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Is there a 'left art' of city government? A view from post-apartheid South Africa

Claire Bénit-Gbaffou

Preamble: Sobering realities – South African municipalities in crisis

At the time of finalising this book (late 2022), South African state and municipalities were in a state of severe crisis, marked by dysfunctionalities generally attributed to significant if not massive corruption. Several national infrastructures such as the national electricity company (Eskom) and airline (South African Airways) had collapsed, while others (such as the South African Revenue Service) had significantly weakened, emptied out of their human, financial and material resources by rent-seeking state and party elites. 'Two-thirds of municipalities appear to be in financial distress or dysfunctional in differing degrees.'¹ The 2018 water crisis in Cape Town, the recurrent lived experience of daily power cuts ('load-sheddings') in Johannesburg, the catastrophic management of the 2022 major water floodings in eThekweni, alert us to the fact that major metropolises, even if marked by a certain political and functional autonomy, are not immune to such crises, aggravated by global environmental change.

Beyond popular and general denunciation of elite corruption and greed, this process has been widely analysed as 'state capture' (Chipkin and Swilling 2018): a system of nepotistic appointments in the state and civil service, put in a position to effect wide resource-plundering and develop rent-seeking practices, set up under the auspices of President Jacob Zuma (2009–18). Behind this largely malevolent and destructive behaviour also lies the effect of more structural dynamics, some of which may be related to the generalisation of the 'contract-state' (Brunette et al. 2019).

Procurement, at national but also local level, has become an essential part of the state's developmental and redistributive policies (Swilling 2017), and awarded contracts and jobs a major lever for the upward mobility of an aspiring Black middle class (von Holdt 2010). It is, however, a key site of clientelism, corruption, sometimes violence, and destabilisation of state capacity to govern, in spite of many attempts for regulatory reform (Brunette et al. 2019). Some authors, observing directly the workings of municipal government at a local level, add how the conjunction of an opaque political party funding system and a large confusion between the African National Congress (ANC) and local government networks and hierarchies have led to municipal maladministration (Reddy 2018), 'perpetual instability' (Phadi et al. 2018), wide use of violence (von Holdt 2013), and sometimes municipal collapse (Olver 2017) – at least in the smaller and less resourced municipalities.

There are reasons to believe that large cities are less prone to such capture and instability. Not only are they more autonomous financially and politically, through a larger tax base and a wider and more professional administration, they also cannot be allowed to collapse for the national economy, and when they encounter a deep crisis (such as the financial crisis having shaken the City of Johannesburg in the late 1990s), State remediation is quick but also under international scrutiny, far more so than in small, remote, peripheral, often voiceless municipalities. It does not mean, however, that large cities are not marked, too, by corruption and maladministration.

This book is not blind to such dynamics, but does not take them as its primary object. It focuses about a moment in the life of cities and Cities: a 'progressive moment'. In South Africa, this moment is gone, and the 'dark side' that could be considered then an element of context (among others) in which officials deployed their action, has now grown in significance, probably disabling possibilities for progressive change. Some institutional activists may have remained in the state, but they are less visible, and their tactics may have shifted from proactive pursuit of progressive goals, to more covert resistance. But this moment has existed, definitely opening a sense of possibility and a degree of agency in City administrative and political circles. This is what this chapter proposes to reflect upon, interrogating and framing what 'a left art of government' (Ferguson 2011) may mean, at City level, from the South African post-apartheid urban experience. It examines successively the key role of intermediary bureaucrats in driving change; what 'activism' in an institution requires and entails; taking 'porous bureaucracies' seriously by asking the question of space and scale of municipal action; how to

decipher where political choice lies within a complex process and institution; knowledge, meaning and capacity to act; and the challenges of institutionalisation.

The role of intermediary bureaucrats in driving change: key interface between policy and implementation with relative autonomy

A large part of this book explores officials' agency, adopting an emic perspective seeking to understand officials' point of view (Hahonou and Martin 2019). But, differing from classic anthropologies of bureaucracy, most of this book focuses on intermediary officials in City bureaucratic hierarchy. These officials remain accountable to higher-level officials, but also manage an administrative staff. They are sometimes in contact with user groups and civil society (as project managers for instance), but not as the bulk of their jobs, and their mandate and tasks are to a large degree to drive their teams and construct resources, respond to crises, to implement policies and projects that are generally reshaped in the course of their implementation.

Thus, the discretionary power described by Lipsky (2010) for street-level bureaucrats in applying or not applying certain regulations or classifying people in a category or another, the petty everyday corruption and other arrangements analysed by Anjaria (2011), the selective sensitivity to individual cases observed by Auyero (2012), the gate-keeping power and invented statistics illustrated by Gupta (2012), the coping mechanisms to face the double-binds presented by Bierschenk (2014), constitute only a part of the initiatives and puzzle-assembling work that those middle-rank bureaucrats do. Their level of autonomy, even if under constraints, appears higher, with a space for innovation and creativity that does not fit neatly in descriptions of bureaucrats' routines, even if subverted and appropriated. So, rather than focusing mostly on these routines in order to find regular patterns in bureaucratic behaviour that would indicate the various norms (official, practical, professional, moral, etc.) shaping their practices (Olivier de Sardan 2015), we have focused on individual officials and their navigation of rules, in order to 'act': to perform an intervention that may be part of their job, but requires creativity, networks, lobby and battles.

Interestingly, the use of multi-tasking, flexible understanding of the job as service to users, the ability to respond to citizens' issues and to unexpected requests and situations even if outside of officials' direct

mandate, is also what Judith Tandler (1997) emphasises as key to ‘good government’. Another of these key elements is, she adds, a deep public awareness of what public service is supposed to provide, which replaces Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as a bottom-up (rather than top-down) and qualitative (rather than quantified) way of exerting oversight over bureaucracies.

An understanding of routines, rules, structures, procedures and processes are part of the job: how and when to follow them or not points to the gap between official and practical norms. But another part is intermediary officials’ exploration of multiple institutions, and how, through attempting to act, they become aware of what these rules and norms are, and how they really work. If multiple constraints and norms exist, the ‘rules of the game’ (Olivier de Sardan 2015) do not fully pre-exist intermediary officials’ actions – they are shaped, framed, negotiated as the officials test their limits when solving a problem in the city.

Whether the multiplicity of norms they work under and with lead to officials’ paralysis or create windows of opportunity depends on the political local and national contexts. Meny-Gibert (2017) has shown how, in the Department of Education of the Eastern Cape (a peripheral and impoverished South African province), such multiplicity of norms, in a climate of political uncertainty and instability as well as scarce resources and high corruption, led officials to inaction and paralysis. Others, in areas of state intervention seen as sensitive and politically strategic such as immigration policies, have exposed how the intense and minute hierarchical control compels even senior officials to act contrary to their own common sense and humanity, confining their autonomous agency to small cracks in the rules (Laurens 2008). In Johannesburg and in eThekweni, where contributors to this book were able to partly observe City officials’ agency, empirical evidence showed high degrees of tactical and strategic autonomy from intermediary and senior officials, under the broad umbrella of explicit (even if not always dominant in the City politics) progressive political support.

