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AWAY FROM DEMONSTRATIONS

South African Poor People's Movements and the 'Regime of the Near'

Jérôme Tournadre

Abstract: Drawing on fieldwork carried out among different South African poor people's movements, this article explores what is played out on the fringes of this type of mobilization. Away from the noise of demonstrations, we can observe the particularities of a commitment that links together the cause being defended, the immediate socio-spatial environment of the activists, and their everyday worlds—a commitment that is rooted in the 'regime of the near'. The space of activism thus coincides with the spaces in which the daily lives of these women and men unfold. I argue that this approach helps us better understand how mobilization spreads and how it can be sustained. It also makes it possible to measure more precisely that on which the legitimacy claimed by the movement and its visibility are based, as well as the persistence of commitment.

Keywords: activism, mobilization, poor people's movements, protest, social movements, South Africa

The study of poor people's movements has occupied an important place in the social sciences (Zorn 2013), yet the notion is not exempt from criticism. Like another flagship category in anthropology and sociology, that of the 'urban poor' (Das and Walton 2015), it can in fact be accused of reducing local particularities and, consequently, of standardizing what it is supposed to describe. Nonetheless, it is to this category that the following pages are devoted through highly localized case studies: those of contemporary poor people's movements in South Africa. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the country has been the scene of what has sometimes been presented as a 'rebellion of the poor' (Alexander 2010; see also Tournadre 2018), as a source of "new expressions of politics" (Brown 2015: 4). I believe, however, that even though



such examples are part of a national framework, this does not prevent us from discerning a basic definition that can be applied to collective groups from around the world while respecting their singularities. With this in mind, we can define poor people's movements as the collective and concerted actions of individuals whose lives seem to be mainly shaped away from the processes that organize production, consumption, and, very often, official political representation in a society.¹

Two elements, in my opinion, round out this level of definition. First of all, the claims of a large number of poor people's movements mainly reflect their "concrete concerns," as Asef Bayat (2010: 201) has pointed out in his research on the "urban dispossessed" in the Middle East. Behind these concerns, we can sense everything that ought to comprise a proper life in the eyes of those who live in an informal settlement, a township, a slum, or a favela—in particular, the hope of a home that offers the possibility of a 'normal' existence without depending on the sun's cycle for light and heat. And as we will see, these material claims are not devoid of moral and symbolic foundations, such as the quest for dignity or recognition. The demarcation between the extraordinary nature of revolt and the ordinary nature of everyday life therefore tends to diminish. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there are in fact a multitude of connections, links, and interpenetrations between the two.

The second peculiarity is due to the "spatially situated sociality" (Pithouse 2013: 105) of most poor people around the world. Among these populations, those who become politically committed do so in a very specific relationship to the world, 'rooted' in a familiar and habitual environment. This obviously does not preclude some of them, more specifically their leaders, from traveling into and even out of their country—like the 'rooted cosmopolitans' described by Sidney Tarrow (2005)—in order to share their experience. The sense of rootedness, however, remains fundamental and consubstantial. This is quite aptly rendered by the vocabulary of 'community' found in many of these collectives, which their members also present as 'community-based organizations'. This relationship with the local sphere is obviously not specific to the poor people's movements. It is, for example, the case with NIMBY (not in my back yard) movements, which "resist the siting of some unwanted land use in a particular neighborhood, community, or region" (Driscoll 2013: 852). These movements can be led by wealthy people determined to fight against what they perceive as a threat to their private property. Even more generally, it is in any case not an overstatement to conclude that there is "an embodiment and emplacement to human life that cannot be denied" (Escobar 2008: 7). However, this seems to me even truer in the case of poor people. The link between these groups and the local sphere is thus part of an order of things from which their members can hardly be separated. As a result, the space in which their mobilizations are organized merges quite perfectly with their

places of life. The cause defended by the movement therefore moves across what one might call the ‘near and familiar’ worlds of activists: worlds woven from the everyday experiences, moral and social, individual and collective, of individuals; worlds of habits, attachments and memories, repetitions and belongings; worlds, too, where what we care about can be found. These characteristics make it possible to compare the commitment of activists in poor people’s movements with the “regime of the near” that Laurent Thévenot (2006: 220) links to the fact that “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.”² In the case of South Africa, this simply means that the cause advocated by the organizations is what people curse about all day long, whether at home or with ‘comrades’: the water being cut off for several days, the refusal of elected representatives to listen to them, the streets flooded by sewage, the lack of sanitary facilities. In brief, what is affected and justifies commitment lies literally at the heart of the symbolic and material worlds in which these individuals move daily.

