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Between Boredom, Protest, and Community

Ethnography of Young Activists in a South African Township

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Summary : This article is based on an ethnographic study of the young activists of a South African poor people's movement. It questions the finding that some of the young poor people in the Global South are trapped by a boredom linked to their socio-economic incapacity to fully enter into adulthood. Young people are here apprehended through their position within the collective, but also in the framework of the activism they deploy daily in their neighbourhoods. The article shows that even though uncertainty has its place there, the lives of these young people cannot be reduced to idleness. Partly built on emotional bonds, their commitment structures their days and gives them access to a politicization that helps them to put their condition into perspective. Above all, it provides them with a valued role within the "community" and, therefore, helps them to fit into their most immediate social environment: their neighbourhood.

Keywords : youth; social protest; waithood; boredom; community; south africa.

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Since the early 2000s, South Africa has been the scene of demonstrations whose frequency and number are considered by some people as unprecedented anywhere in the world (Alexander and Pfaffe, 2014). This social discontent has taken the form of sometimes violent episodes (municipal buildings set on fire, clashes with the police, attacks on local elected officials, etc.), regularly described as "spontaneous" by the media, but it has also involved actions supervised by organizations seeking to draw the authorities' attention to living conditions in poor

neighborhoods. This second form, however, lost its vitality at the end of the 2000s, as a large number of organizations gradually disintegrated before disappearing.

Driven by the same grievances (lack of housing, inadequate access to water and electricity networks, unemployment, etc.), these protests were marked by the large numbers of young people at demonstrations and other actions. This situation was inevitably linked to the fact that South African young people, especially when they are Black and poor, are particularly vulnerable to the lack of jobs and the housing crisis in the country. The few surveys of young people involved in "spontaneous uprisings" have, for the most part, confirmed such hypotheses (Dawson 2014; Moiloa 2012). These studies describe populations that tend to conform to the analyses regularly made of the younger generation in the Global South. In these analyses we find individuals overwhelmed with boredom and trapped in a "crisis of social reproduction" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001) which removes all "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004). Surprisingly, however, those who have engaged in protest collectives have attracted little or no attention. They have often seemed to disappear behind an analysis of organizations, their demands and their actions (see McKinley and Veriava 2005; Ballard, Habib and Valodia 2006; Tournadre 2018). Yet it is this younger generation on which the present article will focus.

The following pages are based on a fieldwork undertaken with activists from the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM). The UPM is an organization founded in 2009 in Grahamstown, a town with nearly 80,000 residents, located in the Eastern Cape Province. Its activists, who live in the township and the informal settlements, alternate between more or less subversive actions (demonstrations, temporary occupations of public buildings, taking local councillors to task) and attempts to negotiate with the municipality. I tried to spend time with these people in moments of variable intensity, and in a space and a time of their own. This allowed me to regularly observe, talk with and interview about fifteen young activists. The fact that this relationship was in some cases maintained for a period of six years obviously allowed me to witness changes, especially in terms of sensitivity to politics. My own perception of things has also changed over the years.

While being sensitive to descriptions of young people from the Global South as finding themselves stuck between adolescence and adulthood simply because of their socio-economic condition (which is summarized in the notion of "waithood"), I gradually observed more ambiguous situations as I followed these young activists in their various activities. This is what gave rise to this text which, through fragments of lives, questions the relationship of these individuals to the collective and the meaning they give to what they do as activists.

Thabang,[1] Ndisa, Lungile and their "comrades" are a mirror image of the young people I met in other organizations, whether in Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town: teenagers with a very undecided future, students who are struggling to make ends meet, thirty-somethings who have never had a job in the formal economy, as well as young parents and others who are finding it hard to live as a couple as they cannot afford to leave the family home. Despite their differences, they all ultimately form a sort of community in which they share the same condition and, sometimes, the same destiny. The diversity of these profiles nevertheless reminds us that "young people" in no way form a universal category, i.e "a social status generated by the abstract sociological principle of generation" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 267). Maybe "youth" is "just a word" (Bourdieu 1993: 94-102) – the product of always relative and artificial boundaries between age groups. In other words, it is a historical, cultural and institutional production whose contours vary with national and cultural borders. For reasons that will appear quite explicitly throughout the text, I will rely, for my part, on the definition given to the word by the African Union (2006), which defines as "young" the population aged between 15 and 35 years old.

The young people on which my article focuses, moreover, are active within an organization that can be linked to the extended family of poor people's movements (Zorn 2013), those mobilizations of women and men (and sometimes children) whose lives are mainly shaped away from the processes organizing production, consumption and official political representation in a society. As is the case in most movements of this type, UPM activists defend a cause that is

[1] The names of the people mentioned have most been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.

inscribed in a "spatially situated sociality" (Pithouse 2013: 105) and is shaped by their living conditions and those of whom they claim to be the spokespersons. The activism and the familiar world of these individuals thus occupy the same space: the social relations characterizing one are regularly confused or cross-referenced with those defining the other, and vice versa. Their commitment is then part of a "regime of the near." Sociologist Laurent Thévenot sees it as connected to the way in which "personal and local ties increasingly form the basis of social movements: these may be proximity to an endangered environment, one's own body being affected by a harmful substance or a disease, or a deficient habitat" (Thévenot 2006, 220). In the present case, the result of this situation is a specific relationship to the world that surrounds these women and men, that of the "community."[2] They are both members of this community (as "concerned" residents) and its self-proclaimed guardians (as activists). The youngest are in principle no exception. The study of their activism cannot therefore be limited to that of protest actions strictly speaking. It must also include the actions carried out daily in their neighbourhood and, even more, within their "community." In these pages, I am mainly endeavouring to understand what this type of commitment is *doing* to these young people. To what extent, in particular, does it influence their "social navigation" (Vigh 2009) through lives that are often subject to ups and downs and marked by an uncertainty that seems to be the lot of many young people in the Global South?