This intermediary level of bureaucracy is said by an emerging literature to be vested with some potential to drive change (Chiha 2006; Cosson 2015), not limited to the work of operationalisation and translation of strategic directions into practical rules (Barrier et al. 2015). A French critical academic tradition tends to read this autonomy as partly if not fully illusory, pointing to the weight of broader structures within various ‘fields’ (Bourdieu and Cristin 1990) in which their individual agency is extremely limited. Other work in the same school of thought (Bourdieu 1991; Jeannot and Goodchild 2011) empirically examines the work of

those who are said to have ‘fuzzy jobs’: local development officers, project managers. These constitute specific types of intermediary bureaucrats – probably more junior than intermediary, but who have a team that they lead, and report to higher-ranked bureaucrats and politicians, vesting them with the conduct of a project. This work highlights the ‘impossible mission’ they are to carry, the contradictory imperatives combined with limited resources, the precarious nature of their work often bounded in time, that contain in these authors’ view the impossibility of success, and creates high levels of ‘suffering at work’. While this structural analysis should be kept in mind, other work rather highlights their ability to initiate change, their ‘constrained autonomy’ (Cosson 2015). What this book adds, beyond their relative access to strategic players in the City (senior officials, members of the City executive) and in the city (business organisations, housing associations, private developers, social movements), and their ability to drive implementation by directing operational staff, is the importance of their practical understanding of urban societies, that keeps them aware often quite directly of the effects of policies and implementation on local communities.

This intermediary position allows officials to build strategic or policy proposals based on a deep knowledge of operational conditions within City administration and of urban societies where policies and projects are to be implemented. This grounding of policy instruments building in social, operational and practical experience is precious and probably specific. This is the case of Ayanda, a senior manager in City parks, who was able to construct, together with peers from other City departments, a pilot project for participatory park design and management in Johannesburg’s inner city, and use this pilot to both engage with and train regional park managers about how to operationalise participatory park management (Béni-Gbaffou, Chapter 3, this book). Another example is Nikki, first a project facilitator then promoted in the Johannesburg Development Agency, who, based on her first-hand experience of being confronted by poor residents claiming decent and affordable housing, identifies public sites for housing, has them earmarked in planning documents, and contributes centrally to a progressive housing policy proposal with an implementation plan. Rubin (Chapter 4, this book) also narrates how Planning officials are able to operationally delay the attribution of building permits in the inner city to private developers refusing to contribute to inclusionary housing, and to strategically contribute to setting up a high-profile forum with a coalition of inner-city businesses to jointly deal with urban decay, before crafting a whole new policy.

The second element to be stressed is the creative character of those intermediary officials attempting to drive progressive change. Their pragmatic quest for overcoming obstacles, finding resources, building allies, keeping enemies in check through a carefully crafted politics of ‘carrots and sticks’ (Vedung 1998), has been illustrated by Krumholz and Clavel (1994) for North American cities of the 1970s. Some of the tactics found are very similar to the North American ones in the 1970s; other are specific to the place and time – where New Public Management and Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) are commonplace, where public capacity is limited and poverty and informality are massive. This book sheds light on the transversal nature of this work – how these intermediary officials, thanks to their position, navigate their own institution to find solutions literally ‘outside of the box’, discovered outside of their own unit or department – with peers but also with more junior and sometimes more senior officials. A City Park official will build a partnership with City Safety and City Planning to deal with inner-city parks management; planners will need to find ways to work with reluctant Housing officials, income-generating focused Property Department and under-resourced Community Services to build an inclusive housing complex in a suburb.

The degree of creativity might be enhanced in our particular case (post-apartheid South African cities). Officials are not only part of an administrative hierarchy in the making (where administrative control might not be as rigid as in more consolidated administrations), but where they are also, often, benefiting from party (ANC) networks that give them access to other sites of power, intersecting the City’s (Bénit-Gbaffou 2008). The ‘post-apartheid moment’ gave innovative individuals a place and a space to act within local government; City administration was then not only ‘business as usual’. In such a context, another concept has been useful to analyse intermediary officials’ practices – institutional activism.

The heuristic value of ‘institutional activism’

Encounters with Brazilian academia were crucial in this respect. Although this literature revolved mostly around national rather than urban processes in their focus, it took seriously the issue of officials’ practice in the conduct of progressive change, inspired by a particular moment in Brazilian history: the Lula and Rouseff presidencies, where a number of social movement activists became state officials.

What echoed from this body of work in our South African cities debates was first the conclusion that for state officials conducting

progressive reform requires relying on and maintaining a network of allies and institutions in civil society: not only through social movement mobilisation, but also through constantly engaging with professional bodies (*sanitaristas* in the health sector and civil management bodies in the water sector) (Dowbor and Houtzager 2014; Abers and Keck 2013). This is necessary to take into account the long temporality of policy reform, including its implementation and institutionalisation: maintaining popular pressure on politicians tempted to favour quick fixes as electoral gains, and building the conditions for a successful implementation and institutionalisation of reform within society.

A second illuminating idea was the conceptual difference developed, as empirical work progressed, between ‘institutional’ and ‘bureaucratic’ activism. While we continue to talk about ‘institutional activism’ at large (and did not adopt the term ‘bureaucratic activism’), this distinction is illuminating. In this literature, ‘institutional activism’ was initially focused on movements’ activists entering the state and the normative, cultural and political change this entailed, to the point of creating tensions between former fellow activists having remained in social movements, and the activist-in-the-state whose pragmatic compromises towards progressive reforms were often misunderstood (Abers and Tatagiba 2015). ‘Bureaucratic activism’ then framed forms of activism in the institution that were disconnected from any formal relation or previous experience of any existing social movements (Abers 2019): officials in loose networks proactively promoting self-defined contentious causes. Both configurations coexist in bureaucracies, but the latter, disconnecting institutional activism at large from social movements, opens new avenues for analysis. This book takes stock of what has been produced in a Brazilian context, interrogating what it does to use this concept at the local, urban scale and in a South African context, but perhaps more centrally, continuing the work of exploring the richness of the concept of ‘activism’ to study institutional practice and ways of governing societies.

What do City institutional activists do compared with street activists?

What is specific, what differs, when one engages in activism in the state rather than in the street? Or, to cite Verhoeven and Duyvendak (2017): what is it that institutional activists ‘know and do best’? This book proposes several elements of response.

Firstly, and foremost, what City institutional activists do is to create new policy instruments – technically, administratively, financially and

politically. Changing categories and norms of action or control (a KPI, for instance), challenging a rule overtly or quietly (defending councillors' right to protest alongside constituencies, wearing a workers' uniform in City Council, using portfolio committees to have discussions with councillors from other political parties), creating or altering planning documents and spatial frameworks to render visible or start addressing specific issues, negotiating and lobbying for a line in budget, initiating agreements, contracts or partnerships with other institutions, drafting new policies and having them passed, etc. That is what institutional activists are equipped to do, and can seize opportunities to do, from their position in the administrative hierarchy and in a specific portfolio or sector.