In my view, these different findings have an impact on the way poor people’s movements should be more systematically studied. The link between the cause they defend and the activists’ familiar worlds—the link that the ‘regime of the near’ makes objective—logically entails that we focus on more than just what happens at the heart of protest activity if we wish to understand the dynamics and driving forces behind a mobilization of this type. It is therefore essential to step back from the eye of the hurricane of protest and into the ‘near and familiar’ worlds where such protests take shape. In other words, the guiding principle of such an approach involves not being restricted to protest activity solely in the typical sense (demonstrations, banners, confrontations with the police, drafting leaflets and press releases, etc.). Rather, we need to take into account ordinary things, matters of routine that lie outside protest activity—at the crossroads of the individual and the collective.

We could find many examples attesting to the interest of the social sciences in the connection between ordinary, everyday forms of protest and those that are more or less explicit, dealing with, for example, resistance to an oppressor (see Scott 1985) or autonomization vis-à-vis the rules set by the state (see Bayat 2010). In the early 1990s, Arturo Escobar (1992: 420) even called for an anthropology of social movements that focused on the “micro-level of everyday practices and their imbrication with larger processes of development, patriarchy, capital and the state.” Some of these practices, indeed, can be found in the “ethnographic study of domestic worlds” that Anne-Maria Makhulu (2015: 1) has carried out in squatter camps on the outskirts of Cape Town. More often than not, however, these contributions concentrate on actions whose horizon does not exclude a relation (of power) with those

in authority. However, my project is different. Oversimplifying somewhat, we might say that it is not the reflection of protest or rebellion in the daily routine of life that will be most important here, but its exact opposite. The practices, institutions, and relationships that I study are never thought of or experienced in connection with protest. However—and this is the basis of my argument—taking them into account allows us to better understand the logic and dynamics of poor people’s movements. Specifically, exploring what I call the ‘familiar worlds of activists’ reveals elements that shed light on the main-springs of such mobilization: visibility, legitimacy (one’s legitimacy to speak on behalf of the ‘poor’, in particular), rootedness, the persistence of commitments (mainly through an attachment to the cause and to the collective that promotes it), and the meaning attributed to the mobilization by those who take part in it. Using this approach, new facets of the organization and work of activists come into view.

In short, my article is proposing a certain decentering of the gaze or, more precisely, a search for what is generally rejected as lying outside the scope of most analyses of social movements and collective mobilizations. Obviously, this rejection is never total or systematic, as shown by the interest sociology takes in the political socialization of activists. But the approach adopted by the following pages embraces its subject more broadly, initially by including the life stories of activists (Salman and Assies 2017). Such an angle can also justify entering the most personal spheres of these individuals. There is no shortage of work in the social sciences in this area. In his anthropology of Argentinian trade union *militancia*, Sian Lazar (2017: 9) explores some of the “intimate spaces of political activism within a social movement,” emphasizing activists’ family lives, friendships, and daily existences. However, the trade union, its history, its mode of operation, and the activism associated with it remain at the center of Lazar’s analysis. Conversely, my aim is to seek the ordinary and the intimate beyond the political struggle and the borders of the collective.

Before I go any further, I would like to say a few words about the material on which this article is based. As I have already had occasion to write, its hypotheses and conclusions emerged from investigations carried out regularly and repeatedly in South Africa (mainly in Johannesburg, Makhanda, Cape Town, and, to a lesser extent, Durban), between 2009 and 2018 (Tournadre 2018, 2020). I followed activists from collectives struggling against inadequate living conditions in the poor districts of the townships and informal settlements. I spent my days with them in the offices of organizations or in the heart of poor neighborhoods, watching them write press releases or drumming up support for a community meeting or demonstration. But—and this is the starting point of these pages—they also engaged in activities that were more directly oriented toward the ordinary aspects of local social life and were

apparently disconnected from the logics of protest (e.g., mediation in neighborhood conflicts or family disputes). Those years also allowed me to observe a relative diversity in the demonstrations. One does indeed meet “ordinary people” taking part in them, to use the expression of the leaders who wish to suggest that none of them had a vocation to rebel but were forced to do so by the harshness of their condition. These could be young adults stuck in a crisis of social reproduction (Hunter 2011), or individuals in the prime of their lives who have not had access to formal employment for years. They could also be pensioners, many of whom participated in local demonstrations against the apartheid regime in the 1980s. While it is difficult to establish a direct link between mobilizations against apartheid and contemporary social protest (even if their social bases coincide almost perfectly), it should be remembered how greatly the former contributed to making protest a fairly commonplace means of participation in the eyes of many residents (see Klandermans et al. 2001). As the institutional political space was forbidden to non-whites, a large part of the socio-political expression of these populations was directed into demonstrations and protest marches during the apartheid years.

