

“We are the people who don’t count” – Contesting biopolitical abandonment

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1. Introduction

About a year before his lecture series “*Society Must be Defended!*”, in which he first elaborated the notion of biopolitics, in a talk given in Rio de Janeiro, Foucault discussed the “Birth of the Social Medicine”. As a half-way stage of the evolution of what later became public health, between the German ‘state medicine’ and the English ‘labor-force medicine’, he described a model taking shape in the 18th century French cities and referred to it as ‘urban medicine’. With view to the crucial role of circulation in creating a healthy milieu, the main aim of this model was to secure the purity of that which circulates, thus, potential sources of epidemics or endemics had to be placed outside the flow of air and water nurturing urban life. According to Foucault (2000a), it was at this period that “piling-up refuse” was problematized as hazardous and thus places producing or containing refuse – cemeteries, ossuaries, and slaughterhouses – were relocated to the outskirts of the towns. As opposed to this model, which was the “medicine of things”, with industrialization radically increasing their presence in the cities, during the subsequent period of the labor force medicine, workers and the poor had become to be regarded as threats and, in parallel, circulation had been redefined as – beyond the flow of things such as air and water – including the circulation of individuals too (Ibid., 150).

Today’s urban struggles to be discussed in this paper signify yet another model for the government of circulation; groups of individuals appear now to be included in the category of piling up hazardous refuse. Slogans such as “No relocation to human dumping grounds!” are targeted against a mode of urban governance that originate in but twisted the liberal challenge posed against the “poor laws” of the age of labor force medicine. Metropolises of our present diverge from the mode of governing people and things conducted through apparatuses of security that Foucault (2007, 18) demonstrates on the example of the modern town’s evolution, and that centered on “maximizing the good circulation by diminishing the bad”. Topographies of “global cities” now to be found on all continents are defined by the competition for becoming major hubs in the global economic circulation – a competition that, as the one for Cinderella’s precious and fragile shoe, entails cutting off parts now seen as overgrowths. Indeed, “cutting off” is a paradigmatic phrase of present day metropolitan order. In “world class” cities, maximizing good circulation seems not to be carried out by diminishing the bad within the same milieu, but by insulating the milieu of good circulation from that of the bad. Although actual practices of government and the consequent forms of exclusion vary, it could be stated that the risk of “governing too little” – defined by Rose (2000, 7) as failing “to establish the conditions of civility, order, productivity, and national well-being which make limited government possible” – does not apply to the realms amputated from spaces of optimal circulation.¹ With the idea of the universal provision of basic services thought to be essential for urban life recently discarded, urban landscapes display striking differences in the living standards of their dwellers. Ultimately, the power that aimed at fostering the life of the population through working with the effects of reality that were supposed to tend towards the well-being of all, in its present neoliberal form produces

¹ Or applies only in the form of securitizing phenomena associated with the milieu of bad circulation, e.g. poverty and migration. Whereas these too are crucial aspects of biopolitical governance, this paper has a different focus.

spaces of abandonment populated by lives not to be maintained. Home for masses of people deemed superfluous for the smooth functioning of the global city, in these sites – semi-peripheral shantytowns, transit camps, or far-off relocation projects – biopower crystallizes as the power to “disallow [life] to the point of death” (Foucault 1990, 138).

As popular movements taking shape around the world (e.g. in India, Brazil, or South Africa) show, these urban dynamics do not remain unchallenged.² Through focusing on a South African shack dwellers’ movement, drawing on my field research this paper interrogates the possibility of contesting biopower as the power letting the superfluous die. Thus, in interpreting the struggle of the Abahlali baseMjondolo, it argues that the operation of biopower’s dark side can be disrupted by those subject to it, that is, the life cast in these paradigmatic places of our day is not necessarily the bare life of the Camp, as an Agambenian reading would have it. As I attempt to show, the resistance of the shack dwellers allows for a reflection on what politics is when the distribution of the shares from the common is reduced to the government and eventual denial of basic needs, while the movement’s practical theorizing talks to the stakes of conceptualizing “everyday” urban struggles. With the aim so set, in what follows, I first show how neoliberal governmental rationality leads to a ‘biopolitical partition’, that is, how contemporary urban governance fissures the biopolitical rationality of care and visibly molds a rationality that abandons life. In the third section I demonstrate how this rationality materializes in a particular spatiotemporal ordering of superfluous lives. Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic conception of politics, I then turn to the ways this order is challenged through Abahlali’s ‘living politics’ and its three-fold insistence on proximity, with at the end briefly hinting at the possible implications this politics of resistance can have on thinking everyday struggles.

2. Splintering nurture: Fissuring the Biopolitics of Care

“A place in the City” is the title of Jenny Morgan’s (2008) documentary film about the struggles of the Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban. Synthesizing the claims of many popular movements around the world today, the title signifies an arguably major shift in urban governance and the conception of development implied by it.³ Processes of materializing abandonment are apparently exacerbated by the urge with which aspiring megacities engage in redesigning themselves. As, based on Foucault’s work (1990, 2003, 2007, 2008) I argued elsewhere (Selmeczi 2009), biopower, that is, the modern governance of the “man-as-species” toward its wellbeing inevitably entails producing superfluous lives and their consequent abandonment – as the regulation of the massified subject/object of the population turns on the implicit division of governmental practice into pertinent and non-pertinent levels. As security apparatuses working with the relevant effects of reality to achieve the common interest target the pertinent level of the population, with potentially detrimental dynamics allowed to take their effect, multiplicities of people are left unprotected in certain localities at certain moments in time – that is, at spatiotemporal coordinates non-pertinent from the perspective of biopolitical government.⁴

Governing the population from the time biopower took shape at the end of the eighteenth century till the last third of the twentieth century was conditioned upon the notion of society as the *vis-à-vis* of the state and as a field of intervention correlate to that of the economy (Foucault 2007). Whereas the relation of these two fields were always subject to the

² See e.g. Appadurai (2001) and Caldeira and Holston (2005) on urban struggles in India and Brazil, respectively.

³ See also David Harvey’s conception of the “right to the city”, e.g. in Harvey (2008).

⁴ See primarily Foucault (2007, 41–45). See also Foucault (2000b) on the “Risks of Security”.

fundamentally liberal fear of governing too much and so interfering with their beneficial natural dynamics, the various interventionist economic policies characterizing post-World War Western welfare states still could legitimately carry social objectives. The crisis of the welfare state emerging in the 1970s, however, introduced a break into the relationship of the economic and the social – the imperative now became their decoupling.⁵ Separating the two “systems” implied reconfiguring the ideal of the economic as pure from notions of social justice and significantly redrawing the scope of the social. As Foucault (2008, 201–202) shows, this intention of purification brought along the reintroduction of the ‘poor’ and ‘poverty’, while “giving up the idea that society as a whole owes services like health and education to each of its members” reintroduced an imbalance between those receiving benefits and those supposedly capable of taking care of their needs. The consequent “death of the social” – as the governmentality literature refers to these processes – accompanied reconceptualizing public services as marketable and replacing the idea of social citizenship with that of the active and responsible individual (Rose 1996).⁶

In the realm of public infrastructure, so reshuffling the responsibilities of the state and the members of the population meant that the welfarist ideal of universal service provision (backed up by the late modern notion of mass technological progress) was discarded, giving place to conceptions of urban development more suitable for the image of competitive, entrepreneurial localities. Decoupling the economic and the social within governmental rationality thus went hand in hand with giving up what Neil Brenner (1998, 476) refers to as “homogenizing spatial practices on a national scale” and allowing for the intensification of uneven spatial development. Increasing liberalization and privatization of infrastructural networks brought along by the prevalence of the neoliberal governmentality thus ultimately lead to what Graham and Marvin (2001, 33) call ‘splintering urbanism’, that is, processes of infrastructural networks’ unbundling “in ways that help sustain the fragmentation of the social and material fabric of cities”. Crucially and more particularly, weeding out the idea of social justice from the government of service provision implied largely disposing of the system of cross-subsidies, that is, the regulation tariffs through channeling resources from the more affluent to the poorer segments of the society. As a perfect example of the decoupling imperative illustrates, it now became possible to argue (for a representative of Britain’s water services regulator, Ofwat) that:

it would be unfair to other water customers if general tariff policy were to reflect social objectives. These should be health and social service policy. Any costs from providing support to customers with particular needs should be met by the appropriate agency, and not by the water customers generally (quoted in Graham and Marvin 2001, 235).