[2] In South Africa, the "community" refers at the very least to the population of a space whose limits are never formally fixed but which most often corresponds to a street, a neighbourhood, a district. It is also a veritable cultural heritage that takes the form of a common history (particularly, that of the struggle against apartheid), values (a solidarity among neighbours that is presented as natural, a capacity to resist illegitimate rulers, a sense of resourcefulness, a certain idea of equality, etc.), shared living conditions (even though the townships are not socially homogeneous), and a wide range of what Polleta and Jasper call "cultural materials" (2001: 285).

Methods

This article is based on intermittent fieldwork undertaken from July 2012 to July 2018. It is part of a larger research project that analyzes the relationships between protest and daily life in South African poor neighborhoods. The first contact with the UPM was made through an email sent about ten days before my arrival in town. I had found the movement's e-mail address at the bottom of a press release. This type of very simple contact had already proved its worth in a previous survey conducted in the late 2000s with other protest groups in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. Acceptance of my presence by the main leaders was then certainly facilitated by the fact that some of them had some familiarity with the world of research: sometimes they had struck up friendships with South African academics, or they had collaborated in developing studies on life in the township or post-apartheid discontent.

I was there in the morning when one of the UPM members opened the door of the movement's office. Very often, I was also there at the end of the afternoon, when the last activists left this same office. The period that elapsed between these two times of day enabled me, for example, to conduct semi-structured interviews (30 to 90 minutes) with these women and men. The exercise was repeated several times with some of them over a period of six years. At the same time, I observed these same activists in their usual everyday lives: interacting with residents seeking help from the movement, organizing and running community meetings in the township, drafting press releases, intervening in neighbourhood conflicts, not to mention the time spent waiting in the office without anything happening. It was in these different contexts that I quickly noticed the significant number of young activists in the ranks of the movement. The lack of activity characterizing certain days also allowed me to take part in their discussions. On these occasions, the conversations were no longer just about the collective combat – or, more exactly, they incorporated this combat into personal stories. This situation of relative proximity also helped me to enter the private sphere of about fifteen of them, whether it was during

evenings spent in one of the township's taverns, during weekends spent pacing up and down football fields, or while walking through the streets of their neighborhoods.

This ethnographic relationship has of course evolved over the years. During our first meetings, some of my interlocutors had often warned me about the case of researchers or employees of NGOs who suddenly disappeared after having apparently obtained what they needed. The fact that I come back regularly has since been welcomed by some. It seems to me that this has, more generally, helped to reduce a certain mistrust towards me. Until then, I had, for example, often thought that being French placed me a little apart on the scale of the mistrust that my interlocutors are entitled to nurse towards Whites. One of them assured me that I wasn't "too White," unlike some of the "others," and that I didn't have a problem with my "Whiteness." If my nationality has sometimes aroused a certain curiosity, there was no lack of opportunities for reminding me of this dimension of things in the course of my first two or three stays. More precisely, it never diminished the weight of the past that I am supposed to bear as a White European. It was not unusual for me to be asked ironically if I was aware of "the history of the colonization of Africa by France," or for the "resistance" displayed towards the West by the Zimbabwean Robert Mugabe to be praised to my face. However, things evolved over time as the activists seemed to get used to me and no longer saw much point in testing me out this way. The distance that constantly creeps in between the observer and the observed has obviously not disappeared, but a form of familiarity has gradually entered into the relationship too.

Dispositions to protest?

Mark was born in Johannesburg in the early 1990s. He arrived in Grahamstown about 22 years later to study at Rhodes University. I first met him in 2016. Unable to afford the rents in the university dormitories, he first rented a room in one of the Black neighbourhoods in Grahamstown, before getting permission from UPM leaders to move into one of the four rooms in the organization's premises.

Mark was raised by his mother, a "feminist" teacher who inculcated in him a "critical" relationship to authority. She herself had her first political experiences during the 1970s. In particular, she discovered the Black Consciousness Movement, which at that time was enjoying a high profile at the expense of the African National Congress (ANC). In addition to the ferment of the times, it was the murder of her brother by the police that drove her into defiance of the apartheid regime. One of her main feats of arms was definitely the time she burnt the flag of the "regime" at a demonstration organized in her community. I could easily imagine, as I listened to Mark relate this episode with obvious pride, how many times he must have heard the tale from his mother's lips as a child.

Such a background certainly helps one to understand why this young activist was so involved in student struggles from the time he arrived in Grahamstown. During his first months in the city, he was the main organizer of a protest on the part of poor students who requested financial help from the university administration to pay for their food, and received a refusal which they deemed "contemptuous," whereupon they invaded one of the dining halls of the university restaurant at lunchtime and simply helped themselves. It is also significant that he joined the UPM; we can find the basis of an explanation for this in the young man's years of political apprenticeship. He feels that he learned a lot from his uncle by marriage, one of the main media figures in the post-apartheid social movement. This uncle, who had been a leading cadre in the Young Communists before he was expelled for criticizing the party's support for Jacob Zuma, was mainly distinguished by his commitment to the rights of homosexuals and the fight against AIDS. So Mark's first political memory is associated with his participation in a Pride march partly organized by his uncle in 1995. Thanks to this man, Mark was able in particular to catch a glimpse of this sphere, where the non-governmental left had come together since the beginning of the twenty-first century, at the interface of the intellectual, political and trade union worlds. The young man regularly accompanied his uncle to various meetings and political actions in the early 2010s. It was on one such occasion that he met some of the leaders of the UPM.

Mark's relatively sophisticated political socialization is not the norm among young UPM activists. For one thing, not everyone comes from politicized family backgrounds. At most, the youngest of them know whether their parents vote or not. When this is the case, they most often cast their vote for the ANC – which represents a rather commonplace, distant reality that they now take for granted. It's how it is. No more than that. "They voted for ANC if I can remember." Siphokazi, aged 22, was not the only one to give me this kind of answer, in a rather apathetic, monotonous tone of voice. Thus trivialized and rid of its ideological trappings, this vote amounted to an obvious choice that history, at a given moment, had justified.

