



Conceptualising Corruption, Conflict and Cities in Africa: Towards a Typology of Urban Political Articulations

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Abstract:

Both corruption and conflict are routinely associated with politics in Africa, and raise serious questions with regard to the effectiveness, stability and legitimacy of political orders. They also raise questions with regard to emerging forms of governance that are capable of addressing complex social problems. Whereas there is a plethora of literature on the macro-level of African politics, there is as yet very little research focusing on spaces in which political order is emerging. This paper argues that cities play a crucial role as sites of new and changing social interactions and constitute significant spaces in which transformations of political order can and should be explored. However, this exploration requires not only a critical examination of the relationship between corruption and conflict in urban spaces, but a thorough conceptualisation of urban political articulations.

Introduction

The aim of this working paper is to clarify the relationship between corruption and conflict in African cities. It is related to an ongoing research project focusing on the conditions under which legitimate and inclusive urban politics emerge and stabilise in post-conflict societies in Africa.¹

Both corruption and conflict are routinely associated with politics in Africa,² and raise serious questions with regard to the effectiveness, stability and legitimacy of political orders. They also raise questions with regard to emerging forms of governance that are capable of addressing complex social problems.³ Whereas there is a plethora of literature on the macro-level of African politics, ranging from frequently rather bleak analyses of the state in Africa⁴ to more emic approaches to understanding the

1 "Corruption, Conflict and Cities in East and West Africa" is a comparative research project under the lead of Prof. Till Förster, the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Basel, and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (2014-2017). For more information visit <https://ethnologie.unibas.ch/research/projects/projekt/98/> (last accessed 16/11/2015).

2 For a literature review and critique see Koechlin (2013, chapter 2).

3 This is what we have elsewhere termed 'governance', anchoring the concept of governance in the agency of social actors and the political articulations between them (Förster, 2015; Koechlin, 2015; Förster and Koechlin 2011).

4 Important contributions to African studies include Chabal (2009), Chabal and Daloz (1999) or Bayart et al. (1999). For more recent contributions see for instance Booth (2012).

Border control in
Bukavu, DRC
(September 2012).



‘practical’ norms of state-society interactions,⁵ there is as yet very little research focusing on spaces in which political order is emerging. We argue that cities constitute such spaces in which transformations of political order can and should be explored. However, this exploration requires not only a critical examination of the relationship between corruption and conflict in urban spaces, but a thorough conceptualisation of urban political articulations.

There seems to be a general assumption that corruption breeds conflict, as key literature on failed states argues.⁶ A still entrenched understanding is that the more corruption, the more illegitimate the political regime, the more ineffective the public institutions, the greater the propensity of conflict. Conversely, there seems to be a general assumption that the absence of corruption leads to effective and responsive public institutions.⁷ However, this linear relationship between corruption and conflict has rightly been critiqued for being too simplistic to allow for a discerning understanding of the factors and processes shaping politics in Africa. Contrary to this linear understanding, regimes characterised by ‘corruption’, for instance clientelistic or neo-patrimonial regimes, seem to enjoy a great deal of ambiguity with regard to their legitimacy and stability.⁸ Evidently, there is no predetermined correlation between corruption and legitimacy.

5 This body of literature comes mainly from the anthropology of the state in Africa (see Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, eds, 2014; Blundo and LeMeur, eds, 2009; or Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, eds, 2006).

6 For influential contributions on failed states see Rotberg (2003) or Zartmann (1995).

7 This assumption is most pronounced in the developmental “good governance” framework. For a critique see Harrison (2004).

8 This will be discussed further down. Suffice to note for now that much literature on clientelistic and (neo-) patrimonial regimes is concerned with this relationship.

As more recent research on the anthropology of corruption illuminates discerningly, the ‘corruption complex’ (Olivier de Sardan 1999) characterising the relationship between state and society in Africa has two main effects:

“In ranging between the dimensions of exchange and extortion [...] these practices give rise to processes involving the informal redistribution of public resources and of forms of power and authority. However, they also generate mechanisms of inequality and exclusion in terms of the access to these resources.” (Blundo and de Sardan 2006, 6)

There seems to be a consensus that such practices are the currency governing political regimes in Africa.⁹ However, the relationship between corruption and conflict, between inclusion and exclusion, and hence between the stability and legitimacy is unclear, especially on levels below the nation state. When and how do corrupt practices sustain political order, and when and why does corruption trigger or fuel violent conflicts?

One key political space that lends itself to the more focused analysis of such interrelationships are cities. Historically, cities tend to be sites of authority and of concentrated political and economic power (Sassen 2000; Southall 2000; Hall 1998). Frequently (but not necessarily), cities are also catalysts of social change; their social complexity, economic dynamism and dense infrastructure tend to make cities sites of societal transformation. However, by the same token, these specifically urban features “also make cities volatile social and political spaces” (Beall and Fox 2009, 31): cities can be sources and sites of conflict (Beall 2009, 2006; Beall and Fox 2009; Vlassenroot and Buescher 2009; Sumich 2007). And as will be discussed further down, corruption in urban spaces can be both the currency of social and political order as well as a catalyst of such volatility. So cities may fuel individual as well as social creativity; at the same time they also constitute sites of magnified social problems and destitution.¹⁰

In contemporary Africa the rapid growth of cities is leading to highly dynamic social, economic, cultural and political processes. Two key features merit attention: the first is the speed at which Africa is urbanising (United Nations 2014; UN Habitat 2014), triggering both serious governance problems in terms of service delivery and urban infrastructure, as well as new societal figurations on a local, national, regional and global level. The second is the growth of mid-sized cities, not just in absolute terms, but also in terms of relative economic and political importance.¹¹ This shift in relative national and regional importance is related to ongoing processes of decentralisation and devolution, giving municipalities greater political and economic autonomy. This makes mid-sized cities an extremely relevant and fertile ground to explore emerging social actors and political articulations.¹²

Some questions that merit attention regard the impact that rapid urbanisation has on the lives of urban dwellers. What does this mean for the social problems pertinent to

9 Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006, 6); see also Smith (2008) or Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2014).