Meanings of Protest

An essentially materialistic reading often prevails when it is necessary to determine the meaning of the struggles waged by poor people’s movements throughout the world. I myself partially retained this dimension when I emphasized the importance of ‘concrete concerns’ in defining these mobilizations. It is therefore not surprising that the protests that have taken place in poor South African communities since the start of the twenty-first century have often been presented as ‘service delivery protests’. This analysis, widespread within the media and in the political and sometimes the academic worlds, thus sees the most immediate demands of the protesters, such as access to water, electricity, and a roof, as of prime significance. But just as the uprisings against the price of wheat in eighteenth-century England were not only “rebellions of the belly” (Thompson 1971: 77), the demonstrations of contemporary poor people (whether South African or not) cannot be reduced to the mere expression of material needs. Protest is akin to a complex equation. It involves material claims, which monopolize signs and banners, and more symbolic and moral claims, which refer to demands for respect or the defense of what is perceived as due or just. There is nothing contradictory about this: symbolic struggles are never devoid of more concrete stakes, just as redistributive conflicts are never independent of immaterial issues. In this case, the poverty in which millions of South Africans live has elective affinities with the disrespect they believe they have suffered. The reference to ‘dignity’ thus comes up regularly

in the conversations I have had with South African activists. This in itself is not surprising: the social sciences have, at least since the end of the twentieth century, stressed how much the “quest for dignity” (Auyero 2003: 10) has been at the heart of insurgencies. What one might call the ‘official discourse’ of the South African poor people’s movements expresses the very same phenomenon. The memorandums handed over to the authorities after demonstrations, the interviews some of the leaders give to the media, press releases, and, more simply, speaking at mass meetings—all involve denouncing the humiliating living conditions of the poor and their virtual exclusion from the human community. In the early 2010s, I heard the chairperson of the Landless People’s Movement explain to dozens of families living in a large settlement in Johannesburg that the poor could no longer vote for certain people—that is, African National Congress (ANC) officials—because they claimed that “squatters smell bad.”

These elements of the ‘official discourse’ of poor people’s movements allow us to get an initial idea of the meaning that its main actors seek to give to protest. In particular, they show the struggle of the poor as a struggle for a dignified and decent life—one free of the feeling of humiliation and lack of recognition. This becomes quite clear when we step away from the cyclone of protest and its watchwords and turn to the more personal worlds of the activists, where their expectations and aspirations are expressed.

As elsewhere, the lack of housing is one of the main causes of the mobilization of the poor in South Africa. This problem is exacerbated by the widespread phenomenon of corruption at the local level. The strong presence of the majority party, the ANC, and its networks in most municipalities is regularly reflected in the establishment of an informal system of nepotism and clientelism. Activists of post-apartheid protest movements are said to be the first victims of this system. Many claim to have been identified by ANC members and subsequently excluded from the allocation of municipal jobs or houses built as part of public and para-public programs. While the leaders often adopt a moral discourse, which allows them to point out the flaws and the illusions of electoral democracy, some of their comrades adopt a very different position. It then becomes easy to understand, without having to read between the lines, that if they criticize this system, which organizes a whole swathe of local social life, it is mainly because it excludes them. A few, who campaigned in the majority party in the past, told me about what they consider to be a gross injustice: “I fought and campaigned for the ANC, but the ANC gave me nothing.” These words reveal, first and foremost, one of the implications of the ‘regime of the near’ to which the activism of poor people’s movements is closely attached. The notions of ‘common cause’ and ‘collective’ are not enough to capture this commitment as a whole. It must also be remembered that individuals enter the organization with a ‘lived experience’ (shaped by personal grievances, such as the absence of a home) and that they may naturally seek to defend the interests

generated in this context. More generally, the same desire, which in no way contradicts the collective cause, is apparent in these different cases, that is, the desire to be granted the right to conduct a ‘normal life’, built on the sense of security that a job and a decent home can provide.

Here we find the famous materialist dimension (having a real roof and enough to feed one’s family), but with the extra demand to be recognized as having the means to be a member of society like anyone else. In an ethnographic study she carried out in a squatter camp on the outskirts of Cape Town, Fiona Ross (2010) recounts the ideals of decency and respectability that her interlocutors associated with leaving their shacks for a proper house. They could thus conform to a set of social norms perceived as dominant and therefore expect full inclusion in society. It is the same idea that the youngest activists of the poor people’s movements in South Africa confirm when speaking not of their struggles but of their future prospects. For instance, 22-year-old Siphokazi told me that she wanted “loads of things” for her future, including going back to school, going to university, then having “[her] own house, [her] own car and money,” while continuing to “help people.” The challenge lies in finding one’s place in the South African social body, despite adversity. Even if some members of these poor people’s movements claim to be ‘socialists’, their aim is ultimately not to try to overturn the existing social order but to draw the attention of the public authorities to various immediate needs. When I questioned an activist about his organization’s relationship to illegal activities, he summed up the situation as follows: “We fight for electricity. We make barricades. But when we have [power], we don’t connect illegally.”

