



“Setting the agenda for our leaders from under a tree”:

The People’s Parliament in Nairobi¹

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In Kenya the social movement (Bunge la Mwananchi) concept has grown organically and spread in towns across the country. The oldest gathering being Jeevanjee grounds where members meet every day for more than 15 years now. Amongst the towns that the movement has grown are Mombasa, Kisumu, Eldoret, Nakuru and Kakamega. The unique thing about the movement is that membership is voluntary and one can participate in actions anytime and disengage at will. This has enabled the movement to survive being hijacked by donors or infiltration by state security agents, who apparently are not amused when ordinary citizens have the audacity to take a matter affecting them into their own hands

— *A Call to Liberation, Bunge la Mwananchi (2009)*

¹ The article is dedicated to the memory of our friend and engaged activist in Bunge la Mwananchi, Jacob Odipo Odhiambo, who passed away on November 4th, 2010.

In a park in the heart of Nairobi, members of Bunge la Mwananchi, which means “the people’s parliament” in Swahili, meet every day. Four benches placed in the cool shade of bougainvillea trees form the physical base of the parliament, or Bunge, as it is more colloquially known. Each day, heated debates about topical issues concerning Kenyan politics and the occasional scandal take place. The daily gatherings are public debating forums, open to all ethnic groups, genders, occupations, and party affiliations. By virtue of this inclusivity, Bunge la Mwananchi transgresses many of the boundaries that routinely frame Kenyan politics.²

Bunge la Mwananchi is one of the most vocal grassroots organizations in Nairobi and defines itself as a social movement. There is no formal membership required and the movement is made up of whoever chooses to be part of it. Nevertheless, there are an increasing number of people whose sustained presence and practice has permitted for them to be regarded as essential members, and it is from these people that a ceremonial “leader”³

² Even with this inclusivity and the outreach that has been done to ensure as much diversity as possible, the typical Bunge member is male, between 25 and 45 year of age, and of any possible ethnic affiliation. To our knowledge, there are not many people of different abilities/disabled who participate in Bunge. Nevertheless, within the last two years, since the Bunge women’s movement (these are women in Bunge and in the Bunges around Nairobi) has begun to gain more ground, there is more and more gender diversity within Bunge.

³ Although the membership of Bunge is in constantly in flux, there is a group of core members (a core that is constantly increasing) who have been attending Bunge the longest. When we refer to Bunge we refer not to just this core group but to the increasing number of people, who although they do not come to the park every day, identify as being part of Bunge. To our knowledge there has never been an attempt to count all of these people, but a conservative guess is that least 5000 people identify as being part of Bunge in Nairobi. It is important to note that there are also other Bunges across the country with a membership that is growing and each of these Bunges are organised according to community requirements. In addition, Bunge is intentionally de-hierarchical and the aforementioned core group of members hold no formal position in the movement, but their experiences, dedication and contributions are highly valued. It is usually from these members who are consistently present at the park that a ceremonial leader (who can also be called Ambassador, President, Chairman or Speaker) is chosen. The role of this leader is for the most part to present the face of the movement – both for members and

is chosen every two years. The majority of the participants in the movement come from the lower socioeconomic strata of Kenyan society, and consequently it would seem that *Bunge la Mwananchi* is at the margins of Kenyan society and politics. However, the focus of this article is not to discuss whether *Bunge la Mwananchi* is marginal or not. Rather the aim is to understand the everyday practices and transgressions of political boundaries of *Bunge la Mwananchi* by looking at the creative processes of alternative politics its members employ in a country where the common person's access to the formal political system is limited. Such an endeavour does not deny the existence of hegemonic political hierarchies and centre-periphery relations that frame Kenyan politics, but instead it highlights the everyday political practices of *Bunge la Mwananchi* to reveal how members practice a politics without boundaries.

A central assumption in the article is that to be able to claim a politics without boundaries and to focus analytically on the challenges and transgressions of the boundaries, one must recognize the existence of boundaries. Bearing this in mind, it is important to note that, despite our use of the notion of margins when describing *Bunge la Mwananchi*, our emphasis is on how members deliberately use and reproduce their marginal position to transgress and overcome not only the marginality of the social movement, but political boundaries in general. Essentially, we look at how members of *Bunge la Mwananchi* continuously struggle for space while concomitantly challenging hegemonic pre-defined perceptions of space in their work, work that endeavours to establish and fortify "infrastructures of resistance" that they recognize as engendering the alternate democracies needed by the Kenyan people. Here, space is understood as both physical and political.

for observers – as decisions are never taken by the leader alone. However there are also some members who may be chosen as leaders of a specific activity. The present ceremonial leader of *Bunge* at Jeevanjee gardens is a young woman called Dinah Awuor.

Before we detail the history of Bunge la Mwananchi and engage in an analysis of their political practices, we need to outline the understanding of political engagement and political practice that frames our analysis of Bunge la Mwananchi's actions. The analyses in the sections following the theoretical outline focus primarily on the appropriation of space (physical and political) and the often non-conformist and counterhegemonic approaches to politics. The article is based on ethnographic material, which stems from Kimari's on-off engagement in Bunge la Mwananchi's activities between 2007 and 2010 and from Rasmussen's cumulative year of fieldwork in Nairobi between 2008 and 2010. Our collaborative effort combines the gazes of two differently positioned anthropologists, who could be conceptualized as an insider and an outsider, but perhaps are better distinguished as an observing participant and a participant observer.