This differs radically from social movement or street activism, generally crystallised in opposition to broad policy change, with open ends regarding what alternative policy would or could be advocated. When street activists develop positive demands, these seldom fit neatly into administrative, political, scalar or sectoral categories of the state apparatus – this is where the work of institutional activists may start. Institutional activists are compelled to be constructive – constructing instruments that will produce a different city and a different way of responding to urban issues. They are compelled to be pragmatic: constructing instruments that will work in practice, relatively simple and as liberating as possible, as Ferguson (2013) would argue in uncertain and dependant societies and complex state administration; constructing instruments that will pass in City Council, through a work of balance and trade-offs, without losing the core of the initial objective. Institutional activists create policy instruments, and when possible a set of policy instruments – whether they start from policy drafts and then need to grant resources (budget, institutions, staff, guidelines, data) to implement it; or they begin with practical tools (mapping, planning practices, staff training) and move up to policy reform. Sometimes, they even (re)create their own mandate, within their official position – either informally (as 'their' cause, sometimes publicly displayed and sometimes not), or officially (Ayanda held for instance a unique title in Johannesburg City administration: 'head of knowledge and partnership management', within City Parks – Chapter 3, this book). A position that allows and entitles them to work transversally, and not be encapsulated in a single portfolio, unit or department – this transversality being often key to their project and their work (Needleman and Needleman 1977).

When one reflects further on which networks and alliances City institutional activists build and how, and interrogates what the conditions are for institutional activism to be successful, there are cases in which stars

seem to align – when sufficient bureaucratic support (the departments key to the specific intervention), political support (from the mayor and executive committee, or from a majority of councillors), and social support (visible constituency or media campaign), has been gathered. While this might appear as a tautology, or an impossible alignment to attain, most institutional activists in the City have worked on at least two, and often three, of what we can call ‘fields’ (as each has its own rules, positions and battles for position, even if they may intersect). It is classic to describe how institutional activists need to mobilise administrations: their own department (their boss higher up, as well as their operational staff), but also other departments whose portfolio is relevant or required to conduct the project or policy, and to overcome resistance, or find ways of sidelining those who might obstruct. It is also quite expected, although less easily described, that institutional activists need support from politicians: mayor and the executive committee, councillors or parties. Generally, intermediary officials are not likely to be directly in touch with councillors. In post-apartheid South African cities, it was however often the case, through prior ANC networks. Lastly, the importance of the link to civil society has been emphasised by the work of Dowbor and Houtzager (2014) on the Brazilian health sector. They demonstrate how social mobilisation matters to keep motivating politicians to go for the ‘difficult dive’ (Stone 1995) so that they keep trying to conduct progressive reforms which require a difficult and politically costly confrontation with market forces, that only a mobilised constituency might assist in compensating. Observing various City activists’ practices in post-apartheid South African cities, it is striking to see how their work generally straddles the three fields – with different balances depending on position, ability, skill and appetite. Generally, when one of these fields is insufficiently invested, it is where the obstacles (and likely failure) emerge even though, as in Bourdieu’s notion of capital convertibility, mobilisation in one field may compensate for the lack of mobilisation in another (civil society mobilisation becoming the condition for political support; political support a way to avoid administrative obstruction).

So, in response to the question about what *institutional* activists do, we can answer that institutional activists build policy instruments, and build capital in two or three of the political, bureaucratic or civil society fields. Two specificities need to be highlighted.

Firstly, this form of institutional activism may be specific to these short progressive moments in the lives of cities. Other modes of institutional activism exist in other contexts, such as covert resistance to policy, especially when there is radical change in national government,

and municipalities attempt to keep some autonomy. Analyses of officials' practices in 'sanctuary cities' or 'cities network for climate' in North American cities opposing the national policy of ex-president Donald Trump, and inventing instruments to resist or circumvent national directions, would probably lead to other features for institutional activism. These features would echo the 'guerrillas in the bureaucracy', described by O'Leary (2014) in the form of covert, individual resistance against administrative or political order, and by Needleman and Needleman (1974) analysing collective, sectoral battles within the bureaucracy.

A second specificity is that this book is focused on institutional activism at the City level, with the specificity we highlighted earlier: a close proximity to societies to be governed, allowing intermediary officials in particular to see rather immediately the effects of the policies promulgated and crafted. At this scale, the 'policy and implementation gap' is probably narrower than elsewhere, and officials' discretionary power, due to their position, might be higher.

Why are institutional activists, activists? Intensity and the (in) ability to last in position

These conclusions help us to reflect on further heuristic dimensions of the concept of institutional activism. What does considering activist officials as 'activists' help us see and understand? Here, we can only indicate directions for reflection. We have mostly looked at what activist officials 'do', not centrally on who activist officials 'are' (their biographies, their training, their professional trajectories), which seems to coincide with dominant approaches to activism in the studies of social movements seeking to explain why, how, and when people enter or leave social movements or political parties (Sawicki and Siméant 2009). These directions are two-fold: the blurred boundary between work and life experienced by institutional activists, and the opportunistic and blurred framing of 'the cause'.

The reference to 'activism' to describe some officials' practices first allows us to understand the intensity of their life at work, and the blurry boundary between their life and their work, where their work becomes an important part of how they see and define themselves. This lived intensity, the sense of a mission carried by many officials in intermediary or high positions, is both exhilarating and exhausting. Our understanding of institutional activism (playing simultaneously on three different fields of action – bureaucratic, political and social – alongside the transversality of

activist officials' actions, not confined to their own unit or department) does explain this intensity practically. It requires the constant and regular engagement of activist officials with a number of departments, officials, sectoral issues and regulations, civil society activists, politicians and media. This produces new understandings, opportunities and instruments for action but is also extremely time- and energy-consuming.

Bourdieu analyses this 'suffering at work' (Bourdieu 1991), but possibly underplays the exhilaration generated by the felt possibility of change and creative responses to issues, the sense of meaning and contribution, the collegiality created by a jointly constructed ethos of public service and social justice. However, the toll taken by the demands of activism and the many failures for few victories generally lead officials to not last very long in their position, which also limits the possibility for consolidating and institutionalising change. As fundamentally, for institutional activists, political reform requires longevity in the institution – the incremental building of technical capacity, of institutional knowledge, of various political, technical, administrative, media and social networks, that may be mobilised when an opportunity emerges. This book does not go further on what makes institutional activists stay, nor on what makes them leave the institution: retributions of activism, activism fatigue, moments of biographical disposition to activism or retreat thereof, dismissal or marginalisation by the institution, gendered dimensions of institutional activism, are directions for complementary research.