The quote also seems to underline Rose’s (1996, 346) claim about the rescaling of governmentality corresponding to the “death of the social”: the emergence of the ‘marginalized’, ‘the excluded’, and other similar categories circumscribed groups that have “particular needs” which, in turn, have to be addressed by bodies of special expertise and attended to by special agencies – preferably also operating through the market. Thus, as the customization of services implies different pools of choices for responsible consumers and those catered for by the resized and specialized social, the totalizing aspect biopolitical care is visibly fissured.⁷

⁵ See e.g. Foucault (2008, 200–202).

⁶ C.f. Dean (1999) and O’Malley (1998).

⁷ To be sure, the norm of the responsible costumer infiltrates this sphere too; c.f. Rose (1996).

Importantly, Rose (1996, 347) notes that, at least with regards to the newly defined poor, these processes have a spatial aspect as well: “these abjected subjects are re-unified ethically and spatially [...they] are relocated, in both imagination and in strategy, in marginalized spaces”. In terms of place making practices such as urban development and infrastructure provision, nevertheless, this statement only partly grasps the consequences of the biopolitical partition. For, when adaptive to the supposed requirements of the global competition of localities the state becomes “spatially selective”, much more is at stake: rivaling states and cities “are constructing experimental models of urban planning and infrastructure provision for building local microgeographies within strategically significant regions whilst withdrawing policies geared to mass integration and redistribution” (Jones quoted in Graham and Marvin, 197). This, in turn, means practically neglecting less valuable places associated with less valuable groups of people, and when this neglect is equivalent to not providing basic infrastructure such as water or electricity, we are faced with nothing less than the emergence of spaces of biopolitical abandonment. That is, dethroning the ideal of universal provision and removing the redistributive measures of its regulation in effect creates separate circuits. At best, in less marketable areas this means retaining the original (monopolistic) provider often with higher tariffs and fewer options; at worse, gaps emerge in the service, casting non-serviced groups of people into inhuman living conditions that eventually lead to their death. Whereas there are modes of service provision that could parallel the special agencies referred to by Rose (1996) and that similarly carry disciplinary functions of forming the responsible customer even in marginalized realms, such as the installation of pre-paid meters, very often – such as in shantytowns to be discussed below – provision is explicitly or implicitly withdrawn or denied. Thus, when it comes to its infrastructural crystallization, the “death of the social” may become literal and so, arguably, we encounter a radicalized form of biopolitics here. Replacing the ideal of the “emancipatory city” with the “competitive city” while correspondingly discarding with the conception of infrastructure as a public good designates a new phase in the deployment of biopower and the life that is subject to it.

To be sure, in the context of this paper’s outlined aim the question easily emerges: how far can we extend the relevance of this line of transformation to understanding the government of life in states of the global South: states without a tradition of welfarism as described above, and with alternative ideas of modernization? In particular, how adequate is it to assess South African (urban) development through the framework provided by the neoliberal criticism of liberal governmentality in the West? Although it is impossible to engage in a thorough discussion of the extendibility of governmentality analysis here, a brief account of certain aspects of urban governance in the South may justify applying the biopolitical lens for the present reading.

On the one hand, the aim for universal provision of infrastructure entailed by the modernist West’s concept of the “emancipatory city” was certainly not exported to the colonies. Instead, as Graham and Marvin (2001, 82) argue, it was readjusted to the twofold requirements of securing the efficient flow of goods to the metropolitan core and servicing the local colonial elites, so creating “a system of spatial apartheid” whereby the native population was completely neglected in terms of urban planning.⁸ On the other hand, gaining their independence, through regulating their economies along the lines of modernization theory and engaging in import substitution industrialization, post-colonial states tended to reproduce similar patterns. Even though both of these approaches relied on the figure of “trickle-down” thus showing determination to extend the scope of urban modernization beyond economic and commercial centers, conceiving of major cities as the engines of development yet again

⁸ For a discussion of the role of biopolitics in colonialism and the production of inequality, see Venn (2009).

resulted in the uneven allocation of infrastructure. Therefore, one could argue that regarding the general outcomes – if not the rationalities – of any of the modernizing regimes, urbanism in the South has been splintered well before neoliberal governmentality promoted by international financial institutions could take effect. This argument would seem especially grounded in the case of South Africa and the history of apartheid. Here, as Graham and Marvin (2001, 296) also note, “infrastructural inequalities were explicitly configured by the apartheid system”. The mandate of the post-apartheid government that was based on the Mandela-led African National Congress’ (ANC) endorsement of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP, 1994) nevertheless places the South African case in a different perspective. In light of the emancipatory promise to eliminate, through providing “a better life for all”, the inheritance of white minority rule and its almost incomprehensible system of discrimination carried out through “pass laws”, the construction of peripheral townships, and Bantustans, the quick shift to neoliberal urban governance is particularly puzzling. As Patrick Bond (2000) recounts, simultaneously with the drafting of a Constitution that put remarkable emphasis on social justice and a Bill of Rights that incorporated the *Freedom Charter’s* (1955) claims for economic and social rights (among them the right to housing), the ambitious but not unfeasible goals articulated in the RDP were discarded already two years into the democratic governance, giving way to hardcore neoliberal policies.⁹ Consequently, and similarly to other post-colonial states such as India or Indonesia (McFarlane 2009), in the late nineties the post-apartheid South African state too began (again) to engage in selective spatial practices and joined the global competition of constructing “megacities”. Not without “success”: Johannesburg, rebranded as “JoBurg” and home to approximately one million shack dwellers, is currently the only African city listed as “world-class” (Bond 2007). As such, together with Cape Town and Durban or Jakarta and Mumbai, it fits into the pattern according to which regardless of their location, “world-class” cities reconstruct the regional divide of developed/underdeveloped within their boundaries.¹⁰ Reflected in megacities’ spatially selective practices of planning, this divide, in turn, implies dualistic development schemes.

In the South African case, due to the gradual withdrawal from implementing the equalizing expansion of infrastructure as envisioned by the RDP – which might have provided the poor black majority with what Mark Duffield (e.g. 2007) refers to as the ‘insured life’ characteristic of populations in the developed world – beyond prime urban spaces, the state and local agencies alike often turn to mobilizing the principle of development as the presumption and/or promotion of self-reliance: the essence of Western liberal conceptions of developing the ‘non-insured lives’ of backward populations in the South. Thus, justifying the above outlined argument about refocusing the social, in localities that are not attractive enough for private developers, communities are sometimes encouraged – and are aided by IGO or NGO expertise – to construct their own “development framework” and build infrastructure by themselves (UN-Habitat n. d.). Accordingly, Graham and Marvin (2001) take account of “community infrastructure” as one of the pathways to unbundling networks, even though they note that the integration of self-built infrastructural networks into market-based ones is very much conditional upon the private providers’ expected returns, which, in poor communities, is far from guaranteed. Except, of course, in such successful cases as the one discussed in a UN-Habitat (n. d., 2, 9) report on a “Housing and Infrastructure Development through Self-reliance” project in the South African village of Klapmuts, which demonstrate that improving the rate-paying moral is part of the process:

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the trajectory from liberation and the RDP to the endorsement of neoliberalism, see Bond’s (2000) monograph.