Being Political

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, our focal concern is how the members of Bunge la Mwananchi are political. Nevertheless, before we can investigate their political practices in more detail we need to outline how we can theoretically understand their ways of being political. In this regard, we have found great inspiration in Isin's (2002; 2005) philosophical approach to ways of being political and are also informed by Gramsci's (1971) discussion on hegemony.

In his work, Isin is concerned with what he terms "the city as a difference machine" and with "investigating citizenship historically as a generalized problem of otherness" (2005, p. 374). A key point in his argument is the distinction between politics and being political (Isin 2002; 2005). Though our concern is not with citizenship and otherness as such, nor with the city, we do investigate Bunge la Mwananchi members' attempts at political inclusion

(from a perceived outsider position) through their various everyday practices in the city of Nairobi. Nevertheless, we are principally interested in a specific element of Isin's analysis, namely his perception of everyday ways of being political, which we find particularly helpful in understanding Bunge la Mwananchi and its members' activities.

Isin defines being political as relational and as expressed through people's everyday activities (2005, p. 382). This doesn't mean that any everyday activity qualifies as a way of being political; one only becomes political when one's activities question the virtues of the dominant or when they reveal the arbitrariness of this dominance (Isin, 2002, p. 21). This can be done by making claims of justice either as dissent, affirmation, or resistance (Isin, 2005, p. 382). It is the actions that challenge, expose, and redefine the previous meaning and order of existing political domination that qualify as ways of being political (Isin, 2002, pp. 21–22). In other words, being and becoming political is dynamic and momentary, temporal and fluid, and is as much about agency as it is about claiming rights and justice.⁴

In his discussion of what constitutes the political, Isin draws on a variety of disparate thinkers such as Heidegger, Foucault, Weber, Elias, and Simmel to name just a few. Though our concern here is with the above outline of how one becomes political, this outline would make little sense if we failed to interrogate how Isin arrives at his definitions. In short, he argues that citizenship is relational; it is about the dominant groups of the city articulating their virtues, morals, and identities as citizens, thus defining

⁴ Isin's argument is more complex than the summary here; for example he suggests that *forms* (orientations, strategies, and technologies), *modes* (solidaristic, agonistic, and alienating) and *positions* (citizen, outsider, stranger, and alien) together form ways of being political (Isin, 2002; 2005). Though we talk of forms in terms of strategies, modes in form of resistance, and positions in forms of marginalization, we are more interested in a practical application of Isin's ideas in the analysis of everyday political processes and practices than in distinguishing specific forms, modes, and positions.

themselves against others (strangers, outsiders, and aliens). However, Isin argues that these dominant articulations do not constitute politics in itself nor are they examples of ways of being political, as one only becomes political in the moment when hierarchical positions are questioned, redefined, reversed, and re-evaluated. It is this element of being and becoming political that renders imperative the questioning of the arbitrariness of dominance, which we complement with Gramsci's (1971) discussions on hegemony.

Bunge members, in their rejection of the hegemonic "common sense" of politics in Kenya — a common sense that is also shared by the civil society — act in ways that are often counterhegemonic, because they seek to create alternate institutions and a strong and questioning civil society that is not the vanguard of a "passive revolution" but rather resists the hegemony of the dominant class (see Cox and Sinclair, 1996, p. 129). There are exceptions to this, such as when alliances are made with members of the civil society such as NGOs, as seen during the recent 2010 campaign for a new Kenyan constitution in Kenya. Nevertheless, in their day-to-day practices in both political and physical space, seeking to undermine the hegemonic political and social structures that have been put in place, Bunge members more often than not act in ways that are counterhegemonic in their insistence (both in theory and praxis) that what is really required are the negation of the hegemonic "commonsense" politic and rather the implementation of alternate forms of democracy. Therefore, we find it fitting to use both Isin's (2002; 2005) discussions on being political that are part of his discussions of historical citizenship as well as Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony in order to understand political practice at the grassroots level in Kenya.

Though Isin has the historical Western city as the locus of his analysis, his ambition is to challenge the notion that citizenship could have developed only in Western cities, thus refuting the

notion that it is only in these spaces where people have struggled to constitute themselves (Drummond & Peake, 2005, 341-342). We therefore find some support for our attempt at applying parts of his argument in an empirically different setting and context than the Western city. We take the risk of not only simplifying Isin's theoretical and philosophical argument but also turning away from his focus on citizenship and instead looking at only one aspect, namely the process-oriented and dynamic political practice. We claim that our exegetic reading of Isin, complemented by Gramsci's discussion of hegemony, provides us with a framework for understanding how Bunge la Mwananchi members practice a politics without boundaries.

