



Roadblock Politics

There are so many roadblocks in Central Africa that it is hard to find a road that does *not* have one. Based on research in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR), Peer Schouten maps more than a thousand of these roadblocks to show how communities, rebels, and state security forces forge resistance and power out of control over these narrow points of passage. Schouten reveals the connections between these roadblocks in Central Africa and global supply chains, tracking the flow of multinational corporations and UN agencies alike through them, to show how they encapsulate a form of power, which thrives under conditions of supply chain capitalism. In doing so, he develops a new lens through which to understand what drives state formation and conflict in the region, offering a radical alternative to explanations that foreground control over minerals, territory, or population as key drivers of Central Africa's violent history.

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Roadblock Politics

The Origins of Violence in Central Africa

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What travels along the path might be money, gold, or commodities, or even food – in short, material goods. You don't need much experience to know that goods do not always arrive so easily at their destination. There are always interceptors who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world.

Michel Serres, The Parasite

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Preface and Acknowledgements

As a young Ph.D. student thoroughly immersed in the ‘conflict mineral’ literature, I was sent out in 2010 to Ituri, eastern Congo’s hotbed of gold mining, to do a little research for a non-governmental organization (NGO) on the relations between mining and conflict. I visited a number of artisanal mining sites. To my surprise, none of them was visibly infested with rebels. Over the next few years, I visited countless more. Very few showed any signs of conflict. To be sure, many were the ‘authorities’, traditional or state-affiliated, imposing informal taxes on gold mining, and artisanal miners led a tough life. Yet in my mind, the link between Congo’s conflict and informal mining became more and more questionable.

What did strike me though, was that in order to get to these remote mining sites, I incurred many delays, along the seemingly endless strings of roadblocks that litter eastern Congo’s roads. At the time I considered them little more than a nuisance, as my analytical aperture was fully geared towards relations of power around mining sites. When one day I decided to simply keep track of roadblocks on a 350 km stretch of road I had taken many times before, I was surprised at the result. I counted over forty of them between the border town where I started, and my destination in the heart of Ituri.

I carried this observation around in the back of my mind until I started to look at how Heineken deals with the sheer density of conflict actors in eastern Congo. Having studied the country’s private security sector at length, I had a pretty good idea beforehand what I’d find: the usual entanglements with the army and police, paid to protect corporate compounds. But again I was blinded by my analytical tunnel vision. After I landed in Goma, friends pointed out to me I ought to take a look at beer distribution rather than the security of their premises alone. This was in 2013, incidentally the heyday of a rebellion, and Goma and its surroundings were occupied by an armed group called M23. Over the following weeks, I learned how Heineken structurally

paid M23 rebels at roadblocks, to gain access to critical routes for beer distribution.

All of a sudden, things came together. How important were roadblock taxes for M23? How was it possible that a global brand was paying rebel checkpoints, without seemingly noticing this itself? If this was just *one* company and the roadblocks of *one* rebel group, what would one find if one tried to look at *all* companies and *all* roadblocks? These practical questions also led to bigger ones: what if Congo's conflict economy isn't so much about control over natural resources, but rather about control over spaces of circulation – roads? Might roadblocks form an entry point into forms of political order that somehow remain invisible in conventional state theory?

Such are the questions that animated my wanderings in Central Africa. I began by looking for answers along eastern Congo's roads and found how pervasive the phenomenon was. To obtain a more rigorous picture, I teamed with the Belgian mapping organization International Peace Information Service (IPIS) to try to map them. Over the next three years and with the help of many local researchers, I worked on mapping roadblocks and figuring out how they hung together with questions of conflict, order, as well as more mundane issues such as livelihoods and perceptions of security. We did in-field surveys using geocoded questionnaires; interviews with roadblock operators and victims; focus groups with farmers, transporters, cattle herders and women; and participatory forms of cartography together with typical road users. We asked local human rights defenders to report roadblocks and local incidents for us to follow up. Altogether, we put 800 roadblocks in eastern Congo on the map – many more than we expected to find, yet far fewer than actually exist in the region. While we eventually disposed of a solid budget, we simply ran out of money as we started mapping, leaving many areas uncovered. The outcome is as much shaped by my own obsession with roadblocks as it is by the situated preferences of the local researchers, many of whom over the years became close friends. The reader might notice, for instance, that much more nuanced detail is available for Masisi, Walikale, and Rutshuru than for other portions of eastern Congo; this is because local researchers wanted to get to the bottom of how the phenomenon affected their own communities and ancestral lands.

