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Enacting the state through security assemblages

Materiality, technology and political subjectification in Nairobi

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Summary

This dissertation examines how people and objects are put to work in various types of security practices and in the process contribute to the enactment of the state and of political subjects in Nairobi. I set out my work by asking the following research questions: *How is the state formed through socio-material security practices? What kind of political subjects are formed through these processes?*

After the terror attack at Nairobi's Westgate Mall in September 2013, the Kenyan security sector experienced an increased demand for security services. Private security personnel, police, residents and various objects and technologies were mobilized in the securitization of Nairobi's commercial and residential spaces. These public-private collaborations, also observable elsewhere in the world, challenge vested notions about the state holding a monopoly over the provision of security. Focusing on these practices, I argue we can better understand the state as a relational achievement that is enacted through socio-material security practices, rather than a natural entity.

I position my work in conversation with scholars in both political anthropology and science and technology studies (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 builds in particular on the work of Trouillot (2001), who proposes to focus on practices beyond those of government or national institutions, because it is there we can 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, the production of boundaries and jurisdictions. In this dissertation, I show how in security practices these state effects primarily lead to processes of political subjectification. I define security practices as any practices in which security, protection and safety

emerge as a key concern and where people and objects are mobilized simultaneously. I show how characteristic of such practices is that people are ordered into two groups: those people considered to belong to various communities (households, neighborhoods, the city and the nation) and therefore in need of protection; and those people who are enacted as dangerous, criminal and not belonging to such communities.

In Nairobi as elsewhere, contemporary security practices rely on various objects and technological devices. These technologies help routinize the differentiation of threats from non-threats and as such contribute to making up the social world. I found out that these labels are often attached to specific social groups, most notably people “like us” and dangerous “others.” I describe how in Nairobi this *othering* becomes visible in the discrimination of Muslims, Somalis and Somali-Kenyans, domestic workers, and young African men living in poor urban settlements. For instance, security practices that deploy cameras inside private homes contribute to enact domestic workers as criminal and dangerous.

Having set out the theoretical perspective in Chapter 1, I move on in Chapter 2 to focus on the role that objects and technologies had in the security assemblages in Kenya’s past. I thus provide historical context to my current research. I show how some contemporary practices of state enactment and political subjectification remind of logics and rationalities that were deployed in colonial and post-independence Kenya. Through the train infrastructures, barbed wire, passes, and the establishment of urban spaces such as the Indian Bazaar, the British Colonial Empire was brought into the East African territories. Central to the establishment of the colonial regime was the discrimination and segregation of certain categories of people, such as Asians, native Africans or Kikuyus. Security concerns were consistently the official reason for such discriminatory processes. They left traces, ways of doing security, that are often reactivated in contemporary security practices and contribute to enact some people as criminal and non-belonging.

In Chapter 3, I detail the cooperation between police, resident associations and private security companies in the form of joint patrols in upper-mid-

dle class neighborhoods in Nairobi. In these patrols armed police officers ride in the vehicles of private security companies. In this chapter I show all the different people and objects that work together in these cooperation agreements (cars, guns, police officers, private security guards, residents' associations). While residents expected the state (in the form of the police) to be the security provider, my analysis shows that for the state to be able to assume this role, it needs to be materially enabled by those very residents, in cooperation with private security companies. By analyzing such cooperation arrangements, I show how these specific practices not only enact the Kenyan state as a security provider, but also position the residents of these neighborhoods as subjects who are worthy of extra protection.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the technological artifacts deployed in Nairobi's security practices. Alarm systems, barbed wire, electric fencing, cameras and so on often hold specific security assemblages together and inform the everyday routines of security provision. In some security practices implicit assumptions about danger and dangerous people, become inscribed in the security technologies and objects. I focus on the effects of such assumptions once they are inscribed in technological artifacts and show how political subjects and technologies are enacted reciprocally. Security technologies consistently single out the same groups of people as dangerous. In this chapter I thus reveal how technologies do political work, as they contribute to distinguish between threatening and non-threatening subjects.

In Chapter 5, I analyze how some residents and private security officers in Nairobi use material markers such as dreadlocks, skin color and clothing style to recognize dangers and dangerous people. I identify three – seemingly ubiquitous – imaginaries of urban dangerous types, the “inside job,” “al-Shabaab” and “the thug,” and how they are associated with specific categories of people. Such identifications are always uncertain, however. They are made certain only after some of these people become victims of extra-judicially killings or are detained without charge and have been labeled, for example, as thugs or inside jobs. Those identified as dangerous and criminal are consistently part of certain groups of people: domestic workers for the inside job, African young men living in poor urban settlements for the thug,

and Muslim Somalis living in Eastleigh (a Somali enclave) for al-Shabaab. Through the repetitive identification of dangerous types with these groups of people, the abovementioned markers not only come to stand for ethno-racial, class, gender or topographic differences, but also become indications of danger and criminality.

In the conclusion I articulate four fields of attention that emphasize specific patterns of enactments of the state and political subjects in Nairobi's security practices: *identification of danger*, *spatiality and mobility*, *violence*, and *labor relations*. With these fields of attention, I establish relations between the various ways in which the state and political subjects were enacted throughout the chapters. Here I stress again the crucial role played by objects and technologies. Each of these fields shows how socio-material security practices produce state effects, how security assemblages work to enact the state and political subjects. Firstly, *identification of danger* is mediated by objects and technologies from cameras to codes, and from passes to dreadlocks. The identification of danger is always accompanied by categorizations of who embodies the danger. *Spatiality and mobility*, second, points to the relevance of spaces as they are reconfigured through the intervention of objects and technologies such as fences and alarms. Spaces themselves then become technologies that contribute to manage different subjects. Although physical and interpersonal *violence* was not central to my empirical material, the processes I described did articulate diffuse and inconspicuous violence, enabled by the various artifacts that discriminate between groups of people. Finally, objects and technology contribute to producing *labor relations*: they mediate and specify how certain categories of employees become suspicious or how they can be surveilled and controlled. These categories of subjects become individualized, reconfigured as part of a collectivity (often considered dangerous), managed accordingly and associated with different spaces in the city, the neighborhood or a private residence. I conclude by highlighting how these four fields of attention are specific ways in which state effects come to life and how they are part and parcels of state enactments.