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A political sociology of roadblocks in DR Congo

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ROADBLOCKS AT THE RHYTHM OF THE COUNTRY: A POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF ROADBLOCKS IN DR CONGO



Centre on Armed Groups
Research. Dialogue. Advice.

Judith Verweijen, Kasper Hoffmann and Godefroid Muzalia

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Judith Verweijen, Kasper Hoffmann and Godefroid Muzalia

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ABSTRACT

This working paper develops a political sociology of roadblocks to demonstrate how roadblocks in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) contribute to the production and reproduction of public authority beyond their spatial and regulatory effects and while transcending particular claimants to authority. Using a dramaturgical approach, we show how during roadblock encounters, public authority is instantaneously produced through the joint performances of roadblock agents, roadblocks and road users. Drawing on structuration theory, we show how these performances are scripted by social structures – namely, norms, discourses and power relations – which imbue them with meaning and shape the agency of those involved. Because most roadblock encounters remain within the parameters of well-defined scripts, they ultimately contribute to the reproduction rather than the transformation of the structures that script public authority in the DRC – regardless of who exercises it. Our approach offers a refined conceptualisation of agency during roadblock encounters, which provides a better understanding of when and why people comply with demands made by roadblock operators and of the cumulative effects of the micro-practices enacted at roadblocks on broader sociopolitical orders. In addition, we highlight the overlooked importance of routines and the performative effects of things in studying the (re)production of public authority at roadblocks and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Many roadblock exchanges in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are relatively uneventful. They do not entail much drama, aggression or tension, but consist of a sequence of routine practices. People pass a roadblock while having a few often torn and wrinkled *Francs congolais* (Congolese Franc) bills at the ready, knowing exactly how much they need to pay, when and what gestures to make. Seemingly without much anxiety, and often without much conversation, they put the bills in the hand of the person operating the roadblock. A soldier in the Congolese army, the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC, Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) once confided that he often takes some sips of *kanyanga*, a local brew made from maize or cassava leftovers, because the roadblock duty is long and boring: 'always the same'.¹ This comment corresponds to our observations that many roadblock interactions are highly routinised and predictable, following well-established scripts. Paying during these performances mostly occurs because it is a taken-for-granted practice that is part of the script, implying compliance happens out of routine.

Not all roadblock interactions in eastern DRC, however, are predictable and scripted in detail. It often occurs that roadblock agents creatively invent infractions, or exploit the absence of required paperwork among road users, such as insurance papers, to impose exorbitant fees. The result is often lengthy processes of bargaining, with sequences of demands and counter-demands, overt and veiled threats, and efforts to claim exemptions or pleas for leniency. These bargaining processes follow particular rules and are informed by deep-seated discourses that define specific subject positions, in this case, that of public authorities and taxpaying subjects. Furthermore, the unfolding and outcomes of bargaining processes are heavily shaped by power relations, for instance, road users' connections with powerful patrons. In most cases, however, people end up paying. As we will show, compliance in such less routinised situations stems from various intersecting logics and evaluations, including warding off dangers and seizing on (potential) opportunities in both the present and the future.

To examine the basis of agency and its broader effects during roadblock encounters we develop what we call a political sociology of roadblocks, zooming in on how these encounters contribute to the (re)production of public authority. As we show, this occurs in two ways. First, public authority is instantaneously produced during roadblock encounters. Roadblocks generate performances in which roadblock operators are readily positioned as 'public authorities' and road users as 'subjects', in part as roadblocks are deeply rooted in historically shaped imaginaries of 'stateness' in the DRC (cf. Hansen and Stepputat, 2001). Second, tracing the broader effects of roadblock encounters, we contend that during these encounters, the actors involved instantiate and therefore contribute to the reproduction of the social structures that crucially inform the exercise of public authority in the DRC. These structures include particular discourses (e.g. names

¹ Conversation with an FARDC soldier, 29 February 2011, Lulimba.

for financial contributions made at roadblocks, such as *massage*); norms (e.g. the 'price' of the imposed fees); and power relations that position roadblock agents and road users in relation to one another. Taken together, these social structures enable the exercise of public authority in a particular manner, normalising the extraction of wealth from citizens in routinised, brutal and seemingly arbitrary ways. Given that all claimants to public authority in the DRC draw upon these social structures when exercising such authority, roadblock encounters have an effect on the sociopolitical order as a whole, and not only on the position and practices of those authorities that happen to operate a roadblock at a particular place and time.

To better understand how roadblock encounters contribute to the (re)production of public authority, we draw on a combination of structuration theory and Goffman's dramaturgical approach, conceptualising roadblock encounters as performances. These performances consist of interactions between three actors: roadblock operators, roadblocks and road users. Studying roadblock encounters through a dramaturgical lens helps us better understand the nature of the agency that is at play during these encounters. Based on Emirbayer and Mische's conceptualisation of agency (1998), we identify two main recurring bases of this agency: The first is *iteration*, which occurs during highly routinised roadblock interactions. The second is *practical-evaluation* and is most prominent during interactions that involve bargaining, which are informed by an overall less detailed and less rigid script. Both iteration and practical-evaluation lead mostly to the reproduction, and not the transformation of the social structures that script the performance of public authority (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), even if bargaining holds the potential for generating transformative outcomes. Aside from illuminating agency, a dramaturgical approach sheds new light on the role of roadblocks during the performances acted out at roadblocks, uncovering that roadblocks co-produce public authority. They are not merely props on the stage where the roadblock encounter is performed. Rather, they play a key role in the performances enacted around them, for instance, as the mere sight of a roadblock activates specific routines or as the roadblock imposes a dimension of coercion, in the form of physical restriction, that is essential to the roadblock agent's staging of authority.