For those whom the media regularly call the "born free" (because they were born after the first democratic elections of 1994), the ANC is mostly the party they have always known in power. Its past role as a liberator is therefore not the first thing that comes to their minds. The situation of their young elders, those who were barely thirty in the early 2010s, is not very different (Mattes 2012). They were children in the last years of apartheid, and they indeed came of age politically in the late 1990s. Their first political experience was therefore with a relatively "normal" political system. This reality can also result in misunderstandings or differences of opinion within families, as we can sense from the remarks of Arthur, a young thirty-something:

> The whole family is ANC… with ANC members. My mother votes for ANC. She would kill you if we talked bad about ANC [*Laughs*]. You know… that mentality. There's a tendency in the old South African people… that… the ANC fought for freedom. The old people, they're talking about Mandela, and the ANC, and stuff, you see? So the whole family is ANC… and I grew up in it like that. The whole family is ANC… because of the liberation.

Surprisingly, it is common for those who grew up in more militant families to tend to qualify the idea of any strong political socialization. The example of Thabang is quite a convincing case in point. This young thirty-something from the Zulu nobility has been unemployed for several

years. He has actually worked for only two years since the end of his accountancy studies at college. This was as a service consultant in a bank in town. Heavily involved in the social life of his district, he also volunteers as a coach for a team of young footballers. On an October afternoon, in a freezing wind, as we were watching them play on a football field with imaginary limits right in the middle of one of the plains surrounding the township, he told me about his family. He explained to me that his parents, although "active in the Struggle [against apartheid]," did not talk much about politics when he was a child. Whether they were close to the ANC or another party during these years was not really important, he said. What matters most was their resistance to power. Even now, Thabang remembers well the way the police brutally burst into the house of his uncle, a policeman imprisoned on Robben Island for helping communist activists. Thabang has also not forgotten the traces left by torture on the hands of a friend of the family. It is quite likely that these experiences exposed him to a specific conception of commitment. They also made him more receptive to the modes of action proper to protest, and in particular to the possibilities of breaking the rules of a political order considered as unjust. This form of sensibility also crops up fairly regularly in interviews conducted with the young activists of the UPM who grew up listening to the stories of a parent's or a relative's fight against apartheid.

Désœuvrement

The UPM has moved its offices four times since my first stay in Grahamstown in 2012. This is a clear sign of the precariousness and uncertainty in which the organization operates, as each of these moves was the result of difficulties in paying the rent. In the last months of 2017, the activists moved for a few months into a small room in a set of community premises located behind the Day Hospital. They rubbed shoulders with the employees of an association for the disabled and those of a federation of South African families. This solution was meant to be only temporary. They did not really settle down. The walls were still covered with posters put up by

the previous occupants, members of an association supporting development projects in rural areas. No phones or computers. The "comrades" who went there in the daytime sometimes met Simthandile and Siphokazi, two 22-year-old women. They were on duty, in exchange for the promise of a weekly stipend of R200 (US $15) financed by the funds donated by a European foundation. The two activists arrived every morning at about ten o'clock, having walked from the township. They would close the doors of the premises six hours later.

Simthandile and Siphokazi have been waiting for three years to retake some of the subjects that make it possible to obtain the matriculation certificate (or National Senior Certificate, NSC), the high school diploma in South Africa. The former did not obtain this certificate at her first attempt. The results of the latter were not good enough for her to get into university. The delay in taking the exam again, in fact, is related to financial issues: their parents are unemployed and do not have the money to finance their studies. While the level of education among the younger generation of Blacks has increased since the Liberation, only a certain minority manage to pass the NSC: for example, only 41% of the 2015 matric cohort (i.e. the 1,118,690 second graders enrolled in 2005) passed this exam.[3] The stakes are quite high since not having this certificate exposes you to a higher risk of unemployment. In 2017, the official unemployment rate was over 33% for individuals without the NSC, compared with 28% for the entire working-age population.[4]

It is thus perfectly logical that Simthandile and Siphokazi should have had to postpone the realization of certain life projects. Their dreams of independence, in particular, have been put on a back burner, as Simthandile notes regretfully – she is eager to free herself from a mother whom she criticizes, among other things, for being "too lazy." The two young women mostly went

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[3] Yeukai Mukorombindo and Gabriel Nahmias, "What do the matric results mean?" *GroudUp*, January 8, 2016. Retrieved 15 October 2017 (http://ww.groundup.org.za/article/what-do-matric_results-mean).

[4] Stats SA, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey*, June 2017. Retrieved 13 November 2017 (http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=9960).

through a period of idleness in the months following the exam results: "I was doing nothing. I was sitting at home. I got bored." In fact, the French term "*désœuvrement*" seems more appropriate here than "idleness," as it more accurately reflects those feelings of discomfort and depression that accompany a lack of activity. It therefore manages, as Adeline Masquelier notes (2013: 483), to bring together in one word boredom, frustration, dullness and dread.

The *désœuvrement* expressed or manifested by these young people echoes the accounts given in many contemporary sociological and anthropological studies of the younger generation in the Global South (Mains 2012; Masquelier 2013; Jeffrey 2010). They depict young people reduced to a state of waiting in the face of an uncertain future which they suspect will be filled with the same boredom they are already experiencing. In a study of unemployed young Ethiopians, Daniel Mains described a daily life in which there was an abundance of "unstructured time in which introspective thoughts about their future became a source of unease" (2007: 660).

In principle, it seems quite logical to transpose these analyses into the context of South Africa. In May 2018, the National Statistical Institute, StatsSA, confirmed that the 15-24 age group was highly likely to be jobless: the unemployment rate in this group exceeded 52%.[5] In her survey of young men living in an informal settlement in the Johannesburg area who took part in violent protests in 2011, sociologist Hannah Dawson clearly saw signs of this distress (2014). She describes young adults seeking to kill time by gathering at street corners. For hours on end, they play cards, talk, listen to music and watch the activity of the neighbourhood, including the various interactions that structure the exercise of local political power. As so often, the interpretation of such situations as these turns out to be relatively ambiguous, or at least more complex than a first reading might suggest. Because they allow young people to momentarily escape their frustrations and organize a sociality, these shared moments are part of a certain "productive idleness," in the phrase used by Craig Jeffrey to refer to unemployed young people in India (2010, 101). What they

[5] Stats SA. 2018. "Youth Unemployment still High in Q1: 2018." Retrieved July 28, 2018 (http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=11129).

offer, perhaps above all, is a way of temporarily dealing with the feeling of "exclusion from the 'new' South Africa" (Dawson 2014: 870) that strips these young people of any illusions about their future.