Jeevanjee Gardens and Bunge La Mwananchi: Incarnating Democratic Participation in the City

The park that hosts Bunge la Mwananchi's very lively daily debates is called Jeevanjee Gardens. The raked paths and well-kept lawns are the result of a recent rejuvenation of the site. With the shade of bougainvillea and jacaranda trees, the park provides a resting place for office workers and students from the nearby Nairobi University, or whoever chooses to pass through from the bustling city centre. In the centre of the park, two small statues guard each side of the common green space. These imperial busts are reminiscent of a different time, portraying Queen Victoria and the original founder of this recreational space, Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee. Bunge la Mwananchi members have their parliament in the quiet northeastern corner of this location. It has not always been this quiet though, for both Bunge la Mwananchi and the park have over the years been at the centre of struggles over their right to exist.

If Bunge la Mwananchi represents a grassroots alternative to political participation, Jeevanjee Gardens constitutes an alternative

political space as it has been a contested site since its creation in 1906 (Patel, 1997, p. 211). Like many other colonial cities, Nairobi was planned as a segregated city, where areas were designated hierarchically for the different "racial" groups: the Europeans, the Indians, and the Africans. The founder of the park, the Indian businessman Jeevanjee, had the ambition of creating a public leisure area for urban residents and not only the Europeans. As an homage that would make it difficult for the imperial government to oppose the park, the statue of the British queen was erected at the centre of Jeevanjee Gardens as an honour to the British royal family. Though Jeevanjee's grandchild Zarina Patel has described it as a sincere respect paid to the royal family, the statue also stands as an example of creative resistance against the otherwise exclusive politics of space in Nairobi at the time.

In the early 1990s, motivated by the *laissez-faire* approach to urban planning in Nairobi, developers planned to build an underground carpark at Jeevanjee Gardens, and the park was threatened with demolition. At that time, Jeevanjee Gardens was considered a no-go area inhabited by street-preachers, homeless families, and criminals. A campaign lead by descendants of A. M. Jeevanjee, and supported by the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Wangari Maathai, managed to mobilize people in defence of the park and against the grabbing of public land (Patel, 1997, p. 216). At that time, before the multi-party elections of 1992 when public debate and political gathering were not without risk, the park was protected through the support and protests of a diversity of people. In celebration of this feat, the Jeevanjee family donated a number of benches to the park.

In the latter part of the 1990s, people from various informal forums around the city (bus stages and street walks) took their debates to the park, as the Nairobi City Council launched a crackdown on street hawkers, vendors, preachers, and political agitators in the downtown core of the city. The debates took place on

two of the donated benches that faced each other and were initially referred to as simply “a place to sit” but quickly became known as the “people’s gatherings.” These debates marked the beginning of Bunge la Mwananchi, whose members today meet around four benches. During the early hours of the afternoon, these benches are surrounded by concentric circles of people listening to and engaging in communal discussions. Despite having gathered in Jeevanjee Gardens since the 1990s, Bunge la Mwananchi gained its name in 2003, when the movement held its first elections as a mockery of the parliamentary elections that were held in December 2002. These elections signalled the broadening of a national space that permitted freer public dialogue and debate, but in no way did they hasten the decriminalization of dissent. Until 2002, the associational space in Kenya had been limited, despite the first steps towards free assembly that were taken with the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1992 (Nasong’o, 2007, p. 33). Nevertheless, Bunge la Mwananchi members still find their meetings occasionally interrupted by the police and a significant number of their members under frequent surveillance⁵ (see *Sukuma Kenya*, 2009, and Human Rights House, 2010).

The daily meetings in the park have become an institution in Nairobi and have established an alternative political space in the city. They have become a public training ground for both political

⁵ It is becoming increasingly frequent for Bunge la Mwananchi meetings to be disrupted by the police and members to be arrested for “idling in the park” or being part of an “illegal one-man assembly” or an “illegal movement,” despite the fact that affairs are conducted in the open (Nyongesa, 2009). Even when not at Jeevanjee Gardens, members have been arrested. One example of this occurred on February 22, 2009 when Gacheke Gachihi, a long-term member of Bunge La Mwananchi, was arrested that Sunday morning while he was drinking tea in a local restaurant in his neighbourhood (*Sukuma Kenya*, 2009). On the more extreme end of this surveillance and persecution, some members such as Samson Owimba Ojiamo and Godwin Kamau Wangoe have been abducted and harassed and their families have been threatened as a direct result of their political work (Human Rights House, 2010).

debate and agitation and a space for creative political practice. In a bid to expand these spaces, Bunge la Mwananchi is in the process of setting up "congresses" all over Kenya and around the different neighbourhoods within Nairobi. Even so, the forum in Jeevanjee Gardens retains a special position within the movement. In Nairobi, Jeevanjee Gardens is often just referred to as "Bunge" (Parliament). Insiders use this colloquial term to refer not only to the park, but also to mark the particular Bunge faction meeting there as the main part of the movement. In many ways the park and the movement have a dialogical relation, as Jeevanjee Gardens historically presents itself as a place that not only encourages political being but also as a place whose existence has relied on people's resistance to dominance — on their being political.