10 See Förster (2013), in particular for a conceptualisation of urban creativity.

11 See for instance the latest State of African Cities Report (UN Habitat 2014), which underlines the growing importance in demographic, economic and political terms of secondary cities. Conversely, it also addresses the problems it poses in terms of urban governance: “Since the bulk of the urban population increases are now being absorbed by Africa’s secondary and smaller cities, the sheer lack of urban governance capacities in these settlements is likely to cause slum proliferation processes that replicate those of Africa’s larger cities.” (UN Habitat 2014, 7)

12 Hence, the case-studies of this research project focus on stand-alone case-studies of four mid-sized cities, two in Kenya (Eldoret, Kisumu) and two in Côte d’Ivoire (Korhogo, Bouaké); as well as their comparison. See also Förster (2012) and Förster and Koechlin (2011).

urban spaces, and to collective practices addressing such social problems? What kind of collective practices can be observed that address societal problems? How do social actors link up to form political regimes that address societal needs, values and problems? What informs their agency, and what are the dynamics relating actors, agency and the articulation of political order? And, on a more emancipatory note, what does it mean for the possibility of open and diverse articulations and the formation of social spaces?

Understanding these ‘politics of governance’, as we have argued elsewhere (Förster 2015; Koechlin 2015; Förster and Koechlin 2011), is key to understanding the dynamics of social agency creating, ‘living’ and transforming social spaces and political order. Corruption as a signifier of politics of both inclusion and exclusion thus becomes a particularly significant entry-point to trace the legitimacy and effectiveness of collective practices addressing societal problems. In other words, we are interested in the role that corruption plays in framing urban governance in this eminently political and actor-oriented understanding, and the processes through which conflicts emerge, erupt, are transformed, and are mitigated.

These questions shall be systematically explored in the following sections. First, the problematic term of corruption shall be discussed in more detail, anchoring it to the analysis of social agency and sketching out some methodological implications. Secondly, the notion of conflict shall be examined in terms of political change, and linked to a conceptualisation of corruption and the conditions of a democratic, inclusive political order. Thirdly, I shall turn my attention to conceptualising cities and in particular urban politics; corruption and conflict will be theorised in terms of types of social interactions and the production of urban space. Building on these clarifications, I will, lastly, seek to incorporate these thoughts to develop a tentative typology of urban political articulations.

Kipkaren Estate,
Eldoret, Kenya
(January 2015).



Corruption

The Meaning of Corruption

As reels of scholarly debates demonstrate, corruption is a notoriously hard term to define.¹³ Fortuitously, an exact definition is not the purpose of this section. The purpose of this section is to clarify the political significance of corruption, in order to tease out the relationship between corruption, conflict and political articulation more clearly. The starting point is the premise that political contestations around corruption, such as scandals, rumours, allegations, etc., “are not just ‘noise’, or a problem to be resolved by definition” (Johnston 1996, 322), but reveal the deeply political nature of corruption. Practices and claims of corruption are *in medias res* of state-society relations. Firstly, they inherently refer to the distinction between ‘the state’ and ‘society’, i.e. the ideal-typical boundary between the public realm and the private realm, between universal norms and particularistic norms. Secondly, they are directly related to practices and systems of inclusion/exclusion into the political, social and economic system. This means that the analysis of corruption poses “significant questions relating to fairness, justice and the connections between wealth and power” (Johnston 1996, 322); analysing ‘corruption’ always also implies shedding light on particular understandings of state-society relations.¹⁴

And here the mundane practices and encounters of people with the state, the unspectacular politics of the everyday are key to understanding how this relationship is constructed; more pertinently, as Akhil Gupta discusses in his seminal article on corruption and the ‘imagined state’, it is precisely “these everyday encounters [that] provide one of the critical components through which the state comes to be constructed” (Gupta 1995, 378). In this sense, corrupt practices, such as giving a bribe, demanding a kick-back, etc. are not merely economic transactions or a question of rational choice, but are signifiers of complex cultural practices, which in themselves reflect the contradictory experiences of people, as well as the diverse practices through which statehood is enacted and represented (Förster 2013; Migdal 2001; Gupta 1995).

From an anthropological perspective, therefore, the exact definition of corruption is a moot point; far more significant are the meanings that social actors themselves ascribe to corruption, and the social agency informing such acts. Are people in positions of power and authority ‘stupid’, if they do not engage in practices of enrichment and re-distribution along particularistic lines? Or is it just “what people accuse each other of when they see them acting against their interests” (Philp 1997, 454)? Or is it a matter of survival and lack of political and economic alternatives that make disenfranchised citizens vulnerable to corruption? Whenever corruption is evoked, an image of particular norms, values and social order is implied. Speaking with Charles Taylor (2004), one could refer to social imaginaries that form the background of social actors’ shared interpretation of the world.¹⁵ These social imaginaries are composed of implicit and routinised practices, and the shared meaning and explicit worldviews that informs these practices; in other words, the common understandings which lead to common practices and the construction of a shared social space. From a more empirical perspective, this is what Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan seminally termed “the moral economy

13 For seminal contributions see Johnston (1996) or Heidenheimer et al. (1993).

14 See Koechlin (2013) for a discussion of the relationship between corruption and the structuring of political order.

15 On the importance of the imaginary see Castoriadis (1975).

of corruption” (Olivier de Sardan 1999), seeking to analyse that shared horizon of meaning and the structural matrix informing people’s actions.

Corruption and Social Agency

Contrary to dominant discourses of foreign aid, such imaginaries articulated around corruption are not self-evident. Corruption is neither *a priori* good nor bad; its evaluation depends crucially on the perspectives of the actors concerned. The key question to be asked from an actor-oriented approach is not whether corruption is pernicious, but how actors evaluate and practice corruption within specific temporal and spatial contexts. In other words, a clearer understanding of social agency is required to grasp both the factors framing the (re)production of corruption, the effects that ‘corruption’ has on the social agency of actors, and, not least, the factors influencing changed practices and evaluations of corruption. The social agency of actors, through which they practically and discursively articulate corruption, cannot be abstracted from concrete situations. Their agency develops “within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 967) of actors.

Although there will always also be habitual dimension to social agency,¹⁶ the bullet point here is that actors always also employ ‘reflective intelligence’ to evaluate and judge these ever changing contexts. This premise is crucial for understanding agentic responses to specific contexts by social actors. It allows us to explore why social actors act the way they do (passively, actively, imaginatively, etc.), and why their agency changes at a given point in time. As Mustafa Emirbayer and Anne Mische elaborate in a compelling article, the

“ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present make a difference to their actions; changing conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose and effort.” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973; emphasis added)

This dynamic interrelationship between agency and the structural contexts is at the heart of our analytical approach. Tying it back into the study and understanding of corruption, both practices and interpretations of corruption provide valuable clues to the ways in which political order is structured, lived and contested by diverse social actors. It is within this discursive field that the analysis of corruption needs to be situated.

