this particular sensitivity as an explanation in itself, it nevertheless helps us to better understand certain foundations of commitment and to understand to what extent the vicissitudes of life in the township test out this commitment. The community refers at the very least to the population of a space whose limits are never formally fixed but which most often corresponds to a street, a neighborhood, a district. In a very tangible way, the community is the parents, neighbors, friends and 'pals' whom we have known since childhood and whom we meet daily. It is, in a way, a 'familiarity', in the term used by a young UPM activist whom I asked to help me understand a notion that was, to put it mildly, unfamiliar to me as a European. The community also comes with more symbolic, even cultural, aspects that take shape in what we might call a discourse of institution. For the community is indeed an institution, that is to say a set of social relations that, as an aggregate, has acquired a life of its own and come to be associated with beliefs, practices, principles and a culture. This discourse reveals more precisely, and very explicitly, the ideal model of the activist at the service of the 'community', with its codes of conduct and its right ways of doing and being. Of course, not everyone is committed to it,¹⁵ but those who have grown up since childhood in the 'central hearth' of the community¹⁶ implicitly know that they must respect it at least a little if they want it all to hang together and provide them with a position of their own. The very specificity of the township probably reinforces this configuration. The neighborhoods that make it up are indeed embedded in a common lifeworld: they thus share the history of a segregation that is not such a distant memory. These spaces together give shape to an urban form that appears as a coherent 'anthropological place' (Augé 1992): it exists through a set of relationships, stories and memories that allow those who inhabit it to identify with this space, irrespective of their differences.

Fig. 12. In the premises of the UPM, McDonald Street, Grahamstown, 28 April 2016



Photo © Jérôme Tournadre

- 24 Ayanda undoubtedly lives in the heart of this ‘central hearth’ and never missed an opportunity to remind me that his movement was ‘at the service’ of the community. Returning to the topic of the UPM’s investigations into illegal resales of RDP houses by city councilors,¹⁷ he explained to me:

‘We are going with this information to the community. The community will advise us. What should be the next step? We take our mandate on a daily basis right from there [...] Those are the people who decide what problems they want to talk about and for which we will act [...] We will not take decisions on their behalf. We will not say that there’s no contradiction between our ideology and their thinking ... We just go there.’¹⁸

- 25 Regularly, however, the sense of community comes into tension with this nostalgia, or melancholy, which spread through the townships of the post-apartheid era (Dlamini 2009). The idea that gives substance to this contemporary feeling is quite simple: while the conditions of the poorest are generally dominated by unpredictability, life in the township could, at one time, be synonymous with stability, proximity and continuity, in particular because it involved facing up to repression. The deindustrialization and the collapse of formal unskilled employment at the end of the 1990s, however, swept away these benchmarks, impoverishing the most vulnerable and playing into the hands of a certain individualism. However, it is not so much the disappearance of a ‘cultural intimacy’ within the recently oppressed populations (Hansen 2012) that seems to preoccupy Ayanda as the erosion of solidarity under the effect of what he sees as a brutalization of local social life. In the mid-2010s, one of the main spokespersons for the UPM was sentenced to life imprisonment for his involvement in a particularly heinous crime. After the verdict was delivered, and as we were walking back to the

movement's premises, Ayanda, visibly very affected, broke out of the silence he had observed for many minutes:

'You know, it's not the first time I've been in this courtroom and heard that kind of things. All this cruelty. All those crimes... torture for hours. It means the township no longer exists. There's no longer a sense of township, no longer a sense of community. All this violence... Our township is a concentration camp now.'
(Conversation, 18 July 2018)

- 26 These moments of despondency and near resignation, however, seem to be tamed by the sense of community with which Ayanda claims to be invested. His days would obviously be quite different if this were not the case, less ostensibly placed under the seal of this apparent abnegation which requires reproducing, every day, the practices supposed to consolidate and protect the community. Such an enterprise admittedly appears all the more coherent since it carries with it in particular the promise of a certain stability at the heart of everyday life. It can also be hypothesised that by putting himself at the service of the 'community' and, more concretely, of those who are enduring the same things as he is, Ayanda finds the resources to create a good image of himself. He thus protects his self-esteem from the humiliation that is the daily lot of the poor in South Africa —a humiliation related to their living conditions, but also to what they perceive as the indifference, even the cynicism, of the political elites. These initial virtues can be reinforced by what a large number of people outside the movement say about him. Regularly, people whom I do not necessarily know, and whom I meet at random in my wanderings across the city, point out his 'devotion' and his 'humanity' to me. When these scenes take place in his presence, he seems both embarrassed as proud. These testimonials and these marks of admiring support certainly bear fruit. It is likely that they reinforce a form of reassurance —that, in particular, he is serving as he should a cause that he deems to be 'right'. In any case, the expression of this recognition also helps him to transcend his own condition. It helps to remind him that he is not 'only' an unemployed man living in a shack, when so many others would be gnawed by envy, resentment, frustration or the 'self-hatred' that he sometimes says he can perceive among certain residents. In other words, his activism can make him feel as though he is able to act on his life, an ability seldom available to those around him in the township.