Bunge la Mwananchi members define themselves as part of a social movement, but contrary to members in many other social movements, they accept affiliation to political parties across the spectre (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2009; cf. Castells, 1983). Bunge la Mwananchi's somewhat organic growth out of the park also sets it apart from many other traditional social movements, in the respect that it has not evolved into a social movement from a fight for a specific localized goal, such as local service provision, housing rights, and local environmental issues (see Castells, 1983). This is the case of many of Bunge la Mwananchi's African allies, such as the South African slum dwellers movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, which grew out of the fight against evictions. What Bunge la Mwananchi shares with these other more traditionally founded social movements is their grassroots orientation, their un-hierarchical organization, their partiality to mass action and activism, and their revocation of class aspects, understood as a conflictual relation to the state (see Castells, 1983; Ferrarotti, 2007; Melucci, 1989).

"The Kenya we DO NOT want"

The political actions and everyday practices of Bunge la Mwananchi members relate in one way or the other to their overall aims and objectives as a movement. In order to discuss their political practices and their ways of being political, we need to contextualize the movement, by conveying its historical background, aims, and objectives.

In 2009, Bunge la Mwananchi members arranged an alternative workshop called "The Kenya we DO NOT want" in response to a highly publicized and expensive government conference titled "The Kenya we want." This workshop was motivated by what Bunge members perceived as the government's neglect of salient issues such as poverty, high food prices, corruption, and human rights abuses in its recently published vision for Kenya (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010). The alternative event and its sarcastic title reveal the arbitrariness of the government's agenda and the contention over who *is* the "We" that is spoken of, a contention that illustrates the division between the political elite and the ordinary people of Kenya.

The workshop is but one example of the activities of Bunge la Mwananchi members that express dissatisfaction with the government and the present state of things: the "common sense" that prevails in Kenyan politics. In pamphlets are phrases such as "a call for liberation" and "dreaming of another Kenya," as well as "We aspire to mobilize one Kenyan at a time into a strong political force that will transform Kenya's politics" (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010, p. 8). In their activities and in their written sources, it is apparent that members are working to create "infrastructures of resistance" to engender the societal change needed for political transformation in Kenya. The overlapping desires for political transformation are expressed and employed in the members' daily debates and actions in the park.

Furthermore, Bunge la Mwananchi's mission statement reiterates the same quest for "a Kenya where citizens enjoy unfettered sovereignty to organize so as to free themselves from all forms of oppression and domination; are aware of their socio-economic and political rights and responsibilities, demand accountability, and have accessible opportunities and resources to realize their full potential" (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010, p. 10). The very foundation of Bunge la Mwananchi, the quest for change, and the will to fight for transformation by challenging, redefining, and exposing, is consistent with Isin's (2002; 2005) ideas of being political, as it is about questioning the authority of leaders by making claims of freedom, rights, and justice. The goal that is fervently pursued is change, inclusion, and influence, and it is about setting the agenda for the leaders from under a tree.

A Politics without Boundaries and Bureaucracy

Bunge la Mwananchi is not registered with the Non-Governmental Organisation Co-ordination Board of Kenya as an NGO, nor with the Department of Culture and Social Services or any Provincial Administration as a community-based organization. In addition, the movement is not the project of any organization, business, or politician. Consequently, Bunge la Mwananchi has often been criticized for not having a formal or registered status. It is accused for being a movement that is not expressly anchored in the governmentality of a "liberal democracy,"⁶ and of merely "doing noise" and being no better than "mobsters,"⁷ as

⁶ The assumption that Kenya is any sort of democracy would be sneered at during any Bunge la Mwananchi meeting.

⁷ On a Kenyan Discussion Platform called Jukwaa, Bunge's call for the resignation of members of the Kenyan cabinet who had voted against the new constitution was being discussed. One contributor to this discussion *Kamalet*, in the voicing of his discontent against this call by Bunge called them "mobsters." This can be found on the following link from the Jukwa Pro Boards site.

one observer noted. Despite this, Bunge la Mwananchi members have chosen to remain organic and informal, regardless of the fervent criticism this provokes (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010).

What are the reasons for this rejection of formality, the disavowal of an institutionalized status that would confer legitimacy and allow for the negation of the “noise makers” title? In this section we analyse in detail the reasons for the aversion to institutionalization. Although Bunge la Mwananchi members are insistent about not registering, they still consent to alliances with many of the formal organizations that constitute the “Euro Dollar Chaser Industry,” as the movement members have dubbed the NGOs and other civil society organizations whose intentions they often hold suspect (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010).

The reluctance of Bunge la Mwananchi members to institutionalization indicates their concern with the stringencies that would result from such a formality. For the purposes of this article, these concerns are captured in three broad and overlapping themes.

First, there is a recognition by members of Bunge la Mwananchi that the registering body that would confer to them an institutional legitimacy is part of the very same governing structure and “historical bloc” (Gramci, 1971) that contributes to their marginality and the severe human conditions that most Kenyans live in. Therefore, participation in this system would render the task of questioning the arbitrariness of dominance increasingly difficult, a task Isin (2002) asserts as imperative for being and becoming political. This is because registration in any national organization would regulate and restrain Bunge la Mwananchi’s activities much more than the periodic disruption of their meetings by the police, thus hindering the counter-hegemonic strategies and technologies that are essential to the movement (cf. Gramsci, 1971). Further-

more, this is coupled with the reality that a large majority of the organizations that are registered often become part of what Shivji (2007) terms the “neo-colonial offensive” and what Bunge la Mwananchi members deem the “Euro-Dollar chaser Industry” (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010). In regards to the latter, the Bunge la Mwananchi secretariat asserts,

The mainstream civil society has turned itself into “Euro-Dollar” chaser industry focussed on championing Western interests at all costs. This repugnant behaviour has turned civil society into an elite society of academics writing proposals, papers, holding workshops and press conferences one after the other, without much or anything to show for it in terms of positive change. It is the impatience with this sad state of affairs and an appreciation of a functional civil society as strong pillar in a functional democracy that formed the crucible that crystallised Bunge la Mwananchi as an organic movement. The movement is an initiative to leverage people's individual passions to create collective action and to put a human face on depersonalized policy discussions on complex socio-economic problems bedevilling a majority of our people (Bunge la Mwananchi Secretariat, Bunge La Mwananchi, 2010).