Why are institutional activists, activists? The usefully blurred framing of 'the cause'

A second direction emerging empirically from our collective study and striking stimulating parallels with the literature of social movements, is interrogating the framing of 'the cause'. Following Abers, we define a cause as 'ideas that, from the perspective of believers, need to be defended against powerful forces of stability or change' (Abers 2019, 24). Empirically, for activist officials, cause framing seems far more blurry, opportunistic, fluid and self-constructed than for social movement collectives. A number of factors may explain this. Firstly, the 'cause' in institutional activism is less in need of being explicitly formulated than in social movements, because the adoption of a new policy or norm or instrument precisely requires flexibility in the way it is framed, a degree of discretion if not of secrecy in subtle and multi-institutional tactical and strategic moves, so as to garner wide and diverse support, building

compromises without losing too much content. Publicity might be needed at times, but carefully framed at specific moments of the process. A second reason for this blurry framing might be the effect that operationalisation (constructing a concrete public intervention in its broad and minute practicalities) has on causes – that, in social movements, can be built in broad and principled, oppositional and confrontational ways. The ‘institutionalisation’ of the cause, that some have called ‘domestication’ (Neveu 2011) but that Katzenstein (1998) has distinguished from its ‘de-radicalisation’, transforms it substantially, as illustrated by Abers and Tatagiba (2015), and in this book by Pingo and Bénit-Gbaffou (Chapter 5).

In municipal activism, the framing of the cause is generally profoundly grounded in specific urban contexts – perhaps even more than for street activism – and is possibly far more individual than collective. If institutional activists are likely to be driven by a broad sense of justice and wanting to contribute to better societies, the specific cause they are pushing in the institution generally emerges opportunistically. It does so as officials encounter opportunities or are stricken by issues arising with urban policy processes and their local implementation. For the Planning officials described by Rubin (Chapter 4), the broad ‘cause’ (a conception of justice where the poor should access the city) was opportunistically embodied and framed in a specific inclusive housing policy process they had the opportunity to push, without being mandated explicitly by their political boss. Likewise, a project facilitator portrayed by Bénit-Gbaffou discovered the world of homelessness and developed his intervention around it: it could have remained a marginal issue in his project, but a polite but radical criticism by academic consultants tasked to follow the project made him brutally realise its exclusionary dynamics. While this sudden realisation or crystallisation might be similar for activists joining social movements (not specific to institutional activists), the difference lies in the fact that the latter are able to join a collective process framing ‘the cause’ and exploring different directions and repertoires of action – while institutional activists will also, and perhaps mostly, frame the cause according to the opportunities provided by their position in administration, and by the policy instruments they are able to construct.

Here we come back to Clavel’s (2010) fundamental idea that progressive cities are built through pushing boundaries in both participatory and redistributive dimensions of justice. While some officials analysed in this book (generally those at more senior positions) have built their cause and politics through an acute and principled sense of the need for redistribution, and the necessity for planning to protect

the most deprived (and majority) sections of the city and residents, many officials at more intermediate levels have experienced participatory engagements first-hand. From there, they have worked their way up in strategic policy-making, incrementally becoming aware of the shortcomings of policy and instruments, ill-adaptation or blindness to the social dynamics on the ground, but also on the possibilities of reform, instruments and resource mobilisation. This dimension of participatory planning, ‘behind the scene’ type of work – where the moment of encounter with local communities might bring new understandings to officials, some of which might take it further and work with it in multiple realms – is largely understated by literature on urban politics, democracy and participation.

As explained earlier, we have not delved into the biographies, political and personal trajectories of those activists. As a consequence, we are not able to analyse why specific officials would be predisposed to become institutional activists, in their own life path and in this particular moment of South African history; this remains a direction for future research. But we can see empirically how the ‘cause’ itself is generally not external nor independent of officials’ practice and position. It is not as a force shaping and channelling those practices, as a collective movement with a collective framing process defining boundaries, principles and identity. It is often tacit, at least for officials who are not expected nor in a position to directly hold public discourses. It is constructed and framed by the specific institutional position and context in which officials are located, crystallising around a window of opportunity (at large, the post-apartheid moment, and specific – a crisis, a public issue, a moment in the political or electoral cycle), and incrementally refined as those officials engage in conceptualising, resourcing, implementing and institutionalising the policy instrument that is key to their intervention.

Taking ‘porous bureaucracies’ seriously – understanding the making of policy instruments in space and scale

On the nature of officials’ constrained autonomy, beyond the discretion of street-level bureaucrats, we were continuously inspired by the work of Indian scholar Solomon Benjamin (2004), who proposed the concept of ‘porous bureaucracies’. By this, he did not just mean that the state is not autonomous from society and is always subjected to its influence; he highlighted that local administrations were particularly permeable to the societies they were meant to administer because of their social

and spatial proximity. In his view, not all bureaucracies are equally porous, and not in the same ways or to the same social groups. Paying attention to the local level of policy-making (below the scale of metropolitan or State authorities whose plans and officials are the most famous and prestigious), he looked at how local councillors and bureaucrats ended up being open to their local constituencies' claims and needs, even if in contradiction with master plans or other existing broader legislation. A 'politics by stealth', he did not term it a 'progressive politics' (the term might be too strong), but illuminated how these practices contributed substantially to the inclusion or even upliftment of the poor, sometimes in contrast to grand claims by NGO or social movements' discourses of rights, which ended up having large exclusionary effects. He explained this porosity as a result of the social proximity of those councillors and bureaucrats, originating from backgrounds similar to that of their constituencies; by direct interest as well, local councillors owing their position to their ability to attract local votes (the democratic, albeit not rosy, dimension of clientelism: [Chatterjee 2004](#)) and (generally at least)² to avoid social unrest, an objective that might be shared by local administrations.

This reflection emerged in a long international tradition of studying the state and deconstructing the idea of its autonomy, through observing state–society encounters (as moments) or the fuzzy framing of the borders between state and society (as institutions), classic but important ways of studying the state, 'from the outside'. Seeing the 'state from its margins' that reflects its core ([Das and Poole 2004](#)); from the 'street-level' ([Lipsky 2010](#)); from its 'interfaces' ([Dubois 2017](#); [Gupta 2012](#)); from its spaces of 'engagement' ([Wafer and Oldfield 2014](#)); or its 'institutional surface area' ([Heller 2019](#)) where categories of public action meet reality of society; observing the movements and mutual influences ('state-in-society' and 'society-in-state') ([Migdal 2001](#)), to cite only a few.

