1 *Introduction: Sovereignty on a Shoestring*

On 20 November 2012, a rebel group called M23 seized control of North Kivu's provincial capital Goma. Over the subsequent year, it would occupy a substantial portion of that Congolese province. From the outset, M23 made itself an obligatory passage point for trade by occupying such places as Kitoboko, Nyongera, Sake, Kibati, and Bunagana – all strategically situated at the heart of flows of internal displacement, minerals, aid, and trade. The rebel group handled taxation professionally: it gave out receipts, set fixed rates for different sizes and types of vehicles, and charged standardized amounts for different goods. The importance of this elaborate roadblock system for M23 is captured by the following anecdote:

> In July [2013, *red.*], the chief of finance of M23, Erasto Bahati, … wrote a memo complaining that the activities of the Mai Mai and Nyatura groups [two other Congolese armed groups] were decreasing traffic through M23 territory and consequently leading to a loss in taxes.[1]

About half a millennium ago – in 1568 to be precise – the Jaga made a similar move, conquering a particularly strategic point along a key trade route in what is today Congo. 'This', writes Jan Vansina, a preeminent authority on pre-colonial Central Africa, 'was the first instance of an inland people attempting to gain wealth by cutting out middlemen along the trade routes.'[2] Although both these events stand out, they do so only as clear instances of contemporary strategies with a much broader purchase. Today there are so many

[1] UN (2014) *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2014/42)*, New York: United Nations, paras. 33–34.

[2] J. Vansina (1990) *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 201. While historians often use 'Jaga' mistakenly to refer to a people, contemporaries used it to refer to anyone engaged in raiding. For discussion, see J. Staller (2019) *Converging on Cannibals: Terrors of Slaving in Atlantic Africa, 1509–1670*, Athens: Ohio University Press.

roadblocks in Central Africa that it is hard to find a road which does *not* have one; and in the centuries following the Jaga episode, numerous African polities would be crafted out of the control of bottlenecks along trade routes. This book is about these roadblocks, about how control over passage points along trade routes embodies a key form of power and an object of struggle in Central Africa, present-day and historical. Both examples illustrate a strategy which I will call 'roadblock politics', in which actors impose themselves on strategic points of passage in flows of people and goods, to derive power from the capacity to disrupt this movement.

This book is the result of seven years of research on roadblocks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR), through which over 1,000 of them were uncovered. Their density is so high in both countries that a map showing only the coloured dots of roadblocks could pass for a map of transport routes. The book takes a journey along those roadblocks, on the way offering an exploration of the hitherto invisible web of politics with which these roadblocks mesh – roadblock politics. To appreciate the political significance of roadblocks, we need a different theory of power, one that goes against the grain of conventional state theory and what it has to say about the roots of conflict and order in Central Africa. If established approaches to state-making often emphasize power as having to do with centralized control over territory and population, key to the story this book attempts to tell is a conception in which control over the movement of people and goods is central to patterns of state formation and conflict.

Whereas roadblocks are of course central to this story, the term roadblock politics casts a wider net, taking in the struggles and forms of power involved in the universal aspirations to make things circulate and to derive power – political, financial, or symbolic – from the capacity to slow them down. I start with the example of M23 because they temporarily laid claim to what can be considered the prize of roadblock politics: to occupy obligatory points of passage in crucial global supply chains, positioning themselves in such a way that they become un-skirtable – *incontournable* in French. It is for this reason that one M23 roadblock operator could claim in an interview: 'here, the road passes through *here*', while pointing to his pocket.[3]

[3] Interview, Goma, 2013.