Nevertheless, it is important to re-emphasize that Bunge la Mwananchi members often create alliances with some of these “Euro–Dollar Chaser” organizations. Isin points out that “while the logics of exclusion would have us believe in zero-sum, discrete and binary groups, the logics of alterity assume overlapping, fluid, contingent, dynamic and reversible boundaries and positions where beings engage in solidaristic strategies” (2002, p. 17). These alliances are forged in accordance with a solidarity strategy, with the ultimate goal of political transformation. Bunge la Mwananchi's mission is defined by the following three enterprises: “organizing citizenry, setting the agenda, transforming lives” (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010).

Second, as has been discussed earlier, Bunge la Mwananchi is a movement that began through informal and organic embodied practices that were not the impetus of any institution. Akin to

many of the historical resistance movements in Kenya, Bunge la Mwananchi was merely continuing "the culture of coming together among Kenyans, formally or informally, in neighbourhoods, at the markets, on the roadside, under a tree etc to dialogue on pertinent community issues" (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010). Members assert that it is this type of coming together "that fomented political consciousness among Kenyans for self determination towards democratic rule" and moreover that

This politics-motivated coming together can be traced to the 80s and 90s, during the agitation for multiparty democracy, when it was difficult to freely organize political meetings in fear of former President Moi's use of the Kenya Police to terrorise dissenting voices. During this period of terror, Kenyans involved in the underground struggle for change would hold secret meetings, especially in the parks such as Jeevanjee Gardens Park in Nairobi to exchange views on Kenya's political problems (Bunge la Mwananchi Secretariat, Bunge La Mwananchi, 2010).

A formalized status would not sustain the informality that is characteristic of this type of grassroots organizing. The formalizing of Bunge la Mwananchi, and the hierarchy that would be imposed by institutionalization, would work to negate the intentional personal-community and inclusive dynamic that prevails, a dynamic that permits for people from all walks of life — "progressive university intellectuals, conscious students, politicians and the disempowered population of workers, peasants and unemployed" (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2009) — to come together. Rather than allowing for "the reality of the social world [where] in the everyday experiences of beings, there are no clear group boundaries and group identifications or affiliations and disassociation or differentiations are multiple, fluid and overlapping" (Isin, 2002, p. 16), the registration of Bunge la Mwananchi would lead to the privileging of such factors as education, professionalism, national identification documents, hierarchical structures, and registration fees. This would create both tacit and visible limitations to partici-

pation, engendering ruptures between this organic social movement and the history that provoked its becoming.

In addition, the issues that are interrogated and the “direct political action” employed by Bunge la Mwananchi members (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010) would not be possible if the movement’s actions had to be approved by an overseeing body. As a consequence of their deliberate institutional marginality, members can freely discuss Kenya’s “flag independence” and “imperialist allies.” And they can support and contextualize comments on their website about being “governed by mostly mentally ill or bankrupt, definitely in all cases stupid self-serving politicians, each aspiring to be the richest lazy fool in the world sitting like an over-fed baboon atop the tallest tree in our devastated and rotting vineyard, savouring their exploits amidst squalor, hunger and decaying corpse” (Osahon, 2010). If Bunge la Mwananchi were registered or a project of a civil society group, the explicit and unrelenting opinionation and direct political action employed by members would most likely be vetoed by a governing body or an organization accountable to an international donor or the national government.

Its informal status, which initially appears to emphasize the boundaries to political participation, conversely works to the benefit of Bunge la Mwananchi. For it is in the role of outsiders within a “passive revolution” that members are able to more efficiently and creatively question the arbitrariness of the municipal and national governments. As we have seen, Bunge la Mwananchi members are able to participate in both formal and informal settings, and they navigate and transgress these boundaries with an immense knowledge of the city, with resourcefulness and determination to carry out their political agenda. Isin argues that “we may owe the existence of politics not to citizens but to [...] outsiders” (Isin, 2002, p. 26), and in this regard we can think of Bunge la Mwananchi members’ intentional marginality in relation

to Kenyan formal politics as a positional strategy, one that allows them to more insightfully challenge the hegemony of the dominant political class.