Our political-sociological approach to roadblocks builds on and complements a rapidly growing body of work on roadblocks and sociopolitical order-making. We join the emerging trend of centring the roadblock encounter itself (e.g. Jeganathan, 2004; Lombard, 2013; Takabvirwa, 2023), rather than its effects on regulating flows of people, goods and money, seizing it as 'a critical empirical entry point' to study the production of authority at and through roadblocks (Schouten et al., 2024: 5). In addition, we build on approaches that foreground the effects of the roadblock itself and its materiality within roadblock encounters (e.g. Rijke and Minca, 2018). What we add to this literature is a more refined conceptualisation of *agency* at roadblocks, which allows for a better understanding of when and on what basis people comply or do not comply with the demands placed upon them by roadblock agents. We therefore take up the call to study the 'subjective experience of checkpoint encounters' (Schouten et al., 2024: 26), which has been deemed

essential to better comprehend the perceived legitimacy of roadblocks. In addition, our focus on structuration enables for assessing the broader effects of roadblock encounters on order-making, which surpass the effects on the authority of roadblock operators and the group they belong to themselves.

We draw upon periodic fieldwork in eastern DRC conducted by all three authors independently between 2005 and 2024. In the course of this fieldwork, we jointly passed hundreds of roadblocks. The first author further conducted extensive observations at roadblocks operated by the FARDC (Congolese army) between 2010 and 2013 for dissertation research (Verweijen, 2015). In addition, the second and third authors coordinated a multi-researcher project in 2019 and 2020 that examined the wider sociopolitical functions of roadblocks (Muzalia et al., 2021).

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We first situate our work in the existing scholarship on roadblocks and public authority and then sketch the theoretical outlines of a political sociology of roadblocks. Subsequently, we trace the historical evolution of the social structures scripting present-day roadblock encounters. We then explore more and less routinised roadblock encounters, in order to illuminate the differential bases of agency at play. This helps explain the variegated impacts of these encounters on the (re)production of the social structures underlying the exercise of public authority in the DRC. In the conclusion, we further highlight what our approach contributes to the existing literature on roadblocks and public authority in postcolonial states. Specifically, we point to the need to work with more sophisticated understandings of agency and relatedly, to deploy methods that can better capture the differential bases of agency, such as observations.

CONCEPTUALISING THE PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY AT ROADBLOCKS

Within the extant literature on roadblocks, three key aspects have so far received less attention. The first is a theorisation of agency. Much roadblock scholarship works with implicit rather than explicit theoretical understandings of agency. Second and relatedly, this scholarship therefore overlooks the importance of routine interactions, focusing on practices informed by deliberative, reasoned agency instead. The same focus marks the literature on compliance and non-compliance (with controls and taxation) at roadblocks, which emphasises legitimacy and reciprocity, often seen in relation to public service provision (Hoffmann et al., 2016). Determining whether or not an authority provides a return service requires conscious reflection and evaluation on the side of citizens. Yet it is our contention that many roadblock interactions are not based conscious reflection but on routines, which draw on *unconscious norms* and *tacit knowledges*, including what Olivier de Sardan (2008) labels ‘practical norms’. Only a few studies have looked at the crucial role of iteration during the roadblock encounter. Drawing on Butler’s conceptualisation of performativity, McDonald (2009: 73), for

instance, concludes that 'The reiterable actions necessary to successfully traverse an Israeli check point ... constitute citational practices that, through their repetition, instantiate a prescribed Israeli discourse of Palestinian subjugation and criminality'. McDonald thus underscores how reiterable actions at roadblocks instantiate and (re)produce broader social structures, specifically, particular discourses and subject positions.

A third aspect that has received less attention in the literature on roadblocks is the role of the roadblock itself within roadblock encounters. A notable exception is the work on the government and self-government of bodies at checkpoints in the Occupied Territories (e.g. Kotef and Amir, 2007). Describing checkpoints as 'sites of exaggerated corporeality', Hammami (2019: 587) traces how they divide up and order bodies. Similarly, Rijke and Minca (2018) examine how the materialities of the checkpoint shape the bodily practices of those passing it. They conceptualise checkpoints as a spatial political technology, focusing on 'how the assemblage of biopolitical categories, material devices and barriers, procedures of control, calculative rationalities and selective practices that we call 'checkpoints' *do things* (emphasis in the original) (Rijke and Minca, 2019: 36). As with most literature on roadblocks, the focus here is on the government of space and the mobility of people and things. However, in our analysis, roadblock encounters contribute to the (re)production of public authority also beyond their spatial and regulatory effects. To explain how this works, we draw on a combined dramaturgical and structuration approach.

A dramaturgical analysis of roadblock encounters

Goffman (1959) proposes to conceive of everyday encounters as performances in the course of which performers try to influence the audience's understanding of the situation and their perceptions of the performer, or what he calls 'impression management' (1959: 14). Drawing on Goffman's (1959: 234) insight that 'power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it and will have different effects depending on how it is dramatised', we suggest that roadblock operators try to project 'public authority' by staging their actions in such a way that audiences come to perceive them as public authorities legitimately collecting contributions/taxes, rather than engaging in extortion.

Impression management hinges to a large extent on what Goffman (1959: 13) labels 'front', denoting 'expressive equipment' that is 'intentionally or unwittingly' employed during the performance. Front has two dimensions. The first is the setting, which tends to be stationary, 'so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it' (1959:13). Roadblocks can be defined as settings in as much as roadblock agents generally perform authority at and around the roadblock. The second dimension is what Goffman (1959: 13) calls 'personal front', referring to insignia of office and rank; clothing; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures, but also age, gender and perceived racial characteristics (ibid.). An almost universal feature of the personal front of roadblock operators in the

DRC – whether state or non-state actors – is that they consciously and unconsciously perform ‘stateness’ (Hoffmann et al., 2016). Roadblock operators often don uniforms, provide receipts upon the payment of taxes and fees, and employ discourses that position them as official authority, for instance, claims to engage in public service provision.

The ‘audiences’ or road users who watch the roadblock performance readily associate uniforms, insignia, stamped documents, and certain gestures and verbal expressions with public authority (Hoffmann and Verweijen, 2019). In addition, they have deeply engrained expectations regarding how roadblock operators should behave, which are guided by what Olivier de Sardan (2008) labels ‘practical norms’. The latter are rules, generally non-codified, that guide everyday micro-practices, being inscribed in forms of practical knowledge and reasoning (Verweijen, 2015). Inversely, roadblock agents hold deeply rooted expectations regarding the behaviour of road users. When during a roadblock encounter, both roadblock agents and road users stick – to a greater or lesser degree – to these norms and mutually acknowledge the social roles that each performs (that of roadblock agent/public authority and road user/citizen, respectively), they become defined in relation to one another in an unequal power relationship. This definition of the situation activates and is activated by certain discursive registers and norms that render it a ‘normal’ practice to pay to roadblock agents, hence that underpin these unequal power relations. In sum, a simple roadblock encounter is shaped by a range of entwined, historically formed discourses, norms and power relations.

