Enacting the state through security assemblages

Materiality, technology and political subjectification in Nairobi

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Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how various types of security practices and the socio-material assemblages they put to work contribute to the enactment of the state and of political subjects in Nairobi. I sought to address the following research questions: *How is the state formed through socio-material security practices? What kind of political subjects are formed through these processes?*

I have positioned my work in conversation with scholars in both political anthropology and STS. Political anthropologists, rather than approaching the state as a stable and homogeneous entity, tend to study the state by attending to the everyday practices involved in its formation. My own approach specifically built on the work of Trouillot (2001), who proposes focusing on activities and encounters beyond government or national institutions as sites to observe "state effects." These effects concern first, the production of individualized subjects; second, their realignment into collectivities; third, the deployment of governance tools to classify and regulate collectivities; and fourth, spatialization through the production of boundaries and jurisdictions. Nugent (2007: 214) interprets Trouillot's suggestion as a process of attending to governmental forces as they become disentangled from state structures. While these governmental forces reproduce effects similar to state structures, they are saturated with very different "ways of life" that distinguish them (Humphrey, 2007: 435). The security practices I have analyzed are at times disentangled from the structures of the state, while at the same time they contribute to enacting the state. I have sought to contribute to these debates in political anthropology by emphasizing that we can understand state formation, state effects and governmental forces as enacted simultaneously by people and objects.

In this dissertation, I have sought to identify these "state effects" in the security practices that I encountered in the upper- and middle-class areas of Nairobi where I conducted my fieldwork. For instance, young African men

from poor urban settlements are *individualized* as dangerous subjects prone to crime; they are *reconfigured* as part of a larger collective of "suspected thugs" and shot dead by the police; barbed wire, metal detectors and "smart cameras," among many other technologies, are deployed to identify, classify and *manage* dangerous types. I also detailed how the police, private security companies and residents associations come together in joint patrols that *spatialize* these state effects, enacting boundaries within which residents and private companies enable the police to protect some people more than others.

Drawing on insights from STS and material semiotics, I have sought to draw attention to the role of non-human entities – and specifically to objects and technologies – in the production of state effects. While political anthropologists tend to focus on the agency of human actors, this dissertation has emphasized the symmetrical contribution of objects and technologies in enacting the state and political subjects. To better understand the role of these objects and technologies in Nairobi's security practices and their political effects, I have drawn on the concept of *performativity* as an analytical sensibility and theoretical commitment. More specifically, I have used the notion of *enactment* to emphasize that the state and political subjects are relational achievements that take shape through socio-material practices. This body of theoretical work associated with STS and material semiotics begins with the premise that "the social" is the result not only of relations between humans, but of heterogeneous relations between non-human and human entities. Drawing on this perspective, then, the state and political subjects are not pre-existing or even necessary entities, but are effects that result from the diffuse workings of socio-material assemblages.

This dissertation framed subjectification through security practices as a political process. While categorizing the population allows for discriminatory actions targeting particular groups of people, it also informs the conditions from which subjects can act: categorization shapes the conditions from which political action is possible. While Isin considers the actualization of this possibility – of deliberating and making claims on what the social world should be – an act of "becoming political" (2002: 275), my analysis has

focused less on such modes of being political, which have been amply examined in studies of citizenship. Instead, I have emphasized how "politics" permeate security practices.

I have argued that objects and technologies are not simply passive tools in people's hands as they reveal how processes of subjectification and state enactment result from the symmetric mediation of humans as well as non-humans. In foregrounding the role of objects and technologies, my question was not *whether objects are political* – a question that prompted Winner (1980) to label some technologies as "inherently political." One of the often-heard slogans in STS is that "science is politics by other means" (Latour, 1993: 229). The point is not that science and technologies are the so-called dependent variables of power differentials, but that science, technologies and power are inextricably entangled, necessitating alternative ways to approach *the political*. In this dissertation, I chose to focus on *how* objects carry out political work, animated by Cowen's (2014: 30) proposition that "it is the how that shapes the what." The "what" of Cowen's proposition is the clear presence of power relations. But the "how" – the specific way in which these technologies shape power relations – also matters. Technologies contribute to ordering people – making them up, as Hacking (2002) would say – in relation to security concerns.