¹⁰ See also Shapiro (2009).

A development forum was established in 1995 to work with the Stellenbosch Municipality. This facilitated strong community participation in the design and implementation of infrastructure and housing projects which resulted in a dramatic increase in payment for services from virtually zero to 95% of the households paying. [...] Security of tenure and home ownership has created a new sense of place and civic pride as may be witnessed by the establishment of gardens, extension of houses and often unique home decoration. The high level of payment for rates and services in the order of 95% is another indication of civic pride.¹¹

Whereas already the idea of self-help infrastructure is quite distant from the late-modern concept of universal infrastructure development as the state's "natural monopoly",¹² as noted above about the consequences of the death of the social, in cases where even this option is unavailable and where consequently traces of "informal infrastructure" appear, it is abandonment that materializes. Indeed, considering the distance between the modernist ideal of homogeneous cities and the present condition of marginal spaces (marginal either in terms of their physical location or the social clustering of their inhabitants) "informal infrastructure" seems to be a contradiction in terms, and carries similar risks as those of justifying the contempt for shack dwellers' struggles for a living by projecting entrepreneurial potentials into the informal sector that flourishes in shantytowns (Davis 2006).

This also means that in order to assess the radicalized biopolitics of life-saving infrastructure provision (and especially resistance thereto), one has to go beyond the governmentality-framework. Despite there being governmental intentions at play to conduct the conduct of shack dwellers – such as supporting community initiatives of voluntary social work with HIV/AIDS infected inhabitants – the difference in the type of lives supported by the customized networks of prime spaces and the unserved peripheries that these networks incessantly bypass is not completely accounted for by focusing on practices and rationalities of subject formation.¹³ The implications of biopolitical partition taking shape in splintering infrastructure – even when not representing direct life-hazards – draw completely different spatiotemporal frames around the lives of circulation-capable consumers and the superfluous needy. The very effect of splintering urbanism is the production of formidable difference in living conditions through the separate infrastructural circuits that serve valuable and increasingly tend to bypass non-valuable spaces.¹⁴ It is the latter case, that is, biopolitical abandonment, to which I turn in the next section.

3. The spatiotemporal materialization of abandonment

On the more straightforward level, it is not hard to see how being included in infrastructural networks provides users with a generally unnoticed luxury of immediacy while

¹¹ This project won a Best Practice Award in 2000. (<http://www.bestpractices.org/awards/awards02b.htm>).

¹² Infrastructural networks were considered to be "natural monopolies" in the era of universal service provision: considered to be "essential to a civilized life", they were thought to be most efficiently regulated by a sole public supplier (Sleeman quoted in Graham and Marvin 2001, 79).

¹³ Not mentioning the fact that often even in such cases it is not only disciplinary power that is in operation. For instance, the eThekweni (Greater Durban) Municipality ceased funding the HIV/AIDS Drop-in Center at the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban (the settlement in which Abahlali baseMjondolo emerged) based on accusations that the movement misuses the funds – even though the movement and the center were institutionally independent (author's notes, May 2009).

¹⁴ According to Graham and Marvin (2001, 167), a crucial phenomenon of splintering urbanism is the creation of infrastructural bypasses that serve and connect valued users locally, globally, or virtually and completely exclude non-valued users.

exclusion implies time-consuming and laborious ways of catering for basic needs requiring the same resources.¹⁵ As quoting Bruno Latour Graham and Marvin (2001, 189) also note, being enrolled into or disconnected from networked infrastructure can compress or stretch “the natural and social spaces and times of our daily lives”. The tremendous impact infrastructural bypasses can have, appear crystal clear through the example of Ntambanana, a village in rural KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa). As a film made for the NGO Open Democracy Advocate Center documents, whereas other territories surrounding the village were gradually developed, Ntambanana was consequently left out of any plans of service delivery. According to a representative of the NGO, in this case “we are dealing with, I’d say, neglect because you have a village that is not getting services that other people are getting” (ODAC 2007, 14:19). In the complete absence of potable water provision, inhabitants of Ntambanana had to collect water from the nearby river, in lacking electricity they collect firewood from the forest and in lacking any means of transportation, they have to walk great distances to the closest health care center. Exacerbating their hardships, the river dries up in the winter, so, as one of the inhabitants tell the filmmakers, they have to dig holes on the shore and get up at three or four in the morning to collect their daily portion of water. Although in 2000 piped water network had been brought to the area, inhabitants of Ntambanana Ward 2 soon learnt that only those living by the main road were to be given access to the pipeline. Their next disappointment occurred when, as a “temporary plan”, the municipality decided to truck in water but allocated only one water tanker for the whole community – one truck that filled up a tank located even further away from the interviewed women’s dwellings than was the contaminated river.

Clearly, biopolitical neglect here imposes a spatiotemporal regime on the villagers’ lives that must be beyond the imagination of middle-class urban dwellers only a few hundred kilometers away. That this regime is correlate to a state of political superfluity, is revealed by the narration of how, fuelled with disappointment,¹⁶ two women from Ntambanana decided to engage in a dialogue with those responsible:

I realized that since we are far from the main road, we would not get water unless I took some action. That’s why I went to talk to the councilor. I asked him to tell us his plan. So when he puts in place his development structure, we can be part of that development structure. He left and he never came back to us... (Winnie Biyela, ODAC 2007/1, 16:09–16:36).

Banal it might sound, exclusion from circuits of information is very much characteristic of lives whose ‘proper’ frames are similar to those of inhabitants of Ntambanana. In the radically biopolitical ordering of spaces and times, assuming the capacity to dispose information is not normally attributed to those whose days are supposedly centered on catering for their basic needs.¹⁷

¹⁵ “The worst thing in living here... you know, when you are coming from a home where there is water inside the room, there is electricity, if you need to bathe, you just go to the bathroom and just relax there but here, if you need water, you just have to go out and fetch water with a heavy thing, and if you need the toilet, you have to go out even if it’s raining, even if it’s hot, even if it’s winter...” (Zodwa Nsiband, author’s interview, May 27th, 2009).

¹⁶ On the role of (political) disappointment in the process of political subjectivization, see the discussion further below.

¹⁷ In the case of Ntambanana, this manifested in reacting with a complete confusion to the Ward 2 women’s official request of information. To the simple question if and when the area will get water, it took six months to send a response – to a distant municipality office. Fortunately, this time around the response was rather positive: although in the long-term scheme of delivering piped water the village was indeed at the end of the line (due to its greatest distance from the source river), water tankers were planned to be deployed in Ward 2 in the meantime. While the plans thus included them, for the inhabitants to gain this information required the help of an

As also documented by ODAC's film, Abahlali's efforts to gain information on the eThekweni Municipality's plans regarding the future of their settlements and their chances of being allocated "RDP houses"¹⁸ are exemplary of the parallel spatiotemporal patterns of distributing access to infrastructure and to information, and therefore are worth to be discussed in some detail.¹⁹ After mayor Obed Mlaba failed to show up on a meeting to which Abahlali invited him so as to be informed about the low-cost housing project the mayor announced to the media previously,²⁰ the movement decided to file a request for information with reference to the *Promotion of Access to Information Act*. Already the act of filing the request is emblematic: as an enactment of practicing their rights, members of Abahlali decided to deliver the request in person.