Wanting to make sense of what I had found in eastern Congo, I looked for ways to put the findings into perspective. I decided

I needed to be able to compare what I found in Congo, so I embarked on a similar roadblock mapping in the Central African Republic. In both countries, I interviewed many dozens of people: international conflict experts, aid workers, transporters, state agents, artisanal miners, rebels, and civilians who became specialists in human rights after their experiences with roadblock abuses. I visited rural roadblocks, police stations, rebel strongholds, United Nations (UN) and NGO offices, and cattle markets in remote territories. I befriended roadblock operators, followed truckers, artisanal miners, and women peasants around as they trudged along worn paths, and attended international policy meetings to gauge the significance of roadblocks for political order and disorder in Central Africa. As we presented preliminary results in both countries, local reporters and activists picked up the topic and started to denounce roadblock abuses, spreading debate in their own societies.

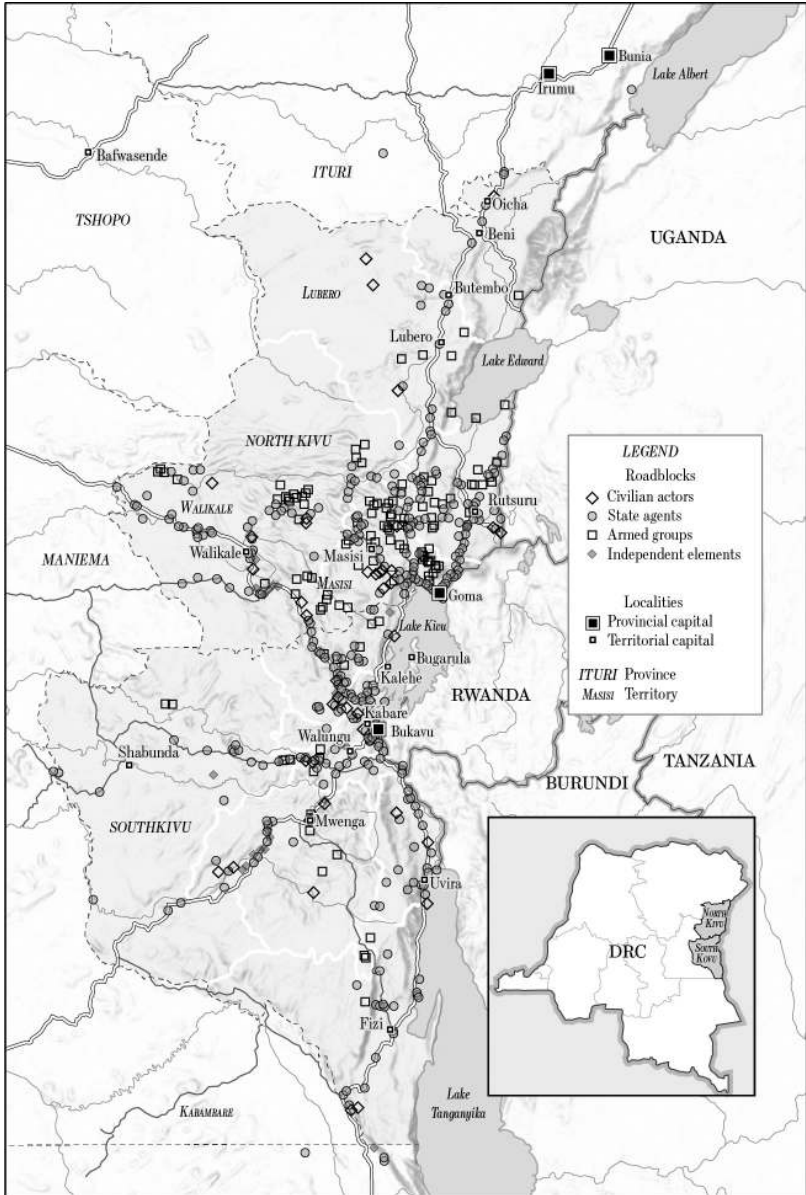
Besides studying contemporary roadblocks, I dug into the region's history to figure out exactly how it had all begun. I consulted colonial archives and compared the travelogues of early explorers with the accounts of historical anthropologists; I read up on the politics of long-distance trade on other continents to be able to put Central Africa into perspective. As I came across more and more evidence that before the Industrial Revolution, too, roadblocks formed a key tool in the arsenal of would-be public authorities – however contested – it started to make sense in all directions.