A number of these authors use this interface to interrogate how civil society dynamics shape both policies and practices of (local) officials. That is how [Tendler \(1997\)](#), moving away from a normative participatory agenda, sees the improvement of local officials' practices both through a higher public awareness of citizens' rights and what the state is supposed to deliver, and through an enhanced central intervention that, far from relinquishing power to decentralised authorities, continues to provide a shield and a recourse (alongside increased public awareness) against clientelistic practices and pressures, often paramount at the local level ([Olver 2017](#)). Tendler's shift away from state–society binary, towards a triptyc (central state, local authorities and the public) is illuminating. It

is also what Benjamin investigates, grounding his critique of broad-brushed analyses of state practices in cities (identified as neoliberal or clientelistic or both) in a constant attention to differences between scales of government. In his case studies, metropolitan authorities, not only because of specific objectives and mandates but also because of their relative social, spatial and electoral remoteness from their poorer constituencies, have historically developed regressive Master plans and urban policies that are disconnected from ‘the majority of the people’ (Chatterjee 2004). In reverse, local councillors and administrators, be it by electoral interest, fear of social unrest, pragmatism or sympathy with residents, more often ended up being de facto, informally, more progressive. This experience of local public institutions in practice more progressive than higher levels of government contrasts with Tandler’s conclusions, as well as Gupta’s (2012) and Dasgupta and Williams’ (2022), whose work on Indian rural development argues that the more progressive directions driven by the Indian national government are lost in the transmission to the lower levels of administration, where social and caste prejudice, locally-embedded norms, clientelist practices generally lead to the reproduction of the status quo. While similar clientelist interests may drive local councillors in cities to pay attention to the demands of their constituencies and to confront (at least in practice) Master planning, one can only conclude that context does matter – one scale of government not being inherently more progressive than another (Purcell 2006). Looking at the interplay and contradiction between scales of public intervention is crucial in grasping elements of progressiveness in politics.

Benjamin’s work can also be placed in a rich Indian scholarship inviting reflection on, and from, the state’s ordinary, mundane, ‘everyday’ practices, in a way that may have become banal but was then novel (Fuller and Benei 2000; Das and Poole 2004; Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2012). Benjamin is one of the first scholars to have developed this examination of state everyday practices in urban, rather than rural, settings in India. His study of ‘porous bureaucracies’ is strongly grounded in various local urban settings, with their specific issues, configurations and stakes: in areas of informal settlements, ‘porous bureaucracy’ is about inventing new, ad hoc ways of regularising tenure (Benjamin 2005). In areas of industrial-residential areas (Benjamin 2004), where mixed-land use generates a degree of social cohesion and upliftment, ‘porous bureaucracy’ is about finding semi-official ways to provide electricity to small informal businesses. This regulatory creativity is not studied from the bureaucrats’ perspective – difficult to reach especially as they work in grey zones, but

from the various documents (internal, official, informal) provided by local administrations to individual residents or entrepreneurs, that have a degree of 'officialness' (as they generally parallel existing regulations).

Studying the urban policy-making process not only in time (such as those inspired by Foucauldian, genealogic approaches to policy instruments), but also in grounded and specific spaces; paying attention to policy instruments' circulation across government scales; and actively looking for documents with different degrees of 'officialness' reflecting the policy-making process between state and society (as advised by Hull 2012), are the three directions we have followed in this book, inspired by Indian scholarship. I want to illustrate this with two specific examples.

The grounded contexts in which urban policies originate, be it through a specific local mobilisation calling for public attention or a situated modality of regulation and city making set up locally, and their lasting influence on the final policy framing, are often understudied in the analysis of urban policy-making. This is at the core of Modiba's contribution (Chapter 6), interrogating how urban street trading is governed in three South African municipalities. The governance arrangements she found depended centrally on two main (interrelated) factors: the way street traders' organisations were structured, and the local history of contention between the City and the traders. Indeed, from a local bureaucracy's point of view, in order to delegate managing power to street traders' organisations (necessitated by the incapacity of bureaucracies to manage street trading on their own), street traders needed to be sufficiently organised to have some management capacity, but not to the point of becoming antagonist and making too contentious claims towards the municipality. In parallel, where the history of street trading regulation was marked by deep violence, the fear of triggering civil unrest had often led local administration to concede more power to street traders' organisations. Here, an institutional governing arrangement, and the specific urban policies deriving from this arrangement, are directly framed by local historical configurations.

Interrogating policy-making not only in time and space but also across scales, is even more telling. Demeestère (Chapter 7) studied the framing of regulation of neighbourhood shops from local to national policy (and back), from a letter of threat issued at the local level by business organisations, to its various iterations in documents of different nature and scale, up to a national bill endorsed by the ANC. The nature of the initial document (a letter) produced by the business owners, their insistence on having agreements (mediated by the police, then local authorities assisted by the United Nation High Commissioner for

Refugees) written down and signed – as a mark of officialness – played a key role in framing the issue and policy. Even if the direct xenophobic threats were incrementally removed as regulatory documents became more official, the letter's initial xenophobic framing remained, became the object to be negotiated, amended and rephrased but not structurally questioned. The traders' lobby accepted the policing of xenophobia against the promise of its institutionalisation, in a form of trade-off. Such porosity here between state and society, where society becomes bureaucratised and the state informalised, is in this occurrence deeply regressive. This shows the limits of pragmatic politics, where populist framings of problems and policies are no longer mediated, transformed and challenged by an open, public, programmatic or principled politics, but negotiated as close as possible to local communities. A politics by stealth, porous or open to popular claims, is not necessarily progressive, especially in times marked by populist dynamics, nurtured by social deprivation as well as narrow political ambition.

Deciphering public political choices: officials' intentions, public transcripts, and state rationalities

A constant and productive tension throughout the research programme and in this book is what to make, how to conceptualise, how to operationally grasp and observe, and how to analyse, 'strategic choices' made by 'the state' to govern cities. These strategic choices were collectively constructed and contested, blurry, messy, collective, iterative, with a part of arbitrariness and informality that keeps escaping an observer's grasp; but strategic choices nevertheless were made, had an existence, had effects, and we believed it mattered to look for such choices as they were key to our ability to reflect on democracy at large, to raise issues of public accountability and of political alternatives.

The variety of disciplines that made up our research team, the fact that political scientists and sociologists were a minority compared to the planners who often assumed functionalist understandings of 'the state' and its urban policies led to naïve yet fresh and meaningful discussions on how to conceptualise issues of 'intention', 'policy objective', 'political choice', 'urban strategy' that are consubstantial to the act of governing. On our way, we found many theoretical framings of the state – many leaving the researcher disempowered and lost, due to their highly abstract nature and their disconnection from the materiality of city spaces and societies, from the practicalities of officials' action, and their silence or

blurriness on empirical methods for researchers attached to ethnography. If our book provides methodological guidance, and if this guidance opens to epistemological reflections, then we will have produced useful work.

Most contributors interrogating officials' agency and working in ethnographic ways (Part I in this book), used the term 'objectives', not attributed to a specific agent or even institution but generally to a policy or a policy instrument. The use of this term avoided the challenging question of individual or collective agency, the personification of the state, and the psychological approach of officials. Officials' constrained autonomy was then grasped through the concepts of 'tactics and strategies', at the intersection of individual agency, power position and situated contexts. Even if the issue of alliance building (and among these, political and institutional support) were key, they were observed as processes and interplay of positions, rather than described as a definite City direction or clear political strategic choice.

Parts II and III this book, which generally did not adopt ethnographic approaches of City institutions and could not observe practices, reflected more directly on how Cities frame strategic choices and how policy decisions might be made in one direction or another, using different conceptual frames.