They wanted to see, they wanted to see the faces of officials when they exercise this right, when they occupy this political space – because this is exactly what it was: it was occupying political space and forcing better engagement with the authorities (Mukelani Dimba, ODAC 2007/1, 11:42–12:01).

The City Hall, nevertheless, resisted being easily occupied by the information-hungry shack dwellers: among the obstacles was a security guard (calling on the Abahlali to "Go, wait over there!" and "Wait at the bottom!") and various forms of bureaucratic evasion, stretching the simple and costless act of filing the request to a ninety minutes long tragicomedy. Similarly telling of the sensory ordering are eThekweni City Manager Mike Sutcliffe's (ODAC 2007/2, 05:55–06:00) mediations on the dangers of providing information: "We don't want a situation where we raise an expectation of people, which we know is not going to be realized". Finally, and also illustrative of how more violent means are often deployed to secure the proper distribution of the audible and the inaudible: to get to a radio station where they were to be interviewed, Abahlali members rented a car but were upheld by the police on the assumption of having stolen the vehicle. Charged with resisting arrest, chairperson S'bu Zikode was arrested, thus, evidently, the radio interview could not take place.

For the shack dwellers, exclusion from the flow of information and thus being impeded from making their voices heard is implied also by the regular and violent police raids of electricity cut-offs.²¹ More than that, with announcing its Slum Clearance Programme in 2001 and correspondingly denying the electrification of informal settlements, the eThekweni Municipality hugely contributed to the deterioration of inhabitants' living conditions and to

NGO in filing a request with reference to the *Promotion of Access to Information Act*. The "interim" solution of providing a new water tank was realized two years after filing the request (ODAC 2007).

¹⁸ The common name for low-cost houses allocated to those below a certain (R 2500) level of income – as set out by the 1994 *Reconstruction and Development Programme*. For more on the subsidy-system, see Pithouse (2009).

¹⁹ Consider also, in this context, Abahlali's conception of the practical, time-bound character of living politics (discussed below) and their insistence on posing the "W-questions": "All we are interested is the W-questions. Where are you going to build this house, how are you going to build this house, how many of these houses are you going to build? When are they going to be built, where are they going to be built, how are they going to be built? What assurance can you give that it's going to happen? You cannot just make promises over promises that cannot be honored. You know, promises that have always been made, that have been made fifteen years ago..." (S'bu Zikode, author's interview, June 2nd, 2009).

²⁰ The mayor's staff notified the movement two hours before the set time of the meeting (ODAC 2007).

²¹ "We ask the media and our comrades around the country and around the world to please understand that communication from Abahlali baseMjondolo will be difficult until this latest attack has been rolled back. It will not just be email that will be difficult. Even charging cell phones will not be easy. Our march today in eNkwalini was very powerful. Our clean up campaign in Kennedy Road over the weekend was very successful. Children from poor families in Motala Heights are being excluded from the school. But it will take time to put all this news out" (Abahlali baseMjondolo, February 15, 2008).

what is here understood as the materialization of abandonment. The above discussed shift from aiming to provide services universally to no provision is made explicit by the program:

In 1990 the Durban City Council announced and began to implement an ‘Electricity for All’ policy. The aim was to electrify 168,000 dwellings. In 2000 the Municipality believed that it had accomplished 90 per cent of this. In 2001, when the *Slums Clearance Programme* was announced, the policy changed and shack settlements were no longer electrified as they were now considered ‘temporary’. The 2001 policy states: “In the past (1990s) electrification was rolled out to all and sundry. Because of the lack of funding and the huge costs required to relocate services when these settlements are upgraded or developed, electrification of the informal settlements has been discontinued” (Abahlali quoted in Birkinshaw 2008, 5; references omitted).

The policy that Abahlali explains with the municipal intention of the shack dwellers’ “ruralization” – that is, the will to push the poor beyond the boundaries of the city – imposes tremendous and often fatal constraints on those living in shantytowns in and around Durban.²²

The most dangerous consequence of lacking electricity and so being forced to use alternative means of lighting and heating – mostly candles and paraffin stoves – is the constant risk of shack fires.²³ In generally overcrowded dwellings that are built close to each other and of highly flammable material such as wood, cardboard, and plastic, a candle tipping over develops into a lethally spreading fire in a few seconds’ time. Beyond being more expensive than electricity,²⁴ heating and cooking with paraffin oil is detrimental as it contributes to respiratory illnesses and serious injuries when stoves explode – which they tend to.²⁵ Lack of street lighting combined with the absence of sanitation also seriously endangers shack dwellers: when approaching or using the few toilets (if) allocated to the settlements (or the bushes if toilets are also lacking or are too far away) in the dark, children and women are exposed to physical abuse. Furthermore, adding to the burden of coping with these direct life-hazards, denying electricity carves further temporal and tangible marks into shack dwellers’ lives: without an operating refrigerator food cannot be stored, without proper lighting children are unable to do their homework after sunset, and without electric iron – mothers fear – their school uniforms display where they come from.²⁶

Already such a brief discussion of the fatal consequences of being denied services reveals the characteristic temporality of spaces of abandonment: the municipality cancelled its universal service delivery policy with reference to the temporary nature of shack settlements and, re-enforcing this very temporariness, it prohibits elevating permanent structures. Both decisions lead directly to increasing the threat of shack fires, as temporary structure implies flammable building materials. However, imposed temporariness and forced mobility – its

²² “Many of us believe that by leaving us to be killed by diarrhoea and fire and rats while they waste millions on casinos, the themepark, stadium and the A1 Grand Prix the Municipality is trying to force us to leave our homes and to accept ‘relocation’ (which is really ‘ruralisation’) by forcing us choose between living with fires and rats and plastic bags for toilets in the city or without fires and rats and plastic bags for toilets in the relocation sites” (Abahlali baseMjondolo, February 15, 2008).

²³ C.f. Birkinshaw (2008).

²⁴ See Mike (2008)

²⁵ Zodwa Nsibandé’s narration of her own painful experience with an exploding paraffin stove: *Guardian Weekly* (September 11, 2009) at <http://www.guardianweekly.co.uk/?page=editorial&id=1245&catID=9>.

