

**“An Idle Mind is the Devil’s Workshop”? The Politics of Work Amongst
Freetown’s Youth**

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Abstract

Youth unemployment has been presented as a security risk to countries emerging from civil war. These assessments often rely on the assumption of a direct relationship between labour market exclusion and political violence. This thesis challenges this assumption, not by denying that the connection exists, but by suggesting that we need a better understanding of how the two are related. Through qualitative research with young people engaged precariously on the margins of the informal economy in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, the thesis explores how labour market experiences influence different patterns of political mobilisation. It puts forward that violence is not inherent to unemployment, but that the impact of joblessness on mobilisation is mediated by social factors and the specific nature of the post-war political economy. For Freetown's youth, labour market exclusion has implications for social status, identities, norms and the nature of social relations. This in turn shapes their political subjectivities and claims on the state; it structures the opportunities and constraints to their collective action; and influences their trajectories towards political violence. These processes reflect a fraught articulation between tactics employed expediently to respond to structural circumstances and longer-term aspirations. Individual attempts to survive adverse economic and political terrains coexist with work-based political claims placed on the state and aspirations of social and political inclusion, even if the two are often at odds and the former undermine the latter.

To Busta and Emperor (for/ despite everything).

To all Sierra Leoneans, in solidarity, may you find the strength to overcome yet another challenge.

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List of Abbreviations

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
APC	All People's Congress
ASTA	Abacha Street Traders' Association
BRU	Bike Riders' Union
BSA	Belgium Sellers' Association
CDF	Civil Defence Forces
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
HI	Horizontal Inequalities
IFI	International Financial Institutions
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MOFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
MLSS	Ministry of Labour and Social Security
MYA	Ministry of Youth Affairs
MYS	Ministry of Youth and Sports
NAYCOM	National Youth Commission
NDMC	National Diamond Mining Corporation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council
OSD	Operational Support Division
PBC	Peacebuilding Commission
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PSRU	Public Sector Reform Unit
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SLA	Sierra Leone Army
SLBC	Sierra Leone Broadcasting Company
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
SLST	Sierra Leone Selection Trust
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIPSIL	United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone
UNOMSIL	United Nations Observer Mission to Sierra Leone
WASSCE	West African Senior School Certificate Examination
WID	Waste Management, Improvement of the Roads and Decongestion
WSB	West Side Boys

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Glossary

<i>Attaya</i>	Chinese gunpowder tea
<i>Bad heart</i>	Selfishness
<i>Bundu</i>	Female secret society
<i>Cookry</i>	Street food stalls
<i>Djamba</i>	Marijuana
<i>Half-half business</i>	Casual trading
<i>Hustler</i>	Sex Worker
<i>Jewman (pl: jewman dem)</i>	Commission chaser(s)
<i>Make gladi</i>	To cheer for politicians
<i>Master money</i>	Ride-and-pay arrangement with motorbike owners
<i>Okada</i>	Motorbike
<i>Pikin</i>	Child
<i>Rarray Boy/Girl</i>	Hoodlum
<i>Sababu</i>	Personal connection
<i>Upline</i>	The provinces outside of Freetown

Introduction

Youth unemployment has increasingly come centre stage in policy discussions across the world. Economic adversity and a lack of jobs has placed young people in limbo, the symbol of a generation in crisis and varyingly characterised as “waithood” (Honwana 2012: 3), “blocked transitions to adult life” (Utas 2003: 6), “timepass” (Jeffrey 2010: 5) or even “social death” (Vigh 2006: 104). The need to create employment is often presented as necessary to quell a perceived risk to social stability presented by un- or underemployed youth. A 2005 report by the United Nations Office for West Africa, for example, argues that: “current levels of unemployment among young men and women in West Africa are a ticking time bomb for the region and also beyond” (UNOWA 2005: 5). Similarly, Population Action International dubbed young people as “the security demographic” (Cincotta et al 2003), in line with popular theories about the risk that a “youth bulge” might pose in terms of the likelihood of civil war (Urdal 2004). These theories have been especially prominent in countries on the brink of or just emerging from civil war, where the unemployed are presented as an explosive mixture for state stability. Underlying these portrayals of the unemployed as “ticking bombs”¹ is the assumption of a direct connection between labour market participation and the nature of young people’s political engagement. This thesis challenges this assumption, not by denying that the connection exists, but by suggesting that we need a much better grounded understanding of how the two are related. Through qualitative research with marginal youth in Sierra Leone’s capital, Freetown, the thesis therefore unpacks the relationship between labour market experiences and young people’s patterns of political mobilisation in a post-conflict country.

¹ Interview with government representative, Freetown, 7.08.2010.

Sierra Leone was in many ways the unfortunate poster child of the “ticking bomb” narrative as applied to post-conflict countries. Its civil war, taking place between 1991 and 2002, was framed as a “crisis of youth”, with young people’s prominence in all combating factions strongly linked to their lack of economic opportunities, and especially jobs, in the years leading up to the war (Abdullah 1999; Fanthorpe and Machonachie 2010; Mitton 2013; Peters 2011; Richards 1996). Amongst the debris of war, Sierra Leoneans, their government and its international partners attempted to make sense of what had happened and considered how to prevent conflict from erupting again. Sierra Leone was one of the first case studies of the United Nations’ Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), which together with the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and various development and security partners, identified youth employment as one of the crucial target areas in a strategy to avoid relapse and ensure durable peace (PBC 2007a). Despite a dearth of reliable data, unemployment was approximated to be around 70% and feared to be dangerously close to pre-war levels (UNDP 2013; PBC 2011). Youth engagement in, primarily election-related, political violence has also stoked fears of further conflict and unrest (ARI 2011; CCG 2011; Christensen and Utas 2008). These trends seem to threaten Sierra Leone’s status as “Africa’s most successful post-conflict state” (ARI 2011: 1) as an “even growing army of unemployed, socially alienated youth is a perennial threat to security” (ICG 2008: i). Employment is consequently not only a development priority but also a necessity to ensure the sustenance of a peaceful polity. The saying that “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop” is oft repeated amongst Sierra Leoneans to express concern with joblessness amongst young people.

The narratives that posit the unemployed as a potential spoiler for Sierra Leone’s attempt to avoid relapse into war is however reductive and tell us little about the processes that connect labour market experiences to young people’s involvement in political violence. They may tell compelling aggregate stories (although even the statistical data on the relationship between the

two is in fact inconclusive and patterns difficult to ascertain (Cramer 2011a)), yet they do not explain the micro-level mechanisms of the relationship or how some people starting from the same economic position might engage in different forms of political action. The imprecision of this narrative is immediately clear if we consider that “unemployment” itself may be in fact inadequate in its ability to capture the complexity of young people’s experiences of labour market dynamics in developing countries. In contexts like Sierra Leone, in fact, the lack of social security nets makes the idle masses of the unemployed a fiction (Hart 1973; Ranis and Gollin 2014; Stewart 2012). Consequently, the “unemployed” are by necessity actively engaged in different forms of work, primarily precarious and casualised activities in the informal economy (Overa 2007). We must therefore broaden our lens to focus on young people’s experiences of marginal work.

More fundamentally, the transmission mechanisms from unemployment to the potential for violence remain little understood, as we still know too little about the connection between labour market experiences and avenues of politicisation. As Cramer (2011a; 2011b) has compellingly argued, this requires serious engagement with labour markets as social institutions, in order to understand how the socially embedded experience of surviving on the margins of the formal economy and of being excluded from stable and decent employment influences patterns of political engagement. This means understanding both how labour market experiences translate into political violence and how they influence other potential avenues for political engagement. I suggest that this requires looking beyond the numbers, or beyond what Urdal (2004: 1) has termed the “devil in the demographics”, to how the “ticking bomb” narrative relates to the lives of the young people it purports to describe. Presenting a more complex picture of the relationship between youth, violence and the post-war state, I shall argue, is important not only to advance our understanding of these processes but also to counter the blanket securitisation of unemployment. The portrayal of the unemployed as a

threat *per se* risks painting a whole generation as a security risk and, short of full employment, precludes creative interventions to counter exclusion and its potentially violent outcomes.

This thesis thus sets out to answer the following research question: How do labour market experiences influence political mobilisation amongst Freetown's youth? I answer this question through an analysis of qualitative data collected amongst young people precariously engaged in different ways in Freetown's informal economy. Charting their trajectories from labour market exclusion to different forms of political engagement, I attempt to offer a more nuanced depiction of how the "ticking bombs" mobilise in the aftermath of war. In so doing I aim to contribute to the growing literature that engages with the nature and dynamics of youth politics in sub-Saharan Africa. In line with this literature, I take youth as a social and political category, rather than being constrained by chronological age, and as a life stage characterised by the inability to achieve socially sanctioned adulthood (see Chapters 1 and 4 of this thesis). The study situates itself within those approaches that look at the multifaceted nature of economic motives and their interaction with socio-political factors in determining the nature of young people's politicisation. Despite the bold claims made about the political consequences of unemployment, however, labour markets have been largely neglected or only indirectly addressed (Cramer 2011b). In addition to a more systematic focus on labour market experiences, I aim to expand on the rich literature on youth participation in violence to consider the time beyond the silencing of the guns, to probe more directly the claims made about the destabilizing effects that youth are posited to have in the aftermath of war. This also includes taking into account the opportunities and barriers to the other, non-violent, forms of mobilisation that are often hidden from view.

This introductory chapter firstly reviews the literature that provides the starting point of this study, that is, those interpretations of youth politics in fragile and post-war countries that

emphasise the destructive potential of economically excluded young people. It therefore draws out in more detail the theoretical underpinnings of the unemployment-violence nexus. Secondly, it contrasts these with different interpretations of how socio-economic factors influence youths' engagement in political violence. Thirdly, it outlines the thesis structure by introducing the notion of a "Politics of Work" to suggest how we might go about challenging reductive narratives through a specific focus on labour markets. The chapter concludes with a discussion of methodological and ethical considerations.

Makers or Breakers? Youth Unemployment and its Political Outcomes

The Post-Conflict Moment: Reconstruction and 'Surplus Populations'

The explosive potential of youth became especially salient for Sierra Leone in its post-conflict period. It is therefore important to situate the notion that unemployed youth as a security risk in the context of reconstruction efforts aimed at rebuilding a viable and peaceful state and society. While Chapter 3 looks in depth at how the "ticking bomb" narrative has developed in ways that are specific to the Sierra Leonean reconstruction environment, defining the broad contours of the post-conflict moment as understood in contemporary scholarship offers a key point of departure.

The end of the Cold War saw a marked increase in internal conflicts across the world, a phenomenon that was matched by an unprecedented level of international active engagement within states torn apart by civil war (Caplan 2005; Chesterman 2004; Harbom and Wallensteen 2010). In particular, as the United Nations (UN) increased its peacekeeping presence, it quickly became clear that durable recovery required more than simply ensuring

the end of hostilities (von Billerbeck 2011). This was further bolstered by a new interventionist doctrine that depicted internal problems such as civil war, poverty or disease, as of interest to the international community due to the threat that these occurrences pose to other countries in an interconnected world (Blair 1999; Duffield 2007; Yannis 2002). As Galtung (1969) had long advocated, therefore, peace came to be understood more positively as a deeper process of transformation. This was firstly and most eminently captured in 1992 by then Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali's *An Agenda for Peace*, which added the notion of peacebuilding to the UN's toolkit. In it, Boutros Ghali defined peacebuilding as "an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict" (UN 1992: para. 21). Without addressing and reforming those institutions and societal tensions that had brought about conflict, in other words, peace was unlikely to be sustainable.

In the post-war moment, then, conflict-affected states were to undergo transformation so as to address to root causes of war to avoid relapse. This however begs the question of what such a transformation would require. The practical implementation of peacebuilding measures starkly mirrored the normative assumptions of the international community, as a common reconstruction blueprint guided interventions across different operations. This blueprint has been characterised by scholars as "liberal peacebuilding" as it included a matrix of measures essentially aimed at building liberal market democracies (Newman et al 2009). Interventions thus included support to the reforming of institutions of governance, including the holding of elections and bolstering of rule of law, while also delineating these institutions' role in the process of economic reconstruction. This reflects the assumption that "certain kinds of (liberally constituted) societies will tend to be more peaceful, both in their domestic affairs and their international relations, than illiberal states are" (ibid.: 11). This has been seen as a manifestation of a certain narcissism as Western powers that are often at the forefront of

these interventions attempt to remake states emerging from war in their own image (Ignatieff 2003; Mustapha 2010).

As understandings of what constitutes peace expanded to include the radical restructuring of state and society, development came to play a significant role in peacebuilding discourse. Reconstruction blueprints have included a prominent focus on economic transformation, and the newly erected structures of governance are expected to deliver on socio-economic development. Of course this carries with it normative assumptions about the preferable direction of economic governance and, given these interventions' liberal mould, they have primarily promoted marketisation, liberalisation of trade and a minimalist regulatory role for the state (Paris 2002). This variant of Western narcissism has been widely criticised both by those denouncing its neo-colonial tendencies and from the point of view of its content, focusing on the likely detrimental impact on the economies and societies emerging from war (Chandler 2006; Chopra 2000; Paris 2004; Richmond and Franks 2009). For our purposes, however, what is significant is that in expanding the notion of peace, these new approaches have also widened the pool of what is seen as a threat to the stability of the post-war state. The focus on root causes and their eradication, in other words, has led to the designation of an increasing number of phenomena as a security threat. Specifically, the inclusion of development in the realm of conflict prevention relies on the conviction that underdevelopment is a likely source of violent strife.

Mark Duffield (2001: 1; 2007; 2010) has written extensively on the interventionist assumptions of a "circular complementarity" between development and security and the securitisation of development policy. He analyses how Western governments have justified development aid as a way to avert the risk of collapse in developing countries by relying on the idea that it would pose international threats in the form of refugee flows, the spread of

disease and the rise of global terrorist movements. Duffield compellingly shows how these discourses summon the image of a “surplus population”, which he characterises as “a condition of existence that, but for the changes, adaptations or opportunities that progress either demands or presents, would otherwise remain effectively useless, irrelevant or *dangerous*” (Duffield 2007:9; my emphasis). Development interventions constitute such an opportunity for progress. Duffield’s framework relies on Foucault’s notion of bio-politics as a technology of government centred on the “administration of the processes of life at the aggregate level of the population” (Duffield 2007: 7). Development, in this framework, is thus a means to control and discipline surplus populations. Without needing to stray too far into post-modernist territories, the role of development in liberal peacebuilders’ narratives can be understood as a form of pacification for sections of the population seen to present a threat.

Unemployment is the perfect example of this, as the “ticking bomb” narrative manifests. The 2011 World Development Report highlights a large population out of work as a key “stress factor” increasing the risk of violence (World Bank 2011: 74). Similarly, as we have seen, youth bulges in developing countries’ demographics are thought to increase the likelihood of civil war erupting (Urdal 2004). According to the PBC, these threats persist in the post-war period as countries are at risk of relapse given that “youth unemployment in many post-conflict countries has the potential to act as a conflict driver” (PBC 2010: 1) A significant corollary of this is the notion that employment can turn around the role of youth in these countries, or change them from “breakers” into “makers” to borrow de Boeck and Honwana’s (2005) dichotomy. Employment according to the PBC, can transform youth into “an agent of change and economic development if their potentials are harnessed with timely intervention” (PBC 2010: 1). In Duffield’s (2007) terms, the unemployed are a “surplus population” that, through intervention can be steered away from their dangerous potential.

This has consequently made youth an important aid-recipient category in post-war states (Lindberg 2014).

The problematisation of youth is by no means a recent phenomenon, or one that is restricted to war and post-war circumstances. Youths have been long portrayed dichotomously as “makers” or “breakers” (de Boeck and Honwana 2005), “vandals” or “vanguard” (Abbink 2005). These images encompass youths’ historical prominence as leaders of anti-colonial struggles or young entrepreneurs on the one hand and child soldiers and idle criminals on the other. Youth, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 20) have aptly summarised, “stands for many things: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future”. Going further back, the portrayal of youth as a potentially problematic category was also a key component of colonial strategies of control. The long-standing concern with youth defiance alarmed officials in colonial Africa, and as unemployment became a key characteristic of poverty in the colonies, idle youth were identified as delinquents and as a threat to the “late colonial ‘modernising state’” (Waller 2006: 86). Young men in particular were often framed as sexual predators, as shown by McCulloch’s (2000) study of the Black Peril in Southern Rhodesia between 1906 to 1916, when the marked escalation in perceptions of the sexual danger posed to white women by black men gave rise to a series of measures such as the Immorality and Indecency Suppression Ordinance, which allowed for stronger control over colonised men (as well as over white women). These accounts not only reflect the long history of the youth problematic, but also highlight its gendered nature, which also pervades contemporary “ticking bombs” narratives. As we shall see, the effective erasure of young female fighters from accounts of the Sierra Leone war has contributed to a post-war emphasis on the dangers of male youth (Macdonald 2008).

What is nevertheless distinctive about the securitisation of youth in the contemporary post-war moment is firstly the specific set of assumptions that link unemployment to the likelihood of unrest. Secondly, and relatedly, it is the specifically political nature of the threat that youth is envisioned to pose. While economic exclusion has been linked to a variety of social ills, from interpersonal and sexual to gang violence², the “ticking bomb” narrative discussed here focuses particularly on the risks that the unemployed pose to post-war political stability. As the next section elucidates, the unemployed are envisioned as likely recruits in rebelling factions or keen foot soldiers in the schemes of entrepreneurs of violence.

There are undoubtedly considerable concerns to be raised regarding the securitisation of employment in itself, and many have pointed not only to its limitations but also its potentially counterproductive consequences (Abrahamsen 2005; Enria 2012; Munive Rincon 2010). However, for our current purposes we must dig deeper into these theoretical assumptions that underlie these securitizing narratives. How have different schools of thought characterised the relationship between young people and violence? What makes, according to these scholars, the unemployed a threatening demographic? A first, and influential set of theories offers an interpretation based on neoclassical economic assumptions.

Economic Theories of War and Relapse

The direct association of unemployment with the threat of instability finds its starkest interpretation in economic theories of conflict, one that has been vigorously embraced by policy-makers in post war countries (see for example Collier et al 2003, World Bank 2011). These theories, most prominently put forward by economists such as Hirshleifer (2001) and

² See for example Bourgois (2003) on gang-violence and Groes-Green (2009) or Silberschmidt (2001) on sexual violence.

Collier (2000; 2007; 2009), present an alternative to interpretations that emphasise the grievances of combatants as a means to explain the occurrence of civil war. Rather than focusing on groups' identities and political reasons, these economists suggest that we centre our attention on combatants' economic motivations. The perennial collective action problem lies at the foundation of these debates, as it invites analysts to explain how individuals can be motivated to behave collectively to achieve some form of public good (e.g. regime change) when they might instead free ride on others' actions (see Olson 1965). These readings have gained significant traction in contexts like Sierra Leone, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3. There, the prominence of looting and struggles to control natural resources combined with the fact that combating factions on all sides of the conflict drew from the same pool of poor and marginalised youth have seemed to confirm the model's assumptions.

Before turning to a discussion of economic models it is however important to place them in the context of the large body of literature on the role of group grievances in explaining political violence. Collier (2000) categorises these types of explanations for collective violence into four strands that attribute the incidence of war to: ethnic or religious hatred; economic inequality; lack of political rights; and governments' economic incompetence. At the foundation of these theories is the assumption that violent mobilisation is a result of frustrations and perceptions of injustice, either against the government or another group. The role of identities such as ethnicity in stimulating conflict has been put forward in various guises. Primordialist accounts, or "clash of civilisation" explanations, for example postulate a mobilisation advantage of deep-rooted and easily identifiable collective identities (Huntington 1996). These accounts presume identities to be fairly monolithic and in essential opposition to each other, favouring readings of motivations based on visceral hatred (Fletcher 2007). In contrast, studies such as Kalyvas' (2008) present a more nuanced view of the instrumental role that ethnicity can play, the changeable nature of identity and its interaction with other

motives. The salience and function of ethnicity in different conflicts remain a matter of debate, and the statistical evidence on the relevance of ethnic fractionalisation as a predictor of internal warfare remains inconclusive (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

Another interpretation that focuses on group differences and collective grievances, but that comes closer to economists' analysis of economic motives, emphasises "horizontal inequalities" (HI) (Langer et al 2012; Stewart 2008). This school of thought suggests that "inequalities in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups" present the potential for violent mobilisation (Stewart 2008: 3). Divisions between groups, in other words, gain salience when they are demarcated by inequalities such as differential access to political rights or to economic opportunities such as public sector employment. A focus on HI, therefore, suggests that group identities become liable to mobilisation when strong grievances exist along ethnic lines (or other salient group lines). The relationship between HI and conflict is however not presumed to be automatic, rather, conflict potential is exacerbated when different forms of HI are consistent and in the same direction, as well as by a set of political, economic and cultural demography conditions that can either diffuse or exacerbate conflict (Langer 2008). While Stewart (2008: 7) suggests that personal motivation undoubtedly plays a part, she adds that: "it is our contention that in many conflicts people are primarily motivated by their group identity". Based on this understanding of how conflict occurs, Langer et al (2012: 3) note that "gaps in addressing what are often deeply entrenched forms of group-based discrimination and deprivation and marginalisation" endanger post-war reconstruction efforts as lingering discontent threatens relapse.

Economic models offer an alternative reading that shifts the lens from the group to the individual. Collier and Hoeffler's (1998; 2001) "greed"³ model for civil war, relies for example on the basic assumptions that the individual is the most significant unit of analysis and that individuals' motivations are driven by rational choice frameworks aimed at maximising self interest. Methodologically, this implies that motivations ought to be arrived at through observed behaviour rather than through discussions with combatants, as the latter would have incentives to either be untruthful or to paint their actions in a favourable light (Collier 2000).⁴ These assumptions are characteristic of what Cramer (2006: 125) terms "economic imperialism", namely, the "confidence amongst neoclassical economists in their ability to explain an increasingly wide range of social experience in terms of axioms and logic of this form of economics". Collier's in fact is only the most popularly acclaimed version of what is a large literature on the economic incentives for violence. Based on the criminological insights of scholars such as Becker (1968), these theories posit that poverty and the attraction of profits lowers the costs of collective action and, more specifically, the opportunity costs of collective violence, in a way that ethnic hatred and frustration against injustice cannot do. In other words, while injustice and identity grievances are plagued by the free rider problem in the neoclassical framework, the individual pursuit of profit through war avoids this.

Collier (2000: 93) uses several proxies for capturing these economic incentives, including the share of primary commodity exports so as to model the "availability of 'lootable' resources". One of the most significant variables, at least for the initial greed model, is the "proportion of young men in a society". This demographic observation, he argues, offers a way to study "the cost of attracting recruits to the rebellion". In order to understand what the cost of violent labour is, Collier puts forward that unemployed youth are more likely to join a rebellion, as

³ In later versions, the model was adapted to look at the "feasibility" of civil war, though retaining the emphasis on individual economic agendas as opposed to grievances (see Keen 2012).

⁴ See McGovern (2011a) for a direct discussion of this methodological assertion.

their opportunity cost for engaging in violence will be lower than those with better life prospects. Because of the paucity of reliable unemployment statistics, Collier assumes that the relative opportunity for accessing income-generating activities can be proxied by levels of education. Other studies have also highlighted the interaction between poverty and unemployment and the ability to make profits out of war, for example through looting or gaining control of natural resources (Hirshleifer 2001; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Verwimp 2005).

It is important to tease out even more explicitly what these theories tell us about the greater propensity of the unemployed for engaging in destabilising violence. These interpretations share the unspoken but chilling assumption that the risk of being killed in combat is preferable to a life of poverty; in other words “the poor engage in war because life is cheap” (Cramer 2006: 136). Consequently, the poor are more likely to either choose collective violence or to be more easily recruited by violence entrepreneurs. This distinction between youths’ collective violence ‘from below’ and their recruitment ‘from above’ is important because it helps us make more concrete the kinds of political threats that unemployed men are expected to pose.

These assumptions also extend to the post-war period, with small alterations. According to Collier (2007), countries that have experienced conflict are not, per se, more likely to relapse. The likelihood of relapse is however increased by the inability to address the root causes of war as identified by these economic approaches. Specifically, economic reconstruction that fails to adequately raise the opportunity costs of violence for young men sets countries onto a path for renewed violence. Collier’s work has been central to the popularisation of the development-security nexus, through his suggestion that poverty throws countries into vicious cycles of violence (Keen 2012; see UN 2004 and World Bank 2011).

Approaches like Collier's have however been energetically and voluminously challenged. These challenges form the springboard for this thesis' rationale. A number of critiques have targeted Collier's use of proxies, and in particular the assumption that unemployment can be captured through education statistics (McGovern 2011a; Cramer 2006). This is no small matter as it leads us to question the prominence of the notion of unemployment in explaining the economic situation of fighters. As discussed above, in most of the developing and conflict-affected settings that these theories address, unemployment is not a viable option for the poor. Indeed, Cramer's (2011a) review finds that even where evidence is available, a conclusive pattern relating unemployment to violence is not evident. This does not mean that the relationship is not there, or that labour market dynamics do not matter for understanding violence. Rather it suggests two things: that the relationship is unlikely to be mechanistic and needs further explanation, with a particular view to the interaction of different factors; and that we need to extend our focus to different kinds of marginal labour market experiences (e.g. underemployment or precarious labour) – how do these experiences relate to violence if at all?

These suggestions for further, contextual, study also emerge from another important set of concerns with economic theories of war: those that relate to economists' assumptions about human nature, their interpretations of motives and, most importantly, the way they conceptualise how labour market experiences might have political outcomes. These challenges, importantly, need not amount to a rejection of economic motives as a lens through which to study political violence. Instead they push us towards a less reductive analysis of how political and economic motives might become intertwined.

Indeed, the neat separation and juxtaposition of grievance and economic incentives is largely artificial, and there are good reasons to suggest that motives may be inseparable and that specific indicators may not in fact tell us the mechanism linking it to the conflict at hand. For example, we may equally interpret unemployment as an objective marker of individuals' cost-benefit matrix, or we may view unemployment as a source of frustration with unjust exclusion from labour markets. The suggestion that economic incentives and political grievances are mutually exclusive forecloses a multi-causal interpretation of violence that can accommodate for a variety of reasons for individuals' decision to join (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Stewart 2008). McGovern's (2011a: 350) critique of Collier's work is illustrative from this point of view as he argues that: "the emotive and even perverse dynamics that micro studies tend to point out suggests that participants in violent politics are operating according to rational and irrational choice models at once".

This more nuanced view is evident in his meticulous study on political violence in Côte d'Ivoire, where he suggests that "the political, the economic and the rhetorical, the tactical and the strategic, the conscious and semi-conscious motivations of actors in the Ivorian conflict (and many others) often coexist, even while they are at odds with one another" (McGovern 2011b: 3). It is such micro studies, discussed in the next section, that can help us gain a more rounded understanding of how labour markets might be linked to violent politics in practice. Such studies are necessary to offer an alternative to neoclassical assumptions, not least because the latter fail to take us very far in gaining a better insight into the circumstances under which the "ticking bombs" might explode. Although, as we shall see, more nuanced, contextually rooted and multi-causal studies of youth engagement in violence have yet to address head-on the question of labour, they offer an important backdrop for such an endeavour. These theories in fact focus on combatants' economic positions and motives

without lapsing into reductive or deterministic assumptions, taking grievances seriously while emphasising the significance and complexity of individual motivations.

Political Economy and Anthropological Alternatives

This rich literature articulates the complex interactions between economic motives and mobilisation, making space both for political and historical circumstances as well as acknowledging the socially situated meanings attached to economic relations. These readings make the detachment of greed and grievance difficult and helpfully foreground this thesis' attempt to understand unemployment as a social, rather than simply economic phenomenon, so as to unpack its political implications.

A first set of theories in this direction is led by scholars who frame economic motives in a broader political economy analysis. In so doing, they explain how economic calculations, historical and political circumstances, and individual or collective articulations of injustice and resentment can reinforce each other at critical junctures. Keen's (2000; 2002; 2005) theoretical and empirical work is illustrative, as he has explicitly made the argument against a facile dichotomy between economic motivations and political drivers. In his comprehensive study of Sierra Leone, for example, Keen (2005) emphasises the central role of natural resources and opportunities for looting while also discussing how poverty and marginalization under a repressive political regime had turned the diamond fields into a powerful symbol of exclusion.

What is especially interesting in Keen's work is his recognition that war is not simply anarchy, but rather has its own internal logic. This can mean for example that for combating groups making profit from war, winning may not be preferable to the continuation of conflict. Recognising the economy of war, however, also means looking at "how violence is generated

by particular political economies, which it in turn modifies (but does not destroy)” (Keen 2000: 22). This involves understanding the particular genealogy of wars and acknowledging that profit motivations do not exist in a vacuum, and are closely tied to processes of exclusion and control. Keen’s recognition that there are benefits to be gained from war therefore does not preclude, and indeed necessitates, an acknowledgement of how these calculations emerge out of particular pre-war and war-time political economies and how rebels’ subjective engagement with these processes may range from greed, to anger, perceived injustice and fear.

Cramer (2006) similarly places emphasis on the political economy of violence by stressing the diversity of these processes across space and time. He notes that given the rootedness of conflicts in their particular historical and political contexts, it may not ultimately be possible to find clearly decipherable regularities. In an argument against the conceptualisation of conflict as simply “deviant” or as “development in reverse”, Cramer emphasises the importance of a historical perspective on the political economy of conflict (ibid.: 9). Violent conflict, he argues, “however destructive, may contain dynamics that have the potential to help bring about progressive long-run change”, so a view of conflict as simply aberration is “without historical memory” (ibid.: 10). In stressing the relational aspect of grievances as well as their rootedness, Cramer privileges an analysis of the historical development of specific political economies. He also highlights the centrality of power and the hold that it has on people to move beyond purely economic understandings of material incentives. Understanding conflict in this way, therefore, eludes mechanistic explanations without romanticising motives.

Another relevant strand of analysis focuses more specifically on the subjectivities of fighters as social actors, engaging directly with their belief systems as well as observed behaviour. Contrary to Collier’s expectations, these theories do not shy away from looking at profit motivations. Instead, they elucidate how economic situations and immediate material

incentives can be understood from the vantage point of fighters' lifeworlds and their collocation within broader social, political and economic landscapes. Keen's (2000; 2002; 2005) work for example complements a political economy approach with a focus on psycho-social elements such as fear and anger, as well as humiliation and a search for respect. He argues that aside from the immediate benefits of looting, the excitement of the power conferred by a gun, or the determination to seek revenge for past wrongdoings or humiliation cannot be underestimated, without amounting to a justification of what are often unconscionable and brutal actions. Crucially, Keen links these feelings of humiliation and the impulse to seek revenge to a long trajectory of youths' socio-economic exclusion, urging that the pillaging that takes place during war be understood as an attempt to finally get a share of the cake, a potent fusion of greed and grievance. A similar approach is taken by McGovern's (2011b) study of the Young Patriots militia supporting Laurent Gbagbo in Côte d'Ivoire and their involvement in various instances of political violence. He frames his study in the anthropological tradition that identifies the meaning that violence can have, or the "structures of feelings" that are involved, while also placing the political competition for scarce goods in centre stage (ibid.: 107). McGovern traces the emergence of a politics of resentment that finds its roots in the development of the cocoa economy, changing migration patterns and the loss of control of local politics by autochthone populations.

The burgeoning literature on combatants' experiences is also spearheaded by authors like Utas (2003; 2008) and Vigh (2006a) who apply anthropological methods to the study of war as a form of social navigation. Viewing combatants as constrained by volatile socio-economic terrains, these authors describe the ways in which war can also be seen as a way for young and often marginalised people to steer their lives towards an imagined horizon, or even just to get by in adverse circumstances. Both Utas and Vigh place emphasis on the category of youth, portrayed as a social signifier of interrupted transition, and in particular as a group whose

social world is constrained by economic adversity. For Utas (2003: 6), for example, unemployment and “blocked paths to adult futures” play a significant role in understanding the motivations of young fighters taking up arms in Liberia. Yet, he encourages us to look at the specific ways in which violence came into play as a reaction to youths’ experiences of a thwarted future. Using Ferguson’s (1999) concept of “abjection”, Utas reflects on youths’ experience of being cast aside and unable to achieve their dreams of modernity and status. “By taking up arms”, he argues, fighters were “transformed, from victims of gerontocratic violence, to social masters” (Utas 2003: 37). While the ability to “use the gun as a credit card” (Sesay 1996 cited in Utas 2003: 166) played a significant role in rebels’ behaviour during the war, reflecting on the very significance of achieving economic independence, Utas takes us beyond mechanistic interpretations. Crucially, he highlights the importance of power relations, depicting war as a way to turn the tables and become strongmen: “by the establishment of power and status on a local level, many youths attained a wealth of adult dignity in the form of land, houses and wives” (ibid: 116).

Vigh’s (2006a) work with combatants in Guinea Bissau similarly emphasises agency in constrained terrains, highlighting how dire economic circumstances can structure young people’s behaviour during war, with violence as one option. Vigh encourages us to look at war as praxis, meaning that youths’ engagement in violence can be seen as socially situated rather than ideologically motivated. He argues that this pragmatism is not tantamount to economism, as it urges us to see young people’s participations in militias as a way of surviving and forging a future when the “space of possibilities is narrow or non-existent” (ibid.: 30). These authors’ crucial contribution is therefore their offering of a grounded narrative that can make sense of how economic positions can influence trajectories into violent movements, acknowledging profit motives but reading them through the lens social meaning and future-oriented strategies. This further allows us to abandon economic determinism, allowing for

agency in a way that still foregrounds the structural constraints of economic adversity. A similarly nuanced approach to youth agency in war is offered by the growing, but still limited, literature on female combatants, whose realities are often obscured by the norms that equate violence with men (Enloe 1996). Coulter (2009) for example collapses the distinction between agent and victim when in her analysis of women's lives in the Sierra Leone civil war. She describes how her respondents went from being abductees and rape victims to becoming fighters, and discusses how "choiceless decisions" (Aretxaga 1997 cited in Coulter 2009: 150) structured by adverse circumstances can be nevertheless framed as part of attempts to survive, to gain some power in impossible conditions and even to gain a sense of fearlessness by holding a gun.

What's Missing?

These studies of conflict and combatant's mobilisational trajectories therefore offer valuable alternatives to the mechanistic assumptions of economic theories. They show us the importance of looking at incentives as more complex, plural and even contradictory. Without underplaying the significance of poverty and even the thirst for economic power, these analyses invite us to understand the social significance of economic positions and the multiple purposes that violence can serve. They also encourage us to root our interpretations in political terrains and the histories that underpin them. The subjectivities of fighters or would-be fighters can give us an insight into how youths attempt to survive, forge a future and even attempt to challenge and reverse existing power structures. These readings can undoubtedly be invaluable for efforts to avoid relapse into war. Against the backdrop of this compelling literature, I suggest that there are three key areas that require further attention.

Firstly, while political economy and anthropological approaches to war have taken us a long way in understanding the intricate ways in which socio-economic factors impact violent mobilisation, the specific role of labour relations and experiences needs to be better understood. As Cramer (2011a: 2) intimates in his incisive review of the evidence on the connection between unemployment and violence: “we still know too little empirically, let alone theoretically about the relationship between labour market participation, institutions and relations of violence”. We know that labour somehow matters, but that its influence is not monocausal or deterministic. Yet, work is often in the background, the effect of unemployment assumed and often equated with poverty, but the specific significance of labour processes and experiences are frequently muted. Redressing this begins with a contextual analysis of the realities of work in post-war countries, where the poor are more likely to generate precarious incomes on the margins of the informal economy.

One reason why the specific role of labour market dynamics is under-researched is that labour is often treated like other commodities while in fact, “because labour is a human, social phenomenon, the labour market is a social institution in a way that other commodity markets are not” (Cramer 2011a: 4). This thesis thus rests on and develops the idea of labour markets as social institutions, suggesting that we focus on how young people experience the job market and their exclusion from it. We then need to explore how the social dimensions of labour, the identities and relations that it conjures up, mediate young people’s mobilisation in the post-war period. In other words, it means explicitly tracing the transmission mechanisms from the way labour markets function, and how they exclude young people, to the nature of young people’s political post-war mobilisation. This does not imply that experiences of work are the only aspect that matters for understanding mobilisation. On the contrary, it is a suggestion that we unpack an oft-assumed relationship by situating it in a broader context.

Secondly, while studies about how and why youths engage in war are of course instrumental in the post-conflict moment to identify root causes and to understand the mechanisms that may trigger relapse, it would be unwise to assume that a post-war society is either a blank slate or a mirror of pre-war realities. The assumption that to avoid relapse we need to look at why wars happen in the first place is important, and one that underpins the peacebuilding model, however the way the war happened, the development of war-time relations and identities and the specific dynamics of reconstruction must be analysed in order to understand how experiences of unemployment in the aftermath of war influence political behaviour amongst young people.

Academic engagement with youth in post-war countries has often focused on ex-combatants, especially when it comes to considering the potential for violent (re)mobilisation (Persson 2012; Utas 2012a). In addition, memories of war tend to take precedence over an analysis of current situations and post-war navigations. Specifically, whether dealing with ex-combatant or non-combatant youth, post-war labour market experiences and their relationship to mobilisation trajectories remains understudied. Cramer (2011b: 136), for example, argues that “much too little is actually known in any systematic way about the economic fate and labour market experiences of demobilised combatants”. The experiences of economically marginal, non-combatant youth are even less in the limelight, with a dearth of research into how post-war labour markets influence them and their options for politicisation. This is of course a very different kind of study than an analysis the reasons why war breaks out, as, by definition post-conflict countries have not, or not yet, relapsed. What it explores instead is what kind of political actors youth are in the post-conflict moment, or how opportunities and constraints to different forms of political mobilisation taking place after war can be linked to labour market experiences. In contributing a post-conflict view, then, this study does not purport to predict whether war will break out again in Sierra Leone, but rather to understand how the

unemployment-violence nexus operates in the aftermath of war and the ways in which young people may (or may not) be seen as a threat to stability. Theories of conflict can offer a backdrop but ought not, as economic theories tend to assume, be seen as mirrors for the contemporary situation.

Finally, challenging the “ticking bombs” narrative requires not only a better understanding of the mechanisms connecting labour market participation to political violence, but also an analysis of how labour processes influence other forms of mobilisation amongst post-war youth. The dominant intervention paradigm posits that the employed (or those with access to stable, decent work) are more likely to be peaceful citizens than the unemployed. It assumes, in other words, a simple relationship between labour market status and the nature of one’s political engagement. Hidden from view in these accounts, however, is the non-violent political behaviour of a large part of marginal youth. This omission is largely due to the fact that, traditionally, the unemployed are viewed as either violent or apathetic and ineffective political actors. What Marx and Engels sardonically called the “alchemists of the revolution” have however more recently come into the limelight, as the unemployed have featured amongst the ranks of protesters from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Movement (Jeffrey 2013).

There is a growing literature, focusing on African youth that looks at how they have become involved in social movements, religious groups, political parties and so on (Abbink 2005; de Boeck and Honwana 2005). This literature tends not to draw an explicit link between youths’ economic positions and the nature of their mobilisation, yet their description of the non-violent channels through which young people become mobilised offers important conceptual tools for our purposes. These are discussed further in Chapter 1. Similarly, a flourishing literature has emerged devoted to chronicling the political potential of precarious and

informally employed workers (Chen 2012; Lindell 2010a; Meagher 2010b). Relating to this literature (further developed in Chapter 1), this thesis aims to unpack how labour market experiences might shape the space for these types of political action and young people's trajectories within them. The purpose of this is twofold: firstly, it contributes to a challenge of a deterministic portrayal of the unemployed as "breakers"; secondly, considering what space exists for non-violent mobilisation might also influence the nature of violent political terrains.

The Politics of Work: Thesis Outline

This thesis' contribution therefore lies in its analysis of how the labour market experiences of marginal youth in post-war Freetown translate into different forms of political mobilisation. It develops empirically Cramer's (2011a; 2011b) suggestion that we look at labour markets as social institutions whose significance stretches beyond the pecuniary. I hope to show that the potential for violence is not inherent in unemployment, but that the impact of experiences of marginal work on mobilisation is mediated by social factors and the specific nature of the post-war political economy. For Freetown's youth, labour market exclusion has implications for social status, identities, norms and the nature of relations and societal hierarchies. This in turn shapes their political subjectivities and claims on the state; it structures the opportunities and constraints to their collective action; and influences their trajectories towards political violence. These processes are expressed in young people's narratives through the fraught articulation between navigation, that is, tactics employed expediently to respond to structural circumstances, and longer-term aspirations. Individual attempts to navigate adverse economic and political terrains coexist with work-based political claims placed on the state and aspirations of social and political inclusion, even if the two are often at odds and the former undermine the latter.

In Chapter 1 I develop the notion of a Politics of Work to describe the process that connects labour market dynamics to political outcomes in the lives of Freetown's marginal youth. The conceptual framework rests on two analytical levels: the first is that of individual and collective lived experiences of work and politicisation; the second level roots these experiential accounts within an analysis of labour market and political opportunity structures. Chapter 1 thus offers the conceptual tools for studying the political economy of work and the social implications, or "subjectification function" (Weeks 2011:8) of labour market dynamics. The chapter then defines mobilisation along three dimensions: state-society relations; channels of mobilisation; and modes of mobilisation (violent and non violent, and "from above" or "from below").

Chapter 2 analyses the role of labour in Sierra Leone's trajectory of economic development and in determining the nature of the political space for young citizens from colonial times up to the reconstruction effort after the ten-year civil war. In so doing it frames young people's contemporary experiences in the context of the evolution of a political economy of work characterised by increasingly narrow networks determining the functioning of an exclusionary labour market, exacerbated by war and economic reform. At the same time it considers the nature of democratisation from independence to reconstruction, looking at the intersections between labour, informal networks and political practices to study the space for young citizens' engagement over time. Through an analysis of the post-war dispensation and reflections on patterns of continuity and change, the chapter raises question about the opportunities and constraints for inclusive employment creation and meaningful political participation in the post-war landscape.

Chapter 3 discusses how the post-conflict moment in Sierra Leone has given rise to particular policy narratives about the dangers of the unemployed and how these in turn have led to the securitisation and devaluation of certain livelihood strategies in the informal economy. These valuations of informal work are in turn contrasted with young people's daily experiences of marginal livelihoods in their urban microcosms. The chapter thus explores what work means to young people within these distinctive urban spaces and how understandings and valuations of marginal work frame young people's assessments of their current situations vis-à-vis their future aspirations.

Chapter 4 focuses on how labour market experiences impact social identities and relations. Engagement in marginal work and interpretations of how labour markets operate to exclude young people influence constructions of "youthhood" and gender, shaping the contours of social "smallness" and a creating perennial gap between the status quo and aspirations to become something else. The chapter shows how young people understand the labour market dynamics that seem to exclude them through the figure of a *sababu*, a coveted but elusive personal connection, and identify their predicament as being rooted in their inability to access a *sababu's* networks. These reflections give rise to a contrast between notions of social justice and critiques of private accumulation on the one hand and youths' tactics for escaping marginality through individual incorporation on the other.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at the processes through which the experiences chronicled in the previous chapters influence different paths of political engagement. Chapter 5 discusses the relationship between marginal youth and the post war state, portraying a variety of ways that exist for young people to be political actors in post-war Sierra Leone. Although a distinctive political imagination based on notions of a citizens' right to employment is well articulated, being "small" influences opportunities for engagement in Sierra Leone's post-war political

system. It limits young people's influence inside informal occupational associations co-opted by government, often encourages opportunistic modes of participation and erects barriers to independent collective action. In this context, youths' threat of violence remains a useful bargaining chip to carve a space in political debates.

In the context of this constrained political space, Chapter 6 turns to the dynamics of post-war political violence, attempting to decipher its relationship to the labour market positions of those taking part in episodes of electoral unrest. The chapter contrasts the experiences of a group of marginal youth occasionally involved in political party-related violence to those of party "task forces", primarily made up of ex-combatants and systematically engaged in these episodes. The comparison elucidates how violence can be seen as a mechanism to cement productive relations of reciprocity to navigate exclusionary labour market dynamics in the context of Sierra Leone's post-war political dispensation. Individual tactics thus run counter to, and often undermine, a political imagination based on broad-based claims for redistribution and voice, yet they are framed as expedient to forge a path out of marginality.

Methods

The key premise of this study is that focusing on young people's experiences of labour market exclusion can help us understand the mechanisms connecting unemployment to political mobilisation, avoiding mechanistic understandings to look at processes. Consequently, the methodological approach is a qualitative one that privileges the experiential accounts and observed behaviour of marginal youth, the protagonists of post-war narratives on unemployment. The research was designed to analyse how Freetown's young people understand the labour market dynamics that exclude them, the livelihood strategies they

engage in as a result and the identities and relations that emerge from these experiences. In turn, it set out to understand how young people mobilise, the nature of their political behaviour and how different political trajectories relate to experiences in the labour market.

In order to grasp these complex processes in a grounded manner, I combined interviews with young people engaged precariously in the informal economy with ethnographic methods and life histories. Young people's experiences, their choices and trajectories, cannot be understood outside of the structures in which they take place. Therefore, I also undertook elite interviews and a political economy analysis based on primary and secondary literature. In the following sections, I discuss the rationale for employing these methods and offer my reflections on their merits and limitations. The subject matter and context gave rise to ethical and practical dilemmas, and I discuss them at length here because I believe they are central to the nature of the data I collected and to my approach to its analysis.

The data was collected over four field trips between 2010 and 2014, which amounted to just over eight months in Freetown. I chose four groups of young people engaged in the informal economy precariously and irregularly, and carried out interviews, life histories, focus groups and ethnographic observation with each group. I also used these methods to work with the "task forces" (i.e. security details) of both major political parties, whose central role in post-war episodes of electoral unrest made them an important group for analysis. Overall, I carried out 151 semi-structured interviews and 16 life histories, two focus groups, and detailed field diaries of daily observations and informal conversations. At the start of the research process, during a fieldtrip for my MPhil thesis in 2010, I studied the inclusion of unemployment into peacebuilding and conflict prevention narratives and carried out elite interviews with UN officials in Freetown and New York, as well as implementing Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) and a small sample of young men, which served as a starting point for

the current project. In the following research trips I continued to carry out elite interviews to build a picture of the economic and political context. I conducted 78 elite interviews including with individuals involved in the drawing up of employment programmes⁵, officials at the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MLSS) and the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS), political party officials, leaders of informal trade associations and civil society activists.⁶

Participant Selection and Research Sites

The four groups of youth whose labour market experiences and processes of politicisation I traced were: commission chasers⁷, commercial motorbike riders, women street traders, and “idle women” (primarily domestic workers and sex workers). Each livelihood strategy was associated with a particular geographical location in the city, different microcosms in the urban space. The rationale for choosing four groups and for selecting these specific livelihoods was to gain a spectrum of insight into different forms of income generation and to add a gender component to the analysis. As shown in Chapter 3, these activities enabled an analysis of varying levels of respectability attached to different income-generating activities and of how gender norms play a role in determining the meaning and value of work.

Despite the ubiquity of the term in policy documents and everyday discussions, “unemployment” is a contested term in Freetown. Given the unviability of inactivity for the capital’s poor, separation of livelihood strategies across the “employment/unemployment” line (and thus between peaceful citizens and “ticking bombs”) is often artificial (See Chapter 3). When selecting groups for analysis, in discussion with my assistant, I focused on those

⁵ This was also done as part of a research report I co-authored for International Alert on youth employment programming in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Batmanglich and Enria 2014).

⁶ Throughout the thesis, elite interviews are anonymised and footnoted. The material collected with marginal youth is introduced through its ethnographic context in the body of the text, and is also anonymised..

⁷ Young men who sell used goods for a small commission.

youths whose engagement in the informal economy was precarious, unwaged and often devalued or criminalised. Almost without exception, respondents defined themselves as young people without a job. Because of the contested nature of the terminology describing youths' labour market positions in Sierra Leone's context, definitions of "employment" in young people's imaginaries were therefore a key subject of research. Accordingly, my approach was based on the insights of grounded theory, which suggests that concepts and theory be discovered through data collection (Charmaz 2000; Glaser and Strauss 1967). I tried to leave categories open, so as to allow definitions of employment and unemployment to emerge from discussions. This also allowed me to understand how each livelihood strategy was viewed in terms of narratives about labour market exclusion.

The process of generating definitions "from the bottom up" was valuable as it gradually revealed the components of what employment means, how it differs from the income-generating activities that these young people currently engaged in, and, most importantly, their interpretations of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion from "proper" jobs. Through this grounded approach in Chapter 3 I develop a description of "marginality" to refer to the socially defined labour market position of my respondents. I used a similarly deductive approach in my decision to include political party youth in the study. While, as I shall show in Chapter 6, some youths from these microcosms of informality engaged in episodes political violence that caused concern after the war, an analysis of these episodes in discussion with informants made clear that these could not be understood without an insight into the central role played by political party "task forces". The comparison between these different groups' engagement in violence was fruitful, and offered a more multifaceted view into the relationships between labour and violence.

Interviews, Ethnographic Methods and Political Economy Analysis

Discussions with young people centred on their interpretations of relative labour market positions, including experiences of exclusion from jobs and their current livelihoods. They also prompted conversations on social aspirations, experiences of political mobilisation and interactions with the state and its officials. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for comparability but also in order to ensure that the interviewee's perspective could come through (Fontana and Frey 2000). The interviews were carried out in either English or Krio, with some occasional translation from my research assistant. Upon returning I coded by interviews and life histories together with my field notes to draw out significant analytical themes (Boyatzis 1998)

During my time in Freetown, my key informant and assistant was an invaluable asset for achieving access and trust and to build durable relationships with participants. His identity as an informal trader himself, his knowledge of the cityscape and youth culture together with his sensitive and personable nature made him a precious resource in entering new research spaces. Together we introduced the purpose of my visit and the aims and limitations of my research. By "hanging out" for extended periods of time in each microcosm, we developed relationships with key individuals who acted as primary informants on the area and the specific livelihood being studied (Geertz 1998). As I gradually introduced myself and my research to more and more people in the community, I used semi-structured interviews as a way of gathering information but also as a means to get to know different youths in the microcosms. Often in fact, these interviews rather acted as a springboard for further informal discussions, which provided the richest material. This is a major strength of the ethnographic method, which emphasises a longer and more sustained engagement with research subjects

outside of formal research settings so as to develop a deeper understanding of respondents' lives, the conditions which shape them and the meanings they bring to them (Bryman 2001). Ethnography thus allows the researcher to interpret the findings contextually to mitigate "their normal, human inclinations to inject their own personal views into informants' accounts" (Gold 1997: 389).

Spending longer periods of time with youths in each microcosm, getting to know them and their families and friends, enabled me to build relationships with a number of them. This was also facilitated by return trips and by technology that made it possible to keep in touch while I was away. These relationships, built on trust and reciprocity, over time enabled honest and open discussions about difficult issues that I was not prepared to address before having established relationships, such as experiences of violence. This was both for ethical reasons, discussed in more detail below, and to ensure that discussions about these sensitive topics were honest and open. Once relationships had been built I also started carrying out life histories, building on informal discussions to outline rich life trajectories that exemplified the complexity of young people's attempts to navigate their circumstances.

The importance of relationship building was made clear to me as stories of violence began to emerge by themselves through these conversations, moving from more general observations to a discussion of personal experience. Differentiating between accounts of violence, ranging from symbolic threats to close encounters, from episodic involvement to explicit and systematic engagement in political unrest, gave crucial theoretical insights. At the same time, it highlighted the role of interviews, life histories and informal discussions not only as a means of data collection but also as instruments of self-representation for respondents (Silverman 2000). The way events, experiences and views are told were veritable windows into individuals' lifeworlds, their aspirations, identity and relations. Narratives, in other words,

were central to an analysis of how youth bring meaning to the processes being studied. However, acknowledging that narratives can be about self-representation brings up the issue of truthfulness. Even when studying subjective experiences it remains important to consider the possibility of distorted or untruthful recollections. One way of dealing with this issue is to triangulate with other sources, especially when it comes to analysing specific events whose significance goes beyond how individuals perceived them (Charmaz 2000). For example, I used interviews with civil society activists and political players, as well as news sources, to corroborate accounts of mobilisation.

Even untruthful or embellished accounts are nonetheless important, as they prompt us to understand why the respondent might have decided to represent his or her story in a particular way, and what that reveals about the issues at hand. One challenging example was that of an individual who claimed to have been involved in a particularly notorious incidence of inter-party violence. Through triangulation of sources I knew he was not among those being tried for the case and openly ascertaining whether he had been involved would have incriminated him, severed my trust with him and others around him, and in any case was difficult as several competing stories were being told in the case. Robben (2012:187) suggests that the “seduction” of ambiguous accounts of violence can be subverted “by playing along with it and [grasping] its meaning from the inside”. In interpreting this young man’s story I therefore tried to make sense of what he told me regardless of its veracity: why was this story being told? In what context was he telling it and what relevance did it have to his broader narrative about his own life and political engagement?

This brings us to the deeper limitations of qualitative methods. Aside from the practical constraints of my ultimately limited time in the field and difficulties such as finding quiet spaces to interview, the issue of interpretation is fundamentally problematic. The dilemma of

interpersonal communication is aptly summarised by the figure of The Father in Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of An Author*:

Each one of us has within him a whole world of things [...]. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do.

The words uttered in discussions and interviews can never fully bridge the gap between separate subjectivities, so that in interpreting the voices of the youth I worked with I inevitably did so through my own understanding. Obviously this is a deeply philosophical question, but it is also one that has methodological and ethical implications. Most importantly, it reminds that, as du Toit (1993: 317) tells us, “traditions, hopes and dreams” are elusive and inextricable from their place and time; as such, they “confront us with the challenge of understanding the otherness and specificity of lived experience”. Ethnographic observations, the development of relationships with key informants and a commitment to engaging with local norms and frames of reference helped contextualise conversations. This was also bolstered by bringing initial analyses and thoughts into discussions with key informants, eliciting their feedback and their own interpretations as part of the process. This attempt to co-produce knowledge is based on a long tradition of participatory approaches to research and on a feminist methodology committed to avoiding the objectification of research participants through their inclusion in the practice of research and analysis (Acker et al 1991; Chambers 1997).

The part of the research aimed at framing experiential accounts within the structures that condition them involved its own methods and considerations. It was carried out through a combination of interviews and a review of primary and secondary documents. Respondents for elite interviews were selected according to their knowledge and involvement in labour market or mobilisation processes (see Dexter 2006; Tansey 2007). Policy documents, project evaluations and relevant newspaper articles were also collected and read together with secondary literature. The purpose of elite interviews and document reviews was twofold. Firstly to understand the contours of Sierra Leone's political economy, looking in particular at employment dynamics in different sectors, macroeconomic policy, and political opportunity structures, including the space for civil society and the mode of interaction between citizens and state officials. Secondly, I attempted to draw out "policy narratives" (Roe 1994:1, see also Mason 2002). This was crucial in identifying the approach to unemployment inherent in the "ticking bombs" policy discourse and to contrast these interpretations with the perspectives of marginal youth. In this process, I took elite interviews and documents as narratives, understanding motives and contextual factors, reading both along and against the grain (Stoler 2009).

Ethics and Reflexivity

The attempt to study meaning-making and complex, rooted processes, comes with its specific ethical concerns. My time in Freetown over the different fieldwork trips gave rise to a series of questions and challenges that were not easily resolved by textbook research ethics. These issues also forced me to confront my identity as a researcher, asking difficult questions about my position and the nature of my relationship with what we might consider a vulnerable group. Here I offer some reflection on the processes I went through to ensure that my research was ethically sound and to understand my interactions in the field.

Informed Consent and Anonymity

The first imperative for ethical research is to ensure that participation is based on informed consent (Christians 2000). On the surface this was easy enough; every time I entered a new space, I spent significant time and effort, together with my research assistant, explaining who I was, why I was there and what my research was about. This involved answering questions about the likely outcomes of my study, something that immediately made apparent the difficulties surrounding informed consent. Although I am confident that my repetitions of the aims and limitations of the research in terms of immediate impact dispelled for the most part the expectation that jobs would result from taking part in the research process, it is not ultimately possible to control people's hopes. This could be mitigated by engaging in on-going, frank conversations about the role of research and the importance of making sure that voices and experiences were collected and heard. The key to this process of negotiation was ensuring that gatekeepers and key informants were willing to act as mediators in explaining the research and managing expectations. This also meant being open to having difficult conversations, accepting criticism and disappointment and working it through with the individuals expressing it.