A dramaturgical approach allows for observing that many of the norms that are enacted in roadblock encounters are latent. According to Giddens (1984), social agents reflexively monitor the ongoing flow of social life and its contexts. An important element of reflexive monitoring is the ‘rationalisation of action’, or human agents’ own understanding of the reasons for their conduct (1984: 3–4). Agents can elaborate on this understanding by drawing on ‘discursive consciousness’, expressing the motivations for their actions in text and talk (idem: 5–6). However, social agents are not able to verbally express all of the reasons for their day-to-day conduct, as a part of that conduct is not directly motivated but grounded in institutionalised rules and knowledge that is taken for granted. This taken-for-granted knowledge is what Giddens calls ‘practical consciousness’, or ‘tacit knowledge that is skilfully applied in the enactment of courses of conduct, but which the actor is not able to formulate discursively’ (Giddens, 1979: 57). It is precisely such knowledge that is drawn upon in routines, or reiterative, habitual actions that generally entail limited anxiety because of their predictability (Giddens, 1984).

Many roadblock encounters are deeply shaped by routines. To stick with dramaturgical metaphors, they follow a clearly established script that both roadblock operators and road users know and follow: there is a habitual sequence of action-reactions, including movements, gestures (e.g. taking a bill and slipping it into the roadblock operator’s hand), and speech (often a simple greeting such as *habari* or how do you do). This shows that road users are not merely an ‘audience’

for who public authority is staged: they play an active role in the ‘drama’ staged around the roadblock. When both roadblock users and operators meticulously follow the script – where the roadblock user pays the usual amount without hesitation or fuss – the entire roadblock interaction can become a sequence of routines primarily governed by practical consciousness. In such cases, passersby perform routine compliance. They pay because the practical norms prescribe paying. This does not mean, however, that when interpellated and asked their opinion they would approve of paying. Such interpellation would activate discursive consciousness and a different register of social norms that govern the exercise of public authority, including norms around reciprocity or perceived returns (Verweijen, 2015).

Discursive consciousness is also at play when people bargain at roadblocks to reduce the imposed financial contribution or have it waived altogether. To achieve this, road users sometimes try to leverage their social identity, position and connections, for instance, emphasising their status as a co-ethnic, wife of a soldier or friend of an important general (Fairhead, 1992; Schouten et al., 2022). Bargaining processes are also recurring phenomena where roadblock operators effectuate controls, often the *roulage* or traffic police. If people fail to produce the required documents, such as proof of the payment of a range of taxes, roadblock operators will demand an unofficial payment in exchange for letting them pass. For motor-taxi drivers, this paperwork includes: a licence to transport goods and people; proof of insurance; a certificate of technical control; and a receipt for the payment of a public road tax. In addition, they need to have a number plate and demonstrate membership of the *Association des chauffeurs du Congo* (ACCO, Association of Drivers of Congo). The majority of motor-taxi drivers, however, do not pay any of these taxes or contributions as the *roulage* avoids stringent controls when paid an appropriate amount.² Since there are no formal rules governing these situations – officially, *roulage* have to check the documents and motor-taxi drivers have to pay these taxes and contributions – the traffic police have a large amount of discretion to determine the amount that needs to be paid. This opens the door to bargaining.

Bargaining between citizens and authorities, as well as between authorities, is a quintessential characteristic of the exercise of public authority in eastern DRC (Bilakila, 2004; Trefon, 2009; Verweijen, 2015; 2018). It is scripted by deeply engrained norms that intertwine with particular discourses and power relations. For instance, road users can reject roadblock operators’ demand for informal fees, but they need to do so respectfully. Should they reject too vehemently, or use inappropriate gestures and language, they would transgress the script and provoke the operator’s ire. Moreover, a precise language is deployed which frames payments as *impôts* (taxes), *motivation* (motivation) or *unités* (referring to cell phone credits) rather than as fines, corruption or extortion. Such euphemisms

² Interviews with members of the motor owners’ and drivers’ association (APROMOTESKI), Bukavu, 25 March 2011 and Misisi, 9 March 2011.

serve to legitimise and normalise illegal demands, thereby sedimenting unequal power relations between citizens and officials.

What then, is the specific role or function of the roadblock within these encounters? We contend that roadblocks are more than the mere setting as described by Goffman, even though they physically mark the stage where the performance is played out. Rather, the roadblock is an integral part of the roadblock encounter through its *performative effects*. These effects lie on the one hand, in how they are imbued with particular meanings that provoke the enactment of particular social practices and on the other hand, in how they impose physical restraint, thereby governing the movement of bodies and objects (cf. Hammami, 2019). As such, roadblocks constitute an essential part of the performance of public authority at roadblocks. Indeed, because they are historically associated with the exercise of public authority, they have become a powerful signifier of authority in and of themselves. A person standing on the road could just be a person, but if they stand in front of, or on the side of a roadblock and if they strike a certain posture and use certain gestures, they become recognisable as an authority of sorts. A good example is roadblocks put up by youngsters claiming to engage in road repairs, who demand a contribution to the work they carry out. Short of any other symbols of authority, such as uniforms, the roadblock itself becomes the main emblem symbolising public authority and performing such authority in conjunction with the roadblock operator. However, such performances often fail to convince the audience, implying the roadblock operator's impression management falters, and their definition of the situation (namely, that they act as public authority) does not become dominant. The result is that road users refuse to pay. Without means to enforce the tax, the youngsters have no choice but to resign or, sometimes, shout insults at the road users. As this example illustrates, the performative effects of the roadblock depend on its interaction with all the other elements involved in the performance.