The "Mwananchi Freedom from Hunger Train": Debating the City

When Rasmussen passed by Jeevanjee Gardens on a February day in 2010, there was a heated debate about the constitutional draft that was being assessed by the government. A group of men were concerned about rumours that rights for homosexuals would be introduced in the proposed constitution. In response to this concern, others argued that it was a strategic card played by clever politicians who wanted to divert people's attention from the "real issues" by introducing a controversial theme such as gay rights. On a previous occasion, the debate had been about food shortages in remote areas of Kenya, and another day it had concerned housing and civic rights. On all of these occasions there was consensus that the "real issues" of food shortages and housing policies were grave and required immediate resolution. Despite this consensus, there was disagreement about how best to solve the problems and where to place the responsibility for their persistence. Despite Bunge la Mwananchi's declared openness to all party affiliations and ethnic identities, issues of who to blame sometimes brought about accusations of ethnically motivated politics, which then fuelled debates about ethnicity internally in Bunge.

Though the debates in Jeevanjee Gardens are often vibrant, detailed, and well informed, they are more often than not characterized by disagreement, and few decisions and agreements are actually made here. Many people from Jeevanjee Gardens meet in small groups in restaurants and teahouses around the city before or after going to the park. It is often in these small groups of likeminded people that activities are planned and decisions are

taken. After brainstorming beforehand about what activities should take place, these groups then introduce their ideas in Jeevanjee Gardens in order to gain wider support in terms of mobilizing people or raising funds. Nevertheless, regardless of the popularity of proposed ideas, they usually do not remain uncontested.

A number of these different groupings affiliated with Bunge la Mwananchi collaborate with civil society organizations and NGOs, which in turn are intent on making alliances with this increasingly powerful and ubiquitous grassroots movement. Bunge la Mwananchi members have been involved in spearheading a demonstration for a proposed free information bill in parliament. They have been commentators at public debates at cultural institutions such as the Goethe Institute and fierce critics of impunity at debates arranged by Release the Political Prisoners and Kenyans Against Impunity. Furthermore, one evening while Rasmussen watched a public debate on TV, a participant from the audience who had asked critical questions introduced himself as a member of Bunge la Mwananchi. As briefly illustrated by the above examples, the members of Bunge la Mwananchi are negotiating and pushing their way into debates all over the city and they take every opportunity to get their message across.

French philosopher de Certeau (1988) has written about how the ordinary person can change and influence the city space by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the moment. He defines space as relational, that is, the meaning ascribed to a certain space depends on the people passing through this space and the events that take place there. Therefore, space is not defined only by its immediate functions or by the intentions ascribed to it by planners and lawmakers. Central to de Certeau's theory of man's appropriation of space is that it is temporal. De Certeau argues that the ordinary person influences space through hers or his practices in it, but these actions only redefine the meaning of a

certain space for a short time as the space opens itself to other influences and other inscriptions when the person leaves. In other words "what he gains he can't keep", but this does not diminish the power of what has been gained in that moment.

When Bunge la Mwananchi members use events other than their own to make their voice heard, they take advantage of the moment, redefine the space, and make it theirs. When moving within and about Nairobi to attend various events, they take advantage of what the city has to offer in terms of public platforms and in this way they expand their use of space beyond Jeevanjee Gardens. Regardless of whether their appropriations of city space are temporary, they change the meaning of spaces and events by using them as platforms for their political agenda.

It is important to note that Bunge la Mwananchi members are not only using and transforming the city by capitalizing on others' forums, they are above all trying to spread their debate all over the city and the country. The members that come to Jeevanjee Gardens come from every corner of Nairobi and its surrounding estates (neighbourhoods), and it is through these members that the debating forums (so-called congresses) will be set up in the aforementioned locations. Aligned to this pursuit, Bunge la Mwananchi members initiated what they call the "Mwananchi Freedom from Hunger Train."

From various often poor and peripheral locations around the city, a commuter train carries people to work in central Nairobi and the industrial area every morning and back home in the evening. On one occasion, likely familiar with the train's winding journeys and the sheer number of passengers that accompany it on its long sojourn, some members of Bunge la Mwananchi boarded the night commuter train with the intention of engaging the Nairobi workers in political discussion. They carried with them 2,500 leaflets titled "Why are President Kibaki and Prime Minister Railia begging Foreigners to feed Kenyans" (Bunge La

Mwananchi, 2010) that highlighted the grave food situation that many Kenyans faced. These leaflets discussed the food crisis in the country and provided salient information to the commuters while also acting as an icebreaker of sorts for these activists. With activities such as these, Bunge La Mwananchi members are taking their political debate out of the park and bringing it to the residents of Nairobi, in this way debating the city. On the one hand, they are debating a specific topic — the city — by discussing issues that affect the majority of Nairobians and Kenyans. At the same time, they are actively carrying out the practice of political debate, that is, debating all over the city while moving through it, while engaging the residents who compose the life that is debated in the city.

Through this political praxis, members of Bunge are mobilizing others to become political. While mobilizing people to participate in political debates and while creating political awareness, they train people to argue and agitate for their political viewpoints, viewpoints that in their difference from the prevailing "common sense" are themselves counter-hegemonic. Furthermore, in debating the city, Bunge la Mwananchi members are transforming the meaning of city space, as what used to be a commuter train for workers is suddenly turned into a rolling political debate forum. A similar point can be made about the congresses set up in the "slums," for a corner at the marketplace in Mathare slum no longer remains just a trading space but is rapidly converted into a venue for political debate. While navigating through the formal and informal public political spaces of Nairobi, the members of Bunge la Mwananchi are working on the city, democratizing it. They practice a politics without boundaries by challenging, transgressing, and expanding the notions of what a given space means by temporarily turning it into a political space, and these moments of spatial appropriation are simultaneously moments of the political (cf. de Certeau, 1988, & Isin, 2002).