²⁶ “When speaking about ironing, the anger over being denied a service was revealed once again. One young Kennedy Road and AbM activist, Zama Ndlovu, mentioned that without electricity she could easily be identified as someone who lived in the *jondolos* [shacks] because the heavy irons would leave marks on her clothes. A mother interviewed at Kennedy Road, expressed distress over difficulties in ironing her children’s school uniforms. She seemed frustrated that the other children would be ‘smartly dressed’, ‘...the other children have ironed uniforms, they need them for school, as a parent how can I send my child without?’” (Mike 2008, 19).

spatial correlate – infiltrates superfluous lives through and through. Global cities’ competition for hosting “mega-events”²⁷ entails project-based urban redevelopment with set deadlines – failing to meet which risks losing hosting rights and all the expected benefits coming with it.²⁸ Whereas for those with access to the prime biopolitical circuit and its life-fostering infrastructural networks the sunny side of purpose-led redevelopment brings ever bigger and ever more impressive stadiums, shopping malls, and exclusive means of transportation,²⁹ for those whose makeshift homes are mostly seen as disturbing debris on valuable land, the only “fast-tracked” process is eviction.³⁰

Forcibly evicting shack dwellers from their homes – a practice that automatically calls for associations with the forced removal of black people under apartheid – in South Africa can have various destinations, but all imply furthering exclusion from crucial infrastructural networks and, consequently, lengthening distances and the stretching state of temporariness. Sometimes even less than these: illegal evictions – illegal because they lack court orders, fail to notify inhabitants within the legally prescribed time, and/or do not provide alternative accommodation – enforced by municipalities and accompanied by shack demolitions cast the complete uncertainty of no-destination on the lives of those removed.³¹ “Transit camps” or “Temporary Relocation Camps” are loci of uncertainty in the form of stretching temporariness: once relocated, hardly are people informed about if and when they will be allocated low-cost housing. What is worse, these camps, consisting of rows of corrugated iron barracks that are often of poorer quality than the shacks from which their inhabitants were removed, appear to be spaces of abandonment *per se*: services that are initially provided (e.g. communal water taps and ablution blocks) are soon left un-maintained.³² As a (not much brighter) alternative case, when provided, low-cost housing in relocation sites far away from urban centers represent the permanence of time standing still: with relocated people lacking the means and the resources to travel daily to the city, they stop attending school, lose their jobs (if they had one in the first place), and have minimal chances of finding new employment – with all these circumstances contributing to complete isolation: “we are just sitting here” (Abahlali, September 13, 2007).³³ Whereas the list of similar spatiotemporal materializations of biopolitical abandonment could be continued, it is to the living politics of Abahlali

²⁷ For a critical reading of securitizing mega-events, see Boyle and Haggerty (2009). Although, despite their relevance due to South Africa hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup or Rio de Janeiro (at the time of Boyle and Haggerty writing only competing but since then) having won the hosting rights of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, the authors do not discuss mega-events in mega-cities of the global South.

²⁸ Consider, for example, the tensions around the delays in building the Olympic facilities for the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, or the most recent anxiety about South Africa hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

²⁹ One of the paradigmatic forms of infrastructural bypasses, as Graham and Marvin (2001) show, is the development of private highways offering shorter travel times or exclusive transportation lines directly linking prime hubs while bypassing marginal areas. Under the name “Gautrain”, the latter type is put in place in Johannesburg for the 2010 World Cup (c.f. Bond 2007).

³⁰ On the contrary, “to fast-track many of these mega-projects, governments have short circuited established planning processes and removed these developments from public scrutiny and democratic politics, creating such entities as ‘special exemptions’ and the like” (Sandercock quoted in Graham and Marvin 2001, 113).

³¹ For a sad caricature of illegal evictions see the adequate scene of the movie *District 9*, whereby an alien (the one working on returning their spaceship to operation) tries to resist being evicted with reference to the private security forces’ lacking a valid court order.

³² The transit camp near Siyanda (Durban, KwaZulu-Natal Province) that I visited stank with smell of human waste. Inhabitants told me that despite their numerous requests, the Municipality fails to send anyone to resolve the plugging-problem. They also said that the water is unexpectedly turned off at random times of the day, and that despite the fence around the area, there is no security whatsoever in the camp. Eviction from their shack settlements nearby was due to building a highway through the area. Inhabitants were then promised to be relocated to low-cost houses within a year but during the two months spent in the Transit Camp, they have not been informed about this by the Municipality (author’s notes, May 28th, 2009).

³³ C.f. Abahlali’s photo-report about the Park Gate relocation site (Abahlali, September 13, 2007).

baseMjondolo – a politics potentially disrupting the order that allocates abandonment to them – which I turn to in the next section.

4. Living politics: Challenging the spatio-temporality of abandonment through a politics of proximity

Interpreting the life of those cast to spaces of abandonment by the biopolitical governance of life-supporting infrastructure, to be sure, bears the temptation to draw on Agamben's (1998) concept of the *homo sacer's* bare life. To understand the shantytown – that indeed seems to be the paradigmatic space of our age – as the Camp, that is, as the space of exception inhabited by those stripped of all their rights as citizens and consequently rendered into lives that can be killed with impunity, is doubtlessly expressive of certain facets of a radicalized biopower. Nevertheless, attributing to shack dwellers the bare life of the Camp based on the assumption that their poverty and the inhuman living conditions of shack settlements deprive them of the capacity to separate and oppose themselves to their own bare lives (Agamben 1998),³⁴ runs the risks of denying or at least radically limiting their possibilities of resistance.³⁵ Referring to shack dwellers – like Slavoj Žižek (2006) does – as “the ‘living dead’ of globalization” thus implies that biopolitical abandonment is uncontested.³⁶ As will be argued here, Abahlali's “living politics” challenges such assumptions at multiple points. For two of his further points, however, it is worth staying a bit more with Žižek's discussion of “slum-dwellers”.³⁷

On the one hand, stating that “in contrast to the Foucauldian micro-practices of discipline, a slum-dweller is the one with regard to whom the Power renounces its right to exert full control and discipline, finding it more appropriate to let him dwell in the twilight zone of slums”, Žižek (2006, 269) seems to be arguing along similar lines to the above mentioned limits of applying the governmentality framework in spaces of abandonment.³⁸ On the other hand (and much more importantly), attributing an even greater extent of freedom to shack dwellers than that of Marx's proletarian revolutionary subject, beyond apparently running contrary to the *homo sacer* argument, risks attaching the event of politics to an identifiable social class, even if presenting this class as completely outside of the police order. Similarly, through extending his point about the shack dweller's double freedom and offering an understanding of shanty towns as “evental sites” in Alain Badiou's sense, Žižek (Ibid., 268) pins down freedom to a specific kind of space. It seems to me however that an understanding of “freedom as a practice” (Foucault 2000c) would be more in line with the above discussion of shanty towns as the sensible correlates of a biopolitical order. Interpreting shack settlements as spaces of abandonment underlines that governmental practices aiming to form the shack dweller as a circulation-capable entrepreneurial subject are not generally applied here, but does not present this withdrawal of the means of conduct as a state of complete freedom from control – as abandonment taking shape in these sites is the function of the biopower to let die. At least, describing shack dwellers as being “‘freed’ from all substantial

³⁴ C.f. Andrew Norris' (2000) related discussion.

³⁵ For a more general and slightly more elaborate version of this argument, see Selmeczi (2009).

³⁶ The complete clause is this: “a slum-dweller, much more than a refugee, is *Homo sacer*, the systemically generated ‘living dead’ of global capitalism” (Žižek 2006, 269).

³⁷ I put “slum-dwellers” among inverted commas to signify the verbal degradation Abahlali associate with their homes being referred to as “slums” (author's notes, May 9th, 2009).