Whether they deal with South Africa, India or any other part of the Global South, these studies describe a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood: these young people are, as it were, stuck in a "prolonged adolescence" (Masquelier 2013: 475). Certain authors have called this a period of "waithood" ("waiting" for "adulthood") (Dhillon and Youssef 2009), arguing that it was now the social condition of a majority of young people in the Developing World. It was even, in their view, gradually replacing conventional adulthood (Honwana 2014: 26) by pushing the boundary of youth up to 35 years (Abbink 2006: 6), an option, as we may recall, validated by the African Union in 2006. Lack of jobs, insecurity and shortage of money is preventing them from crossing the social thresholds that enable them to settle into their roles as responsible adults: economic independence, a home of one's own, becoming part of a couple, parenthood, etc. In South Africa, waithood also has a perfect ally in the shape of *isishumane*: this is the fear, present in the imaginations of the young men of the township, of their manhood being diminished because they are too poor to have a girlfriend. However, waithood may foster the emergence of sub-cultures or alternative forms of livelihood (Honwana 2014, 26) and would not necessarily imply giving up all expectations. Living in uncertainty can make it possible for people to hope that something might happen, as the uprisings of an educated younger generation trapped in unemployment during the "Arab Spring" of the early 2010s clearly showed.

Even a schematic account of the living conditions of several UPM activists aged from 20 to a little over 30 seems, at first glance, to support these hypotheses. Just consider the case of Arthur who, at age 31, still lives with his mother, a pensioner. After being occupied as a casual worker, he found a place in the Community Work Programme (CWP) launched by the government at the end of the first decade of the 2000s. This programme aims above all to support jobless young people by giving them various tasks that will contribute "to the development of public assets and

services in poor communities."[6] These activities (fixing community assets like schools, roads and parks, setting up food gardens, etc.) keep Arthur busy for only two days per week and do not earn him more than R600 (less than $45 in 2017). But, as he explains: "I have to provide at home… I do put something on the table and my principle is 'Something is better than nothing.' So they give me something at least." Arthur's case perfectly illustrates one of the paradoxes of the post-apartheid state. Between 1994, the year of the first democratic elections, and the mid-2010s, social spending more than quadrupled in real terms (see Seekings and Nattrass 2015). However, the state takes the decision to protect huge groups traditionally considered as dependent (children, mothers, disabled, old people) and manifestly ignore others, even though these latter are weakened by developments in the economy, namely, the (male) working-age unemployed. As James Ferguson suggests (2015: 116), this apparent deficiency must partly be read as the result of "a persistent [...] fantasy" according to which, if they are not "lazy," able-bodied men should all have a paid job allowing them to live with dignity. In a context of massive and lasting unemployment, such a model leads to the marginalization of cohorts of young (and not so young) men trapped in a social reproduction crisis. The establishment of several public employment programmes, such as the CWP which employs Arthur, was therefore a move towards a "philosophy" centred on "the opportunity, the dignity and the rewards of work," to use the very words of a government spokesperson in the early 2000s (Quoted in Barchiesi 2011: 130).

By his own admission, it was thanks to cash transfers that Salinda's family was able to survive. Having become a mother when she was nineteen, this young activist (aged 22) lives with her daughter, younger sister and mother in a RDP house in Vukani, one of the poorest places in Grahamstown. No one works in this household, which therefore depends on the payments of the two child support grants (i.e. R750 monthly). The young woman also says that she cannot count

[6] See the presentation of the CWP on the dedicated government site:

http://www.cogta.gov.za/?programmes=community-work-programme

on the help of her child's father. The results she obtained in the matric exams, at the end of high school, were not good enough for her to go to university. She turned to a private college to quickly pick up some "marketable skills," with one of her uncles agreeing to pay the fees. He, however, "dropped [her]" after a few months, forcing her to terminate her studies prematurely.

We could continue this list, adding in particular the name of Zandile. This 30-year-old lives with her baby and two unemployed sisters in the "bond house" of her father, a retired policeman. The same is true of Thabo (aged 28), who, like hundreds of thousands of young South Africans, lives under the same roof as his parents and grandparents.

Reasons for hope?

Several things suggest that we should nuance the straightforward reading we might give of these few fragments of existence.

Firstly, the oldest of these young activists, those who are approaching their thirties and would therefore seem to be the privileged targets of waithood, occupy other social roles than that of prisoners of waiting (even if they are that too, of course). As Marco Di Nunzio notes from his contacts with young urban Ethiopians (2015: 159), they are not "centred around transitioning to adulthood, as the literature on youth in Africa has often assumed." Zandile, as we have just seen, is also a single mother who manages to get her child looked after during the day so that she can perform the duties of UPM administrator paid by a European foundation. She is also very involved in the issues of sexual violence, parenting and women's empowerment, issues which she seeks to promote in the Young Women's Forum, an association affiliated to the UPM. Bheki is a husband and a young father who, after giving up his schoolteacher training, worries about the future of his family but has finally got a job in the construction sector thanks to the support of his movement. Thabang is a role model for the children he coaches in football and for whom he and his wife have begun a training in sports management, albeit with frequent absences.