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NOTES

1. Ayanda Kota is a relatively well-known public figure in South Africa, and so I have not felt obliged to conceal his identity. I have done so, however, for the other activists mentioned in this text.
2. Used by the apartheid administration to designate Blacks and thus distinguish them from Whites, Asians, and Coloureds, the term Africans (or 'natives') is still today claimed or, at the very least, used by many Black South Africans to define themselves.
3. Interview with Ayanda, November 2018.
4. 'A Better Life for All' was the ANC campaign slogan in the first general elections in 1994.
5. Still found in various poor neighborhoods in the mid-2010s, the bucket system is supposed to overcome the lack of toilet facilities by the use of simple plastic buckets. See Stats SA, 'Bucket Toilets: An Update,' September 7, 2015. online: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=5375> [accessed September 2015, last access, January 2021].
6. Though this brief description may seem very pessimistic, I have nevertheless sought to show, in another article (Tournadre 2020), how activism allowed many young people not to completely sink into *waithood* (a contraction of *waiting for adulthood*), the social condition shared by most 18-35 year olds in the 'Global South.' Unemployment, insecurity and lack of money does indeed prevent them from crossing the social thresholds that establish a person in the role of a responsible adult —economic independence, access to one's own home, becoming part of a couple, parenthood, etc.— and thus maintain them in a 'prolonged adolescence.' On this notion, see in particular Honwana 2014.
7. This was the website of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a movement with a relatively high profile in the media, mainly active in Durban and its region.
8. They did so alongside residents, mostly White, who were active in two associations that regularly warned against the mismanagement of the municipality during the 2010s.
9. Black Liberation Theology appeared in the United States in the late 1960s. Its supporters proposed that racism and segregation should be combated on the basis of Christianity.
10. Conversation, 28 October 2017
11. 'Tales of a Divided City. Church of Soccer', *Grocott's Mail*, 24 September 2014, online: <https://www.grocotts.co.za/2014/09/24/tales-of-a-divided-city-church-of-soccer> [accessed December 2020]
12. Conversation with Ayanda, 28 October 2017.
13. Interview with Ayanda, 22 April 2017.
14. Interview with Ayanda, 28 October 2017.

15. The threat of finding themselves isolated in the event of a problem hangs over those who take the risk of withdrawing. A young UPM activist, particularly committed to the life of his neighborhood, had unambiguously explained this to me: 'The one who does not come to the [community] meetings, we know who he is and he will not be supported in case of a problem.'

16. I am here drawing, somewhat freely, on the words of Maurice Halbwachs (1913).

17. In April 1994, the government elected in the first democratic elections had the heavy task of healing the wounds of apartheid. It therefore set about implementing 'catch-up' policies in favour of the more modest 'non-White' populations. The Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), initially an ANC electoral manifesto and then a roadmap for the first governments, was intended to improve South African living standards by promoting employment, health and access to fundamental services such as water and electricity, education and, perhaps most importantly, providing everyone with a home. A system of public subsidies, with a particularly low allocation threshold, was designed to ensure the diffusion of private property among a Black and poor population to whom apartheid had refused this right. Nearly 3.3 million 'RDP houses' were built between 1994 and 2013.

18. Interview with Ayanda, 22 April 2016.

ABSTRACTS

This text is dedicated to one of the main leaders of these local collectives who, since the beginning of the 21st century, have been protesting against the poor living conditions of millions of South Africans. However, it invites us to leave the space of protest as such, so as to better explore the apparently more ordinary territories on its periphery. By re-inscribing the existence of this activist in some of the relationships, institutions and experiences that structure social life in poor and working-class neighborhoods, the aim is indeed to emphasize how much the relationship to 'the community' helps to better understand some of the springs of commitment in a 'poor people's movement'.

INDEX

Keywords: South Africa, activism, community, poverty, ordinary life

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