Technologies such as nanny cameras or security codes interfere with interpersonal relations of trust or reproduce the lack thereof on a daily basis. In other words, they make a difference. While power and resource distribution are among the driving forces behind these processes of political subjectification, my focus – inspired by Cowen's maxim – has been on *how* various distinguishing and discriminatory practices take place through the mobilization of objects and technologies. Those objects and technologies that I analyzed in this dissertation contribute to producing categories of people that become visible and amenable to intervention: through extra-judicial killings and indiscriminate terminations of employment or, conversely, through the provision of extra and more careful protection.

To answer more explicitly *how* state formation takes shape socio-material-

ly and *what kind* of subjects are formed through security practices, in the next section of this conclusion I articulate four thematic areas that deserve specific attention: the identification of danger, spatiality and mobility, violence, and labor relations. These themes [*fields of attention*], which cut across the dissertation's chapters, point to specific patterns through which the state and political subjects are enacted in Nairobi's security practices. While these themes intersect, they represent specific modes through which these political enactments unfold, and indicate the crucial role of objects and technologies in the work of security assemblages. I then move on in a final section to suggest what such a socio-material approach can do beyond the domain of security and and the specific case of Nairobi.

How security assemblages work

The empirical material that I have drawn on in each chapter, and the respective analyses I suggested, are part of more complex phenomena that go beyond what I could trace. My "method assemblage" allowed me to "craft complexities and simplifications" (Law, 2004: 107) and advance a coherent argument about the state and political subjectification based on cases across time and space. In this section, I point to patterns of state enactment and political subjectification that extend across and beyond the specific cases I presented in each chapter. The four themes I highlight here – the identification of danger, spatiality and mobility, violence and labor relations – show *how* socio-material security practices produce state effects, *how* security assemblages work to enact the state and *what kind* of political subjects form through this work.

Identification of danger

The most prominent way of enacting the state and political subjects that this dissertation has distinguished is through the *identification of danger*. Chapter 5 focused specifically on the identification of dangerous types by residents, police and private security guards through material markers. Yet the identification of danger featured in different ways in the other chapters, which highlighted different socio-material practices. Mediated by objects and

technologies, identifying danger is always accompanied by categorizations of who embodies danger. From the colonial empire to contemporary Nairobi, leading security practices have revolved around identifying dangerous subjects, exemplified by the "unhygienic" Asian, the Mau Mau, al-Shabaab, the thug and distrusted security guards. The logics and rationalities emerging from such practices of identification rarely relied on the idiosyncratic characteristics of particular individuals; they instead mobilized well-known categories of people populating Nairobi's social landscape. What these practices of identification changed was the association of categories of people – based on ethno-racial, class, gender, residential and age distinctions – with danger and criminality. Alongside the identification of dangerous subjects came the identification of those subjects who should be protected from such danger. The European settlers positioned themselves as threatened by "unhygienic" Asians, "idle, vicious or criminal natives," and Mau Mau rebels. Later, middle-class and upper-class residents of the neighborhoods where I carried out fieldwork became the subjects worthy of extra protection. Through these differentiations, security practices enact a series of political communities, simultaneously ordering who belongs and who does not. The nascent city, the colonial state, neighborhoods and households are all examples of such distinct – if overlapping – political communities enacted largely, though not exclusively, through security practices.

Objects and technologies mediated and specified these processes. During the Mau Mau emergency, the full-body hoods worn by the gikunia allowed for a non-negotiable identification of Kikuyu individuals as Mau Mau members or sympathizers, enacting them as a collective and homogeneous rebellious group. In contemporary Nairobi, smart cameras have taken the place of full-body hoods, with anonymous operators in a London bunker having the discretion to decide who and what situation is dangerous. The metal detectors in Nairobi's malls, as I suggested in Chapter 4, seem to be more about "who" rather than "what" enters the mall: objects such as folding knives are allowed entry depending on who carries them. Together with alarms, electric fences and other surveillance systems, these artifacts contribute to categorizing some groups as dangerous, in the process enacting them as criminals. The work technologies do is thus not the same across the

spectrum of security practices. The work of a specific technology is always in relation to the work afforded by other objects or people. Material markers like dreadlocks, skin color and the clothes one wears become indicators of danger, travelling through camera feeds and mobilized to identify danger. In these ways, objects and technologies influence what it means to be part of a group.

Spatiality and mobility

Spatiality and mobility together are another theme that helps us see how the enactment of the state and political subjects unfolds beyond the specificity of an individual case. Spaces are of particular relevance because they are reconfigured through the intervention of objects and technologies, themselves becoming technologies that order and manage different subjects. Spaces were mobilized in security practices from Nairobi's earliest days: with the Indian Bazaar, the Asian population was forced to live and work in unhealthy neighborhoods, while the Vagrancy Act barred the African population from entering European neighborhoods. Contemporary practices to identify dangerous types such as the thug or Al-Shabaab continue to mobilize space-markers such as "living in" or "coming from" Eastleigh or a low-income urban settlement.