One way of doing so has been to use the notion of officials' or politicians' 'intentions'. The notion of intentionality has been defined in psychology, but also in economics, management and anthropology, to analyse how agents imagine and effect voluntary actions as a means to an end (Blackler and Regan 2009). Debates are mostly about what factors frame intentions, between beliefs, desires, but also awareness (of the context, the possibilities for change, what it would take) and skills (mastering the tools, garnering the resources needed to effect change) (Malle and Knobe 1997). Charlton (Chapter 10), for instance, uses the notion of 'intention', in a layman's way, to frame the paradox at the core of her chapter, echoing Murray Li's (2007) and Gupta's (2012) central questions – how come good-willed, well-intentioned, policies and agents end up increasing rather than challenging, or even mitigating inequality and injustice in the city? One of her conclusions is that too few good-intentioned (planning) officials ended up exhausting their capacity by confronting oppositional middle-class residents' groups around a new middle-income housing project, diverted from the other, key battle of protecting existing affordable housing for the poorest. A second factor of failure was their false belief that existing policy instruments were sufficient for doing so, without strongly engaging with City housing officials, who worked in other directions. What an approach in terms of

officials' 'intentions' might show is that the intention failed to achieve the desired change due to lack of 'awareness' (of the real possibilities for change) and to the lack of 'skills' (inattention to housing instruments).

The idea of objectives driving practice is also analysed using Scott's (1990) concept of 'public versus hidden transcripts', where the analysis of what different actors choose to show and to hide is used to reveal the situated interests, objectives or directions of different parties. Galvin (Chapter 11) does so to study water politics in eThekweni, where City objectives are particularly muddled, as state officials and social movement leaders paradoxically use the same 'deceptive lens' in their public discourse to describe access to water in eThekweni (pretending that the poor do pay for water, while they both know it is not the case). Galvin explains the deception by differentiating between what she calls actors' 'interests'; the 'image' each actor wishes to project of themselves and their institution; and their 'ideology' or worldview – useful notions operationalising several levels of explanations. Here, 'hidden transcripts', the resistance of social life to state policies, are potentially taken up by the City official who, by stealth, keeps fighting for water resources' distribution to the poor. The study thus operationalises the study of 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts in original ways to understand City officials' objectives that are not immediately observable, leading to unsettled assumptions that public transcripts are borne by a modernist and oppressive state, versus hidden ones borne by civil society (organised or not) in resistance.

A third family of approaches, dominant in this book, has been to use a Foucauldian lens that conceptualises political choices not as individual leadership and agent's making but as the result of diverse and competing 'state rationalities', reflected and revealed in the genealogy and framing of 'policy instruments' (Lascoumes and Legales 2004). This book contributes to operationalise such an approach, following previous work (Halpern et al. 2014), taking it one step further. Not focusing on the contested genealogy of one single instrument (a particular policy or a given institution), but a set of various policy instruments used by different public actors on a site or sector of public interventions, the study of their divergence, intersections or convergence assists in identifying competing state rationalities (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a). Bouyat (Chapter 9), tracking the construction of 'foreignness' in Johannesburg's low-income schools through the study of policy instruments used at national, regional and micro-local levels is thus able to follow the distributive, the managerial and the xenophobic rationalities of school registration, where she sees how the latter is growing in prominence. Beyond her documentation of the rise of xenophobia in South African society and state, investigating

policy instruments in that way (as a set, transversal to several units and scales of the state), within a sector and with a specific question in mind, is a novel way of deciphering state competing rationalities as they are actually implemented and lived by citizens.

In this framing, however, the issue of political choice is often left unresolved, policy effects being conceptualised as the result of competing rationalities, not necessarily intentionally designed. However, their persistence in time, especially when they are contested by civil society groups attempting to put the issue on the public agenda, gives an indication of their functionality in the eyes of political leadership, and hence reveal a form of political choice.

New Public Management, knowledge on municipal action, and the loss of meaning

The link between state knowledge and public action rests on a long academic tradition questioning the categories used by the state to make society legible in order to act (Scott 1998). It has been renewed by contemporary reflections on state ignorance, where the illegibility of society is partly functional to government. Breckenridge (2012) has coined the idea of ‘no will to know’, where no effort is made by the state to gather data on a specific phenomenon, area or community – reflecting a lack of interest for issues not framed as ‘public problems’. Roy (2009) has proposed the ‘politics of unmapping’, where large portions of space or society remain out of sight of public maps, registers and databases, an opacity that may well serve the interests of the state, sinister or not. Aguilera (2017) has shown how gathering and displaying data, constructing instruments and categories to measure a phenomenon, compel the state to intervene – thus, not gathering specific data, conversely, allows the state to overlook the need for intervention. Elsewhere, I have termed this feature, paraphrasing Breckenridge, ‘the will to not know’ (Bénil-Gbaffou 2018b): not the absence of effort or resources to gather knowledge, but the active refusal of ways of knowing, of publicising existing knowledge, or even the denial that such knowledge exists. In an urban context of poverty, informality and social fluidity (Simone 2004), gathering data does require resources, that are often lacking especially in areas that are not identified as public problems or political priorities. Yet, simultaneously, in the age of New Public Management in urban governance, a plethora of data is produced and circulated within and between various public and semi-public institutions, to monitor and

evaluate public action and bureaucratic practice. What to make of this paradox, and how to understand the production of data as both reflecting and potentially guiding municipal intervention?

A cross-cutting result in this book is the loss of meaning experienced by many officials at low, middle and even sometimes high levels of the City, when it comes to their own or municipal action. Much has been written about how New Public Management and its quantification of everything constitutes, like many forms of technicisation of political action, an ‘anti-politics machine’ (Ferguson 2004), a way of invisibilising the political choices encapsulated in what is presented as undecipherable technical decisions (Hibou 2012). This loss of meaning and capacity for strategic action in officials’ experience is anchored in the type of data they are gathering and working from – as if their lenses were ill-adapted and they were conscious of this ill-adaptation without however being able to change them. Charlton (Chapter 10) explains how well-intentioned officials, genuinely working towards including lower-income households in a flagship urban project, fail to ‘see’ both the social groups they are aiming at protecting (the poor in a middle-class suburb, a non-issue and a non-group), and the ill-adaptation of the policy instruments advanced to protect, maintain or develop affordable housing. Galvin (Chapter 11) presents how deceptive lenses, used by both officials and activists to frame and literally map (based on precise GIS data) the problem with water provision to the poor in the eThekweni metropolitan area, are used as functional political tools by each party but ultimately deprives them of instruments of action in their respective field to expand water access to the poor. Bouyat (Chapter 9) analyses how education professionals (school staff and Provincial bureaucrats), trained in an ethos of care, education and humanism, become complicit in tracking and excluding undocumented learners from access to education, in spite of themselves: trapped in a computerised registration system supposed to facilitate public action and allocation of resources. Mushongera (Chapter 12) presents how middle-rank City officials, having delegated the operation of water services to a para-municipal and autonomous agency which they are supposed to oversee and give strategic direction to, end up disempowered, having lost track of urban realities, filling their time with compiling meaningless figures to respond both to their own Key Performance Indicators and to the requested audits from various other services and public institutions. Smith (Chapter 13) focuses on high ranking officials on the one hand, and local councillors on the other, mandated to provide oversight on the City’s strategic action – the former being lost in meaningless quantitative data failing to measure and

interrogate the ‘outcomes’ of public action (focusing rather on easier to measure and to perform ‘outputs’), the latter being utterly disempowered in the face of an increasingly complex, overlapping and sedimented administration whose reports bear little relation to material realities of the city and their local constituencies.