A short example will suffice to illustrate this point. Whereas a decade or two ago, corruption was standard practice and seen to be ‘business as usual’ for Western companies operating in the Third World, in the past two years it has been systematically criminalised and a set of international, regional and national regulatory frameworks have been established to prevent and sanction acts of corruption.¹⁷ In the same vein, there is virtually no political campaign in Africa which is not waged in the name of the fight against corruption, by incumbents and opposition alike. And to take the point further, a whole revolution – the Arab spring – was catalysed by increasingly unendurable levels

16 On such ‘habitual’ or ‘routine knowledge’ (“*Gewohnheitswissen*”) see the influential phenomenological contribution by Schütz and Luckmann (2003, 156-163). On the habitual dimension of bribing see Förster (2012) or Smith (2008).

17 For a timeline of international anti-corruption conventions see Koechlin (2013, 4; Figure 1).



Poster of an official anti-corruption campaign in Rwanda (September 2012).

of corruption of the regimes in question.¹⁸ Without a doubt, global structural transformations such as the end of the Cold War, globalised economies and radically new information technologies were precondition for such fundamental changes in attitudes towards corruption; however, it is equally evident that such changes would not have been effected if corruption had been uncontested by social actors, if changed attitudes and practices had not been demanded, and if informed judgements and a dose of imagination about a different and better world had not driven actors to make a difference, and if these new forms of social agency had not been articulated across society.

To put these arguments in Clifford Geertz' words:

“Ideas – religious, moral, practical, aesthetic – must, as Max Weber, among others never tired of insisting, be carried by powerful social groups to have powerful social effects; someone must revere them, celebrate them, defend them, impose them.” (Geertz 1993 [1973], 314)

For a socially more significant understanding, hence, we need to understand how discursive fields articulated by corruption are constituted through social actors, and

18 Important to note in this context is the key role that cities such as Cairo, but also secondary cities such as Suez played in catalysing the revolutionary movements (see for instance Kanna 2012).

how their reflective intelligence, the pre-predicative ‘self-evident’ practices, as well as their aspirations for the future shape their actions. In other words: how (changing) ways of understanding the past, present and future make a difference to their actions.¹⁹

Taking an actor-and agency oriented approach to analysing corruption therefore allows insights into the intersubjective as well as the discursive realm of the social. It allows us to capture the meanings that certain practices produce, the interpretations and evaluations that people make of the practices themselves as well as the contexts they relate to, and the ways in which diverse (and sometimes seemingly incompatible) actors link up to each other. It also allows for a more differentiated understanding of the contradictions and incoherence that often confuses scholars of corruption. People say one thing and do the other, and what they say and do may change from situation to situation and from role to role the people find themselves in – and this holds particularly true for practices of and enunciations on corruption. This has clear methodological implications, for “the observability of corruption is structured by a constant tension between occultation and visibility and between the spectacular and the commonplace” (Blundo 2007, 34). An anthropology of corruption needs to therefore develop a clearer understanding of social agency, combining an analysis of both the agentic production of the discursive field as well as the emic view of social actors, to make this tension both visible and legible.²⁰

Corruption Reporting
Box in the National
Museum of Nairobi,
Kenya (July 2012).



19 Suffice to note for now that social agency has a temporal dimension, in that it incorporates three different – but intertwined – agentic orientations : the agency of social actors is composed of iterational (i.e. habits), practical-evaluative (i.e. judgements), and projective (i.e. imagination) elements. In other words, social actors orient themselves in a temporal-relational fashion, and social agency is composed of different sources of such agentic orientation. Social agency means that actor-and context-specific understandings of the past, the present and the future are enacted (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

20 On the theorisation of visibility and legibility for a theory of the politics of governance see Förster (2015).

Conflict

Conflicts, Struggles and Social Transformation

Currently we are witnessing a rather inflationary use of the term ‘conflict’. Conflict studies are thriving in Universities across the globe, development agencies have employed armies of conflict advisors, the media reverberates with headlines on conflicts – and yet ‘conflict’, a key concept of the social sciences,²¹ is frequently used in a very simplistic way. When it is connected with the global South, it is usually associated with resource conflicts, poverty and terrorism. This linear association is problematic for all sorts of reasons, not least because it deprives the concept of conflict of its rich potential to understand processes of social transformation. Therefore, the understanding put forward in this section emphasises a dynamic understanding of conflict as a potentially productive force of dislocation and rearticulation.

Social conflicts and contestations around values, practices, identities, as well as (but not only) around resources shape social life and political transformation. In this understanding, society is a “mélange of social organisations rather than a dichotomous structure” (Migdal 2001, 49) dividing ‘the state’ from ‘society’. The state itself is a heterogeneous mix of different social organisations that are endowed with particular resources and authority, but can act in incoherent and divergent fashions. In a very dynamic sense, therefore, the state is thus embedded in society, and is always “becoming” (Migdal 2001, 50), always in a process of transformation contingent upon such struggles between social actors. Society is linked up by the articulation of social actors, and these articulations become visible when they are contested. This approach defuses the normative notion of conflict, by putting conflict or struggles at the centre of society itself, indeed constituting the very possibility of society.²²

Corruption is one medium of such struggles, signifying particular practices of access to and control over state resources, as well as evoking specific normative understandings of social and political order (Koechlin 2013). However, the effects of such struggles on the articulation of political order need to be explored from the perspective of the social actors themselves, in order to assess the social imaginaries and diverse identities framing contesting claims and practices. This in turn allows the analysis of the social foundations of political order, the power relations shaping them, and the critical junctures leading to more stable or more volatile political articulations.

- 21 The concept of conflict has a long history in sociological and anthropological thought. As should become clear in this section, I do not subscribe to an approach predominantly building on the distribution of power, coercion and authority in society, such as was classically proposed by Rolf Dahrendorf (1958). The Manchester School’s conceptualisation of conflict as an inherent dimension of social cohesion (seminally see Gluckmann 1955) is more fertile for our purposes, for it understands conflict as emerging out of the social whilst at the same time shaping the social; see also Collins [1975, 2004, 2008] who innovatively conceptualised conflicts in terms of emotional energy of specific interaction rituals, and its effects on social cohesion and creativity. I also draw on the school of thought that developed around Charles Tilly (Tilly 2006; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Giugni, McAdam and Tilly 1998) as well as on Joel Migdal (2001) for my understanding, who embed the notion of conflict (which they frame in terms of “contestation” or “struggle”) within the social. However, I further develop the concept by introducing key arguments of political discourse theory, seeking to shed light on the effects of social conflict on the structuring of the political (see also Koechlin 2013).
- 22 This is a key distinction to Charles Tilly’s understanding of contentious politics, which are always defined in relation to the government and state (Tilly 2008; Giugni, McAdam and Tilly 1998; McAdam et al 2001). Joel Migdal (2001), conversely, frames social struggles in a broader, social sense, leaving actors and claims empirically open.