³⁸ As opposed to Tim di Muzio (2008) who, on the one hand, similarly approaches the inhabitants of “global slums” as *homines sacri* but – drawing on Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (2006) – argues that global biopolitical governance, through NGOs and community based organizations (CBOs) and mostly by promoting self-help projects, actively works on improving life in the shantytowns.

ties; dwelling in a free space, outside state police regulation” does not seem to fit the struggles of Abahlali, one of the main points of which is contesting the “official” definition of freedom by arguing that the life imposed upon them is equivalent to ‘unfreedom’.³⁹

Contrary to approaching shanty towns as spaces outside of police regulation, reading them – as I suggest – through Rancière’s (2004a) aesthetic conception of politics implies that they indeed are parts of the police order. For Rancière (1999), *police* is an order that allocates spaces and times to the parts of the community based on their shares from what is common. As such, it also defines what is to be visible or invisible, audible or inaudible, and what counts as political. *Politics*, in turn, is a process, whereby this distribution of spaces and times is disrupted by a surplus subject, by a part of the community that is in excess to the account of the police order and which, for this reason, is able to re-distribute the sensible order. Arguably, this conception which, by assuming that the formation of the political subject is contemporaneous with the event of disrupting the police order avoids the limitations of defining shack dwellers as *homines sacri* and offers a more promising reading for a politics of resistance against biopolitical abandonment through challenging the spatiotemporal frames it entails. Instead of (not) practicing “the politics of living dead” (Norris 2000), Abahlali’s living politics disrupts the above discussed spatiotemporal ordering through their manifold insistence on proximity. As discussed below, the South African shack dwellers reject the perspectival superfluity of biopolitical governance by persistently opposing the singularity of human life to it;⁴⁰ they challenge the forced mobility of superfluous life by demanding *in situ* upgrades, and they eliminate the distance/delay of development’s pedagogical fiction through their egalitarian pedagogy: ‘living learning’.

Against the notion of life that biopower turns on – the population’s life in general,⁴¹ a life of the long-term, and a life in the context of which “trickle-down” makes sense – Abahlali pose the singularity of every human being. By conceiving of living politics as a space where everyone can recount their own suffering, it insistently preserves a close-up perspective to the sensible effects that biopolitical abandonment has on shack dwellers’ lives.

So it’s a very important space, it’s a very-very important space for any human being that is oppressed in the manner that our members are oppressed. It’s a space where they can cough out all their frustrations. In many aspects, it’s a space where their dignity is restored. Their thoughts are respected, their views are listened to. If there is no other space that can listen to them, than it is an alternative space. A space that does not have any councilors that are meant to systematically save them. A space where there is no chief government that can entertain their activities but a space where other colleagues at the similar level with them can acknowledge and make their submissions to be so serious. A space that takes serious decisions and a space that acknowledges that those frustrations are actually legitimate (S’bu Zikode, author’s interview, June 2, 2009).

In turn, it is these very narratives that provide the content of living politics and, through articulating perceptions of the injustice that casts them amidst inhuman conditions,

³⁹ One of the main events of Abahlali baseMjondolo is the yearly “mourning of unfreedom” through organizing the UnFreedom Day on the April 27th, the anniversary of the first democratic elections in post-apartheid South Africa. “When we have UnFreedom Day as well as the new law like the Slums Act being pushed at the people by the same politicians and all in the name and language of ‘freedom’, we see the contradictions in our country” (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 24).

⁴⁰ ‘Perspectival superfluity’ is understood here as the effect of biopower due to which phenomena below the massified level of the population are non-pertinent from the perspective of governmental practice. C.f. Foucault (2007, 41–44).

⁴¹ See Foucault (2003, 253).

trigger the enactment of the *dissensus* and thus the shack dwellers' subjectivization as 'the part that has no part'. Constructing themselves as political subjects that speak the injustice inherent in their daily sufferings disrupts the spatiotemporal order of the biopower that abandons them, as they reject the position that casts them as inaudible. That is, they enact what Rancière (1999) refers to as the "mere contingency of every social order" because, through constructing their politics as a stage of appearance, they make plain the basic equality of every speaking being – the basic equality every social order is conditioned upon, since to obey, the governed must understand orders and must also understand that they have to obey orders.

Beyond remaining close to the direct consequences of living in spaces of abandonment as narrated by the shack dwellers, living politics as the space for speaking suffering is disruptive of the biopolitical order in several further respects. To begin with – and as the event of the movement's formation following a spontaneous road blockade illustrates – protesting against the injustice of the municipality's decision to sell a piece of land earlier promised to the inhabitants of the Kennedy road settlement disturbed the division of what is considered to be political and what is not.⁴² It was fuelled by anger – the "first political emotion" according to Simon Critchley (2007, 130) – that they politicized their everyday sufferings.⁴³ Thus, far from assuming the mute bare life of the *homo sacer*, the shack dwellers' subjectivization fundamentally disturbs the Aristotelian separation of speech declaring what is just and unjust, and the voice of pleasure and pain.⁴⁴ It is exactly based on this disruption: by declaring that to let them live and die the way they do is unjust, that Abahlali's (Abhlali and Rural Network 2009, 25) political speech of suffering consequently resists being labeled as "service delivery protests":

When we looked back over our list of ideas that had come up, we saw that it reflects a way of critical thinking about the life of the people, starting to uncover and name the contradictions this shows against what the powerful want us to believe about our situation. We also see that our ideas about freedom go much deeper than the way our struggles are presented when they are described as 'service delivery protest'.

Finally, the Abahlali's speech of suffering and death also undermines the biopolitical disqualification of these.⁴⁵ Resonating with Foucault's (2003) point on the privatization of death that accompanies the prevalence of the power to make live over the sovereign's right to kill, Michel de Certeau (1984, 190; original emphasis) forcefully describes how, in our age, "the dying man *falls* outside the *thinkable*":

An "anticipated mourning", a phenomenon of institutional rejection, puts them away in advance in "the dead man's room"; it surrounds them with silence or, worse yet, with lies that protect the living against the voice that would break out of this enclosure to cry: "I am going to die." This cry would produce an embarrassingly graceless dying. The lie ("Of course not; you are going to get better") is a way of assuring that communication will not occur (Ibid.).

⁴² On the formation and the history of Abahlali baseMjondolo, see Bryant (2008), Patel (2008), and Pithouse (2008).

⁴³ C.f. Rancière (2004b) on the untenability of the public/private divide, and (2003) on the relation of politics and the 'social'.

⁴⁴ C.f. Norris (2000, 40–41).

⁴⁵ See also, in this context, Didier Fassin's (2007) discussion of the political role of the suffering person's life-narration.

By crying “We are dying while we wait!”, Abahlali do exactly this: break out of the enclosure of spaces of abandonment.⁴⁶ This cry, in turn, already sheds light on another aspect of the living politics’ insistence on proximity.

It does so because it attacks the spatiotemporal frames of the kind of development they are promised (or denied of). With a speeding pace of urbanization and the RDP’s social housing provision slowing down, and because of the frequent occurrence of fraud around the allocation of low-cost housing when eventually built, delivery seems ever more distant for most of the shack dwellers.⁴⁷ In spite of the eThekweni Municipality’s depiction of informal settlements as temporary, many of their inhabitants have spent significant periods of their lives there.⁴⁸ Similarly permanent seem to be the Transit Camps to which shack dwellers are moved when evicted or when their shacks burn down – since rebuilding them is officially prohibited.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as it was also mentioned above, both transit camps and formal low-cost housing projects are located in a distance from the city that is mostly insurmountable for poor people. Finally, proximity in this context is also to be understood in the above referred sense of being enrolled into infrastructural networks – proximity, which hardly any of the scenarios imposed upon shack dwellers provide. It is thus against these perspectives that Abahlali baseMjondolo define their struggle for land and housing in the city and demand that settlements be upgraded *in situ*: here-and-now.