The bases of agency during roadblock encounters

Although performances at roadblocks are scripted by norms, discourses and power relations, the people enacting them always have agency. To conceptualise agency, we draw on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) structurationist understanding of the notion, which highlights that agents simultaneously draw upon, instantiate and transform social structures. Following Giddens (1984), we define social structures as recursively organised sets of rules and resources, which come in three variants: 1) structures of signification, or the interpretative schemes (discourses) that actors draw upon to produce meaning; 2) structures of legitimation or the norms that render some forms of behaviour acceptable and others not, as well as the sanctions that ensure compliance with these norms; and 3) structures of domination, or different sets of power relations. Structures of domination are constituted by the asymmetric distribution of two types of resources. Allocative resources relate to capabilities generating command over material resources, including goods, the material features of the environment, and the means of production and reproduction. Authoritative resources relate to

command over persons, and concern the organisation of social time-space, life chances and the production and reproduction of the body (Giddens, 1984). For Giddens (1984), power is simultaneously a constraining and an enabling force. It is anchored in all dimensions of a social order, implying it permeates all actions. Consequently, structures of domination, signification and legitimation are indivisible.

A core assumption of Giddens' (1984 xix-xxi) approach to structuration is the 'duality of structure', which holds that social practice and social structures are mutually constitutive. Structures are produced and reproduced, intentionally and unintentionally, through the everyday practices of knowledgeable, situated agents. Social agents draw upon recursively organised sets of rules and resources in their day-to-day practices. By enacting reiterative practices, they 'instantiate' these structures, thereby contributing to their (re)production. It follows that structures are both the medium and outcome of social practices. Thus, structuration draws attention to the interface between, on the one hand, the institutionalised features of historically constituted social orders and, on the other hand, the day-to-day actions of individuals taking place in smaller strips of time-space (Giddens, 1984).

The approach to agency of Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 970) looks at its interrelations with social structures. They define agency as 'the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. For Emirbayer and Mische, agency is constituted by a chordal triad with three dimensions corresponding to three different temporal orientations (past, future, present), which have a differentiated impact on the reproduction of social structures. These three dimensions (iteration, projectivity and practical-evaluation), are always simultaneously present in agency yet one of them tends to dominate in any given situation. Iteration relates to actors' selective reactivation 'of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity' (idem: 971). It predominates in routine actions, which together with the seriality of daily encounters, enable social structures to be produced and reproduced over time (Giddens, 1984). Projectivity denotes 'the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears and desires for the future' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). It can therefore potentially contribute to the transformation of social structures. Practical-evaluation relates to 'the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (ibid.). Social practices informed by practical-evaluation may contribute either to the reproduction or the transformation of extant social structures, depending on which temporal orientation gains the upper hand.

During roadblock encounters, each of these three kinds of agency can predominate. For instance, when roadblock interactions mostly follow routines – familiar gestures and standard discourses and practices – iteration predominates. In this situation, roadblock operators and road users draw on and instantiate sedimented practical norms, meanings and power relations. Practical-evaluation is also a recurring basis of agency during roadblock performances. For example, if a road user is suddenly confronted with demands to pay a higher amount than usual, they need to make a ‘practical and normative judgment among alternative possible trajectories of action’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). They can, for instance, comply, refuse or propose a compromise. In many cases, this situation leads to bargaining, which is primarily guided by practical-evaluative agency. Such agency can lead both to the reproduction or the transformation of social structures, depending on how much those engaged in bargaining stick to the script as well as the outcomes of the situation. If a road user refuses to pay more, social structures (in this case, the norms governing the amount to be paid) will not transform, unless the refusal sparks a sequence of actions that ultimately force them to do so. Yet if they end up complying, they will contribute potentially to the transformation of the norm in question, at least, if other road users also systematically comply.

Projectivity predominates more rarely in roadblock encounters. One example observed during our fieldwork is that of an FARDC soldier who tried to raise the usual fee in order to buy a motorcycle and rent it out for motor-taxi services, in this way making more money on the side.³ In doing so, he attempted to create a new local norm giving him access to more resources at the expense of road users. Within the FARDC, the day-to-day operation of roadblocks is centrally organised by the *état-major* (general staff) of regiments (the armed forces’ core organisational units). Soldiers need to cede a fixed amount of what they collect at a roadblock to their hierarchy, the so-called *rapport* (report, but signifying gain, return, profit). However, they can keep what they collect above that threshold for themselves. By raising the fee, he leveraged his status as army soldier to demand more resources. In this way, he changed the norms of the script governing performances during roadblock encounters while trying to reconfigure structures of domination, notably, the distribution of allocative resources.

THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF ROADBLOCKS IN EASTERN DRC

While roadblocks in eastern DRC have only recently drawn dedicated scholarly attention (Schouten et al., 2016; 2017), they are not a new phenomenon. During the Belgian colonial era (1908–1960), colonial authorities erected roadblocks to control the movement of so-called *indigènes* (indigenous people), who needed a *passeport de mutation* (travel passport) to settle outside of their area of origins (Bianga, 1978). Roadblocks were thus an integral part of the colonisers’ system of population

³ Observations on the road between Fizi Centre and Mukera, 19 February 2012.

control, imposed to maintain reproductive and labour capacity; ensure taxation; and contain the political and social consequences of mass migration to urban centres, which were considered 'white' spaces (Muzalia et al., 2021).

After Congo gained independence on 30 June 1960, roadblocks continued being a key instrument of population control, even though they no longer served to uphold racial boundaries and control the labour force. On 24 November 1965, Mobutu Sese Seko seized power through a coup d'état. At the beginning of his reign, roadblocks were erected to control circulation and for security reasons, as the government battled numerous rebel movements that had erupted during the first years of independence. Yet in the 1970s a different roadblock logic developed. An unprecedented economic crisis drastically diminished the regime's resource base, implying it could no longer properly pay state agents (Young and Turner, 1985). To top up their declining salaries, officials turned to the non-official economy and wealth extraction from citizens. These practices were encouraged from the top down, as Mobutu exhorted state agents to creatively 'fend for themselves' (*se débrouiller*), whether by means of pilferage, extortion or other forms of power abuse and predation. Such ways of inventive and coercive revenue-generation eventually became widespread in society becoming known as *la débrouillardise* or *système-D*. With an eye to multiplying revenue-generating opportunities, the regime created myriad rules and regulations that prescribed authorisations, permits and fees for even the most insignificant activities. Civil servants were allowed significant leeway in the interpretation of these rules, enabling them to commodify public service provision. This intensified the negotiated character of governance, with almost anything that was directly or indirectly related to the administration becoming subject to lengthy processes of bargaining (Trefon, 2009). As a result of these processes, security forces became a 'free-floating source of insecurity' (Schatzberg 1988: 70). Across the country, roads were dotted with roadblocks erected by army units, state party youth groups, or local police units ostensibly conducting search and sweep operations, which became important vehicles to extract wealth from citizens (Callaghy, 1984; Fairhead, 1992).