The issue of informed participation can be complicated by the role of gatekeepers (Homan 1991). Certain individuals, such as community leaders, youth activists or simply youth with whom I had developed rapport, often offered to introduce me to other young people in the area. While this was a useful snowballing technique, I also tried not to rely entirely on their recommendations and spent time with my assistant walking around the areas being studied discussing my research with different people, emphasising the option not to take part in the research. This required some balancing so as not to undermine gatekeepers' authority and trust, while also ensuring that I could gain a variety of perspectives. The nature of the

qualitative paradigm and my research design meant that I was not aiming for statistical representativeness, but rather wanted to ensure that a wide range of views were included and that consent was not mediated by gatekeepers' power over respondents.

The topics treated in this research were often sensitive, whether because they asked respondents to reflect on distressing situations of poverty and uncertainty or because they involved conversations about violent acts. I ensured that all respondents were kept anonymous, both through pseudonyms and by making sure that in the write-up phase, stories were told in a way that did not make respondents identifiable. I occasionally recorded interviews, although I followed my instincts about when this seemed appropriate and when, instead, respondents were made uncomfortable by the presence of a recorder. The files were kept secure and for a small number of interviews for which I required help in translating from Krio, I ensured that the translator was trusted and only asked her to transcribe parts of interviews that I was confident did not contain sensitive material or that would make the respondent easily identifiable. I discussed with my respondents what was going to happen to the data, how I was going to present their stories and how I would ensure that they would not be identifiable. However, even when discussing difficult experiences, respondents often claimed that they wanted their stories to be heard, so it was often my own decision to keep them anonymous in order to guarantee their safety and privacy while ensuring that their stories were told effectively and accurately.

Researcher Identity and Reflexivity

The situated nature of knowledge production requires us to examine how who we are and our relations with others impact the processes of research and analysis (Caretta 2014; Rose 1997). My identity as a white, Italian woman was an important determinant in shaping my interactions in the field. My race and nationality, as well as my position as a student at an elite

university, had several implications for how I was viewed by respondents and for the relations of power inherent in our encounters. My status for example played a part in the high expectations placed on the potential outcomes of my research. It also highlighted the challenges of representation, as in collecting and presenting people's stories to complete my own qualification, the broader power relations and global hierarchies determined by race and economic status were inescapably at play. Reflecting on one's position of power is not enough. Attempting to make research participatory and less extractive is a key way of addressing, though never entirely resolving, this. I thus conducted research as a process of collective knowledge production, letting members of each community teach me about their communities, trying to define concepts as youths themselves defined them, discussing my findings with them and engaging in conversations about what relevance their stories might have in bringing about change.

Beyond participatory data collection and analysis, the creation of relationships and of empathetic spaces to tell one's life story can also go some way towards mitigating the ethical concerns with power imbalances and the limited practical impact of research into the lives of groups living in poverty. As Jackson (2002: 17) argues: "what matters is how stories enable us to regain some purchase over the events that confound us, humble us, and leave us helpless, salvaging a sense that we have some say in the way our lives unfold". Creating the spaces for such narratives can make the research process positive and meaningful for the participants and respondents often reflected on the value of being listened to. This was carried through to the analysis stage through attempts to "subvert the power-loaded relationship between researcher and researched and let the voices of informants [...] be heard through the text" (Caretta 2014: 2).

Working with Suffering and Poverty: On Empathetic Distance

Developing human relations with research participants, entering their life worlds and discussing sensitive topics also raises two different kinds of ethical concerns. Firstly, one must consider the impact that discussing sensitive topics might have on respondents (Leydesdorff et al 1999). Reflecting on conditions of poverty and uncertainty or episodes of violence occasionally brought up difficult emotions. Creating an empathetic space for discussion meant being able to respond to this emotion, interrupting the interview when necessary and staying with the person after the interview was over. Speaking about difficult events, as Jackson's (2002) quote above notes, can potentially be cathartic and give interviewees a sense of release over events. However, so as to ensure that the process was positive and not re-traumatising, making sure that the interviewee was in the driver's seat and providing adequate support proved essential.

A second aspect of working with marginal youth on occasionally challenging topics is the impact that this can have on the researcher and her relationships with research participants (Lee-Treweek 2000). Establishing the meaningful relationships necessary to embed myself into the research context and to make the process mutually enriching, also meant engaging with the expectations placed on these relationships. If research is rendered less extractive by developing human relations and spending time with informants, it also opens up far more complicated interactions. I did not offer rewards for taking part in an interview, beyond a drink or some food if appropriate. However these relationships of reciprocity that emerged from participants letting me into their lives often engendered requests of help and support during difficult times, a very different issue. While some situations may be straight forward, others were less so, such as the time when a key informant asked for help to see a doctor after having been diagnosed as HIV positive, or when another's husband died suddenly.

Because these issues emerged after relations had been built, and often after interviews and discussions had been had, I was not concerned that these relations might skew the responses. Rather, these challenges highlighted the ultimately irresolvable nature of power imbalances. In addition, in deciding to offer emotional, and sometimes financial support, in some cases and not in others, I relied on my own moral compass but decisions were never entirely satisfactory as it often meant making arbitrary judgement calls, employing what Fontana and Frey (2000: 662) term “situational ethics”.

These processes also occasionally took a personal toll that inevitably shaped the way I engaged with the data. Life stories were sometimes difficult to hear. Lather (2009: 19) warns researchers of the “liberal embrace of empathy that reduces otherness to sameness”. Empathising with respondents’ predicament need not mean losing sight of one’s positionality and awareness of the incompleteness of intersubjective understanding. Neither does it necessarily mean losing objectivity. Adopting an empathetic approach does not amount to seeing respondents simplistically as victims of their situation. Ethnographic methods enable a more rounded view of participants’ lives, of the multifaceted and contextual nature of their character and existence. Even in structurally dire situations, I could see how my informants made decisions, engaged with their lives and with those of others actively and occasionally destructively, violently. Utas’ (2005: 403) notion of “victimcy” in war-torn Liberia is useful from this point of view, as it helps to characterise the “self-representation by which a certain form of tactic agency is effectively exercised under the trying, uncertain and disempowering circumstances that confront actors in warsapes”. These considerations about agency in volatile terrains are thus crucial not only theoretically but also methodologically.

Over the period of research I discovered the significance of what I have come to understand as empathetic distance— a way of setting up boundaries between myself and participants

while remaining empathetic in my interactions with them. This was important to maintain a level of objectivity and to protect myself emotionally.

Experiencing Violence While Researching Violence

One especially difficult aspect of my research also enabled me to maintain a nuanced perspective on the young people I was researching and my position in the research process. On several occasions I witnessed violent episodes and in some instances also experienced them first hand. It is important to note that the communities I researched were by no means pervasively or inherently violent, and the majority of my research experience was positive. My informants engaged with their marginality creatively and proactively, and also almost always endeavoured to ensure my personal safety. While recognising this, it is also necessary not to shy away from the fact that situations and places can turn destructive and violent. This is true of many places, but especially of those where attempts to assertively confront marginalisation can deviate in less positive ways. As Bourgois (2003: 9) potently argues: “although street culture emerges out of a personal search for dignity and a rejection of [...] subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruins”. Recognising that in certain situations, hardly specific to Sierra Leone, violence was normalised, as means to achieve internal order, to gain status or to assert power over others was an important research observation, but also raised important methodological and ethical issues.

Studying violence may bring us into close contact with it in disturbing ways. This underscores the importance of the distinction between understanding violence and justifying it, a task often rendered difficult by the emotions that violence engenders (Keen 2005). These encounters also made me acutely aware of the multi-directional nature of power relations. While it is essential for a researcher to identify his or her own privilege, this ought not to

result in essentialising the researched community as powerless. Related to that, limited instances of personal insecurity made it clear that different aspects of my identity had different implications for my position as a researcher. My gender identity for example as opposed to my race or economic status placed me in a different relationship with my male respondents than with my female ones. This was not only true of these isolated experiences, but more broadly as I felt that being a woman occasionally made me less threatening or easier to open up to for female respondents. Similarly, my age placed me in a similar category as my young respondents while in some elite interviews it was clear that it was associated with inexperience. To put it simply, these initially difficult experiences helped me understand the intersectionality of identity in both experience and interpretation of research encounters.

Finally, because some of these experiences ended up with me leaving abruptly after one of the trips, the issue of entering, exiting and re-entering the field was relevant. Utas' (2004: 9) discussion of "fluid research fields" warns us against the assumption that once having gained access the work is done. He highlights how research spaces change over time, with relationships having to be rebuilt, but also reflecting on the possibility that after having been granted access it can be taken away. Leaving abruptly I feared, would rupture my relationship with informants and break bonds of trust I had built. This turned out not to be the case, but upon re-entering I had to renegotiate relationships. Keeping in touch while I was away helped from this point of view. These moments of exit and re-entry can make or break efforts to ensure that research is more than an extractive enterprise and it was therefore important to manage them sensitively.

This research process was inevitably limited by its design, especially in terms of its choice to focus on a geographically and numerically limited group of young people and to privilege an analysis of their representations of their lifeworld. For example, I did not carry out a survey to

systematically collect demographic data in the four urban microcosms. This meant that I could not analyse characteristics such as ethnic background as potentially salient predictors of mobilisation trajectories beyond young people's own accounts. As we shall see, ethnicity did come up with respondents during interviews and discussions, but their experiences of politicisation appeared to suggest that, at least in Freetown, occupation and individual tactics might be more useful lenses through which to understand youth mobilisation. In the absence of demographic data and given the small sample of respondents, it was nevertheless not possible to ascertain that a shift away from the political salience of ethnicity is indeed taking place in urban Sierra Leone.

Despite its significant limits (further discussed in the Conclusion), the choice of design was aimed at gaining a grounded insight into young people's ways of making meaning work and mobilisation. It was characterised by the commitment to participatory and emancipatory methods, based on the building of relationships and trust. This was not always easy, or even successful, yet the very process of reflecting on relations, interactions and relative positionality was central to a nuanced and sensitive analysis of the data, one that I hope does justice to the lives and struggles of Freetown's youths without painting them as either helpless victims or inexorable "breakers" of society.

Chapter 1

The Politics of Work: A Conceptual Framework

Challenging the assumptions of the “ticking bombs” narrative requires opening up the black box between unemployment and violence, reflecting on the intervening processes and the diversity of young people’s political behaviour. The aim of the chapter is to give theoretical substance to the notion of a “Politics of Work”, understood as the process whereby the meanings, identities and relationships that are constituted by labour market experiences influence political behaviour and young people’s relationship to the post-war state. Experiences, furthermore, must be framed in a thorough understanding of the social, political and economic forces that condition both labour market and political opportunity structures that face young people. The chapter therefore lays out the theoretical groundwork that we need to analyse each step of this complex process, before turning to an empirical exploration of the Politics of Work.

The Chapter begins with a note on agency, introducing the central concept of “navigation” in order to conceptualise the interaction between the structural constraints that frame experience and young people’s choices in shaping their trajectories. It then turns to theorising labour markets, building on the notion that they are social institutions by outlining what it means for the labour market to have social components and implications. In so doing it firstly deals with the factors influencing the constitution of labour market structures and secondly theorises the effects of experiences of work (or lack thereof) on social identities and relations. The third section puts forward the tools for studying political mobilisation, focusing on three dimensions: state-society relations; channels of mobilisation; and modes of mobilisation (violent and non violent, and “from above” or “from below”).

Navigating Complex Terrains: Of Tactics and Strategies

An overarching question that lingers over each component of this framework is that of agency. If we want to understand how labour market and political opportunity structures influence experiences, and how experiences of work translate into patterns of political mobilisation, what do we make of young people's choices in the process? At each level of analysis, while labour market dynamics, social identities and political constellations significantly influence and direct young people's lives, we must allow space for individual and collective choices. Taking into account different choices enables us to talk about varied political trajectories from shared economic predicaments.

We therefore need a theory that allows us to look at the processes through which labour markets influence mobilisation that allows for agency but does not forget the very real constraints posed by the economic and political contexts in which such processes take place. Vigh's (2006a) study of young combatants in Guinea Bissau offers a lucid and nuanced elaboration of the perpetual structure versus agency debate. He uses the concept of "navigation" to denote the space "between agency and social forces", suggesting that rather than acting as a metaphor for agency, it posits "inseparability of act and environment, knowledge and praxis" (ibid.:14). Vigh portrays young Guineans as acting both in response to immediately adverse terrains while also aiming towards a positive life in the future. Here he usefully borrows de Certeau's (1984) distinction between "strategy" and "tactic". While "strategy" presupposes the ability to constitute space and to shape one's relations with the world, "the place of a tactic belongs to the other" (ibid.: xix). Tactical agency thus requires moving in spaces shaped by others. Vigh usefully adds a temporal dimension to these distinctions, recognising the coexistence of different registers in youths' attempts to get by, as

their actions are “directed towards both immediate and future survival, [...] navigating lives along an envisioned trajectory in an unstable environment”.

The distinction between tactics and strategy is at the heart of the Politics of Work in Freetown, and it underpins this thesis’ discussion of how the processes outlined below are interconnected in practice. Freetown’s youth’s attempts to move tactically within difficult terrains whose contours are beyond their control, run parallel (and often counter) to their strategic assessments and hopes for change in the future. This contrast helps us understand how people engage with externally determined labour market and political opportunity structures, as well as how they negotiate the social identities and norms attached to being young and out of work.

Labour Markets as Social Institutions

Labour Market Structures

A discussion of how labour markets influence young people’s lives, through different forms of participation or through exclusion, must first be framed in an understanding of the functioning of labour markets themselves. The structure of the labour market, the factors that shape patterns of exclusion and inclusion and the nature of supply and demand, naturally shape experience. Labour markets are however not unidirectionally constitutive of social experience, as the way in which labour is bought and sold in the market is largely impacted by factors other than economic imperatives. This section explores theoretical approaches to the influence of social elements on the constitution of labour markets, as well as that of history and political calculations.

Labour market theory has increasingly diverted from neoclassical economics to acknowledge the different characteristics that may distort the working of the market and influence the nature of participation or exclusion. Institutional approaches have recognised that “more is involved in labour markets than the buying and selling of labour through the market” (Fine 1998: 87). Most importantly, social characteristics have been shown to play a role in determining the dynamics of supply and demand. Segmented labour market theory conceptualises this insight, studying those divisions in different groups’ labour market opportunities that cannot be explained by standard economics. Starting from the notion that labour market structures are “defined historically by the creation and reproduction of definite socioeconomic structures”, theorists show how segmentation can happen as a result (Fine 1998: 9). Generation, for example, has been studied as an element of segmentation, as young people’s overrepresentation in un- and underemployment statistics has been attributed to the fact that they face different labour market opportunities than their older counterparts. They are for example disadvantaged in entry due to assumptions of inexperience, “last-in-first-out” policies make them more liable to lay-offs and labour policy often favours insiders (Cling et al 2007; ILO 2005; Leibbrandt and Mlathseni 2004).

Intergenerational conflict may also play a role in determining young people’s employment opportunities, as evidenced by analyses of youthful rural-urban migration. Economic models attempting to study labour markets in developing contexts have emphasised market dualism and rural-urban linkages in explaining employment dynamics and high levels of informality (Fields 2007). The Harris-Todaro model, for example, explains urban unemployment (and a growing informal sector in cities) as a manifestation of unsuccessful migration resulting from imperfect information, as migrants expect higher wages in the urban sector (see Ranis and Gollin 2014). Anthropologists and political scientists however have highlighted a multitude of

other reasons contributing to young people's decision to migrate, and thus to the size of urban labour supply. Young people's limited land rights in contexts where older men control land, for example, make agriculture a less desirable option for young men and women (Ayalew et al 2000; André and Platteau 1998). As discussed in Chapter 2, rural life in Sierra Leone has long been demarcated by powerful gerontocratic structures, so that dreams of the city encompass not only expectations of higher economic returns but also of adulthood and independence.

Considering labour market dynamics from young people's point of view also requires studying other intersecting characteristics that might shape their opportunities in segmented labour markets. Gender is a key component, as labour markets can be conceived of as "bearers of gender" (Elson 1999: 611). This is both in terms of the well-documented sex discrimination that cannot be accounted for by productivity concerns and that shapes women's entry and the nature of their participation, and due to the failure "to acknowledge the contributions of the reproductive economy" (ibid.: 612; see also the next section). Race and ethnicity have similarly been identified as important factors in determining employment dynamics. South African studies have pointed to the relegation of African people to low paid occupations during apartheid as well as reflecting on the fact that although wage gaps attributable to racial discrimination decreased after 1994, a racial wage gap persists due to differences in education, skill and location (Seekings 2008). Similarly, ethnic wage differentials and occupational clustering according to ethnicity have been identified in several contexts (Barr and Oduro 2001; Meagher 2005). These patterns point to the need to consider labour markets as part of a larger system of interlocking factors giving rise to segmentation along different dimensions.

Along these lines, economists have identified the role of social networks in determining the fortunes of prospective employees, with those better connected having greater opportunities

(Granovetter 1973; Montgomery 1991). These studies however tend to be more descriptive than they are explanatory, as their exogenous treatment of social networks does not help us understand how networks are constituted, the nature of interpersonal connections in the labour market and the processes through which they come to be central to labour market dynamics. The historical development of networked markets, and their intersection with broader political developments, is especially important in the Sierra Leonean context. Chapter 2 will consider how the nature of state formation and economic transformation led to the prominence of increasingly narrow networks that erected significant barriers to entry for young people.

The central role of historical processes in determining the characteristics of labour markets is compellingly highlighted by Mkandawire (2010), as he elaborates on Amin's (1972) division of African economies into different macro-regions, according to their particular historical formation. He shows how forms of colonial incorporation manifest themselves through labour market structures and relations. Colonised enlarged West Africa, of which Sierra Leone is part, is characterised as a cash crop economy, with peasants in charge of production while marketing was left to mercantile houses in the metropolises. Low commodity prices were paid to peasants and justified through vent for surplus theory, which rationalised surplus extraction from the colonies without capital investment by portraying West African farmers as "wallowing in unwanted leisure until colonial trade opened up outlets for surplus" (Mkandawire 2010: 1649). This was in contrast to Southern Africa of labour reserves, where highly dualistic labour markets emerged from colonial incorporation through racial segregation, migrant labour and townships. Through such comparisons, Mkandawire points for example to the much higher levels of informalisation (and weaker state reach) in economies that were incorporated as cash crop economies than in tightly controlled labour reserves.

Emphasising a historical approach also encourages us to complement a microanalysis of supply and demand dynamics with a view of macro-processes that determine labour market functioning. This is firstly in terms of the impact of broader global and local economic trends in determining the availability of jobs. Secondly, it also means recognising, as political economists have done, how markets are constituted at the intersection of political imperatives and patterns of economic development. A political economy analysis, as that adopted in Chapter 2 to analyse the Sierra Leonean context, allows us to consider the relationship between politics and work over time and how political and economic developments at the national level interact with global trends. Macroeconomic policy and approaches to economic development such as those adopted by International Financial Institutions (IFI) across the developing world in the 1980s are a clear example. The IFI's consensus on how economic growth and poverty reduction were to be achieved, resting on their analysis of overextended African states, emphasised the shrinking of public sectors and the removal of price controls and subsidies. An extensive critical literature on the political economy of structural adjustment policies has pointed to the privileging of investors' needs in contrast to disastrous impacts on the recipient populations (Stiglitz 2002; Mosley et al 1991). Indeed, in an attempt to create a minimalist state, adjustment decimated civil service employment put significant financial strains on urban dwellers and limited their access to now privatised social services (Williams 1994; Loxley 1990).

Labour market policies similarly influence the nature of employment in any given country. The 2013 World Development Report highlights how labour market policies and institutions can work to redress imperfections and, in some cases, can contribute to distorting the market (World Bank 2012). The Report points to the ambivalent outcomes of different forms of labour regulations (e.g. minimum wage laws) and levels of collective organisation for

employment trends. In practice, because of the trade-offs involved, the direction and content of labour market policies is an ultimately political exercise, contingent on local context and the relative power of different groups affected. This will mean that the mix of labour market policies enacted and their synergy with the macroeconomic context will lead to vastly different labour market structures facing prospective entrants.

Employment dynamics in any given context therefore are far more complex than the simple buying and selling of a commodity in the market – they are shaped by history, by societal structures and by the politics of development and policy-making. These factors contribute to the availability of formal jobs, and young people’s ability to access them and they shape the relative importance of the informal economy as those excluded from formal labour markets often find a living through casualised and low quality work in the informal economy (Ranis and Gollin 2014). They mould, in other words, the terrains that young Sierra Leoneans attempt to navigate.

The Social Implications of Labour Markets

Labour markets are not only social in the sense that their functioning is shaped by extra-economic factors: labour market outcomes also have social implications. This aspect of labour markets, as we saw in the Introduction, is often ignored as they are treated as other commodity markets and the focus remains on income aspects when assessing their salience in mobilisation processes. This thesis suggests instead that we must grasp how the socially embedded experience of being excluded from stable and decent employment influences youths’ political trajectories. As Cramer (2011a: 24) notes, “where unemployment—and other experiences of labour markets—is relevant [for participation in violence] it is sometimes partly for pecuniary reasons but almost always or mainly because labour markets are sources of

status and loci of struggles over norms of fairness and ideologically validated identity”. Beyond the structure of the market and its collocation in the economy, therefore, experiences of incorporation or exclusion create meanings, social identities and relations.

This sub-section provides the conceptual components of an analysis of the social meanings and effects of work. It focuses on three different facets of work in order to trace their social consequences: definitions and valuations of work; the type of work one does; and the absence of work (or of what is defined as valuable work). The section however first introduces the genealogy and foundations of the particular strand of scholarship that looks at how the political economy of work has social implications for individuals and for relations of power within society.

Anthropological Foundations: Marx, Polanyi and Moral Economy

The notion that labour markets are social institutions has deep theoretical roots. A number of scholars have long attempted to demystify the market by emphasising its social character and effects, breaking down the barrier between economy and society elicited by notions such as that of the market’s “invisible hand”. Marx’s work on the relationship between labour relations and class struggle in 19th century Europe is the most influential body of work in this direction (McLellan 2000). Marx’s theory of alienation begins from a vision of man as an inherently social being, whose creative and self-realising work is at the heart of his social being (*Gattungswesen*). The significance of work for social identity is clear in Marx’s vision of unalienated labour, as production fulfils humans’ creative potential and the division of labour creates bonds between human beings. Capitalist production, by forcing the property-less worker to sell his labour power, alienates the worker from the fruits of his labour and thus from his social being. Deviating from his *Gattungswesen*, the worker develops a particular

consciousness of himself within society: he becomes alienated from his fellow men and more hostile to those who own his labour.

In this framework, therefore, the labour relations necessitated by capitalist production have crucial implications for social relations. Labour market positions mark the dividing line between classes, that is, between a property-less proletariat and the owners of the means of production, while an “army of the unemployed” keeps wages down perpetuating the condition of the proletariat. Both the type of work and the terms of inclusion in the capitalist labour market are therefore important in determining individual’s position in society. By turning relations between human beings into commercial interactions, in which individuals see each other as means, capitalism detaches men from their social nature and from the community. Ultimately, Marx argued, progressively degraded working conditions in industrial Europe would be the trigger for the development of class-consciousness that would bring the class antagonism inherent in capitalist modes of production into open revolutionary conflict. This analysis of capitalist development, albeit presented only superficially and very briefly, gives some insights into how we might begin to conceptualise the social implications of labour markets by pointing to how the nature of work and one’s position in the market can shape individual and collective identities, social relations and power dynamics.

Marx’s theories set the stage for the subsequent work of economic anthropologists, who most clearly put forward the notion that the functioning of markets produces and reproduces subjects and relations. Polanyi’s (1944) *The Great Transformation* is seminal from this point of view. He incisively argued that the establishment of a market economy had also engendered a “market society”, a distinctive departure from previous modes of social organisation. Market society, as he analysed through Europe’s experiences in the early 20th century, necessitated the arbitrary separation of the economic from the political sphere under the illusion of a self-

regulating market. This illusion, in turn, relies on the subordination of society to the laws on the market, the disembedding of individuals from the community and, in particular, on the conception of all elements of industry as commodities. Polanyi saw the commodification of labour, a key component of market society, as having far reaching consequences as: “in disposing of a man’s labour power, the system would incidentally, dispose of the physical and the moral entity ‘man’ attached to the tag” (ibid.: 72). Polanyi’s work not only highlights the culturally contingent nature of society’s subordination to economic principles, but also underscores the idea that economic processes such as the organisation of labour and the nature of society are mutually constitutive. Like Marx, Polanyi expected the onset of market society’s labour dynamics to have political consequences, including class conflict and the rise of Fascism.

The mutual constitution of economy and society thus elicits the exploration of social meaning imbued in economic transactions and processes of economic transformation. Economic anthropology’s study of moral economy focuses on this as it analyses the varying role of reciprocity in exchanges across different kinds of societies. The focus of these studies is on social relations and how the morality governing these interactions is related to specific economic systems. Scott’s (1976) study of South Asian peasants, for example, uses the term moral economy to depict a society where norms of reciprocity, alongside a right to subsistence, are the principles organising labour and, consequently, social relations. In moral economies, “production of wealth and social distribution are inextricably linked” (Bryceson 2010: 267), so that the morality of work is dependent on whether its products are socially or individually consumed. The concept of a moral economy has tended to be used primarily to describe agrarian societies and to differentiate them from market economies in industrial societies, where the profit motive and individualistic rationality dominate. Following in Polanyi’s footsteps, the rise of capitalism would bring about a demise of so called,

substantivist societies, and replace them with market society. This distinction usefully highlights the role of morality and norms in defining the nature of economic exchanges and relations in different societies as well as casting light on the non-universal nature of market principles.

In the African context, concepts such as “moral economy” and “economy of affection” and, more generally, of reciprocity have indeed been used primarily to discuss peasant societies. Hyden (2006: 3) for example defines the “economy of affection”, distinctive of African peasantries, as “a network of support, communication and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affiliation, for example religion”. Such an economy is necessitated, in this framework, by the imperatives of survival. Bryceson (2010: 268) argues for example that rather than being a distinguishing feature of African societies: “It is the significance of reciprocity in productive systems close to the fine line between basic subsistence and famine, which gives enhanced meaning to the act of reciprocity”. A related framework is offered by proponents of “wealth-in-people” theories, which can help us not only describe the existence of relations of reciprocity but also highlight their role in processes of power and social stratification.

Bledsoe’s (1980) ethnography of the Kpelle of Liberia made use of the notion of “wealth in people” in the West African context, pointing to the accumulation of dependants by older men as a route to power. Through the production of surplus, “big men” would attract dependants and establish relations of obligation, as controlling their labour would fulfil farm labour requirements and create loyal political followings. Wealth in people, in other words, refers to a situation where “status [...] is based on labour and allegiance rather than on wealth in privately owned goods or land” (ibid.: 54). These understandings are important for conceptualising labour markets as social institutions as they show how obligations underpin

economic interactions and how specific economic systems and the structure of social relations are mutually reinforcing. Economic transformation is thus posited to thoroughly alter the relations underpinning moral economy, as it leads to the gradual disembedding from social obligations towards private forms of accumulation. As we shall see below, theories of moral economy need reworking in order to be applied outside of agrarian societies.

The work of economic anthropologists nevertheless lays the groundwork for thinking about how labour markets can impact social norms, identities, and relations between people, to probe further the ways in which experiences of work (or lack thereof) contribute to the creation of social subjects. The next section gives an overview of how we might build on these foundations to answer these questions in conversation with the empirical material in the next chapters.

The Meaning of Work and Subjectification

The notion of work's "subjectification function" (Weeks 2011: 8) offers a useful lens through which to elaborate on the insights outlined above in order to consider how precarious work in Freetown's informal economy might influence social identities, relations and ultimately political behaviour. In her original and provocative analysis of *The Problem with Work*, Weeks highlights the social role of work in what she calls "work society", referring primarily to post-Fordist United States. Rather than being simply an economic practice, Weeks argues, the kind of work necessitated by capitalist production also serves important extra-economic functions. Waged work, in particular, mediates people's integration into the economic system and the forms of social and political organisation that underpin it. Dominant values naturalise work as both economic necessity and social duty. According to Weeks, the consequence of this is not only the impossibility of imagining creative production outside of the boundaries of waged

work but also that those not integrated into the economic system, as workers are perceived as failing their duties to society. In elucidating the dominant ethic of work society, Weeks sheds light on what she considers to be work's "subjectification function", whereby "work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects" (ibid.: 8). Because of its centrality in individuals' lives and to society's imagery, work defines subjectivities and relations in different ways. In this thesis I apply the notion of the subjectification of work in order to argue that inclusion or exclusion from work, or the kind of work one does, has important consequences for social status, identity and relation to others. Furthermore, the social identities created through labour determine relative positions in societal hierarchies, and thus relations of power between groups and individuals creating political subjects.

The subjectification function of work operates in different ways; I focus on its creation of gendered, generational and occupational identities, and on how we might see work as structuring social interactions and networks applying the notion of moral economy to non-agrarian societies.

Subjectification and Social identities: Gender, Generation and Occupation

The workplace is often the locus of "gendering" and "classing" processes. Studies like Willis' (1978) *Learning to Labour*, which outlines how young working class boys get working class jobs, have chronicled how class and gender identities are reproduced through work. The kind of work one does thus has significant implications for status and social identity. While much focus has been placed on how normative conceptualisations of work impact the worker, they also potently influence those who are excluded from the labour market in the first place. McDowell (2003) highlights the consequences of unemployment for identity formation in her discussion of "redundant masculinities" in the British post-industrial context. She shows how

changes in the British labour market resulting in reduced opportunities for work have impacted young white men's self-perceptions and their understandings of their masculinity, as compared to notions of manhood that were previously constructed around work. She notes the difficulty in negotiating the "transitions to adulthood and pathways to employment when traditional ways of becoming a man are increasingly less available" (ibid.: 4).

The impact of unemployment on men's self-worth and social status can therefore be significant for men themselves, but it can also play a role in structuring their social interactions. The disempowerment perceived by unemployed men has for example been linked to their increased sexually aggressive behaviour, as mass unemployment leads to "young men basing their authority vis-à-vis women on bodily power [...] rather than on economic powers and social status" (Groes-Green 2009: 286; see also Sliberschmidt 2001). In order for the notion of threatened masculinities to have explanatory power, however, men's sense of threat to their masculinity externalised through other forms of control must be placed in the context of how work comes to be central to normative constructions of masculinity and thus to gender relations (Connell 1995; 2000).

Much of the scholarship on the impact of unemployment on gender identities and relations tends to focus on men's experience. However, the notion of "gendered work" or even "women's work" offers a window into how social assessments can determine what work is valued in the first place. The definition of what work is, or what differentiates work from other forms of production or survival activities, is an important foreground for grasping how self-worth and societal standing may be derived from certain forms of work over others. A key ground of feminist debate in the 1970s was the question of domestic work, and whether it ought to be recognised and thus remunerated (Bryson 2003; Millett 1977). This cast light on the undervaluation of women's unpaid work. At the same time it raised the concern that the

pecuniary valuation of domestic labour in the context of contemporary gender norms would simply reinforce women's relegation in the home.

The undervaluation of domestic labour stems from its invisibility, or rather naturalisation, which legitimates women's role as homemakers and mothers. Labour force statistics all over the world underestimate women's activity because they do not take into account the work they do at home, and their reproductive labour (Beneria 1992; Elson 1999). Definitions of work that centre on market transactions therefore cannot take into account the unpaid contribution that women make to the household and, through the reproduction of the labour force, to the economy. What this shows is that what is recognised as work in the first place depends on societal valuations. The recognition that the meaning of work is contingent is especially important in a context like Freetown's, where the absence of social security makes inactivity unviable for the urban poor, who are instead often engaged in precarious, irregular and low-income livelihoods in the informal economy, a vast space encompassing a plethora of different activities (ILO 2002; Ranis and Gollin 2014). In this space, as we shall see in Chapter 3, determining which livelihoods are recognised and valued, and who is seen to be working becomes both contested and highly salient for defining social status.

Like gender identities, generational ones have been increasingly seen as social constructs, and therefore as malleable to the influence of work or its absence. This has been the result of anthropological analyses of generational categories that have emphasised social rather than chronological age, in reaction to biomedical and linear approaches to child development (Ebata et al 2005; Hart 2008; Boyden and de Berry 2004; Christiansen et al 2006; Panelli et al 2007). While these scholars have emphasised the cultural specificity of what it means to be young, this also needs to be framed in the context of the economic forces and power relations that shape the experience of youth and its adversities (Hart 2008). Economic status,

determined by both economic forces and localised responses to economic change, has been shown to be more important than age in determining transitions to adulthood in several contexts. Authors such as Honwana (2012) discuss how lack of economic stability and exclusion from labour markets has foreclosed transitions to socially sanctioned adulthood for African youth. These approaches to the construction of youthhood thus offer us a lens to see how labour market dynamics can be imbued with social meanings, effectively keeping people stuck in the category of “youth” when employment acts as a marker of adulthood. As Christiansen et al (2006: 11) note, this is especially important because: “generational categories are not neutral or natural, but rather part of the struggle for influence and authority in almost every society”. Youth consequently becomes a category to be escaped rather than a period of carefree enjoyment and labour market exclusion determines not only the ability to generate income but also one’s position in society.

Through characterisations of youth as a socially constructed category, we must also avoid overly structural depictions of how economic adversity influences identity, relations and social hierarchies. As noted above, it is important to consider how young people navigate complex terrains, how though facing constraints set by others, they attempt to steer their lives and forge their paths to the future. Consequently, those who inhabit generational categories are not simply passive recipients of economically-defined identities, but also delineate the contours of their social being as they seek to “escape or move within it in meaningful ways” (Christiansen et al 2006: 1). Alongside an understanding of how exclusion from labour markets, or particular labour market experiences, give rise to specific subject-position, this opens up the space for an analysis of how youth attempt to escape their predicament or to construct alternative identities. Processes of subjectification, in other words, need not be unidirectional or close-ended.

Work's subjectification function can also be analysed through the emergence of individual and collective identities based on occupation. Bryceson (2010) for example introduces the concept of occupational identity as a way to make sense of the occupational upheaval across the African continent, resulting from structural adjustment and gradual deagrarianisation. Occupational identity refers not only to a particular job, but also to individuals' position in society's hierarchy, because, the type of work one does influences not only their sense of self but also the way they are seen by others. Despite its significance in people's everyday lives, occupation has been neglected by scholarship on the construction of social identities in Africa, which has tended to focus on gender, ethnicity and generation, without taking into account how these intersect with occupational identities. Noting that different types of work influence social worth, Bryceson also argues that "failed occupationality" results in "social disapproval and a personal lack of meaning and purpose" (ibid.: 7).

The notion of occupational identity is however also useful as a means to study the formation of work-based collectives. The development of a distinctive identity based on one's experience in the labour market and work place has in fact formed the basis for the development of trade-based associations and other forms of collective action, discussed in more detail in the next section. Studies of groups emerging in the economic sphere have focused primarily on the collective activities these groups can resort to in order to overcome market imperfections, such as asymmetrical information, but also failures in social security (Ardener and Burman 1995; Baden 2013; Pandolfelli et al 2007). As we shall see, a growing body of literature is emerging to look at how collectives based on occupational identities, especially within the informal economy can develop into instruments of both informal governance and political voice (Chen et al 2012; Lindell 2010a).

Social Networks and Reconceptualising Moral Economy

Labour market dynamics can also shape the way people interact, their social ties and the norms that regulate exchange, as recognised by analysts of moral economy and of social networks. Applying the insights of moral economy to non-agrarian societies can shed light on how economic change can alter, rather than supplant, the parameters of reciprocity that regulate exchange and give rise to contrasting logics of accumulation. This underpins the thesis' analysis of the role of increasingly exclusionary networks of redistribution in determining the functioning of Sierra Leone's labour market over time, and its impact on relations between those who are insiders and those who are outsiders.

The dichotomy drawn by theorists between moral and market economy to define different socio-economic systems can be overly strict, as norms of reciprocity often coexist with the processes of disembedding and private accumulation associated with market economies (Appadurai 1986). The demise of agrarian society in different countries has not universally or automatically translated into the demise of reciprocity, yet the flux into which morality and social organisation are thrown as a product of economic exchange is significant, as Marx and Polanyi predicted. Bryceson (2010) has warned that Africa's occupational transformation on the back of economic change, such as neoliberal reform and deagrarianisation, has sparked significant uncertainty, and an "ethical vacuum" that might lead to social breakdown but also offers opportunities for redefining norms of trust and work ethics. Adapting notions of moral economy to eschew a rigid separation between agrarian and market economies can therefore offer an important lens through which to analyse how economic interactions are embedded in social norms and give rise to particular kinds of relations. Allowing for the coexistence of different moral registers within market societies helps us make sense of how certain economic interactions and structures can be perceived by parts of society as deviating from ethical

norms. This is especially important in the volatile terrains with which the protagonists of this research have to contend. Forms of resistance to market dynamics from the margins, as evidenced by movements such as Occupy in the West or Y'en a Marre in Senegal, are an illuminating example of how economic systems are not simply passively experienced but are actively critiqued according to contending moralities.⁸

Ferguson's (2013) work is especially insightful from this point of view as he offers a way of thinking about how the notions of "dependence" theorised by moral economists and students of "wealth in people" continue to be relevant in the midst of massive socio-economic change. He discusses how economic restructuring in Southern Africa has resulted in significant labour surpluses. While these changes have been combined with liberal expectations of independence and disembedding from reciprocal relations, Ferguson argues that economic restructuring and the rise of mass unemployment have not resulted in a universal shift away from notions of personhood rooted in social relations. In a context where offering one's labour is no longer enough to elicit relations of dependence, "subordination in exchange for membership" continues to be an explicit goal in the struggles of the "perilously insecure" (ibid: 231). Ferguson's analysis of these "declarations of dependence" alerts us to the contrasts between logics of accumulation in post-agrarian societies and to the complex ways in which labour markets matter for understanding social relations. Similarly, Bolten's (2012) study of social relations in times of crisis in war-torn Sierra Leone is illustrative of both the persistence of norms of reciprocity and of the sanctioning of perceived deviations from them. Bolten's analysis relies on the emic concept of "love", a "concept of material loyalty— relationships forged and sustained in complex, often compassionate acts of resource exchange" (ibid.: 3).

⁸ The Occupy Movement began in 2011 in New York, as Occupy Wall Street, a protest against social and economic inequality that sparked similar occupations across the world to challenge the global financial system (see Graeber 2014). Y'en a Marre (Enough is Enough) is a movement of Senegalese youth that emerged from protests about power cuts in Dakar in 2003 and was later at the forefront of opposition to President Wade's bid for a third term (see Gueye 2011).

The opposite of love, which she terms “betrayal”, refers instead to the sanctioning of individual accumulation of resources without adequate redistribution to dependants. Focusing attention on expectations of reciprocity provides a useful starting point for an analysis of the impact of labour market dynamics on social relations and the norms that govern them.

Social networks are thus an important component of a discussion of the relationship between labour markets and social relations and can give us an insight into how people manage vulnerability. Bryceson (2010) has argued that in the face of rapid economic change, restructuring and dislocation, social ties are constantly created in people’s everyday work lives in order to enable livelihoods. Networks based on reciprocity can be useful to gather information and to create safety nets through mutual obligation. Inclusion or exclusion from the labour market as well as one’s occupation have implications for individuals’ collocations within social networks. Socio-economic status can influence the nature of networks and we can for example differentiate between vertical ties between unequals and horizontal bonds of solidarity amongst those facing similar adversity.

Meagher’s (2005, 2010a, 2011) work on the role of networks in African economies helps us move beyond culturally determinist frameworks that envision the role of personal networks as a continental cultural deficiency, whereby networks’ generation of liabilities such as corruption has been understood as inherent to the functioning of social capital in Africa. Instead, she puts forward an analysis of how networks developed within spaces of economic activity can be seen as products of the historical, institutional and political context in which they arise. In the context of the Nigerian manufacturing town of Aba, Meagher thus shows how economic liberalisation has eroded the productive potential of social capital in the informal economy as the absence of state support has led informal producers to shift to networks that “impede growth and exacerbate differentiation, uncertainty and opportunism” (Meagher 2010a: 124).

Vertical differentiation occurs at the expense of harnessing shared socialisation in spaces of economic activity to develop skills and productive relationships. The role of collectives, such as savings associations, mentioned above show another possible trend of horizontal reciprocity. These studies reflect how economic change and work-based experiences can define the nature of social relations and networks between individuals, both within and across socio-economic strata.

In this section, we have identified some key components for sketching the impact of work, or its absence, on identities and social relations. Labour market exclusion and precarious work constitute the terrains that young people have to navigate, as they are confronted with economic constraints permeated with social meanings. Understanding the social functions of work and its role in processes of subjectification serves as an important bridge to a discussion of political mobilisation. Relations, networks and identities emerging from labour market experiences are imbued in power-relations, as they affect positions within societal hierarchies and the terms of interactions between members of society. Furthermore, collective identities formed in the work place as well as the challenges presented by differential access to employment opportunities can, at different points in time, be politically salient. In other words, work constitutes not only social but also political subjects. It is to an understanding of this bridge that this thesis hopes to contribute. The next section turns to an overview of the conceptual tools for analysing the second part of this equation, namely forms of political mobilisation.

Youth, Politics and the State

Narratives that portray young people as risk factors in the aftermath of war make specific assumptions about the political behaviour of the un- or underemployed. Informed by varied insights about the motivations of marginal youth, these narratives, as we have seen, frame youth in post-conflict countries as a threat to the rebuilding of a peaceful polity. Young people's potential for violence may be manifest in different ways, as actors on behalf of entrepreneurs of violence vying for power; as autonomous organisers of insurrection; or even as the "infantry of adult statecraft" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 24). All of these modes of violent engagement imply a different kind of relationship to the state and involve different kinds of actors and collective organisation. Furthermore, achieving a more nuanced picture of the political behaviour of the unemployed entails not only unpacking the processes the link labour market experiences to engagement in different forms of political violence, but also considering alternative modes of political engagement open to young marginals and understanding how labour market dynamics may shape, or hinder, these alternatives.

We therefore need to open up the space of where we look to analyse the nature of young people's political mobilisation and specifically their engagement with the post-war state, to which they are envisioned to pose a threat. An analysis of youth navigation in the political sphere thus means considering possibilities and pathways young people choose, constrained by the terrains in which they move. The confines of political opportunity structures must thus be seen in relation to how young people engage with, resist, or subvert them. This section lays out three dimensions of an analysis of young marginals' political mobilisation: the relations between state and society; the types of actors and channels available for mobilisation; and modes of mobilisation.

State-Society Relations

Engaging with claims that youth are a threat to the post-war state through their potentially violent political behaviour requires first a conceptualisation of what the state is and how it might be seen to interact with young people. Chazan et al (1992: 39) define the state as the “organized aggregate of relatively permanent institutions of governance” and put forward a useful interactive approach, which aims to analyse the character of the state through transactions between social groups and state institutions. An interactive approach importantly privileges an empirical focus, which avoids normative conceptualisations and focuses instead on how state-society relations play out in practice, how negotiations of power and claims over public life and the common good occur at different levels, in different guises and locations. In other words, the application of an interactive approach in this thesis relies on the contention that we must look at the nature of these relations in action, rather than deducing their character and purpose *a priori*. These interactions furthermore, must be placed in their historical context so as to understand how institutions and practices of governance develop over time and how historical junctures influence the relations between the state and the governed (Mustapha and Whitfield 2009).

An empirical approach is especially important in conceptualising the post-colonial African state and its relation to societal groupings in the context of on-going debates in Africanist political science (Mustapha 2006). Despite being a ubiquitous concept in political theory, if not its foundation, the state remains a largely contested term, and one that theorists have struggled to define in non-normative terms. In the African context in particular, the state is perennially prefixed with normatively loaded terms such as “neopatrimonial”, “failed” or even “criminal” (see for example Bayart et al 1999; Chabal and Daloz 1999). Neopatrimonial African states are depicted as being ruled by corrupt individuals who run state affairs through

informal, often criminal networks, according to their personal interests and those of their clients. When war occurs, states are said to have collapsed and failed, implying a shared, but often assumed, understanding of what state functions are. These characterisations have been criticised for their limited analytical value both because of the assumptions they rely on, and because they tend to act as catch-all terms for a plethora of different phenomena (Wai 2012). In attempting to make sense of a variety of different practices, such as the use of state authority for personal gain or how both weak and authoritarian states may encounter insurrection, through catch-all concepts, these analyses slide into culturalist and ahistorical terrains, as they purport to explain the politics of the continent as driven by culturally specific and generalizable deficiencies (Mustapha 2006; Meagher 2011).

This framing is at least partly the result of an underlying reliance on normative conceptualisations of the state based on Weberian ideal types, that tell us more about what the African state is not than what it is (Verheul 2013). In addition, these normative and Eurocentric yardsticks of statehood are often the product of a failure to engage with historical analyses of state formation and in particular of the legacy of colonial rule on the structures and practices of governance in postcolonial states. These characterisations, consequently, do not get us any closer to understanding the specificities of how states operate in postcolonial Africa, the complex and multifaceted interactions that citizens have with institutions and state officials or the avenues that exist for mobilisation within or outside, for or against, the state. Furthermore, they prevent us from understanding how these contemporary interactions are shaped by trends of institutional and economic development, which, as Mushtaq Khan has highlighted can “make patron-client politics both rational for redistributive coalitions and effective as strategies for achieving goals of powerful constituencies within these coalitions” (cited in Mustapha 2006: 21). Moving from “abstract methodological constructs to actually empirically existing types”, as Wai (2012: 35) recommends, entails a dialogue between socio-

structural, rather than cultural, analyses of state-society relations and their historical underpinnings.

A first step in this direction is to sharpen the terminology used to conceptualise state-society relations in order to drop the normative baggage of catchall terms. We can for example unpack a concept like neo-patrimonialism to differentiate between different phenomena. Van de Walle (2007) distinguishes between at least three different forms of patron-client relations that are often referred to collectively, namely: tribute, patronage and prebendalism. Tribute refers to the bonds of reciprocity and trust amongst patrons and clients in peasant societies manifest through gift exchange; patronage is instead the use of state resources to provide jobs and services for political clienteles; while prebendalism describes the use of public office for individual gain. A similarly useful distinction is that between structures and practices of governance. The former refers to the formal-institutional aspect of the state, as per Chazan et al's (1992) definition, and thus to the organisational arrangement of institutions of governance such as the judiciary or the executive. The latter refers instead to ordinary interactions between state officials with members of society, across often-blurred boundaries (Migdal 2001; Migdal and Schlichte 2005). Citizens' experiences of the state and their attempts to make political claims in the public space might thus be characterised through a complex set of interactions with both institutions and practices, formally and informally. Citizens might, for example, engage with the state both as they vote in an election and as individual politicians vying for power approach them to mobilise their vote outside of the formal channels. The nature of state practices, or the relative importance of formal over informal interactions, is then contingent on structural features developed over time and boundaries may be blurred.

A compelling example of such an analysis that also offers a more constructive insight into the nature of patron-client relations in African politics is offered by Utas' (2012a) discussion of

informal governance networks. Utas's work on "bigmanity" in conflict-affected countries focuses on informal network governance as a structural alternative to "weak or absent state institutions" (ibid.: 5). This, Utas argues, is not specific to the African context, but rather a result of particular institutional constellations. For example we might consider how a state army's inability to control parts of the territory, might result in alternative arrangements and parallel authority structures. Similarly state officials may engage with citizens outside of formal structures through informal networks. Utas' work emphasises the role of "big men" as key nodes in these networks, whose status is gained through the ability to build and maintain followers through forms of reciprocity based on redistribution. This need not predetermine the nature and purpose of networks, as they may be mobilised to gain political control, to ensure order, to maintain power through redistribution, or to destabilise the state through conflict. The position of these networks vis-à-vis the formal state can thus be varied. Importantly, Utas points to the need of big men to "extend solidarity within a moral framework" and to the nature of networks as "moral communities" (ibid.: 8).

These approaches open up the space to look at long-term institutional development in order to understand the emergence of present patterns of informal practices of rule that often rely on relations between big men vying for power and their clients. A focus on networks also helps bridge our previous discussion of how labour markets may constitute social relations and the political dimensions of social ties. Utas' focus on warlords and criminal networks however risks, despite its usefully structural approach, once again sensationalising and pathologising the role of networks as it hides from view the other more ordinary negotiations of power that occur across the continent and the plethora of motives involved in the establishment and maintenance of informal networks of governance. These may be rational responses to institutional and economic developments rather than aberrations. In addition, while understanding informal networks through a structural and historically sound approach is

essential, focusing only on “big men” and informal practices of governance can also obscure the contestations and imaginations of the state that can occur within and outside of state institutions. Giving “bigmanity” centre stage not only risks obscuring the views and experiences of those who are “small” but also places out of sight the attempts (and failures) at political action of those who are not effectively embedded in networks or whose experience of the state, whether in its formal guise or through informal relations with its representatives is limited in practice. As this thesis will argue, engaging with economically excluded youths’ political imagination highlights their on-going contestations of both formal and informal governance arrangements.

Having thus offered some conceptual foundations through which to understand the Sierra Leonean state we turn to the specific channels and modalities of political action that may be available for young people to make political claims and to engage with or against institutions and practices of governance.

Actors and Modes of Action

In analysing channels and modes of political action, a distinction between actors and modes of action provides significant insights. We must thus consider through what kind of actor or collective youth mobilise or are mobilised; whether mobilisation happens through formal or informal channels as defined above; whether mobilisation is autonomous or “from above”; and finally, and most importantly, whether it is violent or non-violent. The considerations can help us distinguish between the plethora of political action that youth can be involved in: as clients in big man networks, actors for entrepreneurs of violence, participants in violent youth uprisings, political party cadre, peaceful activists and so on. It is of course impossible to be exhaustive, however laying out some criteria for understanding the shape that mobilisation

might take and the channels through which it might happen provides a foundation for analysing the experiences of Freetown's youth. The task in the following chapters will then be to elucidate the processes connecting labour market experiences, as conceptualised in the previous section, to these forms of mobilisation as they manifest empirically.

Political Parties, Entrepreneurs and Youth Violence "From Above"

A first set of actors we can identify to analyse youths' mobilisation opportunities are political parties and political entrepreneurs. The role of young people in political parties has been especially well-documented in the context of independence struggles across the continent and in dominant party states that emerged in some African states after decolonisation (Abbink 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005). In particular young people have been actively involved in youth wings, which in turn have played varied roles across countries and political systems. While potentially offering the opportunity for youth to influence political decisions, youth wings, especially in authoritarian states, have been involved in acts of political violence and the intimidation of opponents (Konings 2005; Mehler 2007). As discussed in the Introduction, the role of political entrepreneurs in mobilising youth for violence in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia has been highlighted as a key argument in depicting young people as threats to these post-war states (Christensen and Utas 2008; Persson 2012; Utas 2012a; see Chapter 6 for discussion). Indeed, also in countries neither experiencing nor recovering from conflict, political entrepreneurs have played a role in the mobilisation of youth for violence in a context of electoral competition (see Kagwanja 2005).

Political parties and entrepreneurs can however also play a different role in the mobilisation of young people, as they approach them as voters and potential supporters. Political parties' organisational structures and their mode of appeal to voters has been at the centre of a

burgeoning literature in Africanist political science, which aims to take seriously parties' strategies to gain supporters and organisational structures to mobilise the vote (Bratton et al 2012; Cheeseman and Larmer 2013; Ishiyama 2012; LeBas 2011). While analyses of electoral mobilisation strategies have often focused on parties' ethno-regional appeal and the use of selective spending to client constituencies (e.g. van de Walle 2003), this more recent literature attempts to offer a more complex spectrum of strategies. Cheeseman and Ford (2007) for example argue that opposition parties' fall back on ethnic mobilisation strategies due to their lack of access to state resources to build more inclusive parties. The emergence of populist claims, based on economic grievances and anti-elitist sentiments have also been analysed, primarily in the Zambian context, in conjunction with identitarian or more "programmatic" appeals (Cheeseman and Larmer 2013; Cheeseman et al 2014; Larmer and Fraser 2007). The role of political parties and specific political entrepreneurs in mobilising young people can therefore take different forms and can either be violent or non-violent. Young people might engage as party members or violent enforcers for the party or a specific politician, or they may be approached and mobilised as voters according to a matrix of different strategies and appeals. The questions guiding the following chapters therefore are how political parties and entrepreneurs feature in young marginals' experiences of politicisation and how such engagement relates to their labour market circumstances.

Civil Society and Social Mobilisation

A second set of actors important for analysing young people's mobilisation avenues is what is frequently categorised as civil society, an increasingly popular but often analytically elusive concept. Making a comeback from the confines of 19th and early 20th century European political philosophy, civil society became the development industry's buzzword in the era of structural adjustment and democratisation (Ferguson 2006). As states were envisioned to be

over-extended and authoritarian, a vibrant collection of associations was imagined as the rightful locus of democratic activity. While civil society has broadly referred to associational life, its contours and implications have remained vague. Harbeson (1994) usefully suggests that, as a starting point, we differentiate civil society from society at large by highlighting its distinctively political function. Individuals, groups and associations can therefore be considered civil society when they seek to define, engage with or promote changes in the working rules of political life. The main concern with civil society as a theoretical concept is however its normative, often Euro-centric, image of organised society, separate from the state and somehow more “civil” and emancipatory in nature (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Mamdani 1995).

More useful conceptualisations for understanding citizens’ collective action thus do not begin from normative premises, avoiding the reification of society as entirely autonomous from the state, and focusing instead on the empirical exploration of state-society relations, looking at their interdependence rather than a balance of power, without prejudging the nature of these relations (Harbeson 1994). Such an approach is illustrated by Chatterjee’s (2004) *The Politics of the Governed*, in which he intimates that we need to differentiate between the formal positions of citizens as holders of rights within the state’s governance structures, and the way in which the majority of citizens experience their interactions with the state. In most of the world, he suggests, civil society as a normative ideal is in fact the prerogative of an elite few, while the masses’ relationship to the state is better conceptualised as “political society”, whereby populations “have to be both looked after and controlled by various government agencies”, and as such enter into political relationships with state actors that rarely conform to constitutional visions (ibid.: 38). Through these interactions of welfare provision and control segments of the populations are classified into different “categories of governmentality”, which are in turn invested with “the imaginative possibilities of community” as the governed

attempt to make political claims (ibid.: 60). This, Chatterjee argues, is by definition a heterogeneous mode of interaction with the state, and depends on the forms of community formation, their ability to position themselves vis-à-vis the state and the nature of the claims made on its institutions. As such it is a far cry from the equal application of the rights of citizenship.

The notion of civil society, for all its conceptual pitfalls, is nevertheless useful to demarcate a complex set of actors that are relevant for describing possible mobilisation channels. Civil society's paradigmatic focus on associational life, for example, brings into the picture the political dimension of the groupings based on shared occupation discussed in the previous section. The political role of informal workers' associations is a particularly salient example for our purposes, and one that has given rise to lively debates amongst scholars of the informal economy and trade-based political organisation. Lindell (2010a) for example argues that studies of the informal sector have largely neglected the political dimensions of processes of informalisation in African cities, and sets out to redress this by documenting the multitude of collective action initiatives amongst urban informal workers. Lindell and her volume's contributors focus on how political action in the informal sector has engaged with centres of power in order to challenge policy and regulation openly and forcefully. They also point to variations across associations in their level and forms of organisation, and the attempts by some groups to bring together individuals across different levels of economic capacity and standing, as well as across gender and ethnic lines. This suggests that: "the contours and agendas of collective organizations of informal workers cannot be mechanically read from their specific structural positions in society" (ibid.: 12).

Similarly, informal actors can be analysed in terms of the kind of relations they have with dominating powers, at different levels of governance, from the municipal to the national. In

defining informal actors' engagement with power, Lindell (2010b) puts forward a distinction between "exit" and "voice". Informal actors may "exit" from the purview of the state, attempting to become invisible to its regulations as well as avoiding engagement with its practices (Simone 2004). Disengagement, or lack of overt engagement need not mean that actors in the informal space are apolitical. Scott's (1985: xv) work has for example highlighted the need to recognize that "most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized political activity". For this reason, Scott suggests a focus on the "ordinary weapons of powerless groups", which are characteristically unplanned and centred around informal networks, avoiding direct confrontations with power. More recently, Bayat's (2010) work on the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" by the dispossessed has added a layer of complexity to what he calls the "resistance paradigm", as it challenges Scott's assumption of intentionality in ordinary acts. Bayat suggests that the micropolitics of the everyday that in practice challenge authority and bring about social change, but may have been enacted out of necessity without any political intentionality. Allowing space for appreciating the political salience of mundane acts helps us expand the notion of political subjectivity and action amongst groups that "structurally lack institutional power of disruption" (Bayat 2010: 11).