One of the major means of the shack dwellers’ fight against the forced mobility imposed upon them is law. That forced evictions came to a halt in KwaZulu-Natal was largely due to Abahlali’s campaigns and successful court cases (on occasions when they were provided pro bono legal support).⁵⁰ This fact seems, again, to undermine interpretations of shack dwellers as *homines sacri* and, more importantly, reflects an important aspect of political subjectivization. To go back to Žižek’s (2006, 269) discussion of the “‘living dead’ of global capitalism”: for him, shack dwellers are *homines sacri* because, “pushed into the space of out-of-control”, they are also excluded from the legal space of citizenship. Thus, although (somewhat later in the same book) Žižek cites Rancière’s (2004b) argument about the depoliticizing effect of Arendt’s interpretation of the Rights of Man as paradox, he seems to reproduce the same effect.⁵¹ The claim that the shack settlement is a space out-of-control is

⁴⁶ “The fact is that our government should consider this very, very seriously. Our lives are threatened by fire on a daily basis. This is like HIV. Our demand for land and housing in the city is a very serious and very urgent issue. We are dying while we wait” (Philani Zungu quoted in Abahlali August 13, 2006).

⁴⁷ In principle, those entitled to low-cost housing are registered on “waiting lists”. As this system of registry is by far not transparent, during their meeting with the provincial Head of Department of Housing, Abahlali suggested that the records be kept on the provincial level, so as to avoid local political interests determining the allocation of houses (author’s notes, June 27th, 2009).

⁴⁸ As a 2001 Quality of Life Survey of Durban reports “[O]ver half of the household heads with informal dwellings have lived in their homes for between five and ten years and a quarter have lived in them for over eleven years” (Nicholson quoted in Birkinshaw 2008, 4).

⁴⁹ “Yeah, we don’t want the Municipality to come and build transit camp for the people. We make sure that here the people they know how to build these things, they must just to give them the material to rebuild themselves. [...] [A]s we know that you are supposed to go to a transit camp if there is a provision for you, when you notice that the government is building houses there for the people. And you’re supposed not to live in transit camps for more than a year. But you notice here that you stay in these transit camps for more than even five years!” (Mashumi Figlan, author’s interview, June 30, 2009). C.f. Pithouse (2009).

⁵⁰ In principle, to resist forced mobility, the shack dwellers have sufficient legal background. Significantly, the South African Constitution endorses the right for decent housing. Based on the Constitution, it is generally the *Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act of 1998*, known as the PIE Act that provides the grounds for contesting forced evictions. Furthermore, in reaction to the insufficiency of the results of post-apartheid housing policy, in 2004 a rather progressive policy framework entitled *Breaking New Ground* was adopted by the central government (Pithouse 2009).

⁵¹ C.f. Žižek (2006, 339-342).

analogous to Arendt's (1976, 296) statement about the rightless: "nobody wants to oppress them" and thus implies similar assumptions about the "end of the Rights of Man".

Nevertheless, as the Abahlali's attack on the KwaZulu-Natal Province's *Elimination and Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Act* demonstrates, litigation might indeed have a significant role in resistance against biopolitical abandonment and therefore the problem of rights worth further discussion.⁵² Based on his criticism of Hannah Arendt's (1976) claims on the "perplexities of the Rights of Man" – claims that rest on her disillusionment about a political sphere contaminated by the social and claims that Agamben (1998) largely accepts – Rancière (2004b) reformulates the answer to "Who is the subject of the Rights of Men?". Showing that Arendt's thesis that the Rights of the Men are "the rights of those who have no rights" is either a void or a tautology,⁵³ he provides a third option: "the Rights of Men are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not" (Ibid., 302). The resolution of this cryptic statement lies in the process of political subjectivization, through which rights' two forms of existence are bridged. On the one hand, and again in line with his aesthetic conception of politics, for Rancière (Ibid.), written rights have a materiality as "inscriptions of the community as free and equal".⁵⁴ On the other hand, rights are of those who decide to make "something out of that inscription" through staging its verification. In other terms, rights are of those who, through the event of political subjectivization and thus filling the empty name of 'the people', bridge the worlds of politics and the police order: the basic equality of everyone and the contingent hierarchy of every social order (Rancière 1999).⁵⁵

Arguably, channeled through their anger over a betraying decision of the local municipality, through their formation Abahlali enacted the division between their inclusion into the democratic South Africa as "vote banks"⁵⁶ (Gibson and Patel 2009) and their exclusion from the benefits promised by the post-apartheid order. It is thus in this context that their attack on the "Slums Act" gains particular significance: the long journey from the shacks to the Constitutional Court figures as an iterative stage of appearance for the "part that has no part";⁵⁷ of fissuring the totalizing count of the social order by showing up its contradictory

⁵² C.f. Huchzermeyer (2006) and a collection of related documents and articles at <http://abahlali.org/node/1629>.

⁵³ "[Arendt] makes them a quandary, which can be put as follows: either the rights of the citizen are the rights of man – but the rights of man are the rights of the unpoliticized person; they are the rights of those who have no rights, which amounts to nothing – or the rights of man are the rights of the citizen, the rights attached to the fact of being a citizen of such or such constitutional state. This means that they are the rights of those who have rights, which amounts to a tautology" (Rancière 2004b, 302).

⁵⁴ C.f. Rancière (1991, 32) on the materiality of the book as the condition of the equal relationship between "two minds".

⁵⁵ To be sure, Rancière also acknowledges the contemporary difficulties of litigation and consequently of enacting the *dissensus*. In a way not completely alien from Foucault's (2007) hints about the biopolitical instrumentalization of law, Rancière (1999, 2004b) describes the phenomenon of the factualization of law. The factualization of law occurs when, in the name of *Consensus*, the spaces of *dissensus* are closed, the society becomes equal to the some of its parts, and thus the gap between law and fact also disappear. (For Foucault, the sovereign, disciplinary, and governmental modes of power can be mutually articulated through each other, so allowing for the deployment of law to achieve biopolitical ends; see also Butler (2004)). These phenomena, combined with the increasing regulative autonomy of substate levels and in light of Agamben's (1998) conceptualization of the way law, life, and abandonment relate, would require further discussion.

⁵⁶ Abahlali reject being treated as "vote banks" through their "No land, no house, no vote"-campaign, that is, by abstaining from voting in elections. "So we, as the shack dwellers are treated as five-year specialists, which are election specialists because during elections everybody takes care of us, everybody comes to us, everybody promises us heaven and earth. Everybody respects us, everybody calls us comrades. But after elections, no one cares, no one acts, you see. So that is why we launched the 'no house, no vote'-campaign. Because we were tired of always being the voting materials at all the times" (Mnikelo Ndabankulu, author's interview, June 29th, 2009).

⁵⁷ See the short video by the Dear Mandela-crew shot after the Slums Act court hearing (May 14th, 2009) at <http://www.abahlali.org/node/239>.

processes of exclusion. What the actual returns or the limits of Abahlali eventually winning the case and achieving that the “Slums Act” was judged unconstitutional will be is, to be sure, largely conditioned upon the above mentioned interaction of the factualization of law and the regulative autonomy of substate levels.

The more particular context of struggling for *in situ* upgrades and the references to the *Breaking New Grounds* framework or the UN-Habitat’s recent policy guidelines provide for it,⁵⁸ similarly have to be seen in light of the Abahlali’s political subjectivization: the forced mobility of superfluous lives posed against the freedom of movement guaranteed by the fall of the apartheid. Thus, whereas di Muzio (2008) is rightly cautious about the disciplinary practices inherent in the global biopolitics of self-help development deployed through slum upgrade policies, appropriating elements of this discourse does not necessarily lead to the successful depoliticization of shack dwellers by reformulating them as micro-entrepreneurs. In turn, articulations of Abahlali’s critical stance on development – that seems to resonate with Foucault’s (2000d, 256) thesis that “everything is dangerous” – already takes us to the third aspect of their insistence on proximity.