Former shop burned down in the post-election violence of 2007/08 in the centre of Kisumu, Kenya (July 2012).



This brings us squarely to the relationship between political order, conflict and corruption. I argue that this relationship is always contingent on the specific properties of the social and political formation. For instance, political theorists have long posited that endemic corruption does not necessarily lead to conflict; quite the opposite, the blurring of the boundary between the public and the private sphere can be the very stuff holding political regimes together, such as for instance with regard to clientelistic or neo-patrimonial regimes. As the term implies, neo-patrimonialism is characterised by the intertwining of personal relations and legal-rational procedures, sometimes to the degree of “institutionalised informality” (Erdmann and Engel 2006, 19). In other words, corruption is at the heart of such regimes, the medium of redistribution and in/exclusion and a key structuring principle of society.²³ However, this feature in itself does not allow for any predictive insights into the legitimacy or stability of a political regime.²⁴ Indeed, the personalised distribution of public resources and the spoils of the office historically and contemporarily play significant roles in the integration of diverse social groups within a political system, and can thus be a key factor in generating political stability (Médard 1983; Clapham 1982). The ‘machine politics’ of cities such as Chicago or New York provide historically and spatially bounded cases in point (Parker 2011, 55–61; Scott 1969).

23 The distinguishing feature of neo-patrimonial regimes is precisely the boundary-crossing between the public and private sphere. As Erdmann and Engel rightly point out, “under neopatrimonialism the distinction between the private and the public, at least formally, exists and is accepted, and public reference can be made to this distinction (it is a different matter whether this is observed or not). Neo-patrimonial rule takes place within the framework of, and with the claim to, legal-rational bureaucracy or ‘modern’ stateness” (Erdmann and Engel 2006, 19).

24 See Theobald (1999) for a critical discussion; see Bratton and van der Walle (1997) for seminal case-studies.

But such political formations are contingent upon a structural context. When these contexts change, legitimacy may tip into illegitimacy, stability into volatility, order into conflict. Examples include the wave of democratisation that swept across the African continent in the 1990s. This wave did free up emancipatory spaces; most evocatively perhaps in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. However, the changing contexts and breakdown of whole regimes also led to extremely violent conflicts that embroiled whole regions, for instance in West or Central Africa.²⁵ And yet the effects of these structural transformations were highly particular to each country and each region. In other words, the social and political formations are shaped by wider contexts, but they are also, in a dialectical relationship, shaped by the agency of the social actors and their articulations across society. These social identities and practices are particular to each social formation, which explains why similar structural changes lead to contingent outcomes. For instance, why did elections in Kenya lead to viciously violent conflicts between political parties and ethnic identities, whereas elections in Tanzania, a neighbouring country, have so far been peaceful? Why are some areas more affected by violence in a conflict, and others manage to produce relatively peaceful and stable spaces? These are some of the questions that we hope to provide some insights by analysing them in terms of social agency, the articulation of social actors and the fault lines made visible by contestation.



Looking down onto the slum of West Point, Monrovia, Liberia (February 2014).

25 For a selection of case studies see Kaarsholm (ed.) (2006).

Conflict, Democracy and Dissensus

At this point I would like to carve out one particular aspect which is routinely ignored in conflict theories, although it constitutes a cornerstone of theories of social transformation and democracy: namely the importance of dissensus. Evidently, the political contentions and social struggles outlined above are articulated around differing perspectives and claims of social actors. This institutionalisation of difference is formalised in the political regime of democracy, which, both in its procedural as well as substantive understanding, builds on political competition.²⁶ In other words, democratic politics are premised on the articulation of dissensus and difference. This is one key reason why democratic politics – not in its procedural sense, but in this intrinsically political sense of the articulation of difference – create the conditions for political emancipation; for a freeing up of identities, practices, and claims by revealing the deeply contingent nature of political order.²⁷

Now, this articulation of dissensus is arguably also one of the most challenging dimensions of democracy as a political regime, for it can easily foster division and fragmentation if the procedural institutions of political competition are not bound to a substantive imaginary of a “common symbolic space” (Mouffe 2000, 13). Dissensus – as precondition and premise of democratic politics – requires tolerance and respect of the ‘other’, of other claims and identities, of other interests and practices that may differ from ones own but still are included in the common symbolic space of an imagined political community. In this sense one of the most fundamental preconditions of political openness is the principle of tolerance and respect upon which dissensus rests.²⁸ It is the condition for “the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds” (Rancière 2010, 39). This ontological tension requires an “infinite respect for the other” (Rancière 2010, 61) in “the democratic shape of an otherness that has a multiplicity of forms of inscription and of forms of alteration and difference” (Rancière 2010, 61). Put in more ontic terms: democracy only works when and as long citizens are able and willing to tolerate difference without seeking to negate or destroy its existence.²⁹

So-called ‘mature’ democracies have (at best) institutionalised and internalised procedures, norms and practices for accepting incompatible differences and identities, nota bene demanded and fought for through highly political and often outright violent social struggles. But these norms and practices of accepting multiplicity and difference within a shared field of politics are historically contingent, as even the widely divergent political cultures in Europe and Northern America demonstrate. The competition and political struggle that democratic regimes have institutionalised to guarantee such multiplicity may, in different historical situations, lead to violent conflicts about the exclusion of certain identities from this common space. All the more so if this common space is structured not symbolically, but economically, if political power is so tenaciously coupled with economic power that the “spoils, and the losses, are total” (Aké 1996, 73),

26 Classically, see Schumpeter 1993 [1950], in particular Chapter 22, where he expounds on the principle of political competition and its effects.