I began writing this book because I wanted to bring the sheer proportions of the phenomenon of roadblocks to the attention of scholars and policymakers interested in understanding the vagaries of conflict and order-making in contemporary Central Africa. But along the way, I also came to realize that the obstacles that roadblocks pose for political theory can be traced back to a powerful set of theoretical assumptions that began to inform the political imagination exactly at the moment that the availability of unprecedented logistical capacities to imperial powers was altering the fate of African people. To appreciate the phenomenon of roadblocks *as* political – roadblock politics – it became necessary to also engage some of the most commonplace assumptions about state-making. For a narrow version of state theory has long acted as a veil that redirected attention away from the vast sphere of abuses and conflict dynamics associated with control over the road, and towards minerals and territory. While the theoretical stakes

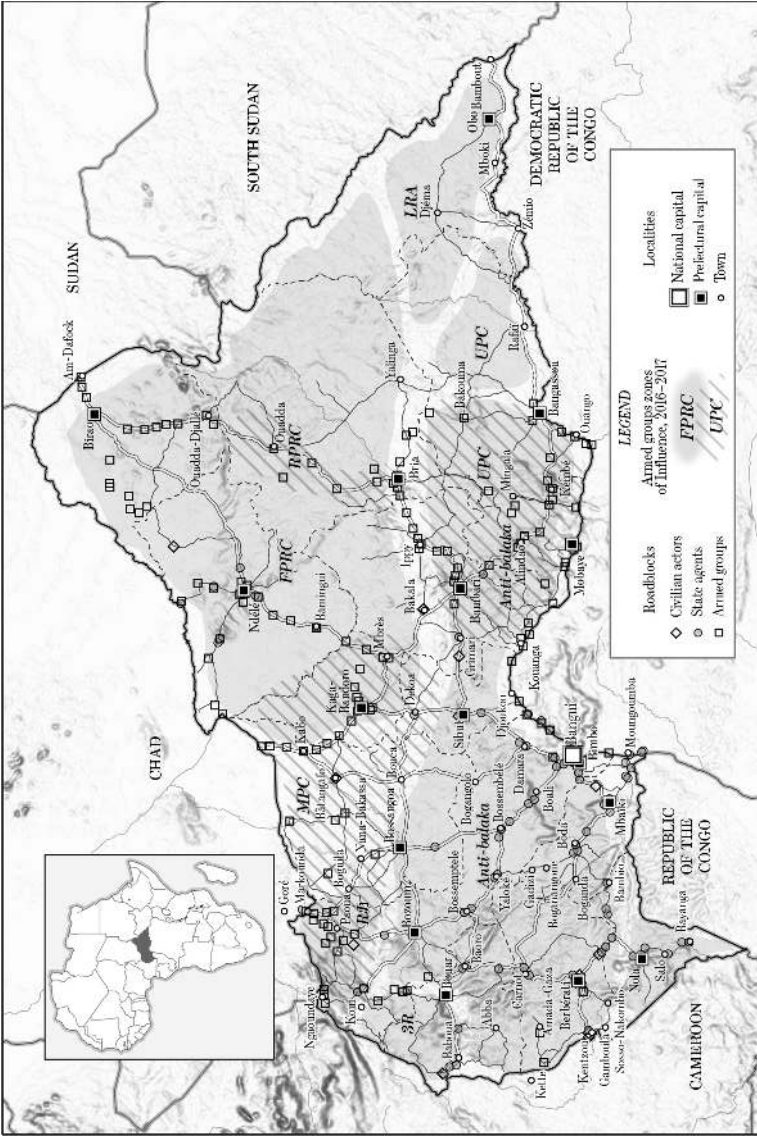
are clear, this is not primarily a work of critique. The notion of roadblock politics is ultimately no more than a ‘thinking tool’, a device to pry open new questions – and hopefully one which invites use in other contexts.