Chapters 2 and 4 highlighted the reconfiguration of spaces as technologies of security through the mobilization of other objects. The Indian Bazaar – and most vividly, the Kikuyu villages during the emergency years, when they were fenced with barbed wire – became spaces of containment for dangerous subjects and enemies of the colony. Spaces such as the European quarters in colonial Nairobi and, today, bedrooms and kitchens within private homes have played crucial roles in making the presence or absence of people legible in terms of security and danger: "natives" without valid passes became "idle and vicious criminals;" Kikuyus behind the wire became savage rebels; a maid without the right code becomes a threat when found in the bedroom. In these and many other examples, colonial European neighborhoods, Kikuyu villages, private homes and residential or commercial compounds have been reconfigured as critical mediators and

technologies in the categorization of people as (not) belonging.

How security practices are entangled with spaces – especially in relation to the technologies of mobility required to travel to, through and from these spaces – encourages us to see enactments of the state as more than historical processes. Enactments of the state point to the "reproduction and *spatialization* of power, difference, and inequality" (Jaffe, 2016: 17, emphasis added). As such, these processes are "emplaced" – a term Jaffe uses to show that the racialized designation of bodies changes in relation to both the larger urban landscape and micro-spaces of interaction. Chapters 2 and 3 showed how such emplacement unfolds through spaces and technologies of mobility, with the Mombasa-Uganda railway and the cars of private security companies introducing institutional state actors into particular areas. The railway literally and figuratively brought the East Africa Protectorate to what would become Nairobi, while the cars of private security companies today bring armed police officers to upper- and middle-class neighborhoods where residents seek their presence. These specific technologies do not enact the state simply anywhere; they spatialize it (cf. Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

Violence

Although I did not detail episodes of physical and interpersonal violence from my fieldwork, a certain degree of often diffuse and inconspicuous violence, enabled by physical objects and technologies, can be identified throughout the material I analyzed. Security practices mobilize objects that bring with them different types of violence, discriminating between groups of people. This work that objects do shows that violence not only involves discrete and interpersonal violent encounters, but also what Galtung calls structural violence (1969). The most evident and spectacular cases that this dissertation highlighted pertain to the policing of the Mau Mau in the emergency years and in the wake of the rise of the Mungiki. But similar modi operandi are deployed in contemporary Kenya, where extrajudicial killings and the sentencing without evidence of "suspected" thugs, al-Shabaab members and inside jobs are troubling examples. More mundane and subtle violence, however, impregnates all the security practices that I analyzed.

As Tilly's equation of state-making to war-making suggests (1985), violence permeates the logics and rationalities entangled with any security practice.

To varying degrees, barbed wire, fencing walls, electrified fences and alarms with maid codes enable and enforce violent separations and discrimination. Metal detectors contribute to invasive checks of customers' bodies and property, while the police's guns and the Mungiki's machetes were and are central in the enactment of the state and political subjects through violence, albeit in very different ways. The policeman-with-a-gun is a specific socio-material assemblage that contributes to enacting the state in classic terms – as the locus of the legitimate monopoly of force and of sovereign power with the ability to kill, punish and discipline with impunity (cf. Hansen & Stepputat, 2006). As I stressed in Chapter 3, police officers are often identified and associated with the possession and use of firearms. This has clear consequences for how policing is configured in Nairobi, as it allows the police to use firearms in almost unrestricted ways. As long as the victim of police violence is a "suspected" thug, the use of guns is largely considered legitimate. Conversely, the machetes in Chapter 2 – "the best way for a poor man, who can't afford a gun, to kill a man" (Rasmussen, 2014: 227) – fueled an image of the Mungiki as a cruel and bloodthirsty group. The machetes and their use in violent acts became entangled in processes that enacted the Mungiki as dangerous and criminal, in need of containment. The particular violence elicited by the machete helped to categorize the Mungiki as enemies of the state, which in turn legitimized violent retaliation by the state's security forces.

