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# Becoming citizen after the Miracle. Political Subjectivities of the youth in Angola and South Africa

Chloé Buire

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I everyone, thanks for still being here on the third day of a very intense conference! The paper I'm presenting today is my first attempt at bringing together fieldwork I conducted in Luanda and in Cape Town over the last say 4 years. Although the history and the narratives might seem very different in these two 'post-liberation' countries, I argue that we are currently in a similar phase of redefinition of what it means to be a citizen in these Nations.

I'll start by giving key elements of context but what I really want to do today is tell a few stories about how young people position themselves in Luanda and in Cape Town nowadays, how they build their opinions and how they negotiate a space to be heard.

As this picture suggests, the first similarity between the youth of Angola and of SA is the roots of political identities in ideals of socialism, popular struggle and defeating colonial oppression/apartheid. I like this picture because it visually evokes the romantic idealisation of the struggle of the 80s, the enthusiasm that contrasts so starkly with the political 'mood' of today: skeptical, celebrating individual success...

## Angola 2012 general elections: a spectacle 'cooked from the start'



To go back to the genealogy of this project, I wanted to say a few words about the political context in Angola: country ruled by the MPLA since its independence in 1975, prolonged civil war that only ended in 2002 when the leader of the opposition party / guerrilla was killed. Since 2002: uncontested hegemony of the MPLA, constitutional reform in 2010 gave even more power to the president, José Eduardo dos Santos who had been in power since 1979 but was formally elected for his first mandate in 2012. 2002-2012 = impressive period of economic growth, what de Oliveira called the “spectacle of reconstruction”.

The pictures here illustrate this spectacle during the elections in 2012: massive posters, luminous signs in a city that suffers severe power cuts. But many Angolans bought in the spectacle, wanted to see themselves as part of this miraculous moment. ZeDu elected with 82%, all analysts emphasised the resilience of the old ruling party but the work we conducted on the ground (my work but also Antônio Tomás, Claudia Gastrow, Sylvia Croese, Jon Schubert, etc), showed that there were cracks in the domination.

The last picture illustrates the silent dissent that started to manifest in 2012 (sign with the fingers: vote for number 9, Casa Cé).

Since then, there have been spectacular changes in Angola: in 2015 the economy literally crashed with the drop in global oil prices, series of political scandals that durably tarnished the image of the MPLA (young activists accused of plotting a coup for being part of a book club, hundreds killed when the police raid an autonomous

## SA 2014 general elections: the unrising Born Frees



The situation in South Africa is probably more familiar to everyone here so I'll be concise. If we take the last general elections in 2014, we also start from a general discourse of a strong dominant party that can't be challenged in the polls: not necessarily because a massive popular support but rather because of a general apathy that leads to abstention and failure to register for voting, especially amongst the youth. However since 2014, this narrative has been proven wrong by the vigorous protests that erupted in the universities (that for the spectacular part) and by many small scale actions through which ordinary people reclaimed their agency to give sense to their world in a political way without using the formal channels of party politics. The local elections of 2016 showed that these small changes might now even reflect in the polls.

So in both countries, we are facing moments of uncertainty: the time of unchallenged ruling party seems to be over but not very clear what is coming up next. We are in this time of "after the miracle". After the spectacular growth in Angola, after the consolidation / normalisation of multipartism in both countries. New script remains to be written. And I argue that one very interesting angle to look at this moment is to reflect on what citizenship means to the newcomers.

## **'We need a new vocabulary of citizenship' (Isin 2009)**

"To investigate how new actors, scales and sites of citizenship shift and emerge means to investigate **acts of citizenship** – those deeds by which actors constitute themselves (and others) as subjects of rights."

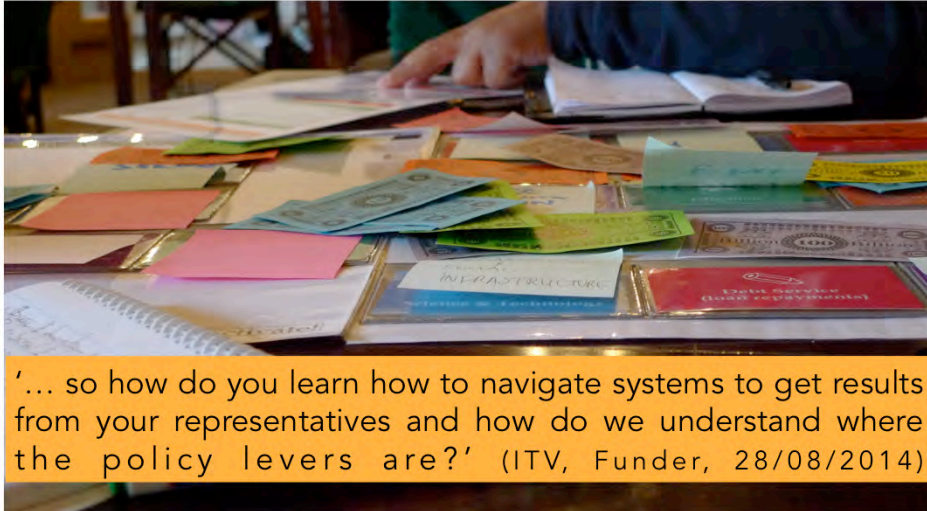
"By contrast to active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, **activist citizens** engage in writing scripts and creating the scene."