Contrary to the way a ‘heroic’ aura often imbues the space of social movements, it seems to me that there is a clear split here, similar to one described by James Holston (2019: 134–135) when he differentiates between insurgence and protest. In his view, insurgence expresses an “objection to current conditions by articulating alternative proposals” that individuals formulate from their own experience and with the ambition of seeing a new society—or a “new city”—take shape. Protest, on the other hand, is also an ‘objection to current conditions’, but it is framed by requests directly addressed to public authorities whom the protesters feel they cannot do without. These nuances may partly explain the discrepancies that sometimes occur between activists of poor people’s movements and certain ‘radical’ intellectuals committed to their struggle.

Capital of Autochthony

It is not illogical that the main part of the analysis of protest should focus, in general, on what takes place in the ‘space of social movements’ (Mathieu 2021). Depending on national contexts, this space is more or less an integrated

periphery within which protest activities are carried out, demands made, and political relations developed. However, far from being free-floating objects, protest and its agents are also rooted in regular and repeated relations that are disconnected from any eruptive logic. The social network these relations form is above all the framework in which the daily life of activists involved in local mobilizations unfolds. In other words, they define the places of life and the ordinary experiences of these women and men. Taking an interest in them, and therefore setting aside the challenges and constraints of protest activity in the strict sense, is all the more necessary since it is in this immediate spatial, social, and cultural environment that the struggles of poor people's movements are generally waged. This is also where the living conditions that provide the fuel for the causes defended by this type of collective are defined. Finally, there is above all something essential to the visibility (and success) of a local mobilization—the way it puts down roots. To put it otherwise, a collective is fully inscribed in its environment when people can no longer retort scathingly to its members, “You can't understand because you're not from here.” This situation is largely conditioned by the possession of a ‘capital of autochthony’ (Retière 2003), a popular social capital based on neighborly kinship, friendship relations, and a positive local reputation.

In the poor neighborhoods of the townships and in the informal settlements of South Africa, the most successful embodiment of this type of capital is provided by community leaders. These local figures are not unique to South Africa. Indeed, the community leader is one of the most common forms of “the informal politics of representation in poor, urban neighbourhoods of the global south” (Piper and Bénit-Gbaffou 2014: 39). Studying the social and political life of a Brazilian slum, Martijn Koster and Pieter de Vries (2012: 88) have aptly summarized the situation by explaining that “the term community leader ... is not applied to individuals appointed to particular functions, but to persons with particular life histories and characteristics.” Post-apartheid social protest is embodied by many of these individuals. In the various places where I conducted fieldwork, a person can gain such a position most often through an election (informal, because not officially validated by the public authorities) in which residents of a street or a district vote, or by being the head of an association or a locally influential collective. This recognition can also reward someone who has led socio-community initiatives such as the creation of childcare nurseries, involvement in the implementation of health prevention programs, coaching a local football team, and so forth.

The days spent alongside South African activists—sometimes in moments of their more personal lives, far from protest activity—have also allowed me to witness the role of problem solver that many of them assume in their respective districts. Neighbors regularly ask for their help in filling out administrative documents, resolving a family conflict, or reporting an assault. These situations

of multiple investments of time and exposure to the most diverse demands are well illustrated by the case of Andiswa, a 50-year-old activist from an unemployed people's movement in Makhana, a city located in the Eastern Cape. The mother of a disabled boy, she sought for a long time to establish a school for abandoned and sick children in the township. At the same time, she has led several demonstrations complaining about living conditions in her neighborhood, from the beginning of the twenty-first century onward. Over the years, Andiswa has become a person relatively difficult to ignore in her neighborhood. She has especially attracted the attention of NGOs who wish to make her their ambassador to encourage the development of individual vegetable gardens and thus promote food self-sufficiency among the poorest people. Like any community leader, Andiswa must regularly respond to requests from other residents, who seem to rely on the experience and qualities they attribute to her. When the local school was on the verge of closing, for example, she was the person whom her neighbors asked to attend the information meeting organized by the local councilor. All of them, she told me, knew that she would not hesitate to tackle the problem head-on and publicly voice the fears of the community.

Even if Andiswa and most of her peers had already occupied this micro-local role before joining a protest movement, their membership in the organization has often reinforced their visibility within the communities. One characteristic distinguishes them from many of their peers. In general, the legitimacy and authority of community leaders rests on their "ability to channel and redistribute resources to the community, according to some kind of local 'moral economy'" (Piper and Bénit-Gbaffou 2014: 38). Access to these resources (municipal jobs, housing, etc.) is obviously easier for leaders close to the main political parties. This has never been the case for activists in the organizations I have studied, as they are considered by the ANC to be political opponents. However, everything suggests that belonging to movements with an ever-greater profile has strengthened the position of activists in their neighborhoods by allowing them to respond to certain requests from residents and, in doing so, to remain in the local political game. For example, the proximity of their organization to lawyers or legal specialists allows community leaders to provide legal advice to their fellow citizens. The latter may also conclude that the way these individuals are connected to a seasoned protest collective means that they are in the best position to express dissatisfaction.