In contrast to these forms of disengagement or quiet resistance, "voice" characterises those attempts at collective mobilisation to make overt political claims, for example to contest urban regulation or economic policy (Brown and Lyons 2010; Chen et al 2012). They can include contestations such as protest and civil disobedience, as well as the more traditional forms of lobbying authorities. Significantly, however, Meagher (2010b: 301) has cautioned against equating collective organisation in the informal sector with voice, as "informal resource mobilisation and associational life do not necessarily translate into social empowerment". This also means once again rejecting the portrayal of associational life as

necessarily against the state and thus as separate from it, or as unequivocally “from below”. Analysts have in fact pointed to the possibility for capture or incorporation of associations and social movements by political entrepreneurs. Azarya (1994) defines incorporation in his analysis of civil society as groups’ attempts to become close to state actors and benefit from incorporation into these networks. The mobilisation potential of associations, therefore, is once again open-ended, ranging from disengagement and “quiet” resistance, to what Holston (2008) terms “insurgent citizenship” or co-option and incorporation.

Moving beyond normative notions of civil society and analysing the nature of political action within spaces of informal economic activity inhabited by Freetown’s young marginal thus requires disentangling the meanings and manifestations of these different processes.

Violent Uprisings

It is finally crucial for our purposes to identify the potential for citizen action to turn violent. The normative nature of civil society as an analytical concept is already encapsulated by the prefix “civil”, which implicitly delineates a set of “uncivil” actors that may nonetheless be politically engaged (Berman 1998; Fatton 1995). Comaroff and Comaroff (1999: 22) highlight “the continuing uneasiness of normal social science with ‘uncool’ forms of African association; forms dubbed partisan, parochial, fundamentalist”. This thus often excludes ethnic or religious organisations, but also, and most importantly for our purposes, it leaves violent forms of contentious politics in analytical limbo. This brings us to the second strand of the “youth as threat” narrative, whereby young people are envisioned as potentially violent not through their recruitment by violently minded patrons but for their potential eruption in collective unrest. A violent politics “from below”, in other words.

A recent turn in social movement studies has started paying attention to the mechanisms and processes through which contentious politics turns violent, and to the interplay between group dynamics and individual motivations on the one hand and political opportunity structures on the other (Bosi et al 2014; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Malthaner 2012). Della Porta (2009), for example, analyses the different waves of violent radicalisation in the Italian Red Brigade movement in reference to the closing of political space at different points in time. The underlying hypothesis being that “the closing down of opportunities is a precondition, especially the disillusionment after apparent opening-up of opportunities for the opposition” (ibid: 10). Importantly, Della Porta highlights that opportunity structures that enable or engender political violence are not simply objective but rather interpreted and reacted to subjectively by different actors and groups. She stresses the need to focus on processes, rather than causal mechanisms between structural conditions and radicalisation, as different factors, from the individual, to the group and environmental, interact often over long periods of time.

Aside from the opportunities that present themselves for mobilisation, an examination of political violence “from below” must also differentiate between different organisational structures and the degree of violence that they engage in. Violent contention can for example take the form of clashes between young protesters and state forces, as seen during the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa. Anti-oppression struggles across Africa during decolonisation also occasionally resulted in violent contestation (Abbink 2005; Fanon 1963). Episodic violence can be contrasted with violent organisations such as terrorist groups, or rebel movements like the RUF in Sierra Leone engaged in full-blown civil war. Violent protest or insurrection can in other words be understood according to the processes of radicalisation, the degree and level of organisational of violence, and to analyses of motivations for joining, such as opportunism or revolutionary conviction as discussed in the Introduction.

These distinctions leave us with a set of potential avenues for youths' mobilisation, defined according to the different actors involved, relations to the state and the mode of action, especially violent versus non-violent. The task of the empirical research, then, is to look at which opportunities for engagement are available to and taken up by young marginals in Freetown's informal space and to trace the linkages between experiences of labour market exclusion and the patterns of mobilisation that manifest themselves. The boundaries between forms of mobilisation are of course not to be taken as rigid, as there may be intersections between types of engagement and as modes of action may mutate over time as political constellations and opportunity structures change. This loose typology nevertheless is intended both to lay out some conceptual tools for what is to come, as well as presenting the intricate interactions between the political structures that face young people and the avenues they may choose as they navigate complex and often volatile political terrains.

The Politics of Work: Looking Ahead

This chapter has put forward a theoretical approach for a study of the path that connects young people's labour market experiences to various forms of mobilisation. Each component of this theoretical framework is taken up in the following chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the historical development of the political economy of work in Sierra Leone, from colonial times until the post-war period, showing how labour market structures and the political spaces facing youth today were shaped over time by socio-political as well as economic forces. The role of networks of redistribution is given particular attention as they emerge as an essential bridge mediating labour market dynamics and political processes. Chapter 3 shows how understandings of unemployment are contingent on social valuations of different livelihood

strategies and how young peoples' navigations of difficult economic terrains are geared towards the fulfilment of aspirations of employment based on these social valuations. The social meanings and interpretations of labour relations give work extra-economic significance, as it creates subjects. Chapter 4 thus turns to an exploration of how labour market experiences influence social identities such as youth and gender, and how these influence young people's position within society's power structures.

These meanings, identities and relations and the way in which young people embody, engage with, or attempt to escape them in turn offers a window into how labour market dynamics influence participation in political violence or other forms of political engagement. The process through which work-based individual and collective identity formation becomes politically salient, and through which social norms and relations influence mobilisation strategies, or a Politics of Work, is the subject matter of Chapters 5 and 6. There, different avenues, opportunities and constraints for political mobilisation, from above and from below, violent and non-violent, are discussed to show how they relate to experiences of marginal work. It is these experiences that limit the space available to marginal youth for action "from below" and for some forge the path towards violence led "from above".

Chapter 2

The Politics of Work in Historical Perspective

This Chapter traces the historical development of the independent Sierra Leonean state and its labour market. In doing so, it aims to both contextualise the experiences of Freetown's marginal youth and to highlight the historical roots of the structural conditions that they presently face. As outlined in Chapter 1, it is important that experiential accounts of the processes connecting unemployment and mobilisation are rooted in an analysis of labour market and political opportunity structures within which these experiences take place, and to take into account the development of these structures over time. The Chapter therefore focuses on the role of labour in Sierra Leone's trajectory of economic development and in determining the nature of the political space for young citizens in the years between decolonisation up to the reconstruction effort after the ten-year civil war. Such an analysis shows the mutual influence of the economy and politics over time.

The first section analyses how the mode of colonial rule and the nature of the decolonisation process shaped the political economy of labour and how the necessities of indirect rule and speedy independence placed powerful intermediaries the centre stage in the political process. The decades following independence saw the development of an exclusionary economy, whereby political tactics and economic restructuring led to a shrinking of opportunities for a majority of Sierra Leoneans. The second section traces this process through Siaka Stevens' trajectory towards one party state and the evolution of narrow networks of personalised redistribution centred on the President and the diamond economy. The third section turns to the economic deterioration of the 1980s and the collapse of the formal state, opening the way for war. The fourth section then deals with the war itself, focusing both on how exclusionary labour markets have featured in analyses of root causes and on the dynamics of the labour of

war. Finally, the Chapter analyses the reconstruction years, setting the stage for the present day experiences of young marginals, highlighting the constraints and opportunities facing youths' attempts to find work and to mobilise politically.

The Economics of Colonial Rule and Electoral Decolonisation

Colonial Ventures and Indirect Rule

Sierra Leone's colonial experience played a fundamental role in the subsequent development of the country's economy and political landscape on the advent of independence. After a brief encounter with Portuguese colonial ambitions in the 15th century, Sierra Leone became a central port in the British Atlantic slave trade. Moves towards the abolition of slavery resulted in the British resettlement of freed slaves to West Africa, including Sierra Leone. The resettlement scheme was established as a response to the "black poor problem", that is, increasing concern with "undesirable jobless blacks" who came to England after the American War of Independence and who, after a ruling by Lord Mansfield in 1772, could not be re-enslaved (Alie 1992: 51). The chosen immigrants' first shore of arrival in 1787 was the "Province of Freedom", later Freetown, where they were soon joined by Nova Scotians. Their acquisition of land from the local chief was to be the beginning of the separation between the city, populated by the descendants of freed slaves, the Krios, and those living in the hinterland. Despite promises of freedom, the Freetown Peninsula was in fact to be administered by the Sierra Leone Company, established by a group of abolitionists with the aim of promoting commerce between the Colony and the West. In 1793, as the Company faced financial problems and fears of insurrection, its Chairman requested that the British government take control. The Western Peninsula became a Crown Colony in 1808.

The financial problems of the Colony were not entirely resolved by formal annexation and the question of how to get the Colony to pay for itself remained a recurrent concern throughout the colonial period. Up until the discovery of diamonds in 1930, Sierra Leone seemed to have little to offer to private investors and most economic activity, such as the export of palm kernels, tended to be small scale and at subsistence level. According to Cartwright (1970), limited engagement in the cash-crop economy and wage-employment during this time significantly shaped the country's social fabric as it underpinned patterns of dominance that might have been challenged as a consequence of drastic economic change. Cartwright in particular refers to the role of chiefs, a key set of players in the interactions between colonial subjects and the foreign-administered state. As in other colonies, the British administration relied on indirect rule as they extended their control outside the Colony into the hinterland, or the Protectorate, from 1896 (see Mamdani 1996). Paramount chiefs were identified as accepted traditional authorities and as such as the ideal intermediaries between the state and its subjects, or in other words, a cheap way to control the hinterland to generate more revenues in a struggling colony. Reno (1995: 29) depicts the relationship between the colonial administrators and the chiefs as form of "accommodation with local elites". Such arrangements between the state and local "big men" relied on giving collaborators access to state resources and markets in exchange for their ability to maintain social order. This set a precedent as "access to state power translated into private benefit" (ibid.: 33).

The chiefs' importance in the system of indirect rule and their resulting control of production and trade weakened checks on their powers and opened the way to their use of their position for personal enrichment as well as to the outright abuse of chiefly authority over their subjects (Cartwright 1970). Forced labour was a key example of this and it was central to cementing chiefs' dominance. Under this system, young men were required to perform community work

which increasingly became synonymous with labour at the chiefs' disposal, for example on their plantations. With the chiefs as nodes in networks of access to state resources and as key brokers of trade and other forms of economic activity, subjects became "incorporated [...] in a growing network founded on privileged relations to Freetown", giving rise to an "ever widening circle of dependent tributaries" (Reno 1995: 34).

The chiefs' bargaining power in the establishment of their collaborator position was made evident during the Hut Tax War of 1898. Colonial attempts to impose a household tax angered chiefs who perceived their authority to be undermined by the demand to exact tax for the government. The resulting rebellion was a key test for the relationship between the colonial government and its intermediaries, and it was followed by extensive attempts at pacification including the official recognition of forced labour in 1902. Chiefs' exploitation of youthful labour was taken as a sign for the colonial rulers that, with the help of collaborators, "Sierra Leoneans could be dragged into an expanding taxable cash economy" (ibid.: 38). Work was therefore of central importance to the colonial accommodation. Indeed, the mobilisation of native labour was a key concern of a colonial administration intent on creating new markets to profit the metropole, and Lord Chamberlain's *New Colonial Policy* envisioned that private sector expansion would be facilitated by introducing: "the native labourer to the European capitalist" (Sir Harry Johnston cited in Reno 1995: 35). However, private investment remained weak in the first part of the 20th century, and state funds were primarily channelled into chiefs' trade interests in the form of state-sponsored farm enterprises worked by tributaries.

The Rise of Mining

The discovery of diamonds in 1930 was a significant turning point: it reshaped the economy's structure, conditioned labour flows and became key to the continuation of elite

accommodations in years to come. In 1932, the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST), a subsidiary of DeBeers, was given an exclusive mining contract and by 1938 diamonds had become the largest single export by value (Cartwright 1970). In 1933 the Marampa iron mine in Port Loko district was also opened.

The impact of mining operations on the labour market was not immediate yet it was drastic.⁹ The nature of mining work and the increasing incidence of illicit mining and smuggling started changing social dynamics, as the operations drew young men away from their communities towards mining areas and into the cash economy (Machonachie 2012). Labour was employed through the exploitative system of “tributing”, which consisted of small teams doing the mining and selling it to the holder of the mining lease at half price (Zack-Williams 1982). Chiefs’ powers were strengthened by their control over the inflow of labouring “strangers” into mining districts, allowing them to counter colonial attempts to bypass them (Peters 2011). This entrenched their position as gatekeepers that the European company had to pay off to reduce illicit mining, especially after SLST was given monopoly over mineral resources. Interactions between youths from different districts, as they worked side by side in the mines and then seasonally returned to their communities, however created a breeding ground for resentment against chiefly authority, culminating in the 1950s riots discussed below.

The rapid development of mining into the primary economic activity also had an impact on the evolution of the ethno-regional divide that was to have significant repercussions on the country’s political system. Before the advent of mining, most economic activity took place in the Southern regions, populated primarily by the Mendes, while the Temne- and Limba-speaking North remained relatively underdeveloped. Educational opportunities were similarly

⁹ The SLST for example initially employed less than 2,000 Sierra Leoneans in its first decade (Cartwright 1970)

disparate along ethno-regional lines, with Southern regions benefiting more from missionary education (Harris 2013). As a result, Sierra Leone's professional class in the last days of colonialism hailed primarily from the Mende South-East. In contrast, the North's economic transformation came in the form of the up-rooting mining rush and, even if limited, wage-employment in the mining operations.

Decolonisation: Accommodations and Discontent

As constitutional change began to pave the way to decolonisation, however, the primary divide remained that between the Krios of the Colony and the indigenous populations of the Protectorate. This was reflected in the political constellation in the decade preceding independence and in the patterns of mobilisation employed in those years. The first attempts to challenge colonial authority came from ITA Wallace Johnson's Youth League.¹⁰ The Youth League's activists campaigned on the basis of labour grievances and in favour of constitutional change, and initially attempted to bridge the Colony-Protectorate divide, although this was ultimately unsuccessful as a result of clashes with Southern elites (Cartwright 1970). The latter were also mobilising and developing ties with chiefs in their region. It was these educated elites, led by Milton Margai, a doctor and advisor to Mende chiefs, and organised through the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), who ultimately led the transition to independence. The SLPP's collaboration with the chiefs in the transition to independence was thus a smooth continuation of the colonial elite accommodation.

Speedy electoral decolonisation was marked by the 1951 elections. The SLPP relied heavily on the chiefs and other local elite to reach the electorate. The SLPP ensured that chiefs' interests

¹⁰ See Sptizer and Denzer (1973) for a discussion of Wallace Johnson and Youth League's role in Sierra Leone's trajectory towards decolonisation.

were protected in negotiations with the British and the chiefs reciprocated by guaranteeing a pool of supporters. Partly due to the speed with which elections took place, and partly because of the SLPP cadres' close relationship to chiefly houses, the party made little effort to build an organisational structure capable of independently mobilising a large electorate. This, together with the single member constituency system, favoured the development of personal affiliations and local appeals by individual candidates and forced reliance on elite networks to mobilise local strongmen's followings.

Despite the fairly smooth approach of independence in 1961, the last days of British colonialism were not problem-free. The fear of discontent that prompted colonial rulers to seek accommodations with local intermediaries proved well founded as bouts of unrest erupted in 1955-56. The "Northern Riots" manifested young miners' growing discontent with traditional authorities in the midst of the mining boom (Cartwright 1970). Similar riots in rural Mendeland in the mid 1950s were also interpreted as forms of "rural radicalism" (Kilson 1966 cited in Tangri 1976: 311), a view that was later nuanced by those suggesting instead that youths' frustration with chiefly exploitation was manipulated by adversaries of chiefly houses to challenge their power (Barrows 1976; Tangri 1976). Another key set of events were the "Freetown riots", two days of rioting and destruction of foreign shops as well as attacks on ministers' houses based on soaring food prices and rumours of embezzlement. In this period therefore we can distinguish between two forms of violent youth mobilisation that recur throughout different stages of the country's history: rebellion from below against the status quo, and the instrumentalisation of youths for elite politics.

The SLPP and its colonial interlocutors largely dismissed the expressions of discontent. Another set of emergent political players however managed to capitalise on the turmoil: the young and primarily Northern politicians who left the SLPP to form the socialist-leaning All

People's Congress (APC) led by trade unionist Siaka Stevens. The APC did not rest solely on an ethno-regional base, as it also leveraged on youths' increased engagement in the wage economy and young people's growing discontent with their marginalisation in the competition between elites (Bøås 2001). The more elitist SLPP was unable to cater to these more radical demands. However, even the APC, despite its populist work-based claims, was not able to quickly and effectively develop a mass following and also relied on intermediaries to reach the electorate. Partly, they turned to hunting societies and voluntary associations such as the *compins* of working men. They also began to develop links with Lebanese diamond dealers who gave them access to the diamond diggers with whom they worked on a tributary basis.

Despite a tense independence ceremony under state of emergency, during which APC leaders were detained due to inter-party violence, the opposition polled well in the first independent elections in 1962 and established itself as a major political force. As the British departed, their rule had left an indelible mark on the structure of the new nation's political economy. Its elite accommodations cemented the role of intermediaries and of informal networks in the mobilisation of labour and electorates. Skewed economic development following the discovery of minerals and the administration's toleration of forced labour gave rise to politically-charged labour market dynamics, whereby gerontocratic domination was compounded by exploitative and volatile work in the mines. The fathers of the nation therefore faced significant challenges as they took over the reins of the state.

The First Two Decades of Independence: Siaka Stevens and His Networks

The 1967 elections were a crucial turning point in Sierra Leone's post-independence history. The APC's unexpected victory with 44% of the vote reflected the increasing popularity of its

anti-elitist rhetoric, as well as increasing dissatisfaction in the Northern districts (Harris 2013). The victory however can also be seen as a result of some key mistakes by the new leader of the SLPP, Albert Margai, who took over after his stepbrother's death in office in 1964. Given the APC's strides in 1962, the younger Margai faced the challenge of re-organising the party structure to reach deeper into the electorate without alienating the chiefs. Instead he attempted to neutralise the opposition, for example through a botched attempt to pass one-party-state legislation and through the use of thugs to break up APC meetings, which was responded to in-kind by the APC. Albert Margai's management of the economy was another important, though often ignored, component in the SLPP's defeat: state plantations and industries proved unviable and the Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Board encountered difficulties amidst allegations of corruption (*ibid.*).

The first handover of power to the APC was extremely short-lived as only a few hours after Siaka Stevens' swearing in, Brigadier David Lansana staged a coup. Stevens was reinstated in April 1968 by a counter-coup and faced the challenge of a faltering and undiversified economy and a state apparatus that lacked penetrative power. In addition, the APC's constituency meant that he had to "re-order" the elite accommodation (Reno 1995). Stevens increasingly relied on Lebanese diamond dealers to underpin his political authority; these businessmen effectively had free reign over the economy and were dealing directly with the head of state. Over the first two decades of independence, the nationalist vision of economic planning and social welfare was swiftly abandoned in favour of narrow privatisation and increasingly exclusionary patterns of accumulation. For his part, President Stevens focused his efforts on placing himself at the centre of exclusive networks so that both business and political competition became a struggle for access to State House and the President's personal connections (Hayward 1989; Reno 1995).

Initially, political entrepreneurs within the APC attempted to manipulate localised popular grievances emerging from the increasing clash between Stevens' clientelism and the governments' obligations to its population. In response, Stevens, bankrolled by Lebanese support, ensured that the state, and himself more specifically, became the only avenue to access resources. State employment, the distribution of mining licences through the National Diamond Mining Corporation (NDMC), and the allocation of import-export licences and access to foreign currency played a key part in this centralisation of power and in the dislocation of a state whose practices were increasingly outside the formal structures of governance. This meant, in other words, that opportunities outside of Stevens' networks became very scarce and, "local political competition for state-regulated access to newly 'privatised' resources incorporated factional struggles into the political network, rendering political competition less threatening to regime survival" (Reno 1995: 121). Stevens' reliance on exclusionary networks thus consolidated the central role of mining in the economy, despite the fact that the benefits for the large part of the populations were negligible (Gberie 2002).

Expensive elite accommodations compounded by the fact that private economic activity increasingly bypassed the formal state meant that resources for public services were scarce and the APC was no longer able to elicit support from its citizens. Accordingly, the sustenance of an exclusionary elite accommodation had to rely on the control of opposition through a balance of co-option and intimidation. Organised labour was for example brought into the fold as the head of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress was appointed to parliament after several strikes in the 1970s. Chiefs, who had initially been sidelined by the direct dealings between the Lebanese and the NDMC, were told that: "no chief can keep his job without the support of the government" (Stevens cited in Harris 2013: 70).

Violence also came to play an important role, for example in forcing the SLPP's withdrawal from the 1972 elections after significant intimidation and the execution of dissident APC members for treason in 1973 (see Forna 2002). A particular group of young people was key in Steven's repression: APC Youth League enforcers, recruited from urban slums, though excluded from any engagement in the party's decisions, became infamous for their potential for intimidation (Abdullah 1999). Young people however were also represented in the opposition to the regime, as manifest in the vocal student demonstrations of 1977, which also garnered support from alienated urban youths who were increasingly exposed to radical and Pan-Africanist thought in Freetown. These protests were crushed with force by the state.

By 1978 Sierra Leone was officially a one-party state and while intimidation stifled popular opposition, a restricted number of people prospered. Reno's (1995: 126) reflections on the attitudes of the average Sierra Leonean in this context are indicative of the impact of these exclusionary patterns of accumulation on their everyday lives, and in particular, on their employment status:

In the long-term all seek meagre collaborations with elite networks for subsistence. Most of these activities put people in a position of obligation to some aspect of the network's authority. As all seek access, even while they recognize and condemn elite privilege, independent political activity remains difficult to organize. Social categories, such as illicit miner, security officer, rich merchant or frustrated entrepreneur became defined in terms of one's level of access to the shadow state.

By the end of the 1970s, relations between the state and society were characterised by the contradiction between centralisation of power and repression on the one hand and the retreat

of state institutions and provisions in favour of exclusionary informal networks on the other (Hayward 1989).

The 1980s: Deterioration and Collapse

At the start of the 1980s, Stevens' network economy began to run into trouble, not only in the face of societal pressures but also due to external credit obligations and a collapse in revenues brought on by global trends. Stevens' regime relied on his ability to use his monopoly over the use of force to demarcate the boundaries between sanctioned and unsanctioned economic activity, thus ensuring that access to resources was entirely dependent on his networks. The situation came to a head as revenues from natural resources dropped in the midst of global price fluctuations. By 1984 diamond sales had dropped by 50% while production through the NDMC had fallen by as much as 90% (Reno 1995). This also resulted in the total collapse of state services provision, with development outlays ultimately making up only 3% of the overall budget. Parallel to this, the economy's concentration on a volatile mining sector had absorbed not only land but also significant swathes of the labouring population, as young men left farming to try their luck in mineral areas. As a result, food production per head had fallen by more than 10% and Sierra Leone became dependent on rice imports (Keen 2005). As resource prices fell, however, young labourers in the mining fields were the first to be hit.

Reliance on bankrolling by Lebanese businessmen with access to credit abroad was no longer enough, and Stevens was compelled to turn to the IFIs for support in order to address the growing budget deficit and external obligations. In 1981 Sierra Leone received an extended loan facility from the IMF and a World Bank loan for rehabilitating enterprises for privatisation. The IFIs' intervention, as in other parts of the developing world in the 1980s,

relied on the assumption that states needed significant restructuring in order to emerge from crisis (Mosley et al 1991; Herbst 1990). This was done by making loans conditional on a three-pronged approach to fixing the ailments of overextended, inefficient states: privatisation, devaluation and the ending of subsidies and price controls. The impact of these reforms on Sierra Leone's population was dire as austerity measures had a disproportionate impact on the poor, through a further shrinking of redistributive space. While privatisation aided Stevens' buttressing of his own networks as parastatals were sold to long-standing cronies, the IFIs' conditions of balancing the budget and reducing price controls and subsidies resulted in drops in already meagre government spending on social development. The IFIs' concern with fiscal stability and the repayment of debt arrears meant that they continued to support the Stevens' regime even as it failed to meet conditions and as privatisation was doing little in the way of tackling the informalisation of political and economic power. Sierra Leoneans started referring to the situation as "Black Colonialism", a way to describe what they saw as the devastation of the populace for the economic benefit of a few, politically-connected businessmen (Reno 1996).

Revenue crisis and degenerating clientelism continued to spur occasional outbursts of popular dissatisfaction, despite the APC's use of violence in order to maintain its hold on power. In 1982, for example, the Ndorgoyosoi rebellion broke out in Pujehun, after an opponent of the APC's Vice President Francis Minah was killed during a local election. In the midst of these tensions, Siaka Stevens stepped down in 1985 and selected General Saidu Momoh as his successor. Momoh faced the pressure of creditors' demands as well as the potential of increasingly autonomous Lebanese businessmen challenging his authority. He therefore had to, once again, reshape the elite accommodation, this time by relying more heavily on foreign investors. He heralded a "New Order" and established mechanisms to control illegal mining, which in practice offered the opportunity to act as gatekeeper for new foreign players. The

“New Order” also entailed enforcing those structural adjustment policies that Stevens considered political suicide, such as the cutting of oil and rice subsidies (Zack Williams 1999).

Again, the effects on the average citizen were disastrous. In the financial year 1986-1987, more was spent on debt servicing than all social services combined (Reno 1995). The cut in subsidies also resulted in growing inflation, and the devaluation and floating of the Leone failed to elicit the expected response from exporters (Keen 2005). Momoh also struggled to balance his elite accommodation as several of his ventures with foreign investors failed.¹¹ This left Momoh in a difficult position as he had alienated Stevens’ networks while austerity had further eroded state revenues to support clients and elicit societal support. As the President’s grip on resources was flailing, he continued in his predecessor’s footsteps using violence as a means to maintain control. In 1990 he ordered an especially brutal “Operation Clean Slate” to evict illicit miners.

By 1991, as the RUF entered Kailahun district, the political and economic situation was critical. The network-economy of Stevens’ and Momoh’s authoritarian, and often violently repressive, regimes followed their colonial predecessors’ pattern of rule. The result was a bifurcated form of development between outsiders and insiders, where economic and political status was intertwined and dependent on the degree of integration in narrow networks. Privatisation and public sector restructuring exacerbated the impact of these processes. The economy remained overly dependent on mining, at the expense of agriculture and manufacturing, and while industrial mining initially created some jobs, the combination of global price shocks and structural adjustment programmes soon put many young illicit miners

¹¹ Most famously, he struck a deal with LIAT a construction company headed by Israeli entrepreneur, Shaptai Kolmanovitch, to whom Momoh gave exclusive mining access and who was ultimately arrested for fraud in London.

out of work (Cubitt 2011a).¹² Outside of the mining sector, private sector development remained limited and public sector jobs were dependent on political connections as well as being drastically diminished by structural adjustment. While resources became accumulated in an increasingly small number of hands, those left out turned to a growing informal sector to make ends meet. As austerity combined with global economic crisis, Momoh's hold on either his networks or society as a whole was slipping, and even the autocratic state's monopoly over the means of violence was soon to be challenged as civil war ensued.

The Civil War: 1991-2002

On the 23rd March 1991, the RUF entered the Eastern diamond-rich district of Kailahun. With its origins in Libyan training camps, the RUF, led by Foday Sankoh and supported by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), took up armed struggle against the APC regime. Before discussing the contested causes of the war, and in particular its relationship to youth and labour markets, a short chronology of the conflict offers a useful background.

Chronology of War

In its first phase, the war remained primarily in the South-Eastern district. Government forces quickly proved unable to counter the insurrection, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) deployed a force to Sierra Leone to support the Momoh regime. In 1992 Momoh was ousted a coup by disgruntled and underpaid junior officers, led by Valentine Strasser and Solomon Musa, establishing the National provisional Ruling Council

¹² 30,000 unskilled labourers were put out of a job by attempts at formalization of mining operations (Conteh Morgan 2006).

(NPRC). Strasser's commitment to ending corruption and economic decline while also defeating the RUF made the NPRC initially popular, especially amongst Freetown youth (Opala 1994). However counter-insurgency proved ineffective and Strasser himself admitted to high levels of disloyalty in the army (Harris 2013). Sierra Leone Army (SLA) soldiers came to be popularly known as "sobels" (soldiers by day and rebels by night), reflecting citizens' distrust in the state's capacity to protect them (Keen 2005). In response, Civil Defence Forces (CDF) with roots in hunting societies began to emerge, most prominently the Southern Kamajors led by Chief Hinga Norman. Strasser attempted to address the issue by engaging the South African security company Executive Outcomes in 1995. By 1996 the violence seemed to be subsiding and after a bloodless coup led by Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, the country headed towards elections in February. Despite significant electoral malpractice and the brutally symbolic amputations by the RUF to stop people from voting, there was a handover of power to Tejan Kabbah's SLPP, after decades in opposition. A few months after the elections, the Abidjan Peace Accord was signed, including a cessation of hostilities, amnesties for belligerents and the demobilisation of the RUF, turning it into a political party.

The Abidjan accord was however short-lived. Only a few months after the contract with Executive Outcomes was terminated, another coup in 1997 plunged the country back into war. The coup brought to power a group of renegade SLA junior soldiers, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) led by Johnny Paul Koroma, who then promptly invited the RUF to join the new junta. The weeks following the coup, the new occupants of State House ravaged the city in what they called "Operation Pay Yourself". The coup leaders justified their actions as a response to the privileging of "ethnic militias" by the new SLPP government, but other factors were also at play including junior officers' exclusion from networks of redistribution and the extension of the sobel phenomenon as the SLA further disintegrated (Harris 2013). A reinforced ECOWAS deployment (ECOMOG) ultimately managed to

recapture Freetown and force the AFRC/RUF back into the bush in February 1998. A UN Observer Mission (UNOMSIL) was established later that year. ECOMOG's counterattack was however soon put to the test again as the AFRC/RUF launched the bloodiest assault of the war in Freetown in January 1999, "Operation No Living Thing".

After days of atrocities, ECOMOG once again defeated the rebels and the Lomé Peace Accord was signed in May 1999. The Accord was strongly criticised for the prominence given to RUF fighters in the post-Lomé government, and especially the decision to make Foday Sankoh the head of the Commission overseeing the production of diamonds and other minerals (Abraham 2001). Sankoh ultimately used his position to strike informal diamond deals and was "unable to exchange the physical hold over the diamond areas for the entitlement to market gems" (Harris 2013: 114). The RUF soon began destabilising peace once more, most notoriously as it kidnapped 500 UN Peacekeepers in 2000. British intervention amplified at this stage, especially after eleven Special Air Service soldiers were kidnapped in Occra Hill by the West Side Boys, a breakaway group of the AFRC. Foday Sankoh had by this point been arrested and, weakened by its encounters with the British contingent and under the more conciliatory leadership of Issa Sesay, the RUF entered new negotiation resulting in the final Abuja Peace Ceasefire Agreement. This was also a result of civil society mobilisation, such as action by the women's movement demanding a meeting with Foday Sankoh, sparking a mass demonstration in May 2000 (Mazurana and Carlson 2004). As the Demobilisation Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) process began in 2001, and once the war was officially declared over in 2002, the country faced a difficult reconstruction and reconciliation process. Unspeakable atrocities had been committed on all sides, with no factions, including ECOMOG and the CDF, escaping accusations of looting, arbitrary executions, rape and other war crimes.

Explaining the War: The Role of Youths' Economic Exclusion

As the RUF and other splinter factions wreaked havoc across the country, heated debates began about the causes of war. Significantly, the nature of state development and the political economy of APC rule have played a key role in leading analyses. In different ways, all these analyses have highlighted the role of young people in combating factions and violence has been traced back to youths' exclusion from economic opportunities.

A first strand of explanations has focused on the structural conditions that made the war possible. Decades of economic decline and oppressive rule entrenched in informal networks predated on the country's resources gave rise to a bureaucratically weak state from which many were excluded. A global downturn and the IFIs' imposition of austerity measures not only dealt a blow to the financing of the country's networked political economy, it also made it difficult for the country's elite to "secure the uncoerced compliance of subordinated strata to their rule" (Kandeh 1992: 30; see also Zack Williams 1999). One prominent interpretation of these conditions' role in the descent to war is Richards' (1996) "crisis of patrimonialism" thesis, which argues that the contraction of patrimonial system amidst the downturn of the 1980s essentially provided an army of disaffected youths whose opportunities had been entirely truncated by exclusion from increasingly narrow channels of accumulation and a bankrupt formal state.

Bangura (2004) challenges this particular slant and questions Richards' framing of patrimonialism as being "in crisis". He suggests that it was precisely because powerful patrons were flourishing that the conditions of war emerged, both because of the economic neglect of the population (which for Bangura is better conceptualised as a "fiscal crisis") and because of its violence and political repression. While the difference between the two positions may

appear semantic, underlying the two analysts' disagreement is rather a contrasting conceptualisation of the relationship between the belligerents and the clientelistic rule of the APC. Richards has in fact been criticised by scholars like Bangura and Abdullah (1999; 2004), for granting the RUF far more ideological coherence than they are due. In his seminal book *Fighting for the Rainforest*, Richards (1996) places significant emphasis on the rebels' manifesto, *Footpaths to Democracy*, which virulently criticised years of corrupt rule. An analysis of who took part in the rebellion is crucial in Richards' argument, as he points to disaffected intellectuals who then would have also taken on marginalised, unemployed youths. These young fighters, he argues, found in the RUF's anti-elitist propaganda a compelling explanation for their predicament. Years of exclusion from education and services as well as from access to jobs prompted a violent rejection of the system. For Richards, the extreme violence of the RUF was "an expression of the social exclusion of a group of educated exiles determined to force patrons 'in town' to imagine what life is like for the young minds stranded 'in the bush'" (ibid.: xxv).

Peters' (2011) recent work reinforces this portrayal of the war as an ideologically driven "crisis of youth", framing it as a response by marginalised young people in rural areas to decades of oppression by the chieftaincy system of forced labour and other forms of exploitation of youthful labour in the gerontocratic societies of the provinces. In the bush, Peters argues, a meritocratic and egalitarian system was established, in the form of bush schools and hospitals, in direct opposition to the APC's form of exclusionary rule. Ultimately however, this experiment of a "sectarian scheme of social cohesion" was undermined by the atrocities committed and the loss of control over looting and pillaging (ibid: 231). Peters explains this degeneration by arguing that as they interacted with the outside world, the RUF's rebels were forced to face their marginal status once more.

Peters' emphasis on the rural character of the RUF is in contrast to Abdullah's (1999) suggestion that the rebels were part of a youthful urban lumpenproletariat. Underlying Abdullah's focus on "lumpen culture" are also assumptions driving urban marginal to join forces. He traces the development of the RUF, starting among youth discontent under Stevens voiced in Freetown's *potes* and couched in vague Pan-Africanist and Marxist discourse, which brought together young marginals and students in a critique of the system. Some of these individuals trained in Libya but, Abdullah argues, the educated elements abandoned the movement leaving the armed struggle in the hands of a group made up of "unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wit or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy" (ibid: 207). These young men had been at the centre of both uprisings against the government and the APC's election violence as casual recruits. The implication of his argument is that these young men were essentially criminal and motivated by what, to return to the theoretical debates discussed in the Introduction, we might characterise as "greed". In his attempt to discredit the RUF's political coherence, however, Abdullah leaves unexplained the connection between being "lumpen" and criminal behaviour, seemingly relying on an assumption of the inherently criminal nature of marginal street culture.

The question of whether the RUF was urban or rural, and especially whether it was ideological or simply criminal is likely to have a more nuanced answer. Despite their differences, all assessments point to a contracting state where redistribution was limited to narrow networks and an increasingly exclusionary market economy where young people's socio-economic opportunities had been truncated. The timing of the eruption was certainly aided by regional dynamics and the disastrous developments of the 1980s (Gberie 2005). While engagement in predatory and extremely violent and often counterproductive tactics undermines the idealistic notion of the RUF as a coherent political project aimed at

establishing a fairer system, this does not take away from an argument that the rebel group can be seen as a product of a system developed in previous decades. Keen (2005) has shown that recruits (and the large number of forced conscriptions) came from disaffected rural youths, urban marginals, and those who seasonally tried their luck in the diamond fields. The sociological background of recruits, regardless of their longer-term intentions or short-term calculations, thus points to a critical mass of disaffected youth sustaining the rebellion.

The complex role played by economic marginalisation in the Sierra Leone war is made evident by Keen's (2005) discussion of how economic factors played a role both as motivation and in protracting the violence. Economic exclusion, such as that embodied in the diamond fields that had fuelled the APC regime, was not only a powerful material incentive but also a cause of frustration and anger. However rudimentary and quickly betrayed by their action, the RUF's propaganda and their attempts to set up alternative bush societies cannot be entirely dismissed from this point of view. Similarly, it is not coincidental that the RUF established itself in the first instance in the long-neglected Southern districts. Pointing to a conjunction of motives can also help us make sense of a similar pool of recruits on all sides of the conflict (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008). Keen (2005) furthermore challenges the search for an unequivocally rational explanation, whether in ideological or economic terms, focusing on feelings of anger and humiliation. Looking at how violence offered a form of respect, he points to the opportunities to turn the table as an important component is relevant in a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between youths' marginalisation and their engagement in the civil war: "those who were poor and poorly regarded could become 'big men'" (ibid: 56).

Hoffman (2011a) has similarly chronicled how, inside fighting forces, young men and women who had been previously excluded from the clientelistic networks of the APC's regime could rise through the ranks and effectively become patrons. In his study of the CDF, Hoffman

emphasises the continuation of “social logics that predated the war” so that the use of military ranks often rather referred to patron-client relations (Hoffman 2011a: 134). Hoffman’s analysis of the overlapping logic of war and peace thus also offers an opportunity to look at the role of labour not only in explaining motivations for joining (i.e. grievances surrounding unemployment or opportunity costs) but also during the war, while also blurring the line between wartime and peacetime in terms of the modality of labour (see also Hoffman 2007; 2011b). Using the Krio term *dreg* used to define “youth labour at the margins of the economy and society”, Hoffman suggests that: “what a political economy of *dregging* meant, was that a population of male youth was constantly available to be put to use for virtually any form of labour” (Hoffman 2011a: 53).

Bringing together these analyses therefore reveals how youths’ socio-economic exclusion played a role in various ways in the ten-year conflict that shook Sierra Leone in the 1990s. The roots of the conflict in an economically and politically marginalising system, with a distorted and exclusionary labour market at its core, combined with the deployment of violent labour during the conflict expose the central role of work and its political implications at this key juncture of the country’s history. Whether a conscious attempt to change the system, simply a reaction to it or an attempt to forcibly gain a place in networks of power, the rebel war was arguably a logical conclusion of the historical development of the Sierra Leonean state since its colonial days. The devastation of war would inevitably leave scars but also offered creative potential in terms of opportunities to redirect the course of the country’s development.

Post-War Reconstruction and The Current Dispensation

The post-war period sets the stage for the experiences of the young protagonists of this research as they navigate their trajectory from labour market status to politicisation. These experiences take place at an important juncture, as the particular mode of reconstruction of the Sierra Leonean state constitutes economic opportunities and the nature of the political space. Despite the creative potential of the rupture brought about by war, significant change on the surface has in practice been held back by continuities. This section analyses the past decade of reform with a focus on how reconstruction has impacted the labour market and political opportunity structures facing the country's post-war youth. These two processes are intertwined, as they have been throughout history, and they hang in the balance between continuity and change.

Before delving into the details of post-war reconstruction, it is important to recall that Sierra Leone's recovery has taken place in the context of international peacebuilding interventions. These have seen international actors heavily involved in the design and implementation of reforms beyond ceasefire. In Sierra Leone, peacebuilding was institutionalised and coordinated through the newly established PBC and the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL). Although as we shall see in Chapter 3, the nature of the peacebuilding process was the result of a series of negotiations across a series of actors, they were also largely shaped by international norms that provide the blueprint for governance and economic reform. The liberal peacebuilding paradigm that has come to dominate these interventions, as we saw in the Introduction, relies on the conviction that rebuilding functioning state institutions will "have positive effects on the economy, society and politics" (Wesley 2008: 373). This conviction relies on specific assumptions about what kind of state is conducive to peace, namely, liberal market democracies.

Sierra Leone has often been portrayed as a successful example of liberal peacebuilding, as democratisation and liberalising economic reforms seemed to place the country on a path to recovery (Cubitt 2011b). Yet, as critics of liberal peacebuilding models suggest, the key challenge is to look beyond the changes in edifices of governance to see how they are socially reproduced at the local level, how and whether they alter the nature of the state and its interactions with its citizens. Understanding the nature of reforms is therefore a crucial precursor to an analysis of citizens' experiences as economic and political actors in the post-war state.

Democratisation and the Reform of Political Space

The first prong of the liberal peacebuilding model is the establishment of democratic forms of governance. In Sierra Leone, effective democratic processes were central to the peacebuilding project because decades of despotic and corrupt rule were identified as root causes of the war, but also because of the international consensus that democracy reinforces economic growth and stability (Cubitt 2011c). The focus of democratic reforms in post-war Sierra Leone has been primarily on procedural aspects, such as the holding of multi-party elections. Since the official cessation of hostilities, Sierra Leone has held three elections in 2002, 2007 and 2012, all of which, despite some irregularities were overall deemed to be successful (Freedom House 2012; Harris 2011; Kandeh 2008). The 2007 elections were especially significant as they marked a turnover of power from Tejan Kabbah's SLPP to Ernest Koroma's APC, restoring legitimacy in the process and allowing the expression of popular dissatisfaction with the limited extent of peace dividends through the ballot box (ICG 2008). The re-establishment of political competition was heralded as marking Sierra Leone's successful transition from conflict, and the 2012 elections prompted the wind-down of UNIPSIL's operations signalling

a transition from “post-conflict” to “development” (Datzberger et al 2014). There is however a danger in equating elections to democratisation, and despite the indubitable significance of the electoral process, some concerns remain regarding the nature of democratic space over a decade since the end of the civil war.

To begin with, there is the question of accountability versus episodic elections. Cubitt (2011b: 11) deems democratisation to have been a “shallow exercise” given the lack of attention paid by statebuilders to all other accountability mechanisms and checks on executive power, such as Parliament. The nature of citizen engagement in post-war Sierra Leone also remains a challenge (see Chapter 5). Reformers have emphasised the importance of civil society’s rebirth after years of repressive rule, and all of Sierra Leone’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) place importance on civil society engagement (GoSL 2005; GoSL 2008; GoSL 2013). And it cannot be said that Sierra Leone lacks a vibrant collections of associations and local, as well as international, NGOs. Indeed, Cubitt (2011b: 13) goes as far as to say that “the number of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) [have] reached epidemic proportions”. The sheer number of CSOs, however, does not guarantee civil society’s ability to hold government accountable or, more specifically, their ability to express young people’s voices. CSO leaders raised questions regarding donor’s preference for international NGOs when it comes to project implementation.¹³ In addition some questioned the openness of political space, pointing to restrictions on freedom to demonstrate and of expression justified through the constricting 1965 Public Orders Act, which is still in force today (GoSL 1965).¹⁴ On the other hand, national CSO leaders have come under criticism for urban-bias and elitism. The ICG (2008: 7) have pointed to the rise of a local “NGO elite” made up of “young Sierra Leone professionals with no formal political experience, who have risen to prominence as managers

¹³ Interview with Civil Society Organisation (CSO) representative, Freetown, 30.07.2010; Interview with CSO representative, Freetown 12.07.2010.

¹⁴ Interview with CSO representative, Freetown, 27.03.2014.

of post-war reconstruction”. This elite’s ability to represent the most marginalised is further questioned on the grounds of their closeness to government and dependence on the graces of international aid.

The issue of continued political exclusion has been especially highlighted from the perspective of gender and generation as significant factors determining access to political voice.¹⁵ Women’s participation at all levels of political life continues to be limited, and attempts to push through reforms to include them more effectively in formal processes have stalled despite President Koroma’s government’s vocal commitment to gender parity (Castillejo 2009). Concerns over young people’s marginalisation similarly persist, despite a litany of appeals for youth empowerment and the establishment of a National Youth Commission (NAYCOM) in 2010, a Ministry of Youth Affairs (MYA) in 2013 and a series of mechanisms for youth representation (GoSL 2009a; UNDP 2013). Youth leaders reflected in particular on the limited attempts at meaningful consultation especially with youth from poor backgrounds.¹⁶ These challenges of meaningful inclusion highlight the gap that can emerge between the establishment of seemingly effective structures of governance and the practices that underlie them. This points to the need to look deeper into the relations between state institutions and citizens in practice to assess the space for youth voice in post-war Sierra Leone. Against this backdrop, Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the nature of unemployed youths’ political engagement, outlining the extent to which reforms have (and have not) managed to reshape the relationship between youth and the state in the aftermath of war.

The proximity of citizens’ to their institutions has also been a matter of debate in assessments of Sierra Leone’s democratisation. The decentralisation process, embodied in the 2004 Local

¹⁵ Interview with Academic, Freetown, 19.07.2013.

¹⁶ Interview with CSO representative, Freetown, 30.07.2010; Interview with CSO Representative, Freetown, 12.04.2013.

Government Act and intended to bring governance closer to the population, has been questioned as power continues to be Freetown-centric.¹⁷ Concerns have also been raised regarding the coexistence of local government and the reformed chieftaincy, especially given chiefs' role in the creation of conflictual intergenerational relations before the war (Sawyer 2008; Peters 2011). The potential disconnect between formal institutions and the practice of governance has been more fundamentally highlighted by Brown et al (2005), who warn of the persistence of informal institutions in the way government is run, specifically in terms of the prominence of elite networks in determining the business of politics and the functioning of the economy. These "deeply rooted informal political institutions", they argue, can coexist with, and adapt to, the erection of structurally sound democratic edifices so that reform and the holding of periodic elections does not necessarily preclude the "return to politics as usual" (ibid.: 7). This has been also manifest in the fact that, although all three elections have been deemed fair and peaceful, outbreaks of violence occurred amongst supporters of the two major parties and both parties have drawn criticism for resorting to personal security outside of the state apparatus (Christensen and Utas 2008; ICG 2008).

The apparent re-emergence of the ethnic divide that characterised post-independence politics presents a similar challenge for democratic consolidation, as ethnic networks have been put into action to garner electoral support. Political parties have made efforts to strengthen their organisational structures and inject their cadre with younger and capable members (Brown et al 2005). The SLPP has for example recently made explicit internal changes to shed their historical image as an elitist party, adding a Young Generation and a Grassroots Wing.¹⁸ Nevertheless, ethnicity has provided "a ready source of political identity and mobilisation" and resource distribution on a regional basis has been used to ensure hold on power (Brown

¹⁷ Interview with UN representative, Freetown, 27.07.2010.

¹⁸ Interview with SLPP Youth Activist, Freetown, 17.03.2014.

et al 2005: 5). While the 2002 elections were anomalous in the SLPP's landslide victory, all subsequent competitive elections, reflect ethno-regional blocs in voting patterns with the APC holding power in the North and the SLPP in the South-East (Bangura 2012). The ethno-regional divide, as we have seen, has also coincided with disparity in education and to some extent class and occupation, so a simplistic reading of bipolar ethnic politics is myopic. Similarly, frequent cross-carpeting and the presence of Freetown and Kono District as swing Districts in recent elections cautions against over-reliance on ethnicity to explain Sierra Leone's political landscape as a whole.¹⁹

Overall then the picture of the political space facing young people in post-war Sierra Leone is a complex one. Reforms have changed the face of political institutions attempting to address the causes of the war rooted in the historical development of an irresponsible and ultimately repressive state. Elections, an opening of the space for civil society and moves towards decentralisation have been countered by concerns with the persistence of informal networks, ethnic mobilisation and continued marginalisation, especially of women and youth from poor backgrounds. The implementation of reforms based on globalised models of governance and with a focus on structures of governance leaves open the question of what happens beneath those surfaces and how rebuilt institutions interact with local dynamics. The practices of government and youths' everyday experiences of politicisation analysed in this thesis must therefore be understood against this backdrop.

Economic Reconstruction and the Reshaping of Labour Markets

¹⁹ Interview with government advisor, Freetown, 23.07.2010; Interview with trade union representative, Freetown, 24.02.2013.

The second component of the liberal peacebuilding model embraced by Sierra Leone's statebuilders was the (re)creation of a market economy. Efforts have centred on the liberalisation of the post-war economy, encouraging a strong private sector, a small state and integration in the international economy. This cocktail of policies is remarkably similar to the IFIs' pre-war recommendations as they attempted to prevent, but ultimately exacerbated, the crisis of the 1990s. As Cubitt (2011b) notes, the difference in the contemporary international consensus on economic adjustment lies in the emphasis on the rhetoric of national ownership as well as the recognition of a need for restructuring with "a human face" (see Cornia et al 1987). Like democratic transition, economic recovery in Sierra Leone has on the surface been successful. Growth rates have shot up in the years after the war and until recently, the country was projected to be amongst the fastest growers on the continent.²⁰ Even after the expected spike as hostilities ended, real GDP growth was estimated to be as high as 16.3% in 2013 (Zayid 2014). Other oft-cited evidence for optimism are improvements in the investment climate, symbolised by the return of multinationals, especially in the mining sector; increases in trade; and a single digit inflation rate as a result of increased food supplies and improved fiscal position (Zayid 2014; IMF 2014).

While these indicators have ensured that Sierra Leone meets donor demands, the impact that economic recovery has had on poverty and specifically on job creation offers a more sobering picture. In 2014 the country was 183rd (out of 187) on the Human Development Index with multidimensional poverty estimated at 72.7% suggesting that the benefits of growth are failing to trickle down (UNDP 2014). Despite a dearth of reliable labour market statistics, youth unemployment and underemployment are estimated to be as high as 70% (Peeters et al 2009;

²⁰ Note that these assessments predate the spread of the Ebola virus, reflecting the circumstances facing research participants at the time of fieldwork. It is too soon to tell what the full impact of Ebola will be on Sierra Leone, yet the heavy strain on national resources, inflationary pressures and the shutting down of business (especially large mining companies such as London Mining) are likely to set the country back significantly (Machonachie 2014; UNECA 2014).

UNDP 2013). Employment generation efforts focused on stimulating private sector investment in the hope it would create jobs.²¹ At the same time, several internationally funded youth employment programmes, primarily involving skills development and entrepreneurship training have also been undertaken.²² This section looks at the current shape of the Sierra Leonean labour market, focusing firstly on labour market policies and supply-side issues and secondly on sectoral opportunities for employment generation. In other words, what opportunities and constraints face unemployed youth looking for work in post-war Sierra Leone?

Labour Market Policies, Distortions and Supply Side Issues

Labour markets in countries emerging from war face significant challenges; they are not simply victims of struggling economies, as war itself creates significant distortions (UNDP 2005). In addition, as we have seen, the historical development of Sierra Leone's labour market, inextricable from processes of state formation and political development, influenced the nature of employment generation. Labour market segmentation is of particular interest because of the barriers that exist to young people in finding work. This is primarily a result of economic deterioration brought about by conflict and years of economic mismanagement, as discussed in the next section, yet there are also structural dynamics at play. A survey of employers carried out found that youth, especially female youth, are not favoured in recruitment as their skills levels are perceived to be low (Peeters et al 2009). Last-in-first-out policies also act to perpetuate higher unemployment rates amongst young people. The historical predominance of networks in the development of labour market dynamics, whereby

²¹ President Koroma has repeatedly emphasized his intention to “run the country like a business” and in his 2013 Agenda for Change, private sector development (in various sectors like mining, agribusiness and fisheries) is presented as the main driver for job creation (GoSL 2013; Koroma 2009).

²² See Batmanglich and Enria (2014) for a detailed review of post-war youth employment programs in Sierra Leone.

intermediaries played a crucial role in matching candidates to jobs, has disadvantaged young people with fewer connections (ibid.). The perception of limited opportunities and the relationship between “connectocracy” and youth unemployment, as discussed in Chapter 4, further discourages young people with few connections to apply for jobs.

Labour market policies also play a role in determining the nature and dynamics of employment in Sierra Leone. Legislation relating to employment protection and active labour market policies has been largely neglected since the end of the war. For example, minimum wage legislation was due to be discussed by the Joint National Negotiation Board in 2013, but until then it had remained at the 1996 levels of 21,000Le a month (approximately USD\$4).²³ Similarly, hiring and firing are reliant on out-dated policies, with unskilled labourers hit especially hard by practices of hiring casual labour that leave them unprotected.²⁴ National organised labour was perceived to be weak and too close to government, so that its impact on youth employment was negligible.²⁵

All respondents involved in employment programming identified a consistent failure in matching young people to jobs. Active matching policies were mostly not in place, although some international organisations, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), were beginning to build information centres.²⁶ The establishment of NAYCOM was similarly hoped to go some way towards redressing this mismatch, as the commission is expected to act as an intermediary between job seekers and employers. More fundamentally, a lack of forward-looking labour market analyses means that it was difficult to know what the economy needed (and what it was likely to need in the medium to long-run) and therefore to

²³ Interview with Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MLSS) representative, Freetown, 24.02.2013.

²⁴ ibid.; Interview with construction company owner, Freetown, 4.03.2013.

²⁵ Interview with Employers' Union representative, Freetown, 8.04.2013.

²⁶ Interview with UNDP representative, Freetown, 21.03.2013.

provide training and education that was employment-relevant.²⁷ The issue of training is especially salient as internationally funded youth employment programmes have placed significant emphasis on the supply side, offering a plethora of trainings which have been criticised for being inadequately matched to labour market demand (Batmanglich and Enria 2014; McQuinn 2011; Stewart 2012).

This problem was already evident in the reintegration packages offered during DDR. The reintegration component was officially completed in 2004, with 51,122 ex-combatants registered (UNDDRRC 2003). Opportunities offered by DDR ranged from apprenticeships, to formal education, agriculture and (much rarer) job placements. Some combatants were simply given a one off payment. Although the Sierra Leonean DDR has been praised as a success and used as a model for other post-conflict countries, several shortfalls had an impact on the employment opportunities of former combatants. Firstly, the programme suffered from a significant gender bias, as 84% of those demobilised were adult men, despite the fact that thousands of women were in fact active in rebel and government militias, as bush wives, cooks and spies but also as fighters (Mazurana and Carlson 2004). Secondly, the trainings were insufficient and largely detached from any assessment of labour market demands, leading to trainees transitioning either into unemployment or alternative informal activities (UNDDRRC 2003). Post-DDR employment programmes sponsored by the UN and the World Bank offered training in activities very similar to those offered by DDR, thus placing young people, in, at best, already saturated markets. The issue of skills mismatch is also partly traceable to failures in the education system's ability cater to the current economic needs of the country but was rather still shaped by colonial emphasis on the production of white-collar workers for the imperial administration (Bolten forthcoming; Matsumoto 2011).

²⁷ Interview with MLSS representative, Freetown, 24.02.2013.

The lack of adequate labour market analysis going into externally funded training provision arguably reflects the short-term views in which donors are often operating, especially in post-war contexts. This was epitomised by the World Bank's cash for work programme, which was intended to "prevent social crisis"²⁸ and only employed young people for a very short period of time in unskilled infrastructure work. This, as a senior official at the Ministry of Youth argued, not only did very little to increase their employment opportunities after the programme but also potentially created further frustration: "You give these guys this money, without skills and without outlet, what you do is basically make them survive today, and in surviving today they create problems for tomorrow".²⁹ A preference of quantity over quality and sustainability is not simply a product of donor's short-termism, but also of governments' concern with electoral cycles, as evidenced by President Koroma's promise of extensive job creation in his electoral campaigns.

These interventions by the international community and recent governments have therefore not gone very far in addressing labour market distortions and in creating an adequately qualified labour supply pool. The demand for labour is also limited by constraints faced in most sectors, to whose analysis we now turn.

Sectoral Overview

Private Sector

In Sierra Leone's post-war recovery strategy the private sector was expected to be the primary driver of employment generation. However, despite improvements in the investment climate

²⁸ Interview with World Bank representative, Freetown, 12.04.2013.