In the second half of the 1980s, roadblocks by the national police were legalised, in particular those guarding access to seaports, airports and markets, where people were asked to pay up in *na esprit ya bien* (in good spirit) to avoid 'unpleasantness'. In the early 1990s, towards the end of Mobutu's reign, roadblocks also started to be used to control the payment of taxes and other duties. In addition, more or less mobile and nocturnal roadblocks popped up, which quickly became sites of harassment by soldiers who rarely received salaries (Muzalia et al., 2021). In sum, during the Mobutu era, roadblocks became inseparable from harassment and extraction by state agents, leading to the institutionalisation of a certain 'logic' of predation often marked by arbitrariness and cruelty, that Congolese people call 'the rhythm of the country' (*au rythme du pays*). While this institutionalisation was driven by the ever-present threat of violence lurking behind interactions with state agents, it was sedimented by particular discourses that sanctioned predation from citizens, such as the army's infamous dictum *civil azali bilanga ya militaire* (civilians are the field of the military) (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008: 65).

During the two Congo Wars (1996–7 and 1998–2003), when eastern DRC was occupied by various rebel movements, roadblocks set up for control, security and revenue-generation purposes multiplied. The resulting omnipresence of roadblocks has remained until today. Roadblocks are operated in both rural and urban areas by a range of state and non-state actors. Key state actors at roadblocks are the security services, including the FARDC, police, traffic police, intelligence and migration services and park rangers, who check on traffic in and around protected areas. Other state services that can be found at roadblocks include: the *Fonds d'entretien routier* (FONER, National Road Maintenance Fund), which collects road tolls; the provincial department for transport and transportation routes, which controls vehicle loads and traffic permits; the provincial department for the environment and sustainable development, which collects taxes on flora products (boards, wood and embers); and the provincial department for tourism, which carries out checks to fight against the traffic of rare animal and plant species from protected areas. Aside from armed groups, civilian non- or semi-state actors also operate roadblocks, pointing to a measure of 'democratisation' of the roadblock phenomenon. One can find, for instance, representatives of customary chiefs at roadblocks, but also roadblocks set up by what are called *Rasta* (Rastafari), local development associations and so-called *volontaires* or youth self-help groups that engage in activities ostensibly to the benefit of their community or society, but also to make a living (Muzalia et al., 2021). These roadblocks can be found at various locations, including at border posts and administrative boundaries (e.g. between provinces); on access roads to protected areas; and at the entrance to markets, harbours and mining sites (see also Schouten et al., 2016). In addition, in both rural and urban areas, there are roadblocks at parking spaces, where travellers embark and disembark, and trucks are loaded. There are also circumstantial roadblocks, for instance, put up only on market days; to temporarily enhance security; or as a means of protest (Muzalia et al., 2021).

This overview shows that roadblocks – also used herein for barriers placed at the entrance of certain economic sites – are omnipresent in eastern DRC. They have become important sites for a wide range of state and non-state, armed and non-armed actors to exercise forms of public authority and extract wealth from citizens, being integral to the 'rhythm of the country'. Therefore, passing a roadblock has become an everyday occurrence for large sections of the population. As previously noted, this event follows well-established scripts.

ROUTINE ROADBLOCK SCENES

One of the most routinised forms of roadblock interaction that we witnessed during our fieldwork concerned roadblocks at the entrance to the market in rural areas. Farmers selling small quantities of produce and particular categories of small-scale traders have to leave a certain amount of their merchandise at the roadblock, which is framed as a 'contribution'. The collected foodstuffs are subsequently distributed among customary chiefs, the local market committee and

a variety of security services, including the FARDC and/or armed groups. The amount people have to leave is deeply institutionalised: vendors know exactly how much they have to contribute and which measure is used for it. For instance, those selling sugar and salt need to contribute one glass (*kilahuri*) per large sack. For palm oil, the contribution is, depending on the quantity sold, either a full bottle or a small can of tomato paste (*koroboye*), while for sacks of flour, it is a can of milk powder (*kigoze*). For foodstuffs such as potatoes, maize or fish, there is not a specific measure but a designated quantity, such as six to nine (depending on the size) potatoes per sack, or three to six cobs of maize. Those who sell beer generally have to leave one beer per crate.⁴

Because people know exactly how much they need to pay, passing market roadblocks has become a highly routinised practice. Vendors deposit the required amount – often without much talk and seemingly without much anxiety – in front of the roadblock at the entrance of the market. People know exactly what to expect and the whole scene usually unfolds in a predictable way. During these interactions, marketgoers mainly rely on practical consciousness, being guided by practical norms and internalised power relations, namely, the implicit understanding that contributing is mandatory. Their agency is therefore dominated by the iterative strand that activates existing patterns of action and thought. People thus mostly comply because paying has become a taken-for-granted practice, responding to the idea of *twende tu*. This Kiswahili phrase from Bukavu can be translated into English as ‘let’s make do with it’, meaning ‘let’s move to the rhythm of the country’ or ‘let’s go along with the realities of the country’ (Muzalia et al., 2021). Hence people comply out of routine and not necessarily because they approve of the practice – in fact, when asked about it, which renders discursive consciousness more salient, they might very well express disapproval. People will often complain that they receive nothing in return for the taxes. As expressed by a member of a youth organisation: ‘I know that I can go to the market, and I pay the tax; so, what do I expect? It’s the counterpart. I have given something, what have I received in return? And if I don’t see anything tangible, when I see nothing, I want to complain’.⁵ However, many interviewees also expressed a broad awareness that everyone in the DRC is scraping by and that state agents are drastically underpaid and under-resourced. As a woman selling beans commented at a market in a remote region: ‘they [FARDC soldiers] have nothing to eat here. The rations do not arrive in the mountains. So, we have to share a bit’.⁶ A member of a local community organisation further commented that they rather give some food to soldiers at the market or via organised household collections ‘otherwise they start uprooting your field at night’.⁷

⁴ Field notes on observations made in Bulambika, Kalehe, 13 July 2010; Walungu Centre, 27 July 2010; Kalingi, 8 December 2010; Bigaragara, 7 February 2011; Kiziba, 3 December 2010; Mikalati, 29 January 2011; Makutano, 13 December 2010; Bijombo, 28 January 2011; Hwehwe, 27 January 2011; Magunda, 23 November 2011.