But, and this is what should interest us, this relationship between poor people's movements and their activists who occupy positions as community leaders is perfectly circular. The place these women and men occupy in their neighborhoods has given them a local fame or notoriety (even a notability) from which the movements opportunistically derive part of their own legitimacy. As a first step, the organizations were indeed able to aggregate various types of "good reputation" (Bourdieu 1991: 194) that were clearly the products, in the

main, of the reconversion of a capital of autochthony accumulated in different domains. The relationship thus shaped is largely the opposite of what often characterizes party or trade union organizations, where elected officials and leaders owe their authority, in principle, to the fact that they have been given a proper mandate (ibid.: 206).³ Taking into account this relationship from outside the protest movement thus helps us better grasp the conditions in which the collective can put down roots and, above all, some of the daily processes by which these conditions can be actualized.

Roots of the ‘Us’

Collective mobilizations are aggregations of heterogeneous expectations and objectives. The poor people’s movements do not *a priori* escape this rule. The essential unity of the movement, its constitution as a group, is therefore built around an identity that turns out to be collective and sufficiently encompassing for everyone to recognize themselves in it. In the cases that interested me, the idea of ‘the poor serving the poor’ was the one that came up most often when my interlocutors tried to explain what characterized them and the meaning they hoped to give to their commitment. The challenge doubtless lay in affirming the absence of any social distance between them and the rest of the population in low-income neighborhoods. “I’m just struggling like everyone else,” an activist once told me. From this reality would flow an obvious legitimacy in claiming to be spokespersons for the residents.

Even if we are apprised of the contours of a collective identity, however, we may know nothing about the conditions of its emergence and its effectiveness. We learn very little about any mechanism when we consider only its functions. First, presenting oneself and considering oneself as a ‘poor person in the service of other poor people’ raises a certain number of questions. Poverty has different faces, as confirmed by the very composition of the poor people’s movements in South Africa. Some of their members live in shacks, while others are housed in brick or cement houses. Some are active in the so-called informal economy, while the income of a large number depends on social benefits.⁴ These differences obviously produce variations in conditions between individuals. A sheet metal roof does not protect you as well as a concrete block wall, and shacks rarely have direct access to water. The informal economy is fickle, while payment of child support grants and pensions, albeit modest, is at least regular. In a local setting (i.e., that of a neighborhood or township), everyone can witness these differences, but they do not seem to cause divisions within movements. Dissension can arise following rumors about the use made of the money collected by the organization or discreet jealousies toward those who, as community leaders, draw a few rands from their collaboration with an NGO. Yet these

signs of distrust do not seem to prevail over the feeling of sharing the same condition as one of the ‘poor’. This is confirmed when some people, for various reasons, end up distancing themselves or coming less often to meetings or to the movement’s premises, but it is quite rare that they will disappear completely. They are sometimes seen in the township, especially during community gatherings, and people talk about them in the movement’s offices. Above all, they are neighbors, friends, and relatives whose living conditions mean that they cannot be matters of indifference to the movement and its struggle.

The roots of this belief in a community of destinies, which is essential to the success of a mobilization, are to be found far from the moments and actions of protest. We need to dig deeper into the social, cultural, and historical layers of activists’ places of life. It is in fact partly there that the cause of the poor people’s movements is shaped and, even more, that the ‘subjective roots of social protest’ (Mansbridge and Morris 2001) can be found. First, we need to be sensitive to the fact that local social life in the poor districts of South Africa is largely shaped by a discourse on the community that is itself a discourse on and of an institution. It “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” (Tournadre 2021). Obviously, not everyone adheres to it. In particular, some studies have shown that the poorest neighborhoods are often characterized by “weaker social bonds” (Muyeba and Seekings 2012: 48) that fail to reflect the values of mutual aid and reciprocity commonly associated with ‘community’. Other research has underlined that respect for these values sometimes led to false pretences or ‘reluctant solidarity’ (Bähre 2007). But those who, from their childhood onward, live and move at the heart of the community are caught up in the *illusio*—“invested, taken in and by the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 116)—and thus contribute to holding things together. It is undoubtedly this *illusio* that, for example, prompts Mandla, a full-time activist from Makhanda, to make a detour twice a day in order to ensure that the work in his district school is making good progress. He knows that this is one of the things the community expects of him, and he is obviously helping to consolidate this entity by doing so.