Secondly, the obvious precariousness of these lives is not systematically synonymous with an absence of projects. Lungile's case is, to say the least, evocative. When I met him for the first time, Lungile was 21 years old and had just been elected chairperson of the UPM. Silent and reserved, he was still struggling to fully enter this role but seemed anxious to take advantage of the experience (especially the political experience) of other leaders, mainly older than him. Four years later, the transformation is quite striking. Far from the seemingly anonymous appearance of his former tracksuit and cap, Lungile has opted for a Rastafarian style that sets him apart in the township. More voluble than before, he has above all gained a certain emancipation by settling in a shack of a little less than 105 square feet, a few steps from the dried earth dwelling in which his parents and his grandparents live. When you push open the door, you discover what now takes up a large part of his time. The walls are covered with the "revolutionary" stencils that decorate the t-shirts he has been making for a few months. Forced to leave law school at the end of his first year, the young man is seeking to launch his "business." He has developed various projects, such as selling his creations at the annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. This occupation has not totally removed him from the protest cause. I continue to run into him in the UPM offices, even though he obviously calls in there less frequently. His activism is now mainly expressed in his neighbourhood, especially during the community meetings where he always appears, in the eyes of his neighbours, as one of the main representatives of his organization. If his existence is still rather insecure, being largely reliant on the sale of a few t-shirts and the jewellery that he makes, Lungile feels he has the right to believe in a better future than his current condition. This is, in any case, a feeling that I have regularly observed when talking with other young activists who I knew were finding life difficult. With all the wisdom of her 22 years, Siphokazi describes it in a very explicit way:

> For my future? I want a lot… A lot, a lot. I want to go back to school, first […] I want to go to the university. I want my own house, my own car… Have money… Be able to help people. I want a lot for myself.

This hope, which at first glance contrasts with what day-to-day life is like, has already been noted in other research on the township youth (Swartz 2010). It expresses a desire to belong to the "South African social body" despite adversity. Such confidence in the future seems to reflect the desire to cheat fate by exercising the control over one's own life that poor people cannot always aspire to (Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy 2013: 32).

While a degree of optimism about what post-apartheid society can offer is found relatively often in the lives of these young people, it is by no means naive. Most young UPM activists say, for example, that they do not recognize themselves in the very "cosmopolitan Johannesburg" image broadcast by the main media, especially in fictional depictions and TV shows that spotlight "Black middle-classes living happily." The more politicized of them interpret this type of situation in the light of a certain fascination for the West evinced by the South African media, to the detriment of an "African culture" despised by the elites. Most of them also display a certain fatalism about the nepotism and the corruption that are eating away at society. However, this does not prevent them from fostering future projects (becoming a school teacher, going to university, working in an "international firm," etc.) which underline this need to convince themselves that uncertainty does not close off all possibilities. And is this what Bheki is suggesting when he tells me he is "still young" at 28 – an age when he can see that things might yet improve?

Attachement and sociabilities

These young people are often full-time activists. They therefore spend most of the day in the movement's premises. They welcome activists and residents and inform them of when community meetings are to be held. They also participate in the drafting of press releases. But most of the time, they sit in the central room, which serves in turn as a living room and meeting room, and chatter about this and that. These moments confirm an obvious fact that it is always worth remembering: the most common *militant time* resembles a kind of floating, or something a little indecisive. It is woven of moments where nothing really happens, without the boredom weighing down too heavily.

On Friday or Saturday, it is not uncommon that a small group of four or five of these people spend the evening in a tavern. The place is in fact a vast courtyard surrounded by single-level buildings. Inside, everyone can watch a sports broadcast on a big screen, dance, have a beer or buy meat to grill on one of the three barbecues available. During these moments of relaxation, few of the activists mention the cause: conversation turns mainly on the football championship or more personal and everyday topics. In the course of the evening, they also encounter other comrades of all ages who have come to spend an hour or two at this great nocturnal mingle.

Such moments regularly occur in close proximity to the heart of activism. They barely disturb militant activities – in fact, they actually help to weave and strengthen the bonds that link commitment to other dimensions of the lives of these young people. They also include various elements that help one understand the persistence of people's investment in the collective. Environments that are conducive to commitment and its continuity over time are often characterized by an entanglement of various links, whether friendly, family, or emotional. These situations can potentially lead to dense bonds which foster loyalty to the institution or, at the very least, a form of solidarity mediated by loyalty to the people we meet there. The movement thus appears as a space of sociability like any other, or almost. This is also confirmed by the habit adopted by many activists, even those who are less involved, of visiting the offices every day to catch up with the news or sit down and chat for a few minutes.

The importance of an emotional attachment is clearly summed up by Arthur, a man in his thirties who works a few hours a week for the Community Work Programme. Unlike many people, this young Grahamstownian did not join the UPM after a meeting organized in his community or on the advice of a friend. Drawn in by the hubbub, he simply dared to cross the threshold of a premises that he regularly walked past:

> "I was just passing in front of the UPM offices. I got curious and got inside. I saw the UPM abbreviation and they told me: 'It's an unemployed people's movement.' And Zandile, she welcomed me warmly… very well… […] Ayanda was there with Zandile, and they explained everything to me. In the very good manner… nicely. And to be honest with you, I like the UPM. I like it."
>
> "Is it like a family?," I asked.
>
> "Not per se, not per se, 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 UPM."

In interviews, people often refer to the friendly relations within the movement. These friendships have sometimes been forged after they join, but they may also have been present beforehand and led to their entering the organization. This is true of Simthandile, for example. This young activist, about twenty years old, joined the movement mainly as a result of regularly hearing about it from Ndisa, her neighbour and best friend, whose mother is one of its founders. Tshepo, the younger brother of the same Ndisa, has managed to lure five of his friends into the movement. According to this young man, who says he has been an activist since he was fifteen, this was done in two stages. He first undertook to "conscientize" them at the most innocuous moments:

> With my friends, we sit in a room, playing games […] And we discuss politics, history, revolutionary, all of those things… discussing about the icons like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King,

> Steve Biko and all other heroes. So my duty to them is to show them: "Ok, this person did that and this person sold out the nation and its people… that is why this people is in this situation." Sometimes, I come back to my room at 11 pm…because… we discuss these things, discuss, discuss, discuss… all the time.