⁵ Focus group interview, youth group, Walungu centre, 28 July 2010.

⁶ Interview, Mikalati market, 29 January 2011.

⁷ Interview, Bijombo, 28 January 2011.

Discursive consciousness also surfaces when routine breaks down. During fieldwork in a remote rural area, the first author once observed how FARDC soldiers at a market roadblock tried to raise the amount, asking for more tomatoes or an extra bundle of *lenga-lenga* (cassava leaves). The argument was that due to ongoing military operations, there were more soldiers to feed. However, marketgoers simply refused to pay the increased amount, arguing that this was not the way things were usually done and that they usually only paid this or that amount. They assumed that since this FARDC unit was new in the area, they must have mistaken the amount. As more and more people refused, the soldiers eventually gave up on raising the levy.⁸

From extensive observations, we gleaned that in highly routinised market roadblock encounters, vendors tend to be focused on the roadblock itself and on quickly getting to the market to sell their produce or merchandise, rather than on the identity of the roadblock operators. It seems as if it is the roadblock, rather than the roadblock operator, that compels them to make their contribution. One reason for this might be that the contributions are later divided among various authorities and services, not all of which are physically present at the roadblock. This has reinforced the understanding that one pays 'at the roadblock' (Muzalia et al., 2021). Even during the temporary absence of operators, people continue to drop off the required amount of produce or merchandise at the roadblock.⁹ Furthermore, changes in the nature of the roadblock agent may not make much of a difference. In 2010, the FARDC suddenly became present at the market of Hwehwe, previously exclusively controlled by a particular local militia. The FARDC was unpopular, and the population had more confidence in the local militia, which consisted of co-ethnics. Yet this did not seem to have any effect on their behaviour at the market roadblock, where paying the in-kind contribution continued to follow existing routines.¹⁰

The example of perennial roadblocks further illustrates that in some roadblock scenes, the roadblock itself takes centre stage. Perennial roadblocks refer to roadblocks that remain, sometimes for decades, at a fixed location despite there being no obvious reason for it. This contrasts with roadblocks that are placed at targeted locations, such as between administrative boundaries or at militarily or economically strategic sites. Since perennial roadblocks have been there for as long as one remembers, people expect to pay at that very location. Perennial roadblocks also 'survive' regular FARDC rotations or switches from FARDC to rebel control or vice versa. Whenever a new FARDC unit is deployed to a particular area, they commonly operate roadblocks at the same locations as their predecessors. Similarly, in cases of changing armed faction control, the newly dominant faction takes over the same roadblocks as their predecessors. These roadblocks do not belong to anyone. Rather, they seem to have become features of places, rather than of particular authorities or groups. In such situations, the roadblock itself becomes

⁸ Observations at Minembwe market, 19 December 2010.

⁹ Observations at Mikalati market, 29 January 2011.

¹⁰ Observations at Hwehwe market, 27 January 2011.

the protagonist, while the roadblock operators are relegated to the supporting cast.

Reflecting on why these roadblocks stay at the same location over time, it becomes apparent that because there is routine compliance at this particular roadblock, the transaction costs of operating it become lower. Putting up a roadblock where people would not expect it would yield much more friction. Rotating army units and rebel factions thus copy the roadblocks of their predecessors, even if this undermines their security and control functions. After all, if everyone knows the location of a roadblock, evading it becomes easier. Perennial roadblocks also make it easier to stage an ambush or commit other roadside robbery, as perpetrators know exactly where on the road they should plan these acts with minimal disturbance. In sum, the force of routine and habitual compliance appear to triumph here over other considerations.

ROADBLOCK PLAYS WITH MULTIPLE SCENARIOS

Not all roadblock interactions are minutiously routinised. One example is roadblocks where services carry out controls, for instance, to check whether all paperwork is in order. While there is certainly a script at play in such situations, it merely provides broad outlines, enabling several scenarios. The actors involved therefore draw more strongly on discursive consciousness and on the practical-evaluative strand of agency. Those passing the roadblock have, for example, the choice to make a 'financial greeting' (Mukulu Nduku, 2019), also called *massage*, or not. *Massage* refers to the act of a driver discreetly slipping a few banknotes into the hand of a roadblock agent, simulating a greeting. Most drivers end up making this greeting regardless of whether all their paperwork is in order or not, because even if the paperwork is impeccable, there is always the risk that roadblock operators make up infractions on the spot (Muzalia et al., 2021). The next act in the script involves the roadblock operator approaching the driver. The operator has several options: they can waive the paperwork check, thereby foregoing additional income, or they can decide to inspect the paperwork. If the paperwork is in order, the agent can either invent an infraction or let the driver proceed. If an infraction is invented, or if the paperwork is not in order, a bargaining process typically follows.

Bargaining between authorities and citizens is a complex process that is deeply shaped by a range of factors, including the personal features of those involved and situational dynamics. The latter generally involve dramaturgical aspects, such as people and objects' credibility of performing a particular role; the extent to which scripts are respected and circumstantial features affecting performance, such as roadblock agents being drunk. Bargaining processes are further shaped by social structures, namely, particular norms regarding what can and cannot be said, and how to behave; discourses defining citizens as (potentially exploitable) state subjects, and naming and normalising unofficial taxes and practices; and the power relations between authorities and citizens, which are shaped by their

structural social position, particularly the allocative and authoritative resources at their disposal. These resources in turn are conditioned by their social connections, such as having powerful patrons or belonging to a specific ethnic group (Verweijen, 2015; 2018).