Writing on the everyday practices in urban Africa, urban theorist Simone concludes that power in urban Africa “increasingly derives from a capacity to transgress spatial and conceptual boundaries, erasing clear distinctions between private and public, territorial borders, exclusion and inclusion” (2006, p. 357). Through members counter-hegemonic actions that transform both political and physical space, Bunge la Mwananchi, similar to other African organizations such as the aforementioned Abahlali baseMjondolo, is becoming increasingly more powerful as a grassroots organization and conferring knowledge about how to transgress political and spatial boundaries, while above all engendering alternative ways to seek inclusion for those who are put at the most at risk by dominant political interests.

Ironic Practices: Inverting the Meaning of Arrests

Isin refers to Wirth, the Chicago School sociologist who states that groups who are conscious of their oppression and their rights are a political force to be reckoned with (2002, p. 20). We observed this dialectic relation between rights awareness and political power in a number of encounters between Bunge la Mwananchi members and the police. Members of the movement articulated the police’s interference with the movement’s activities and meetings as an example of the state’s violation of their civic rights, but also as the state’s implicit recognition of them as a politically influential force. Every now and then, the police interfere in the daily debates at the park in order to stop or disturb the planning of coming events, or as some participants of the movement stated, “to scare people” from engaging in the forum (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2010; Human Rights House, 2010). Though the police interferences had the immediate effect of dispersing most attendants, the interferences also provoked creative resistance against this violent manifestation of state control.

However, not all confrontations with the police are about existing rights. They may also be about gaining new rights by challenging the legal system. Activists from Bunge la Mwananchi have been arrested at different times and charged with incitement to disobedience, idling, and disorderly behaviour, perfunctory charges often laid when the police respond to resistance to the state's dominance. When such arrests occur, other members of Bunge la Mwananchi contact supportive lawyers and often try to mobilize people to go to court and to rally in support of the arrested outside of the courthouse.

One day in December 2008 outside the Kibera Court, a small crowd of Bunge la Mwananchi supporters awaited the hearing of some of their "comrades" who had been arrested for incitement at a demonstration. As the arrested were released, one of them conveyed that she was not concerned about the arrest. It was her third pending case and she had kept a low profile until recently, while another case reached its conclusion. "I can only afford three cases at the time,"⁸ she said in a matter-of-fact tone. It took a short investigation to reveal that some of the more engaged activist members of Bunge la Mwananchi deliberately got themselves arrested at public gatherings and demonstrations in order to put pressure on the judicial system in terms of extra workload and extra costs for running minor cases. These deliberate arrests are aimed at exposing what the activists perceive as the absurdity and unjustice of a legal system that criminalizes dissent. As a consequence, these members of Bunge la Mwananchi seek to invert the outcome of the arrests by turning a means of government repression into a burden for the judiciary. Therefore, what on the surface may appear to be a mechanical arrest by a police officer in order to maintain law and order is in fact the result of a political strategy aimed at change.

⁸ BW, personal communication December 2008.

In rhetoric and linguistics studies the act of inverting the meaning of a given word in order to reveal an underlying meaning is called irony (Burke, 1969, p. 512). The quality of irony not only makes it an obvious tool for uttering or acting out a critique, it also includes a creative element through its ability to transform the meaning of an utterance or act into a different significance. If this definition of irony is applied to the activists' deliberate arrests, these actions can be seen as enactments of irony or ironic practices that are resourceful ways of challenging existing politics (cf. Isin, 2002, p. 26).

Bunge la Mwananchi members' use of irony is not only expressed in subtle ways such as arrests; the ironic mocking of the political elite is central to the movement's counter-hegemonic foundation and is discernable even in its name. As mentioned in the introduction, the English translation of Bunge la Mwananchi is The People's Parliament. By claiming to be a parliament for the people, the movement critiques the real parliament for not representing the ordinary Kenyan people, a critique that they act out in their daily practices.

Bunge la Mwananchi holds elections every two years, and anybody who signs up in advance can vote. At the August 2009 elections in Jeevanjee Gardens, the ballot boxes were made of transparent plastic, an intentional gesture that highlighted the accusations of rigged ballot boxes during the general Kenyan elections of December 2007 and the overall lack of transparency in Kenyan politics. A rewording of the Kenyan national anthem reveals further ironic commentary. On their website, Bunge La Mwananchi members have reworked the second verse, which is full of calls for patriotism, national service, and sincerity. The national anthem had been written hastily in a bid to replace "God Save the Queen," which had been the anthem of the British Empire. The second verse of Kenya's English national anthem reads:

Let one and all arise
With hearts both strong and true
Service be our earnest endeavour
And our homeland of Kenya
Heritage of Splendour
Firm may we stand to defend.