Tshepo then convinced his friends to accompany him to a political school organized by the UPM. For two days, they were able to listen to some of their more politicized elders, and two academics close to the movement. Obviously seduced by the experience, Tshepo's five friends decided to join the ranks of the movement, thereby reinforcing a relatively frequent pattern. Indeed, the various events organized by the collective are attended by women and men who have been persuaded to accompany a friend there. If attending a public meeting sometimes leads to an increased awareness of the cause which will, for example, justify taking part in an event a few days later, it may also lead to a more sustainable membership of the organization. However, the mere fact of knowing someone who is already committed does not explain everything. These "prior ties would appear to encourage activism only when they (a) reinforce the potential recruit's strong identification with a particular identity and (b) help to establish a strong linkage between that identity and the movement in question" (McAdam 2003, 287). Accompanying a friend, neighbour, brother or sister to such meetings certainly simplifies access to the collective, but above all it potentially confirms that other "ordinary people," who are experiencing the same distress and the same threats as you, have decided to confront them. This is clearly true of Thozi, who accompanied his sister, already an activist, to one of the public meetings that the UPM organized in his district. He says that he then had a "revelation," as he listened to "poor people like [him]," committed to a movement of which he became, a few months later, the organizer in his own neighbourhood. The case of this young man, who suffers from a slight intellectual disability, also emphasizes that, in addition to being a framework of identification, the organization can be an area of inclusion, especially for those who have to face the hostility of

their social environment. According to one of its leaders, entrusting this young man with the coordination of the operations carried out in his neighbourhood was first of all meant to help him gain confidence, as "the simple-minded, AIDS patients and the disabled" are regularly discriminated against or made fun of "in the townships." The UPM was not the only thing that counted in this young man's life. He was also active in his church and an activist in a breakaway party from the ANC. However, it was within the protest movement that he seemed to feel "at home," in a place where he was most valued, where he felt most justified in being assiduous in his commitments, engaging in many discussions in his neighbourhood and regularly travelling to the premises of the organization to relay requests, attend meetings or, simply, to be with his "comrades."

So while their depth and intensity should not be overestimated, friendship and intimacy do have their place within the organization. People meet or make friends and acquaintances there. Arthur's answer is ultimately quite enlightening: the collective is not a family but that obviously does not stop one from feeling a strong attachment to it. This affective bond can indeed sometimes endure through testing times. Salinda, for instance, left the movement in the second half of the 2010s, having been a very active participant in it for two years. Her departure was the result of increasingly exacerbated tensions with some of the leaders. However, the young woman does not seem to bear the organization any grudge, as she feels it helped her to become more self-assertive. More specifically, in the course of those years, she found a place for herself in a group of several young mothers, often single, who had formed a "young women's forum" within the UPM itself. As happened at other times in the women's movement (Staggenborg 1998, 127-130), this new collective gradually changed into a "caring community": "a safe space where women could discuss anything," as Salinda, who became one of its main organizers, calls it. I myself have witnessed this atmosphere of camaraderie and trust. On two occasions, arriving at the UPM premises at the end of a meeting, I was able to observe the laughter, the songs sung by the fifteen or so women, and the sharing of the dishes of meat and potatoes prepared by some of

them. Initially conceived to promote initiatives for the benefit of the township female residents, the forum quickly became a place of learning, exchange and support between activists. The meetings, open only to women in the movement, were opportunities to reflect, among other things, on what it meant to be a 20-year-old mother in the township. The female participants were most often accompanied by their children so that, as one of them said, they could be "mothers while being activists at the same time." Salinda, indeed, soon decided to keep her daughter at her side at these meetings and various workshops ("as a way of teaching her"). Such intimacy between women inevitably liberated speech, whether on the sexual harassment that some of them experienced in their private lives or the sexist remarks and attitudes of certain male comrades within the movement itself. This group made it possible to collectively grasp the gap, long since demonstrated by the social sciences (see, inter alia, Evans 1979), between the egalitarian ideals of an organization and the reality of its internal relations.

These relatively dense relationships, however, are not the only basis on which people become and stay committed. Take the case of Bheki. It is admittedly quite likely that this activist barely in his thirties was drawn into it by a man who, a few years previously, had coached him in football and helped him to find political words for the injustice he was experiencing. Nevertheless, the fact that he joined the UPM can also be read in the light of an upbringing marked by the recurrent memory of well-known "community values": solidarity, a certain idea of equality, altruism, the ability to resist all types of oppression, etc. During our conversations, the young man frequently mentioned the commitment his parents had shown to their neighbourhood, its associations and its meetings. They explained it to their children, most often establishing a parallel with Christianity. Bheki also has every reason to believe in these values insofar as he was able to see them regularly transcribed into the mobilizations of residents against floods or crime. In the view of Bheki, who also adheres to an "anti-imperialist" ideology echoing that of the collective's leaders, the unemployed movement is able to defend the ideals with which he claims to have grown up. In other words, the actions of the UPM largely meet the expectations that are

part and parcel of his socialization. This last example sheds light on some of the springs of commitment. It confirms that, although membership in a collective is sometimes based on the encounters that one happens to attend, it can be linked to values that are partly forged outside the organization. This observation could apply to different types of structure, a party or a union, for example. However, it is even more evident within a protest movement. As James Jasper rightly notes, the public, collective and often intense nature of protest has the effect of deepening "the significance and emotional impact of beliefs and feelings" (1997: 5). Protest therefore comprises an unparalleled forum for expressing an indignation that combines people's sensibilities and their moral convictions.

Find one's Place

There is an element that should, in principle, protect the young UPM troops from the spectre of waithood and the sense of social uselessness that accompanies it. First and foremost, the *désœuvrement* sometimes felt by these young people seems to have dissipated as they decided in favour of full-time activism. The latter is indeed experienced as a structuring activity: "It's like a job... other than sitting at home. I took it as a job because it's better than sitting at home." This situation sometimes means they can earn a few rand when the organization manages to attract funding. Simthandile and Siphokazi were able to glimpse this just before the European foundation stopped its funding and deprived them of the promised weekly stipend. Sometimes, too, a close acquaintance with certain researchers and teachers working on issues related to life in the township can result in small temporary salaries for assistants. Most of the time, this work is to help academics in conducting interviews or collecting data.