More than most academic products, this book is truly a collective effort. I have perhaps myself visited 20 per cent of all the roadblocks mapped; the bulk of empirical groundwork for this book was laid by a sizeable team of human rights activists and local researchers. The most important among them, without doubt, are Janvier Murairi and Saidi Kubuya in Goma and Soleil-Parfait Kalesoppo in Bangui. Perhaps more valuable than their enthusiasm for this project and their terrific ideas is the friendship we have built up and which will surely outlive our shared fascination with roadblocks. For intrepidly venturing out and mapping roadblocks I also have to thank Guillaume, Valentin, Fortunat, Celestin, Isaac, Jacques, Luc, Zacharie, Chrispin, Lebon, Xavier, Emmanuel, Georges, Victor, Gratiyas, and Nicksson. The mapping would equally have been impossible if the good people at IPIS – particularly Ken and Filip – hadn’t agreed as enthusiastically as they did to commit time and scarce resources to exploring roadblocks. My colleagues and friends at the Danish Institute for International Studies compelled me to write clearly and focus on the big picture. So many Congolese and Central Africans – women, transporters, local activists, and even rebels – lent their unselfish support, supplying me with detailed answers to stupid questions, that it would be impossible to start thanking them all. Many of you will however recognize yourself in anonymized quotes that I hope lend the book a bit of a human touch. A warm thanks also to Daniel Ruiz – the only high-level UN person I know with a painting of Che Guevara on his wall – as well as Faouzi, Raymond, Yannick, and the many other people within the UN who creatively worked around their Kafkaesque bureaucracy to help out. I want to thank Michael Watts and Leo Arriola at the University of California Berkeley for hosting my research stays – without your nudging I’d have never embarked on this book project. The immense generosity of all who participated – despite the smog – in the manuscript session at the Center of African Studies at Berkeley raised more rich and fundamental questions than I could possibly address in subsequent revisions. Besides Leo and Michael, Aharon de Grassi, Martha Wilfahrt, Bruce Hall, Christina Mobley, Paul Thissen, Ann Laudati, and James Smith have gone out of their way to read through the whole

beast and provide me with a lifetime of comments and questions to ponder. Many of the arguments presented here took shape during years of talks, paper presentations, and discussions, and let me say to all the people who engaged with earlier versions of the arguments in the book: I fall drastically short of incorporating all your wise advice. In particular to Judith, Christoph and the other members of the *Nganda*: the errors remaining are solely my own. Thanks to Maria Marsh for placing her confidence in this project; I could not have asked for a better assistant editor than Atifa Jiwa or a more thorough copy-editor than Ken Moxham, or for kinder reviewers. Fragments of the arguments in this book appear in the article ‘Roadblock politics in Central Africa’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 5, issue 3, 924–941 (2019), and the bulk of the data behind the book has been published in two 2017 reports: *The Politics of Pillage: the political economy of roadblocks in the Central African Republic* (with Soleil-Parfait Kalessopo) and “*Everything that moves will be taxed*”: *the political economy of roadblocks in North and South Kivu* (with Janvier Murairi and Saidi Kubuya), both of which are also available in French. The interested reader can also explore the roadblock data through interactive web maps, available at IPIS’ homepage. Funding for this research came principally from the Danish Research Council, but also from the US State Department, the International Organization for Migration, IPIS and the Belgian Development Cooperation. I also thank the Conflict Research Programme (CRP) hosted at the London School of Economics, whose Conflict Research Fellowship contributed towards research for Chapter 9. The views expressed in this book do not necessarily reflect any of these funders’ official views and/or policies. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the UN police official who scolded me in a meeting in Goma, telling me I was out of my mind as I first presented the idea to map roadblocks. Your public castigation gave me the conviction I was taking on a topic that would defy entrenched notions of political order. And above all – M, N, and O, without you, I’d be half of a P.



Roadblocks in eastern Congo



Roadblocks in the Central African Republic