²⁹ Interview with MYS representative, Freetown, 10.08.2010.

and the gradual re-emergence of multinational companies as well as moves towards the privatisation of parastatals, the absorption of youth by the private sector has remained low. This is firstly because several constraints remain to the expansion of private business in the country and, consequently, to the sector's ability and willingness to employ young people. To begin with, perceived risk associated with investing in a country emerging from a long period of political instability has been recognised as a key barrier to attracting investment in post-war contexts.³⁰ Slow infrastructure development, furthermore, creates disincentives for businesses, as electricity and roads remain key stumbling blocs. The Bumbuna hydroelectric project, for example, finally began to provide power to the capital in 2011 after decades of delay, but electricity remains intermittent, especially outside of Freetown and the turbines have broken on various occasions (AfDB 2013). Similarly, despite clear commitments by the current APC administration to improving the investment climate, concerns with corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency are high amongst investors, and Sierra Leone remains low in the "ease of doing business" index (Cubitt 2011c).

A focus on the struggles to attract investment however risks obscuring the fact that the private businesses that do operate in the country, despite having been hailed as panacea to the employment problem, have in fact provided limited opportunities for the majority of young Sierra Leoneans. A first reason for this has to do with the mining sector, long the source of Sierra Leone's woes. Despite disastrous historical precedents, Sierra Leone's economy remains overly dependent on the mining sector, especially iron ore, which accounts for at least 10% of the impressive growth figures.³¹ The role of the mining industry in present day Sierra Leone continues to be problematic: disadvantageous and exclusionary deals with Paramount Chiefs

³⁰ This has for example been recognized by the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, which in 2013 set up a Conflict Affected and Fragile Economies Facility to provide cover that takes into account the high risks faced by investors in these countries (World Bank 2013).

³¹ Interview with Ministry of Finance and Development (MOFED) representative, Freetown, 01.03.2013.

have been strongly contested by community rights and environmental activists (ALLAT 2013); concession agreements are not transparent and attempts by government officials to retain investment have resulted in minimal revenue generation from the sector;³² and recently, severe human rights abuses in the mining fields have been reported (Human Rights Watch 2014).

Aside from poor working conditions for those employed, the mining sector has created limited direct and indirect job opportunities for young people. A key problem relates to the skills mismatches discussed before, as mining companies such as London Mining and African Minerals hire skilled personnel from abroad in the face of a skills gap in country.³³ This has also to do with the nature of the mining sector, with long exploratory phases that disincentivise investment in developing local skills and even in creating markets for local procurement, as well as the fact that given modern mining technology, the sector is currently not as labour-intensive as might be hoped (Machonachie 2012). Diamond mining, furthermore, is structured similarly to how it was before the war, largely through informal networks and with continued potential for smuggling, despite non-negligible improvements after the Kimberly process (Brown et al 2005; Gberie 2002).

A “myopic” focus on development through mining has prevented a robust approach to employment generation in other sectors (Cubitt 2011c: 101). Significant barriers to the development of commercial agriculture have limited opportunities to create large-scale employment. The GoSL’s (2013) *Agenda for Prosperity*, for example highlights high labour costs in small scale processing, and poor infrastructure as key hindrances. Consequently, as in the decades preceding the war, Sierra Leonean agriculture remains primarily small-scale and

³² Interview with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Zusammenarbeit representative, Freetown, 19.04.2013.

³³ *ibid.*; Interview with mining company representative, Freetown, 01.03.2013. See also Arai et al (2010) for a discussion of employment trends in Sierra Leone’s mining sector.

subsistence-oriented. In addition, rapid rural-urban migration, especially amongst young people, has been interpreted as a rejection by post-war youths of agriculture as a viable employment strategy.³⁴ Young people's rejection of agriculture however must be understood in its socio-political context, as well as in the context of a currently under-developed commercial agriculture sector. As discussed above, rural society has long subjugated young people to oppressive gerontocratic rule, and restrictive land ownership laws and social norms make "the village" an unattractive option for young people. It may, furthermore, be inaccurate to frame young people's rejection of agriculture as permanent, as several observers have pointed to a resurgence of commercial farming activities especially in districts where artisanal mining is stagnating (Fanthorpe and Machonachie 2010; Pijpers 2011).

These considerations lead to the conclusion that economic reform through privatisation has so far been limited in its ability to create inclusive employment.

Public Sector

Given the faith placed in the private sector, the public sector has not been a key focus of policies geared towards employment creation. Although, as the World Bank has recently recognised, the shrinking of the public sector through structural adjustment policies resulted in "informality, a devaluation of educational credentials and forms of social exclusion", the consensus remains that "it is not the role of the government to create jobs" (World Bank 2012: 21). In post war Sierra Leone, as part of the liberal economic reconstruction model and the IFI's emphasis on fiscal restraint, there has been a continued emphasis on reducing public sector employment (Cubitt 2011b).

³⁴ Interview with UN representative, Freetown, 20.03.2013; Interview with agribusiness expert, Newton, 22.03.2013.

Aside from the lack of incentives to create work in the sector, recruitment in the civil service faces a set of constraints that especially affect young people's prospects. Generational turnover was identified as problematic in the civil service, where "ghost workers" artificially inflate the government payroll and thus lock young people out.³⁵ The PSRU have also conducted an analysis of the sector's needs, which revealed a lack of available skills to be the biggest problem for public sector recruitment (PSRU 2009). With a whole generation of young people having missed out on educational opportunities and a continued failure to adapt the curricula of schools, universities and vocational training institutions, youths have few opportunities to find white-collar work. Peeters et al (2009: 7) indeed find that "public sector opportunities are mainly for adults". Not only that, but civil service recruitment has continued to be highly politicised, as evidenced by Ernest Koroma's dismissal of numerous government officials to replace them with APC supporters as his party regained power in 2007 (ICG 2008).

The Informal Economy

As recently as 2009, only 3% of young people aged between 20 and 24 and 8% of those aged between 25 and 35 had formal sector jobs in Sierra Leone (Peeters et al 2009). The large majority of youths, therefore, engage in informal economic activities that are not directly regulated by the government and that lack social protection. Women, furthermore, tend to be overrepresented in the informal sector, and across sub-Saharan Africa, 84% of women outside of agriculture work informally (Meagher and Mustapha 2013). Given the failure to generate formal employment and the lack of state social security nets available to young people, it is unsurprising that the informal sector remains the largest source of income-generation (GoSL

³⁵ Interview with Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU) representative, Freetown, 06.03.2013.

2013). A large number of these activities take place in urban centres, following trends of rural-urban migration.³⁶

Informality often encapsulates a large variety of activities to varying degrees of return, yet barriers to accessing capital and low level of business skills development, especially amongst young people, are key reasons for low productivity and profitability in the informal economy in Sierra Leone (MLSS and MYS 2012). This means that the majority of activities in the informal economy tend to be small-scale and only profitable enough to ensure subsistence. This is also likely due to the over-saturation of the informal economy given the lack of opportunities in the formal sector, especially since the 1980s (Meagher and Mustapha 2013). This over-saturation, as discussed above, is exacerbated by the specialisation of vocational trainings in a limited number of trades, so that young entrepreneurs enter the informal economy with skills that are not in demand. Policy-making, by the government and international donors, has generally shown a lack of consensus and direction about how to engage with the informal economy as a generator of opportunities for decent work, despite the fact that the sector is arguably the most realistic livelihood generator in the long term. The contradictory attitude of policy-makers to informal sector employment and young people's experiences and perceptions of informal work are discussed in further depth in the next chapter, as the marginal youth at the core of this research are engaged by necessity in informal economic activities. As we shall see, given that unemployment proper is unviable for poor Sierra Leoneans, it is precisely those informal workers lacking capital and surviving precariously who are the "idle minds" feared by policy-makers.

³⁶ In 1963 19% of the population was urban while figures for 2014 were projected at 37% (GoSL 2013).

Sierra Leone's apparently miraculous economic recovery after the ten-year civil war is therefore still a long way from providing the dividends of peace expected by the country's population. Poverty remains high and jobs are yet to materialise in the numbers necessary to uplift the majority of the population, and especially its young people. Generation continues to be a significant determinant in access to employment, in both public and private sectors. As in the sphere of governance, continuity has dampened change. Limited job opportunities for young people, undiversified growth, high barriers to youth entry into the job market and persistent perceptions of the prevalence of "connectocracy" remain a concern amidst optimistic growth projections.

Conclusion

An overview of how Sierra Leone's labour market structure developed over time in conjunction with the political space that took shape over the years since the end of colonialism, therefore points to several key issues. The first component to bear in mind as we consider marginal youths' navigations of the post-war space, is the historical development of an increasingly exclusionary market economy and of a contracting state where redistribution was restricted to narrow networks. In this context, a majority of young people's employment opportunities were truncated. These processes alert us to the prominence of the relationship between labour, networks and political practices. Various forms of labour interacted with political constellations at different points in time: youths' forced labour underpinned chiefs' power in the colonial accommodation; the rise of mining prior to decolonisation created new gatekeeping dynamics and new networks of power while also creating pools of discontent amongst young miners. Under Siaka Stevens and later Saidu Momoh, elite accommodations became narrower and employment opportunities and survival entirely dependent on one's

level of incorporation in elite networks consolidating the APC's regime. As Momoh's hold over these networks eroded, a civil war ensued that was a product of these dynamics that created a pool of economically excluded youth and which created labour market dynamics centred on the deployment of violent labour.

The second issue of note is that of youths' multiple roles in Sierra Leonean politics through history, as voters, as hired thugs for political parties, as rebels and civil society activists, all determined at different junctures by the interaction of various economic and political opportunity structures. Finally, because the study at hand takes place in post-war Sierra Leone, an analysis of the contemporary landscape highlights the tension between continuity and change, raising questions about the persistent role of networks and the impact of reconstruction on labour relations and the nature of political space. Young people in post-war Freetown have few opportunities for formal employment, despite robust economic growth in recent years. Although statebuilding efforts have placed emphasis on the rebuilding of democratic structures of governance, meaningful political inclusion remains a challenge. These developments and questions help us paint a picture of the forces at play in determining the terrains that Freetown's youth contend with now that the war has ended.

Chapter 3

What is Unemployment? Policy Narratives and a View from the Urban Microcosms

In a 2009 lecture, the Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warned her audience of the “dangers of the single story”. “Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become”, she noted. This chapter is about the stories told about employment and unemployment in Sierra Leone’s post-war moment. These stories and the reasons they are told give an insight into how different forms of economic activity are valued. These valuations are a first step towards understanding how experiences of work shape young people’s social identities and relations.

The chapter begins by discussing how and why unemployment has been securitised in Sierra Leone. It outlines the ways in which policy-makers have woven a particular narrative about the dangers of unemployment in post-war Sierra Leone, showing how the international shifts in thinking about post-war reconstruction influenced the content of these narratives in the country. It also considers why these accounts emerge from interactions between different sets of actors involved in policy-making and implementation and through the convergence of a variety of different motivations and interests. Through these interactions, specific definitions and assumptions emerge about who the unemployed are and what dangers they pose to the reconstruction process. The chapter then goes on to compare and contrast this official story with the stories of everyday survival that exist in Sierra Leone’s capital, offering portraits of young people’s varied lived experiences in four different urban microcosms. By introducing the protagonists of this research, and offering an insight into the lives of motorbike riders, street traders, commission chasers and “idle women”, it aims to show the multiplicity of

economic activity amongst those who do not fall within the sphere of formal employment. Furthermore, the chapter examines how young people themselves understand and interpret their labour market positions and experiences of work in the city. Descriptions of marginal livelihoods are thus complemented by a discussion of what work means, how notions of employment are negotiated in a quest for economic inclusion and the ways in which these understandings frame young people's assessments of their current situation vis-à-vis their future aspirations. This articulation between young people's experiences and their interpretations reveals the power of narratives about unemployment in shaping young people's self-perceptions and expectations.

The Policy Gaze on the “Ticking Bombs”

The policy discourse relating to youth unemployment in Sierra Leone finds its roots in the immediate post-war context, when the country, in collaboration with the international community, embarked on a process of soul-searching to understand what caused the slide into conflict. This process was based on a particular analysis of Sierra Leone's political and economic history but it was also largely influenced by contemporary trends in international engagement in war-torn countries. Indeed, the resulting policy narrative, although seemingly a “single story”, must be understood as a product of interactions between at least three sets of actors, each driven by their different (though often intertwined) institutional and contextual motivations: the international donor community, the GoSL, and the on-the-ground implementers of development projects. This section describes how these players have contributed to the weaving of a specific narrative on unemployed youth in the country. In doing so it rests on Whitfield and Fraser's (2009a) political-economy approach to the analysis of donor-recipient interactions. This takes players in these interactions as “political agents

partially constituted by the ideas and memories of the communities from which they emerge”, so that their approach to policy negotiations is both strategic and based on institutional legacies and ideological conditions (ibid.: 37). It is through the intersection of motivations and strategic interactions between the main players that the policy narrative on Sierra Leone’s youth unemployment problem emerges.

The International Donor Community

The first set of players is the international donor community. This is of course a widely diverse group and analysing it as a single actor requires a level of simplification, as is true for the other sets of actors. However, as we shall see, the very complexity and diversity of international actors engaged in policy-making plays a key role in determining the contours of the gaze on the unemployed. Understanding the position of the international community must begin by situating their involvement in the context of the broader ideological and institutional developments in international intervention in war-torn countries. As international peace missions in countries torn apart by civil war expanded beyond the achievement of ceasefire, the addition of the term “peacebuilding” to the UN toolkit emphasised the need eliminate the causes of war to avoid relapse. As discussed in the Introduction, the transformations envisioned by international peacebuilders were far-reaching, and extended to the achievement of development, based on the conviction that underdevelopment is a likely source of violence and instability.

Sierra Leone is in many ways emblematic of such post-Cold War complex emergencies that saw the international community increasingly entangled in conflict resolution and subsequent reconstruction. Indeed, the country was one of the first case studies of the PBC, a body established to institutionalise these longer-term approaches to conflict prevention (Biersteker

2007; Enria 2012; Jenkins 2008). The PBC's task is to act as coordinator of international efforts in war-affected countries, bringing together actors from across the intervention spectrum, and is therefore an interesting window through which to gage the international policy gaze. Significantly, the PBC championed the incorporation of socio-economic development into peacebuilding. The *Report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change* (UN 2004: viii), which served as the Commission's founding document, for instance, states:

Development and security are inextricably interlinked. A more secure world is only possible if poor countries are given a chance to develop. Extreme poverty and infectious diseases [...] provide a fertile breeding ground for other threats, including civil conflict.

The “circular complementarity” between security and development identified by Duffield (2007: 1) is thus at the heart of the PBC's engagement in Sierra Leone. Attempts to pinpoint the root causes of the country's civil war highlighted failures in pre-war development policy (PBC 2007b). In particular, youth unemployment was identified as a pressing security issue from this point of view and chosen as a key peacebuilding priority (PBC 2007a). A PBC document, written in conjunction with the GoSL, notes the risk of young people being recruited again for violence by pointing to post-war unemployment figures dangerously close to those witnessed before the breakout of war (PBC 2011: 1). Underlying the identification of unemployment as a security concern is the fact that young people were the primary perpetrators of the civil war, combined with the notion that unemployment causes violence. While the unemployed are identified as a threat to peace, PBC documents suggest that employment can transform young people into “an agent of change and economic development if their potentials are harnessed with timely intervention” (PBC 2010: 1). The

labelling of young unemployed Sierra Leoneans as a “security risk” (UNDP 2007: 6) is thus embedded in the development of international discourses around fragile countries emerging from war, and in particular in the securitisation of international development policy in these contexts. As Whitfield and Fraser (2009a: 41) point out, it is essential to understand how donor policy preferences reflect “developments in donor societies, in the developing world and in internationally set norms and agendas”.

The tendency to describe an increasing number of phenomena as falling into the security realm has been highlighted by members of the Copenhagen School, who suggest that the process of “securitisation” serves to portray the referent object (in this case underdevelopment, or unemployment more specifically) as an “existential threat” (Buzan et al 1998). It is a linguistic tool with practical implications: it emphasises the urgency of intervention. Duffield (2007: 2) argues that the purpose served by the securitisation of development policy is the establishment of an unequal and “enduring political relationship: a post-interventionary terrain of international occupation”. Powerful security interests, in Duffield’s framework, are pursued by hiding behind development aid. However a focus on hegemonic constellations underplays the pragmatic concerns faced by policy-makers, quite apart from the power relations that may well be underlying. This obscures the role of policy as institutional practice, often serving important internal purposes by ensuring support across a wide range of openly articulated but not necessarily identical interests. Without the agreement and cohesiveness of an “active network of supporters”, intervention would not be possible (Mosse 2004: 648).

The portrayal of unemployment as a destabilising force in post-war Sierra Leone serves as a useful tool to mobilise the variety of different actors that comprise the international donor community, as it facilitates the achievement of a common, urgent narrative. This is especially

important for organisations like the PBC, whose primary aim is to act as a coordinating body for international efforts in the country and in particular to bring security and development actors to the table in the design of reconstruction policy. As a senior UN official recognised, in order to ensure “buy-in” from a very diverse group of actors, it was often useful to adopt a level of “vagueness”.³⁷ In other words, bringing together a “multitude of contradictory interests” in the policy-making dimension necessitates “technical-rational, politically acceptable ambitious and ambiguous models” (Mosse 2004: 651). The unemployment-violence nexus undoubtedly relies on such a model: it identifies a pressing concern without delving into the complexity of its dynamics, resting on mechanistic interpretations of how joblessness leads to war. While, as we shall see shortly, this has significant practical implications, the securitisation of the unemployed and its ambiguous underpinnings helps weave a shared story for development and security actors engaged in Sierra Leone’s reconstruction process.

The Government of Sierra Leone

It would however be inaccurate to depict the “unemployment as threat” narrative as necessitated solely by the institutional needs and preferences of the donor community. Indeed, although the framing of this narrative is strongly influenced by current trends in development and security discourses, its underlying analysis of the Sierra Leonean context resonates strongly with national interpretations of the country’s recent history and present development needs. The GoSL’s official approach in fact relies heavily on this account of the unemployed as potential spoilers when making the case for job creation to be central to social and economic agendas (MYS 2003; GoSL 2008). The newly elected government’s third

³⁷ Interview with UN Representative, New York, 13.12.2010.

generation PRSP, despite aiming to direct attention away from the war towards Sierra Leone's struggle to achieve middle-income status, asserts that:

One of the major challenges Sierra Leone faces is the high level of poverty and unemployment, especially among the youth, women and vulnerable groups like youths with disabilities. Youth issues remain crucial for *maintaining peace* and promoting pro-poor growth (GoSL 2013: 113; my emphasis)

Government officials interviewed in Freetown similarly analysed the employment issue in terms of its potential security implications, with one National Youth Commission representative asserting that: "the country is on a time-bomb, the youth are just waiting for the slightest opportunity".³⁸

In analysing the government's adoption of this policy narrative on youth unemployment, two mechanisms must be considered. Firstly, it can often be difficult to distinguish between the preferences of the national government and those of the donor community in contexts where the latter is heavily involved in policy-making. As Whitfield and Fraser (2009a) argue we ought not to see recipient countries as simply passively accepting externally set policy priorities. Indeed, in the age of country "ownership", donors themselves are increasingly eager to emphasise national governments' need to take responsibility for the design and implementation of policy.³⁹ Nevertheless, there continue to be significant, if unacknowledged channels through which donor preferences can influence national agenda setting. Firstly, donors maintain "soft power", that is, the ability to push recipients to adopt their policy

³⁸ Interview with government representative, 7.07.2010

³⁹ Country ownership, or the notion that developing countries should set their own agendas for poverty reduction and institutional development was established as a fundamental principle for aid effectiveness in 2005 at the Paris Conference (see Cramer 2002).

narratives, for example by playing a role in planning processes as major stakeholders.⁴⁰ Of course donors also maintain the final say in whether or not the plans put forward in a country's PRSP are deemed appropriate for funding. In addition, there is increasing "institutional entanglement", as donor structures penetrate national governments, for example through international consultants building local capacity (Whitfield and Fraser 2009b: 101). This in turn results in a level of "discursive convergence" (Holtom 2005: 558). Such convergence can be thus seen as both the product of strategic calculations by the recipient government, whose budgets are dependent on external aid⁴¹ and by a degree of entanglement in national agenda setting. From this point of view, then, it is not surprising that the GoSL's articulation of the youth employment question reflects the language adopted by policy-makers.

At the same time, however, the destabilising potential of unemployment it is also a very real concern for the GoSL, one that reflects popular interpretations of the war as well as the current concerns of the country's electorate. The TRC Report (2004: 26) is a useful document from this point of view, as its purpose was to build a comprehensive picture of what happened during the conflict and to reflect a "social truth", that is a locally and popularly accepted version of the facts. The TRC specifically highlights that: "As the conflict arrived, youths used brutality not to prop up political elites, but to accumulate the resources and power that had been denied to them previously, attacking the very foundations of the elites' society" (ibid.: 345). These youths, the Report argues, were primarily "marginalised, uneducated and unemployed" (ibid.: 360). Accounts of the war that emphasise a "crisis of youth" have thus become the "master narrative of post-war reconstruction" in Sierra Leone

⁴⁰ An illustration of this of this was the PBC's alignment of its peacebuilding priorities with the GoSL's PRSP in 2009. The shift was presented as an attempt to honour the UN's commitment to full national ownership, yet in practice the UN had played a key role in writing the PRSP and therefore the re-alignment did not in fact lead to any substantial changes in priority areas (Interview UN Representative, York, 13.12.2010).

⁴¹ In 2009 Sierra Leone's aid accounted for approximately 18% of GDP (GoSL 2009b).

(Fanthorpe and Machonachie 2010: 256). As Mitton (2013: 322) notes: “this post-conflict master narrative of security has been dominated by the idea that if placed in conditions similar to those of pre-war Sierra Leone youths will once again drag the country into civil war”.

The reliance on interpretations of the recent war to understand and address the current threat of unemployment is for example evident if we look at the gender dynamics of DDR reintegration packages. As women were largely excluded from official accounts of the war, despite their active participation, it is often men who tend to be identified as threats to post-war stability, and thus who were primary beneficiaries of employment interventions during DDR (Mazurana and Carlson 2004).⁴² The social resonance of these narratives is also strengthened by the fact that they build on a long history of disciplining discourses that hinge on young people’s threat to social order by both colonial and independent governments in the country (Waller 2006; Abdullah 1994). Furthermore, Whitfield and Fraser (2009a: 30) point out that “the idea that recipient government actions might reflect the democratic wishes of their citizens” is rarely taken into account by those theories that frame national governments’ motives as primarily to do with maximizing personal and political gains. Instead, it ought not to be underestimated that the Sierra Leonean electorate is overwhelmingly youthful⁴³ and, as we shall see, extremely concerned with the current labour market situation. Securitising unemployment thus adds urgency to a politically salient issue.

The discursive convergence around the threat of unemployment as the current policy gaze on youth in Sierra Leone is therefore the result of broader trends in international thinking about development and war-affected settings, the institutional practices that favour these types of

⁴² According to MacDonald (2008: 135) gendered narratives about violence in Sierra Leone reflect were “integral to maintaining the myth of the young aggressive African male and the ‘white saviour’, both essential for the ‘new wars’ and the humanitarian industry”. For a discussion the focus of narratives of violence primarily on men see also Enloe (1998).

⁴³ People between the ages of 15 and 35 make up 70.2% of Sierra Leone’s population (SSL 2013)

interpretation and their convergence with local analyses of the war and political concerns underlying policy-making at the national level.

The Logic of Implementation

The implications of a reductive, though attractive and potent, policy narrative are most evident when we consider the logic of implementation on the ground. Aside from the blanket securitisation that emerges from leaving out the question of how unemployment and violence are related, another reductive aspect of this narrative is to do with classification. Despite a confident policy discourse centred on unemployment and its socio-political consequences, a question remains open: who are the unemployed? This question is of crucial salience as it has important implications for how different forms of work are classified and therefore valued. Despite the oft-quoted statistic that over 70% of Sierra Leonean youth are unemployed, reliable labour market statistics do not exist in the country to validate this claim (UNDP 2013). In addition, definitions of the unemployed based on inactivity are an inadequate descriptor of most young people's labour market position in the country. Those who can afford to be inactive are likely to be a fairly small group given Sierra Leone's high poverty rates, certainly too high to warrant the level of alarm that surrounds the word "unemployment". What this means is not that the concern with unemployment has been exaggerated, but rather that the term has been used imprecisely to point to a far broader phenomenon that includes different forms of subsistence that are often poorly remunerated, unprotected and irregular, and consequently that tend not to be considered as appropriate forms of employment.

In the context of current policy narratives, therefore, this means that "unemployment" and the way it is problematised in post-war Sierra Leone, is in fact a grey area given that inactivity

is in fact largely impossible for the poor. This of course is especially significant given the portrayal of unemployed youth as “ticking bombs”, as this grey area becomes open to interpretation of what constitutes a threatening livelihood and what, on the other hand, may be acceptable and worth encouraging from a peacebuilding perspective. In other words, determining who the “ticking bombs” are gives rise to processes whereby policy-makers effectively sanction certain livelihoods over others. It might thus be useful to differentiate between work, which refers to the productive activities through which the poor ensure their sustenance, and employment, as a more normative term reflecting sanctioned, or peace-conducive forms of work. As we shall see below, these processes of valuation are not simply top-down as they are both appropriated and contested through young people’s own interpretations and experiences. Policy-makers’ implicit and explicit valuations of certain forms of work over others form one side of a conversation with the country’s youth about the parameters of economic and social inclusion.

Sanctioning processes manifest themselves in different ways. Firstly, they can be implicit in the types of employment programmes that are implemented as part of peacebuilding interventions. Here a different set of actors takes centre stage, namely implementers, who can either be CSOs, NGOs or local donor branches, depending on the implementation channels of funding. Implementers face a different set of motivations determined by internal structures and guidelines from policy-makers at headquarters or government. As discussed in Chapter 2, a wide array of activities has been funded under the rubric of employment creation in Sierra Leone, with mixed results, ranging from short-term cash for work schemes aimed at preventing imminent “social crisis”, to longer-term entrepreneurship and skills-training programmes in activities such as tailoring, hairdressing and mobile phone repair (Batmanglich and Enria 2014). The design of these programmes, and in particular the types of activities they

encourage can be seen to reflect the types of occupations that are actively recognised as employment in its normative sense.

Despite this significant symbolic impact, the rationale behind the project design tended to be driven primarily by the internal dynamics of implementing agencies and their relationship with their donors. This operational perspective was the lens through which policy narratives were translated into concrete projects. Implementers were encouraged by funding and evaluation procedures to frame their projects in terms of the policy narrative in order to uphold an image of coherence and shared meaning (see van Ufford 1993). At the same time, the broad link between unemployment and instability drawn at the policy level left significant room for manoeuvre in determining the actual features of projects. The latter were in practice influenced by a variety of pragmatic concerns, ranging from organisational expertise to a level of risk-aversion that favoured the reproduction of tried and tested projects. Continued preference for DDR-style trainings in professions such as carpentry and tailoring regardless of demand for these services, for example, reinforced the framing of these occupations as conducive to the integration of potentially violent young people.

That organisational expertise and inertia drive project design has important consequences in a context where unemployment is portrayed as a security risk. The language of peacebuilding and its corollary of securitisation did not necessarily direct the content of projects but primarily their packaging. Although peacebuilding had seeped into the jargon it was not always seen as requiring a specifically different approach to employment creation in non-fragile settings. As a UNDP official put it:

What's the difference between peacebuilding and development? You are basically doing the same thing in the context of post-conflict, so there are political sensitivities.⁴⁴

The broad causal link between unemployment and violence in policy narratives made it easy to justify any employment intervention as a peacebuilding intervention, rather than focusing specifically on the mechanisms of transmission from economic marginality to unrest. This reinforced the notion that unemployment is dangerous *per se*, while also implicitly sanctioning the particular income-generating activities promoted in the projects as being peace-conducive.

Policing the Urban Space: Operation WID

A different kind of livelihood sanctioning process occurs through state attempts to control and restrict certain forms of economic activity. A recent urban development and beautification project in Freetown is especially illustrative. On the 7th of January 2013, the Freetown City Council, backed by a Presidential Task Force, the Sierra Leone Police and the Transport Authority, introduced Operation Waste Management, Improved Road Access and Decongestion (Operation WID). Amongst other measures, the Operation banned commercial motorbike riding and street trading from the Central Business District, dealing a significant blow to the young people whose livelihoods depends on these activities.

The Director of Traffic justified the targeting of motorbike riders and street traders to the public by arguing in a popular newspaper that: “the country is overwhelmed with lawlessness and indiscipline” (cited in Kamara 2013). Indeed, the project was aimed not only at making the

⁴⁴ Interview with UNDP representative, Freetown, 16.07.2010.

city more “developed” but also as a way of controlling what was perceived as criminal behaviour in the capital. Motorbike riders and street traders represented this concern. Motorbike riding, for example, was popularly construed as dangerous in the city’s public imagery: riders were thought to be primarily ex-combatants, rude and lawless. As we shall see, these descriptions are not necessarily representative of riders as a category, yet what is important is that the riders were seen to pose a threat, they were a reminder of a violent past and a symbol of the fears of poorly integrated youth.

Operation WID must be understood from the perspective of urban development trends across the continent, whereby the urban poor are increasingly pushed out of blueprints for the ideal, developed city (Myers 2011; Simone 2002). The growth of gated communities paralleled by beautification projects that include slum clearances and campaigns against street trading and pavement dwellers are clear examples of these approaches to urban planning and of the creation of exclusionary spaces and notions of who does and does not belong in the modern city. The authorities’ treatment of livelihoods such as motorbike riding and street trading therefore reveals that official concerns lie not simply with idleness but with particular modes of survival deemed improper. Operation WID in the absence of alternatives seemed fairly counterintuitive given prevailing notions that lack of livelihood options is linked to unrest. The Council, the police and the public were aware of this when probed, yet the argumentations around the Operation reflected the potency of the rhetoric around the threat of youth and the need to control young people’s livelihood activities.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ A spokesperson for the Sierra Leone Police for example noted that bike riding had substantially contributed to the sustenance of a large number of youth whose options for employment are limited; however he argued that because “they like to violate laws” and because “bikes are also used to perpetrate crime and to attack people” they needed to be brought under control (Interview, Freetown 26.04.2013).

The policy gaze on youth livelihoods is therefore shaped by an intentionally vague rhetoric on the dangers of unemployment that, in a context where inactivity is unlikely for the urban poor, effectively opens up a value-laden debate on which forms of work classify as (proper and peace-conducive) employment. As we have seen, this policy gaze emerges from interactions between different players engaged in the making and implementing of policy, through the convergence and intersections between their varied motivations in the post-conflict context. These official discourses form one side of a conversation with the subjects of intervention, namely the country's marginal youth. By shaping the boundaries of what counts as employment, they reflect implicit and explicit valuations of work. Young people situate themselves within these debates in order to articulate their aspirations but also to make claims on the government and its international partners. The contrast between policy narratives and their views are indicative both of the consequences of blanket securitisation and of the importance of valuations of work for determining social status. Before turning to these reflections however, we must introduce youths' experiences in the spaces where they take place: Freetown's urban microcosms.

Urban Microcosms: Four Snapshots of Freetown's Informal Youth

The streets of Freetown have been the theatre of a tumultuous history, one that is impressed in all corners of the city, in its architecture and geography. The violence of Sierra Leone's past is for example embodied by King Jimmy Market's tunnels, where the chains that imprisoned the victims of the Atlantic slave trade are still visible. Similarly, the towering cotton tree in the middle of the city's Central Business District reminds Freetonians of the futures that freed slaves may have imagined as they arrived to the Province of Freedom. In Freetown's streets, some of the bloodiest pages of the civil war were written. Throughout history, therefore, the

city has been the stage of its inhabitants' imaginations and expectations in the midst of violent realities. It is in these streets that Freetown's youth inscribe their existence; here livelihoods are made, identities are created and moulded, and social networks are built. The streets and neighbourhoods of Freetown are populated by the protagonists of this research and are the stage of their daily lives, of their experiences of work and politicisation. We must therefore start by understanding these spaces to set the scene for what comes next.

In analysing the "moments of intersection between theory and practice in African cities", Myers (2011:5) chooses the "post-colonial" as one key attribute of contemporary African urbanism. Understanding cities like Freetown as post-colonial entails framing the analysis in the "critical aftermath" of colonialism, that is, recognising "cultures, discourses and critiques that lie beyond, but remain closely influenced by colonialism" (Blunt and McEwan 2002 cited in Myers 2011: 30). The post-colonial city emerges out of a colonial history that shapes its contours. Freetown went from being a slaving port to becoming the destination of freed slaves and the British "black poor" before the official establishment of a Crown Colony in the Western Peninsula in 1808 (see Chapter 2). The colonial period saw significant changes in the city's geography and demography. Freetown's proximity to the sea and its torrential rainy season gained it a reputation for being a "white man's grave", prompting its European settlers to relocate higher up the city's hills, which soon became gated communities, with pre-fabricated homes being shipped from Britain and an entry ban for the African population. Below, closer to the sea, Freetown became a collection of cities within the city, with different neighbourhoods hosting different ethnic communities, many settling in the city from the hinterland, engaged in various occupations (Banton 1957). As we have seen, labour migration to the city, and to and from the mining fields, was a central trend both before and after independence, with significant impact on urban demographics in the decades preceding the conflict. The war itself inevitably marked the city's landscape, as its population swelled with

the internally displaced and many who, amidst the war's destruction, relocated to the city hoping to make a living (Ibrahim and Shepler 2011). Today, therefore, the "geographies of exclusion" (Myers 2011: 29) that characterised colonial Freetown continue to structure the existence of the city's inhabitants.

Discussions of African cities have focused on the processes of urban informalisation, characterised by sprawling informal settlements, informal service provision and a booming informal economy (Simone 2002). In these spaces, attempts at urban governance have pitted the "grounded rationality of Western modernity and development" (Watson 2007 cited in Myers 2011: 80) against the perspective of a marginalized majority on what the city should be, which is ultimately based on their lived experiences. The establishment of Operation WID is a vivid example of a perceived incompatibility between attempts at daily survival and official narratives on what the city ought to be. The discourses on unemployment and deviance intersect with those rationalities of modernity to exclude certain segments of the urban population, such as traders and motorbike riders, from the blueprints of the modern city. Their attempts to survive this city, what Simone (2004) calls "peripheral urbanism", are the focus of this section's snapshots, as they give us a grounded insight into the daily existence of the young people at the receiving end of the policy discourses outlined above.

This peripheral urbanism not only reflects daily efforts to get by, but also certain bottom-up imaginations of the city, or its "*mundus imaginalis*" (de Boeck and Plissart 2005: 56). The articulation between survival strategies and imagination is crucial to understanding these marginalised perspectives on work in the city. Freetown exists in different forms for different inhabitants. The young people discussed in this thesis inhabit different microcosms, different cities-within-the-city that provide stages for daily struggles for survival, as well as forming distinctive communities and singular urban experiences. Life in Freetown's microcosms

happens mostly outside and sociality in the streets underpins the different modes of existence. It also means that individuals often move between microcosms and the city's prolific *radio trottoire* diffuses stories about each of them.

Freetown's multiplicity is also to be found in the distinctive ways in which the characters of the microcosms imagine the city and chart possibilities and alternative futures through their presence in the street. The microcosms' residents imagine the city as they position themselves in its streets, and their very presence denotes an image of the city that is different from that envisioned by the city planners. Through these forms of space-claiming and imagination Freetown's young people make the places they inhabit. The following snapshots describe particular livelihood activities, the places where they occur, and they trace a profile of the young people who populate them and how they ended up there. They are portraits of peripheral urbanism, of attempts to survive, inhabit and imagine the city. The notion of a microcosm is intended to portray a particular territoriality of existence, as these spaces are fundamental in processes of social navigation, as these micro-cities are the stage where "agents seek to draw and actualise their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities and life chances in a volatile social environment" (Vigh 2006a: 4). Reading these snapshots alongside the policy gaze depicted above begins to show the inadequacy of a single story to understand a multitude of trajectories, as well as offering an initial insight into how exclusion from formal labour markets is experienced in practice by Freetown's youth.

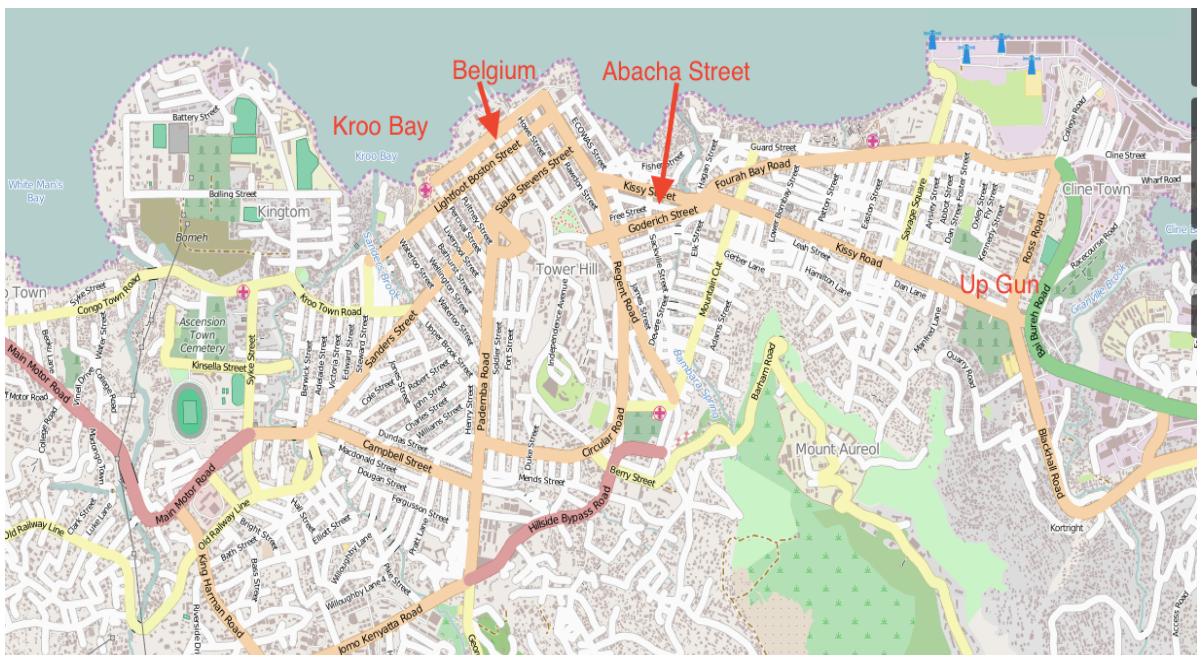


Figure 1: Map of Central and Eastern Freetown

Up Gun: Commercial Motorbike Riders

As Operation WID came into force, the Up Gun riders' park was teeming with angry young motorbike riders debating the council's decision to restrict their business outside of the city centre. Commercial motorbike taxis, or *okadas*, are a fairly recent phenomenon in Freetown. Different stories exist about how they arrived in the city. John, a former RUF combatant who took up *okada* riding after the war, argued that Hondas, as they were called before borrowing their Nigerian name, started being used by rebels in the Tongo mining fields, as fighters tired of using bicycles to carry ammunition over the difficult terrain. Since their arrival, *okadas* have become a permanent feature of the city's landscape despite several attempts to be rid of them, and they provide a key form of transport in an increasingly bottlenecked city.

Commercial bike taxis have in the past four years been subject to government attempts at formalisation. While before *okada* riding was an entirely unregulated activity, since an

intervention from the Overseas Development Institute and the local Centre for Coordination of Youth Activities, riders have become unionised, have to register their bikes and wear a high visibility vest and helmet at all times. These changes, and the more recent restrictions on traffic, are challenged and defied on a daily basis by riders. In addition, despite moves towards standardisation, *okada* riding continues to rely on a variety of informal arrangements defined by ownership of the bike. There are broadly three types of riders. There are those who own their bikes and who are generally the best off. These riders are rare because there are significant barriers to purchasing a bike, so that those who can afford one tend to have another primary occupation and use the bike as a source of additional income. The large majority of riders in fact use a bike owned by somebody else under a daily or weekly payment arrangement commonly known as *master money*. Riders pay their *master* between 30,000 and 50,000 Leones⁴⁶ per day, which is approximately half of daily revenues during times of good business. The *master money* arrangement occasionally stipulates that the rider will eventually pay enough to buy off the bike, but informal contracts are difficult to enforce in practice. *Master money* is not the only expense for riders, as other expenditures include fuel (about 20,000Le per day), weekly oil refills, bike repairs and occasional police bribes. Another, and worst off group of riders, do not have a *master money* arrangement and therefore rely on the kindness of colleagues, who will lend them the bikes when they are taking a break.

My work with *okada* riders took place at the Up Gun riders' park, which lies at the edges of the city's crowded East End. Getting there from the centre of town requires traversing the impossibly trafficked Kissy Road, an obstacle course of trucks and street hawkers, or going through narrow backstreets lined by ever growing informal dwellings. The East, in Freetonians' imageries, represents the struggles faced by Sierra Leone's metropolis and its "geographies of exclusion". The influx of internal migrants trying their luck in the city settles

⁴⁶ At the time of fieldwork, the exchange rate was just under 7,000Le to the British Pound.

there rather than the quieter and opulent Western part, contributing to a seemingly explosive housing situation and a concomitant public services crisis (Ibrahim and Shepler 2011). Up Gun provides transport to this growing population and is one of the biggest parking grounds in the city, spreading over two sides of the road. Some riders look for customers while parked inside the National Petroleum fuel station facing a large cemetery. Others prefer to cater to the customers on Bai Bureh Road, the highway leading out of the city, and congregate by an *attaya* base, where the strong gunpowder tea that fuels most riders through their long days atop their bikes is always brewing.

This is a heavily male urban microcosm; the *okada* rider is typically a young man, both in actual fact and in the powerfully symbolic discourse that frames him as potentially dangerous. Their collective, rather than individual, presence is significant and makes the place, in the sense that it is a considerable physical claim on the urban space and that the *attaya* base and the fuel station have become riders' grounds. The riders' presence has also given rise to a sizeable economy that revolves around them. It is in fact common to hear riders argue that a single bike can feed up to fifteen people if one traces every component of the value chain, so to speak. Pop-up bike repairs, *cookery*⁴⁷ shops, hawkers and *attaya* brewers, have all emerged to cater to the young riders and occasionally their customers. Near the *attaya* base, in addition, a recent councillor built a small covered space where the riders can sit in their idle time, playing board games and the increasingly popular Mercury gambling game. Sitting on the walls of this structure, the riders never take their eyes entirely off the road, in case a potential customer arrives. Similarly, across the street, the fuel station offers repair from the sun as well as places to sit that are slightly hidden from view, allowing those riders who indulge in the occasional toke of *djamba*⁴⁸ to do so without judgement from prospective customers.

⁴⁷ Street food stalls.

⁴⁸ Marijuana.

Trajectories to becoming an *okada* rider were varied and personal histories quickly revealed the inadequacy of the “single story”. Mohamed, a 32-year-old from Makeni, in the North, had been riding in Up Gun for three years. He left school just as the war was starting and his trajectory into *okada* riding was fraught:

At the age of eight years I went to the tailor shop because I was from a poor family. My father was sick, so all the provisions we were supposed to get from him were not there. [...] In 1998 the rebels attacked Makeni, I was with them since they held the town capture because I didn't want to be harassed like the other people. I was with them just to protect myself. I did not like the thing; I just wanted to live a peaceful life.

The narrative Mohamed offered about his own life was a clear attempt at rejecting public discourses that frame him as a “bad guy”. During the war he became close with a prominent RUF battlefield Commander and ultimately took up a leadership position in the armed group in a Northern town. Despite his success in the ‘jungle’, Mohamed cast his wartime actions as an aberration, and his emergence from the bush, “decently dressed” on the day of Eid as a form of rebirth or transformation. He retrained as a tailor during DDR in Freetown, and graduated after three years feeling “like a helpful man in the society”. Mohamed made sure not to tell anyone about his combatant past so as to start his new life: “I am not like them, I am a decent guy”, he argued, “I want to become somebody perfect”. The tailoring business however turned bad and he ended up starting up a *master money* arrangement, while waiting to save money to open a tailoring shop.

Riding okada played a key part in Mohamed's story of redemption as it had allowed him to support his two children and previously their mother, who had later left him. However, Mohamed was aware that riding was not perceived as a respectable occupation, and often made sure to differentiate himself from other riders and to emphasise that riding was not his ultimate goal:

Tailoring is more gentle, more responsible. The mere fact that you are riding *okada*, people are just looking at you like any rough guy or idler or a thief, because the bad guys are among us. You have some okada riders amongst us who are thieves, you know they are radicals: they steal people's phones, steal people's bags. I am not part of them, but they class us all the same.

Another different, but more common, road to Up Gun was that taken by Allieu, a 23-year old from the Eastern town of Kenema. From the age of nine, Allieu supported himself through school through a small business, which he continued until he sat his West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in 2009. After graduating, the business stopped seeming like a viable option and the big city became more attractive:

I was selling things like creams, sprays, I was doing it but I was not gaining enough profit so I left the business and I was engaged in teaching. I taught for about seven to eight months but I was not trained to be a teacher, they were just giving me some compensation, like 100,000 or 150,000Le but the money was not enough, I could eat that before the end of the month, so I decided to learn this *okada* riding. I learned by force and I came to Freetown, I started riding.

Allieu had been riding for about a year when I met him but he dreamed of continuing his education, and ultimately of becoming a journalist.

Up Gun, therefore, as the first urban microcosm, is a place where young men make a living, but it is also a place that they make into their own through their presence. It is also a place that makes them. In Up Gun, riders like Mohamed and Allieu not only earn their daily sustenance, but they also reinvent themselves and imagine their future, portray a particular image of who they want to be and navigate the urban world around them together with their colleagues.

Belgium: Commission Chasers

The area around King Jimmy Market, along the shore up to Government Wharf is a densely populated slum area, along the city's bay facing the Atlantic Ocean. Above it is Lightfoot Boston Street, the centre of what is known as Belgium,⁴⁹ a site of frenetic informal business amongst the so-called *jewman dem*. A visitor passing through Belgium will undoubtedly be struck by the number of young people crowding the street, perched on railings and sitting on street corners. The street, both physically and in terms of what it represents, is a central component of a *jewman's* life.

The *jewman business* is a widespread survival strategy characterised by the "chasing" of commission through the sale of second-hand (sometimes stolen) goods, from mobile phones, to shoes and even furniture. The key differentiation amongst the Belgium sellers is between those who chase commission, who are the focus of this research, and the *investors* or *capitalists* who have the means to buy the goods being sold. The *jewman dem* either sell these for the capitalists or they buy business from people who come to Belgium to make some extra money

⁴⁹ The name Belgium is said to come from the idea that second-hand goods come from Europe.

from their unwanted items and sell it on to the investors. Abbas, a 27-year old Belgium seller, explained the daily routine of a commission chaser thus:

When we are in Belgium, we are in the street, because it's in the street that we do business. When anybody comes by the street, we call them and say 'Psst, business?' If anybody comes with a phone [to sell], they come and say: 'I have business?'. Me I don't have money, but I want it, so I will tell them I can pay for it. [The customer] will tell me that he wants 30,000Le for it, so I will try to sell it for 40,000 and eat the 10,000. That's how we operate. We have people in Belgium who have money, the investors. When I get the phone I will show them, we talk and I sell it to them. Sometimes also the investor can come meet me and say: 'Go sell this phone for me'. They can give us iPods, iPhones, anything. If I can't sell it, I'll give it back to them. Because we have nothing, nothing at all, so it's us who have to strive to get business to come.

The profits made from commissions are small and irregular, dependent on a highly overcrowded and undifferentiated market, offering a precarious survival. Commissions however are often shared, and the *jezman dem* understand the importance of communal living for survival. They also occasionally rely on other, often risky, tricks of the trade to supplement their commission. The so-called *do or die* is a good example of this, whereby a small team of sellers collaborate on a scam involving selling the customer a broken phone or an empty box. These types of tricks, together with a reputation as a selling ground for stolen goods has earned Belgium a negative image, as a place for idlers and thieves, or *rarray boys*.⁵⁰ Belgium sellers like Abbas were aware of this reputation:

⁵⁰ Abdullah (2005:173) defines *rarray boys* as "pickpockets and petty criminals, engaged in violence in their everyday life".

Some pass and curse us, say we are criminals and thieves. Then some when they see how we operate then they see. Because you can say we are thieves but then when you come close to us you can say that these are not bad people. We are all the same in the end, it's the commission that made us come to Belgium.

Belgium, like Up Gun, is a male dominated place. The young sellers are united by stories of misfortune, and specifically by a vulnerability that means that one's life can be thrown into sudden disarray. Although the commission is what makes young men come to Belgium, everyone has their own story of how and why they "jumped to the streets". Abbas for example was born in Freetown in a family that migrated from a small village in the North. He developed what he called a "business brain" at an early age, when he borrowed a pair of trainers from a friend and came to Belgium to sell them, telling his friend they had been stolen when he went for prayers at the mosque. After observing the sellers make their transactions he brought business a few times and the sellers started sharing their commissions with him, encouraging him to join them.

Abbas dropped out of school before sitting the WASSCE and joined Belgium full time:

I was not able to sit the exams, and now business started to dominate my mind. I had nobody to encourage me to go further, because my parents they didn't go to school. I am the big one in my family.

He ended up spending a few years homeless, and slept in the street where he did business until he managed to save some money for a crowded shared room in the Eastern part of town. His father pushed him several times to travel to the Northern village of Peppel, where

African Minerals' operations are taking place, but his trips had not been fruitful. Worse than that, on one of them, some of the phones he took with him from Belgium's investors to sell on the way were stolen which got him into trouble and caused him to avoid the selling ground for some months for fear of repercussions. Having been unable to find a mining job he tried out work as a caretaker in a popular Lebanese restaurant in Western Freetown, but within two weeks he was fired without pay or explanation. Despite his repeated attempts to leave, Abbas also saw Belgium as his only certainty not least because, as he put it: "I don't have anywhere where I can have friends like in Belgium".

Solomon's determination to leave Belgium was equally frustrated. He was born in Pujehun district in 1983 and was amongst the first to experience the insurgency from Liberia in 1991. In the war he lost his father in a burning building, escaped the RUF's training grounds for child soldiers and ended up in Freetown where he was reunited with his mother and sister. After a short spell of solitary migration in neighbouring Guinea, he found himself in Belgium where some friends showed him the trade. While his sister was alive he went to school and was involved in the local music scene and the "social clubs":

During that time life was simple. What made me popular in Freetown was that I was doing music so when we did that people admired us, women would send for us. Those were the school days. [...] Then when I lost my sister, there were fights in the house so I just left, met with some friends, and we had nothing to do. I just forgot about music, I started going to the street.

His sister's sudden death in 2010 cut off his financial support network and curtailed his efforts to finish his WASSCE, making him dependent on Belgium's commissions.

Commission chasing is widespread across the city, but the types of commission that can be sought are territorially circumscribed and closely tied to particular places. Belgium is known for its expertise in technology, though it also caters for those looking for used clothes and shoes. A few streets down, in Howe Street, are the slightly more up-market Sweissy Jewellers, who work for commission aiding individuals interested in buying diamonds and gold. Similarly, the *dollar boys* of Siaka Stevens Street, the city's main thoroughfare, gain commission from the exchange of foreign currency. Further down the coast, down thick stone steps that hide Freetown's notorious slum Susan's Bay from the average person's view, young men offload boats coming from Guinea for a small commission. Although all of these are ultimately the same survival strategy, characterised by irregularity and precariousness, they are differentiated by the place where they occur and the type of service being provided, and it is these differences that give rise to distinctive identities and to particular forms of organisation and mutual support.

Belgium is not only characterised by the type of business that occurs there but also by distinctive forums of sociality. These are the streets themselves where irregular commission chasing is alternated with discussions on topics ranging from daily happenings in the neighbourhood to political stirrings. Social events, such as the football matches and carnivals organised by the Belgium Sellers Association (BSA) also cement Belgium's identity (see Chapters 4 and 5). Sociality outside of business hours also tends to centre on less visible areas of congregation. Below Lightfoot Boston Street, for example, lies an old cement market square known as Ajekule, supposedly in reference to a mythical Nigerian market where human flesh is rumoured to be sold. In Ajekule, formerly a rebel hangout spot, ex-combatant and non-combatant youth mingle, drinking, gambling, taking drugs and listening to music.

For young men like Abbas and Solomon then, the street is both a place of struggle and resilience against adversity. And in this street Belgium's commission chasers navigate their existence, constantly on the lookout for business while hoping to move on to something better.

Abacha Street: Traders

Kadija stands under the sun all day, a pair of *skin tights*⁵¹ in each hand, and several more strewn over her shoulders. She has been hawking on Sani Abacha Street, a busy street that links central Freetown to the Eastern part, for a couple of years. She stands on the same corner every day, with other women traders, some of whom have their own wooden stands, while others lay their goods on the ground with a watchful eye in case the city council comes to "scatter the market". "I used to be a *bustler*⁵² before", Kadija tells anyone who will listen, much to the disapproval of her colleagues. "What do you say things like that for?" they plead. But for Kadija, it is important that people know how she got to Abacha Street. She started "street life" when she was young, aged eleven, as a friend introduced her to a *kadie master*⁵³ and she became engaged in sex work. "They just used us and didn't pay, and if we tried to talk back they would beat us, we slept on the market tables, so a friend came to pick me up and said 'Let's go sell'". Leaving the *bustlers'* street, Kadija landed on Abacha Street, selling clothes for another woman for a flat-rate commission of 2,000Le a day.

Abacha Street is a busy street market; almost anything can be bought there, from household products to the latest fashion imported from neighbouring countries. Prospective customers as well as anyone else trying to get to the Eastern part of town wrestle their way through the

⁵¹ Women's trousers.

⁵² Sex worker.

⁵³ The owner of a brothel.

narrow pavements behind the colourful stalls or in the street, dodging delivery vans. Street traders crowd the streets, standing up, laying out their market or presenting their goods on stalls. Behind them are lines of shops, most of them foreign-owned, that sell in bulk to the traders, part of a complex supply chain. Despite recurrent controversies surrounding the role of foreign owned shops, relations between the Lebanese or South Asian shopkeepers and the traders are cordial and the shops can often serve as a welcome escape from the midday sun. While the shopkeepers are predominantly men, the street itself is a predominantly female space, and the traders are commonly known as the “Abacha women”.

The Abacha women are a manifestation of a regional trend of “successful penetration of West African women into local markets” (House-Midamba and Ekechi 1995: xi). This dominant womanhood is visibly performed in the market: while waiting for customers, the wooden stalls turn into improvised hairdressers, where friends braid each other’s hair, paint nails and try on clothes to be paraded to nearby observers. The market stall is also often a site of heated discussion, often described as gossip, or *congosan* as it is known. In reality conversations often centre on key issues facing Freetown women, from illness to children and husbands. Although Abacha women’s presence in the street is distinct from their roles in the home, the household occasionally enters the business place as children arrive after school to be fed, and babies are passed around to leave mothers free to engage in transactions with customers.

Abacha Street is also distinctive in Freetown for its ethnic homogeneity; it is more common to hear traders speak Temne, the language from the North, than Krio, Freetown’s lingua franca.⁵⁴ Like the other strategies discussed, there is a hierarchy amongst traders defined by relations of ownership to the goods being sold in the street. At the top of this hierarchy are

⁵⁴ This has to do with the historical development of Sierra Leone’s ethno-regional divide, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, resulted in Northerners being principally involved in trade in contrast to Southerners’ engagement in the civil service and the law.

the “big traders” who undertake the journey to Pamlap in Guinea or Dakar in Senegal to buy *market*. Before the Ebola outbreak shut down the borders, big traders undertook the journey to Guinea every couple of weeks and then, if there was business, further to Senegal, buying the latest items. Being a big trader can be very lucrative and some of the most prominent Abacha women were travelling with up to US\$3,000 every time they went. The small traders, on the other hand, usually buy goods from big traders or from the foreign-owned shops and keep the profit they make in a day.

Though often more stably established than those of the commission chasers, not all arrangements are the same. Some like Kadija work for a flat-rate commission, while others are paid daily depending on how much they sold. Low numeracy skills made it difficult to accurately estimate daily intakes, but observations made it possible to approximate an average of 10,000Le a day for the small traders. Significantly, Abacha traders’ profit rate is decided at the beginning of the arrangement by the person that offers them the market, and these commissions can often be quite low compared to the selling price of the good being peddled. Remuneration on Abacha Street, therefore, is highly dependent on personal relationships and ad-hoc arrangements, a lottery of sorts, dependent on who “carries” one to Abacha Street. Being “carried” to Abacha has a similar meaning to Belgium sellers’ stories of “jumping to the street”, it denoted a turning point in the women’s lives, both entering a new profession but also a new set of social networks and ultimately becoming an Abacha woman. Kadija’s story in which her friend rescued her from a life of prostitution and homelessness for example emphasised the importance of being liked by someone in order to be carried to Abacha Street. There is therefore an element of personal agency that may initially be obscured by the passive connotations of being carried: being liked requires having particular personal qualities, or doing something to earn appreciation. In all small traders’ narratives, in fact, being liked, or

trusted, was key to establishing trading arrangements and therefore essential for survival on Abacha Street.

