

Gang Politics: The Instrumentalization of Urban Counterculture in Conakry, Guinea

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Guinea's capital Conakry is the site of a remarkable politicization throughout the past five years. Strikes, rallies, riots, and demonstrations are frequent, vociferous, and plural in their concerns and effects. Youth gangs occupy a central role in them: not only do they initiate protests by being the first ones to take to the streets, ignite car tires or erect barricades; they also mobilize and organize the young population of their neighborhoods over which they exert a considerable influence. Economic incentives are doubtlessly pivotal for such political actions (many gangs use politics like a business) but do not rule out their substantially political character. Rather, money channels an often dramatic, indiscriminate and diffuse political rage of gang youths against the misery that surrounds them, and, not to forget, their dreams and hopes in the amelioration of their conditions.

This emotional and cognitive raw material of their protests is rooted in the cultural repertoire of global hip hop into which the self-proclaimed *ghetto youths* tap to craft their own social fields, urban spaces, and institutions, express and realize their desires of independence, and experiment with new forms of sociability and micro-political organization. While their counterculture distances them from the political elite on an abstract level, they practically become entangled in an inherently ambiguous two-directional instrumentalization. Theoretically, this confirms many authors' emphasis on youths' potential to break with a Mbembian postcolonial epistemology but also demonstrates that an affiliation with transnational cultures does not imply independence from the very tangible orders of urban every-day lives. Out of sheer necessity and lack of alternatives, gang youths become part of local politics, simultaneously undermining and stabilizing an increasingly complex order which which they urgently seek to frame and understand. This paper, analyzing the conflation of (self-)ordering by youths and the disorder of urban protest politics, draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from field research in 2009 and 2010. It attempts to link the academic debates on urbanity and youth in Africa to emphasize the two aspects' interdependencies and shared political relevancy.