This loss of meaning could be one effect of ‘governing by numbers’, generally described as a feature of the governance of mass societies marked by large scale and high complexity (Desrosières 2008), where statistics are one means of rendering society legible to the state in order to act upon it (Scott 1998). In a number of cases described in this book, the collection of data seems to have lost this function of governing society, instead becoming a bureaucratic exercise that may be used to control officials’ practices, but in quite pointless ways – disconnected from officials’ meaningful activities as much as from existing social dynamics. In Mushongera’s and Smith’s chapters (Chapters 12 and 13 respectively), numbers seem to have become a mode of governing by apathy, or by sideration, with officials trapped in endlessly compiling meaningless quantitative data on which they have no power, limited understanding, nor mandate neither real motivation, to act. Sometimes, however, ‘reality’ strikes back, surging in violent ways through protest action or litigation, and leading political leaders to suddenly ask for the compilation of meaningful data – data that can contribute to knowledge of social dynamics and needs.

Here the spatialisation of analyses provides an original dimension to understanding the way urban materiality sometimes resist the ill-adapted categories and measurements. Scattered, decayed and over-occupied flats in the dense urban fabric of a suburban, formerly White, middle-class area in Johannesburg (Charlton, Chapter 10), partly explains the political invisibility of poor Black residents. The hilly topography of vast peri-urban land owned and managed by the opaque Ingonyama Trust in eThewkini, poses specific water pressure problems where overuse, non-payment, absence of mapping and coordination of land construction aggravate the topographic factor to explain poor water delivery. This issue may ultimately shift the power balance towards the City administration (Galvin, Chapter 11). The location of low-income schools in Johannesburg, in migrant-friendly or xenophobic townships, strongly influences how their staff responds (through compliance or resistance) to institutionalised xenophobia embedded in the computerised school registration systems (Bouyat, Chapter 9). Perceived ‘mushrooming’ informal settlements whose spatial and political marginality renders City-wide mobilisation difficult, allow officials to justify and not bother too

much about the lack of progress on residents' access to water and sanitation services (Mushongera, [Chapter 12](#)).

To make sense of this decreasing sense of meaning of public action for City officials, linked to a probable diminished capacity to act, this book offers several hypotheses. Firstly, increasing neoliberal rationalities incrementally hollows out the post-apartheid rhetoric of redistribution, without discarding it as it remains a key feature of public discourses, thus rendered meaningless and disjointed. Secondly, this increasing meaninglessness can be seen as one outcome of the adoption of New Public Management's principles – not only in the way quantification of all action prevents assessing key dimensions of public intervention, or how it constitutes a way of depoliticising and invisibilising actual policy choices ([Hibou 2012](#)), preventing from asking 'the right questions' (Smith, [Chapter 13](#)), but perhaps mostly through the disconnection between oversight and operation, depriving local officials from their key power: their intermediary position between situated, local knowledge ('the field') and knowledge on the political and bureaucratic apparatus. Nowhere is it more visible than in Mushongera's chapter ([Chapter 12](#)), where water delivery is thrust upon an opaque para-municipal agency, and City officials in a skeleton water department supposed to exercise oversight (but incapable of doing so) express their disempowerment, explicitly or through high levels of absenteeism and job vacancies. Besides the divorce between strategic and operational capacity (straddling both constituted the strength of intermediary officials), it is also the contradiction between revenue generation and basic rights' provision, two core and contradictory drives of local government, which becomes disarticulated. As long as this tension is held by a single entity, department, municipal agent, the drive to find a balance between these two essential needs remains paramount. When revenue generation becomes encapsulated in a water autonomous agency (business-like and responding to an independent board checking the financial balance) while the objectives of redistribution, or mere public service delivery to the poorest is only defended by officials disconnected from operational capacity and odd politicians in times of protests or elections, the essential requirement of local government to balance the two contradictory objectives (providing basic services in both efficient and equitable way) collapses.

Lastly, this loss of meaning in bureaucratic public office might derive from what Bierschenk ([2014](#)) calls bureaucratic 'sedimentation' – where new institutions are created to respond to dysfunctional ones, without suppressing the latter nor fixing the former, leading to duplication,

overlapping and competition, opacity and confusion in mandates and responsibilities. This sedimentation is the result of usual dynamics in complex organisations, but it is aggravated by at least three factors. The first factor, post-apartheid local government underwent a series of successive and repeated institutional reforms (a story recalled in Mushongera and Smith, [Chapters 12](#) and [13](#) respectively), to incrementally move from apartheid local government to complex democratic institutions. A second, both contextual and global factor, is the sometimes uncritical adoption of New Public Management principles, pushing for the creation of parallel agencies and the use of private contractors, fenced-off from political ‘interference’ seen as corrupt or inefficient, while the state institution with similar functions cannot be suppressed, to maintain at least the illusion of democratic accountability in the form of political oversight over this parallel agency. A third, intersecting factor relates to ‘pockets of excellence’, temporarily set up as responses to crises or innovative pilot projects, or linked to specific grand mayoral urban projects that ephemerally attract political and administrative attention and resources ([Pinson 2009](#)). These administrative ‘pockets’ are only superficially inscribed in the state apparatus and therefore have low ability to institutionalise the innovations they might be developing.

Progressive change as incomplete policies: the never-ending work of institutionalisation

In retrospect, it is striking to see how in the South African case studies we observed, many of the attempts to construct progressive legislation ended up incomplete. Benjamin’s ([2005](#)) case studies on multiple, albeit fragmented, parallel local legislations giving informal settlements’ residents a form of security of tenure, which seems widely developed in Indian cities, contrasts starkly with the challenges narrated by Harrison ([Chapter 2](#)) in creating policy instruments recognising incremental regularisation of Johannesburg informal settlements, an ambition actually inspired by the municipal planner’s trip to Brazil. Klug ([Chapter 8](#)) analyses his deception when what he saw as an opportunity for progressive inner-city housing policy led to a meaningless policy document that failed to engage with the real issues. Charlton ([Chapter 10](#)) is puzzled by the eviction of the working poor in the Corridors of Freedom, which was aimed at offering better life conditions for this social group, and her whole chapter investigates this contradiction. The three

activists portrayed by Bénit-Gbaffou (Chapter 3) multiplied attempts at reforming policies and institutions for social justice – if they won small victories, they encountered large defeats and two eventually left the City.