Other trajectories to the market place involved a sudden necessity to take care of oneself and one's family. For women like Yeri, for example, trading in Abacha was a lifeline in the context of an abusive relationship:

My father gave me to this man in Kailahun, and it was him who came with me to Freetown, but we used to make confusion. Once he knocked my teeth out, so I decided, let me leave. He used to beat the children, so my father took them, now I am only with the elder one, I trade and whatever small thing I can make, I send it to them *upline*.⁵⁵ I learned business during the war, because the big ones would be killed them if they went, but I was small, so I would go and buy the market far and come back and sell it.

Indeed, many Abacha women are, like Yeri, the sole providers in their household and as such are viewed as particularly strong women in the city. This portrayal of Abacha women is in line with the literature on West African women traders, which often presents women's penetration of the market as having significant impact on gender relations and women's status or independence (Clark 1994; House-Midamba and Ekechi 1995). This influence however tends to be overstated: as shall be discussed in the next chapter, women's physical dominance on Abacha Street has had mixed consequences on their daily experiences of gender dynamics, especially for the smaller traders. Nevertheless, the traders often embrace these portrayals, and they frequently assert: "We are the men now". This also means they are popularly feared for being fierce, or even aggressive. Undoubtedly the intense competition caused by

⁵⁵ The term used to refer to the towns and villages outside of Freetown.

overcrowding in the trading ground encourages a fairly forceful attitude to sales. Abacha women rarely hold their tongue if a customer “scatters their market” without buying anything, and heated arguments frequently erupt between the traders themselves should one of them feel slighted by the other. Conflict, however, is also to a large extent part and parcel of the performance inherent in trading. *Talking price*, the established practice of negotiating the price of a particular good, is for example a well-rehearsed script, whereby both trader and customer are expected to raise their voices and insult the other for daring to utter an unacceptable price before reaching an agreement.

Alongside these connotations of strength and trajectories of struggle against adversity, Abacha traders also perceive that their livelihoods are looked down upon and, as in the case of Operation WID, actively challenged. Thirty-year-old Salematu, a fashion trader, expressed her frustration arguing that: “Not everyone can be an office person, God has a place for everyone, but they tarnish our character!” Abacha Street therefore has a distinctive character and its traders, through their presence in the street have made the place into more than simply a hub of business. Despite the individuality of Abacha Street and its traders, there is a sense of impermanence. For years, the traders have been promised a proper market place and with the onset of Operation WID, the promises intensified, as the traders demanded an alternative to trading in the street if the latter is no longer allowed. Previous administrations have tried to clear the traders off the street, for example through President Kabbah’s Operation Free Flow, but the traders always return. They argue that they will move once they have another place to trade, but for now they claim Abacha Street physically, laying down their market there, sitting on its pavements. Abacha, in the traders’ words, is “like Mecca, everyone is after their own blessing”.

Kroo Bay: "Idle" Women

They say that if you want to sell food in town you cannot tell people you are from *down Bay*. Kroo Bay is tainted by its reputation as unhygienic, as an overcrowded informal settlement where houses float by the sea on piles of garbage and where crime is rife amongst young *rarray boys* high on diazine. Long-standing inhabitants of Kroo Bay however argue that the place has changed since the war. Jeneba for example, grew up in the community since she was four and argued that: "Those who came spoiled the community, they weren't born here, before the young girls I knew were not involved in this prostitution business, but those who came made everything change."

Down Bay, as Kroo Bay is popularly known, is a slum that stretches along the coast. Because of the proximity to the sea, water is a key aspect of daily existence in Kroo Bay and it features prominently in descriptions of life in the community. Heaps of rubbish are used to keep the sea at bay, with little success, so that flooding is a common occurrence. The mazes of houses that make up the Kroo Bay area are thus often inundated by water forcing its dwellers to flee the bay, up the hill. Although "water" was the most common response to what problems face the community, residents have consistently refused to be moved outside of Freetown.⁵⁶ Kroo Bay is a self-contained, fairly insular community, and low rates of external employment mean that dwellers' existence is almost entirely confined to the bay area. Identification with the place, exemplified by refusals to move, therefore contrasts the shame attached to the portrayals of the slum areas up in the city. Kroo Bay is self-contained in the sense that it is a veritable city-within-the-city. It has its own chief who holds court in his compound to solve

⁵⁶ A Freetown City Council relocation scheme to Robamba, a village in the Western Peninsula was for example resisted. As a Kroo Bay community spokesman argued: "People are used to being here; they say the water affects us too much, and we recognized the concern, but it affects different wharf areas, so why transfer us?" (Interview, Freetown, 22.04.2013).

disputes emerging in the chiefdom. The Bay also has two *Bundu*⁵⁷ bushes, where young women are initiated into the female secret societies. Despite differences in the reputation of different sections of the Bay, the slum's football pitch forms the centre of young people's sociality. Here football tournaments pit rivaling sides of the Bay against each other, and at night they become the hub of parties and get-togethers.

I arrived in Kroo Bay looking for *uman dem way no get wok* (women who do not work), leaving that open for women to self-ascribe to the category. This meant that I spent my time there amongst women who populate the bay area during the day, being, by their own depiction, "idle". Unlike the other microcosms, the Bay is also young women's home. They live in the Bay with parents, husbands or boyfriends, yet the days are characterised by women only spaces. While many of the Bay's young men engage in scavenging for scrap metals or chasing commission in Belgium, young women wash clothes, cook, take care of their children and sit with other women discussing the Bay's latest occurrences. Alongside these, many young women undertake other small tasks that are either paid very little, infrequently or in kind. Sale, for example, did what she called *half-half business*, selling small items around the community whenever she could afford to buy some. Sale and her friends however also said, when asked how they got by: "we survive by our boyfriends". One of them, for example, was seventeen and eight months pregnant. She thought I must be surprised that she was having a child so young so she offered an explanation:

Why did I do this? Because my granny who I live with does not have anything, so

I involved myself with this man. He will now try to take care.

⁵⁷ Bundu (also known as Sande) is the name of the secret societies of women that perform initiations for young girls into adulthood. For an insightful analysis of female secret societies in Sierra Leone, see Ferme (2001).

Others still have, as they would say, gone *rarray* and live the “street life”, meaning that they engage in commercial sex work. Sex work in Kroo Bay is not organised through brothels; the Bay’s euphemism for prostitution, “going to the club” gives an insight into how the occupation works. Young women like 18-year-old Miss K go out to the city’s many nightclubs looking for customers. Going to the club has its risks, and Miss K bore the scars of physical fights with customers. However, she also made significantly more than her neighbours (at times as much as 70,000Le a night). Miss K and her colleagues were however also very conscious of the reputation that their livelihood brings them even within the collectively stigmatised Bay area, as Jeneba’s quote above shows.

Arriving in Kroo Bay was equivalent to “jumping to the streets”. Miss K was born in Hastings, just outside of Freetown, where her parents were gardeners facing few prospects of flourishing. As a child she helped supplement her parents’ income by selling firewood by the army barracks but by the time she dropped out of school, at sixteen, her parents decided to send her to stay with her aunt in the city. There she was expected to help her aunt sell corn flour but very soon she left her aunt’s place and started going to the club:

My aunty did not treat me nice that is why I left. I could sell all day and she only gave me 5,000Le and with 5,000 you can do nothing. When I stopped I came here. [I got involved in hustling] through my friends, when I came down here they said there was money in it.

For Miss K the “street” was central to her description of life in the Bay, as a place where she came to fend for herself and where she got by with the other *rarray girls*, trying to ignore the judging gaze of other dwellers. Jeneba and her close friend Aisha, in contrast, centred their stories of life in Kroo Bay around their homes and family lives. Aisha was born in the Bay and

dropped out of primary school early but was able to train as a hairdresser with the Young Women's Christian Association. The hope of a stable livelihood offered by training however quickly evaporated:

When it was done they gave us a kit: shampoo, conditioner, and other things. So we came home and sat down, because there is no money. Now I sit down at home and do this thing at home, I braid hair.

Following her short stint in hairdressing school, Aisha has spent most of her life working in the home, helping out her mother, her grandmother and later her mother in law, while also taking care of three children and a husband who was in and out of precarious work and was planning to travel to Qatar as a manual labourer.

Kroo Bay is a complex and in many ways fractured community. Similarly, the “idle women” are a diverse group, much more so than the other groups discussed above. Faced with similar circumstances and backgrounds, Kroo Bay's women attempt different strategies to navigate their situations and imagine different futures away from the water. These navigations and the ways in which these women interpret them allow us to reflect on the complexities and subtleties surrounding grassroots notions of work, to which we now turn.

The Meaning of Work: Grassroots Perspectives

These snapshots of urban microcosms give an insight into how different groups of young people make a living in the city and how, through their various livelihood strategies, they claim and make the urban space. The urban microcosms are also loci of meaning creation. In Up

Gun, Belgium, Abacha Street and Kroo Bay, young people make sense of their exclusion from formal labour markets and the survival strategies they are involved in as a result. As we have seen, the policy gaze on these survival strategies reflects a loaded debate on the forms of work that are classified as “employment”, a debate that is highly charged because of the assumed consequences of activities that do not fall within that rubric. The case of Operation WID for example illustrates how the language of idleness in practice extends to undesirable livelihoods, which are mostly marginal and take place in the city’s informal economy. “Employment”, in other words, is contested within this policy-level discourse and shaped by norms of acceptability, as well as the internal dynamics and preferences of training providers, narratives on urban modernity, and so on.

This section looks at how young people themselves bring meaning to their daily experiences of work and how this is situated within the context of these debates on (un)employment. Two concepts are crucial for the analysis of how young people across these microcosms engage with the issue. Central to their understanding of work, this section will argue, is the interface between navigation and aspiration. Navigation, the space between agency and social forces, delineates attempts to make the most of a situation constrained by powerful structures in volatile and shifting environments (Vigh 2006a). Aspiration, on the other hand, has been conceptualised most compellingly by Appadurai (2004) who emphasises the cultural ability to look into the future. Most pertinently for our purposes, Appadurai challenges individualistic accounts of aspirations put forward in economic analyses, suggesting instead that aspirations tend to be framed in the language of values that are shared across society. An important corollary of this is that it might also mean that: “the poor are frequently in a position where they are encouraged to subscribe to norms whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity” (Appadurai 2004: 66).

The interface between navigation and aspiration posits current forms of work as a temporary, undesirable necessity that cannot be viewed as employment in its normative sense. Employment, instead, is an aspiration whose contours are shaped by shared social values, those very same values applied to the analysis of the marginal economic activities that take place in the urban microcosms. At the same time, as we shall see, framing employment as an aspiration in a way that draws on the parameters of the policy gaze, serves the function not only of expressing hope and futurity but also of articulating a claim for socio-economic inclusion through job creation.

The Informal Economy and Marginal Work

It is important to firstly situate the forms of work outlined above in the context of the informal economy, where they all take place, as this begins to reflect the complexities of conceptualising employment within these economic spaces. Although a plethora of definitions of the informal economy have been offered, a common denominator is the absence of state regulation that characterises the formal sphere. In addition, lack of security and social protection and adverse working conditions are included in most definitions (ILO 2013). The contours of the informal economy are however contested, and scholars of the informal have pointed to the difficulty of determining the boundaries between the formal and the informal (Castell and Portes 1989; Myers 2011). These shifting boundaries are due to the interdependence between spheres, but also to the constantly changing nature of relations between the state and the informal economic sphere (Lindell 2010a). The space is ever changing because of contrasting trends. Economic deregulation and a shrinking public sector can expand the range of informality, while attempts to control livelihoods through formalisation or criminalisation can shrink the informal space, although the latter have to contend with resistance and attempts at circumvention. It is therefore helpful to conceive of

the informal arena as a fluid space of economic activity, whose boundaries are defined by a dynamic relationship with the state.

Despite the inadequacy of a strict formal-informal dichotomy, as we shall see, contrasts with formal labour markets remain central to subjective understandings of employment. Barchiesi (2010: 70) captures this well when he notes: “the concept of informality reflects both a degradation of existing jobs on offer in the labour market and a range of alternative coping strategies developed in response to poor employment prospects”. While this may be too narrow a depiction of a largely varied and differentiated sector, it reminds us that in Sierra Leone the informal economy denotes a context where employment is a contested term that relies on qualitative and relative assessments. This fluid space thus encompasses a spectrum of informality, where some occupations are undergoing formalisation attempts, where each livelihood is valued differently, and where one’s position within the microcosm influences these valuations. There are nevertheless important commonalities in all four groups’ experiences of informality. These can be divided into objective and subjective characteristics.

Objective characteristics are firstly those that denote informality, such as lack of social protection and direct regulation. A second objective aspect relates to what we might call the relation to the means of production. In *Capital*, Marx differentiates between capitalists who own the means of production and workers who, own nothing but their labour power. The worker is thus: “free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour power as his own commodity and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realisation...of his labour power” (cited in Harvey 2010: 99). Similarly, the youths at the centre of this research did not own their bikes, market, business and so on, and owned very little else beyond their labour power that could be the source of income-generation. To different degrees, all groups faced

uncertain working conditions, and the viability of continuing to make ends meet was dependent on the whims of the owners of the means of production, as well as daily luck in overcrowded markets. These characteristics are complemented by the social norms that devalue these livelihood strategies and preclude them “employment” status. This occurs to different degrees, from the depiction of street trading as undesirable to the portrayal of riders as threats or sex workers as deviants. This subjective component is derived both from official discourses and young people’s internalisation of them, but also from their own understanding of their current economic position in relation to their aspirations and expectations.

Altogether, these objective and subjective characteristics may best be summarised through the notion of marginality, or marginal work, a sub-set within the spectrum of informality. Each group may experience marginality to different degrees and indeed, variations along these characteristics play a role in how each group situates itself within the (un)employment debate. Within each microcosm, furthermore, those who are economically marginal are to be differentiated from those figures within those same spaces who are not, such as Abacha Street’s big traders or Belgium’s investors, who for example own their goods. This definition of marginality helps us better conceptualise grassroots understandings of employment by situating them as products of the interaction between those in this particular economic position and broader societal norms and debates.

Unemployment/ Self-Employment / Employment

Within the informal space inhabited by economic marginals various understandings of work exist. Young people’s articulations of what work means to them and the ways in which they categorise their daily activity constitute their side of the conversation on unemployment and its consequences.

In Freetown's streets, the Krio term *wok* is an umbrella term for various forms of activity that are in fact regarded and valued very differently by the city's youth. These distinctions were best deduced from people's reflections on their daily experiences as well as some linguistic nuances in the way they were framed. For example, while individuals might refer to their activities through the Krio term *wok*, this was different from having *wok*. Almost without exception, the young people of the microcosms said they did not have work (*Ar no get wok*). The notion of a *job* best describes the distinction between work and employment (as a normative category of work) discussed above. A job is not simply, as the World Bank (2012: 5) defines it, an activity that "generate[s] income, monetary or in kind, without violating human rights". Young people's ideas of what counted as a job were steeped in social norms of acceptability and often defined negatively, by what it was not, namely the kinds of livelihood strategies that they presently engaged in. Their assessment of their current situation was indicative from this point of view.

Unemployment was characterised as a form of navigation, a way of getting by and a testament to young people's ability to manage in the face of adversity. They described their present state as "sitting down", which in Krio (*sidom*) is more figurative than literal and implies having to wait for something better. Indeed, in individual trajectories, sitting down usually denoted the entrance into the particular livelihood strategy and was used to emphasise that the current activity was simply a stop-gap to support oneself before a more ideal path became viable. Kroo Bay women and Belgium sellers were the most likely to perceive themselves as "sitting down", which is significant because in both spaces livelihoods were not only unwaged but also highly irregular, casual and occasionally illegal. Commission chasing, or *half-half business* never featured in discussions of future aspirations. Leaving Belgium was the ultimate goal for most commission chasers, although, as Abbas and Solomon's stories show, this was no easy

feat. Looking for business on Lightfoot Boston Street was not a problem *per se*; it was a useful expedient while adverse circumstances made sitting down necessary. The problem was getting stuck there. The precariousness of life in both sites also highlights the vulnerability associated with unemployment, as survival for the day was never certain and relied on hustling and the goodwill of others.

The language of idleness was constantly evoked amongst those who classified themselves as unemployed. In Kroo Bay, Aisha argued that women like her “just *pass-pass* all day”. Belgium sellers were similarly aware that they were seen as “idlers” as they perched on railings and sat on street corners. Idleness as such, however, is arguably not descriptive of daily experiences. In Belgium time is a precious commodity, not one to be wasted or misallocated. Business could come at any moment and spending time in the trading ground it was quickly obvious that most sellers’ attention was constantly on the street should someone catch business. The use of the language of idleness is nevertheless significant because it shows young people situating themselves in debates about employment and exclusion to make sense of their current position. It was an articulation of aspirations, but also a recognition that so far these aspirations had not materialised. Portraying oneself as idle was a way to express dissatisfaction with one’s current navigational tactic, as well as reassuring oneself that it was only temporary. As Solomon frequently argued, “You can’t be in Belgium your whole life!”

These articulations were however also more than that, as they were not framed simply as individualised aspirations to be achieved through personal struggle. Young people voiced clearly the conviction that failure to achieve aspirations reflected an inability on the part of the government and its development partners to create jobs. Situating oneself in the charged debate on idleness and its political consequences was therefore a powerful way to express expectations and make claims towards those believed to be responsible. Chapter 5 discusses

these claims and their political significance in detail. Leveraging discourses that portray unemployment as a threat certainly added urgency, yet it was also a double-edged sword, as it served to reinforce the devaluation of marginal forms of work.

In a hierarchy of marginal work, *okada* riding and trading were better regarded by the youth that made a living through them. Both livelihood strategies were less precarious than the former two, as arrangements with owners were pre-arranged and more fixed. However, they also remained insecure due to the fact that contracts were rarely enforceable. In terms of self-perception, young men were reluctant to call *okada* riding a *job* and therefore to see themselves as employed. When pressed for a definition of their occupation, the riders called it “self-employment”, which was used to mean that it was not created by the government. This was not usually a source of entrepreneurial pride, but rather a way of pointing out government failures, framing *okada* as a necessary alternative. Riding was in fact often referred to their occupation as “just self-employment”. This distinction was made clearest by the argumentations made against Operation WID, which pointed to the fact that the young men had been forced into riding because of the lack of jobs, so how could the government take this away too? All riders in fact made clear that *okada* riding was not their ultimate ambition. Twenty-seven-year-old Ibrahim for example noted: “*okada* is not my passion, but because of certain circumstances I am riding”. His colleague Saidu echoed this sentiment by saying: “If I find any kind of work, I will leave”.

Riding was therefore also a form of sitting down. However, when riders appealed to the language of idleness they did so to distance themselves from it. Partly in response to the stigmatisation of riders as threatening and lawless, in their contestations of Operation WID, these young men went to great lengths to argue that they had opted for this form of self-employment precisely to keep themselves busy and not be idle. As discussed in Chapter 5, the

riders astutely argued that were they do become idle, as Operation WID was threatening, they would be at risk of becoming violent. Self-employment was therefore not ideal, but it was better than being idle. This strategic positioning reflects the significance of public discourses on employment in framing valuations of work at different junctures.

There were two aspects of *okada* riding that made it undesirable and therefore “just self-employment” rather than a job. The first had to do with the struggles of riding, the second with expectations and social norms. Riding was seen as dangerous given the potential for accidents on poorly maintained roads and due to the incentives to speed in the hope of increasing daily profits. Police harassment was also often cited as a major drawback to *okada* riding. This was more than a simple practical difficulty and in fact exposed the riders’ frustration with the stigmatisation of their occupation. Ahmed, a 28-year old from the Northern town of Kamakwie insightfully argued that: “*Okada* is a job but as long as we face embarrassment it is not a job”. The shame of being constantly stopped by the police, more than the work itself, then made *okada* riding “just self-employment”. This perception was reinforced by official discourses such as the rationale behind Operation WID that deny riding the status of acceptable employment. Like commission chasing then, *okada* riding fell short of young men’s expectations.

Jobs themselves tended to be more difficult to define than what definitely did not count as a job, largely because the language of employment was primarily useful to articulate the perception of social and economic exclusion. Employment was an aspirational category, pitted against current forms of work. Reflecting Appadurai’s (2004) conceptualisation, aspirational understandings of employment were shaped by collectively shared norms determining which activities were valued and which were not. “Proper” jobs were thus characterised according to perceptions of status, such as that accorded to white collar jobs, usually requiring an

education (thus avoiding portrayals as “dropouts”), an office and a suit and tie. The content of a dream job tended to be secondary to its reputation. Fenty, a commission chaser in Belgium for example reflected that what was important to him was to “be a somebody, like an accountant” doing a “respectable representation”. In other words, as Sen (1975) has emphasised, recognition is a fundamental benefit of employment, and one that the microcosms’ youth felt was denied to them by their current activities.

Similarly, what was seen as a job was influenced by the implicit and explicit sanctioning processes outlined above, such as state restrictions on livelihoods or the types of trainings in other informal livelihoods offered by NGOs, regardless of the fact that these were rarely driven by a realistic picture of market needs. As we saw above, Mohamed, the RUF commander turned rider, envisioned tailoring, which had been offered in his DDR programme, as “more gentle more respectable”, despite the fact that he had had to change course given his shop’s unprofitability. Mining was similarly aspired to given the emphasis placed on the sector in government economic policy, and *okada* riders were on several occasions taunted by the nickname “African Minerals” to deride their inability to enter the labour market. Notions of stability, symbolised for example by the payment of a regular salary, also played an important part, as did the status of a government job.

Current engagement in activities that were not proper jobs could therefore only be rationalised as necessary, if undesirable stopgaps, as forms of navigation towards this aspirational horizon. This also meant that despite young people’s discomfort with public perceptions of their occupations, their framing of aspirations according to shared norms precluded attempts to reclaim or revalue their livelihood activities.

Employment and Gender Norms

Gender norms also shaped aspirations, expectations and notions of employment. Conceptualisations of domestic work are illustrative from this perspective. As discussed in Chapter 1, domestic work has been at the centre of feminist debates surrounding how work in the home and reproductive work are to be valued and the implications of its invisibility. In Freetown, young women were primarily responsible for the maintenance of their households and often those of others. For some, like the Abacha traders, domestic work was a double burden, as after a day of trading they faced the task of cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. For some of Kroo Bay's women, on the other hand, it was a full time activity, which often also included taking on the domestic responsibilities of neighbours and family. Bearing and raising children were also important activities for many of the women interviewed. Although all women reported being responsible for domestic work, the impact this had on their ability to engage in other economic activities varied. One of my informants, Susan, for example traded in Abacha Street until she had to go into labour, while some of Kroo Bay's women discussed how their families or partners prevented them from seeking employment or other forms of income generation after childbirth. In addition, the absence of childcare support meant that it was difficult for many women with children to engage even if the *half-half business* that requires walking around selling products. Unsurprisingly, such activities were not considered jobs, but simply something that had to be done.

Situating young women's understanding and experiences of domestic labour within these debates highlights three crucial points for this analysis. Firstly, it reiterates the ways in which grassroots understandings of employment and official definitions mutually influence each other. The invisibility of domestic labour in official statistics sends a clear message about how societies value certain types of activities. Gendered social norms, furthermore, not only define

the worthiness of an occupation, but also determine the expectations that underpin the categorisation of domestic labour. In other words, women are expected (and themselves expect) to be the ones to carry out the bulk of domestic activities. Even if they were to get a job or a more time-consuming income-generating activity, they would continue to be expected to carry out domestic tasks. These expectations posit women's work as an almost natural task that cannot consequently fall into the sphere of economic activity, and cannot therefore be valued. Finally, because of these gendered expectations, domestic work plays a significant role in gendered labour market segregation. Opportunities for participation in the labour market, as we have seen, are curtailed for women not only by the lack of formal vacancies, but also by the time pressures placed by their role in the home. Gendered norms, therefore, not only influence the way in which different activities are valued but also determine how young women navigate their economic marginality.

Another important issue is the intersection between gender norms and the construction of aspirations. Unlike *okada* riders, Abacha traders sometimes considered trading an acceptable livelihood strategy in the long-term, though they wanted the terms of trading to change. Young traders desired the independence that comes with owning one's own market, for example. Furthermore, young women, like their male counterparts, had expectations on the government, albeit lower than their male counterparts. They wanted a market to be created for them so that they would no longer have to stand in the sun all day or sit in the street. Significantly however trading was not considered a job, so the difference lay not in definitions but rather in small traders' individual estimations of what they could realistically achieve in the future. Kadiatu, who had been in Abacha for some time, for example noted: "In the future I want to do business, but if jobs are there, no problem". Women in other words were more resigned to their exclusion from the market of socially recognised jobs.

There are two, potentially interlinked, explanations for this. Firstly, that although street trading was also constructed as a deviant livelihood strategy by Operation WID, it can be seen as less stigmatised than *okada* riding or different forms of hustling. This is in part because the prospects for career progression within the market are more desirable than in the other professions, especially from the point of view of social status. The big market women who went to Conakry and Dakar were both envied and respected. Secondly, acceptance of exclusion from the job market stems from understandings of gendered hierarchies. When asked what kind of job she wanted Kadiatu laughed and responded: “If there are no jobs for men, you think there will be some for women?” Even just the fact that women were making ends meet though trading was in many ways a deviation from accepted norms, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, one that had significant implications for relations between men and women.

A Note on Illegality

The interface between navigation, through the articulation of current strategies as a temporary necessity, and aspiration is especially accentuated when it comes to making sense of those livelihood strategies that are illegal and broadly understood as immoral.

Amongst the activities that take place in the four urban microcosms, several were on the margins of criminality. The lines between legal and illegal were occasionally blurred and a legal livelihood strategy might have occasionally illegal components, or young people might fluctuate between legal and illegal activities. A first example is drug dealing. Some young people dealt drugs alongside other activities, others sold them to friends for communal consumption and for others still it was a primary form of survival. Amongst those interviewed, the primary drug being dealt was marijuana. Usually it is bought in bulk from what are known

as the *cartels*, through other youths who own small plots outside of town, or from the police. Drug dealing was not considered a job; dealers were aware of its illegality, yet presented it as a survival strategy chosen by necessity. Despite it being seen as a last resort, drug dealing could be quite lucrative. Gibrilla, a dealer in the Government Wharf slum behind Lightfoot Boston Street, for example, rationalised it thus:

I sell marijuana, don't be afraid. To be honest, I can sell above 100,000 or 200,000Le, so I can live with my family. I don't intend to do any bad or wrong, it's just because I know I will earn some money to survive.

Gibrilla's assumption that I would be afraid of him as a drug dealer however reflected firstly his awareness of the impact that marginal livelihoods have on individuals' place in society and secondly of the way in which norms of respectability impact the valuation of particular livelihoods. Gibrilla in fact noted that despite the fact that selling marijuana allowed him to support his family, he was doing it "because of joblessness" and would rather do something that paid him a salary. The fact that a drug dealer did not consider his work socially acceptable may come as no surprise yet it underlines the role of subjective valuations in determining what counts as employment over objective factors such as levels of income. Even more significantly, Gibrilla's distinction between dealing marijuana and his aspirations shows how individuals attempt to justify engaging in an illegal activity by framing them if necessary, even expected, yet temporary navigational strategies.

Another salient example from the sphere of illegality is sex work. Sex work is an interesting, if sensitive, example that helps further spell out the meaning of navigation as the interface between agency and social forces. In many ways prostitution was construed amongst Kroo Bay women very much in the same way as other livelihood strategies, as "sitting down". Like

others on the margins of legality, young sex workers were fully aware that they confirmed the trajectory expected by stigmatising societal gazes and tended to use this to rationalise their predicament by arguing that they were led down the path of illegality by poverty. At the same time, it is simplistic to frame prostitution as forced by absence of alternatives, and young women's reflections on their individual paths to "the life" revealed a more complex picture. Once again, then, we must be wary of the single story. As Miller (2004) argues, analyses of prostitution, rarely based on insights from the women themselves, force a crude and limited decision between viewing them as either agents or victims. The presumed need to understand whether prostitution is a choice reflects moral deliberations about the selling of one's body, and would warrant a separate in depth analysis. Nevertheless contrasting two women's routes into prostitution allows us at least to challenge this false dichotomy between agent and victim as well as the implications that this dichotomy might have on normative conceptualisations of employment.

Ada was 16 when we met, her mother died when she was young so she was taking care of her younger sister. She had been doing *hustler wok* since she was eight years old and stood in the street rather than going to the club, which meant she made significantly less money (about 15,000Le per night). She had tried to get involved in hairdressing or catering with no luck, so she stayed in the street. Ada had to give a quarter of her profits to her boyfriend, who encouraged her to stay in the street and frequently beat her. She knew she would be better off without him but saw few alternatives: "He doesn't work, he beats me and sometimes he keeps me out of the house, but I have nowhere else to go, if I could go somewhere, or if I could get work, I would leave".

Ada's neighbour, Mary, also got involved in "the life" young. She escaped her aunt's place, tired of selling charcoal for her and washing her cousins' clothes. Her and a friend left their

respective homes, agreeing to go to the street. Once they arrived in Kroo Bay, Mary met a woman who told her about life as a *bustler*:

She made my hair and told me: 'Let's go to the club'. The first time I was afraid, I didn't feel fine but I didn't put my attention on that because I was getting big money. I got something like 60,000Le and when I was just in the street I had nothing, so that was big money for me.

Mary's experience has not been easy however: she spoke of police beatings of her fear of some customers. She was also aware that her reputation in the Bay as a *rarray girl* meant that she was not taken seriously or respected. It was primarily this lack of respect that made her want to leave this life: "I want to be somebody, I want to surprise those who think I will never change, I want to make it in my life." Digging deeper in Mary's experiences however, she remembered that she had once been offered a way out of prostitution in the form of work as a cleaner. That would have paid in a month what she could make in two days, Mary pointed out when justifying why she rejected the offer.

Contrasting Ada and Mary's stories reveal the difficulties of placing real lived experiences neatly into a single category in the agent/victim dichotomy. Instead, their stories highlight the importance of understanding of how young women navigate their livelihoods in the midst of limited options. Different women experienced varying degrees of agency. Ada for example may seem far more constrained than Mary, yet Mary's rejection of the cleaning job cannot be seen as a fully willing endorsement of life as a sex worker. Both women experienced violence and felt that they were not respected because of the way they made a living. Both aspired to different lives. As with other activities, the stigma that follows from the criminalisation of prostitution, together with the very real experiences of violence and abuse, played a large role

in valuations of sex work. The controversial question of whether prostitution ought to be legalised, and therefore recognised as an occupation, exposes the significant implications that these valuations have for how young people engaged in sex work see themselves and their lives.

Illegality is an exceptional example in the context of the young people who inhabit these microcosms, yet it brings to the fore very starkly the two key points that apply to grassroots understandings of all forms of work in these spaces. Firstly, that livelihood strategies on the margins are to be understood as forms of navigation, rejecting simplistic agent-victim dichotomies. Young people themselves see them as stop-gaps while manoeuvring towards a different horizon. Secondly, that this way of valuing work is shaped both by internalised social norms and by the aspirations that result from these. Distinguishing navigation from aspirations allows these marginal young people to ascribe to official discourses and societal valuations of work in their own normative frameworks, while at the same time justifying their present engagement in undesirable, devalued or criminal activities.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed social valuations of work in Sierra Leone by contrasting those of official discourses on unemployment and young people's perceptions. It has shown the story told by policy-makers about unemployment in Sierra Leone's post-war context and considered why it emerges as a product of the conjuncture of motivations of policy-makers and implementers. The resulting securitisation of unemployment narrative derives its potency from its simplicity and as such leaves unexplored the complexities of what unemployment means in Sierra Leone, as well as how it relates to politicisation. This chapter therefore offered

a first step towards complicating the narrative through an insight into young people's experiences. It did so by showing the multiple forms of marginal work in the city's informal economy, and reflecting on how young people's understandings of work are closely intertwined with the societal valuations embodied by official discourses.

In an attempt to make sense of their collocation within the grey area of unemployment, young people differentiated between present navigations and future aspirations. These aspirations reflected their hope of inclusion and involved making claims on government to deliver respectable jobs. An important corollary of these articulations is a sort of Faustian bargain, whereby marginal youth accept and even reinforce the devaluation of their current livelihoods in order to emphasise the urgency of future inclusion. This is especially significant in a context where employment, in its normative sense, is central to constructions of the good and peaceful citizen. The next chapter turns to an exploration of the social implications for young people of such value-laden experiences of marginal work.

Chapter 4

“They don’t even see us as people”: The Social Implications of Labour

Market Experiences

As *okadas* were banned from the centre of Freetown, clusters of young riders shared their consternation at the Up Gun parking ground. “They don’t even see us as people”, some riders asserted in reference to the authorities behind Operation WID. These assertions are a stark reflection of the social implications of marginal work, that is, of its ability to shape young people’s perceptions of themselves and their position in society. This chapter explores how labour market experiences, and in particular of exclusion from the jobs young people aspire to influence their social identities and relations. It shows how engaging in precarious, low-income and devalued work has meaning that extends beyond the pecuniary dimension of unemployment.

Marginal work in the four microcosms shaped young people’s social world in several ways. Existing on the margins of acceptable employment moulded young people’s generational identities: their ascription to the category of youth, with its corollary of social immaturity or of being socially “small”, was seen as a direct consequence of their economic exclusion. The microcosms however set the stage for creatively engaging with one’s marginality through distinctive youth sociality. Being socially “small” also had gendered connotations, as barriers to accessing employment influenced the construction of gender identities and relations between men and women. Underpinning these identities, furthermore, was the crucial role played by social networks and relations of reciprocity in understandings of labour market exclusion. Exclusion from redistributive networks with powerful *sababus*, or “big” people, determined young people’s perceptions of themselves in relation to social hierarchies defined

by socio-economic status. Critiques of these exclusive networks reflected deeper concerns surrounding the moral economy of work and expectations of redistribution. At the same time, these critiques were paralleled by attempts to be included in “big men” or “big women” networks in order to navigate one’s life out of marginality. Finally, marginal work gives rise to occupational identities, albeit fragile ones in the context of competition for personal connections.

The processes of “subjectification” (Weeks 2011:8) outlined in this chapter must be understood in relation to Sierra Leone’s post-war context. If we consider war’s creative potential for renewal, the conflict’s destruction left behind a fast-changing social landscape, creating the opportunity to redefine social identities and norms. At the same time, the aftermath of war is not a void and situates itself within a longer-term trajectory of economic development and established social relations, whereby the potential for change contends with attempts to re-establish order as it was previously understood. As we shall see, young people’s realities in this society-in-flux often clash with their aspirations. These contrasts reveal the interplay of a variety of factors and the tension between continuity and change. Youths’ articulations of the social experience of work were framed around ideas of status conferred by social seniority (or “bigness”) and ability to redistribute to dependants, the ascendancy of consumption as a marker of success and the perpetuation of restrictive networks in determining labour market outcomes.

Being a “Youth”: Fluid Notions of Interrupted Transitions

Youth as Social Moratorium

I met Ibrahim in Up Gun, but it took a long time to get to know him. He was reluctant to talk about his life and to reflect on what he felt was a series of disappointments:

I am 27 now. I think if I had been in any other country I would be a different man now. But here in Sierra Leone, at 27 you are still under your parents. At 27 I want to pay rent for myself and take care of someone.

Ibrahim’s assertion is in many ways fitting of recent scholarship on youth that conceptualises it as an increasingly protracted period of time, as transitions to socially sanctioned adulthood are thwarted. For Ibrahim, riding had not allowed him to achieve financial independence for himself and to be responsible for others; something that he would have felt would have made him a “different man”. Being “under your parents” at 27, in other words, was incongruous with his expectations of adulthood. Economic marginality thus posed a barrier to transition, as argued by Vigh (2006b: 37), who states that youthhood: “protrudes as a predicament of not being able to gain the status and responsibility of adulthood and thus a social position that people try to escape”. Argenti (2007) similarly questions whether we can meaningfully see youth as a social category at all, given that it is essentially defined by what its members lack, be it power, wealth or status. It is this definition of youth as a social category characterised negatively by what it is not, that has encouraged portrayals of youth as a time of “waithood” (Honwana 2012) or as a period of being “stuck” (Sommers 2011).

Perceptions amongst marginal youth matched these portrayals, as notions of what constituted “youth” were closely associated to periods of “sitting down” denoted by temporary livelihood strategies. Youth, in other words, was seen as that time when one could accept sub-optimal forms of work while attempting to steer life towards a different future. The connection between devalued occupations and youthhood was thus an intimate one, as manifested by the fact that certain forms of work were presented as only suitable for young people, while engagement in them would be considered shameful for adults. Only during one’s youth, while waiting for the future to unfold, was it acceptable to chase commission, trade or ride for someone else. In Belgium, Solomon for example noted that he advised his colleagues to “plan their futures because in five or ten years they will be ashamed to show their faces here”. These reflections show the mutually constitutive nature of marginal work and notions of “youth”.

Youthhood, as shown by Ibrahim’s comment, was characterised by the absence of status and inability to accumulate enough resources to support family and other dependants. This points to a gap between normative identities and socio-economic realities that was largely premised on the role of access to resources or consumption (both one’s own, and the ability to facilitate that of others) for achieving status. The precarious nature of young people’s work, its poor remuneration compounded by its devaluation, made transition difficult because it forced young people like Ibrahim to be reliant on others rather than being themselves able to “take care of someone”. Youth then is indicative of a particular social position defined in contrast to those who are able to take care of themselves and others. This contrast was figuratively framed as a contrast between those who are socially “small” and those who are characterised as “big”, something to which we shall return later.

Inability to “become somebody”, as Solomon put it, was often accompanied by a frantic search for escape, an avenue to “social becoming” (Christiansen et al 2006:11). Finding

employment was central to articulations of what an escape route would look like. For Professor, a young *okada* rider, the thought of being a rider “at forty” was unthinkable: “when you are young you have to plan yourself”, he argued. While riding on his bike, he thought of ways to finish his education and become a journalist. The scarcity of formal jobs and the widespread poverty that characterise post-war Sierra Leone (see Chapter 2), thus meant that a notion of youth closely related to access to employment stretched over a long period of time and became largely detached from chronological age, as proponents of youth as a social construct have put forward.

Although Sierra Leone’s official definition of the youth category (15-35) is already more generous than global intervals (15-25), it was not uncommon to encounter individuals in the microcosms who defined themselves as youth but were above the age of 35. John for example was 43 years old and had migrated to Freetown from Kono District in the East as a child after his father, a local chief, had died. He argued that since he had arrived to the city he had never worked and relied on commission chasing for a living. “I am a youth”, he said, quickly adding: “but I am not like the youth who go around begging and being useless”, reflecting the negative connotations of idleness that he felt were attached to the notion of youth. His categorisation of himself as a youth was thus closely linked to his inability to find work in Freetown as well as the commonality of experience with other youths in the Belgium area: “We are just living by the grace of the master, there are no good jobs, no provisions for the youth man, nothing like that.”

It would however be misleading to suggest simply that youthhood stretches seamlessly and indefinitely to match one’s socio-economic status. Those at the older end of the spectrum were painfully aware of the fact that they were getting older; “time is going”, many would say. A sense of shame attached to being a youth, and the associated absence of status, resources

and a decent job, had much to do with the increasing inability to reconcile continued marginality and societal (as well as personal) expectations that older age would coincide with transition. In other words, the frustration of being “stuck” in the category of youth becomes more pressing as one gets older. This stresses the importance of keeping chronological age in the picture even when discussing the social construction of generational categories. One of Belgium’s most notorious dwellers, Savage, tellingly reflected on his fears of becoming trapped in the realm of youth:

Look now, I am 31 years of age. I am just too close to forty and a fool at forty is a fool forever. With no achievement at the age of forty, only God can help now, free this guy out of stress. [...] You see 50- or 60-year-old men, they have no shelter to sleep when the night comes they go and sleep in the street. You see some older guys they sit down all day and just talk about this country. It’s because of joblessness! If there were jobs they wouldn’t find themselves in this area.

Getting stuck as chronological age went on, therefore, was at the centre of experiences of youthhood as a category to be escaped.

Alimamy’s Flying Motorbike: Youth as Space of Possibility?

The characterisation of youthhood as a period of waiting, or even as “social death”, which Hage (2003 cited in Vigh 2006a: 104) defines as the “absence of the possibility of a worthy life”, is therefore a good descriptor of young people’s assessments of their lives. However, it can also obscure from analytical sight the complexity, dynamism and creativity of the navigational now. A focus on youth as “becoming”, denoted by a future that is “elsewhere” (Turner 2014), risks ignoring the moment of being and the paths that

young people take to make their reality work, both practically and emotionally in the present. While navigation is future-oriented, temporary livelihood strategies also help make sense of the present. One young man's story was especially symbolic of the limitations of conceiving of youth as "death before dying" (Utas 2012b).

Alimamy was twenty-eight when I met him in 2013, as he used to give me a ride into town everyday on the back of his bike. Eight years earlier, Alimamy had had a dream: he dreamt a flying device. He had never been trained as a welder or an engineer, but his dream also gave him a number that he must repeat over and over again while building this machine. The dream left Alimamy certain that he must build this contraption, and that he would be able to do so armed only with this numerical combination. A few days after he told me about this dream, I headed to his workshop to see his creation. Made out of a collection of recycled materials, Alimamy had turned the skeleton of a motorbike into an airplane, with propellers and a sail (see Figure 2).

It would be easy to fit the symbolism of Alimamy's dream of flight into a narrative about attempts to escape the current reality of thwarted transition. However Alimamy's flying motorbike can also invite us to consider the power of dreams that are only afforded by the certainty that a different future is possible. Alimamy engaged creatively with his present, while dreaming of being elsewhere. Being young, and extending the boundaries of what "youth" means in order to keep oneself inside that category, reflects unfulfilled transitions but also makes it possible to imagine that change will happen. It allows for fluidity and represents a rejection of definitive categories such as adulthood that close too many doors. So while being in a state of "youthhood", especially as chronological age increases, can be deeply shameful, it is also a space of possibility and imagination. Dreams of physical escape are furthermore complex and often full of tensions. Alimamy incorporated his *okada* in his getaway machine,

for example. While thinking of ways of no longer being a rider, his livelihood was also central to his present experience.



Figure 2: Alimamy's Flying Motorbike

The symbolism of Alimamy's motorbike therefore helps us consider how dreams can also be a way to reflect on one's current reality, a way of making sense of it and to counter the fear of getting stuck. Conceiving the ascription to a youth identity not only as the absence of status but also as a strategic identity for creating spaces for hope and possibility helps us better understand how failed aspirations can be rationalized. It allows us not to see youth only as a category imposed by broader standards of achievement but also one that is shaped by those who inhabit it. Youthhood in Freetown was therefore limbo, and it was experienced as "waithood", but it was also more than a "social moratorium" in the sense that it offered an agentive way to give meaning to one's navigational tactic. The need to create space for hope is of course a reflection of dissatisfaction with one's current options, one closely tied with

valuations of work, but it was also not a dissatisfaction that precluded engagement with the present.

Youth Sociality: Alternative Avenues to Status

Another aspect of young people's creative construction of the generational category they inhabit was manifest through youth sociality based on shared spaces and experiences of work. These forms of what we might call parallel youth societies, made the achievement of some form of status possible within these circumscribed social and geographical areas.

Work on youth cultures and youth sociality has been expansive, and has rested on the recognition of young people's active involvement in meaning creation (Amit-Talai and Wullf 1995) as well as the existence of a distinctive world of youth (Parsons 1942). A distinct sociality helps develop a multifaceted understanding of youth as a category that is actively inhabited as well as being constraining. Vigh (2006b: 36) notes that in complex terrains like his case study of Bissau, youth is "not a space or time of amusement, opportunity or freedom, but one of social marginality and liminality". Indeed, as we have seen, youthhood in Freetown's microcosms was experienced as constraining primarily because it was shaped by socio-economic circumstances. At the same time, shared experiences of marginal work gave rise to a particularly youthful sociality that helped define the contours of what it means to be young and jobless in Freetown. Work in the microcosms, in other words, constructed youth as a category to be escaped but also lay the foundations for forging horizontal ties amongst those who share the same experiences. These ties, in turn, offered opportunities to actively respond to marginality.

An example of this sociality is the unique space in the microcosm of Belgium's commission chasers. Belgium street life, or the communal life of so-called *rarray boys*, finds its roots in the history of urban subaltern culture analysed by Abdullah (1998; 2005), and especially in the immediate pre-war period as Freetown's *potes*⁵⁸ became hotbeds of interaction between young marginals and educated elite with revolutionary ideals. Belgium's street life has also been imprinted and moulded by global youth cultures, through the influence of a globalised music and fashion industry, or what Diawara (1988) terms "homeboy cosmopolitanism" (see also Abdullah 2009; Charry 2012; Shepler 2011). As Coleman (1961) highlights, the distinctiveness of youth culture is often characterised by closeness to the market, and Belgium's young men expressed how their clothes, hairstyles and musical preferences were what marked them apart from the rest of society. Young men like Osman, a 28-year-old commission chaser, talked about how he had ended up in Belgium because his family rejected his "Rasta lifestyle", which through dreadlocks and clothes inspired by American hip-hop stars was seen as rebellious by his relatives. For Belgium sellers like him, the creation of distinctive street identities was a strategy to counter the stigma of failed transitions and exclusion, and as such often entailed the performance and reinterpretation of marginality.

In Belgium the performance of marginal youthhood was powerfully premised on the notion of street life and of tough living in the face of adverse circumstances. The street was both where chasers found their commission and where they established forums of sociality, such as Ajekule, the notorious *rarray boy* hangout spot, or a nearby squat on Lightfoot Boston Street (Figure 3). In these spaces, youth congregated to drink, dance, converse as well as consuming drugs and gambling. In this street inhabited primarily by youth who share experiences of marginality, it was possible to achieve status and authority, something that was denied to Belgium's young men outside of the confines of their microcosm. Street names, for example,

⁵⁸ Hangout spots for young people.

were used to emphasise ability to withstand hardship. Young commission chasers referred to themselves as “street representers” or “street soldiers”, as well as taking on the names of global hip-hop stars such as 50Cent or Tupac Shakur. In Freetown, identity as a “street guy”, identifiable both through reliance on the street for survival and the appearance and social life associated with it, denoted resilience and was thus a source of pride in contrast to the shame of being a young man without a job.



Figure 3: Belgium Squat

This was made especially clear in a discussion with a group of commission chasers as they drank palm wine by the sea one late afternoon. After having debated the government’s achievements and failures, the conversation turned to community gossip and in particular to one renowned Belgium seller, Junior. Ibro, a young man who had until then stayed quiet (he said his “mike was low” because he had not yet eaten that day), became quickly animated. He argued that Junior could not call himself a *kráo* (literally the burnt rice at the bottom of the

pot), which was used as a term to refer to those who had grown up in the street. However, because of Junior's reputation of toughness in Belgium, Ibro suggested that he ought to call himself a *Tango*, the trademark name of a football, playing on the ball's strong leather skin and meaning someone who does not easily get hurt. Junior, in other words, may not have always been in the street, but since he had come to make a living in Belgium he had demonstrated the resilience and was thus worthy of admiration and respect. In Junior's own narrative, his time spent doing the *jewman business* conferred a level of recognition amongst the commission chasers. In discussing his trajectory he emphasised how his resilience and sociality had made him into a recognised figure who other commission chasers would turn to for advice:

I started my life with struggle [...] I left School at Form Two. So I decided to start life for myself, to come on the streets to come do things for myself but when I went in the streets I saw lots of things. I mingled with the bad. But I know the home that I came from, so I tried to amend my life to avoid the bad and the ugly. In that time when I lived with the people in the community they gave me a position because I so care for all people [here]. The good, the bad, the ugly. When they have problems they come and tell me I will respond, so they are all happy. I never sleep in the streets but I do things in the streets 24/7. Sometimes I will never go home, I will mingle in the club. Socially it's the best. The more you mingle, the more they know you. For me, I play a great role in this country.

A parallel dynamic of negotiation over status within microcosms like Belgium was the performance and threat of violence. Junior's role as "street soldier" in the Belgium area was in fact also underpinned by a reputation for frequently engaging in quite theatrical physical fights. On one particular day a long-held dispute with one of Belgium's investors escalated into Junior striking his opponent, which landed him at the police station. In recalling the

motives for his behaviour a few days later, Junior pointed to the investor's lack of respect for him and added: "Sometimes shame makes you do things you regret". The war-inspired identity of a "street soldier" and its various permutations thus reflected the connection between endurance and status within Belgium, something that would be difficult to achieve outside of the confines of the chasers' social world, where they would be considered "small" in relation to others because of their economic position.

Female Youth Transitions

Discussions of youth often focus on young men and their inability to achieve adulthood, a consequence of the dominant notions of masculinity discussed in the next section. As Johnson-Hanks (2002: 871) has highlighted, "female adulthood remains oddly excluded from the contemporary move to recast human experience as a cultural construction". Exploring young women's experiences of youthhood and their understanding of what becoming an adult means therefore adds an important layer of analysis. Female respondents' discussions of the difference between being a "small girl" and being a "big woman" and how this related to their experiences of work highlighted the importance of looking at youth as both situational and relational, as well as having different implications along gender lines. While both young men and women experienced youthhood as an inability to match expectations of adulthood, introducing female experience into the discussion brings to the fore several important points for the study of youth and its intersection with economic exclusion.

To begin with, in places like Abacha Street the terms "big" and "small" were used to refer both to generational differences and to ownership of one's market. "Small" traders referred to "big" traders as "elders" as well as pointing out, as we saw in Chapter 3, their access to capital and thus higher socio-economic standing. Conversely, women like forty year old Mabinti, who

had been trading in Abacha Street for fifteen years and regularly travelled to Conakry to buy her market, identified herself as a “big woman” by differentiating herself from the young ones and asserting her moral authority over them as she stated: “We encourage the young ones, especially those who go astray, we give them business so they do not go out”. Mabinti’s distinction between the role of older and younger women in Abacha Street is indicative not only of the assumptions that younger women might be more likely to “go astray” and therefore to need guidance, but also that they would not have business and would thus rely on the “big ones” to give them market to sell on commission, reflecting the close connection between marginal forms of economic activity and notions of youth in female microcosms.

Furthermore, young women’s descriptions of how they might be seen as “big women” in certain aspects of their lives, like those associated with biological functions such as childbirth, while they may be “young girls” in terms of their collocation within community relations showed the situational and relational nature of youthhood. Kroo Bay’s 20-year-old Mariama for example saw herself as a big woman in relation to her dependants since she had become a mother. Pointing to her young daughter she argued: “because I have responsibility, this one calls me mama, so I am a big one”. Although motherhood was an obvious marker of transition and mothers found it difficult not to identify as big women because of their role as carers, their perceptions of generational identity changed when considering relations with more powerful women (and men) in the community. When asked who the “big women” were, young women identified those with positions in the Kroo Bay’s *Bundu* society or those who had better access to resources and to authorities such as the Bay’s chief, or Abacha Street’s Union leaders. Those who might consider themselves as big women in relation to their children and childless peers, therefore, sensed that when interacting with more powerful and wealthier members of the community they would not be taken seriously because they would be considered to be just “young girls”. While the implications of this for young

women's political voice are discussed in Chapter 5, it also exposes the situational nature of youthhood as captured by 18-year-old Fatmata:

I became a big woman when I got my period, but I am a young girl. Big women, they don't get involved in young girl talk and they know what they are doing.

Economic independence through employment was an important aspect of gaining the respect and authority associated with adulthood, as for their male counterparts. Here, we might also recall Mary's words encountered in Chapter 3, as she reflected on her wish to leave commercial sex work: "I want to be somebody, I want to surprise those who think I will never change, I want to make it in my life".

The wish to find respectable work that could ensure becoming "somebody" was also explicitly expressed in the language of generational transition. Mary's neighbour Doris who survived by undertaking small chores for relatives and friends in Kroo Bay for example emphasised: "I will be a big woman when I begin to work, when I take responsibility for my parents and small ones, when I have a place for myself and when anything I want I can do for myself so that they can't come *stupid me*⁵⁹". Doris' assertion shows the overlap between male and female notions of adulthood as premised on gaining employment and, consequently, on the ability to take care of others. This poses a challenge to traditional theories of female transition that focus exclusively on childbirth (see Bledsoe 1980). Furthermore, young women's layered perceptions of what it means to be young and what transition might look like indicate that individuals can inhabit different identities at different times.

⁵⁹ They cannot make a fool of me.

The concept of transition might therefore present too unidirectional an approach to experiences of youthhood. The coherence and clear directionality implicit in “life stages” approaches, as Johnson-Hanks (2002: 866) acknowledges, is belied by the fact that in many cases events such as motherhood “rather than a clear threshold into adulthood” can instead be a “loosely bounded, fluid status”. Achievement of big woman status in some respects may therefore coexist with identification as a young girl in others, or apparent transitions might be reversed. Mary’s life history, for example, narrated through different experiences of work, showed how a level of self-sufficiency at an early age had been succeeded by her lack of status in the Kroo Bay community:

When I was in Mambolo [Kambia District], I grew up like a man. I climbed trees, I went to the wharf, I went fishing like a man, I picked coconuts and sold them to go to school. But when I was in Class Three my granny died so my mother took me to Freetown to live with my aunty.

In Freetown, Mary’s experience of physical freedom and of supporting her own education was brought to a sudden end as her aunt made her sell charcoal but would not let her keep the profits. Mary argued that she felt like a servant in the house so when a friend suggested that they “jump to the street”, she agreed. In her reflections on her first few days in Kroo Bay, Mary focused on becoming a woman, as a young man *virginated*⁶⁰ her and she gradually became involved in prostitution, which made it possible for her to take care of herself and even occasionally to share money with her friends. When it came to discussions of her position in the community, she referred to herself as a girl and a *pikin*.⁶¹ This was especially the case as

⁶⁰ “Virginated” is a term commonly used by young women to denote their first sexual encounter (see Marks 2014).

⁶¹ A child.

she reflected on her interactions with “big” people in the community, whom she felt did not respect her and from whom she expected protection as a child rather than scorn:

The big ones just say we are in the street...Even the chief can curse women, he calls us *rarray girls* and when those *rarray boys* come to us and take advantage of us, he never says: ‘Leave those children alone!’

Mary’s story thus stresses the multiplicity of meaning that youthhood can have in different contexts and how experiences of work can influence one’s social collocation in generational hierarchies framed around socio-economic markers. It also underscores the inadequacy of unidirectional models of transition, with their implications of fixity within generational categories. Furthermore, Mary’s last sentence parallels those expressed by young men above, namely that barriers to adulthood and thus one’s relative “smallness”, are shaped both by the objective conditions of marginality (i.e. low and precarious remuneration) and the subjective aspects of devalued work. The shame attached to being engaged in certain livelihood strategies impacted intergenerational relations as in young people’s eyes, it denied them the respect they saw as central to adulthood.

Finally, bringing female youth into the spotlight also allows us to recognise the heterogeneity of youth cultures and their attempts to engage and creatively navigate economic exclusion and its “social moratorium”. Youth sociality in the microcosms, as we have seen, is indicative of how shared experiences of marginality might give rise to distinctive youth communities and attempts to shape notion of youthhood from the margins. However, discussions of “homeboy cosmopolitanism” and rebellious youth in Sierra Leone have largely referred to marginal males in different contexts (Diawara 1998; Abdullah 1998). Young women’s sociality in Freetown differed across the microcosms and depending on the kind of marginal work they engaged in.

Rarray girls like Mary tended to have similar experiences to the Belgium sellers of Ajekule, and like the sellers, her and her friends' choices of entertainment marked them as deviants from the mainstream and played on their livelihood strategies (in this case, "going to the club") thus both creating distinctive bonds with them while also further marginalising them. Mary summarised her lifestyle this way:

When I get money I run to town, I make my hair, get clothes for the club, you know I am a club baby! I get my Rivon and fix it, then I buy cigarettes *djamba* and rum.