The very specificity of the township probably reinforces this propensity to believe in the community. Indeed, even if this space turns out, at least in large cities like Cape Town or Johannesburg, to be relatively socially diverse, it is nonetheless characterized by highly specific forms of culture and memory. The districts of a township are embedded in a common lifeworld which emphasizes the fact that its residents share the history of a segregation whose memory lies not in the distant past. The township, more broadly, has the coherence of an ‘anthropological place’ (Augé 1995) insofar as it exists through a set of relationships, stories, and memories that allow those who inhabit it to identify themselves with it, irrespective of their social differences. In an article on the

relations between a student organization and a South African poor people's movement, Sally Matthews (2015) points out how those who appeared external to the township could be treated with distrust by activists and residents. This was true of the white students she studied, but also of their black classmates, even though the latter had often grown up in these same poor communities. They studied at university, that is to say in a world commonly perceived as privileged: this seemed to naturally remove these young blacks from 'us' and set them apart as 'them'.

There is one final element, certainly not unique to South Africa, that has the virtue of weaving 'equivalential relations' (Laclau 2005) between distinct social situations and expectations. Beyond statistical data, the term 'poor' is fairly unanimously associated by those who perceive themselves as such with the feeling of having been left out—notably by “those who eat first (the elite),” to use the terms of a poor people's movement in Cape Town (Mandela Park Backyarders 2012). In other words, protest activists and most of those they represent share the feeling that they are not seen as full citizens by their government. This can only be reinforced by the fact that these women and men understand every day how much blackness continues to define “a condition of marginality” (Posel 2013: 73)—in 2015, 93 percent of South Africans living below the poverty line were black (Statistics South Africa 2017: 57). In her study of squatters in the Cape Town region, Makhulu (2015: 109) underlines how such a “shared conviction” could transform a population into a coherent “moral community,” beyond political differences and contradictory individual expectations. We may imagine that the same could be true of small social gaps within a poor people's movement.

My hypothesis is that this representation of the social world, one that would amount to the opposition between 'us' (i.e., the members of the community) and 'them', helps to shape an 'oppositional consciousness' (Mansbridge and Morris 2001) that, in turn, helps unify the group. In an attempt to define the concept of oppositional consciousness, Jane Mansbridge (2001: 1) has suggested thinking about “what people have meant with the words 'class consciousness' and apply the same logic to other groups, such as women or African Americans.” Oppositional consciousness is therefore an “empowering mental state” (ibid.: 4) that prepares members of an oppressed group to act against a “system of human domination” (ibid.: 4–5). It is this, too, that makes it possible to transform a “subordinate identity” into a “positive identification” (ibid.: 1). Even if some studies have shown that the feeling of belonging to the middle class has spread to the poor neighborhoods in South Africa (Phadi and Ceruti 2011), my interlocutors regularly claimed to be poor and, as mentioned above, to be in the service of other poor people. They thus oppose the stigma that most often accompanies this condition with a sense of collective honor. In this way, their “free-floating frustration” can then become “anger” (Mansbridge 2001: 5).

Other Daily Activism

As mainly community-based organizations, South African protest collectives can be found on different fronts of the township's social life. For example, they may carry out actions against domestic violence, help in the development of individual vegetable plots, run soup kitchens, or gather food for the poorest during the COVID-19 lockdown. This characteristic is not unique to South Africa; one can also think of the Argentinian *piqueteros*. In addition to blocking highways since the 1990s in order to resist privatization and layoffs, these groups of unemployed workers have helped to create gardens, clinics, and bakeries within their communities (Osterweil 2014: 478). More often than not, this type of action is intended to make up for the failings or shortcomings of the state with regard to economically and socially marginalized populations. This was the case when, in the early 2000s, activists from a South African organization fighting evictions in the townships of Cape Town opened an autonomous school in a community hall. In the name of the 'constitutional right to education', the aim was to take in children who could not find a place in the state school system, often for financial reasons. Through such activist initiatives, directly inscribed into the daily lives of residents, poor people's movements present themselves as watching over their most immediate social and spatial environment.

More individualized forms of this daily activism can also be observed, and this theme is now fully incorporated into the analysis of social movements. Mansbridge (2013: 337) describes "everyday activism" as "talk and action in everyday life that is not consciously coordinated with the actions of others." Instead, it is actions and words inspired to some degree by a social movement and consciously oriented to produce the change sought by this same social movement (*ibid.*). Unlike everyday acts of resistance, such as rumor, sabotage, concealment, and theft, daily activism is said to be a question of "open resistance": it is visible, like a confrontation (*ibid.*: 338).

This definition makes it possible to break away from the exceptionalism that sometimes prevails in the study of militant actions. However, it neglects a certain number of apparently insignificant, non-conflictual tasks, moments, and interactions that do not interfere with the core features of protest action in the strict sense of the term, but which nonetheless are capable of clarifying the conditions of mobilization. These tasks, moments, and interactions work to maintain things over the life of the organization, either because they support visibility and thus the potential to attract new members, or because they help to integrate militants into the collective by giving them a role that convinces them of their social utility. These actions can obviously involve essential but relatively under-rated things such as opening up the premises each morning, greeting those bold enough to cross the threshold (usually to beg for a little food), or bringing help to a household that cannot cope with the complexities of a water bill.