Together, these features shape the agency at play in bargaining situations, which draws largely on practical-evaluation. It is focused on the present, but still informed by entrenched social structures as people characterise 'a given situation against the background of past patterns of experience' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 997). One example of the importance of prior experience was a driver adding some bills to pay more than the usual 'financial greeting' at a particular roadblock, as there was an improvised bar (*nganda de fortune*) selling *kanyanga* and other booze that had sprung up next to the roadblock. The roadblock agents were frequent guests in the bar, and in the driver's experience, often drunk. Probably, he elected to pay a bit more to avoid trouble.¹¹ This example also shows how other material objects, in this case a roadside *nganda*, can become part of the roadblock scene and importantly shape people's actions. Furthermore, it demonstrates how learning from past experience goes hand-in-hand with a forward-looking dimension, in this case avoiding future trouble. An orientation towards the future may also entail 'keeping options open' and enabling future opportunities (Verweijen, 2018). For instance, a truck driver told he often took it easy during bargaining processes, as truckers are very vulnerable to breakdowns of their vehicle, in which case they need the help from those at the roadblock. These examples illustrate that the forward-looking dimension of practical-evaluation at roadblocks generally does not bear much potential to creatively reconfigure 'received structures of thought and action' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). People focus on individual opportunities for future gain or for averting potential hazards. Thereby, they perpetuate a particular structure of domination characterised by the logics of patronage and unpredictable, arbitrary violence. This compels individuals to avoid making unnecessary enemies and to insure themselves against potential future misfortunes.

Because situations of bargaining are only partially routinised, practical-evaluation is informed by a wide range of considerations and logics. To grasp this, we present here two situations where new roadblocks were put up. In September 2010, the president of the DRC proclaimed a ban on all mining activities. As a result, FARDC soldiers set up roadblocks on access roads to mines to enforce the new legislation (Verweijen, 2015). Not only had these roadblocks been put up at locations where people did not expect them, the scenes unfolding there did not follow the usual script. For instance, on a road leading up to the gold mining site of Misisi in South Kivu province, soldiers often conducted humiliating and sometimes harsh body and luggage checks, appropriated personal belongings without reason, and when discovering gold, seized all of people's valuables. These harsh and arbitrary actions instilled anxiety among people and occasionally, resistance. One *motard* (motor-taxi driver) passing the roadblock commented that

¹¹ Observations at roadblock at *Deux restos*, 12 March 2011.

the mining business was a civilian, not a military affair. Another said that because they found the mining ban illegitimate, so too were the roadblocks placed to uphold it. Yet others singled out the aggressive behaviour of the FARDC soldiers operating the roadblock.¹² These comments illustrate how in situations that are not highly routinised, people's evaluations of roadblock operators and their demands are shaped by various kinds of reasoning, including: the legitimacy of the roadblock operator's authority (in this case also related to the specific governance domain over which they claim authority); the legitimacy of the practices of conducting controls or demanding a contribution (in part related to the purposes that they serve) and finally, how these practices of control and requisitioning are enacted (e.g. levels of violence involved). These evaluations clearly informed road users' willingness to comply with the roadblock checks, as some tried to refuse. Efforts to resist, however, were futile. The roadblocks were operated by FARDC soldiers from a unit with a bad human rights track record, who seized upon the occasion to extract as much wealth from people as possible. Therefore, facilitated by the physical impediment of the roadblock, road users reluctant to comply were beaten up, and sometimes put in detention, while in one case, a motor-taxi driver was shot down (Verweijen, 2015).

While the mining ban roadblocks were manifestly seen as illegitimate, this was not the case for another new roadblock that had been set up by FARDC soldiers in South Kivu. Between Fizi Centre and Lulimba, there is a stretch of road running through 17 kilometres of dense forest called La forêt de la 17 (the 17 forest). In the course of 2011, there was very little FARDC presence in this area, as the army underwent a restructuring process. At the same time, ambushes had started to multiply in the forest. When a new army unit was finally deployed to the area, they set up a roadblock in the middle of the forest. Although this roadblock was new, travellers were not bothered by it. In fact, after travelling for kilometres through the silent, dense forest, expecting an ambush around every bend in the road, the sight of the FARDC on what was considered the most dangerous stretch of road came as a relief. Accordingly, people appeared to willingly pay the fee (Verweijen, 2015). One motor-taxi driver commented for instance (to the first author) that 'our army brings security here', while a truck driver said 'we rather pay here than get ambushed'.¹³

These two cases allow us to further reflect on the bases of compliance whenever discursive consciousness is activated. In contrast to routine compliance, when people comply simply because a practice is taken for granted, whenever the practical-evaluative strand of agency dominates, the bases of compliance are composite, implying there are multiple interacting factors at play. Research on the attitudes of African taxpayers towards taxation generally identifies four factors that shape these attitudes: deterrence, reciprocity, social influences and (authorities') legitimacy (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Eriksson Baaz et al., 2018). In both of the discussed cases, levels of deterrence (perceptions of how difficult it is to

¹² Observations and interviews at and near a roadblock near Misisi, 10 and 11 March 2011.

¹³ Observations and interviews at Forêt de la 17 roadblock, 29 December 2011.

evade taxation) and the legitimacy of the actor involved (in this case the FARDC) were fairly similar. However, the Forêt de la 17 roadblock crucially differed from the mining ban roadblock in relation to reciprocity and social influences. Regarding reciprocity, the FARDC in the Forêt de la 17 was clearly perceived to provide a return service in the sense of increasing security, while there was no perceived return at all with the mining ban roadblock. In respect of social influences (group norms towards taxation), given that the mining ban was widely detested, the prevailing norms defined imposing fees at roadblocks destined to uphold the ban as illegitimate. This contrasted with the social norms at work in the case of the Forêt de la 17 as it has become a long-standing practice in eastern DRC that people financially contribute to (public) security provision, in part because of the structural under-funding of the security services. This practice has become normalised through terms for financial contributions such as *effort de guerre* (or paying for the 'war effort'). This term goes back to quotas of agricultural products imposed by the Belgian colonial regime to help fund their efforts during the two world wars but resurfaced during the Congo Wars in the 1990s to designate contributions to armed groups and forces (Verweijen, 2015).