Despite being representative of a particular *rarray* lifestyle that other women both within and outside the Bay frowned upon, Mary's description of her social life also speaks to the role of consumption in defining the contours of female youthhood, which was common amongst other women too. Hairstyles and fashion items, shaped both by local and global consumption trends, were undoubtedly important in the construction of what we might call a "homegirl cosmopolitanism" that must be incorporated into portrayals of Sierra Leonean youths' cultural creation. The role of consumption in defining the contours of marginal youthhood is however complicated in the sense that it can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, wearing certain clothes or keeping up to the latest hairstyles was a marker of being a young woman. However youth cultures in the microcosms cannot be seen as entirely detached from broader societal trends and expectations, despite attempts to create parallel, or even rebellious spaces. The centrality of consumption in these processes often in fact bred anxiety around not being able to consume enough, as compared to wealthier members of society. Doris for example noted how in Kroo Bay "young girls always look for something to engage in, like market money, because right now this fashion business bothers us, we want this we want

that...” So while performing youthhood offered a way of responding to exclusion, the desire for consumption clashed with the reality of young marginals’ limited resources.

Furthermore, the role of creative navigation ought not to conceal the realities that many young marginal women face in terms of restricted freedom and limited ability to control their steering. Atifatu, for example, had her first child with an older man when she was fifteen. Starting *mammy and daddy business*⁶² had forced her into marriage as her family no longer wanted to have her in the house, so she had to marry the father of her child, a man who beat her to the extent that her friends had recommended that she no longer talk back to avoid further violence. Atifatu’s struggle to get access to even what she called *half-half business* undoubtedly combined with social pressures in determining her continued dependence on an abusive husband. Variations in the ability to steer one’s path can be best accommodated by fluid notions of thwarted transitions, whereby all markers of socially sanctioned adulthood may be out of reach for some, while for others marriage and childbirth arrived early but did not coincide with an improvement in status or an exit from the economic and social marginality characteristic of youth as a social age.

Gender Relations: Masculinity, Transactional Relationships and Role Reversals

As Atifatu’s story conveys, economic exclusion and marginal work have a significant impact on gender relations. Not only that, but the very construction of gender identities in the microcosms was largely shaped by experiences of labour market exclusion. This was manifest both in young men’s frustrations regarding their inability to act as providers for women and in young women’s reflections on relations to men as a means to navigate marginality.

⁶² Sexual intercourse.

“I Need to Stand Like a Man”: Masculinity in Crisis

Young men’s anxieties regarding attempts to transition to adulthood, to stop being “small” and become “somebody”, were intimately connected to struggles to conform to “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1995; 2000). According to Connell, work plays a central role in the construction of such dominant notions of what it means to be a man and, despite the fact that they often diverge from the enacted manhood of everyday life, these hegemonic narratives influence identity formation by creating a gap between what is and what is expected to be. Indeed, Freetown’s young men’s existence on the periphery of labour markets had profound repercussions for their sense of self and their positioning within the microcosms as well as in relation to society at large.

Male youth articulated a clear sense that a man’s role ought to be that of the provider. “I need to stand like a man” was a common reason for why finding a good job was important: it would increase their status, aspirations would have been fulfilled and it would allow them to provide not only for themselves but also for a family. This vision of the man as the head of the family was more commonly translated in young people’s daily lives rather as the ability to give money to a girlfriend (or several on some occasions). The ability to stand like a man, then, was in many young men’s imagination premised on enabling women’s consumption, as they felt that the ability to purchase things was a fundamental expectation that women had from a potential partner. Precarious, low-income livelihoods made it difficult to do this, thus creating another disjuncture between current realities and norms of achievement. For some young men, starting a relationship was akin to other future aspirations, something that was not possible or even undesirable for the time being. As Francis, an *okada* rider put it:

A woman is money, so if you don't have money if you engage yourself there will be problems. If you don't have money to buy her clothes, buy her food every day, she will have to find another guy, and so you will just be there... No, I just need to maintain myself now.

Young men's reflections on their relationship with women revolved around feelings of humiliation and the conviction that maintaining a lasting relationship in the absence of a steady source of income was impossible. In Belgium, Solomon reflected on how, as time went on and he entered his twenties, women began to have higher expectations: while his occasional hip-hop performances might have previously raised women's interest, now he was afraid that should he become involved with one of his fans they may later ridicule him when they found out he was in fact broke:

It changed when I was about 22, many of the girls were now grown and they were thinking: 'We should think of how to do something for ourselves let us try and avoid social life'. They got some distance. Some will still come around, but I am not having money so...you understand? I don't even do performances anymore because then tomorrow they might look at me and say: 'Look at Solomon eating *garr*⁶³ in the street!'

The pressure that young men felt women put on them as failed patriarchs bred significant resentment and it was also discussed as an underlying explanation for episodes of domestic violence. In 2012 for example, a group of Belgium sellers staged a series of street theatre performances as part of an anti-violence sensitisation project. One of the plays involved an argument between a young man and his girlfriend, and the dispute centred on his inability to

⁶³ As a cheap meal made of grated cassava, eating *garr* was often used as a signifier of poverty.

give money for her and their children. After a bout of violence, the setting shifted to the couple's appearance at the police station, where the young man explained his loss of control by pointing to the "pressure" that his girlfriend had put on him when he was unable to provide. The representation emphasised the man's irascibility not as stemming from a perception of the wife as unreasonable, but precisely from the recognition that he was unable to live up to her expectations.

Indeed, the demands of hegemonic masculinity and young men's struggle to fulfil them was also occasionally expressed empathetically, as young men understood the choice of young women who rejected them, as women were also seen to be navigating difficult economic terrains. A stark example of this was Alhaji's story. Alhaji had been a commission chaser for several years, although he had recently begun volunteering as a driver for a civil servant, hoping it might eventually turn into a job. Reflecting on his past he discussed the break-up of a relationship because of his material situation in a fairly resigned manner, accepting the reality that he would not have been able to provide for her, and was even complicit in his own abandonment:

I know a lady who now lives in Australia, she was my former girlfriend, I met her in the streets, she was wild but very pretty and we fell in love [...] I was the one that took her out of the streets where she was prostituting herself [...] As time went by, it was evident she found favour with wealthy men. We agreed because I was poor, for her to marry a rich man if the chance came. So, I asked her to bring the man so I can approve her hand in marriage to a rich man.

These experiences point to the clash between young men's reality and their aspirations to fulfil patriarchal gender norms that would envision them as providers, as well as reflecting how

their status in the labour market is central to the creation of this chasm. Spall's (2014) work on Angolan war veterans' struggles to recapture their masculinities offers a useful analytical lens to understand the role of monetary transaction in the construction of patriarchal norms in context of socio-economic change. Spall argues that as previous avenues to achieve women's subordination were undermined by developments such as women's entrance into the economic sphere during the Angolan war, men's dominance became increasingly reliant on their ability to generate income, with money as the main "way to demonstrate status and a possible path of social advancement" (ibid.: 15). The role of monetary transactions in these dynamics or the notion that "a woman is money" is thus reflective of the ascendancy of money's social value, which Mbembe (2006: 304) usefully links to broader political and economic changes such as the "widespread drying up of liquidities, followed by their progressive concentration along certain pathways whose conditions of access have become ever more draconian". This, he argues, gives rise to what he calls a "*new economy of persons*, [...] based on purely market and object-like relationships" (ibid.).

The centrality of money and men's ability to act as gatekeepers of consumption, then, must be understood in the context of Sierra Leone's political economy and in particular of the key role that exclusive networks have played in determining labour market outcomes (see Chapter 2). As we shall see below, this has made developing relations of dependence and redistribution central to individuals' strategies to escape marginality. Furthermore, Sierra Leone's insertion in global markets and thus in global consumption patterns also underpins what we might see as a commodification of relations. Cole (2004: 576) notes the commodification of youths' desires in the context of Madagascar's economic transformation through neoliberal reform, as "people came to believe that what one consumes defines one's identity and that the trappings of modernity not only represent but also are the essence of social power". Similarly in Sierra Leone, for young men like Francis, Solomon or Alhaji, limited access to resources through

their marginal forms of work paralleled by the value of money in relations with women made the sustenance of transactional relationships both essential to the achievement of hegemonic masculinity and impossible in practice.

Young men's reflections imply women's need to be provided for and thus necessitate an analysis of women's own perspectives and gender identities in relation to their economic position. As we saw in Chapter 3, some young women identified survival "by boyfriend" as a livelihood strategy and many spoke candidly about their experiences and their search for what Honwana (2012: 91) has termed a "sugar daddy". Nineteen-year-old Doris from Kroo Bay, as we saw above, argued that having a job and being able to take care of herself and a family would mean that they would not *stupid* her, meaning that nobody would be able to make a fool of her. This came in the context of a broader discussion about her experiences with men, which she described poignantly:

Here nothing goes for nothing, for example, big men will take your virginity away from you. You will say: 'Uncle I have a problem', and he will reply: 'How do you want me to help you? I have nothing!' Even though you know he does. Then he says you have to give him something, and you have no choice, you do it and he solves your problem.

Doris thus framed this lack of choice in entering undesirable transactional relations with wealthier "big" men as a direct consequence of her economic situation and, as we saw above, expected that once she found a job she would be able to reject men's attempts to *stupid* her. Surviving by one's boyfriend can nevertheless be seen as a navigational tactic, whereby some young women significantly constrained by their economic circumstances retained some level of agency in determining the path they took. Women's choices of partners based on these

calculations were insightful in comparison to young men's frustrated masculinities. Doris for example confirmed her selectivity based on monetary exchange at this stage of her life:

I don't have a man now because I am very sensible. I just keep friends because I have lived [in Kroo Bay] long. The boys have a trick, they will put their trousers down but in reality they have nothing, so you will keep them and they will do nothing for you. I will wait my time. I don't want a man here.

Everything is on the Woman

Perceived gender reversals offer a further insight into the implications of labour market dynamics of gender identities and relations. Women's dominance in African markets has been portrayed as an avenue for women's empowerment through economic independence (House-Midamba and Ekechi 1995). The title of Gracia Clark's (1994) seminal work on Ghanaian women traders, *Onions are My Husband*, neatly encapsulates the assumption that is often made about the role of income generation within the market sphere as a form of role reversal, as women become breadwinners or at least responsible for their own survival and that of their dependants. This is an image that was often painted of Abacha Traders. The traders themselves would often argue: "We are the men now", pointing to the fact that they either headed single parent households or having to complement the income of boyfriends or husbands who could not find employment. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter 3, some individual trajectories showed how trading could allow some young women to escape abusive relationships.

The role of economically active women has featured prominently in the literature on masculinity that focuses on the aspect of "threat" to men's dominance posed by women's

economic advance. In the context of Eastern Congo, for example, Luwambo (2011: 4) argues that: “confronted with the reality that women increasingly take the role of breadwinners, men express sentiments of humiliation and loss of personal value”. Some young women did speak of husbands who might spark domestic conflicts because of jealousy or resentment regarding women’s work in the market. However, the “threatened masculinity” narrative is unhelpful in this context. It is at best descriptive, and gives little insight into the construction of these masculinities that are threatened. The fact that Abacha traders would argue that they were the men now, reflects how women’s economic activity in general was seen as incongruous with models of the man as provider.

Young traders on Abacha Street in fact explained their livelihood strategies as a direct consequence of men’s inability to provide. This did not necessarily mean that they would rather retreat from economic activity, as we have seen in their aspirations for expanding their businesses or finding a job. However, when discussing their dissatisfaction with being small traders, young women reflected not only on the gap between their livelihoods and aspirations, but also pointed to the fact that they were trading because men in the city were unable to find jobs. “*All tin na uman*”, that is, “everything is on the woman”, was often repeated as a suggestion that being the new men was experienced as a burden of responsibility. Expanding on her frustration that now everything was on the woman, Aisha for example played on the popular “50-50” slogan for gender equality of national gender equality campaigns, as she suggested that men should contribute more to household income by arguing that: “It should be more like 30-70”. Women’s trading, then, was portrayed as a remedy to men’s failure to provide, as Aisha continued: “My man is not able to get enough to take care of us so we fight to take care of our families because our men are not able”. Her colleague, Fatmata, shared Aisha’s sentiment as she noted that: “Women now stand as men”, an interesting appropriation of the language about the demands of masculinity.

Women's conceptualisations of their livelihoods therefore reflect complex dynamics, whereby increased activity allowed them to take on new roles and to reverse the norms that would relegate women only to the household. At the same time, women's interpretations of these activities also acted to reinforce norms of hegemonic masculinity. Their articulation of men's failed responsibility thus affirmed the expectation of men to act as providers. This is not to say that women's economic activity is not a key component of a challenge to patriarchal power structures, or that given the choice women would actually choose to be inactive. However these narratives do caution against a superficial reading of gender reversals brought about by socio-economic change.

Sugar Mamas and the Materiality of Life

Some words of caution are essential at this point in the discussion of marginality's impact on gender relations and in particular on the transactional nature of relations. Firstly, when theorising about transactional relationships we run the risk of over-emphasising women's agency through their choice of wealthy partners. These dynamics cannot in fact be meaningfully portrayed as empowering for young women, if we consider their potential for changing their positions in a male-dominated society. Indeed, young women wishing to engage in transactional relationships ultimately faced a choice matrix limited to deciding which man to subordinate themselves to, ultimately reinforcing patriarchal norms of masculinity of the man as provider as Doris' reflections starkly showed. This also begs the clarification that not all young women choose to, or have the freedom to choose to engage in these kinds of interactions. Many young women in Kroo Bay for example were unofficially married to similarly marginal young men, who had only been able to perform the first part of the marriage ceremony, namely the presentation of a kola nut to the prospective wife's father,

being unable to afford a wedding. Significantly, many other women had to support themselves as heads of households through their marginal livelihood strategies as we saw in the case of Abacha traders.

Secondly, it is important not to present overly rigid dichotomies between the sexes, as gender identities and roles can be fluid (Das et al 2014). Indeed, “sugar mamas” were also present in young people’s narratives and their social values as providers did not necessarily undermine their protégés’ status. In 2012 for example I met Osman, as he was still living the “Rasta lifestyle” that, as we saw above, got him thrown out of his family’s house. He lived at different friends’ houses or occasionally slept in the street. When I met him again a year later, he was a changed man. He had shaved off his dreadlocks, wore expensive clothes and walked around proudly asserting he had “become a big man”. This change had been brought about by his engagement to Aminatta, a wealthy Abacha Street big trader with a flourishing business that took her to Conkary and Dakar every other week. Aminatta had been taking care of Osman for just over a year when they married in style in Freetown’s palatial Gaddafi Mosque with hundreds of guests. Solomon, who just a few days earlier had been discussing his own disappointments with women, pointed out that: “It is not easy to see a young man marry like that in Freetown”. Osman, for his part, was often very frank about his understanding of his relationship with Aminatta: “She is like my cashpoint”, he joked one day.

It would however be inaccurate to suggest that relationships like that between Osman and Aminatta were purely financial. These transactional dynamics do not simply imply the marketization of personal interactions, but also what Hoffman (2014) terms the “thick materiality of life”. Recognising the materiality of affectivity need not reduce human interactions to pure transaction, as this leaves out of sight the reciprocity of obligations. Osman’s recounting of his relationship with Aminatta for example began with her taking care

of him in the hospital when he was sick and lending him capital when he was in financial disarray. While Osman's narrative was overtly focused on Aminatta as his provider, he also highlighted the show of care that this provision reflected. Consequently, he argued, he felt an obligation to her to give her a family. It is therefore important to engage more deeply with human interactions at a time of hardship, and in particular the material dimensions of loyalty and reciprocity in these contexts. Bolten's (2012: 3) work in Northern Sierra Leone on "love" as a "concept of material loyalty—relationships forged and sustained in complex and often compassionate acts of resource exchange" is compelling from this point of view. Understanding "love" as an expression of material loyalty reflects the expectations of reciprocity and obligation that underpin these market-like relations. In this framework, the ability to distribute resources is key to the achievement of status (as a man, as an adult and so on), but is recast with more nuance as the ability to "love" others, in this particularly Sierra Leonean sense. This nuance enables us to look at transactional relations in a more multifaceted way and the next section turns to a broader exploration of how labour markets dynamics can be understood through the lens of expectations of reciprocity and a search for social dependence to escape marginality.

In Search of a Sababu: Moral Economy and Competition

Young Freetonians' interpretations of how labour markets worked in the city revolved around the figure of the *sababu*. The term comes from the Krio word *sabi*, which means "to know". The *sababu* is a useful connection who will be able to redistribute resources within his or her networks and, more specifically, to grant access to employment. The *sababu* is thus someone who has managed to transition to adulthood and therefore to become "big"; he or she has gained desirable employment and is thus in the position to act as patron to those who remain

“small”. The *sababu* in other words, stands in contrast to youths’ thwarted aspirations. Young people’s perspectives on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion from the networks of “big men” (or “big women”) give us an insight into how labour markets influence social position. In addition, the *sababu* is a useful starting point from which to examine young people’s critiques of and responses to labour market dynamics dominated by restricted networks of reciprocity and dependence.

Sababus came in different shades in young people’s narratives and their value increased the bigger they were, that is, the greater their ability to connect their dependants to desirable job opportunities. In most young people’s trajectories, a catalyst for change at various junctures was often the arrival of a person who helped them to be in the position they were in now. In Chapter 3, for example, we saw how women like Kadija, the sex worker turned Abacha Street trader, was “carried to Abacha” by a woman who took pity on her and decided to help her leave the *bustler’s* life. In contrast, negative turning points that resulted in increased vulnerability or in a considerable worsening of one’s situation were denoted by the loss of a person who was previously the provider. Having someone in one’s life who had access to resources by virtue of being employed and well connected, and who was willing to take one under their wing, was thus seen as essential to survival. These vital connections could be secured either through extended family networks or by ingratiating oneself to a better-positioned individual. Being “liked” was consequently expressed as an important attribute to be able to make it in Freetown, as a necessary means to establish bonds of obligations with a potential *sababu*. Ahmed, an *okada* rider in Up Gun, for example expressed his commitment to finding someone to become attached to:

I just need structure, somebody that can say: ‘Let me structure this for you’.

Because I have no connections now to go to another job.

In his pursuit of structure, Ahmed had approached an older woman who lived near his parking ground and emphasised his commitment to being judged honest and likable in order to develop (or even “force”) mutual obligations with her:

I know her through my honesty. She paid me for a bike ride and I made sure to give her the 9,000Le change without her asking for it. I went to her place and gave her the change. Now I drive her car occasionally, she can even do it herself but I just forced her so I can help her. I go to her house and there are many things I could steal but I have never taken anything. Now she calls me brother and I call her sister.

The importance of being liked and of entering relations of material loyalty, or of “love” following Bolten’s (2012) definition, was also reflected in the shame associated with begging, not only because of the public admission of destitution this entailed, but primarily because it would visibly expose one’s lack of productive relationships. Sallieu, a panel bender in the Belgium area, for example juxtaposed the shame of begging with the ability to get by through the benevolence of others:

I strain a lot to get customers and materials. To get money is not easy but I am ashamed to beg for money. If I had somebody to support me and was able to buy materials to sit down and work, I would manage because I am not used to walking up and down in the streets.

The most coveted *sababus* of course were those through whose networks it would be possible to gain a good job and thus make a transition of status a reality. Inability to access these

sababu's networks was discussed as the central cause of hindrance to leaving marginal forms of work. This perception caused frustration but it also meant that, perhaps surprisingly, many young people in the urban microcosms had never, or very rarely, applied for a job. The feeling was that, as Fatmata, an Abacha Street trader put it: "In Freetown, everything is *sababu*", to indicate the futility of an application without a well-placed connection. For young men like Belgium's Junior previous experiences of application had reinforced the notion that the lack of an adequate *sababu* meant certain failure. The last job he had applied for, a few years previously, was to be a driver in one of the Ministries:

I have a driving licence, but unfortunately my rival was one guy called John, and he had recommendations. His uncle is the minister. I am the first person who went there and I did the training for two days. This guy went there just on the third day and they gave him the job. That discouraged me, so I will never want to go to a ministry again to find a job.

These experiences show young people's perception that connections were central to the functioning of labour markets. Significantly, they also suggest that not having a job not only meant being relegated to marginal forms of work but also had implications for one's social standing, as it reflected exclusion from productive social networks. As Ferguson (2013: 226) has potently argued we must consider the importance of social dependence for personhood, or the notion that "without networks of dependence, you were a nobody". Escaping marginality and "becoming somebody", then, entailed a search to become embedded in such networks of reciprocity and to elicit obligations of those who acted as "nodes" in these networks (Utas 2012a). Not having a job was a reflection of such exclusion and as such unemployment was as much about social marginalisation as it was about economic adversity.

The primacy of *sababus* and networks of reciprocity in understanding labour market dynamics gave rise to two different and contrasting considerations, both of which were very telling of young people's engagement with the political economy of work. Firstly, it elicited a critique of restrictive networks, evidenced by the fact that young people like themselves were excluded from relations of reciprocity and as a result stuck in their current predicament ("Everything is *sababu*"). These critiques can be seen as articulations of notions of economic justice, or moral economy, "from below". These were critiques, not of dependence *per se*, but of what Ferguson (2013: 233) has termed "asocial inequality": inequality that is detached from hierarchies of dependence.

Challenges to private accumulation need to be understood against the backdrop of economic transformation. The development of market economies has been seen to entail the gradual disembedding of the wealthy from broad-based relations of reciprocity in response to individualistic market imperatives (Byrceson 2010; Meagher 2005; Polanyi 1944). These changing patterns of accumulation are often inherently exclusionary, leading to the "asocial inequality" that Ferguson (2013: 233) refers to. As he notes, labour surpluses in a context of high unemployment result in a growing number of people who are "unclaimed" and vulnerably "in-dependent". The particular nature of these processes in the Sierra Leonean case helps us understand the underpinnings of young people's position. As we saw in Chapter 2, the development of a market economy that has struggled to create jobs was compounded by a shrinking of redistributive space, eroding the opportunities of a large number of young people. Years of repressive and clientelistic rule, war and economic reform gravely exacerbated the impact of an exclusionary labour market, leading to a situation where a key mechanism for accessing employment is inclusion into increasingly restrictive networks accessed through powerful intermediaries.

An exclusionary logic of accumulation amongst a section of society can clash with the expectations of those who remain sidelined in these processes. Young people in Freetown critiqued the narrow base of networks of reciprocity and their resulting exclusion through the notion that in Sierra Leone there was “no love”. The lack of “love” in the country was seen as a reason why so many young people struggled to find employment. As Alimamy, an *okada* rider, argued: “If there was love in Sierra Leone, when you see someone fighting that twenty-four hour struggle, you would pick them up”. The notion that there was “no love” was a constant refrain in informal discussions with young marginals, who expressed their dissatisfaction with a situation where those who had become “big” were seen to be failing to redistribute wealth widely. As Allieu put it in *Up Gun*, reflecting on his recent experiences:

One problem facing us is that we do not love each other in Sierra Leone. For example when I was having that bike, I had so many problems but nobody said: ‘Allieu look have this money for now’. We are not helping each other. Me if I had the chance I would do it. As the saying goes: people have white teeth but black hearts!

These critiques thus also rested on the interpretations of big people’s behaviour as “selfish” or as *bad heart* manifest in the perception that the better off were failing in their responsibilities to those who were smaller, in favour of individual accumulation and redistribution within narrow networks. These critiques of big people’s accumulation reflected Ferme’s (2001: 186) argument that: “status and authority [...] are context-variable, relative attributes and are easily lost or challenged if people exceed their legitimate roles and do not meet the expectations connected with those roles”. Critiques of selfishness were also expressed through articulations of what was known as the “Pulling Down Syndrome”. This referred to the idea that people in Sierra Leone did not want to see others succeed once they had themselves made it and would

thus attempt to “pull others down”. These fears associated with individuals putting their own interests before those of the community were also closely related to ideas of witchcraft, as discussed in Chapter 5. To sum up then, in the context of Sierra Leone’s post-war political economy, urban marginals interpreted exclusion from networks of redistribution, and thus from the market for jobs, as a deviation from norms of reciprocity and the moral obligations of “big” people towards those who were still “small”. The challenge against this exclusion, then, revolved around the legitimacy of current networks, which bar a large part of Sierra Leone’s youth. Chapter 5 shows how these notions of fairness translated into political claims in practice.

A second aspect when considering the relationship between jobs, networks and social standing, requires us to consider that given the status quo, attempts to become incorporated into narrow networks might be the best avenue out of marginality. This reflects once more the paradoxes between attempts to navigate present terrains and aspirations, between what is expedient in the short-term and what is imagined for the long term. Despite critiques of the exclusiveness of these networks and the fact that nobody should be left to “fight that twenty four hour struggle”, being an insider was certainly better than being an outsider. Love, understood as relations of reciprocity, can thus be seen as having different manifestations: from broad-based risk sharing to exclusive and individualised relations of mutual obligation. As long as “love” was scarce and governed through resource monopolies, in other words, the best strategy was for young marginals to attempt to enter in one of these relations. There was therefore fierce competition in the microcosms for a limited number of well-placed *sababus*. As we shall see in Chapter 6, in some instances this meant entering exploitative and even risky relations with powerful “big” men and “big” women and thus being “adversely incorporated” with the expectation of ultimately being given a job (see Hickey and du Toit 2007).

The significance of social networks and dependence in determining labour market experiences thus shows that marginal work is indicative of young people's position in societal hierarchies. It also offers a window into youths' understandings of economic fairness and critiques of the current political economy, and how these views clash with individual strategies to become incorporated into exclusive networks.

Occupational Identities

A final implication of shared experiences of marginality is the emergence of particular occupational identities and horizontal ties amongst youth in the microcosms. This was evidenced by mutual support in the workplace, where social ties with other youths engaged in the same livelihood facilitated business as well as enabling survival in precarious conditions. In Belgium, Abbas explained well the importance of sharing commission with others:

When I am in Belgium now I have so many friends because of business I am doing. If I get business, you see all *jenman dem* rush, and after I take some and then I give the others something. If you don't share, then the person who you didn't share with, one day when somebody gives him business, then he won't give you anything. Because you don't get something every day, so we always share, every time.

A common situation of marginality thus made this kind of reciprocity essential, forming strong bonds of friendship in places like Belgium, so that collective survival was premised on mutual support.

Shared occupations also gave rise to more or less organised trade-based organisations in Abacha Street, Belgium and Up Gun. The Belgium Sellers' Association (BSA) was set up in the early 1990s and counted hundreds of registered members. Aside from regulating business and providing some safety nets, the BSA organised football matches and parties, produced T-Shirts and badges certifying membership and crafted their own devil masks for Freetown's devil competition every Easter Monday (Figure 4).⁶⁴ The Abacha Street Traders Association (ASTA) was established in 2004 in response to Operation Free Flow, a previous incarnation of Operation WID which aimed to get traders off the street. The ASTA brought together various traders' associations that were previously loosely organised. Membership was formalised by paying a 5,000Le fee and then 1,000Le monthly. The Bike Riders' Union (BRU) was established more recently and was organised on a national level with different layers of representation: park, district, regional and national. In 2012 it held its first national election, through a process organised across the four layers, and gained its status as a union. The union raised its revenue through the riders' payment of a daily 1,000Le ticket at the park level. The establishment of associations based on particular occupations went some way in solidifying young marginals' identification with their livelihood activity by offering membership to a trade-based collective, and thus reifying a collective occupational identity. Kroo Bay was in many ways an exception in this context, as the marginal occupations I studied there were not organised through associations. A potential explanation for this is that Kroo Bay's livelihoods were the most invisible of the four microcosms. Sex work is illegal in Sierra Leone, so that registering a sex workers' union was not a possibility. Similarly, domestic labour, as discussed in the previous chapter, tends to be invisible even as a marginal occupation because expected as part of women's responsibilities.

⁶⁴ Opala (1994) discusses the significance of *odelays* in the context of an emergent of a set of "social clubs" amongst disadvantaged urban youth in the early 1990s and views these social clubs as being a crucial resource for political mobilisation by the NPRC under Valentine Strasser in 1992.



Figure 4: Belgium Easter Carnival

Chapter 5 discusses the expectations placed on associations and their potential to act as channels for political voice, and considers how young people's collocation within societal hierarchies, their "smallness" resulting from their engagement in marginal work, had an impact both on their role within associations and on their ability or willingness to mobilise around these occupational identities.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how experiences of marginal work can influence social identities and relations, shaping how young people see themselves and how they collocate themselves in the world around them. It has shown how exclusion from the labour market constitutes social

“smallness”, with its generational and gendered connotations. Despite attempts to engage creatively with and respond to marginality, young people’s tactics were aimed at escaping a predicament characterised by social exclusion. The search for dependence underpinning these tactics was especially salient as it showed both young people’s critique of a perceived lack of “love” embodied by the narrowing of reciprocal ties between “small” and “big” people and their individual attempts to become incorporated in these exclusive networks. Framing the clash between these logics in the context of the development of Sierra Leone’s political economy, revealed both the meaning of marginality through the lens of social relations and the divergence between notions of fairness and expedient tactics to navigate the status quo. This contrast between processes of individualisation and broader norms of moral economy will be central to the next two chapters’ exploration of how the identities and relations engendered by labour market experiences translate into paths of political mobilisation.

Chapter 5

Associations, Citizenship Claims and the Political Imagination



Figure 5: APC Helmet for 2012 Elections

This chapter begins to explore how the labour market experiences traced in the previous chapters influence young people's political mobilisation, by focusing on the landscape for political action in the four urban microcosms. It analyses the relationship between youth and the post-war state; how the former's political subjectivity is structured by experiences of marginal work; and the variety of ways that exist for young people to be political actors in post-war Sierra Leone. In other words, it asks how young people relate to and imagine the post-war state to which they are envisioned to pose a threat. What avenues are available to voice and mobilise around shared political claims? Most importantly: what is the nature of this mobilisation, and how does it relate to marginal work?

As suggested by Chatterjee's (2004) work on *The Politics of the Governed*, this analysis centres on the distinction between the formal structures of governance and the ways in which state-society relations are experienced in practice. Citizenship rights, such as the right to associate or to vote, must be viewed side by side with the praxis of citizenship, the everyday experiences of interactions with the state and its actors. This is especially salient in the context of Sierra Leone's post-conflict democratisation process, as extensive international and local efforts have gone into rebuilding democratic and accountable state institutions. A key question more than a decade after the war, then, is how are these institutions socially reproduced? Invitations by authors like Chatterjee to analyse state-society relations in a grounded manner thus raise a set of empirical questions about how young marginals interact with the state, quite apart from the set of formal rights bestowed on them in the democratisation process, and the forms of civil society organisation that we might see in practice in the urban microcosms.

Occupational associations present a useful lens through which to look at patterns of mobilisation in these spaces and to analyse the symbiotic relationship between labour market dynamics and processes of politicisation. Borne out shared work-related identities, associations are complex political actors that can act as buffers against the state and mediators between youth and the state. Associational life, furthermore, is often taken as the paradigmatic manifestation of civil society, envisioned as the political face of societal actors to mediate between the private sphere and the state to articulate the individual interest of their members in collective rule setting processes (Harbeson 1994).

The chapter begins with a discussion of the political role played by associations in the urban microcosms. Without predefining the nature and position of associations, it instead opens up to inquiry the dynamics within associations and their relation to the state allowing for a range

of possibilities, from disengagement or interpenetration to confrontation or co-option. The extent to which associations can in practice act as an avenue for young marginals' articulation of political claims is put in question by processes of state co-option and internal intergenerational dynamics. Being "small" by virtue of one's economic position, in other words, influences the degree of voice, cautioning against a reading of associations as necessarily emancipatory. The chapter then turns to a discussion of youths' political imagination, that is, young people's claims for meaningful citizenship based on their livelihood experiences. Such claims show the coexistence between the need to find ways to engage with state institutions in their current form, or navigating the available landscape, and the persistence of imaginations of the state and its obligations to young people as citizens.

This leads to an assessment of opportunities and barriers to independent marginal youth action on the basis of these claims, reflecting on the continued constraints to non-violent action in the post-war setting. While barriers to collective action curtail their ability to be either effective "makers" or "breakers", young people engage in more subtle forms of resistance. The limited space to articulate claims for inclusion however continues to make violence a powerful symbolic resource. The contextual backdrop for these discussions is formed by two key events which helped ground discussions of political trajectories: the 2012 Presidential elections and the implementation of the urban beautification project, Operation WID, discussed in previous chapters.

Occupational Associations: Exit vs. Voice?

The Expected Roles of Associations

Within the four microcosms associational life appeared, upon first impressions, vibrant, with a plethora of trade based organisations as well as small self-help groups and social clubs. As shown in Chapter 4, these organisations were based on occupation in the informal economy represented in each microcosm. This meant that they included not only those engaged in marginal forms of work, but also members such as big traders or “capitalists”, a crucial distinction we shall return to later. The BSA, BRU and ASTA were the most prominent associations within their respective microcosms. In contrast, in Kroo Bay, where there was a dearth of associations, informants identified the chieftaincy as the key mediating and representative institution. This offers an interesting opportunity for comparison as well as enabling a discussion of the relationship between chieftaincies and the audibility of youth voices in Sierra Leone’s post-war political landscape.⁶⁵

Understanding the rationale for establishing associations and the expectations placed on forms of community representation offers a useful window into the twofold role of associational life: firstly as buffer or mediator of the relationship between youth and the state and secondly as a potential channel for their political voice. Both roles help us draw a picture of associations’ ability to act as arenas of youths’ political activity, whether in contrast to the state or in dialogue with its representatives. Articulations of the role of associations in the microcosms often started from the description of experiences of the state in young people’s

⁶⁵ As discussed in Chapter 2, analysts of Sierra Leone’s war and its aftermath have pointed to the highly contentious role played by chiefs in the country’s recent history (Fanthorpe 2006; Peters 2011; Richards et al 2004; Sawyer 2008). Although chieftaincies were retained after the war, they have a stronger hold in the provinces and in Freetown Kroo Bay is one of the few communities with an official chieftain structure. Consequently, the role of chiefs in urban areas ought not to be seen as necessarily representative of dynamics outside of Freetown.

lives, both in terms of where it made its presence felt and where it was perceived to be absent. The implementation of Operation WID presented an interesting example of everyday encounters between young marginals and the state, while also highlighting how the nature of these encounters might change over time and through particular events. As the Operation came into force, a distinct trend throughout discussions was the fact that, due to their line of work, young people frequently experienced the state through its enforcement arms: the police and the judiciary.

Okada riders for example repeatedly emphasised their interactions with the police as a key grievance and a primary reason for dissatisfaction with their current occupation. As the Operation was in full swing, I sat with Ahmed in a small café; his bike was parked nearby and during our conversation he got up nervously several times to check on it. Unlike other days, however, that day he was not worried about having to rush off somewhere if a customer came: it was too risky to ride. His decision to forego his income for the day was based on his assessment of what he perceived to be unjust relations with the police, which made risking an encounter with them in days of “pressure”, like those of Operation WID, unwise:

The police are not doing their job: they are attacking us at every angle, arresting us, beating us with sticks, taking us to the police station and taking us to court. Then in court they take you to jail. The magistrates don't work in the streets, so the police are always right [according to them], whatever they say is right to the government, to the lawyers and to the magistrates. Maybe the human right lawyers work with the police and the judges so they don't take your case seriously, you are alone!

Ahmed's considerations reflected a feeling of powerlessness when dealing with the police, one rooted in the conviction that the law was often enforced arbitrarily and that as an individual and a young person, there was little that could be done but avoid confrontation with the authorities wherever possible. Ahmed's colleague Professor similarly emphasised the arbitrariness of interactions, suggesting that regardless of whether *okadas* were actually in contravention of the law at any given time, when stopped by the police, paying a bribe was often necessary in order to avoid ending up in prison:

Sometimes you can have your licence, your two helmets and everything and the police can arrest you. It has happened to me many times. I have spent over a million to give to the police, just as free money! There is too much harassment.

These experiences of state officials as indiscriminate or even predatory and the corollary feeling of individual powerlessness created a role for associations to act as mediators in these disputes between young people and the police. Indeed, leaders such as the recently appointed head of the BSA argued that the group had been set up precisely as a reaction to police harassment of the Belgium sellers during a previous period of confrontation with traders in the 1990s:

Because of advantage and disadvantage we thought it fit to come together and form an organization to which we gave the name, the Belgium Sellers Association, so that whoever comes from other parts cannot enter us so easily, they can't intrude here and exploit us or take advantage of us. At that time, the police used

to come and would invade the ground, now they don't do that anymore, they go through our authority because we are registered.⁶⁶

Perceptions of the state as a force to be avoided or countervailed must be understood within the context of informality where, as we saw in Chapter 3, the boundaries between the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal are constantly shifting and where regulation plays a role in the devaluation of marginal work.

Such portrayals resonate with a common empirical characterisation of the political nature of the informal economic sphere and its association as an attempt to “exit” or “disengage” from the state, or to make oneself or one’s community “invisible” (Lindell 2010b; Simone 2004). Azarya (1994: 83) defines such “disengagement” as those activities “aimed at withdrawing or keeping distance from the state, which is seen as more repressive than rewarding”. In the microcosms, disengagement had both internal and external connotations. Externally it manifested itself in attempts to countervail state power, for example by avoiding confrontations with the police or associations’ intervention as buffers to arbitrary interventions. Internally, it included associations’ performance of semi-governmental functions, so as to minimise interactions with the state and its representatives.

Associations were for example expected to engage in internal dispute resolution, and leaders were identified as first ports of call should conflict arise in the microcosms. Disputes revolved around issues such as payments, disagreements around commission arrangements and the sharing of commissions, as well as the “scattering” of people’s markets or personal conflicts that occasionally descended into verbal and physical fights. Both Belgium and Up Gun had a system of fines in place for “fighting and abusive language” and during my first visit in 2010

⁶⁶ Interview with BSA representative, Freetown, 27.03.2014.

Belgium experimented with a so-called “Military Police”, charged with dealing with infractions such as fighting and theft. In Kroo Bay it was the chief who dealt with dispute resolution, and he described his role as the first arbitrator, deciding when a dispute needed to be taken up with the authorities or when it could be dealt with inside the Bay.⁶⁷ Confrontations relating to conflicts between men and women or witchcraft accusations were under his jurisdiction, while criminal cases would only involve the police if they could not be addressed internally.

A further form of “disengagement” related to the state’s absence rather than its potentially intrusive presence. The lack of institutionalised safety nets through state welfare provision meant that associations were expected to support their members in times of need, for example through contributions for marriage, funeral or medical bills and similar times of financial strain. As such, the associations collected payments of membership fees, which served both to sustain the association and to provide these support functions to members.

These associational functions thus suggest the image of the microcosms as detached from the state and the establishment of associations as an avenue to retreat in response to everyday experiences of arbitrary intrusion or absent safety nets. This image is however incomplete. A second, and not secondary, function for associations and community groups was to be the mouthpiece for their membership in the political arena. Analysts of associations in the informal economy have in fact also focused on the potential of collectivisation to provide “political voice” for informal workers and on these organisations’ ability to “represent the concerns of their constituencies in the public sphere” (Lindell 2010b: 4). Juxtaposed to both “exit” and “quiet” or atomised forms of resistance involved in daily practices (see Scott 1985), membership-based organisations have been presented as channels through which informal workers can collectively and vocally articulate their claims. This is especially evident in

⁶⁷ Interview with the Chief of Kroo Bay, Freetown, 18.04.2013.

instances where the informal sphere comes into confrontation with the regulatory powers of the state during processes of urban development such as Operation WID. Alongside protection from intrusion, then, occupational associations can also be seen as organized interlocutors between their membership and the state and therefore as a link between the informal economy and the political arena.

The youths of the microcosms certainly looked to their associations to take the lead in initiating dialogue with authorities and to lobby representatives on their behalf. “They are our elders, our lawyers”, argued *okada* rider Allieu when asked what the role of the BRU ought to be. Similarly in the other microcosms, community leaders were identified as those who should take youths’ concerns up with government. Significantly, these associations were seen (and saw themselves) as having significant political clout and were popularly recognised as important political lobbies representing key political constituencies.⁶⁸ Unpacking the origins of these popular perceptions sheds light on the political role that we might expect these associations to play at this particular juncture of Sierra Leone’s political history.



Figure 6: APC Campaign Badge in Temne and Krio

⁶⁸ Interview with CSO Representative, Freetown, 27.03.2014; Interview with Abacha Street trade association representative, Freetown, 21.03.2014; Interview with BRU representative 30.01.2013.

Associations and the APC Government

While trade-based associations have been important throughout the post-independence period, their current prominence is a product of the present-day political dispensation. The first reason is a simple numbers' game: Freetown's expanding population engaged in the informal economy in the aftermath of war combined with the city's "swing-state" status in recent elections, makes collective organizations in the informal sector an obvious asset to court during political campaigns.⁶⁹ Another key dynamic specific to the ruling APC regime has to do with the interplay between occupation (or class) ethnicity and politics in Sierra Leone's political landscape. The APC was set up on the eve of independence, as a left-leaning, working-class party with roots in the Northern districts (in the context of the regionally skewed socio-economic development discussed in Chapter 2). This legacy continues to play a role in contemporary politics. During election campaigns and since returning to power in 2007, the APC has vocally represented itself as the party of traders and working people and, less explicitly, as a Northern party.⁷⁰ An APC Youth Activist made this connection between informal work, ethnicity and the ruling party especially explicit:

In the APC, our strength is the grassroots people, these bike riders, these Abacha Street Traders, the King Jimmy boys [...] they are our people. Why? Because most of these people they came from the villages and towns surrounding the capital, most of them from the North, these coastal areas, so most of these people

⁶⁹ In 2002, 28.09% in the West-West electoral district votes went to the APC (Harris 2011). The APC's negative legacy was however quickly dispelled and in 2007, 68.2% of the Western Urban votes were for the APC (NEC 2007). In 2012, 71.4% of Western Urban votes were for the APC (NEC 2012).

⁷⁰ This of course does not mean that voting amongst informal traders was entirely homogenous, but as a youth activist associated with the SLPP's newly established Grassroots Movement noted, the opposition was aware of their need to dispel their historical association as a party of the elite: "When we talk about the youth they think we are just referring to the All People's Congress. They say that the SLPP are an elitist party and that only the older people are on top of the situation." (Interview, Freetown, 17.03.2014).

have a biological attachment to the APC party, because most of the people who founded the APC party, mainly hail from these areas. So 90% of these people engaged in this petty trading, these are our people, they have a physical and emotional attachment to the APC party.⁷¹

This is important because it reflects the political salience of occupations, in the sense that because of these dynamics, being a rider, a trader, or a commission chaser delineates a politically meaningful group. However, being a political constituency for the government and being able to act as an influential channel of “political voice” are of course not the same thing— the question of whether associations can be meaningfully seen as vessels of young marginals’ voice thus remains an important one.

Operation WID put to test the strength of associations’ assertion of a collective voice, the flipside of such a close relationship with authorities. The APC government was undoubtedly aware that they were playing with fire by threatening to deal a blow to the livelihoods of large constituencies as they moved to ban and restrict trading and riding:

Recently there was a thorny issue of removing [traders] from the street, and we were telling them, yes we know that Abacha Street has been an impediment for the free flow of traffic, but at the same time the laws are not there. In other countries it is regulated, so we need to see how best we can regulate it. It was very difficult, because the majority of them are our people that voted for us, it is a very strong pressure group, so for us to just remove them from the street like that it would be counter-productive for us, the politicians, that is very important. So

⁷¹ Interview with APC Youth Activist, Freetown, 18.03.2014.

recently we engaged them and said, yes what do you want the government to do for you so that you can leave the street?⁷²

This government representative's consideration suggests that despite his previous assumption that these groups would be almost certain to vote for his party, it would nevertheless be politically dangerous to alienate them. This indicates that, more than simply a traditional pool of votes, these groups were considered to be pressure groups. Some difficulties in enforcing Operation WID reflected an extent of leverage that associations could have in protecting their members' interests. Despite a powerful public rhetoric centred on the threat of disorder associated with these informal actors, political players entered into negotiations with the associations' leadership aware of the importance of striking the right balance between banning disorderly conduct and not angering a key constituency. As such, the leadership met with the Presidential Task Force in charge of enforcing Operation WID and over a period of time some spoken and unspoken compromises were found. Abacha Traders were for example been allowed to stay in the street, under certain conditions, at least until the building of the Sewa Ground Market was built in the nearby Victoria Park. Similarly, *okada* riders were given alternative routes up the hills of the Eastern part of the city.

From this point of view, associations might be seen as using their political clout to the benefit of their membership, expressing their concerns regarding the curtailment of their shared livelihoods. Discussions with young members however seemed to tell a different story, one of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Riders pointed to the inadequacy of the alternatives presented to them, such as the dangerous terrains of the mountain bypasses. "Small" traders similarly referred to how union leaders had been put in charge of policing Abacha Street and punishing walking traders (i.e. those without stalls and market) and expressed concern that the

⁷² Ibid.

Sewa Ground would be unlikely to fit everybody, especially those without the capital to rent a stall. In addition, associations were seen as ineffective in protecting members from unfair police harassment an issue that, as Allieu argued in *Up Gun*, affected “small people” more because “if you can’t pay, you go to jail”. Allieu in fact continued:

As a union for instance, if I am arrested by the police, and I have my driving licence, I have my helmet, everything is correct, they should be able to go and ask the police: ‘What did you arrest this boy for?’ They are our elders [...] but they are not working in our interest, they are working in the interest of themselves, they are working in the interest of their pockets. That is what the union is doing.

This, according to Allieu, was also evidenced by a failure of the expected duties of support, a widely shared point of contention:

What I think they could do for me is for example when I was involved in an accident; nobody ever paid me a visit! Nobody! Even a few days back, I was sick, but there was no help!

“Unless they give to the big ones”: Intergenerational Dynamics and Co-Option

Allieu’s perception that the union leaders were working in their own interest is especially loaded. Unpacking it requires recalling the differentiation within the microcosms’ spectrum of informality and the intersection between marginal work, generational identities and societal hierarchies. As we saw in Chapter 4, a key implication of being engaged in marginal work was the perception of being socially “small”. This was also salient inside the microcosms as marginal workers were different from those who were “big” by virtue of owning capital, such

as market or motorbikes. Young marginals used the terminology of “smallness” to emphasise the intergenerational dynamics within associations, referring to the leadership as “the big ones”. Leaders’ seniority was denoted by their elevated economic position as capital owners, as well as by their closeness to political leaders as evidenced by their role in rallying support during elections.⁷³ Being engaged in marginal activities in the microcosms therefore was seen to have an impact on youths’ position in the associations. The consensus amongst youths was therefore that associations were primarily “for” the “big ones”, and that the latter were unable or unwilling to act on behalf of the “small ones”, especially when it came to issues that did not affect the two groups alike. Aminatta, a trader of *skin-tights* on commission on Abacha Street for example emphasised: “The traders’ union talk for themselves, not for us”. Her friend Ramatu agreed and added:

The union can’t help me; they help the other ones. We the petty traders, they don’t value us. The government should help the young ones; big ones enjoy money in Abacha!

These notions that the leadership was “working in the interest of their pockets” crucially alluded to the fact that, through the lens of a split between “big” and “small” members, the groups’ political salience was rather experienced by young marginals as the co-option of associations by government. Young members perceived associations as being incorporated into networks of power and felt that this blurred the lines of interests thus blunting associations’ effectiveness in challenging the government on behalf of their smaller members (see Azarya 1994). A year after the implementation of Operation WID, for example, Allieu

⁷³ Associational leaders were in fact, almost without exception, not marginal workers within the informal occupations but investors and big traders as defined in Chapter 3.

remarked on the union leaders' unwillingness to counter or protest the restriction, explaining it as a product of his individually beneficial relationship with government:

I think [the BRU President] is too close to the government, they gave him money and a vehicle. He just talks a bit and then forgets, because he thinks: 'These people are the ones who make me who I am'.

Claims of incorporation were backed up by evidence of the nature of associations' interactions with the ruling party and their limited success in representing the interests of small traders despite their significant entanglement in government structures. During the 2012 elections, associations played a central and visible role in the mobilisation of their constituencies' vote. In all the microcosms, youth recounted experiences of being rallied by community leaders to campaign for the APC and the associations mediated the distribution of incentives such as bike helmets (see Figure 5), T-Shirts and food and drinks to be distributed within the microcosms, experiences to which we shall return in more detail below. Leaders of the associations also often had personal relationships with officials and were incorporated in party decision-making structures, such as committees to select parliamentary candidates.⁷⁴ Accusations of corruption, or rewards for loyalty, such as the widespread belief that the BRU leader was given a four by four car and money to campaign for the APC in 2012 were presented as obvious reasons why, aside from short-lived and unfavourable compromises, the unions had been unable to stop Operation WID altogether or to mitigate police harassment of the most vulnerable in its aftermath. Another rider, Danny, put these views most concisely as he argued in reference to the Operation:

⁷⁴ The relevance of personal connections to the incorporation of associational leadership was made clear for example in an interview with an APC Youth Activist, who emphasised that he had the numbers of union leaders on his mobile phone and that the party kept a list of associations known to be supportive.

They say the union is there to solve our problems, but they sold us. [...] If the union had not sold us, when [the police] hold people, the union should go stand up for us in court, by any means.

The accusation of a co-opted leadership, it is important to note, was not only expressed as a challenge to the inability to effectively lobby on the behalf of “small ones”. Often co-option was contested because the benefits of incorporations had failed to reach the small ones. In Abacha Street, a common phrase used to describe the relationship between government and the traders was “*pas den gee to di big one dem*” (“unless they give to the big ones”). This was used to suggest that government distributed benefits to their constituencies through the “big ones”, who then refused to share. This was a reference to the explicit buying of support, as symbolised by the BRU President’s car, but also to the distribution of material benefits seen as a direct result of being a salient constituency. In Belgium, for example, a government microfinance fund was at the centre of an on-going controversy between the commission chasers and the investors at the helm of the BSA. After both the 2007 and the 2012 elections rumours spread in the Belgium selling ground that the government had given a substantial amount of money to the BSA to distribute as microcredit, something that was confirmed by the leadership of the BSA. This gesture was widely understood as a reward for having campaigned strongly for the APC on both occasions. The BSA Chairman emphasised that given Belgium’s large membership it was unreasonable to expect everyone to benefit.⁷⁵ However, the contestations around the microcredit money starkly revealed the ruptures inside the BSA membership. For most commission chasers, the money had been embezzled or simply shared amongst the big ones, a sign of their selfishness and unwillingness to include the small ones in the benefits of being incorporated.

⁷⁵ Interview with BSA representative, Freetown, 27.03.2014.

In a focus group with Belgium sellers, one participant, Med, framed the issue as follows:

The Belgium Sellers are a part of government. When money comes from the government they just share it amongst themselves. [...] When the time comes to go and collect the money, they will never send a young boy. They just share it amongst themselves. So we are part of Belgium but we are not part of Belgium.

Med's words highlight the limitations of looking at associations' potential political role homogeneously. Associations have the potential to act as mediators between the microcosms and the state, protecting members from arbitrary state intrusion, performing semi-governmental functions and, most importantly, acting as a channel for collective political voice. However, looking at internal associational dynamics revealed that intergenerational divisions limited the association's ability to effectively represent youth voices. Young people's experiences of associational politics reflected a widespread feeling that the "big ones" who ought to act as mediators were acting in their own interests and co-opted by the government. This meant both that the associations' ability to challenge government on behalf of small members was blunted and that young members' felt excluded from the benefits of incorporation. Associations based on shared occupational identities therefore may embody the "possibilities of community" (Chatterjee 2004: 60) with political salience, however, engagement in marginal work, and its corollary of social "smallness" influenced young people's position inside these associations. One might be, as Med put it, simultaneously "part of Belgium" and "not part of Belgium".

The apparent tension between the wish for associations to act effectively as lobbies and the wish to benefit to be incorporated however also points to a question asked by Harris (2013:

147), namely, whether youth in post-war Sierra Leone wish to “fundamentally re-construct” the system or be assimilated in it. The next section discusses how this tension might be understood by contrasting the notion of politics as a form of navigation and young people’s political imagination.

The Political Imagination and Citizenship Claims

The intergenerational differential in access to either voice or the benefits of incorporation were most visibly represented in youth’s reflections of their experiences during the 2012 elections. Looking at how youths in the microcosms engaged with the electoral process from the standpoint of their marginality sheds light on how politics itself can become a navigational tactic at specific moments— a way to adapt to and make the most of the status quo. This however, is to be contrasted with youths’ imagination of political community and their claims for meaningful political inclusion through the language of citizenship. This contrast gives an important insight into the impact of experiences of marginal work on the formation of political subjectivities amongst urban youth.

Politics as Navigation

Young people in the microcosms characterised their experiences of electoral mobilisation as being primarily led “from above” and as being episodic or even extractive in nature. They pointed to two mechanisms involved in the unfolding of electoral mobilisation processes. The first was the specific role of associations and community elders, such as Kroo Bay’s chief or union leaders, in organising young people to campaign around election time. This particular role was cited, as we have seen, as an example of elders’ co-option as they acted as intermediaries for political parties’, and especially the ruling party’s, electoral needs. Material

incentives played a part in these mobilisation processes, alongside the holding of large campaign rallies. In Up Gun, for example, the Secretary of the BRU recounted how in the run-up to the 2012 elections helmets and nineteen motorbikes had been provided through the union as incentives to campaign for the APC (see Figure 5). Other forms of immediate remuneration involved the distribution of T-Shirts, rice and drinks at campaign rallies organised through community intermediaries. In Kroo Bay, Mary, the sex worker introduced in previous chapters spoke of her experience of being approached by the chief to campaign for a particular Councillor in 2012:

The people came and met us down in the Bay and said, ‘Let’s go rally.’ Well actually, the Chief started it, he came and met us and said ‘You guys go campaign for this Councillor here’ and we said ‘Which Councillor?’ They called him [...] over in [a nearby neighbourhood]. So when he came he gave us T-Shirts, then we went to rally and *make gladi*⁷⁶ for him. When we finished doing that, they just gave us one plate of rice.

Mary’s phrasing of her recollection of her engagement with electoral politics reinforces the image of a form of mobilisation “from above” where youth’s engagement with democracy was made of episodic encounters on behalf of elders. Indeed, her narrative points to a second characteristic of young people’s electoral mobilisation, namely the episodic appearance of individual politicians in the microcosms to interact with their electorate to convince them to vote for them. This took different forms, ranging from official campaign rallies to more informal kind of penetration, whereby politicians mingled in the community and attempted to make themselves known to their voters. In a focus group, for example, commission chasers were especially impressed by President Koroma’s personal visit to Belgium and his apparent

⁷⁶ To cheer and sing party anthems for politicians during political campaigns.

lack of fear in going to some of the most notorious *jewman* hangout places: “During the campaign he came down to Belgium, anywhere where the *rarray boys* are, even by the public toilet, he even met the least man to tell him to vote for him”.

Electoral campaigning on behalf of various politicians and parties included a number of activities such as *making gladi*, attending rallies, as well as occasionally being taken to other locations to campaign. Like the display of large groups of *okadas* passing through the city with the Presidential candidate’s face imprinted on their helmets, these were experiences of mobilisation of marginal youth as groups, based on their groups’ presumed political affiliation. They were powerful “spectacles of power” (Hoffman 2011a: 192). However, the portrayal of youth as mobilised by elders and having their vote essentially cheaply bought risks foreclosing an appreciation of young people’s political subjectivities, their ways of understanding and engaging with political processes, which are essential to an analysis of how economic marginality becomes politicised. A starting point for this analysis is to explore their interpretation of this mobilisation from above, and in particular to investigate what their expectations of the political process reveal about their perception of state-youth relations.

Disillusionment with these episodic and extractive forms of politics pervaded most marginal youths’ assessments of their engagement with politics. This disillusionment was expressed in terms of a sense of having been “used” and that campaigning and having been recognised as a powerful constituency had not, as elections ended, translated into political influence or an ability to effect change. As we saw in Chapter 2, there have been significant constraints in creating widespread employment for the country’s youthful population after the war, in a context of scarcity and of policies with mixed results. The microcosms’ youth struggled to reconcile politicians’ vigorous courting of their communities during elections with this failure of jobs to materialise and, compounded by politicians’ retreat after elections, interpreted it as

neglect. This was portrayed in their narratives through the image of politicians rolling up their windows when they passed by in their cars, or of the closed doors to the offices of those for whom they had campaigned. Musa captured the incongruence between Belgium sellers' importance as a political constituency and the lack of visible change in the lives of young marginals after the vote:

Belgium is one of the big organisations in this country, you know that no politician will come to power, no honourable or councillor, who doesn't come and meet us down Belgium. When they come they meet with us, they talk well to us, and they give us promises, they say: 'Boys this is not where you want to end up, you want jobs, you want a place to work, so put us in power, when we win, we will find work for you'. So we can be with them, we can *make gladi* for them, we register we vote, they give us so many promises. But then once we have put them in power, they do nothing for Belgium.