This does not mean that progressive legislation was not passed in post-apartheid cities. Progressive strategic decisions were made at municipal level, complementing an imperfect but existing national welfare system – for instance, firmly and systematically redirecting the bulk of municipal investment towards townships and disadvantaged communities, massively developing basic municipal services in under-equipped areas and promulgating a decent living package (free basic services for the poorest). This book did not target specifically these policy champions (as did Krumholz and Clavel (1994) in collecting purposeful and edited interviews of equity planners retrospectively reflecting on their action)³ looking at the work of officials and institutions to understand the way they worked, and following the process that they crafted towards conducting progressive change. What we were able to observe doing so is possibly less spectacular, but perhaps there is something to learn there too. As a matter of fact, Krumholz and Clavel's (1994) collection of narratives from policy champions, although entailing inspiring stories of political astuteness and technical progressive instruments, innovative processes and courageous tricks, also testifies to the huge difficulties these progressive planners, even in high positions and with major political backing, experienced in institutionalising their practices and consolidating change.

This requires further reflection, structured here around the two understandings of 'institutionalisation'. Firstly, as officialisation of intermediary officials' practices that remain informal and fragile as long as they are not acknowledged and endorsed by the institution. Such a movement of institutionalisation of progressive practices, from the bottom-up, may be key to their continuation in time. Secondly, as the wide naturalisation of a practice or a policy, its grounding in everyday administration, across its different levels. This movement of institutionalisation, from the top-down, from a policy objective to its appropriation by mundane administrative practices, is key to its implementation, today as much as tomorrow. Institutional activists engage in both movements of institutionalisation, with different stakes and degrees (towards the top – passing a new policy; towards the bottom – training staff and reframing institutional structures and incentives) depending on their position in the administrative hierarchy, their resources and their capacity.

Institutionalisation from the bottom-up, from intermediary officials' practice to municipal strategic policy, is costly, challenging and scarce. City officials' battles to pass progressive municipal policies, based on innovative practice and progressive reform, grounded in pilot projects, responses to participatory claims and international best practices were more often than not lost. The experience of success (narrated in Rubin's [Chapter 4](#)) and the many stories of failure seem to indicate that passing progressive policies in City Council is not to be understood primarily as a beginning (setting up a new instrument for progressive municipal action). It is rather to be analysed as an end – the conclusion, or at least the reflection, of a political battle that has already taken place. In many cases, this battle was held (and lost) with property developers, the land-based elite and its political allies described long ago by Logan and Molotch (1987), and still central in contemporary urban politics. This battle was won (Rubin, [Chapter 4](#)) first in practice, by Planning officials using practical incentives and sanctions with individual developers and their coalitions (delaying building permits, opening up an inner-city forum and partnerships), but also with other City departments, agencies and politicians having other linkages and agreements with private developer groups (blocking the public projects they were driving, if they did not bring their support to the inclusive housing policy). This resulted in a new inclusive housing policy being passed. This battle with the land-based elite was avoided in the making of a policy around inner-city evictions and relocation (analysed by Klug, [Chapter 8](#)), which left property owners off the hook even though they were largely responsible for inner-city decay and slumlording. This was a battle neither the City Housing Department nor the human rights lawyers saw fit to start – the former not wanting to embark on a such a large battle about which the mayor was not very keen, the latter finding it easier to win the case by attacking the state than making property owners accountable. Many other stories show the difficulty in consolidating, within official urban policies or through clear political directions, what intermediary officials have tried to build through a series of informal practices and technical instruments explorations.

The second story illustrates what institutionalisation from the top-down might mean. A senior official, working in a strategic City unit advisory to the Johannesburg mayor, had lobbied the mayor for a long time to have the 2006 Growth and Development Strategy (GDS) (a strategic document guiding City planning for five years) include, as part of its five driving principles, 'the proactive absorption of the poor', and succeeded, due to both his persistence, his credibility, and contextual elements opening an opportunity. This official did not stop there: he took

upon himself to workshop each and every City department, to present the GDS principles and content, and consolidate collectively how each department could and would contribute practically to this 'proactive absorption of the poor'. Department-specific translations of this strategic objective were formalised and encapsulated in a set of Key Performance Indicators, annually checked and discussed. Aligning strategic priorities (worked upon at a political level), and basic administrative duties, is hard work, invisible work. Few officials understand the importance of embedding and translating so practically, in coordinated and systematic ways, the key strategic policy directions and political priorities into the actual work and objectives of lower levels of administration. Actually, the following version of the Growth Development Strategy (GDS), conducted by another official in the same position, did not follow that track. This lack of alignment, this loss in translation, is the object of Mushongera's chapter (Chapter 12): how a specific indicator or a progressive water policy (improving water provision to informal settlements), mentioned in the GDS, is in fact nobody's responsibility, and disappears, or becomes meaningless, in City Water officials' Key Performance Indicators. Similarly, Charlton (Chapter 10) shows how a flagship project such as the Corridors of Freedom, with strong political backing and a large budget, fails in programming relevant housing policy instruments to construct socially integrated neighbourhoods. This lack of deep inscription of a policy in administration is telling of a lack of political priority, the hollowing out of strategic documents, or competing state rationalities, where the progressive one lost the battle. It also indicates, in reverse, the work required by officials to have a policy progressive objective (that requires going against the market flow) pursued, fought for and followed through.

What to make of these two different but complementary stories of the challenging work of institutionalisation? These challenges do not mean that progressive practices were not developed. They testify to the difficulties of a 'left art of government', and indicate the type of work in which institutional activists are immersed. If the dominant condition is of incomplete and partial institutionalisation of municipal progressive policies, what does it mean for institutional activists in the City? Many continue to work at their own, intermediary level – building informal but concrete practices, shared with lower-level bureaucrats; training their staff and their peers to alternative, more participatory or inclusive ways of performing their jobs; building joint actions and projects with fellow officials and external partners, with a short time span and a limited scale, but that can be elevated to the status of pilot projects and be expanded,

should a window of opportunity open. The work of institutionalisation, in the sense of formalisation on the one hand, grounding as normal practices on the other, is still at play, even if at a modest level. This is not to downplay the importance of strong redistributive policies and instruments, or ambitious democratic reforms – but to come back to the context in which (even in exceptional circumstances such as in the post-apartheid moment) most officials work, which still allow some progressive practices to continue under the radar, as a ‘politics by stealth’ (Benjamin 2004), building resources and waiting for opportunities to come into the open.

Notes

- 1 National Treasury. 2022. *System of Capacity Building for Local Government: Diagnostic Review*. Public Affairs Research Institute Report, Johannesburg (p. iii).
- 2 Recent populist and fundamentalist politics in India, at national and local levels, constitute an important change in this respect.
- 3 Such a set of interviews was conducted by Claire Bénit-Gbaffou and Rachid Seedat in parallel, but has not been included in this book but is part of another publication project.

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