27 See Norval (2015) for a discerning discussion on this key dimension of ‘imagining otherwise’.

28 In fact, Rancière defines dissensus „as the presence of two worlds in one“ (Rancière 2010, 37).

29 This is what Rancière calls ‚the infinite openness to the Other‘ (Rancière 2010, 60) defining dissensus. Put in less evocative but more approachable terms, sixty years earlier Schumpeter underlined the importance of tolerance and the difficulties in attaining and maintaining such ‚true respect‘ („echte Achtung“) in democracies, even when most deeply held ideals are being questioned by political competitors (Schumpeter 1993, 469). This is one reason why Schumpeter remarks that democracy may be difficult to sustain in times of instability.

as has been the case in many African states. Perhaps not so paradoxically, democratisation can lead to precisely the type of exclusionary, vertical and frequently violent political articulations that it in principle seeks to overcome.³⁰

The notion of conflict must therefore be placed in its proper analytical place. 'Conflict' is not of interest because it is 'bad' or 'destructive', as some simplistic peace and conflict theorists will have it; 'conflict' is a key analytical category because it denotes dislocations of political order, processes of social transformations and the reconfiguring of social actors. What the effects of these dislocations on the agency of social actors, on their identities and claims, and on their practices are, then, is a matter of empirical enquiry, as is the question concerning the properties of the restructured political order. Another key question to raise, and one which the notion of 'conflict' draws our attention to, are the conditions under which social actors engage in contentious politics and practices,³¹ as well as the question of critical junctures in this rearticulation of social actors, and the conditions under which such rearticulations are stabilised in new configurations of political order.



Sticker promoting a radio-programme on peace and reconciliation in the Kofi Annan Institute of Conflict Transformation, Monrovia, Liberia (February 2014).

30 See for instance Aké (1996) or Sandbrook (1996) for discerning contributions on the problems of democratisation in Africa.

31 Here I differ from Tilly et al.'s conceptualisation of contentious politics, which by definition are always directed against the state (Tilly 2008; McAdam et al. 2001). As outlined, however, in my understanding the state is not privileged as a separate, distinct actor, but is itself a melange of heterogenous actors, which cannot be distinguished from other social actors. In addition, contentious politics are not always cognitively framed. Contentious politics can also be prepredicative practices, or ascribed as "contentious" by other actors at particular critical junctures.

Cities

Understanding Urban Spaces

Cities seem ideal tropes to investigate corruption and conflict in Africa, for several significant reasons. An obvious entry-point is demography: cities in Africa are growing at impressive rates.³² This trend is especially observable in smaller and mid-sized cities (Roberts 2014; UN-Habitat 2014, 7). Evidently there is a shift taking place in the relative demographic, political and economic weight of cities in relation to the capital city and the nation-state, in some places sharply exacerbated by processes of decentralisation and devolution.³³ These rapid transformations of urban spaces are characterised – or rather produced – by the emergence of new social actors and social formations. In these rapidly changing contexts, corruption and conflict are articulated in new ways. The understandings of these new phenomena differ depending on the scholarly perspective. These shall be discussed in the following section, which will be rounded off with a conceptualisation of urban space based on types of social interactions.

Whereas the social and political volatility of cities as a product of its heterogeneity has always been recognised – classically with an eye on their emancipatory potential³⁴ – a strong current in today's literature on cities argues that new patterns of exclusion, informalisation and criminalisation are emerging.³⁵ These features take on

Part of the central town in Eldoret, Kenya (January 2015).



32 See for instance United Nations (2014); UN Habitat (2014); UNECA et al. (2013). For latest data see UN Habitat's open access to urban data from across the world under <http://urbandata.unhabitat.org/> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).

33 For Africa see Mafusire et al. (2014) or Pieterse and Smit (2014); in general see Heller and Evans (2010).

34 See Hobsbawm (2005 [1973]), Lefebvre (1991[1974]), or Castells (1983).

35 See for instance McFarlane (2012), Myers (2011), or Heller and Evans (2010). Arguably, of course, these are processes which can be observed in urban areas world-wide, a phenomenon that Arjun Appadurai terms "citizens without a city," i.e. a "huge and constricted population of insecurely or poorly housed people [that] has negligible access to essential services" (Appadurai 2002, 27).

a sense of urgency with regard to African cities. A case in point are influential policy reports, such as UN-Habitat's "The State of African Cities" (UN-Habitat 2014, 2010), that stress the problems caused by these rapid transformations, such as unemployment, slum proliferation, inadequate public services and decaying urban infrastructure. In this slant, these new actors 'living' and appropriating urban spaces may lead to exacerbated conflicts and violent articulations, rather than to urban spaces characterised by new but stable articulations of diverse and heterogeneous social actors as delineated in classic urban theory.³⁶ Scholars describe such processes in drastic terms, such as "[u]rban balkanization occasioned by the increased deployment of violence" (Simone 2007, 64), or "spatial coercion" (Marcuse 2010, 476–482):

"Crime rates are rising; social conflicts with historical roots in rural areas are being transferred to urban centres; cities are increasingly the primary battle field for 'new wars'; and terrorists use cities both as bases and targets for their activities." (Beall and Fox 2009, 177)

Although scholars do warn from "lump[ing] all forms of violence to a notion of all African cities as violent or as equally violent or equally violent in the same ways" (Myers 2011, 143; see Myers 2011, 138–161), violent conflicts of different shapes and colours continue to shape much urban life: be it the structural violence of poverty and exclusion, to crime-related violence experienced in many parts and by many urban dwellers, to outright armed conflict that erupts in or pervades (parts of) cities, such as recently witnessed in Gao, Bangui, Garissa or Bamako.³⁷ In this understanding, the better understanding and transformation of violence, conflict and corruption in urban areas becomes an urgent developmental objective, "a focus on ways in which contentious urban politics can be managed through progressive planning and inclusive governance strategies that accommodate contestation, cooperation and compromise" (Beall and Fox 2009, 198).

A very different approach to this urban planning-oriented body sketched out above is informed by post-structuralist thought, celebrating the diversity, the difference, and the 'unknowability' of cities.³⁸ Here, the radical openness to future possibilities that the urban promises is celebrated.³⁹ One of the most influential authors of this approach to African urban studies is AbdouMalik Simone, who argues that "the heart of city life is the capacity for its different people, spaces, activities, and things to interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them" (Simone 2010, 3). This 'cityness', as he terms it, is part and parcel of "the diversity of the city [that] can easily foster highly competitive relationships" (Simone 2010, 6). In line with other urban scholars, he iden-

36 Georg Simmel is the most influential of classic sociologists, writing on the distinct features of the 'modern' city and the specific novel practices that the urban produces (Simmel 2002).