This begs an important question: having witnessed a number of post-war national and local elections, and feeling a lack of political traction through electoral mobilisation and associational politics, why did young people continue to engage in the political process as voters and often as active campaigners?

The answer arguably lies once again in the tension between navigation and aspirations. Campaigning can in fact be seen as a navigational tactic. Firstly, playing the game had its perks, and many youths were open about the benefits of being mobilised during elections. Rice, small amounts of money, T-Shirts were undoubtedly incentives, something to be taken while it was offered. This also suggests that mobilisation "from above" is not entirely passive, and it also involves making the most out a system given the constraints. As Hickey and du

Toit (2007) have argued in their elaboration of the notion of “adverse incorporation”, these short-term benefits may be useful means of “managing vulnerability”, even if they reinforce exploitative and unequal relations. Incentives, furthermore, were taken from both political parties and were not seen to tie young voters to the particular actor distributing them. Utas (2008) has for example highlighted the phenomenon of “watermelon politics” taking place amongst urban youth during the 2007 elections, whereby voters openly campaigned for the then ruling SLPP (the green party) while ultimately voting for the APC (the red party): they were in other words green on the outside, but red on the inside. After the 2012 elections, one rider similarly described his behaviour as a business transaction: “We are commercial people, so we will give a service if you pay.” Seeing these forms of mobilisation as navigational strategies helps us understand how young people detached their everyday engagements from their expectations of political processes. Indeed, material incentives do not tell us the full story and politics as navigation coexisted with continued hopes for change.

Imagining Political Community: “We are Sierra Leoneans, not Slaves”

Navigation, or “playing the game” must in fact be distinguished from the expectations that young people had about how politics ought to work and in particular from specific aspirations about their role as political actors. Far from a complete retreat from the political system or simply cynical mobilisation as “service”, this reflected a very defined political imagination, a vision for how the state and those vying for its control were expected to interact with young marginals as citizens. This political imagination about what a fair polity might mean was articulated through a series of political claims whose foundations were to be found in youths’ experiences of labour market exclusion and marginal work.

Expressions of disillusionment with the political system and the dissatisfaction with episodic forms of mobilisation in fact revealed specific ideas about the rightful outcomes of the political process. The content of politicians' failed promises as recounted by Musa above is indicative of the centrality of employment in these expectations: "When we win, we will find work for you". Musa emphasised his disappointment with the aftermath of these interactions by arguing, "For someone to have a job in this country it is not easy, so what about us now who are in the streets?" Mary's experience of recruitment by the chief of Kroo Bay similarly had an interesting epilogue in this respect. She argued that as the Councillor offered young Bay dwellers rice as a show of gratitude for the rally, they refused to eat it: "We went to rally and all you give us is a plate of rice?" This protest resulted in a small consultation between the Councillor and the chief as to what else he might do for these young people. The conversation centred on employment creation but according to Mary, the Councillor's choice to approach the chief meant that the small protest was not successful in altering the outcome for young women like her with no connections: "The big ones said they should find work for the boys, but for their children, they went and picked some kids to go to work, but they did not pick us". Nevertheless this episode highlighted expectations of mobilisation that were higher than a plate of rice and were rooted in a critique of exclusion from employment.

A key concept in narratives surrounding expectations of political outcomes was that of "citizenship" which young people used to articulate both why they continued to engage in what they saw as an unresponsive system and their visions of political inclusion. In a discussion with Belgium sellers several young men argued that their disillusionment with the current political dispensation was making them consider disengagement. Sheku for example, after having chronicled various experiences of politicians who had refused to take his and his colleagues' concerns seriously after elections asserted: "I will never vote again until I die". Later in the conversation, however, he retracted saying that although him and his friends had

long been tempted not to vote, they ended up doing it because: “They tell you that you are supposed to vote, that it is your right and that if you don’t vote you are not a citizen”. Although the apparent detachment between voting and a sense of effective political inclusion might raise questions about the substance of post-war democratisation, it would be rash to conclude that such experiences reflected a dilution of citizenship norms into little more than formal rights. Emphasising one’s status as a citizen was important to the microcosms’ youth and voting, as an expression of this citizenship, was equally important however practically inconsequential it might feel, as Sheku’s colleague Abbas put it:

I vote for development in my country. I do not see any development, but because I am a citizen I will do that, I will vote.

Voting as a performance of citizenship was a way to stake a claim of inclusion regardless of outcomes. To give up voting and retreat would be tantamount to abandoning the quest to be recognised as an equal member of the polity. In this sense Chatterjee’s (2004) intimation that in most of the world we must look below the formal trappings of citizenship, while clearly valid, must not lead us to underestimate the symbolic value that equal citizenship can have. Such symbolism could also be mobilised to give substantive content to those rights. The symbolic value of citizenship in fact cannot be fully detached from the expectations that emanate from the wish to be recognized as a citizen. Claiming recognition as a citizen was a way to articulate specific claims on the state and to delineate its expected obligations towards young citizens. This was particularly clear in contestations of Operation WID. Up Gun riders’ challenge to this affront on their livelihoods was: “We are Sierra Leoneans, not

foreigners”, or the equivalent but starker: “We are Sierra Leoneans, not slaves”.⁷⁷ These statements were used to underpin the claim that as citizens they were owed recognition.

Livelihoods were at the centre of this recognition, so that being banned from the streets was interpreted as a breach of the obligations owed to citizens by the state. For Ibrahim, a rider in Up Gun, for example, the seeming lack of concern with how riders like him were going to make ends meet was a clear sign that they were not being treated as citizens: “They don’t even see us as worthy of living, but I am a Sierra Leonean not a foreigner”. Ibrahim’s assertion was especially salient as it emerged in the context of discussions about the banning of informal trades without providing alternatives. This, as riders saw it, was a blatant failure on the government’s part to take the wellbeing of its young citizens into account. As Suleiman figuratively argued: “If you want your daughter to stop eating cassava, you should have rice at home”, reflecting the affinity between the expectations of state behaviour towards its youth to that of a parent towards its children. As Ferguson (2013: 236) argues, the framing of citizens as children to a paternalist state can be read as “a very strong assertion, not just of inequality but, of a social obligation linking state and citizen”. In fact, a further iteration of the citizenship argument against Operation WID claimed precisely that the ban was a double affront because occupations like *okada* riding were already framed as a necessary response to the government’s inability to create proper employment for its citizens. Using the language of citizenship, therefore, young riders brought work to the centre of articulations of state obligations towards its citizens.

⁷⁷ The historical significance of youths’ reference to slavery cannot be underestimated (see Shaw 2002). The legacy of the Atlantic trade is undoubtedly highly symbolic in depicting a sense of powerlessness, but even looking to Sierra Leone’s more recent history, domestic slavery and the exploitation of youths for communal labour by chiefs were central to the unfolding of the intergenerational strife and youths’ narratives of marginalisation in the run-up to the war (Peters 2011).

Contrasted with the short-term claims to be left to make their own way out of marginality, were therefore political claims to a right to employment. Recollecting his recent campaign experiences, Belgium's Sheku for example argued:

We went to Bo, Kenema, everywhere. The only thing they gave us is 10,000 Leones and a T-Shirt. Oh and the free bus. Then no employment, even though African Minerals came. What about the Ministers and the Councillors? They don't work for the country? Because we don't see anything. We go to them and they say they will [...] find work. What are the Councillors doing? African Minerals has come, how many thousands youths have they pulled from Belgium? Nobody!

Notions of state obligations to young citizens were framed as a variation of the “no love” argument that featured in Chapter 4 in discussions around social exclusion as “asocial inequality” (Ferguson 2013: 233). The critique of a status quo where access to employment was reliant on incorporation into narrow networks of reciprocity with a *sababu* was expressed through the idea of a society where “there is no love for each other”. In Kroo Bay, young women like Lucy and her friend Jeneba discussed how lack of employment was a result of the “selfishness” of those in power, who would *watch face*, that is, they would only pick the people they knew for work rather than upholding their obligations to the community's youth as a whole. The idea that a shortage of jobs was a result of selfishness and an infringement of obligations to the citizenry mirrors Ferguson's (2013: 237) argument that the “positive content of citizenship itself may increasingly come to rest precisely on being a rightful and deserving dependant of the state”. These are not, Ferguson stresses, “backward” ideas but rather impress the need to take seriously “contemporary needs for care, moral connection and responsible obligations in ways that emancipatory liberal rights talk often does not” (ibid.).

These reflections reiterate the fact that being engaged in marginal work means not only being poor, it also encapsulates a position of exclusion from nurturing social networks and, in its political guise, was experienced as the product of a failed social contract. Through these articulations of citizenship, young people translated their demands of interpersonal reciprocity into political claims of redistribution. Although in the optic of navigation, competition for a place in informal networks of reciprocity may be an individualised solution, ultimately young people's imagination was rooted in a vision of the state as a provider of employment. Employment provided a language to which to express what it means to be a citizen and what it is fair to claim from the state. These claims about inclusion through job creation thus tell us how labour market experiences influence not only young people's position in the political arena, but also their political subjectivity and imagination.

The fact that this imagination is distinct from individualised strategies for incorporation was shown by the notion that individual betterment might not be the solution to the frustrations associated with a lack of employment. As Alpha, a 34-year-old commission chaser, explained:

I'm not looking for a politician who just gives a little money. I would hold that change, maybe spend it for a month or two months, then later on, when I see them again, I'd still be suffering. I don't want that one to be elected. I don't want just me to achieve, I want both of us, I want all of us to achieve. When it's just me that does well, and my friends don't, I still feel the pressure. Because if my friends don't have, and the next man doesn't have, and it's just me that has, that's even more pressure. So I have decided, [...] all of us, who don't have jobs, the young boys and young girls, we need a better life. So I'm looking for the politician who can think about that.

The pressure Alpha referred to was not an entirely selfless one, and other youths similarly expressed concerns with the burdens associated with individual improvement. This was a realisation that gaining access to stable employment would trigger strong demands of redistribution. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 4, individual, as opposed to collective, accumulation might attract jealousy and community rifts or “selfish” attempts to get in the way of other’s well-being by “pulling them down” through witchcraft or other means.

These discussions thus again highlight the tensions between broad-based expectations of redistribution and even dependence, the constraints to creating inclusive employment and a political economy that has resulted in the fierce competition for inclusion in narrowly exclusive networks of reciprocity, something that we shall return to in the next Chapter. Furthermore, the language of citizenship involved in young people’s imagination helps us conceptualise the persistence of their engagement with the political system. This political imagination shows that historical patterns of predation and disempowering political engagement have not resulted in either acceptance of the status quo or total disengagement. In addition, although daily experiences of state presence, or its absence, and the penetration of the microcosms by various “big” political actors were often exploitative and silencing, the state was indelibly present in young people’s imagination as the locus of political claims. Berman’s (1998: 338) depiction of African polities as characterised by a situation where “the rich and the poor, elite and masses, share the same opportunistic and materialistic view of politics and the state”, may be descriptive of the expedient role of opportunism in the short-term, yet ignores that navigating pre-structured terrains does not necessarily mean accepting them as they are.

Distinguishing between politics as navigation and the political imagination may explain away some inconsistencies between young people’s behaviour and beliefs. However this does not

mean that engaging in the former will not undermine the latter, a dilemma created by youths' position of marginality. The question of whether these claims of citizenship could actually translate into mobilisation for change therefore remains fraught given young people's continued engagement in the current political "game" and their lack of effective voice within the microcosms. This begs the following question: if associations are not acceptable mediators of voice in their current form, but work-based citizenship claims are well articulated, what alternatives exist to mobilise independently on the basis of these claims?

Barriers to Independent Collective Action

The implementation of Operation WID was followed by extensive conversations amongst affected youths about what was to be done. These conversations, alongside more abstract ones about the likelihood of protest, offered an entry point for a broader analysis of the opportunities and barriers for collective action based on work-related political claims.

Some Up Gun riders argued that a strike might be a useful way to bring the government's and the public's attention not only to the difficulties emerging from Operation WID but also more broadly to their wish for greater respect. Allieu for example argued:

If we [strike] for even just one week, the government will see us, they will know we are people, but without doing that they will not take us seriously. We should unite, do a peaceful presentation so that they know that we are people, we are Sierra Leoneans we are not foreigners. We deserve our right. We are self-employees, without striking, people will not value us.

Despite such deliberations, a strike was never organised. Attempts at organising independently of associations, through protest, strikes or even occasional spurts of violence, were sporadic, short-lived and mostly unsuccessful. For example, in March 2013 tensions rose in Up Gun as the police was accused of stopping riders on the bypasses up the hills, those roads on the outskirts of the city that had been agreed not to be off limits. Demanding an explanation a group of riders gathered by the Transport Authority where union leaders were meeting with authorities. As no resolution was reached the crowd outside became agitated and unruly, but the police fired teargas and shot live rounds in the air, swiftly dispersing the crowd. On Abacha Street, a separate group was established in 2014 to protest the associational leadership over the mishandling of Operation WID. In discussions with participants it however became clear that the group, “planned by the Chairmen and the Chairladies”, was perceived as a continuation of the dominance of big traders in the expression of traders’ voices. Overall, most young people reported having never been involved in any kind of protest. In Kroo Bay this was overwhelmingly the case, with none of the young women interviewed having had any experiences of collective action; all forms of political engagement they listed were through the Chief and the political campaign rallies organised through community elders.

Not only were experiences of independent mobilisation limited and short-lived, but in interviews young people argued that strikes, demonstrations or the formation of groups and associations to challenge the existing leadership were unlikely. Indeed, many emphatically dissociated themselves from events such as the attempted Up Gun protest. Even those like Allieu, cited above, who identified the need for group action argued: “We should do a peaceful demonstration but when you ask people they will just say ‘No, I am not going’”. Youths attributed the improbability of youth mobilisation within the microcosms to a set of barriers. That barriers exist to collective mobilisation has of course long been recognised by scholars of collective action (McAdam et al 1996). This literature offers useful frames through

which to understand how particular processes or mechanisms may influence the opportunity for youth mobilisation in the Freetown cityscape, ranging from the nature of the political space and that of organisational structures to collective identity formation.

The presence of barriers is crucial in explaining how labour market experiences influence the space and possibility for youth mobilisation independently of the “big ones” in post-war Sierra Leone. These barriers show the challenges to acting as either makers of breakers despite well-articulated employment-based claims and a very real sense of frustration. Significantly, each of these obstacles relates in different ways to the social implications of labour market exclusion.

Gerontocracy and Organisational Structures

A first set of barriers to youths’ ability to mobilise on the basis of their claims, be this to protest government actions such as Operation WID or to articulate their expectations of state provision, related to organisational structures. As we have seen, existing occupational associations and community representation bodies were led by “the big ones” and often co-opted by government interest, so that their ability to act as an independent vehicle of voice for the “small ones” was limited. Riders like Ibrahim felt that a peaceful demonstration would be the best course of action to express their dissatisfaction as citizens, however the union was unlikely to be interested in such an action:

We should demonstrate, you go and take a licence, go and take clearance from the police then you write something, what you want and what you don’t want, you can hold that peaceful demonstration. You can go to State House or you can go to Parliament. You hold the papers, so the big ones can see what you wrote and then

you get a spokesman to give talk to the big ones. Then they will say: 'Those are our citizens, let us look at what they came to tell us'. It should be a peaceful demonstration and it should be the union that does that, but the union just don't want to know, what they want is money.

Significantly, the sense that unrepresentative elders would not speak for the youth was compounded by the belief that "small ones" could not speak on their own and that should they try they would not be taken seriously. In Kroo Bay, for example, young women expressed a double bind as they argued that the chiefs and other community elders were the only ones who could speak for them, but they would not as they were uninterested in their concerns. Eighteen-year-old Grace noted:

There is nobody in the community to stand up for young women, not the Chairlady. Look at her standing there: she is an APC councillor. If I try [to tell them my concern] they will not listen, they will not take me seriously.

The fear of not being taken seriously, or being seen as *fiɲay*⁷⁸, was associated with being young and socially "small". As Kroo Bay's Doris argued: "Big ones don't give us a chance, they take us as children and will say you are careless, you think you can talk to Pa Ernest?" Kadiatu in Abacha Street summarised the association between smallness and lack of political power when she said: "In Sierra Leone, unless the big ones do something, the small ones, we don't have the power".

These perceptions cannot be disentangled from the broader context of Sierra Leone's political structure. The intergenerational tension and sense of powerlessness amongst youth in the

⁷⁸ Irreverent.

microcosms confirm concerns with a “strong continuity of gerontocratic dominance” in post-war Sierra Leone (Boersch-Supan 2012: 25). Gerontocratic governance, as we saw in Chapter 2, was at the root of instability, something that has sparked significant efforts to redress intergenerational strife by building institutions of representation such as the NAYCOM and district-level youth committees. In her analysis of a post-war generational contract, Boersch-Supan (2012) argues that the emergence of youth as an aid-recipient category after the war holds the potential for youth carving out a space for themselves. However the dynamics of youth representation and the domination of representative bodies by the elite raise questions about the ability of institutional reform to bring about societal change. For young women, in addition, the gerontocratic nature of Sierra Leonean politics is exacerbated by norms that exclude women both formally and informally from active political participation. Kadiatu’s assertion that small women traders “don’t have the power” is rooted in a context where, despite gradual progress in women’s participation in formal politics, this has not “resulted in any real transformation of Sierra Leone’s political institutions to become more responsive and accountable to women” (Castillejo 2009: 18). Young women’s deference to elders and their fear of being seen as irreverent are thus effective reminders of the constraints to collective action posed by “gerontophallic” norms and perceptions of intergenerational power imbalances (Christiansen et al 2006: 21).

This is not to say that leadership by the “big ones” was never challenged, but the difficulties in contesting the representativeness of organisations were evident. In 2012, for example, a handful of commission chasers tried to confront the associational leadership over the alleged embezzlement of the APC’s donation. Junior, one of the protesters described the dispute as consisting of a few young men “scattering the market” of the accused investors. All participants were arrested and later attempts to protest the BSA’s leadership more peacefully

was unable to bring about change; demands for elections were not granted and a “selection” amongst the investors was carried out instead.

Fear of State Repression

A second important barrier reported by young people across the microcosms was the fear of state repression of demonstrations. This was an extension of young marginals’ confrontational relationship with the police, as they expressed their concern that independent action would result in police brutality. This was partly based on previous experiences and was closely associated to the concern that demonstrations might get out of hand. Indeed, the lack of organised youth action in the four microcosms did mean that the few attempts at mobilisation often resulted in sporadic physical confrontations, usually between young people and the police. Ibrahim recalled that the day Operation WID came into force in Up Gun, for example, heavy-handed policing quickly silenced riders’ contestations. He argued that the police’s reaction had been provoked by some riders’ aggressive behaviour, but maintained that what he saw as an indiscriminate response put him off engaging in further protest:

We the riders, let me not take myself out of that, because even though I was not holding sticks or anything, I was there, we confronted the police. [...] They began to open teargas on people, some people responded with stones. Anyone they caught they beat them mercilessly, so I don’t want to be part of that!

For many, the fear of police response explained why they would not consider taking part in any form of collective action outside of those prompted by the associations (such as electoral campaign rallies). In Abacha Street, for example, Fatmata contrasted her attitude to that of those involved in the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011:

The Arabs are not afraid, they have mind!⁷⁹ We do not have the mind to do that.

The police have hot water they can throw on you; they showed it on SLBC⁸⁰, that's what they do.

Fatmata further added that she was “not able to demonstrate because if they catch you they put you in a cell and there is nobody to speak for us”. This is significant because it highlights the fact that Fatmata’s concern was not simply with being potentially beaten up by the police, but also that her position of marginality meant that her lack of personal connections strengthened her fear of facing the law. This once again speaks to the broader reconstruction context, whereby the space for citizens’ action and the improvement of political liberties has been a key component of democratic reform. The persecution or incorporation of political rivals and pressure groups under Siaka Stevens’ one party state significantly shrunk the space for civil society activity and protest in the years preceding the war. In the post-war context, while this space is growing, challenges remain. A representative of a prominent civil society organisation for example, pointed to the fact that the 1965 Public Order Act, which was put in place during Albert Margai’s bid to establish one party rule, continued to be used by authorities to restrict social mobilisation.⁸¹ He also identified cumbersome registration mechanisms and clearance processes for demonstration as a key hindrance to civil society organising. The incorporation and co-option of major pressure groups was also identified as a key concern, as the representative argued the government tried to “play it safe” for example by handpicking partisan organisations during consultation processes. These challenges are therefore especially salient for thinking about the potential for youth mobilisation if we

⁷⁹ In Krio, the phrase “*get mind*” means to be brave.

⁸⁰ The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Company (SLBC) is the main state-run public television channel.

⁸¹ Interview with CSO Representative, Freetown, 27.03.2014.

consider them in tandem with the intergenerational dynamics internal to the microcosms' associations.

Framing

A third set of barriers related to framing processes, or those “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam et al 1996: 6). Here we must think back to young marginals' reflections on their occupations and the tension between their navigational strategies and their ultimate aspirations. Marginal work, in this context, was seen as temporary and necessitated by circumstances and as distinct from the aspirational category of employment. Viewing marginal work as temporary was also closely related to the low social value attached to these forms of work and to their corollary of being socially “small”. These internalised devaluations and the concern with moving on towards one's aspirations made it difficult to solidify collective identities in a politically unifying manner. Rejecting categorisation as deviants often relied on differentiating oneself from others. Mohamed, the RUF lieutenant turned rider introduced in Chapter 3, for instance argued that while others might be “radicals”, he was not “part of them” and was hoping to leave Up Gun to open his tailoring shop as soon as possible. The difficulty in developing a collective identity amongst marginal youth was similarly evidenced by Mohamed's colleague Karim's reflections:

I am riding okada but not with my heart. I am just doing it to keep myself engaged, at the end of the day, I can raise 10,000Le and make my family survive for the day. But I am not seeing my identity as an okada rider because when you look at me, you yourself will say, that is not a good position for me.

These considerations also suggest the broader challenges inherent in transforming common experiences of marginality and socio-economically determined “youthhood” into mobilising narratives. Ultimately, because youths like Karim did not see their occupations as permanent, they were reluctant to solidly embrace their identity as riders (or traders, commission chasers and so on) undermining the potential for a shared framing of common concerns. Significantly, therefore, occupational identities seemed to be more politically salient when mobilised “from above” than as catalysts of youth resistance, despite forming a fundamental pillar of youths’ political imagination. Exiting a period of “sitting down” in a context where the state was seen to be failing to uphold its obligations was a necessarily solitary affair, often reliant on individual attempts to enter exclusive networks. This was identified as a major hindrance to collective action “from below”. In Kroo Bay, Doris pondered on the lack of unity amongst young women in the slum:

It is very possible for women to gather, but it depends on oneness and courage, what is stopping people is the [ability to form a] group. We can be one or two with the intention but the others have their own, so oneness is the problem and thoughts are scattered. With a group a protest could work.

Lack of Trust

Doris’ thoughts point to a fourth constraint to collective identification, namely a lack of interpersonal trust. In the microcosms lack of trust was closely related to the tensions between individualisation and the moral demands surrounding relations between the individual and the community. Fears surrounding others’ “selfishness” and the concern that others might put their self-interest before those of others in the community were expressed through notions of jealousy and the Pulling Down Syndrome (see Chapter 4). The belief that those in one’s

closest circles might want to harm each other out of jealousy was prominent in informal discussions of youths' misfortunes, as *witch guns* and *juju magic* were mentioned as weapons for jealous relatives and friends to pull others down when they were seen to succeed. This reflected a deep-rooted lack of trust in others reminiscent of Geschiere's (1997: 11) assertion that witchcraft is the "dark side of kinship", that is, the "frightening realisation that there is jealousy and therefore aggression within the family, where there should only be trust and solidarity".

Significantly from the point of view of youth collective action, the *bad heart* thought to be widespread in each microcosm was seen as a lack of "sharing spirit" which made it hard to form a sense of community. In Belgium, Solomon linked this back to an erosion of trust and community in the midst of the war's destruction, something that was often echoed by others who felt that witchcraft and *bad heart* had gotten worse since the rebel war:

It was the war that made jealousy and hatred a lot. Because during the war, people became greedy, people just started caring about their intimate people. During the war if I have one beer, I have to hide it from you. Who will I give it to? To someone who can give me something back. Then it's also grudges, like if someone had somebody killed, even if it is not you who killed them, they just won't trust anyone anymore. Like if a human being burns your house, and you see a human being you get that...you'll never feel that confidence again.

The anxieties surrounding jealousy in the microcosms reflected a difficulty to trust others and therefore to act collectively for fear that they might want to cause one harm. The horizontal ties developed out of mutual need were thus difficult to translate into broader collective mobilisation, as suspicion of others was rife. That "wicked" people might want to stand in the

way of others' achievement was in fact also highlighted as a danger of engaging in vocal challenges of big people's greed. Witchcraft was in other words understood as a sign of selfishness in more than one way, and it also related to the fears of retaliation by those who had become "big" through their "selfish" accumulation. Doris in Kroo Bay argued that she would be unwilling to engage in any form of mobilisation in the slum area because:

If anything comes, the big ones hold it to themselves, we are not eager to go there because we know they only try for their own children. Some people try and stand up against that, but it's easy for them to make you sick or kill you.

Being the "Good Citizen"

Finally, the relationship between collective action and notions of citizenship played an important role in processes of shared meaning creation. Being recognised as a citizen was important in young people's imaginations. Showing oneself as respectable and as being within the law was a key aspect of young people's search for the recognition they felt was denied to them by their engagement in marginal economic activities. Allieu's recollection of an especially humiliating encounter with the police demonstrated this well:

Wednesday I was embarrassed at Mountain Cut, they went there and arrested me, I said: 'What? They said we should ride here'. They just said: 'Shut up' and slapped me, they put me inside the vehicle. They saw another bike they wanted to arrest, so when they went to do that I just pushed the door and ran away, I took refuge in one compound. I thought the matter was illegal, I am a citizen, I am a Sierra Leonean! I don't want to go against any rule or regulation, I am a law-

abiding man, I stopped where the government said I should stop, so why are they embarrassing me? It is illegal!

Another component to portraying oneself as the good citizen was the willingness not to be seen as anti-government and an emphasis on commitment to community development. In Abacha Street for example, Musu stated: “I feel happy for the APC, the President does not have *bad heart* he is a *kumbru*⁸² and a business man”. In Up Gun, Ibrahim however contrasted his claims to be seen as a “citizen not a foreigner” with the reflection that: “I love my President and the party, but he does not want to know us”. Their own commitment to community development and to supporting government efforts was therefore juxtaposed to the perception that these were not reciprocated. As Fatmata in Kroo Bay similarly noted: “I want changes, I want girls to work, not to sit down and do this *pass pass*, but they don’t listen unless you have money”.

This commitment to be seen as pro-development and as good citizens, however, also gave rise to contradictions that limited the potential for pursuing collective interests as young marginals. Operation WID was a good example of this. As we have seen it was framed as a project to make Freetown a more “developed” city. Being openly opposed to the Operation, then, might amount to being framed as anti-progress and risked confirming young marginals’ image as anti-establishment, undermining their claims for inclusion and recognition as citizens. It was therefore not uncommon for youths to complain about the impact that the Operation had had on their livelihoods while simultaneously supporting the project in principle. As Daniel argued in Up Gun: “I don’t see the restriction as a problem; when you watch movies from Ghana and Nigeria, the streets are nice and ordered”. As James Scott (1985: xvii) argues in his work on the *Weapons of the Weak*, “in public life— that is to say in

⁸² The Temne term for parent.

power-laden settings— a carefully calculated conformity prevails for the most part”. This conformity, Scott emphasises, is also a reflection of the fact that the struggle between the rich and the poor, and here youth and the state, is often based on shared values. Disputes about the banning of certain occupations, for instance, were not necessarily based on a rejection that such livelihoods are improper, but rather contested the lack of alternatives. Contesting the restriction openly, or more generally challenging the “big ones”, would not have only been difficult because of the barriers described above, but would have also entailed the risk of confirming images of marginal youth as anti-progress and not good and peaceful citizens.

Violent Threats and Everyday Resistance

The importance of public conformity, Scott reminds us, does not preclude other, more subtle forms of resistance. Seeing youths’ attempts to challenge their economic exclusion requires looking beyond organised mobilisation, to forms of everyday resistance and even actions with only implicitly political consequences. Indeed, the micropolitics of the everyday may in practice challenge authority and bring about social change, even when enacted out of necessity without political intentionality (Bayat 2010). Allowing space for appreciating the political salience of mundane acts helps expand the notion of political subjectivity and action amongst institutionally powerless groups. Three distinct variations of everyday resistance, with different degrees of political intentionality, could be identified in the microcosms: the rhetorical appropriation of official discourses; false compliance; and a politics of presence or “quiet encroachment” of public spaces.

“There will be great violence”

My conversation with Ahmed in a Freetown café as he watched on his bike, turned from the discussions of police harassment, explored above, to some thoughts that he said had been bothering him as he reflected on the current situation. Ahmed had come to Freetown from the Eastern town of Kenema after having to drop out of school in Form Six due to insufficient finance. Upon arriving to the city, *okada* riding had been an obvious stopgap, but he wanted to move on, and felt he needed to find someone to “structure things” for him. His lack of nurturing connections meant that he felt stuck in his current profession, something that made him increasingly frustrated:

All that I am thinking now is evil things against my country, against the lawyers, I am thinking negatively, to do bad things even against the magistrates, because I have decided to employ myself, to take care of myself, because I am a school leaver. [...] For now our country is not safe, when the youth are against any government, the country is not safe because we are the future leaders.

Ahmed’s suggestion that this blow to his livelihood, combined with his frustrations at being unable to leave *okada* riding might encourage him to become violent was frequently echoed by his colleagues in different settings. After the small riot outside Transport Authority in March 2013, for example, riders were called to a public meeting. The meeting was tense and inconclusive, so that once it was over the riders lingered to talk amongst themselves. One of them, Fenty, rushed towards me as he spotted me in the crowd and exclaimed:

The police want to start a war! We know where to get guns; we can even go to Guinea to get them!

It was not the first time that these threats of violence echoed in the microcosms. Before the 2012 elections, Belgium sellers warned of the dangers they might pose to security should jobs not be created after the vote. Samuel, a long-time commission chaser for example emphasised:

The government has to do great things for us, or there is going to be another war
[...] There will be great violence in 2012.

These threats of violence drew on the official discourses around the dangers of youth idleness, arguing that taking away livelihoods and failing to provide jobs was likely to cause an uprising or to push people into violent crime. Importantly, these threats were not followed up by attempts to organise violently. Indeed, in 2012 there was no “great violence”. As we shall see in Chapter 6, instances of election-related violence were primarily led “from above” following different dynamics from those threatened by young men like Ahmed, Fenty and Samuel. The barriers to collective action described above played a role in determining the potential for organised violent contestations. Furthermore, even when violence did happen, youths were quick to denounce it and to dissociate themselves from it, and to emphasise their claims to be seen as peaceful citizens. Ex-combatants like former RUF lieutenant Mohamed, argued that those who were posing those threats did not fully comprehend the implications: “Some boys say they will fight, but we call them *Junta-II*,⁸³ they don’t know what war is.”

What then was the significance of these threats? They seem inconsistent with attempts to be recognised as peaceful citizens; they countered efforts to combat stigma and indeed relied on the very narratives that marginalised youth in the urban microcosms. In addition, they did not,

⁸³ The nickname is a play on the AFRC/RUF Junta that followed the 1997 coup during the war.

at least for the time being, seem to offer direction for mobilisation or to provide a unifying mobilising frame, given barriers to group action and the widespread condemnation of violence as a useful political medium. However, the appropriation of official discourses can be seen as a form of rhetorical resistance, as young men leveraged the very language that excluded them, a language that they knew to be powerful and unnerving to decision-makers. This appropriation was therefore simultaneously potent and disempowering; it confirmed the image of young men as “ticking bombs” but may have also offered a rare opportunity to be heard. Violence in other words remains a potentially symbolic political resource for marginal young men in post-war Sierra Leone.

This strategy was indeed a primarily male strategy, as the use of the language of violence was not a resource young women availed themselves to. This highlights a further layer of complexity, whereby marginal young men’s symbolic capital grants them more leverage than young women, despite both groups being similarly excluded from organised forms of political voice. The association between African masculinity and violence that underpins policy discourses, with its long legacy stretching back to modes of colonial rule, was thus instrumentalised by young men themselves. Here, therefore, we see the unintended consequences of the policy gaze on unemployment at their starkest. Although the “ticking bomb” narrative might impact young men more negatively than young women, it also offered them more of an opportunity to make themselves into a salient, and indeed urgently salient, category of intervention. As claims for citizenship resulted in disappointment and the perception of being treated as a “foreigner” or a “slave”, emphasising their threatening potential was an avenue to add urgency to young men’s demands. While youths continued to struggle to organise around this potential salience as a category, their threats helped to bolster official fears, in the hope of ultimately becoming recipients of pacifying employment creation. If

emphasising state responsibilities towards their citizens seemed not to work, threatening violence might.

False Compliance

And indeed, the young men's anger did not always go unnoticed and at particular times, spaces for dialogue opened for a circumscribed period of time. During the implementation of Operation WID, several public meetings were called. A few weeks after the Operation's onset, for example, the Up Gun riders were invited to a public meeting in a nearby football pitch. They arrived *en masse* atop their bikes, raising clouds of dust, making their presence known. The meeting appeared to be a well-rehearsed exchange, where both parties knew their official scripts, being aware that both sides' realities were in fact following different, hidden scripts that were in direct conflict with each other. At the meeting, the union sat with city council on an elevated stand, while the riders were told to stay in the football pitch, looking up as they were being addressed. The official speeches praised the riders for their services and encouraged them to understand the government's reasons. In a highly symbolic moment, the authorities introduced a "model *okada* rider" who arrived impeccably dressed in a white suit, shining boots and police-style hat to be paraded as a prop to tell the riders off for their rough appearance and unlawful behaviour. Promises were made for an agreement to be reached, but no concrete changes or alternatives were offered; the meeting was rather an official acknowledgement of grievances and a plea to respect the new regulations. That very morning the riders were enraged and spoke of violent uprisings as they waited for the officials to arrive. Bockarie, who had fought for the Kamajors during the war, danced around telling anyone who would listen that as they waited for the enemy in the bush they used to dance to show they were not afraid. At the meeting, however, the riders cheered and clapped throughout.

Partly the cheering may reflect the low expectations these young men had of the likely outcomes of engagement with state representatives, if we consider the disillusionment outlined above. In addition, official flattery of the riders, regardless of how tokenistic, was welcomed by a group used to being depicted as lawless and improper. The riders' response can also be seen as an example of false compliance. Official meetings, given the riders' role in public forums, were not the place to resist Operation WID. Open compliance, furthermore, offered the opportunity to be seen as good citizens and to publicly uphold shared values. However, in their daily struggles for survival, small tricks were adopted to circumvent the restriction and to quietly oppose it. Many riders began, for example, painting their registration plates black, covering the red digits denoting vehicles registered to ride commercially. Others continued riding in the forbidden zones, taking the risk of encounters with the police, simply riding faster or taking more dangerous side routes where police check-points were less likely. These circumventions were depicted as necessary rather than intentional political acts, yet they served to undermine the Operation.

A Politics of Presence

Another form of subtle, and unorganised contention was visible in the alleyways of Kroo Bay and the market stalls of Abacha Street, something that we might call a politics of presence. Spending long afternoons perched on the stone walls of Kroo Bay's slum dwellings for example revealed the political importance of public spaces as hubs of discussion about anything ranging from healthcare to elders' "selfishness", where marginality and its causes were contested and a consciousness was being developed surrounding notions of fairness and citizenship.

This was made obvious on various occasions in Kroo Bay, for example, as I spent time sitting with a group of young women as they washed clothes and hung them on lines, or as they looked after their and their neighbours' children. One of them, Fatmata, argued that she had never attempted to make her concerns heard to an elder and had no intention of doing so, yet every day she engaged in vigorous discussions with her friends about the selfishness causing unemployment as elders "*watch face*" when projects come, or about how the government's new free healthcare for pregnant mothers was essentially equivalent to "free die". This politics of presence, visible across the microcosms, in *attaya* bases, palm wine stands, market stalls and so on, is especially significant for young women, whose less threatening symbolic capital made them less likely to be at the receiving end of pacifying opportunities for dialogue. In their market stalls or while performing domestic duties collectively outside, young women's political imagination was forged in the streets. This is also true of the horizontal ties created for survival, the support networks amongst young marginals that, albeit fragile, facilitated business but also offered the opportunity to perform those mutual obligations that were seen as being absent in a society where there was "no love".

Bayat (2010: 14) makes a powerful argument for the recognition of the urban street not only as a place where common grievances are identified but also as a locus of social and cultural reproduction as the dispossessed quietly "encroach" the ordinary through their physical presence of the street and their varied struggles to survive there. He argues that, "these mundane doings [have] perhaps little resemblance to extraordinary acts of defiance, but rather were closely tied to the practices of everyday life" (ibid.: 18). While construing any action as political quickly loses analytical significance, the content and context of "mundane doings" can turn some of these actions into acts of resistance. For example, at a time when the use of urban space for youths' subsistence was contested by the state, presence in the street became a political act. Contestations about a right to employment equally made public performance of

marginal livelihoods politically charged. The unfolding of young people's lives primarily in the microcosms' public spaces can thus be seen as a subtle form of everyday resistance, as a way to claim spaces, inscribing their existence in Freetown's cityscape, making it impossible for authorities to ignore.

Conclusion

This overview of politics in the urban microcosms highlights the multiple avenues for young people to be political actors in the urban space but also the very significant constraints that exist for the effective expression of youth political voice in post-war Sierra Leone. These discussions show three key ways in which labour market experiences shape processes of politicisation. Firstly, experiences of marginal work create political subjects in the sense that they structure young people's positioning within the political landscape, in terms of their relationship to the state and channels of mobilisation. This recognition cautions against a reading of occupational associations in the informal economy as necessarily emancipatory, as internal dynamics and relations of co-optation by the state impact the extent to which they are able to act as vehicles of political inclusion for those who are socially "small". Not only that, being "small" also impairs young members' ability to effectively achieve incorporation into systems of patronage that episodically mobilise them through associational leadership.

Secondly, labour market experiences play an important role in shaping young people's political claims. Young people's political imagination in fact was centred on notions of state obligations relating to the provision of decent work, as articulated through the language of citizenship. Exclusion from labour markets underpinned youths' understanding of fairness but also led them to separate their political calculations into individual short-term navigational

strategies that were distinct from, and often undermined, their redistributive claims. Recognising this paradox sheds light on the challenges of a situation where very high expectations are placed on the state in a context where jobs are scarce and avenues for voicing grievances are limited.

Ultimately despite disillusionment and the clear articulation of political claims rooted in experiences of marginal work, key barriers exist to young people's ability to mobilise collectively, whether as "makers" or as "breakers". These barriers are both internal to the microcosms and externally located in the post-war political opportunity structure, yet they are closely related to the social positions and fragile identities emerging from experiences of marginal work. This means not only that it was difficult for movements to emerge out of marginality but also that, apart from sporadic clashes, violent resistance "from below" was also constrained. However, while young people resorted to more subtle forms of everyday resistance, the continued symbolic capital of violent threats cannot be underestimated in this constrained space for political engagement. The power of claims based on threat of violence reflects young men's ability to appropriate the language that marginalises them, leading to a political dialogue where violence continues to be a major bargaining chip in relations between youth and the post-war state.

Chapter 6

Love and Betrayal: Informal Networks and the Moral Economy of Political Violence

Political violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone has been primarily characterised by inter- and intra-party conflicts, peaking around elections but erupting occasionally throughout the democratic cycle (ARI 2012). The 2007 elections for example saw significant clashes between supporters of the SLPP and the APC (Christensen and Utas 2008). The 2012 elections were deemed surprisingly peaceful, yet during the campaign there were attacks on the opposition leader as well as skirmishes between party supporters (CCG 2011; Mitton 2013). These forms of violence have been far more common than violent action “from below”, which, as we saw in Chapter 5, is difficult to organise. Electoral violence is not new to Sierra Leone. As Chapter 2 showed, the country’s political history is rife with examples of young people being mobilised for chieftom elections or as hired hands under the APC’s repressive one party state. In the aftermath of war, these events take on new meanings and they are shaped by the specificities of reconstruction and democratisation.

Regardless of their collocation in history, young people’s violent exploits around elections summon a specific version of the “ticking bomb” narrative, one that envisions their political engagement as destabilising by framing them as actors mobilised “from above” by entrepreneurs of violence (see Collier et al 2003). The assumption here is that youths, made corruptible by poverty, are easily exploited by powerful political interests. This narrative depicts young people lured by the immediate material rewards offered for acting violently as well as the opportunity for profit in the midst of chaos.

This Chapter looks at the intricacies of the process for recruitment in political violence and how they relate to young people's labour market experiences. Following the political violence trail revealed an interesting contrast between two groups' involvement in violent political incidents. The first was a group of Belgium sellers, who had on occasions made themselves available for violence around elections. The second were members of so-called political party "task forces". A comparison between these two groups' experiences reflects the importance of understanding political violence through the lens of young people's competition for inclusion in redistributive networks. Violence was used by some young marginals as a form of navigation, a way to signal loyalty to political strongmen in an attempt to cement reciprocal relationships, or to elicit the "love" of a *sababu*.

In a context where labour market dynamics are seen as being shaped by incorporation into exclusive networks, violence can be a tactic to enter and maintain relationships. Far from being focused on immediate material incentives, these attempts at navigation involved calculations for the future, despite a lack of immediate rewards, as well as being driven by moral claims of reciprocity and a search for social recognition. At the same time, the Chapter argues that availability for violence posited to be inherent in young bodies is not enough to achieve youths' goal of inclusion in this manner. Instead, the processes linking labour market exclusion and political violence revolve around the complex practices of achieving and maintaining a relationship of "love" with powerful politicians. The more systematic and organised violence of parties' "task forces" relied on the activation of pre-existing social ties and the ability to effectively signal loyalty through demonstrable ability for violence. It was the product of an exclusive form of incorporation that relied on becoming attached to a powerful *sababu* and to become necessary to him/her in the context of Sierra Leone's post-war political configuration.

The first section discusses the experiences of the group of Belgium sellers, through the eyes of

one of them, Siaka. Tracing Siaka's experiences of violence during different political events helps us understand how his calculations relied on his labour market experiences and aspirations. At the same time, Siaka's failure to navigate out of marginality by engaging in violence for a particular politician reflects how his exclusion from durable relations of dependence, or his social "smallness", precluded him from being systematically recruited for violence. In contrast, the second section discusses the processes of recruitment for members of party "task forces" and traces their recruitment to their collocation in the networks of "big men" and "big women". This also entails exploring the "demand" side of violence, asking why violence may be a useful currency of exchange in these political networks. The experiences of the task forces' ex-combatants however ultimately casts doubt on the effectiveness of violence as a navigational tactic.

"The politicians don't know you": Unsuccessful Networking Attempts

Politics is all about recognition, you have to make any moves to be recognised in the party, otherwise when they win, I can go and say 'I am Thomas' and they will just say 'I don't know you, wait for some time'.

Youth Political Activist

In order to engage directly with the posited association of the unemployed with the violent rented crowds phenomenon, it is useful to start with the protagonists of that story themselves: the marginal youth of the urban microcosms. For the large majority of these young people, political engagement and mobilisation were experienced in the way outlined in the previous chapter: co-option of occupational groups and subtle, muted attempts at resistance in the face of significant barriers to independent collective action. However, political violence was undoubtedly a prominent feature of their repertoire of political experience, it happened

frequently, and occasionally involved those they knew. Inter and intra-party violence were the primary, often the only, forms of political violence that young people across the microcosms pointed to when recounting their recent memories of violent politics. While for many personal experiences of politics were characterised by distance and alienation, some had intimate, violent encounters with it. A focus group, followed by several individual conversations with a group of Belgium sellers, who had experiences political violence first hand, illuminated the dynamics of these processes.

Our discussion of electoral violence emerged from extensive reflections on the broader phenomenon of politicians' penetration of their communities around election time, and the experience of being given cash, rice, alcohol or drugs in exchange for support, or making *gladi* for politicians. Politicians might simply ask for support, the logic went, or they might court young people's services for creating disruption. This association is significant because it reflects how violence can be seen as another form of showing support for a candidate and his or her party, an extension of the elite-led mobilisation that young people often find themselves co-opted into. However, individual accounts of violent experiences actually showed a different dynamic at play, revealing the role of more personalised interactions in contrast to community-wide or group-based processes of mobilisation. Van de Walle's (2007) suggestion that we differentiate analytically between different forms of state-society relations that involve exchanges or obligations, rather than classifying them all as "neo-patrimonialism", is pertinent, as the distribution of incentives or selective development as strategies to garner the support of whole electoral constituencies must be differentiated from personalised interactions.

Siaka's story is indicative here. He was twenty-four years old and was born in Liberia but grew up in Sierra Leone, his father's homeland. He grew up in the street after his mother died and

his father returned to Liberia, and this earned him the powerful street name Bomblast, after the deadly RUF commander. His interest in politics began at an early age:

I remember when I came to this country and I had enough sense, I met people who supported the SLPP. So they were SLPP and in 2002 I was also with them. In the 2007 elections I had left my family's place, so I joined up and decided to be independent and went APC. So in 2007 I campaigned and after they called the results and they said that His Excellency Ernest Bai Koroma was the President of Sierra Leone, the celebration was...well, I was sick the next day because I was so happy.

For the 2012 elections however Siaka returned to his initially favoured party, the SLPP, and it was in the run-up to those elections that he came close to power as he was approached, together with a handful of friends, to campaign for one of the many politicians running for a position in the party.

The convention for electing the next party executive was held at the Miatta Conference Centre in Freetown on the 31st July 2011. The Convention saw nineteen candidates contest the party leadership and several others vying for different positions in the party executive (Samba 2011). As the delegates voted inside the Conference Centre, supporters of the most prominent candidates rallied outside, leading to various confrontations. A spokesperson for one of the SLPP's leading women groups recounted some of the violent events from the day thus:

We came but they would not allow us inside the [Conference Hall] so we stayed at the gate, we sang and danced. We saw one of [one of the candidate's] boys and

that boy told our Chairlady to leave the area in ten minutes, he had a knife at the back, so we thought something bad is going to happen. The boys began to fight, firing guns, and they were telling people to hold [us].⁸⁴

Siaka was approached to back one of the candidates⁸⁵ for the convention and his account of this first encounter highlights the processes involved in becoming a politician's supporter. Firstly, Siaka recounted being called into the candidate's office by a man previously unknown to him; he emphasised the location of the encounter, suggesting, as others did in other conversations, that Belgium was a specific target for recruitment because of the large number of young under-employed youths that congregate there:

Before they went into convention one man came to take us from down Belgium, in King Jimmy, where they used to come and take the slaves to go with them; that is where he came to meet us. He said, let's got to [the candidate's] office, so we joined up and went.

The entry of this unknown intermediary was, for Siaka, an informal offering to enter a network, in which, in Utas' (2012a) terms, the candidate was the "node". After following the intermediary, and sitting in the candidate's office, and after a long period of waiting around, the man himself arrived and began his courting of Siaka and his friends:

He told us: 'In this country here, everybody knows this is the strong party, now we are going to convention and if I win [this position], you will see what I will do for people'. He talked and talked a lot to us: 'I'll do better things, I'm ready to

⁸⁴ Interview with SLPP Women's Wing Member, Freetown, 20.03.2013.

⁸⁵ In this chapter I have, as much as possible, removed any details that can identify individual politicians and where necessary also party affiliations. This is to protect my research interlocutors.

take care of young people, I have a big house that some guys can take care of.

Then he said, 'Now first we have to go into the convention and win.'

There was no mention of specifically what he needed them to do except support him and act as his followers, and to seal the deal, he "pulled money, about 250,000Le". Siaka admitted that once they arrived at the Convention he took part in the physical confrontations: "There were fights amongst ourselves, the SLPP supporters, because you know, anywhere where there is someone trying to take power, something must take place". Expanding on why he thought that violence might take place after one had been individually asked to support a particular politician, Siaka pointed out:

If I have a man I like, and I get into an argument with you, it won't take long until it turns into trouble. That's the problem because he [the politician] is the head, he's the cause and he's the one that gave the money, so really it's him that caused the fight.

The last sentence is especially indicative because it reflects an assumption that having been approached and remunerated to support someone individually comes with certain, potentially unspoken, expectations as to what that entails in practice. However, the story is arguably more complex. Firstly it is important to note the episodic nature of Siaka's engagement. After the brief encounter in the run-up to the convention, Siaka never saw the candidate again. "He just forgot about us", he said with unsurprised resignation. While Siaka's story highlights the role of informal networks in the mobilisation of young people during events such as the party convention, as violence consistently breaks out between different backers, it also starts to show that the strength of these networks and their sustainability play a role in defining the contours of processes of political violence.

Secondly, contextualising the encounter with the politician in Siaka and his colleagues' other experiences and their rationalisation of these experiences, helps to nuance the argument that would depict youths simply as vessels for violence exploited by powerful interest. In other words, the portrayal of violence as explicitly or implicitly mandated for political purposes must be balanced by an appreciation of violence as a form of political navigation, whereby showing someone loyalty, for example by fighting for them, can be a useful tactic. As discussed in the next section, certain features of the post-war political space make the ability to call on a personal pool of enforcers desirable for some politicians. Violence then could be a signalling mechanism, a means of portraying oneself as an especially loyal supporter in an attempt to enter into a relationship of reciprocity with a politician, an especially powerful kind of *sababu*. This was for example expressed by Siaka's qualification that political arguments were more likely to spark violence if one of the parties in the discussion had to show their allegiance to a politician: "If it was just a one on one conversation then we could just talk, I wouldn't fight you, but if you want to talk bad against my own politician, I won't accept it, that's when the fights come".

In addition, understanding violence as a way of steering one's path amidst structural realities with an eye towards the future, helps us make sense of why Siaka and his colleagues repeatedly underplayed the role of immediate incentives in their decisions to engage in violence on behalf of a politician. Incentives should not be turned down, they argued, but they were not the ultimate consideration in decisions to take part in confrontations. This was especially evident when contrasted with the widespread view that the money handed out by politicians more generally to make *gladi* was not a particularly useful tactic. Meeting with those politicians that made well-timed appearances in the community, cheering for them as they

campaigned was simply another way of hustling for daily survival, but one that required far less commitment and effort.

Siaka differentiated his ultimately unsuccessful venture with the candidate from other encounters, such as with a local politician who asked groups of Belgium sellers to walk around with him as he campaigned, which they did, and who gave them a small amount of money to share amongst themselves. Siaka argued that for this politician, “when it came to election time, we campaigned hard, but not for him, I have my own party.” Short-term gains, in other words, were not necessarily seen as requiring expending much energy in the campaign. The value of signalling loyalty came instead, Siaka and the others suggested, when there was potential to establish a personal connection, an individualised bond of reciprocity and obligations of future support. Doing this required being recognised by a powerful political player. Being recognised could open doors to the future, especially in a context where labour market success was seen as being determined by access to narrow networks of reciprocity. Despite critiques of these narrow networks, and a political imagination characterised by claims of broad-based redistribution, in practice, given existing resource monopolies, the competition for incorporation was intense. Political navigation in search of recognition then can be seen through this lens, as those actions taken in order to be recognised in the political game.

In Siaka’s narrative, becoming an enforcer was described as a key step towards entering a particular politician’s graces in order to ultimately achieve a position where violence was no longer necessary. It was a first stepping-stone, with the rewards expected to be in the longer term, so that offering one’s protection and solid support would hopefully translate into a strong bond with a *sababu* who would then take it upon himself to take care of him and find him a respectable job. Reflecting on his failure to establish a durable and productive

relationship with the candidate, despite their personal meeting and Siaka's subsequent role in unrest outside the convention, he spoke of his plans for the next election emphasising his need to step up his efforts to be individually recognised. His thoughts are worth quoting at length as they give an insight into the importance of being recognised as someone's "real man":

I am a young man, so life is going. What I am trying to say is that for this trip [the 2018 elections] I am an SLPP man, but I'm not just going to shout "SLPP, SLPP", I mean I'll go with them, yes, but there is a point where I need to get somebody who is a strong one inside the SLPP, who I will link up to see if after the election I can find my own place to hang. So, like, before this next election I want to get someone who is a big one to link with. I will campaign for my party, but when the time reaches I want somebody I can be with, someone who can recognise me and think: 'This man is my vigilant man around'. This trip I don't want to just *gladi-gladi* for ages for nothing, because then my party will win but unless there is someone who know my face... Like, you can go there and they can pull 5,000 or 10,000Le to give us, but if I have somebody who I link up with and they recognise me, they must fight to put me in the kind of position that people will then look at me and say: "This man can be in that position". I will be inside. That is my plan.

Siaka's political preferences and actions were not entirely instrumental: the choice of party was a product of a mix of considerations, such as his family's political preferences as well as, to some extent, an assessment as to what party he expected to be better placed to govern the country according to his priorities, such as job creation. Even the obviously instrumental aspects of his actions were more complex. They were of course central in determining the

means of his engagement, but this was in terms of an effort to be incorporated into networks of reciprocity and the expectation that loyalty would be rewarded with inclusion and redistribution. Siaka's calculations were indicative of the importance of recognition, and in particular of being seen as a "vigilant man". He spoke of his vigilance in reference to his physical strength, something he took much pride in: "Sometimes my friends come around and say, 'If you were in a different country, like Gambia or something, you would make money because you have a good body, you are vigilant'".

Vigilance reflected both physical strength and an ability to protect someone, and in Siaka's eyes, this was an attribute that he hoped might grant him the necessary recognition to become successfully "attached" to somebody. A good position in the future, then, was far more important than immediate pecuniary rewards. In addition, Siaka's words reflected a sense that he deserved to have somebody acknowledge his worth and his ability to take up a respectable position. When discussing how his vigilant body would take him places if he lived abroad, he added: "Sometimes I can sit down and think that this time is just wasted, because the business that we do is not something that means something is going to happen, so I believe this is not the business I should be doing, I should be on a higher level".

This emphasises once again the ultimately social meaning of work and it is here that the connection between the social implications of labour market dynamics and political violence is clearest. It shows the draw of being "on a higher level", as a determinant of one's social worth. In addition it suggests that the competitive search for a *sababu* was not simply expedient to finding work, but also a key component in the search for nurturing relations in a context of resource monopolies, where reciprocity means that one is well-integrated as well as ensuring one's trajectory out of economic marginality and towards one's own "bigmanity". Siaka's story and his way of expressing it and reflecting on it, therefore sheds light on the

richness of social meaning instilled in these relations, the role that violence might play as one way of cementing them, but also the difficulty of becoming effectively included.

A key theme in discussions with this group of Belgium sellers was that despite these young men's occasional use of violence as a signalling mechanism to secure the "love" of a powerful *sababu*, their attempts were mostly unsuccessful; their engagement tended to be episodic and ultimately disappointing. Their signals of loyalty were eventually insufficient to elicit the obligations they had hoped, something that they viewed with frustration and a sense of injustice. This was often articulated through feelings of having been "ignored" or being "invisible" and "forgotten". In the Belgium focus group, Sheku gave an example of an instance when, together with others, he had forced his way through a crowd of traders in order to make space for a rally due to pass along Abacha Street:

Those Abacha Street girls would not let people pass, so [the politician] told us: 'These people are stopping us from passing, make us pass!' So we bulldozed the place, we scattered people's market. We bulldozed the Abacha people! People started running in all directions and as the police started catching people and [the politician] just said it wasn't him we were fighting for. [...] After the fights come, and they beat you good in prison, if you go to the politician and tell him: 'Papi, it's for you that they beat me in prison', they will just tell you: 'Get out you idler, you are drunk, you are crazy!'

Sheku thus felt he had been forsaken after having made significant sacrifices for a politician. What was also interesting in his recounting of his experience was the fact that failure to be recognised was symbolised by politicians' emphasis of the young men's marginality and the stigma that goes with it ("...you idler, you are drunk, you are crazy"). Failed navigation tactics,

in other words, amounted to remaining stuck in one's current socio-economic predicament. A frequent reaction to being discarded was the promise of disengaging in the future. This was encapsulated in a discussion with K-Man, who during the 2012 elections had campaigned for the SLPP faction in Belgium, a minority in the traditionally-APC ground. He spoke of their attempt to keep the elections peaceful, and their decision, together with the APC counterparts to draw an invisible line across the Belgium selling-ground to divide the different parties' supporters. In conveying why he had focused on keeping the elections peaceful he said that one reason was this: "I told my boys to keep cool, because the politicians don't know you, at least they don't know you much". Violence was only seen as a worthwhile form of navigation if it resulted in recognition, otherwise it was futile.