So this domestication can be seen also in how language and words are used and abused – even the ideas that came originally from genuine struggles. For example, at one time, the idea of ‘sustainable development’ seemed like quite a good idea that could accommodate some of the protests against bad development that different struggles have raised – but by now, even the World Bank can use the words ‘sustainable development’ for their own projects. In a similar way, we can say that ‘education is a tool for development’. But if it’s controlled by the oppressors or those who have authority, it can be used to manipulate the poor (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 37).

Complementing the above discussed role of the singular experiences of suffering, keeping living politics close to the poor largely rests on the Abahlali’s practice of “living learning”. Defined against the biopolitical distribution of the sensible within which spaces of abandonment are mute spaces, the practical pedagogy of Abahlali declares that everyone can think, and everyone can equally contribute to the living politics.⁵⁹

You know, when you are staying in the shacks, people just think that you don’t know anything. You are staying in the shacks just because you are stupid. They forget the fact that we are poor in life; we are not poor in mind. We are able to read, we are able to understand (Zodwa Nsibande, author’s interview, May 27, 2009).

As opposed to the assumption that shack dwellers cannot think and to the “domesticating education” of development (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 34), living learning aims to provide an egalitarian space for knowledge production that insists on maintaining constant and direct relation of the intellectual work and the suffering of the shack dwellers (Gibson, Harley, and Pithouse 2009).⁶⁰ So as to avoid the forgetful distancing of those who leave

⁵⁸ See e.g. the UN-Habitat’s *Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme* at <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=592>. C.f. UN (A/HRC/7/16; 13 February 2008) and (A/HRC/7/16/Add.3; 29 February 2008).

⁵⁹ The accusation of the movement in the government-associated media with being subject to “white manipulation” or the “Third force” can be seen as another evidence of the sensible order that constructs the shack dwellers as mute and unable to think their own politics. See Zikode (2005) and Patel (2008).

⁶⁰ In Abahlali’s perception, a paradigmatic example of this type of “domesticating education” that wants “to make us good boys and good girls” and “teaches us to accept that how things in the world are is somehow natural” is a piece of official reaction to a shack fire. As recounted by one of the living learners: “After the fire at

behind the world of the shanty towns when integrated into official education, members of Abahlali baseMjondolo and the allying Rural Network, when offered scholarships to a degree in Participatory Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, created a biweekly forum where they reflected on how what they have learnt in the university can be utilized in their struggle, and prepared for sharing this knowledge with their communities.⁶¹ Although one of the central requirements of living politics is that everyone must understand it, this does not render it a version of patronizing populism. Instead, reinforced by the theoretical practice of living learning that rejects the pretentious superiority of academic knowledge, it talks to the presumption of equality crucial for the disruptive politics of the shack dwellers. It does so because – in line with Rancière’s (1991) reading of Joseph Jacotot’s egalitarian pedagogy that the present interpretation intentionally evokes – it works toward eliminating the hierarchy of teacher and student; that is, it opposes the proximity of equal minds to the distance of explanation.

Importantly, as Kristin Ross (1991, xx) argues in her introduction to the *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991), the trope of explanation, that is, the “pedagogical fiction” is a crucial element of the modern idea of progress. Thus, when Abahlali demand (and on occasion manage) to be included in planning development based on the simple argument that they know best what they need, they contest this pedagogical fiction and disrupt the imposition of (non-)development.⁶² As the quote below suggests, this way of resisting the imposed spatiotemporality of development is not so much about the emphasis on what could be framed as their “local” or “traditional knowledge” (even though, of course, this type of knowledge also features in the practice of living politics) as about the political subjectivization of equal human beings.

Freedom, real freedom, and the experience of real freedom has to be something that is outside of what is prescribed to us; it will come from becoming masters of our own history, professors of our own poverty; and from making our own paths out of unfreedom (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 29–30).

Approached via the conception of politics as disruption that occurs through the event of political subjectivization and that re-distributes visible and invisible, language and voice, the notion of education defining living learning potentially provides a new perspective on the role of knowledge in politics of resistance. Although space here does not allow me to elaborate on this point, it seems to me that unlike *mētis*, the ancient Greek notion of practical knowledge that both de Certeau and James C. Scott (1998) draw on to conceptualize everyday forms of urban resistance, living learning is similarly empty as the name ‘*demos*’ before the event of politics (Rancière 1999 and 2004b). With its central role in the (iterated) political subjectivization of Abahlali, the egalitarian pedagogy of living politics contributes to the redistribution of spaces and times – an effect seemingly different from that of the canny intelligence of *mētis* that allows its ‘user’ to crack the strategic rule of space by tactically

Kennedy road there was a story in the Daily News newspaper which quoted government spokesperson Lennox Mabaso saying: ‘We would appreciate it if Zikode [chairperson of Abahlali] did something to educate his community on fire safety instead of talking all the time’. So, there is a kind of education that others always want to impose on us” (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 20, 35, 44).

⁶¹ “Education can sometimes destroy our struggle – when education makes leaders think of the people that they come from as the uneducated ones, those who ‘do not understand’, those that we ‘move away from’ (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 60).

⁶² A major victory for Abahlali was when in June 2008, despite their conflictual relationship, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the eThekweni Municipality on the upgrade of several shack settlements in Durban.

seizing the right moment (*kairos*) (de Certeau 1984). Therefore, perhaps, it also implies a need to reflect on how we tend to think about everyday forms of resistance.

5. Conclusion

Aiming to interrogate the possibilities of resisting biopower as the power to let die, in this paper I approached biopolitical abandonment through its spatial crystallizations. Drawing on Graham and Marvin's (2001) notion of splintering urbanism, I argued that contemporary modes of governing 'global cities' move away from the deployment of security apparatuses characterizing liberal governmentalities. Neoliberal governance of megacities, materializing the decoupling of the economic and the social (and the consequent "death of the social"), create separate circuits for the "good" and the "bad" circulation. That is, due to disposing of the modernist idea of universal service provision and the resulting process of infrastructural networks' unbundling, valuable urbanites are enrolled into increasingly customized networks, while, unable to buy themselves into these, poor people are offered services on worse terms or are simply denied of provision. When this phenomenon takes effect on basic, life-saving infrastructure, in the so emerging spaces of abandonment we encounter the crystallization of a radicalized biopolitics.

As opposed to the apparently applicable theoretical lens provided by Agamben's concept of a biopolitics radicalized in modernity, that is, instead of approaching the inhabitants of marginalized places as the *homines sacri* or the "living dead" of global capitalism" (Žižek 2006), I argued that this radicalized form of biopolitics can be and is being challenged by those subject to it. Interpreting first the materialization of abandonment through Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible, I then presented the way the Abahlali baseMjondolo, a South African shack dwellers' movement contests the spatiotemporal frames imposed upon them by the biopolitical governance of infrastructure. Describing three aspects of Abahlali's insistence on proximity I showed that the dual scheme of neoliberal development that casts the needy into spaces of abandonment associated with the mute lengthening of distances and stretching states of temporariness can be disrupted by the shack dwellers' living politics. By demanding the here-and-now of settlement upgrades, they contest the forced mobility of superfluous lives. Through voicing their suffering and struggling for a place in the city, they reorder what is visible and audible, what is political and just.

Whereas the extent to which this way of re-distributing the sensible order can eventually lead to reinvigorating the post-apartheid promise of "a better life for all", is yet to be seen. What seems more certain is the imperative to conceptually consider such political practices as those of the Abahlali and thus to continue rethinking what "the weapons of the weak" against radical biopolitics are.

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