37 See also the most recent *The State of African Cities Report* (UN Habitat 2014) for data on urban violence (in particular UN Habitat 2014, 29-33).

38 Again, this argument is not only built on data or case-studies from Africa, but also from other parts of the world, such as Asia (e.g. Simone 2010). However, viewed in a wider body of literature on the state and society in Africa, there seems to be a systematic bias ascribing corruption and conflict as a defining feature of African politics. For a critique see Koechlin (2013, chapter 2)

39 Whereas Simone provides some very evocative description of the lifeworlds and practices of urban residents, he does not go beyond this more literary evocation to provide a theorisation of (changing) urban figurations. For critiques see Quayson (2014, 8), Förster (2013), or Myers (2011, 9-13). For a seminal contributions on difference and diversity see Lefebvre (1992 [1974]) on the social production of space, and Massey (2005) on space in general. For a recent edited volume on coming to terms with such 'unknowable' urbanity see Parnell and Pieterse (eds.) (2013), in particular Pieterse (2013).

tifies a fundamental tension between attempts of urban governance, seeking to tame and control “plurality of relational possibilities” (Simone 2010, 6), and the fluidity and spontaneity of the city and its urban actors. He makes a strong argument that ultimately the city is ungovernable, in the sense that “whatever appears in the city is fundamentally tenuous and uneasy” (Simone 2010, 11; see also Simone 2004, 2007). Whereas this unpredictability and instability is not necessarily depicted as something liberating for urban residents, who, as he also shows, resort to such tactics and practices for survival, not emancipation, Simone strongly privileges the creativity inherent in the chaos of urban life, rather than its misery. ‘Cityness’ is highlighted as a breeding-ground of novel, resourceful, creative practices subverting attempts of hegemonising order and control. In this framing, conflict and corruption signify the inventiveness of urban residents in complex, harsh, fast-moving urban spaces.⁴⁰

This takes us to a third strand of urban theory that has incorporated some of these premises, but sought to build a more comprehensive and thorough analytical framework to systematically explore (African) cities. The by far most important contribution is by Jennifer Robinson, who argued that no dividing line between ‘African’ cities and other cities can be drawn (Robinson 2006). All cities are understood as ‘ordinary’,⁴¹ i.e. characterised by complexity and diversity that transcend any a priori categorisation along historical or geographical lines. Robinson has been highly influential in framing a new, ‘cosmopolitan’ approach to (African) urban studies that has shed its colonial and modernist skin without sacrificing theory and methodology (Robinson 2013, 2011, 2006). However, whereas the creative potential (but not necessity!) of urban heterogeneity and difference on the agency of residents is recognised, Robinson is more concerned with developing an approach to urban studies which captures the similarities as well as the specificities of urban spaces. Her concern is not to celebrate such difference for the sake of a vague notion of cosmopolitanism, but to make cosmopolitan urban studies fertile to understanding and supporting more diverse and meaningful forms of urban development.⁴² In this reading, thus, ‘corruption’ and ‘conflict’ become tropes to explore such specificities of urban spaces and articulations, as well as open up an analytical window to shed light on similarities between possibly very different urban spaces. As can be gleaned from these different strands of current contributions to (African) urban studies, there has been a marked shift in the understanding and theorisation of the city. The common theme is the emphasis on context, diversity and urban residents, rather than on pre-determined, ‘Western’ developmental models and plans. Even the reports of deeply policy-oriented organisations, such as UN Habitat, have picked up on this scholarly change of perspective, notably by emphasising context-specific solutions and the respect for existing practices as the way forward for urban governance.⁴³

40 For a thorough critique of Simone’s premises see Förster (2014).

41 Robinson argues persuasively that all cities are “ordinary cities, which are all dynamic and diverse, if conflicted, arenas for social and economic life. Whereas categorising cities tends to ascribe prominence to only certain cities and certain features of cities, an ordinary-city approach takes the world of cities as its starting point and attends to the diversity and complexity of all cities” (Robinson 2006, 2).

42 See for instance Pieterse (2008) or Myers (2011) who share a similar objective of developing a more sophisticated approach to urban studies capable of recognising and understanding difference, whilst at the same seeking to develop policies and foster politics to empower urban residents.

43 See for instance the Executive Summary of the latest “State of African Cities Report”, which emphasises that “this report does not give ready-made solutions. Each region, nation, city and locality is different and sustainability innovations must be tailored to specificities that vary between localities and over time” (UN Habitat 2014, 7). Whether and how such contextualised policies can indeed be generated and implemented within developmental and planning discourses is a different question.



Public land on the margins of Kapsoya, Eldoret, Kenya (January 2015).

Urban Social Interactions

However, what is missing in all of the approaches is an *a c t o r - o r i e n t e d* conceptualisation of the urban. Therefore, lastly, and for our purposes most pertinently, this gap shall be addressed and tied into a broader conceptualisation of corruption, conflict and cities. In an article on creativity and emancipation in African urban life, Till Förster specifically “seeks to explore how cities, and in particular cities in Africa, shape the agency of their inhabitants and how those who live the cities shape them” (Förster 2013a, 235). Förster acknowledges that cities are ‘ordinary cities’ in Robinson’s sense; like her, he argues that scholarly approaches to the ‘African’ city have been framed by Western historical experience rather than building on empirical research on the city. In particular, he reflects on the nature of urbanity, arguing that whereas heterogeneity, scale and density may be defining features of the city, there is no necessity that an urban society and specifically urban interactions will, so to speak, automatically emerge in a settlement of a particular size or form. In his words: Urban society “has a material side, but, basically, it grows out of the social, that is to say, out of the intentional interactions of those who live the city and produce it as a social space” (Förster 2013a, 240).⁴⁴ It is precisely along the type of these interactions that theoretical and empirical distinctions between different figurations of the urban can be made.