The importance of a perceived return is further illustrated by the roadblocks of FONER, the agency that is mandated to maintain the roads. Yet as anyone who travels beyond the cities can attest, most roads are in a lamentable condition. Whenever there is trouble, it is 'volunteers', rather than FONER, who intervene. Paid by truck drivers and other road users, these volunteers liberate stuck vehicles, repair defective bridges, or plug potholes using makeshift materials. Therefore, the tax levied by FONER is among those most fiercely contested by road users. However, it is almost impossible to bypass a roadblock held by FONER, which is why many of the tax collectors from other state agencies prefer to be stationed there. Nevertheless, in some places, village committees and local civil society organisations organise resistance against FONER roadblocks by calling for fiscal disobedience. For example, in Miti, which is situated 25 kilometres north of Bukavu, several roadblocks operated by FONER were attacked and dislodged by the population – actions clearly drawing on projective agency – after President Tshisekedi's first State of the Nation address on 13 December 2019. In it he declared that: 'there are even many roadblocks on all roads of national interest as well as on agricultural feeder roads. All these roadblocks must be removed immediately'.¹⁴ However, most roadblocks have persisted in the wake of this appeal, which was not followed by an official order. This lack of follow-up action shows that despite professed adherence to the official norms, even the president ultimately pragmatically sticks to the norms dictated by 'the rhythm of the country' – not least as roadblocks keep the security services conveniently self-funded.

¹⁴ 'DRC: President of the Republic's 2019 State of the Nation Address' Zoomeco (News site), 13 December 2019 <https://zoomeco.net/developpement/rdc-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-letat-de-la-nation-en-2019-integral/>

(RE)PRODUCING PUBLIC AUTHORITY AT ROADBLOCKS

Our dramaturgical analysis of roadblock encounters in eastern DRC shows that these encounters are an effective means of staging public authority. Because roadblocks are a longstanding instrument of rule, they are deeply rooted in people's imaginaries of public authority. Roadblocks are therefore crucial in the 'impression management' of claimants to public authority. They help activate a particular script, informed by social structures, that guides the unfolding roadblock encounter. In most cases, the ensuing performance stays within the parameters of the script. Agency is then dominated by routines or practical-evaluation. Even when forward-looking, agency during roadblock encounters generally does not draw on imaginings of differently configured social structures, but on opportunities to minimise individual harm or maximise individual opportunities. Roadblock encounters therefore contribute to the reproduction, rather than the transformation, of the norms, discourses and power relations that script the exercise of public authority in the DRC. We therefore claim that cumulatively, and beyond the effects on the particular authorities that operate roadblocks in a given time and place, roadblock encounters contribute to reproducing the *conditions of possibility* for exercising public authority in the DRC.

This reproduction further occurs through general compliance. Informed by either routines or the composite reasonings and evaluations related to practical-evaluation, most people end up complying with the controls and fees imposed at roadblocks, even when disagreeing with them. Indeed, resistance against paying at roadblocks is exceedingly rare.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the most frequent cases of resistance we observed aimed to *uphold* existing norms, rather than transform them. It was when deeply sedimented routines, such as the 'price' of in-kind contributions at market roadblocks, were disturbed, that people resisted most often. Resistance also emerged where roadblock operators unexpectedly placed outrageous demands on road users, such as imposing exceedingly high fees because of invented infractions. However, road users rarely manage to escape these situations without paying exorbitant sums or enduring denigrating behaviour, such as arbitrary arrests, verbal abuse and even beatings. Paradoxically, even these relatively unpredictable situations help uphold the current order. Arbitrariness and cruelty in the exercise of public authority are a premise for the routine performance of such authority. The ever-present threat of predatory and abusive behaviour eliminates the need for the regular use of force and ostentatious performances of domination.

Existing scholarship on roadblocks has overlooked this interplay between unpredictable arbitrariness and predictable routines. Lombard (2013) for instance, highlights the fundamentally unpredictable nature of roadblock encounters, fitting into a wider trend of centring arbitrariness and uncertainty as key instruments of rule in postcolonial (post)conflict zones (Nassar and Stel, 2019; Tapscott, 2021). Yet unpredictability and routine are two sides of the same coin of public authority.

¹⁵ Much resistance against roadblocks is enacted outside of roadblock encounters, for instance, by petitions and lobby efforts from businesses and civil society organisations (Verweijen, 2015; 2018).

Disruptions of routines are necessary in order to normalise the routine. Consequently, predictability and unpredictability must be analysed in conjunction to get a full picture of how public authority is performed at roadblocks and how, in turn, these performances reproduce structures of legitimation, signification and domination. Moreover, predictability and unpredictability are not dichotomous – as we have shown, they are located on a wide and ever-shifting spectrum.

Where on the spectrum roadblock encounters are located can only be determined through adequate conceptualisations and detailed empirical analysis of the social practices enacted at roadblocks. While Schouten and colleagues' (2024: 4) call for a 'turn to mobility' within the study of public authority in areas of contested statehood, grasping the (re)production of public authority at and through roadblocks requires in fact also a stationary approach. A dramaturgical analysis of roadblock encounters centres relatively immobile performances, rather than the implications for movement. Studying these performances also requires less-mobile methods. As with dramaturgical analysis in general, it requires extensive observations of unfolding everyday situations, for instance, by 'hanging around' at roadblocks. Observations are especially well suited for capturing agency informed by practical consciousness, which cannot be studied through interviewing.

To describe road users' agency in relation to roadblocks, it has become popular to use the terminology of 'navigation' (Lombard, 2013; Rijke, 2021; Schouten; 2022). This term is commonly used to capture agency in settings where both social agents themselves and the very social environment in which they are situated are moving (Vigh, 2010). However, the concept of navigation downplays the heavy imprint of relatively static social structures on people's agency in conflict zones, including in relation to state-society interactions (Verweijen, 2018; Vlassenroot et al., 2020). Many observers have noted the surprising resilience of the abstraction that is 'the Congolese state' and its corresponding imaginaries (Trefon, 2009). This resilience is the product of a myriad of everyday micro-actions that instantiate the core social structures underlying stateness in the DRC. A good deal of these micro-actions take place at roadblocks, privileging them as sites for studying the (re)production of public authority.

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