While the roadblocks discussed in this book physically materialize in Central Africa, they are by no means local phenomena. Peddlers and aid organizations, mineral traders and farmers, smugglers and multinational corporations all contributed to M23's rebellion: the armed group made an estimated USD 180,000 a month from their taxation of these different local and global flows, turning their year-long 'rebellion' into an economically viable and potentially self-sustaining enterprise. Whereas global supply chains are usually thought of as a separate matter, as something fundamentally different from Central Africa's endemic conflict, the strings of roadblocks in the region mark the pathways through which such global supply chains come to life. Precolonial African communities, similarly, crafted their polities out of the capacity to tax long-distance trade flows which eventually connected back to European, Asian, or American consumers. Given that part of what travels along Central African roadblocks tangles into global supply chains, this book is also by necessity an exploration of the politics of global trade and how it links to patterns of conflict and violence in Central Africa. It thus puts roadblocks on the map not only as a pervasive phenomenon with certain empirical features, but also as a key political technique in the struggle to shape mobile economies that extend far beyond the region, ultimately linking to far-flung places.

Sovereignty on a Shoestring

In order to understand the broader question of roadblock politics and global supply chains, we need to appreciate how logistics and power hang together. The political stakes of roadblocks are not self-evident. Henry Morton Stanley derided the transit taxes he encountered along nineteenth-century Central African caravan routes as 'extortion' or 'blackmail' many a time over; most of his contemporaries concurred. Similarly, today's roadblocks are usually treated as having no political intentionality at all, framed instead as everyday petty corruption, symptomatic of deeper and more significant patterns of crisis and state fragility. Such broader issues of war, underdevelopment and violence in Central Africa are in turn approached with reference to other preconceptions about what matters to political order and what doesn't. In relation to Central Africa, such questions often quickly slip into a discussion of 'conflict minerals'. The conflicts in the region, the argument goes, revolve largely around profits derived from control over the

exploitation of mineral resources. Mineral resources, to be sure, play a role in financing conflict in these countries. But how come conflict also keeps dragging on in those areas of Central Africa where few mineral resources are to be found?

M23's strategy might have sat uncomfortably with received notions of what drives conflict in Central Africa, but it was hardly surprising to Congolese. Politico-military actors of all stripes focus their efforts disproportionately on trade routes, and roadblocks are a primary means of financing the exploits of many Central African armed groups – particularly so if, like M23, they don't control much mineral-rich territory. Or as Jean, a Congolese rebel-turned-army-commander we'll meet again later, puts it: 'The first thing you do when you are deployed somewhere is to build a hut against the rain. The second thing is to set up a roadblock to get food and make some money.'[4]

These examples point to something else that is at stake, namely, how we tend to think of the spatial reach of states. Ignoring the stakes involved in the messy politics of control over circulation reflects a parochial underlying conception of political order. It is the conception implicit when the CAR is labelled 'worse than a failed state', a 'phantom state', or when observers argue that Congo's extent of state failure is such that they wonder why it persists at all.[5] Taking it one step further, some have questioned these countries' very existence as states. As countries they do of course exist – yet what these authors imply is that they radically fall short of what we usually expect of 'states'. At the heart of such all too frequent observations sits a conception of state power in terms of exclusive control over force throughout a national territory and over its population. Absent this control – and here the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes is frequently invoked – reigns anarchy.[6] The classical doctrine of statehood is so familiar that it requires no further spelling-out here. Even scholars at

[4] Interview, Goma, March 2018. Unless otherwise indicated, fictive names are used to protect interviewees, and all translations from French, both of interviews and written sources, are my own.

[5] See, for instance, J. Herbst & G. Mills (2009) There is no Congo: why the only way to help Congo is to stop pretending it exists, *Foreign Policy* (18 March); ICG (2007) *Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State*. Washington, DC: International Crisis Group.