A key distinction is introduced with the characterisation of two basic types of social interactions, which Förster terms *e n c o u n t e r* and *d i s t a n c i a t i o n*. “Encounter is, preliminarily understood, an interaction where both actors perceive and recognise the difference of the other, respect it, and try and build it in their relationship” (Förster 2013a, 242). Distanciation, on the other hand, is circumscribed “as an interaction where two actors adopt a disruptive attitude toward the other, trying to secure an independent agency” (Förster 2013a, 242).⁴⁵ Both forms of social interaction are simultaneously present in everyday life, and “[u]rbanity unfolds in the dialectics between encounter and distanciation” (Förster 2013a, 244). In other words, encounters and distanciation are

44 On intentionality in the theorisation of the politics of governance see Förster (2015).

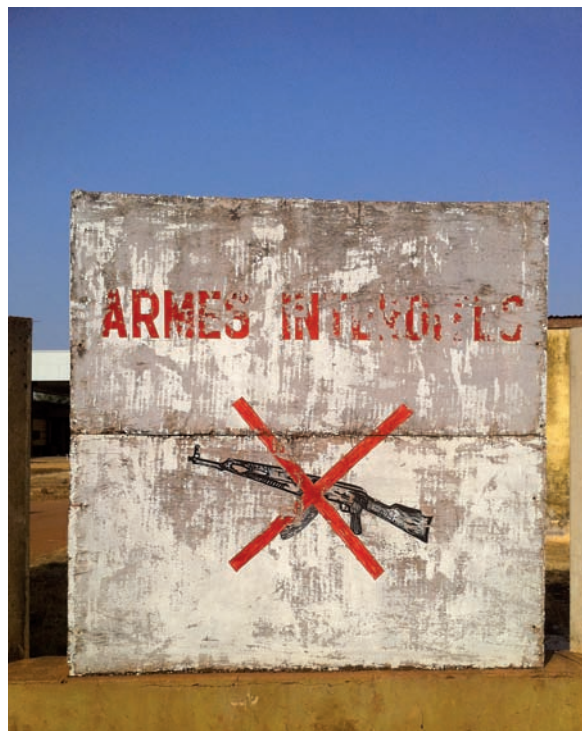
45 Of course, Förster recognises the more conventional use of distanciation as coined mainly by Anthony Giddens (1990), and positions his understanding accordingly (Förster 2013, 243-244).

distinct (but, to a degree, complementary) types of social interaction through which urban society is articulated.

This conceptualisation of urban spaces as emerging from specific social interactions, characterised by distinct possibilities of relating to each other, is key to an actor-oriented understanding of the city. Urban spaces are produced by the ways in which social actors link up to each other. Urban spaces are thus made through the agency of social actors; just as, in a dialectical relationship, the agency of social actors is informed by urban spaces. This approach differs fundamentally from teleological and technocratic Western development discourses on the one hand, and undertheorised celebrations of difference and fluidity on the other, in that it systematically turns its attention to the agency of social actors, their interactions, and the types of urban spaces that are produced through such articulations. In this reading, African cities as research sites are not only relevant because of their growing demographic, economic, political and cultural importance, and the concomitant rattle-bag of opportunities and problems in terms of infrastructure and well-being; African cities, and in particular mid-sized cities, are important sites in which this empirically open relationship between social agency, political articulation and urban space can be observed and analysed, allowing for generalisable insights both into their specificities as well as similarities.⁴⁶

In the following section I shall seek to sketch out a conceptualisation of corruption, conflict and cities that builds on this approach to urbanity and make the linkages to our understanding of corruption and conflict more explicit. I will further develop a heuristic typology that will, firstly, clarify key elements in the production of urban space and, secondly, allow for a systematic analysis of corruption and conflict in cities.

Weathered sign from October 2006 prohibiting arms at the entrance gates of the hospital, Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire (February 2012).



⁴⁶ We have made similar arguments elsewhere (see Koechlin 2015; Förster 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012; Förster and Koechlin 2011).

Corruption, Conflict and the Production of Urban Space

As should be clear from above discussions, the city is distinguished by the complexity of material and social relationships. But the nature of urban spaces is not self-evident. Urban spaces require empirical exploration for a meaningful understanding into the types of urban interactions that produce them, and, dialectically, the ways in which urban spaces in turn shape urban interactions. For the purposes of theoretically and empirically exploring corruption and conflict in cities the distinction between encounter and distancing is crucial. Within this continuum different types of urban social interactions can be sorted out and traced.

The question is how ‘corruption’ and ‘conflict’ are informed by the articulation of urban actors, in terms of *e n c o u n t e r* on the one hand, and *d i s t a n c i a t i o n* on the other. This line of inquiry opens up significant insights into the nature of the urban spaces. Some questions that could be raised are, for instance, whether certain discourses or practices of corruption are more conducive to supporting encounters? What boundaries do these discourses draw, for instance between insiders and outsiders? Is the relationship between these different actors one of distancing, and if so, to what extent? Does this imply systematic exclusion? Or is it a form of structured difference, in the sense that different forms of social agency and identities are articulated within a common space? At what moment do dislocations of social interactions occur, transforming encounters into distancing and vice-versa?

Distancing

Arguably, in spaces where social interactions – for instance ‘corrupt’ interactions – build on encounters, conflicts are of a different nature than conflicts in spaces that build on distancing. What types of conflicts these may be depends on the type and degree of encounter or distancing, respectively.

Let us dwell for a moment on types of distancing: Distancing may be a form of articulating difference that does not only allow for, but is actually the precondition for social interactions in complex surroundings such as cities. So distancing may just mean that difference and dissent are accommodated and accepted by the social actors. The specifically ‘blasé’-attitude described famously by Georg Simmel (2002 [1903]) may be characteristic of such distancing, where there is no contestation or struggle inherent in the distancing from each other. Although it supports processes of individualisation, it may well enable other, novel forms of social interactions and social spaces. Here, therefore, distancing leads to the articulation of new, cosmopolitan spaces. This type of distancing could be termed *o p e n*, in the sense that it allows for the articulation of difference and dissensus.

However, on a sliding scale, distancing may take on more exclusive, closed forms. The disjuncture from other actors, which is characteristic for distancing, may lead to the negation of the agency of (particular) other actors, and thus make interactions and linkages between different actors impossible. Here, distancing leads to the *c l o s u r e* of social spaces. Articulation becomes impossible because of distancing: social actors do not link up through dissensus; on the contrary, difference is constructed as the *i m p o s s i b i l i t y* of articulation. An example would include forced segregation, i.e. an extreme and violent form of physical and social differentiation of spaces. A more radical form of distancing is the holocaust or a genocide, in which agency and indeed the identity of other, particular actors are annihilated; this annihilation here does not only take place on a discursive level, but reaches right out to the destruction of the physical body.

New apartment houses being built in Lolwe Estate, Kisumu (June 2014).