This ethos is expressed even more vigorously in the small services, apparently unconnected to the cause, that an activist may render and that draw most often on the resources provided by the organization. Anyone from outside the organization can easily witness this if they spend a few hours in its offices. They will observe, for example, a neighbor who has come not to ask the movement to intervene but to have his curriculum vitae typed and printed out on the collective's computing equipment, or to access the Internet. These services are certainly less trivial than they might seem as they help to maintain a link between neighborhoods and the collective. They are a means whereby the collective retains a certain usefulness, when disengaged from its periods of activism, and asserts its presence even more clearly as a community-based organization. Through these more or less minor actions, activism is as much a set of practices and activities as a social relationship. Perhaps we should see this as a specificity of mobilizations that take place under the 'regime of the near'. Sociology and political science have often analyzed activism (in political parties, trade unions, etc.) as a life-sphere in itself, with its own logics and dynamics, just like the sphere of work, of studies, of family and emotional bonds (see Passy and Giugni 2000). The preceding examples suggest, rather, a tendency of activism to decompartmentalize itself, even to become more ordinary, by stopping itself from being too separate a sphere, too isolated within the lives of the movement's members. Its horizon is therefore no longer defined solely by the failures and successes of the mobilization. The reason is quite simple: activism is practiced above all in the neighborhood and thus cannot be systematically disconnected from the most banal activities and moments that punctuate an ordinary day.

A Movement of One's Own

The presence of movements of the poor at different times and places in local social life—parallel to and at a distance from their protest activity—is one of the main things that can be observed when we move away from demonstrations and the heart of protest activity. In addition to helping us understand the sources of the movement's rootedness in the surrounding socio-spatial landscape, an awareness of this multi-positionality helps to solve certain puzzles. One of the main ones I encountered is the fact that, in the ranks of these organizations, there are individuals who question the political and ideological dimension of the collective. In the course of more or less informal conversations, I found that some of my interlocutors, not always among the least committed, firmly rejected the idea that their movement could have a political dimension. They consistently presented themselves as "not interested in politics." This discovery was all the more surprising given that, at the same time, many of their leaders

openly supported 'socialism' and/or 'anti-imperialism' and did not hesitate to link their movements to these trends, at internal meetings, for example.

These situations reveal how a movement's very definition can be subject to interpretation. Take, for example, Bheki, a 30-year-old activist. Admittedly, he probably joined the movement in which I encountered him because he was taken there by a man who, a few years ago, had given him training in football and helped him to find words for the injustice he had experienced. However, the fact that he joined can also be read in light of an upbringing marked by the recurrent memory of well-known 'community values', such as solidarity, a certain idea of equality, altruism, and the ability to resist all types of oppression. During our conversations, the young man frequently mentioned the commitment his parents had shown to their neighborhood, its associations, and its meetings. It seemed obvious that, in his view, this movement was first and foremost the best endeavor for embodying and defending the values with which, he said, he had grown up. This example can give rise to two conclusions. The first is that although membership in a collective is sometimes based on the encounters that one happens to attend, it can be linked to expectations and values that are partly "forged outside the organization" (Mischi 2016: 213). The second is that the ability of these movements to extricate themselves on a daily basis from the space of protest gives them a certain plasticity, which allows their members to make (consciously or not) a choice about what aspects of these movements they want to perceive. It is therefore understandable that someone like Bheki would envision his collective through the prism of the bond maintained with the community. This would allow him, at the same time, to downplay or disregard the political and ideological aspects of the collective. He would be all the more encouraged to do so since, even for those who adhere to a political ideology, the reference to the community seems to be the factor that must always prevail: members often state that their collective is above all a community-based organization. In any event, this reference, which we have previously seen helps to lessen the perceptible social gaps between the poor residents of the township, also carries with it a form of consensus that makes it possible to overcome potential internal political differences. Such differences could quite simply arise from the diverse partisan loyalties that can be observed in most of the organizations I have studied.

This link to a social and symbolic environment as meaningful as the community has other explanatory virtues, and one of them bears repeating: the activism of poor people's movements is mainly deployed at the local level. In the case of South African collectives, these are the communities in which the activists live. Over the years, I have observed how being perceived as a member of this type of movement allows young people to take on certain fulfilling responsibilities (Tournadre 2020). When they adopt a full-time activism that sees them organizing community meetings or keeping residents informed

about the actions of the movement in the neighborhood, these young people become de facto representatives of their collective at the micro-local level. Their neighbors therefore turn to them when a mobilization is necessary to remedy a problem facing the community. More than a role, it is a place that these young people find within this small social order. While this situation may not protect them from the uncertainties related to their social condition, it nevertheless keeps them somewhat away from the “prolonged adolescence” (Masquelier 2013: 475) that seems to be the lot of most young people in the Global South. They gain access to a structuring activity and to a certain recognition from which they can derive a feeling of social utility. Indirectly, the movement contributes to the way these young people construct their identity and therefore produces the conditions for a certain attachment to it—an attachment that can help maintain commitments over time.