[6] For discussion, see S. Autesserre (2009) Hobbes and the Congo: frames, local violence, and international intervention, *International Organization* 63(2), 249–280.

the forefront of exploring the diverse historical shapes of state-making assume in the end that states have always harboured the wish to control as much territory and population as possible. In fact, states are often simply equated with this very ambition. Historians of African state formation have largely fallen into line with this doctrine. Jeffrey Herbst, in his seminal treatment of the topic, writes that the kind of politics that prevailed in pre-colonial Africa, in fact, had little to do with state power. States, for Herbst, are 'only viable if they are able to control the territory defined by their borders'.[7] Or take Robert Bates, who equally holds 'the centralized alternative' to be inherently superior and therefore more desirable than the kind of scattered polities that dotted the pre-colonial African landscape.[8]

These precepts have been used overwhelmingly to construe contemporary Central African states as weak or failing. Read along the lines of state-making-as-usual, granted, both countries don't score too well: Congo is home today to over 120 armed groups[9], and the government of the Central African Republic proverbially holds little sway beyond the capital, Bangui. Not only states, but rebels too, are usually measured against the same yardstick. One contributor to a recent volume on rebel governance, for instance, proposes that 'rebel governance, at a minimum, means the organization of civilians within rebel-held territory for a public purpose'.[10] Again we see territory and population serving as the yardstick of meaningful political agency. Absent these, so goes the argument, no meaningful governance, whether by states or rebels, can be spoken of. But what if this approach to statehood hides more than it reveals, concealing a thriving and very efficient form of power, but one obverse to the categories we are used to deploying when talking about states, failed or successful? What if Central African conflicts also involve ambitions different from those of totalitarian control over resources, territory and population?

[7] J. Herbst (2000) *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 3.
[8] R. H. Bates (1983) *Essays on the Political Economy of Rural Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24.
[9] See J. Stearns & C. Vogel (2017) The landscape of armed groups in Eastern Congo: fragmented, politicized networks, *Kivu Security Tracker* (December).
[10] N. Kasfir (2015) Rebel governance – constructing a field of inquiry: definitions, scope, patterns, order, causes, in A. Arjona, N. Kasfir & Z. Mampilly (eds.) *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (pp. 21–46), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24.

Roadblocks, Logistics and Power

Along the muddy roads and forested rivers snaking through Central Africa, rebels and soldiers, traditional authorities and civil servants, erect roadblocks where they deploy the threat of violence to impose their will on passers-by. While roadblocks are essentially premised on violence, this violence is not wanton. Roadblocks – or checkpoints – embody a form of control over circulation at narrow points of passage, control that can be translated into other forms of power, whether symbolic, financial or political. In the process, roadblocks interact with the economic, social, and political order within which they are situated. Roadblocks are, then, to borrow from Charles Tilly, epoch-specific repertoires of collective action, which can both function as a vehicle for popular mobilization and turn into tools of repression.[11]

To open up a space where roadblocks might equally serve projects of state-making and to resist those very same projects, I borrow from the stance first adopted by the enigmatic French political anthropologist Pierre Clastres in the 1970s. 'Rather than representing all social alternatives as incomplete states,' Zoë Strother summarizes his posture, 'he instead proposes to take seriously – as a product of choice, decision, and intention – the strategies by which many societies have actively thwarted the development of coercive authority.'[12] When active resistance becomes part of the vocabulary through which to read roadblock politics, we open up a space in which questions of political fragmentation in Central Africa can be discussed not merely as the absence of meaningful politics but perhaps also in terms of intended outcomes. Understanding roadblock politics means understanding this contestation, exploring how Africans recur to a specific form of violence to either seek and seize upon opportunities brought by the movement of people and goods, or conversely to withstand disruptive outside forces that arrive along pathways of circulation.

[11] C. Tilly (1993) Contentious repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834, *Social Science History* 17(2), 253–280.

[12] Z. S. Strother (2004) Architecture against the state: the virtues of impermanence in the Kibulu of Eastern Pende chiefs in Central Africa, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63(3), 272–295, 273; see P. Clastres (1987) *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, New York: Zone Books.