I know that citizenship is a contentious notion so I'll stick to the "relational definition of citizenship" given by Isin. He insists on the various rights, sites, scales and actors of citizenship but what I'm most interested in here is his idea of "ACTIVIST citizens" that do not merely follow written scripts but rather produce new sites of contestation, belonging, identification...

With the idea of "acts of citizenship", Isin not only calls our attention to the spectacular struggles but to all the enactments through which an individual or a group constitutes itself as a subject of rights, literally "making a difference". >>> we hear it a lot but how do you locate it? In CT, I conducted a 18 months fieldwork in 2014 -2015 with local NGOs and youth groups explicitly working in citizenship education, aiming to broad social change. Critical approach of their methods, what do young people do with the training they receive, how they interpret the values, the tools. Then in 2017, I went to Angola with the idea to collect similar material, although much more difficult to identify "civil society" groups. I spent time with mostly informal youth groups, attended public debates, followed party supporters before the elections...

What I'm sharing today comes from the similar discourses I found in both contexts about what makes you able to "make a difference".

## **'Active' = good, effective, engaged**



Western Cape, 30 September 2015

In CT, I found various formal trainings to teach the youth the values of good citizenship, the rights and duties. In some instances, this was quite dull and patronising, especially the official campaigns to teach duties to young citizens or to encourage participation in the elections: nothing very reflective or sensitive to the everyday life of the young people I met. But I also came across a bunch of NGOs who really thought the whole thing through and sought to be very practical about giving tools to the youth “to navigate the system”: in SA, I saw training about national budget, local government, in Angola last summer a lot of work about how to monitor the elections, in order to minimise the fraud... Of course, none of these trainings were sufficient in and for themselves but that’s also where the comparison is interesting: one of the NGOs I worked with in CT were using the very same difference that had caused youth activists to be imprisoned in Angola.

## Vanguard Party Footsoldiers

'For the Former Liberation Movements, individually and through exchanges, to carry out focused political orientation programmes for youths, both who are members and non-members of their parties, as the primary way of closing the generation gap and inculcating correct ideologies and a sense of belong in them' (workshop of secretaries general of governing former liberation movements of Southern Africa, May 2016, confidential document leaked by *Mail and Guardian*)



Luanda, 20 August 2017

Despite intents of the governing parties, “inculcating correct ideologies” seems much more difficult today than it might have been 20 years ago. Amongst the youth we saw on the video, many were not in age to vote and clearly in there just for the fun. More seriously, I had a focus group with 5 young members of the Casa-Cé political party in Angola. Young in age and young because only joined the party a few months before the elections. The main reason they expressed to join the party was that it offered them a relative protection to be engaged politically. None of them believed their party could win the elections nor that, even if some of their leaders were called in to govern, they would make any difference. Very interesting to see that being engaged in a political party might actually be a tactic to be engaged in debates but NOT a step towards joining formal politics (“politics is for liars”). These young Angolans expressed a very very strong desire to find spaces where they can reflect on what is going on around them: conscientisation, technical knowledge (goes back to being an ‘effective citizen’) > What do we do of this “fear” to be attacked for one’s opinions, fear to be left out of the game?

## **'Activist' = Disruptive Insurgent Revolutionaries**



Luanda, 13 August 2017

Here you see a training organised in a musseque of Luanda where some of the young men who were imprisoned in 2015-2016 facilitate a session about electoral transparency. Some of them had followed a formal 'train-the-trainer' session with observers of the African Union. The meeting, that last about 3 hours was a mixture of Q&A about the electoral process and legislation and much stronger debate about why some decided to vote while other boycotted the elections, what to expect from the arena of formal politics versus what could be achieve from the ground. In this case clearly, acting out written scripts such as the elections triggered opening new spaces of dialogue.

The distinction made by Isin between active and activist is thus much thinner in practice that he makes it sound. So if the distinction between active and activist is not operative on the ground, then what can we use to help describe and understand these new dynamics of citizenship?