Not a Family, but ...

Spending long days with members of a poor people’s movement reveals that so-called militant time is most often a time when nothing happens. The adrenaline of the demonstrations and the intensity of drafting press releases are far from ordinary activism. Most of the time, when they are on the premises, these women and men are chatting or playing on their cell phones. During the day, they are frequently joined by other ‘comrades’ who come to catch up or simply to pass the time. The movement’s offices then appear as a real space for sociability. Inevitably, the hours spent together foster a certain closeness, which can sometimes generate moments of sharing and friendship totally peripheral to protest activity. They do not really disrupt it, since they help to bring coherence to the connections between commitment and the other dimensions of the lives of these women and men. These may include evenings in one of the township taverns or a barbecue in a park. Such moments are admittedly rare, but they do help to generate close ties. Attachment to the movement is thus partly mediated by loyalty to the people one rubs shoulders with (Duriez and Sawicki 2003).

The nature of this emotional bond is clearly shown by Jerry, a 30-something activist. When I asked how his encounter with the collective had come about, he insisted on the “warmth” of the welcome he had received from his very first contacts with the movement, which he now said he “loved.” I asked if he considered his comrades as a “family.” “Not per se,” he replied, before adding, “... but slightly ... I joined those people and got along with them and got used to them, so they’ve become all my friends ... My blood is still here, in [the movement].” The fact that the collective is not thought of as a family does not stop some of those who invest in it from feeling a strong attachment to it. This, inter

alia, is expressed by the ‘vocabulary of life’ used by Jerry (“My blood ...”), which comes up regularly both in interviews and in more informal discussions with other individuals. Another activist, forced to distance himself from his movement after finding a job, explained to me that his “heart” still lay with his comrades. Such expressions demonstrate quite precisely how commitment really cannot be reduced to the mere fact of supporting a cause. It marks one’s immersion in a collective, in a configuration of exchanges, recognition, loyalties, and various bonds. Such an observation could be verified in many types of organization, but it is most definitely underlined by the specificity of the poor people’s movements. As I have already had occasion to note, such an organization can indeed appear to its members as a group of similar people, irrespective of the more or less slight social differences that can crop up between them, and this is largely due to their sense of sharing the same trials of daily life. The persistence of commitment feeds, no doubt, on this type of conviction.

Conclusion

This article was not an attempt to deny the importance of an analysis centered on the space of protest. My ambition was, more simply, to show that such an analysis can be made more complete by considering elements that might seem quite foreign to what takes place within this space. Approaching protest through the ‘near and familiar’ worlds of activists mainly emphasizes what it owes to the ordinariness of lives, in contrast to the exceptionalism that sometimes permeates the analysis of social movements because of the disruptive nature of many practices. By moderating the tendency of certain analyses to focus automatically on the political, this approach reminds us how much the protest dynamic is also based on social and moral foundations. Finally, because it helps to contextualize the grievances underlying discontent in a broad context, this type of analysis allows us to go beyond the public discourse of protest. The primary function of sets of slogans and demands is to produce a common meaning, which tends to mask the heterogeneity of the expectations and objectives specific to any protest movement. I hope I have shown that it is perhaps mainly this loss of complexity and human depth that can be remedied by taking into account the ‘near and familiar’.

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Notes

1. While it may nurture a sense of collective isolation (which reinforces identification with the group), this apparent life on the sidelines does not amount to total exclusion. Even if they are found on the fringes of societies, these individuals and their friends and relatives are regularly in contact with some of the central axes of state activity (see Das and Poole 2004).
2. This regime of commitment obviously does not characterize all forms of collective mobilization. We rarely find any trace of it in the anti-nuclear movement or in protests against animal experiments. Unlike poor people’s movements, these are not always “tied to specific populations” (Morris and Braine 2001: 33) and sometimes even mobilize socially very diverse groups. Their members most often criticize conditions that they perceive as “undesirable” and seek “to make individuals, corporations, and governments act in ways that are socially responsible in order to benefit humanity” (ibid.: 36). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they do not *systematically* have a “personal history, directly related to the movement” (Mansbridge 2001: 9) and its cause—one of the main characteristics of individuals participating in the mobilization of the poor.
3. This dependence of officials on their party is perhaps even stronger in South Africa, where the ANC has long benefited from extraordinary political capital,

from its ability to redeploy its members to different sectors of society and, more generally, from its access to public resources.

4. For this, however, they need to have children or to be pensioners or disabled, as these are the only groups to which the South African state provides benefits.

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