But roadblocks only harbor political possibilities when the terms of passage are locally enforced, contested, or negotiated. Taking a long view, the historical record suggests that this is more feasible in some times and places than others, namely in contexts where capital accumulation concentrates disproportionately in trade rather than in production, but which are characterized by an absence of monopoly control over logistical space. For instance, in centralized states where trade goods are conveyed through narrow, purpose-built, and tightly administered channels, the possibility of manufacturing this form of political power out of distance is, if not precluded, then at least reduced to a select number of often highly policed trans-shipment points.

Broadly speaking, the history of roadblock politics can be divided into three parts: its long heyday, when polities could be forged out of nothing more than the localized power to disrupt long-distance trade; its demise in the wake of the transport revolution in the late nineteenth century; and its reappearance when tightly administered trade gave way to deregulated supply chain capitalism across the globe since the 1970s.[13] The key ingredient determining this historical variation, I suggest, is the waxing and waning of the logistical power of the state. Others have already pointed out that the reach of African states within their often vast territories has been patchy at best.[14] To then assume that only full-blown control over territories and the people within them constitutes meaningful statehood misses out on what is most interesting, namely, exploring and understanding the real distribution of political power and its vagaries. Taking our cue from Eric Hobsbawm, to understand roadblock politics and its history we must therefore see it in the context of the history of power, that is, variations in control by governments or other centres of power over what goes on in their fiefs and among the people over whom they purport authority.[15] Up until the late nineteenth century, the capacity to do so was seriously curtailed for most states by what we in hindsight can identify as a lack of what James Scott has called

[13] I thank Michael Hardt for bringing to my attention that Joshua Clover proposes a very similar periodization: see J. Clover (2016) *Riot, Strike, Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*, London: Verso.
[14] C. Boone (2012) Territorial politics and the reach of the state: unevenness by design, *Revista de Ciencia Política 32*(3), 623–641; Herbst, *States and Power*.
[15] E. J. Hobsbawm (1969) *Bandits*, New York: Delacorte Press, 11.

'distance-demolishing technologies' to overcome 'the friction of terrain'.[16] Yet taking for granted the far-reaching logistical modalities that states have gained only so recently, many political scientists, historians, and even archaeologists have projected backward onto historical states the far-reaching ambitions to control populations and territory that were only realizable because of those widespread logistical powers in the first place. While grafting such territorial ambitions onto states, historic and contemporary, has been denounced as a 'territorial trap', surprisingly little has been done to formulate alternative deep logics of control enmeshed with questions of mobility for Central Africa.[17] By exploring in detail the politics behind today's roadblocks and placing them in their wider historical context, this book attempts to do just this. The remainder of this chapter provides a broad overview of the main storyline and arguments of the book, tracing the politics of control over logistical space – roadblock politics – along the rough-and-ready historical periodization proposed above: long-distance trade, infrastructural empire, supply chain capitalism.

Roadblock Polities

For much of human history, most exchange was both extremely localized and jealously regulated by local custom. When and wherever it emerged, long-distance trade was both coveted for the riches it could afford and feared for the disruptions it could entail to established orders. Roadblocks gave political form to both these sentiments, offering aspiring rulers the simplest way of claiming a share of the riches traversing their fiefs, and communities a mechanism to curb the nefarious effects of outside trade on local orders. In fact, as

[16] J. C. Scott (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 4, 11. Eric Hobsbawm was after much the same when he claimed that until roughly the end of the nineteenth century, states simply 'lacked the material means … to keep *constant* control over all their populations' (Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 14, emphasis in original). See also G. Robb (2007) *The Discovery of France*, London: Picador.

[17] J. Agnew (1994). The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of international relations theory, *Review of International Political Economy 1*(1), 53–80. However, much exciting work exists on adjacent areas in Africa. See for instance the excellent J. Quirk & D. Vigneswaran (eds.) (2015), *Mobility Makes States*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

we shall see, the historical record is littered with examples of 'toll states' located at narrow points of passage along trade routes, but these have never been drawn together as a distinct and meaningful pattern of state-making.