# Productive Social Entrepreneurs

'the business has to have a social impact, it has to be scalable and it must have a business model' (ITV NGO manager, 18/09/2014)

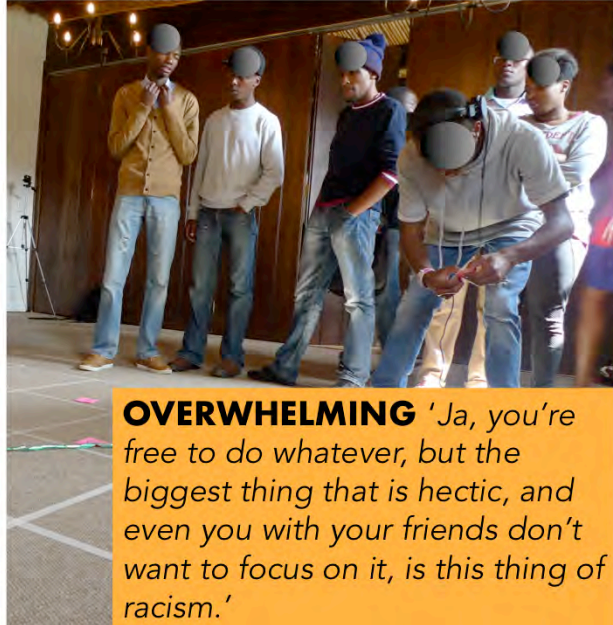
Cape Town, 19 August 2015



Luanda, 25 August 2017

Another obvious parallel that I observed between youth initiatives in CT and Luanda is the celebration of social entrepreneurship. In order to overcome unemployment, build your own business, be creative, use new technologies and transform the social challenges in your communities into business assets. I followed the daily routine in “hubs” and “incubators” in both Cape Town and Luanda and in both countries, same “pitch” about the responsibility every one has to be wealthy in order to push the country up. Powerful narrative that clearly inspired young people but also complex interactions. Young participants, ‘beneficiaries’ of the programmes often very critical of the gap they experience between what the organisation promises and the actual internal practices of their workplace, with hierarchies, with short term benefits they can get, with the discrepancy between the network they develop within the organisation and the actual scale of the system they are supposed to play in. Especially huge in Angola where the owner of the project is a Swiss businessman whose name came up in the paradise papers as one of the main players in the siphoning out of the sovereign fund that ZéDú gave to his son. The Fábrica in itself a very very hotly contested place in Luanda. What do we do of this ambivalent optimism?

## For an affective reading of citizenship



**OVERWHELMING** *'Ja, you're free to do whatever, but the biggest thing that is hectic, and even you with your friends don't want to focus on it, is this thing of racism.'*

>  
**What to do with the overwhelmingness you feel when you take the measure of the challenges?**

>

The answer I want to offer here is to focus on the affective dimension of citizenship: the emotions that are at play.

I took the example of this game that I saw in one of the NGOs I worked with. It's a live "snake and ladder" game where you through dice to move up. But there is a twist to it: 'snakes' and 'ladders' are described as real life obstacles (you get a bursary to varsity, move up the ladder, you fail your exam, go down the snake) AND, before you even start to move through the game, your first results at the dice tell you whether you are from a rural area (wait 2 rounds before you enter the game), or you are a man (jump to box number 8), etc.

>> A lot of activities of this kind that make young people aware of the systemic inequalities in society and what privilege means.

Wendy Brown has alerted political philosophy on the risk of identity politics to be saturated with hate and will to revenge. His text 'wounded attachments' uses Nietzsche's philosophy to reflect on the fact that 'when he then stills the pain of the wound, he at the same time reinfects the wound.'

## **For a critical understanding of sentiments... and resentiments**

Wendy Brown, 1993, "Wounded Attachment",  
*Political Theory* 21(3):

"where do elements of politicized identity's investments in itself and especially in its own history of suffering come into conflict with the need to give up these investments in the pursuit of an emancipatory democratic project?"

"certain emancipatory aims of politicized identity are **subverted** not only by the constraints of the political discourses in which its operations transpire but **by its own wounded attachments.**"



So researching political subjectivities is not just a matter of following theories of change developed by good-intended people and confronting them with the real life of the youth.

It also forces us to accept that there are no ideal scenario, no positive role models or bad role models. As Isin would put it, there are no “site”, “scale”, “actors” or “acts” that are more emancipatory than other,

However, there are affective dimensions that need to be seized and highlighted. Sentiments do not necessarily turn into resentiments, they can also feed critical thinking and new dialogues: “this thing of racism”; they can be productive: many young people highlighted the importance for them to have fun, to feel good. Not necessarily because it directly had any other benefit than the immediate reward of feeling great. And of course these moments of fun are also moments of bounding, friendship is core to the experience of young people. I love this quote from a young NGO manager who explains that at the start of his project, there was basically a group of low profile gangsters hanging out together on the Cape Flats and decide to do something else than drugs.

So to finish, I want to screen the story a young man put together about himself and where he is in life. And I hope it illustrates why I believe there is no reason to oppose ‘active’ and ‘activist’ or to be scared of ‘resentiments’ as it is precisely in the cracks between these different dimensions that the creative energy of citizenship lies.

## For an affective reading of citizenship



**PAIN** 'Ja, you're free to do whatever, but the biggest thing that is hectic, and even you with your friends don't want to focus on it, is this thing of racism.'