Labor relations

Labor relations constitute a fourth theme that emerged consistently across this dissertation's chapters. Objects and technology co-produce labor relations: they mediate and specify *how* certain categories of employees become suspicious. Through the specific ways people are hired or fired, through their terms of employment, or through the technologies deployed to control employees, these categories of subjects become individualized, reconfigured as part of a collectivity (often considered dangerous), managed accord-

ingly and associated with different spaces in the city, the neighborhood or the private residence. The first colonial subjects in Nairobi were inextricably tied to their labor positions as thousands were forcefully displaced from the British Indian colonies to East Africa for the construction of the railway and the administration of the Uganda Railway Company. The indigenous African population, excluded by colonial law from land tenure, became a pool of cheap casual labor at the mercy of European settlers – although the latter feared them as idle, vicious criminals living on their wits. Following the Vagrancy Act of 1922, as detailed in Chapter 2, all Africans in Nairobi had to present a pass to enter or exit European neighborhoods. The pass, which granted Africans access only if they were employed by residents, was a disciplining technology to control subjects considered dangerous in European spaces. But not being able to produce the pass also made the trespasser, by definition, a criminal. In contemporary practices, city-wide or neighborhood WhatsApp chat groups and the technologies they entail are mobilized to share stories of maids, gardeners and security guards as "inside jobs," fueling the imaginary around these workers as inherently suspicious. Possibly the clearest examples of political subjectification through labor relations are indeed those of the inside job in Chapter 5 and the deployment of "nanny cameras" in Chapter 4. Commercial and domestic employees have been collectively criminalized as the obvious brokers of criminals' entry into homes, or as the ones robbing their own workplaces. "Nanny cameras" unequivocally suggest that a specific labor category tasked with the care of children is not to be trusted and should be continuously surveilled. Individual "maids who could rob a resident" or "nannies who could mistreat a child" become ordered and categorized as collective subjects: the technology shows maids with their own codes, thus making the entire group visible, governable and surveill*able* as likely "inside jobs." Similarly, nannies become a collective category who, through specialized cameras, are kept under control as subjects likely to mistreat children. From these examples, service class subjects appear as a category of people who by default are never to be trusted. They are constantly enacted as dangerous and criminal in relation to their employment status, which in turn becomes one of the markers mobilized to identify danger.

Objects and technologies also mediate labor relations between residents and those tasked to provide security, contributing to their reciprocal political subjectification. In Chapter 3, residents of upper- and middle-class neighborhoods paid police officers, on top of their regular salaries, to patrol their neighborhoods, creating a specific labor relation, that of patron-client. This interfered with the supposedly impartial delivery of security by the police, rendering the police consistently present in well-to-do neighborhoods but not in others. In these agreements, the police ride in the cars of private security companies paid for by residents. This financial and material dependence on residents' resources to provide security makes police officers more directly accountable to the residents, who are enacted as worthy of extra protection. But labor relations also interfere with who protects and who is considered a threat. Whereas Chapter 3 showed how guns (among other objects) mediate the labor position of the police, Chapter 4 detailed how security guards hired by residents become distrusted in the discharge of their own tasks, often presented as dangerous gatekeepers prone to criminal collusion. In a palpably material way, security guards – who are not allowed to carry firearms but only batons – are unequipped for their roles as security providers, especially when facing attackers with firearms. Categorized as ineffective in providing security, the guards are reconfigured as untrustworthy if not outright dangerous subjects.

Each of these fields of attention are tied to the general argument I propose throughout the dissertation. More importantly, these four fields of attention are interrelated. When residents try to identify a dangerous type, these efforts are often propelled by fear of becoming victims of violence themselves. The labor categories that I detailed in this dissertation not only reflect and reproduce structural violence, but also become markers towards the identification of dangerous types. Furthermore, the salience of space cuts across the other fields. The labor status of domestic workers is mobilized as a reason to keep them in separate spaces of the house. Living in a specific area of the city is often used as a marker for the identification of someone as dangerous, and becomes a tool of violently separating subjects from fully belonging to the city or the nation. While violent practices and the identification of danger might seem logically connected to security practices,

we cannot separate them from spatial relations and labor relations, as the enactment of the state and of political subjects emerges through their intersections.

A Socio-Material Approach beyond Nairobi and Security

Security practices, as I noted in the introductory chapter, are only one avenue to observe state effects. But they are particularly well-suited to do so because, *first*, they explicitly categorize, hierarchize and manage people, often producing dichotomous categories of subjects: dangerous versus harmless, victims versus perpetrators, residents versus thugs. *Second*, while state effects become visible beyond governmental and national institutions, security practices are rarely disentangled from the interventions of the state security forces. I have detailed how the police in Nairobi remain central within larger socio-material assemblages through extra-judicial killings, joint patrols and laws such as the Private Security Regulation Act.