Yet whereas long-distance trade has a long history in some regions of the world, it came to Central Africa fairly late. Roadblock politics is a phenomenon that can only appear when long-distance trade becomes a fairly regular and capital-intensive enterprise, something which only really started to happen in the interior of Africa in the centuries after the Atlantic trade took off in the early 1500s. It did so advancing along an ever-expanding raiding frontier, at which elephants and people were systematically turned into mobile commodities through extreme violence, carried to the coast, and ultimately shipped to faraway continents. As the trade intensified in the early nineteenth century, roadblock politics ushered in a profound transformation of political authority along the pathways it took into Central Africa. To be sure, goods here had travelled long distances before, by being passed on among familiar neighbours through deeply engrained patterns of reciprocal exchange. With the sudden surge of travellers aspiring to forgo these niceties, communities resorted to levying transit taxes to regulate the increasingly frequent encounters with these strangers. In other words, the emergence of mobile economies across long distances gave rise to roadblocking as a political technique to negotiate and govern long-distance exchange. The next chapter delves into the zenith of roadblock politics in Central Africa, exploring the immense importance of control over nodes along long-distance trade routes as a key sedimentation of political contestation and conflict in pre-colonial Central Africa. Whereas the worldly powers of chiefs had hitherto been purposefully limited, the capacity to control passage points along pre-colonial highways required aspiring roadblock rulers to assume warlord-like coercive powers. As we will see, acknowledging this form of power as a meaningful form of state-making opens up a whole new geography of the political, a pre-colonial Central African political landscape populated by the likes of the Bobangi along the Congo River and the Wagogo along the trunk road between Dar es Salaam and Lake Tanganyika, who derived their might from control over key nodes along long-distance trade routes. By the end of the nineteenth century, more-or-less mature roadblock polities mushroomed along all of the trade routes.

The African experience here recounted can easily be construed as an anomaly, as an outlier to the historical experience of statecraft as usual. Nothing could be less true, and it is important to dispel this misconception from the outset. In focusing disproportionately on control over territory and population, mainstream accounts of state formation have glossed over a vast historical record to the contrary. To appreciate just how common this form of power was, we must make a short foray into the uncharted territory that is the global history of roadblock politics. To be sure, a substantial number of historical polities did achieve a high degree of centralization over large territories and populations. Yet history brims with polities which hardly aspired to control extensive swaths of territory or large populations – on the contrary. Throughout most of human history, most 'polities' were modest affairs; given the enormous efforts they would have to expend to instead tax households throughout their realms or render scattered subsistence agriculture amenable to state appropriation, 'all that remained' for pre-modern rulers, wrote the former French inspector general of finances and fiscal historian Gabriel Ardant, 'was to control circulation'.[18] Up until the late nineteenth century, the historical sociologist Michael Mann concurs, 'states were largely confined to taxing things that visibly moved around',[19] and statecraft thus usually manifested itself, rather modestly, as the attempt to control choke points on long-distance trade routes such as coastal harbours, mountain passes, junctions, watering points, and narrowing rivers. This is also what James Scott finds in his historical explorations of the earliest statelets in Southeast Asia. So pervasively was the political geography of early states draped around such choke points that Scott even refers as 'toll states' to the Malay trading port, polities along the Strait of Malacca, and numerous hill kingdoms along the region's caravan routes.[20]

Europe, usually presented as the textbook example of state-formation-as-usual, was not exempt. The continent was long home to a profusion of statelets, each levying its own transit taxes along roads, rivers, and at the entry to towns. 'In general,' wrote economic historian Eli Heckscher, 'the

[18] G. Ardant (1975). Financial policy and economic infrastructure of modern states and nations, in C. Tilly (ed.) *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (pp. 164–242), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 180.
[19] M. Mann (2008). Infrastructural power revisited, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43(3–4), 355–365, 356.
[20] Scott, *The Art*, 49–50.