Beyond these legitimate pecuniary considerations, the choice of full-time activism obviously offers a purposeful temporality to those who embrace it. It seems to convince them that they are doing something, even if this "something" can take the form of days spent discussing many subjects other than the cause. But – and perhaps most importantly – commitment can be

especially meaningful to the extent that it allows these young people to experience (or, at least, to glimpse the possibility of) a type of responsibility specific to adulthood. Some of those who have just joined the movement are obviously already aware of this. While she had only really been active for six or seven months, Simthandile told to me one day that her membership in the protest movement was beginning to be known within her neighbourhood, where she was already carrying out her first missions:

> "I do tell people about the meetings," she said.
>
> "You do a report?"
>
> "I do a report, yeah," she replied.
>
> "Do your neighbours come to you when they have a problem?" I asked.
>
> "No… not yet. In the future, maybe they will come… because I am planning to bring them. It's important to be that kind of people…"
>
> "Why?" I asked
>
> "It's important because I'll be very useful… and helpful. I'll try to help them with… whatever they're facing challenges in the area."

In the same way, while Tshepo recognized that the youthful ages (20 and 16 years) of his friend Luntu and himself meant they would not be taken seriously by their neighbours, he confided in me:

> People think we're children. That's normal. But come back in a year and you'll see… You'll see. People will change their minds... because the young people in the community, they see that we are active... because we help them. Their parents… and the people in the community, they will know about it and they will come to us. They will change their minds. You'll see!

What Tshepo looks forward to – his forthcoming recognition as a "young pillar of the community" – is perfectly exemplified by Thabo. Perhaps, indeed, it was while I was first listening to this 28-year-old activist that I became aware of the impact that commitment could have on the daily lives of these young people. Late one afternoon in April, when we were in the city centre, Thabo had asked me to take him home so he could pick up his jacket, which was essential for the part-time job he had just started. For a few weeks, and for just a few hours per week, he had been on night duty at the reception desk of one of the hotels in Grahamstown. Ten minutes later, I parked my car in front of the house of exposed blocks in which he lived with his parents and grandparents. When I discovered this neighbourhood of small houses with flat roofs, separated by iron wire fences, I questioned Thabo on the way he thought he was perceived here since he had joined the UPM two or three years earlier. His answer took the form of two short stories.

A few months earlier, a delegation of neighbors had knocked on his door. Several houses in the district had been deprived of water for a few weeks due to a failure in the hydraulic pumping device:

> They came to get me because they would never have complained to the municipality. They came to see me because they know that I am a member of the UPM and that I know how to talk with the municipality. They know that I will be listened to because I am educated and I know how to organize a march or a demonstration. And people know that I will make a report to the community.

A few "old women in tears" also came looking for him a few weeks later. In the absence of adequate sanitation, the municipality had installed mobile toilets in its neighbourhood, which the technical teams were regularly late in emptying. Once again, members of the community decided to entrust him with the resolution of a problem which affected them and involved negotiating with the local political and administrative authorities. At first, Thabo drew on a classic register of

activism, convincing the residents to protest in the city centre. However, he added a more "radical" outcome than usual by bringing them round to the idea of occupying a municipal building and laying it down as a precondition of their departure that the authorities resolve the issue.

These two episodes give some idea of the activist reputation of this young cadre from the UPM. They say rather a lot about how he is perceived in his community and, more generally, what can be expected of him. His case is actually far from isolated and shows how commitment within a poor people's movement like the UPM can allow young activists to find a place in their neighbourhood. In this way, they experience a form of recognition, respect and even local social prestige. Commitment can then act as a source of revelation: it reveals the individual to him- or herself by offering him or her with a kind of vocation, but it also reveals the need for another relationship to the world, via the "discovery" of the community. For some, entry into the movement may indeed be accompanied by a form of education in this social order and its values. The case of Likhaya offers perhaps the best illustration of these transformations.

Likhaya joined the UPM at age 21, just weeks after the murder of his older sister, and quickly became an assiduous activist. The murderer was actually a young man whom Likhaya and his sister had regularly met during their childhood and adolescence. The criminal investigation had been botched and this man was, a few months after his crime, about to be released on bail. This seemed to be the end of the matter, as Likhaya's mother did not have the money to pay for a lawyer who could appeal. The family was then approached by UPM activists and some members of Students for Social Justice who were soon able to mobilize opinion in the surrounding communities. They also tried to draw the attention of journalists from the local weekly newspaper to a situation that was sadly commonplace. A demonstration was finally organized outside the courthouse, just as magistrates were preparing to rule on the terms of bail. It is difficult to explain the turnaround that occurred then. According to Likhaya, the noise produced

by the protesters was such that the lawyers were prevented from bringing the case to a conclusion.

One year after the events described above, while we were talking in the premises of the movement, Likhaya returned in particular to the phase of the preparations for the demonstration in court. This time spent with activists had, according to him, gradually changed his vision of things. These women and men, whom he had only known for a few days, had convinced him that the murder of his sister was, above all, a symptom: the painful symptom of sexism, underdevelopment and the persistence of poverty in some areas of the city. He had subsequently turned some of his anger on the living conditions in Zolani, the neighbourhood where the shack without electricity and water that he had shared until then with his mother and two sisters was located.

Time has certainly helped Likhaya to rewrite his story a bit and to make his commitment seem consistent, even if this has happened unconsciously. It is nevertheless true that the weeks and months that followed this meeting with the collective seemed to reinforce this presentation of things: the young man quickly became a full-time activist and the main representative of the UPM in his community, as an organizer. The changes that have taken place at the very heart of his life have probably played a part. On his own admission, Likhaya spent three years following the death of his sister wandering through a world without landmarks, losing sight of the importance of his studies. In these moments of deep doubt and uncertainty, the only stability seems to have come from his loyal commitment to the UPM and the role he subsequently played in his neighbourhood. In a few months, he had become the go-to person during the floods that follow the heavy rains, when "water's coming into the houses and the houses are leaking." It is then necessary, with the "comrades," to make up for the weak responsiveness on the part of the municipality by evacuating the residents to a community hall, where "blankets, soup and bread" are distributed to them. In the same way as Thabo, Likhaya has gradually taken on new responsibilities and, more generally, a new role within his community. These facts are a reminder

that any institution – and the organizations of protest are no exception to this rule – largely draws "its 'power' from its ability to manage [the] identity constructions of [its members] with the help of more or less explicit models" (Dubar 1994: 227). In this case, this young member of the UPM has been invited to adjust to a role that is both rewarding and valued by local social life: that of "community activist". In some respects, what is at stake is nothing less than a social status in the informal neighbourhood hierarchy. As the example of Thabo already shows, residents expect the community activist to assert him- or herself as a problem-solver. The activist's visibility in the neighbourhood can also make him or her an intermediary with "the outside," whether this be the municipality or an NGO. These situations are sometimes accompanied by opportunities or access to certain goods: enrolment in local development programmes, financing, jobs, etc. More simply, this status offers a relatively central place within the small social world of the community.