The chapters of this dissertation detailed how state effects take shape through Nairobi's socio-material security assemblages. The political subjects that I analysed are part of Nairobi's political geography of security, but they are certainly not an exhaustive list. While I conducted fieldwork in high-income areas, in other neighborhoods, fears over who is dangerous and who is not are radically different. Rather than seeking to generalize my argument across the city or the country in relation to specific subjects or populations, my unit of analysis has been Nairobi's security *practices*. Through a focus on practices, I foregrounded entanglements between people, objects and technologies, as the latter became increasingly present in response to terrorist and criminal threats. This allowed me to analyse the production of political subjects in relation to Nairobi's and Kenya's geopolitical, historical and cultural milieus without treating these cases as either exceptional,[1] or as merely a generic, irrelevant background that I could brush

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1   If anything, my work suggests that Kenya is nothing out of the ordinary. The broader research project of which I was a member identified similar dynamics elsewhere. See e.g. Frossard and Jaffe (2018); Volinz (2018).

past as if the dissertation were written "from nowhere" (cf. Haraway, 1988). Recognizing the specificity of the case, yet drawing out larger patterns, my work has sought to understand the broader socio-material mechanisms at work in processes of state formation and political subjectification, rather than concentrating only on their specific products, which remain contingent and specific to the spaces and times of my research.

Just as my findings have relevance outside of Nairobi and Kenya, political subjectification as state effect can be observed outside of the realm of security, by studying taxation, garbage collection, public health or the provision of utilities, to name but a few possibilities. Rather than considering the state as a unitary and pre-existing entity, my socio-material approach approach ties to anthropological perspectives that understand the state as a continuing and evolving conceptual product that stands in constant relation with various everyday practices. Taxes, for instance, become an compelling example of state institutions being enabled by companies and residents in a socio-material way to match the imagination of the state. Files, letters, bills and email reminders contribute to the enactment of the state that needs to extract resources from its citizens/subjects in order to reproduce itself and provide various services. Taxation practices are also a clear example of political subjectification, enacting people as belonging more or less to the collectivity of "taxpayers" (cf. Björklund Larsen, 2017). The actual or perceived tax-paying status and capabilities of each citizen are often entangled with judgments over the social worthiness and honesty of entire groups: some contribute to the "system," the "economy" and the "public good," while others exploit it.

Road traffic management could be another example. While I was in Nairobi for my fieldwork, the National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA) was busy restructuring the city's highways, removing roundabouts from large roadways and installing prefabricated concrete slabs to separate oncoming traffic. This also happened in areas of the city with high pedestrian traffic. Among other effects, it made the enforcement of the traffic code easier for the police, who could now easily apprehend pedestrians crossing the concrete barriers. Objects and technologies not only reconfigured the traffic of an already congested city, but also indicated how pedestrians did not belong

on public roads, helping to enact them as the targets of the police's unusually careful discharge of their duties (for some, this was outright harassment). Although it matters whether such political consequences are the effects of intentional design, intentionality is not crucial to show how a multiplicity of socio-material assemblages affect our daily lives and how they provide us with the conditions of possibility to be political.

As Trouillot suggested, we need not stray far to study processes of political subjectification as state effects. Furthermore, as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, we should strive to further uncover *how* everyday and mundane objects can have dramatic political consequences in practices that range from security to taxation, from the governance of public transport to the architectural design of cities and buildings. At the same time, the tools offered by STS and material semiotics should be directed more frequently towards those institutional "sites of national government" from which Trouillot sought to free political anthropologists, and focus on the *what* that influences multiple and overlapping domains in peoples' lives.

A final caveat concerns the historical and societal relevance of studying contemporary security practices. While in the previous paragraphs I suggested that political subjectification unfolds in relation to a variety of issues, this should not distract us from attending to the political consequences of the diverse practices mobilized in the name of security, in Nairobi as well as around the world. The security for specific categories of people, in the cases I detailed in this dissertation, was achieved through practices that became clear instances of insecurity for others. One of my interlocutors, an active member of a local security group in a poor urban settlement in Nairobi, pointed out to me that "if you want to bring security you have to be able to bring insecurity." Security, thus, cannot be considered a public good, if public means homogeneously for everyone. It is in this sense that security practices are necessarily entangled with processes of differentiation and of political subjectification. In approaching security practices with intellectual rigor and political commitment, actionable solutions cannot come but from an understanding of all the various subjects and objects involved, so as to highlight how some people are enacted as belonging and others as not.