So, as discussed above, distanciation may well enable dissensus in Rancière's sense, where dissensus is premised on the *r e s p e c t* of difference, and therefore allows for and indeed can be the precondition for the articulation of novel urban spaces. But in order to capture disjunctures at which the nature of interaction characterised by distanciation changes, we need to develop an analytical framework which pinpoints the moments at which distanciation based on dissensus tips into distanciation based on denial of a common symbolic space. We need a more differentiated and more radical understanding of distanciation to understand when distanciation leads to an inclusive, open articulation of urban space, and when it leads to an exclusionary, closed articulation of urban space.

Encounter

Equally, the notion of encounters needs to be reconceptualised to incorporate different types of encounters and their effects on the articulation of urban spaces. The gradients range from open, respectful encounters that foster new forms of interactions and articulations (in the sense that Förster [2013a] uses the term to denote the production of urbanity), to totalitarian types of encounter, in which only actors endowed with the same features are accorded such respect. Examples for the first type of encounters would be, for instance, spaces of democratic articulations of different identities, practices and

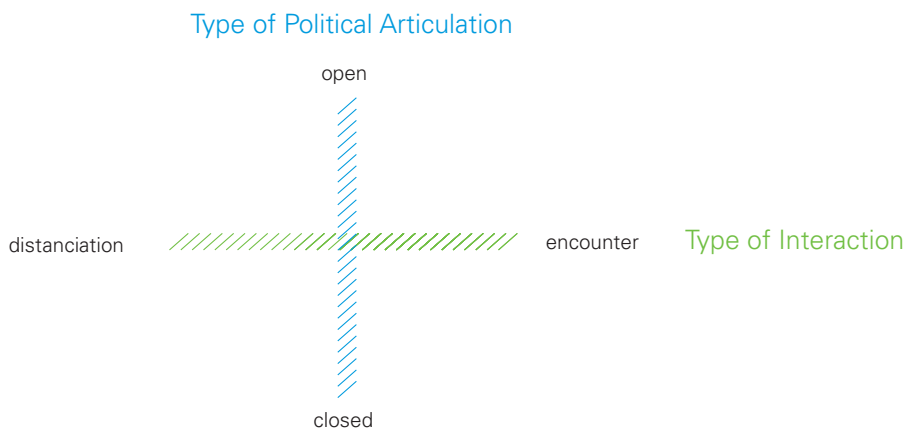
claims. Here, as Till Förster already pointed out, interactions between and across different actors affects their agency; through the moment of interaction that builds on their engagement with the agency and identity of the other, their own agency and identity is modified and changed. This moment of change may catalyse novel forms of urban articulations and new spaces that in turn affect practices and imaginations of urban actors. However, as with distanciation, we cannot assume that there is just one type of encounter. The effects on articulations building on encounters are empirically open, and we need to understand the full breadth of potential social interactions resulting from such encounters. As indicated above, encounters may also build on a respectful engagement with the agency and identity of others; however, again on a sliding scale, *in extremis* it may lead to the closure of such interactions. Examples of this latter type of encounters would include sects, extremists or totalitarian regimes that only allow for social interactions between the same identities.⁴⁷

It becomes clear that the types of conflict change fundamentally depending on where on this sliding scale between encounter and distanciation urban social interactions are located. Taking for instance encounters in Förster’s respectful sense, the nature of conflicts is likely to be more in terms of democratic constestation, rather than violent struggles. However, moving to the outer gradients of the scale, where the boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ become increasingly essentialised, conflicts between different actors are likely to take on more antagonistic and downright violent forms.

By Way of a Conclusion: A Tentative Typology of Urban Political Articulations

Summing up, I posit that social interactions need to be located along a continuum between *encounter* and *distanciation* in order to better understand the nature of the urban space that they produce. This continuum between encounter and distanciation producing urban space is depicted on horizontal axis of the typology below:

Figure 1: The Production of Urban Space – A Heuristic Typology



Source: The author, drawing on Förster and Koechlin (2011) and Förster (2013).

47 Here it becomes clear that encounter and distanciation are indeed two sides of the same coin. *In extremis* they actually meet, albeit with a different emphasis: one with regard to internal articulation (encounters), and the other with regard to external articulation (distanciation).

However, this dimension of urban space needs to be complemented by a further dimension capturing the types of articulations linking up social actors into a wider figuration. As the examples relating to different types of distancing/encounter sought to illustrate, I argue that the production of urban space needs to be related to the degree of openness, or, conversely, closure of political articulations. The key question here is how do actors link up into wider configurations, how are these structured, and how do they, in turn, structure the urban space? In other words, on this vertical axis we are plotting the types of political articulations, i.e. the ways in which wider social configurations are structured. The more *open* such articulations are, the more and the more diverse actors can link up, and the greater the space for dissensus; the more *closed* such articulations are, the more uniform and exclusionary the linkages. Thinking the heuristic cross through in idealtypical terms, for instance radical democracy, – defined by diverse and dynamic articulations of identities and practices – would be located at the uppermost pole of openness; conversely, a totalitarian regime, allowing only for uniform identities and practices, would be located at the extreme end of closure.⁴⁸

Relating this axis to our reflections on corruption and conflict, examples of different types of political articulations would be the degree of openness and inclusion of urban neighbourhoods in an African city. For instance, in some neighbourhoods mainly members of a particular region, ethnicity or religion will settle. Depending on how absolute such segregation is practiced, experienced and judged, the articulation of social actors will slide more upwards or downwards on the vertical axis. Other examples would include access to land tenure or employment, or political participation, which will also be structured along this axis. Practices and discourses of corruption evidently inform such inclusion/exclusion; and, dialectically, these will also affect along which faultlines conflicts emerge.⁴⁹

For our purposes, the important questions to raise are, firstly, how practices and discourses of corruption inform the political articulation of urban space, and, dialectically, how does the articulation of urban space inform the agency of social actors; and, secondly, what effects do particular types of political articulations have on the propensity and nature of conflicts? Sorting out these questions will allow for significant insights into the structuring and legitimacy of urban spaces. In a more dynamic sense, it will also enable us to trace the transformation of urban political orders, or, as is likely in rapidly changing urban contexts, the emergence of new types of political articulations. By exploring the types of social interactions and structuring contexts, particular disjunctures may be identified at which, abruptly or incrementally, urban social actors begin to relate to each other differently, interact differently, link up differently – and hence produce new and perhaps more inclusive forms of urban space.

48 For more elaborate theorisations see Norval (2015), Mouffe (2000), Rancière (2000), or Laclau (1996).

49 On the role of political imagination on articulations of urban space see Förster (2015, 2013).

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