"Not a political person"?

Likhaya was not especially predisposed to join a protest collective. He himself said he had never been involved in political discussions during his teenage years, and his parents kept him away from them "for religious reasons." Most of his time was devoted to the Adventist Church at which he belonged. However, an emotional bond quickly developed between him and the leaders of the UPM, the only ones to have shown any concern for the fate of his family. This state of affairs is a reminder of the extent to which personal ties with influential members of a protest organization can have an impact on the decision to become committed (Snow, Zurcher, and Elkland-Olson 1980), especially when this commitment is perceived as particularly intense, risky or expensive (Della Porta 1988).

However, the enthusiasm he showed as soon as he joined the organisation could not hide certain dissonances. The fact that he rubbed shoulders daily with the most politicized members

of a collective also fighting against sexism did not dissuade him, for example, from making openly homophobic remarks. At various times during our first conversations, he criticized "the state" for spreading "homosexuality and abortion." He also showed no hostility to the African National Congress and never referred to the "socialism" and "anti-capitalism" that so many of his comrades use to justify their commitment. This avoidance, conscious or not, of politics (Eliasoph 1998) is not so surprising. The fact that the UPM moves within a regime of the near justifies its activists' laying claim to the status of "community-based organization": a collective that had emerged from the "community" to defend and represent it. This dimension probably allowed the young man to disregard the more political and even ideological aspects of the UPM – at least for a time: the few months following his entry into the movement.

Such a positioning has not, however, stood the test of time. Things have indeed gradually evolved, in particular through the strengthening of his links with the movement's leaders. The discussions that we had five years after our first meeting are, on this point, quite convincing. Making many references to national political life and presenting himself as a "socialist," Likhaya drew on a very precise and sophisticated discourse that allowed him to establish logical sequences and chains of meaning between the present living conditions of the poor, apartheid, and colonization. More generally, his relationship with the world had changed: he now saw his own case as part of more global and more structural processes. According to him, this "awareness" stemmed from the opportunities for debate and training offered by the movement over the years, but also from mentoring by some of its main members. Surrounded by his "best friends" within the movement, the young man also felt that, without the UPM, he would certainly have been "singing in [his] church" and not "doing anything with [his] life."

The way Likhaya has changed, in less than five years, might seem surprising. It is not an exception, however. I can also observe it in other young activists, to varying degrees. In the first months of their commitment, almost all were reluctant to talk about politics and refused more generally to include the social movement in this register. Most of them, in fact, did not vote: "I

was not a political person, I didn't do politics," Siphokazi felt obliged to point out. A few years later, however, we find that they show a greater ease in the handling of these issues and themes. In conversations, some even claim to support the Economic Freedom Fighters, a party created in 2013 and openly poaching on post-apartheid protest territory. A few months before the local elections of 2016, Thabo was even going to represent the United Front, the organization created two years earlier to embody a left-wing opposition to the ANC.

The various cases above confirm an obvious fact that it is always worth remembering: rubbing shoulders with politically well-trained activists (this is the case of certain leaders) places individuals in a privileged context of politicization. The daily activism characterizing this situation is also a way to access new skills, such as the ability to speak in public, to organize one's work or to speak to certain types of interlocutors: "I helped write letters to the municipality and other important places. Now I know how to do it," as Ndisa notes.

In a movement that is both politicized and rooted in the regime of the near, people also have access to a world view that they are encouraged to connect to their daily lives and those of their friends and relatives. To put it another way, this greater sensitivity to politics gives them the tools they need to put their condition into perspective. The example of Likhaya's "socialism" shows this quite well. Because it allows them to isolate possible causes, such a situation can give activists the feeling of better understanding what they are going through and thus being less passive in the face of events that threaten to overwhelm them. Social activism (practised at different intensities) can therefore "change people" (Giugni and Grasso 2016: 100) somewhat or, at the very least, help to change certain attitudes and perceptions of things.

Conclusion

Many of the young activists I met in 2012 are still in the movement or in its vicinity. Some may turn up less often in its offices. They have become parents and needed to reconsider their priorities, or they have managed to start a course at a college or university. However, they do not

disappear completely. They are sometimes encountered in the township, especially at community meetings. We talk about them in the movement's offices. They are above all neighbours, friends and relatives, people whose living conditions mean they cannot stand aloof from the movement's struggle. In any case, something of an emotional nature has been woven between them and the collective. The resulting sentiment, that of feeling at home in *this* movement, is one of the rewards of activism (Gaxie 1977) that enable the organization, be it a political, trade union or protest movement, to assert itself as a place of sociability, socialization and inclusion. It is in fact relatively frequent in the movements of the "poor," the "subaltern" or the "dominated" (see, inter alia, Lazar 2017). For those who feel that their lives are despised, protest is indeed "a time when they feel justified, accepted and appreciated" (Auyero 2003: 11).

Understanding the activism of these young people in some of the nodes of social relations that extend across neighbourhoods also helps to see what it contributes to their daily lives. In a very prosaic way, activism mainly occupies days into which *idleness* might have crept. But it goes a little further than that. Even if it can justify subversive activities, the commitment of these young people is not to be confused with a "radicalism" that would set them apart from the norms in force in the society to which they belong. It is indeed the opposite which, most often, occurs. It allows them to find a place they consider useful, valued and valorizing in that social order in itself, the community.

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