The Bunge la Mwananchi, version however, evokes a less patriotic fervour:

Let all politicians arise
With scams both wily and foolproof
Eating be our earnest endeavour
And our cake-stand of Kenya
Heritage of Plunder
May we fight forever to perpetuate
(Bunge la Mwananchi Secretariat, Bunge La Mwananchi, 2010)

A further example of Bunge la Mwananchi's attempts at turning things on their head through the use of irony is the aforementioned workshop, "The Kenya we DO NOT want." In addition, in 2007 when Nairobi hosted the World Social Forum, a global grassroots event, Bunge la Mwananchi members arranged a successful Mock Social Forum for the local civil society and grassroots organizations not included in the official event.

In anthropological studies of political rhetoric and everyday resistance, irony and ironic practices are categorized as a tool for opposition and as a weapon of the weak (de Certeau, 1987; Herzfeld, 1997; Paine, 1981; Scott, 1985). The ambiguous character of irony that permits for a word or an action to mean something other than what it seems to mean implies that irony and ironic actions are best suited as responses to other people's statements and actions, as it is dialectic and therefore depends on existing statements and actions to reveal its dualistic potential (Burke, 1969; Paine, 1981). Most oppressed, subjugated, and opposition groups are in positions where they are not in charge of the overall agenda but are charged to react and respond to the

work and actions of a dominant other. The use of irony as a political tool then, requires the ability to take advantage of the moment and the chance openings in creative and spontaneous ways such as when the members of Abahlali baseMjondolo, in response to a declaration that they were criminal and "out of order," fervently asserted that "when order means the silence of the poor then it is good to be out of order" (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2010). Similarly, Bunge la Mwananchi's use of irony is political as it transgresses and challenges the boundaries established by a hegemonic politic and thus succeeds in revealing the exclusion, the hidden agendas, and the arbitrariness of the "common-sense" means of governance in Kenya

"Setting the Agenda for Our Leaders from under a Tree"

In this paper we endeavoured to convey the transgressions of political boundaries that are evident in the everyday political practices of the Kenyan grassroots movement Bunge La Mwananchi. In this pursuit we have highlighted how members' creative and often counter-hegemonic technologies and transgressions are dependent on space in the city (both political and physical) and how they concomitantly work to redefine, transform, and reclaim these spaces. In this regard, the public park Jeevanjee Gardens, which hosts daily debates, has a central position and provides for the otherwise grassroots character of the movement and the relative fluidity of activities. Though the location of Bunge la Mwananchi meetings could be anywhere, Jeevanjee Gardens' particular history of resistance and democratic struggle succeeds in enriching the counter-hegemonic processes of Bunge la Mwananchi, as it is illustrative of the possibilities that can be garnered by a strong inclusive political praxis.

This analysis was anchored in Isin's (2002; 2005) discussion of the political, which defines political being as the result of po-

litical actions, meaning the ability to question the arbitrariness of dominant governing and governance. We have attempted to turn specific aspects of Isin's genealogical and philosophical argument into applicable tools for understanding and investigating everyday political practices and processes. As Isin's argument departs into a discussion of the notion of citizenship as rooted in the city, we have related his ideas of becoming political to de Certeau's (1988) notions of everyday urban resistance and strategies of spatial appropriation to understand not only how becoming political is linked to the city as a historical institution, but also to reveal how the city as a physical and political space is informed by people's being and becoming political. In addition, in order to articulate Bunge la Mwananchi's practices more profoundly, illustrating their actions towards revolutionary change while also highlighting the local and international power relations that frame Kenyan politics, we felt it was imperative to include some discussions of hegemony as articulated by Gramsci (1971). It is through these complementary scholarly dialogues that we have endeavoured to illustrate Bunge La Mwananchi's praxis, their actions to piece together structures of resistance, which in the not-too-distant future may finally ensure the alternate forms of democracy that are fought for by members of this grassroots movement.

Bunge La Mwananchi members, as we have discussed, perceive and position the movement as an outsider, but as an outsider in search of inclusive change rather than an outsider in search of inclusion within the state hegemony. The fact that non-registration is a deliberate strategy and not a forced position allows Bunge la Mwananchi to transgress the boundaries between formality and informality and to seek ways of questioning and revealing the arbitrariness of the government by actively playing on the ambiguity of being an outsider working on the inside or vice versa. As we have seen, both the marginality and the contradictions inherent in the physical and political space of the move-

ment contribute to the success in pursuing a politics that is boundless. This is coupled with the members' knowledge of the city, a knowledge that allows for the creative pursuance of a political agenda that above all utilizes the temporal and momentary in order to inscribe their message.

In pursuit of this politics without boundaries, Bunge La Mwananchi is placed in a dialogical relationship with the city and in this process both uses and creates the city. It is in this way that members are able to motivate, mobilize, debate, and navigate the blatant and tacit obstacles that are inherent in any political culture that privileges the narratives of the dominant. As anthropologists Das and Poole (2004) have argued, it is often at the margins of the state that alternative political practices are instituted and where political creativity is visible. It is through such deliberate marginal positioning, located under a tree, that Bunge La Mwananchi members, through their resourceful political practices, seek to set the agenda for the political leaders in Kenya. While evoking images of age-old African authority and elders' councils gathered under a tree, it is from under a tree in a city park Bunge la Mwananchi members perform and engender alternative politics, thus bridging tradition and counter-hegemonic creativity in an inclusive politics without boundaries.

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