For those who, like Siaka, considered or had in fact been engaged in political violence, the emphasis on reciprocity and the importance of being "known" by a politician, coexisted however with those imaginations of political community outlined in Chapter 5. There was, then a split-level morality in young people's political assertions. On the one hand there were expectations tied to navigational tactics, namely the notion that obligations of reciprocity would emerge from attempts to forge individualised interactions with a *sababu*. On the other, there were notions that voting and supporting politicians should ultimately result in service-provision. Shakur summarised this feeling well in the focus group, pointing to nepotism as a way to condemn the prominence of personal ties in determining one's fortunes in Sierra Leone:

Look how we are now, no development, no nothing, and now they are sitting up there and we played a big role in them sitting where they are [...] They are not even able to make a little water pump that we can survive by. So we, the young men of Belgium, talk to the leaders who are there today and say: 'Please

remember us like you remember your children'. Let them take care of us. Because their children are enjoying their lives today because we put their fathers where they are. As far as I'm concerned, I see nothing they have done for Belgium, just suffering and corruption.

The coexistence of claims of redistribution based on critiques of narrow networks and individual tactics aimed at incorporation in those very networks is significant. It reminds us of the complex nature of those political subjectivities that are often left out of the stories we tell about violence (Hoffman 2006). Most importantly, it points to the institutional roots of these dynamics, that is, to the fact that in the context of a constrained political space and an exclusionary labour market, the contours of a fair polity could be imagined while at the same time attempting to expediently "play the game", occasionally in violent ways. Political imagination remained a thing of a close-to-utopian future, a project that had to contend with everyday realities that seemed to face young people with a choice between individual incorporation, at whatever cost, and exclusion. For some of them, violence appeared as one way of navigating present terrains.

Violence of course is just one possible tactic, and one attempted only by a few, yet it is one that warrants particular attention given the weight of association between youth and the potential for destabilising violence in post-war Sierra Leone. The fact that many young people did not engage in and most commonly rejected the use of violence as a political strategy is of course indicative of the reductive analyses of the political agency of the unemployed. However, it also points to the fact even should they wish to choose this avenue, marginal youth are less embedded in the informal networks that make violence a potentially useful mechanism. John, a shoe seller on Lightfoot Boston Street argued this poignantly:

For my family I would fight...but they [the politicians] don't know me, so there will be no need to make campaigns for them. They do not even know if I exist, I just walk in stress and suffering by myself. Nobody knows me as far as I'm concerned.

Contrasting their experiences with those of more systematically recruited political party foot soldiers reveals the importance of being well inserted in the right networks. In addition, the comparison offers the opportunity to reflect on the demand dynamics for political violence, in which young people such as the Belgium sellers described above themselves occasionally find themselves (less successfully) intertwined.

Risk, Recognition, Reward: A Case Study of Political Party Task Forces

“The war may be over, but the struggle continues.”

Suleiman, ex-combatant/ Task Force member

Introducing the Task Forces

Both main political party offices in Freetown are bustling places, with supporters and hangers-on coming in and out all day, some waiting to see a politician, others simply socialising or eager to hear the latest news from headquarters. Around the corner from the main buildings, hidden from sight inside the compounds, one can also find a different kind of congregation spot, one that is inhabited by the so-called task forces. These are hangout spots, where drinks are sold and *djamba* is cut to be shared out while political discussions ensue. In the evening, food occasionally arrives and is served in order of rank within the task force. Delving deeper

into the occurrence of post-war political unrest, it became clear that these places were essential building blocs in the story.

Task forces have played a crucial role in the unfolding of various violent incidents since the second peacetime elections in 2007. Christensen and Utas (2008) have studied the establishment of these groups in both major political parties, analysing the dynamics of recruitment and positing continuity between the logic of war and that of peacetime politics. The purpose of this section is to situate this phenomenon in the context of our discussion of labour market dynamics. Through comparison with the experiences of young men like Siaka, this will help us draw out broader implications about the complex processes linking labour markets and involvement in political violence for marginal youth. The discussion below focuses on both major political parties, the APC and the SLPP so as to show how the dynamics chronicled here applied across the political spectrum and to focus rather on structural factors and the role of dependence and personal relations. As in previous sections, these findings are based on observations in the party offices and life narratives and interviews with political party activists, including task force members from both parties whose trajectories I followed over the years.

Political party task forces are security details to the party. While a limited number of bodyguards for the highest cadres are paid regularly, most task force members are informally engaged, they act as volunteers, though they are given “incentives” for specific missions and are often provided with daily sustenance and handouts.⁸⁶ For reasons that will become obvious, the task forces are organised along the organizational arrangements of military groups, with a hierarchical structure starting with the Task Force Commander, followed by

⁸⁶ In order to make the comparison useful, I focus the discussion on these non-salaried task force members.

Deputy Commanders and Operations Officers. Both parties' consider the task forces as one of their internal organs, with the specific function of mobilising young people, though their tasks, as security agents, are distinctive. There are, within each party, separate women's groups, but individual women are also given specific roles within the security detail. As well as being party supporters and mobilisers, taking part in campaigns and "sensitisations", these task forces secure the party office as well as being taken on tour as protection during political campaigns. Different task force configurations exist for different purposes and at different times, for example to protect the party office or to tour with party representatives during electoral campaigns.

Task forces' role in politically motivated violence was chronicled in my discussions with individual members through reference to a series of specific incidents that were seen as reflecting the force's purpose. In addition, spending time at party offices allowed me to witness situations when the task forces were rallied into action. Specific events can be broadly categorised as follows: attacks on party offices; attempts on the lives of senior politicians; and intra-party skirmishes. Some examples were the 2007 looting of the SLPP office just hours after the swearing in of President Koroma, a form of shaming of losers by the winning party not unprecedented in Sierra Leone's history (see Ferme 1999). APC supporters attacked and ransacked the office *en masse*. The SLPP task force retaliated in order to protect the office by pelting stones and engaging in physical confrontations with the looters. A similar scene was repeated in 2009, in the aftermath of local elections, and the Bankole-Thompson Commission was established to investigate claims that APC task force members raped nine women inside the party office.⁸⁷ Also in 2007, APC task force members accused opposing party supporters of attempting to murder Presidential candidate Ernest Koroma in his hotel in Bo during the

⁸⁷ These claims were denied by the accused (Cotton Tree News 2009)

electoral campaign. In retaliation, senior APC task force members severely beat a prominent SLPP politician's security detail.

In 2011, during a thank-you tour of Bo, SLPP flagbearer Julius Maada Bio was injured by stones aimed at his head (CCG 2011). The provincial APC office was consequently burnt down and several people injured. The SLPP convention in 2012, as mentioned above, saw task force members take centre stage in confrontations between supporters of contenders for various executive positions. Intra-party violence also erupted in 2013, during my time of fieldwork, as the SLPP Party Chairman, John Oponjo Benjamin and the Treasurer Joe Kallon were accused of embezzling \$60,000 that had been donated to the party by Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan (see Bundu and Senessie 2013). Clashes ensued between supporters of Maada Bio and John Benjamin, and Joe Kallon accused some task force members of manhandling him and stealing his car. This ultimately resulted in various arrests and the barring of entrance to the SLPP office for various months by armed Operational Support Division (OSD) men, turning the office, as some disgruntled supporters put it, into "barracks". Aside from specific instances of clashes and assaults, the task forces' very presence and their everyday performance of violence is of equal importance in understanding the contours of violent mobilisation and its connection to labour market dynamics.

The incidents reveal task force's involvement in confrontations and intimidation of opponents (whether inside or outside the party) and retaliation to such instances of intimidation. Another important task, highly significant for a comparison with the Belgium boys' experiences, was task force members' acting as intermediaries in the recruitment of ad hoc reinforcements, the sort of episodic violent mobilisation discussed above. Unlike youths like the Belgium sellers, task force members are established party foot soldiers, whose daily existence revolves around the party itself. During moments of pressure, they are in charge of

calling for reinforcements from those youths in search of more permanent recognition. Mohamed, a task-force member, for example argued:

We have men from Belgium. We have a lot of people from Belgium. We have our representatives there and they are organising people so we'll just call and say: 'Hey, our man, there is pressure here' so they will come immediately. All over this country, when there is pressure you will just call and say: 'Senior men, we need people to come and reinforce us because people are attacking us'.

Mohamed therefore highlighted the layered nature of the networks central to the mobilisation of violent political action, whereby big-men may be “nodes”, but several intermediaries, placed at different degrees of distance from the central node, play equally crucial roles.

Recruitment: Remobilizing Networks

Understanding who these task force members are and how they were recruited offers a useful insight into what differentiates them from the young men of the previous section. It is in fact this difference that helps highlight how the logic of labour markets and that of political violence are related. The most important differentiating trait lies in the two groups' social networks. The task forces can be seen as a case study into the deployment of violent labour through networks of reciprocity. This deployment however, was not task force members' end-goal, much like their less well-connected counterparts, they hoped that their privileged connection to powerful *sababus* would help them navigate their individual paths into financial stability and thus socially-sanctioned adulthood.

Tracing individual members' entrance into the task force revealed that having someone who introduced them to the office and recommended them to join the task force was central to the recruitment process. Significantly, these stories were often told in terms of having been "recognised" and having their worth acknowledged, precisely what young men like Siaka were after. Alimamy, an APC task force member, told his life story before the task force as one of solitary struggle. As he returned from a spell in Guinea after the war, he started a small commission-based cigarette business but soon turned his gaze to politics as a potential navigational tactic. He argued:

When you work under [somebody else] the pressure is too much. So I looked around and said, let me involve myself in politics, to find a person to help me, because I have so many ideas for my life.

Alimamy's choice of politics as a way to pursue the ideas he had for his future was also combined with a number of other reasons that account, for example, for his specific party preference in a way that politics as survival cannot. The SLPP had been his initial choice because of its role in ending the war, but later he was angered by President Kabbah's Operation Free Flow in 2007 to clear the street of traders, which landed him in Pademba Road Prison for five days. Ultimately, hearing the APC's Ernest Koroma speak in Kono district, where he spent some time as an informal diamond digger, made up his mind: "The way Ernest talks to people made my heart grow, I sat where he was and I just thought, this is my leader, so I decided to leave". Recognising the multiplicity of motives is important to emphasise the interaction between political subjectivity and imagination on the one hand and the instrumentality of violence as navigation on the other. Regardless of his reasons for joining, however, the mode of his engagement was characterised by his success in being

recognised by an APC Chairlady⁸⁸ to whom he supplied business. This woman fit the profile of the *sababu* in his narrative, not only in her ability to connect him to the party, but also for her maternal attitude in taking him under her care:

She said: ‘Alimamy, you explained to me about your business, come near me, let me help you find money for yourself’. She said: ‘Come here, let me find for you’, and she found me a security job at a rubber factory.

After having gained experience as a security Alimamy moved into the the Task Force with the help of the same Chairlady. The move from a paid to a voluntary job may seem incongruous, yet Alimamy envisioned getting into the “political game” as offering better chances of reaching higher places. In his eyes, the Chairlady played a key role in initiating his exit from economic marginality: “Some people still call me with business, but I’m in politics now”, he said with pride.

While the role of solid connections, and particularly well-placed *sababus*, was a recurring theme in all task force members’ narratives, one kind of network was predominant. The majority of established task force members, in fact, were ex-combatants from different factions of the civil war. Their entry into the task forces, as exposed by Christensen and Utas (2008), was through the remobilization of wartime networks. This meant that ex-combatants were remobilised into task forces by politicians who either knew them for their wartime reputation or, more commonly, had been in contact with them during the war years. In addition, as ex-combatants became remobilised, they brought their former colleagues with them into the political arena. High-ranking commanders often acted as nodes in connecting their former “boys” to the “political game”, giving rise to multiple and layered webs of reciprocity.

⁸⁸ ‘Chairlady’ is used here as a general term for a woman with significant ties with the political party

According to task force members' recollections, their units had been called into existence in the run-up to the 2007 elections, with politicians approaching them to request their engagement. A number of them had been jailed during the 2000 state of emergency and appeared in controversial domestic trials against the AFRC (including members of the West Side Boys) and the RUF (See Anders 2014). Their release from jail was the first step in the reactivation of the networks that led them into the political domain. One task force member recalled:

We did more than seven years in prison, then the [party] called us: 'Gentlemen, you are our sons, I want you to forget the past, we need your support', and they brought us in.

Remobilization, in fact, was often depicted as an attempt on politicians' side to redress the "suffering" that ex-combatants had been through in the aftermath of war, a way of recognising their struggle, especially for those who had been jailed. Another task force founding member, Amadu, similarly argued: "They [party representatives] approached us and said: 'Now we have done you bad, we made you suffer, so for that reason we would like you to get involved in politics'". In remembering his trajectory from jail into the political arena, Amadu described a situation whereby politicians from both sides of the spectrum approached the imprisoned ex-fighters who in turn divided themselves along party lines. Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly for a story focused on the centrality of networks, the dividing line fell roughly along former combat group lines. As it happened, Amadu and his companions were approached with an explicit offer. He remembered:

He [a senior politician] invited us to his house. [...] When the [other party's] task force decided, as 2007 was approaching, to attack the our office, so when [he] got

that information he decided to call on [a few of us] and said ‘Now gentlemen, form a task force for this party, I will take care of you. I will be responsible for you, and you will fight this battle. Then after this election, I will send you out to train as security and you will become a personal security.’ So we went there and fought. We fought heavily! From that time we started looking after the party office and we got more involved in politics.

What was clear from these recollections was that the task force members had strong connections with powerful *sababus* who recognised them and promised them future support. It is important to contextualise task force members’ trajectories in order to understand their mobilisation as a form of navigation. Apart from various personal reasons for entering politics, a common narrative reflected the experience of failed reintegration processes, whereby these ex-combatants had not been able to make a living from the trainings they had received. A female task force member, Janet for example reflected on how, after coming out of the bush and undergoing DDR, she found herself unemployed and reliant on an unprofitable street trading business. Those who had been jailed, in addition, had not even been offered the opportunity to train and, as task force member Alex put it: “All I know in this country is the gun”, adding that in any case his reputation as a former fighter made him reluctant to attempt job applications.

Many ex-combatants therefore shared a starting point of economic marginality with their Belgium counterparts, yet what differentiated them was their level inclusion into political networks. They were a step further up the ladder, in the sense that although they remained, by their own admission, “small”, they had access to prominent *sababus* that other youths did not have. The nature of task force members’ social capital and their more systematic inclusion in relations of reciprocity were central to the mobilisation of violent labour for political

purposes. An elucidation of these relations, the expectations and exchanges involved, helps us gain an insight into the dynamics of these networks of reciprocity. Before turning to this discussion however, it is first important to ask why the violent labour of task forces was necessary, and therefore why these networks existed in the first place.

Demand Side Logics: Institutions and Insecurity

If we consider the dynamics described here as a marketplace for violent support, a marketplace defined by socio-structural characteristics as well as moral obligations, demand for violence cannot be ignored. To be sure, elite-engineered violent political action is not new to Sierra Leone, from colonial times to the APC years through to the war, and the informalisation of power over the course of the country's history lay the foundations for the prominence of clientelistic networks as a way of cementing political power through economic resources. Resting on these historical roots, however, the specificities of Sierra Leone's post-war political constellation also shape the logic of contemporary demand for violent politics. While it is beyond the scope of this study to analyse in depth politicians' motivations, contextual interviews with key decision-makers, observation of political events, and task force members' own assessments offered some useful insights.

To begin with, clients or dependants are an important foundation of political power. As Berman (1998: 338) has pointed out, "to survive in such a dangerous world, requires both support and protection, which is precisely what patrons and clients are supposed to provide for each other". Politicians, in other words, also have a stake in establishing multiple, though exclusive, relationships centred on reciprocal obligations and social ties. However, we also need to understand the nature of these relationships, and the basis of access into them, from the point of view of the institutional structures in which they operate. Networks can thus be

seen as a means of achieving common interests, though not necessarily shared goals, between “big men” and their dependants. This is correlated with the fracturing of formal state institutions in the sense that that, “with weak or absent state institutions the structural alternative is more influential and stronger informal networks of governance” (Utas 2012a: 5). Task force members play a specific role in political networks as physical protectors and enforcers, which begs the question: why are protection and violence necessary?

One overwhelming justification lay in a particular kind of institutional weakness, namely a widespread lack of trust in the state’s security forces, reported by task force members and politicians alike. Despite significant efforts to restructure the security sector by international and local state-builders, parties and individual politicians continued to find it necessary to rely on their own trusted security details for protection. This was an especially strong justification on the opposition’s side, whose representatives repeatedly argued that the police and other arms of the state security sector were politicised and as such not to be trusted. This was also evidenced by the fact that the ruling party office was secured, alongside the task forces, by armed OSD officers, while the opposition office relied solely on task force members. When OSD were called in to take over the SLPP headquarters compound during confrontations between Bio and Benjamin backers in 2013, angry opposition supporters claimed that it was a political move to destabilise the SLPP. At the same time they pointed to the fact that Maada Bio’s OSD security detail was withdrawn suddenly and without explanation immediately as the confrontation began, supposedly making him more vulnerable in the midst of a security threat.

However, lack of trust in state security providers was not solely an opposition concern; ruling party officials similarly expressed a preference for security provided by those known to be loyal to the party. A spokesman for the APC’s youth activist for example argued, in slightly

more veiled language than his opposition counterparts, that someone close to the party is more likely to be trustworthy, comparing the party to an individual:

The APC task force are here to provide security services because most of them are retired security servicemen. [...] It is very complex here. In life, you should be the best security for yourself. Inasmuch as people may attempt to give you security, you as an individual are more mindful of your own security. And the man's best servant is him or herself. [...] Normally when politics reaches its peak, security officers are not trusted, and a man's best servant is him or herself.⁸⁹

This lack of trust in the state's security apparatus also importantly reveals a sense of insecurity that pervaded discussions with political actors. Remobilised ex-combatants, and the task forces more generally, derive their relevance, or even necessity from this insecurity attached to the business of politics in post-war Sierra Leone. One important source of insecurity can be understood through the lens of what Ferme (1999: 160) terms the "dialogics of publicity and secrecy". She points to the accepted division between public and secret spheres in Sierra Leone, that is, the widespread assumption, made both by politicians and their electorates, that politics happens in different spaces, some public and some secret, and that covert strategies play a fundamental role in the workings of politics. This makes for permanent ambiguity of political intention, something that she frames as "one of the defining features of postcolonial subjectivity in Sierra Leone" (ibid.: 161). A second, and connected insight, is that performance is key in mediating secret and public domains, as "power is seen to work in secret covert spheres, whose existence is tantalizingly evoked by the use of polysemic symbols in the public domain", and that these symbols are "linked to the historical genealogy of the modern state" (ibid.: 183).

⁸⁹ Interview with APC Youth Activist, Freetown, 18.03.2014.

These two insights were manifest in parties' evocation of insecurity and, consequently, in their deployment of task forces. An especially illustrative case was the SLPP's allegations, made both before and after the 2012 elections that the APC was secretly arming their supporters.⁹⁰ A prominent member of the opposition grassroots youth faction for example argued for the need of a task force pointing to those alleged covert tactics, ultimately inciting violence as a way of addressing the feeling of insecurity provoked by these rumours. He asserted that the purpose of the task forces was to defend the party:

Because we are seeing that the APC passed a bill to legitimise the sale of arms, and they [...bought] arms and ammunitions, right?⁹¹ And they are using their tribesmen, taking them to Samu [in Kambia District] and giving them trainings. A good number of them are becoming OSD, but these are just disguised APC, you know, hoodlums who want to use the OSD to impose violence on our people. But they are making a great mistake in failing to realise that we are already trained. We don't have ammunitions, but we have to buy ours. That is what I am going to advise my youth, to go out there massively and purchase their ammunitions, get your AK-47s and go out there and licence it so that nobody will scare another person.⁹²

In this climate of ambiguity and insecurity, the task forces can be seen to play not only a protective but also a symbolic and performative role. The mere presence of task force

⁹⁰ The accusations that the APC had bought arms in view of the 2012 elections was a cause of significant controversy that prompted the UN ERSG, Michael van der Schulenburg to ask the government for clarification regarding the shipment, which he referred to as a "worrying sign" (Security Council Meetings Coverage 2012).

⁹¹ In 2012 Sierra Leone's parliament legalised the possession and use of arms, ammunition and light weapons by civilians (see Cham 2012).

⁹² Interview with SLPP Youth Activist, Freetown, 17.03.2014.

members at the party office, or standing behind politicians at rallies, was a powerful performance of strength, one that in this context of insecurity, signalled readiness and strength in the face of covert, violent challenges. This spectacle was made especially evocative by the fact that many task force members, as we have seen, were renowned ex-combatants. As such, they could be seen as symbols of the recent past, linked, as in Ferme's (1999: 183) framework, to the "historical genealogy of the state". Their role is embedded in the history of strong-handed rule in the 1970s, yet today this history is recast through a lens far more powerful to the present-day observer, that of the civil conflict.⁹³ It is especially important to understand the centrality of performance from the point of view of the dialogue between public and secret, whereby a multiplicity of meanings coexist in the political arena, where different performances and scripts run parallel to each other. This can help shed light on the apparently incongruous phenomenon of the deployment of task forces made up of ex-combatants and the commitment, perennially vocalised on all sides of the political spectrum, to a new peaceful politics. Public performances of peaceful politics, through exhortations to abstain from violence, were therefore paralleled by unspoken, but equally powerful spectacles of might, which, through the evocation of powerful symbols, sent signals to opponents.

Love and Betrayal: Obligations, Adverse Incorporation and Instability

Insecurity therefore provides a useful backdrop from which to understand politicians' incentives for maintaining relations, and as such goes some way towards explaining how and why political "big" men or women may choose to incorporate task force members into their networks, alongside pre-existing social ties. However, understanding the nature of these relations also reveals how these structural conditions give rise to specific obligations within

⁹³ Several newspapers picked up on this and condemned the use of ex-combatants by emphasizing the signal that this remobilisation sent. The *Standard Times* for example framed its analysis of the SLPP task force thus: "Sending the wrong signal election time: ex-combatants in green colours" (Neville 2007).

these bounded communities. Looking at what inclusion looks like from the point of view of “insiders” shows the nature of exclusive obligations and how these are elicited and maintained. This contributes to an understanding not only of task force members’ motivations for joining, but also of how labour markets, reciprocity and violence are related.

The notion, expressed by several remobilised ex-combatants, that an offer of political engagement was somehow a way to redress past wrongs, to bring ex-fighters back into the fold, together with Amadu’s rendition of a politician’s promise: “I will take care of you”, offers a useful window into the nature of obligations. As assumed by Belgium sellers in their attempts to enter these networks, expectations of reciprocity played an important role in the relationship between task force members and political actors or powerful intermediaries. Incorporation into networks with *sababus* was an expedient way of manoeuvring dependence in order to create opportunities for transition. Ultimately, however, the realities of this much-aspired-to incorporation, as experienced by task force members, had mixed outcomes and rather reflected the limits of seeking independence through a *sababu*.

Relations of reciprocity with political players were characterised by the expectation that loyalty would be materially rewarded, but also relied on notions of fairness whereby those with more access to resources ought to redistribute inside their networks. Loyalty and personal connection were thus emphasised in order to establish the boundaries of a moral community based on “love”, the “thick materiality” of social relations amongst unequals discussed in Chapter 4. Task force members stressed their personal affection for the leader they had “attached” themselves to, a sentiment often linked back to the bonds developed over the years, for example through war-time connections. In order to legitimise their expectations of being taken care of, in other words, task force members leveraged on their being someone’s “boy” (or “girl”). Significantly it was suggested that the intensity of moral obligation to

redistribute depended on closeness to a *sababu*. Task force members would point to the strength of their personal connection to particular leaders, to suggest that it made them better positioned than other would-be supporters to legitimately make claims on them. In one of our discussions, for example, Alex argued that he expected his political *sababu* to help him in the future, so I asked him whether all his supporters expected that, to which he replied:

No, not everybody, but you have the main people who are close to him. [He] calls me by name, he says: Alex, he's my boy.

Being taken care of meant both immediate “incentives” for specific missions and other forms of everyday support, such as bailing task force members out of prison or taking care of their medical expenses. However, these daily expressions of care were often seen as secondary to longer-term hopes that political *sababus* would provide jobs and better livelihoods once they had come into power. Task force members who, like Alex had fought the war and developed links to prominent politicians at the time, spoke of loyalty to their connections in these terms:

He is my boss, I am a security to him. [...] If these election results had gone well, we would be training abroad as special security. Now no job, but we must protect him. Whenever we go anywhere, he gives us something or if he goes he leaves for us, but it's not a basic salary. But he has a plan for us. When [the party] will win anywhere else, he will never leave us behind. We rely on him.

This was often contextualised in discussions by pointing to the fact that *sababus* were essential to finding a job. Amongst the opposition this was also framed in an ethno-regional perspective, suggesting that until the current government was in power, it would not be possible for South-Easterners to find work, something that made supporting the SLPP a

matter of even greater importance. In any case, the fruits of loyalty might take a long time to materialise, depending on the political fortunes of one's *sababu*, yet becoming incorporated into his or her networks was seen as an investment in the future.

Being someone's boy however, the task force members were very aware, required fulfilling one's side of the equation, showing loyalty. Recognition was not a one-off achievement granted by pre-existing networks; it needed to be maintained. Task force members therefore emphasised their relevance and loyalty by showing the extent of their love for their leader. The mechanism linking loyalty to reciprocity in a context of violence was well summarised by Tejan:

There is no salary. That's why they [the politicians] say: 'Risk, Recognise and Reward', you can come and do something without salary so they will say, 'Look this person, he really works hard oh!' [...] They will recognise you and say you are somebody who is good to them, so they will be able to say: 'This person is good'.

The reward is what I get if the party wins.

The ability to struggle for the party was repeatedly highlighted as a way of showing that one was a "real man" to the party. Taking risks for no immediate benefit, according to Tejan, was a way to show commitment to a *sababu* for the promise that, when the time came, this long-standing loyalty would be rewarded. It is at this point that relations of reciprocity and violence interact. The taking of risks referred to instances of violence committed in the past, as well as the demonstrated ability to withstand attacks in order to secure the party and its leaders. Indeed, justifications for having been actively involved in violent incidents usually centred on the importance of being loyal to a leader and emphasising that what had been done, was done for them. Tejan himself for example, took responsibility for an act of violence during an

electoral campaign that had left several bystanders injured. He argued that the acts had not been specifically mandated, but that it was his duty to his leader: “If you are with your boss and you see something going on, something that is not fine, you have to react for him!”

Here in particular, ex-combatants played up their comparative advantage as experienced fighters suggesting that their ability to fight made them more valuable task forces, and that this, together with their pre-existing ties, was what gained them more recognition than others. Amadu recalled the a clash between party factions, one of which had “many thugs”, however:

Most of them are civilians, so we have an advantage. We were able to overcome them because we have the experience, because we are ex-combatants. They are civilians but because they are physically fit they think they can challenge us, but we are braver than them, we ran after them, we beat and we stabbed them. We sang and danced, we powered for him...So fearful! So people saw [our man] has ex-combatants, so people feared, and people said, we will give [him our support]

Suffering violence for the party was also an important aspect of task force members’ attempts to emphasise their commitment, to show they deserved to be adequately recognised. Mariatu for example, a female task force member, spoke of the strength of her engagement for the party, or being “deep into the game” by pointing out the times she had been beaten by the opposition. Near her place in Freetown, she overheard the opposing party’s supporters talking and decided to intervene:

They talked about the [other party] so I said, if [we] come to power, things will change. Their hearts became warm and they kicked my pregnant belly until I lost the pregnancy.

Aside from specific episodes, task force members engaged in everyday performances of violence, visually embodying their potential for acting on the party's behalf. This was for example through frequent emphasis on physical scars acquired during political fights. The notion of being "fearful", expressed by Amadu, was also highlighted as a key attribute of a task force member. This was displayed especially vividly as I spent the day with a group of task force members who were getting ready to announce one of their colleagues' victory in a "selection" for task force commander. The winner, Danny, a former fighter, had bought drinks and rice for everyone and was celebrating (as it turned out, prematurely as the results were later overturned). Throughout the day preparations became increasingly focused on the members' appearance as they tied ribbons in the party colour around their heads and arms. The question "Do I look fearful?" was constantly repeated, expressing the importance of being intimidating in order to confirm Danny's deserving of a prominent task force position.

The role of violent performance was also interesting from a gendered perspective, as the minority of female task force members position themselves within the group by pointing to their ability to fight as men. Janet for example, cautioned that: "I hate violence, but if you beat me, my mind can change, I can damage you". Similarly, one of the leading members of one of the major parties' women's group who had personally engaged in electoral confrontations expressed frustration at being constrained by her gender suggesting that "People say I should have been a soldier, and I wanted to be a driver, but I could not do that, so I sell *cooker* now". Despite these constraints, she argued that her and "her girls" were just as "vigilant" as the men. Performing masculinity can therefore be seen as a tactic to elicit recognition as an equally worthy task force member.

Although most task force members spoke of rewards as something expected to come in the future, some jobs did materialise for a few of them over the course of my fieldwork, seemingly confirming the success of navigational tactics characterised by violent political mobilisation. Unsurprisingly, the ruling party was better placed to offer positions to those that had shown them loyalty. In the APC's second term, for example, a farming project was established. While the farm was officially open to everybody, recruitment for the project was not by application and many of those involved, at least in its first months of operations, had been active task force members.⁹⁴ In addition, another handful of task force members had been hired as caretakers for some of the ministries in the capital. Opposition task force members were less lucky, and were sorely disappointed by their party's defeat in the 2012 elections. Nevertheless one project was often brought up on both sides: temporary employment as security contractors in Iraq.

In 2009, the Ministry of Labour in collaboration with Sabre International established a project, euphemistically aimed at creating "overseas youth employment", that recruited ex-servicemen to act as security forces to the US forces in Iraq (see Christensen n.d). According to one task force member and former combatant who spent two years in Iraq, it was his party's national executive that facilitated their recruitment by writing a letter with their names on them directly to the Ministry, and by providing funds for acquiring passports and medical checks (although there were allegations that certain members embezzled the money, thus foreclosing others' opportunity to travel). The Iraq experience did not however live up to the expectations of just reward. The participants were only paid US\$250 a month for work in conditions of extreme hardship. As they returned, while they were expected to have become rich, they quickly returned to their previous situation of dependence on political *sababus*.

⁹⁴ The project document is rather vague about selection processes, and simply states that 100 youths will be selected according to the following criteria: "minimal knowledge or experience of agriculture, willingness of youth to work in agriculture and the beneficiary must be within the age bracket of 15 to 35" (MYA 2014: 3).

Arguably, rather than having used their connections to transition into socially-sanctioned adulthood, those who went to Iraq simply became temporarily entangled in global networks of exploitative work which ultimately brought them no further than they had been before. In addition, supporting a party in government similarly meant remaining dependent on their benefactors, whose ability to satisfy their clientele was in turn contingent on their remaining in power.

Although these task force members were, because of their social ties and demonstrable ability for violence, able to become incorporated into the close circles of powerful *sababus*, this form of inclusion may be better characterised as “adverse incorporation”. The notion of adverse incorporation emerged as a response to the analysis of poverty as a sign of “social exclusion”, which, as Hickey and du Toit (2007) point out, often ignores how in some circumstances it is rather the way in which individuals are included that may be problematic. Significantly, adverse incorporation allows us to acknowledge that rather than being helpless victims, those with less power (for example because of their limited access to resources, or, their being “small” in the socio-economic sense), may be “obliged to manage this vulnerability through investing in and maintaining forms of social capital which produce desirable short-term, immediate outcomes and practical needs” (Wood 2000: 18).

Indeed as we have seen, both those outside and those inside these networks viewed incorporation as a navigation tactic, and actively took steps to establish or nurture personal relations that could provide both everyday subsistence and hopes for work in the future. Clientelism, then, “may provide a more secure form of political engagement for the poorest people, at least in the short-term” (Hickey and du Toit 2007: 13). However, the adverse incorporation framework also makes it possible to simultaneously take into account the fact that while there may be a rationale in “playing the game” these relationships can be

immediately exploitative as well as undermining opportunities to shift power balances in the future, as shown by continued dependence even after having entered the labour market. Incorporation in this case then was adverse because of its exploitative nature, whereby attempts to escape marginality were made reliant on establishing dependency by taking very real risks. In addition, it was adverse because it is not clear that these relations, thought to be panacea to escaping socio-economically defined youthhood, necessarily delivered on their promise.

The adversity of this form of incorporation was compounded by its volatility. These network systems are “nervously changing and flexible” (Utas 2012a: 18). Apart from the obvious risks involved in violent clashes, there were also substantial risks inherent in placing one’s fortune and expectations on a single, albeit powerful, individual. The precariousness of such arrangements was poignantly reflected by Amadu’s story. As discussed above, he was recruited into a political party task force as he was freed from jail after the AFRC/WSB and RUF trials. A year later, during a by-election in the provinces he was called up to take part in one of the contenders’ security detail. Amadu had known the candidate during the war and said that was the reason he was recruited: “He called the main boys with whom he fought, because they understand him and they are used to him”. After the candidate was elected, Amadu was put in charge of a checkpoint for produce taxation in the district. Before the 2012 elections, however, his boss cross-carpeted. Amadu received the news with shock and concern, but his *sababu* reassured him and his colleagues that it was a good move “in the interest of the people”. He recalled being welcomed by his new task force members, many of whom he knew from the war and their years in prison.

Amadu’s initial concerns however proved to be founded when his *sababu* died unexpectedly. In line with the previous discussion of the relation between secrecy and insecurity, this death

shook Amadu particularly because of the rumours surrounding it. “They killed him!” Amadu asserted, pointing to his leaders’ strange behaviour prior to his death, suggesting that he may have been poisoned in revenge for having switched parties. Amadu’s sudden loss of his *sababu* was traumatic; not only did he now fear for his own life, he had also lost the object of his loyalty and consequently, his future, as he put it:

I have lost many family members and I never cried, but I shed tears like a baby for that guy, up to now, because he is my future. My future has gone. I had hope because if he had got a good position he would have helped us. Some of us have become destabilised. Presently because he is dead, it’s a hindrance, he took care of us, he took care of our families, he helped us. But since he died there is no way.

As we spoke after his patron’s death, Amadu had resigned from his post in the provinces, as he was afraid that his connection with the deceased politician would put him at risk, he was unemployed and unsure of his next steps.

The volatile nature of relationships was similarly shown by Alex’s reflections on a perceived “betrayal” of the moral obligations attached to loyalty shown through violent mobilisation. An analysis of betrayal is useful to further illustrate the use of understanding networks as navigational tactics but ones that also give rise to those specific norms of fairness based on exclusive reciprocity that lie at the foundations of political violence in contemporary Sierra Leone. As I returned to Freetown in 2014 I looked for Alex at the party office but was not able to find him. Eventually I was told he had not been around the office for a while, and I ended up finding him in a small abandoned opened space, in the midst of rubble from nearby construction work, where him and his friends had built a makeshift shelter overlooking the sea. He told me he had broken away from the party because the politician he had provided

protection for had “one problem, the man will not concern himself for his security guys”. Alex felt that his patron had not done his part in nurturing his security and showing them the love they deserved. The norms of fairness that characterise the interaction between political “big men” and their close supporters had been infringed.

Firstly, he felt that that his *sababu* had failed to properly recognise the struggles and risks that Alex had endured on his behalf:

We suffered for that party office a lot, but we see no improvement. When you are suffering for somebody, they should know that this person suffered for them, is that not so? He did not find us a job.

He pointed to a recent instance of being jailed for unrest around the party office, a stint in the Central Police Station where he claimed to have been tortured. He argued that because his loyalty had not been adequately reciprocated, he had decided to withdraw his services: “We are no longer suffering for a person who doesn’t know [our] suffering”, because, why “should you die for somebody who doesn’t know your concern?” Significantly, Alex’s expectation that his *sababu* should “know his suffering” was not limited to not having been given employment, but a broader criticism of his leaders’ inability to take care of his supporters. He gave the example of an on-going dispute he had with another task force member, one that had repeatedly erupted in physical confrontations, and expressed disappointment that the politician had not intervened to settle the dispute and to listen to both individuals’ concerns. He argued that given their close personal connection and the extent of this sacrifice regardless of material rewards, this sort of behaviour was not legitimate:

I supported him in the right way, remember when you have a leader you don't want to know about money, but I supported him from the heart. I used my own money. I gave his praises even as I was suffering.

His underplaying of the pecuniary motive is important, and was often repeated by task force members. A *sababu's* financial support and position within the labour market was undoubtedly a high priority, but one that was couched in terms of moral obligations, a form of compassionate redistribution expected to emerge from unequal social relations. This was illustrated especially vividly by Alex's assertions of how his *sababu* should have behaved:

When people love you, you too should love people. When they have a problem, you are supposed to have concern for those people, because they love you. You cannot just love your family, when people will sacrifice for you, no! You can love people. When you want to be a leader you can love everybody that made you a leader, is that not so? When you don't love this person, then you have discriminated people, that is why we broke away.

There is no doubt that the strength of obligations expressed by Alex were thought to emerge from exclusive relations, based on well-established networks that most young people do not have access to. Indeed, task force members' constant emphasis of their personal relationship to their *sababu* made it obvious that they expected reciprocity based on their incorporation and showed their efforts to reinforce exclusive boundaries. However, as in the case of the Belgium sellers, this particularly restricted notion of moral community did not exclude the possibility for imagining different political landscapes and thus for the simultaneous existence of competing norms of fairness attached to imagined alternatives. These imaginations were inevitably subdued and secondary to the needs to navigate the present terrain and to be

realistic about the likelihood of change in the near future. Nevertheless, in our informal conversations, Alex often brought up the fact that he felt responsible for his friends and that, as such, despite being homeless and poor, he endeavoured to support them, he cooked for them and let everyone sleep under his precarious zinc roof. He complained about the pressure that he felt, suggesting that the love he showed to his friends was reflective of how politicians ought to treat their citizens, connecting poverty in the country to politicians' "selfishness". Similarly, other task force members often had, as already noted, multiple reasons for joining a specific party. Often these were related to their personal networks but they were compounded, they argued, by a conviction that their party was better placed to deliver change. Ultimately, they imagined a situation where violence was not an expedient means to exit economic marginality. As Janet put it succinctly: "We don't want a leader to give us money to fight, we want one who gives work to the youth".

Conclusion

This chapter has considered how labour market dynamics matter for understanding post-war violence in Sierra Leone, suggesting that their impact is mediated by the interaction between exclusive networks and the nature of the post-war institutional space. It has argued both that labour markets are crucial in an analysis of the unfolding of violent episodes and that engagement in such episodes cannot be directly deduced from young people's labour market position.

The comparison between those marginal to informal political networks and those incorporated in them as task force members helped not only to paint a picture of the intricacies involved in the dynamics of political violence but also, more importantly, to situate

these dynamics into a larger story about the intersection between labour markets as social institutions and the post-war political space. Understanding political violence as one form of navigation reveals the crucial role played by social networks rooted in specific structural circumstances. Incorporation in these networks parallels the broader labour market dynamics described throughout this thesis, whereby economically marginal youth aspire to become incorporated into powerful *sababus*' networks in order to step up the social ladder and achieve independence and social standing. Violence, in this framework, is performed as a tactic to enter and maintain these exclusive networks, and pre-existing social capital together with the ability to effectively signal loyalty determine the relative success of this navigational tactic. While marginality was a major component incentivising these tactics, and both groups used violence to navigate the job market, those who were closer to political networks were more likely to be systematically recruited for violence. In addition, the coexistence of these attempts to elicit incorporation with critiques of the exclusive nature of networks points to a profound paradox. While these individualised solutions were presented as a necessary alternative to unfulfilled expectations of broad-based redistribution and job creation, they ultimately perpetuated the status quo that young people critique.

An insight into the logic and nature of these networks further highlights the importance of understanding the social nature of the labour market. It told a complex story about recognition, and social capital and about the distinctive norms of reciprocity attached to clientelistic relations in young people's attempts to navigate labour markets through violence. Jobs in this context are not only material rewards, they are also a symbol of status and of one's social embeddedness, or that one is not "utterly alone" (Bolten 2012: 92). At the same time, this particular form of dependence was a double-edged sword. As task force members become entangled in relations that are ultimately exploitative and do not guarantee a bridge to adulthood, these dynamics reflect both the profound power imbalances inherent in relations

characterised by dependence and the challenges to overcoming marginality by “playing the game”.

Conclusion

This conclusion summarises the key findings of this study and their implications. Given the inevitable limitations of the study at hand, the conclusion also reflects on avenues for further study.

From Ticking Bombs to a Politics of Work

This thesis has attempted to show how young people's labour market experiences in post-war Sierra Leone influence their political trajectories. The starting point was the popular portrayal of unemployed youth as a security risk in post-war countries and its reliance on the assumption of a direct relationship between youth unemployment and the likelihood of their engagement in political violence in the aftermath of conflict. While this assumption has gained significant traction in Sierra Leone, where youth employment has featured prominently in peacebuilding strategies, it relies on a weak evidence base: it is intuitive but analytically reductive. The portrayal of the unemployed as "ticking bombs" obscures the mechanisms through which unemployment, or what is often more likely to be under-employment, translates into violence as well as occluding an analysis of other forms of politicisation amongst young people out of work. This thesis has put forward that while labour markets indeed matter for understanding youth mobilisation, the assumption of a simple relation between joblessness and political violence is misleading. Consequently it set out not to deny that a connection exists, but rather to analyse how the two are related. Through qualitative research with marginal youth engaged precariously in Freetown's informal economy, this study aimed to offer an insight into the mechanisms through which exclusion from the labour market influence the nature of young people's political mobilisation in post-war Sierra Leone.

Taking the rich literature on the political economy and anthropology of war as a point of departure, the thesis proposed that we look at labour markets more systematically in a post-war setting, analysing them as social institutions. Through the notion of a Politics of Work, it suggested that the impact of labour markets on young people's politicisation is mediated by the social meaning of work and the implications this has for young people's identities and relations. These processes mould young people's position in the post-war political space, their opportunities for mobilisation, as well as their claims on and relation to the state. Analysing these dynamics in Freetown's urban microcosms yielded a number of salient findings.

The Meaning of Work

The first part of this thesis analysed the various roles that valuations of work play in defining young people's social status.

The Limits of Securitisation

To begin with, the application of narratives that frame unemployed youth as "ticking bombs" in post-war Sierra Leone leads to the blanket securitisation of economically marginal youth. While being the fruit of an effort on the part of policy-makers to elicit collaboration across a spectrum of development and security partners, and to add urgency to the employment challenge, this securitisation has significant implications for the young people populating the microcosms. In a context where inactivity is not viable for the poor, official engagement with employment for peacebuilding creates a normatively defined grey area of "unemployment" encompassing livelihoods in the informal economy that are consequently devalued and

posited as a security risk. These policy narratives, therefore, produce a pool of youth whose economic activities are framed as a threat to state stability.

The Implications of Devalued Work

Against the backdrop of these narratives, young people's own assessment of their attempts to make a living amidst limited opportunities reveals a fundamental tension that lies at the heart of the Politics of Work amongst Freetown's youth: that between navigation and aspiration. Their rejection of their livelihoods as temporary as undesirable, as a navigational tactic juxtaposed to aspirations of "proper" work, reflects the relevance of social valuations of work for recognition. In addition, it shows the fraught articulation between expedient survival and aspirations for socio-economic inclusion central to young people's experiences. Engagement in devalued work, however temporary or undesirable, has significant implications for social identities— it digs a chasm between the status quo and the wish to become something different. Most importantly, marginality shapes the contours of what is figuratively expressed as social "smallness", a predicament constitutive of a junior position regardless of age, based on the inability to achieve markers of adulthood, and to be recognised and respected.

Understanding and Navigating Labour Markets: The Role of Networks and a Search for Dependence

Despite creative attempts to navigate the present and to reinvent marginal positions, youth remains a category to be escaped by finding stable employment. Young people's understanding of labour market dynamics as being determined by personal connections and, more specifically, by relations of reciprocity with "big" people generates two important insights. Firstly, that involvement in marginal work is also experienced as a form of social

exclusion from nurturing relations. Secondly, it highlights that, in the context of the development of a political economy characterised by an exclusionary labour market and the contraction of redistributive space over time, being “small” places young Sierra Leoneans on a search for dependence. The clash between the logic of private accumulation and young people’s expectations of reciprocity is encapsulated in young marginals’ moral critique that there is “no love” in Sierra Leone. While this forms the foundations of their notions of social justice, in the short-term young people’s calculations for escaping poverty, their tactics to navigate adverse terrains, often involve fierce competition for individual incorporation in “big” people’s exclusive networks.

Labour markets therefore, do not only determine income, they create social subjects, shaping their sense of self and their position in society, as well as influencing decisions on how to navigate terrains that appear determined by others. In addition, work is not simply about individuals, it also shapes social relations and young people’s collocation in societal hierarchies. These dynamics are important for understanding how labour markets matter for mobilisation.

Mobilisation: Imagination and Tactics

Looking at how these experiences and interpretations of labour market dynamics impact political trajectories, the tension between aspirations and individual navigation tactics is starkly transposed onto the political stage as social “smallness” determines both young people’s political subjectivity and the opportunities and constraints for different forms of mobilisation.

Redistributive Claims and Constraints to Political Voice

Exclusion from employment opportunities shapes young people's claims, placed explicitly on the state for broad-based redistribution and job creation. Work and demands of care and reciprocity underpin a political imagination based on redistributive claims and defined by the notion of citizens' right to employment. However, being "small" influences youths' ability to articulate and organise around these citizenship claims. Intergenerational dynamics inside occupational associations co-opted by government, for example, place marginal youth in subordinate positions inside these channels for urban voice and draws them into a logic of opportunistic political engagement through temporary material rewards. In addition, the social connotations of being involved in devalued work configure the barriers to the collective expression of work-based demands. The microcosms' youth face a constrained space for autonomous political voice, fears of state repression and a lack of inter-personal trust and group identification amongst people who individually plot to escape their predicament.

The narrow focus on unemployed youths' potential for violence risks obscuring their understandings of citizenship, their attempts to articulate those claims but also how certain aspects of the post-war political space may favour violent mobilisation over other forms. For example, despite the multiple and often muted ways in which young people attempt to engage with and challenge the political system, violence continues to have resonance as a rhetorical tool as young people leverage their securitisation through threats on the state as a way to emphasise the urgency of their claims. Obstacles to political inclusion, in other words, make violence an enduringly useful political bargaining chip.

Violence as Tactic

The expediency of violence in post-war context finds its most glaring example in the analysis of young people's engagement in inter- and intra-party unrest. Here individual efforts at incorporation interact with certain features of the political system in explosive ways. In their narratives, those young people who had been involved to some extent in these episodes discussed their (not always successful) attempts to use violence as a mechanism to signal violence to powerful patrons to instigate relations of reciprocity. In a context where violence may occasionally be useful for political campaigns and where labour market dynamics are seen to be determined by inclusion in "big" people's networks, this violence is performed to cement relations and to sustain incorporation in these networks in the hope of ultimately being given a job. Being available and explicitly seeking incorporation in this manner, however, does not automatically ensure "success". Pre-existing social capital and the ability to effectively signal loyalty are key determinants, as evidenced by the predominance of ex-combatants in the "task forces" mobilised through reactivated war-time networks by individual politicians and political parties. Even for those who manage to use violence to seek incorporation, however, these dynamics reveal the limits of overcoming marginality by "playing the game" through this form of reciprocity, as loyalty rarely results in the ultimate exit from a marginal existence.

What this thesis has tried to suggest, to summarise, is that at the heart of the Politics of Work amongst Freetown's youth is a paradox between individual tactics, geared towards the cementing of relations of dependence and reciprocity, and young people's aspirations of recognition and political inclusion in the shape of claims of redistribution and job creation. Political trajectories were largely shaped by the interface between these calculations as young people attempt to engage with complex economic and political terrains striving to balance, to put it in de Certeau's (1984: xix) terms, their strategies for constituting space in the future and their tactics in a place "that belongs to the other".

Why Does it Matter?

This study has some theoretical implications for how we think about the relationship between unemployment and violence in a post-war setting. While many of the findings are context-specific, they offer some food for thought for considering more holistically the range of factors that mediate the relationship between labour markets and political violence.

Focusing on Transmission Mechanisms

This study has suggested that in the mechanisms linking unemployment to violence in Freetown's microcosms individual tactics are central but in a far more situated way than envisioned by economic models. Even when violence is expedient and detached from direct attempts to express political grievances, it is rooted in a search for social recognition and attempts to navigate adverse circumstances in line with perceptions of how labour markets work. This corroborates the insights of the literature on the lifeworlds of combatants and their attempts to traverse complex terrains (e.g. Utas 2003; Vigh 2006a), adding a focus on post-war labour market dynamics and non-combatant youth. The mechanisms through which young people are mobilised for post-war violence in Sierra Leone thus highlight how the social dimensions of unemployment matter for violence and point to the need to complement a focus on individuals with an analysis of the role of relationships and networks.

Furthermore, these findings suggest that young people's individual and even opportunistic calculations can coexist with well-articulated political claims, and that the relative importance

of drivers depends on the dynamics of labour markets, young people's perceptions of how employment can be found, and the opportunities available for social recognition and for engaging in a different form of politics. Similarly, the expediency of violence is embedded in the nature of the post-war political system. In Sierra Leone, this is evident in the fact that, due to structural weakness, a predominant informalisation of governance and a lack of trust in the security sector, there remains an underlying demand for violence amongst political players. These insights can raise some considerations of alternatives for engaging with the unemployment question in post-war settings.

Inclusive Employment Generation

Acknowledging that employment does matter for the nature of post-war mobilisation and that exclusionary labour markets play a role in patterns of violent politicisation, suggests that creating jobs is undoubtedly important. This requires a focus on building inclusive labour markets based on forward-looking analyses of market demand, identifying sectors that may grow in order to avoid jobless growth and over-reliance on economic sectors, such as mining, that do not promise significant numbers of unskilled jobs. The challenge of creating employment for peacebuilding also calls for a reconsideration of current employment programming that is overly focused on supply and that perpetuates a mismatch between skills and market demands. The involvement of ex-combatants in episodes of post-war violence as a means of navigating the labour market highlights the particular urgency of considering the shortcomings of reintegration efforts from this point of view.

Not Just Job Creation: Valorising the Informal Economy and Considering the Political Dimension

Having said that, the recognition that labour market exclusion *per se* is not enough to explain engagement in post-war political violence and that the transmission mechanisms are far more complex suggests that job creation is not panacea for diffusing the relationship between unemployment and violence. This is especially significant if we consider that the GoSL faces significant resource constraints and as such is unlikely to be able to create new jobs for the large majority of its population in the foreseeable future.

Understanding the importance of social recognition through work can for example lead us to consider how the informal economy can be valorised as job creation in the formal economy continues to face constraints. This would firstly mean recognising the inadequacy of securitised discourses that are not only simplistic in their inability to describe under what circumstances unemployment can be a security risk, but also counterproductive and easily instrumentalised. A valorisation of the informal economy and a shift away from securitised discourses could begin by delinking the notion of the “good” and “peaceful” citizen from certain forms of work, to reflect the fact that violence is not inherent to unemployment. In addition, it would entail an effort to make current livelihood opportunities more stable, productive and, most importantly, a consideration of how they can be granted social recognition rather than being devalued. As long identified by proponents of decent work, informal livelihoods can be improved, actively supported and productive green shoots identified inside the vast informal sector.

Young people’s perceptions of how labour markets work, their critiques of private accumulation and their claims for redistribution must also be taken seriously, as they reveal demands for social connection and integration. Their attempts, occasionally violent, to become incorporated in networks of reciprocity are presented as alternatives to the fulfilment of expectations of redistribution placed on the state. These expectations may come into

contrast with the logic of private accumulation underpinning current growth strategies and the rationales of an entrepreneurial middle class, or against resource constraints facing governments as they undertake the daunting task of job creation. How these contrasts are managed will be of great significance in determining how the youth question plays out.

The political dimension of these struggles can offer an insight into how such management might take place. Young people's pervasive exclusion underneath the rebuilt edifices of Sierra Leone's democratic governance and a persistently gerontocratic political culture requires considering how young people's perspectives and claims about socio-economic justice can be productively included in a debate about statebuilding. This means looking below institutions at how they are socially reproduced. Associations cannot, for example, be taken to be empowering channels for political voice at face value. Similarly, the lack of trust in the security sector that influences the demand for youth militias calls into question the role of the police and the political will to transform youths' relations to the post-war state.

Where Next?

This study was limited in scope, it focused on a very specific subset of young people in Sierra Leone's capital, it presented their views, though contextualised, and attempted to make sense of how their specific lifeworlds can give us insights into a topical debate. It consequently has significant limitations and further avenues for study present themselves. Firstly, the urban focus of the study leaves unanswered the question of how these mechanisms come into play outside of Freetown, and in particular how rural labour market dynamics and the political context far from the capital's influence the relation between work and mobilisation. In addition, the issue of rural-urban migration was not systematically addressed, but is likely to

be significant. The intersection of rural and urban dynamics is evidenced by the circular movement of young Sierra Leoneans within the country, away from rural areas into the city and back out, for example towards mining fields and plantations. Understanding how young people experience these forms of work and how networks and individual “big” people may facilitate these movements would offer an opportunity for expanding the current research in fruitful ways.

Secondly, Freetown youths’ accounts appear to tell a story about the decreasing salience of ethnicity as a direct predictor of youth politicisation in the city. From their recounting of their experiences, occupational identities, claims borne out of labour market exclusion and individual navigational tactics emerged as more important explanations. However, the lack of methodical engagement with respondent’s ethnic background in the research design makes it difficult to assert a decline in ethnic politics with certainty. An analysis of young people’s interpretations of their experiences of mobilisation gives some insight on the relevance of ethnicity in post-war Freetown; it can show that ethnic identity was not paramount in urban youths’ understanding of themselves as political actors but it cannot assure us that ethnic background does not explain political behaviour. The profiles of young people in the four microcosms outlined in Chapter 3 reflect how the war and economic change contributed to a confluence of young migrants from all over the country in Freetown, making a living together in the city’s slums and centres of informal trade. There, as discussed in Chapter 4, a number of identities are created and moulded, as young people develop parallel street cultures and join occupational groups. In Chapter 5, we saw how the ruling party has indeed used ethnic affinity as a criterion for mobilisation, but the chapter also showed that the overlap between ethnicity and occupation, emerging from colonial strategies of economic development, has made it difficult especially in the capital to disentangle the salience of ethnicity and occupation. Areas such as Belgium, for example, were viewed as APC strongholds while being

far from ethnically homogeneous and the young sellers were often explicitly mobilised on the basis of their line of trade. In outlining individual attempts at political incorporation, Chapter 6 showed the flexibility of young marginals' political preferences as individuals frequently switched party allegiance in the hope of finding a more reliable *sababu*. Collectively, these insights point to a potential weakening of ethnicity as the primary determinant of mobilisation strategies. Further, far more systematic and direct engagement with the political salience of ethnicity in Freetown is needed to corroborate these findings.

Thirdly, the contrast between different groups of youth and their experiences of work and politicisation would make for an important addition. Bolten's (forthcoming: 6) study of perceptions of education in Northern Sierra Leone, for example, highlights how young students engage in "boundary work" as they differentiate "between themselves and non-schooling 'youth' and signal their intent to become elite, simultaneously as they engage in similar labors as youth and cultivate non-educated networks". Understanding how education plays into notions of recognition and how educated youth may understand their position in society, how they manage the transition into work after school and their mobilisational trajectories as political actors could help us gain a richer picture of the relationship between work and politics, outside of the securitisation paradigms that emphasize the potential dangers posed by the poor and marginalized. Similarly, contrasting young people's experiences with those of who have become "big" and who may be attempting to disembed themselves from demanding obligations of reciprocity (or to instrumentalise them) in the absence of institutionalised redistributive mechanisms would add an important intergenerational perspective and help identify mechanisms for managing tensions.

Fourthly, while the transmission mechanisms that mediate the relationship between labour and violence analysed in this thesis are specific to post-war Sierra Leone, the notion of a

Politics of Work lends itself to cross-country comparative study. Comparing across different countries would make it possible to take the theoretical framework much further in showing how structural differences (in labour markets and political opportunity structures but also moral economies and political culture) and different context-specific social filters (such as the meaning of work and its social implications) may lead to distinctive mechanisms connecting work and mobilisation.

The Ebola crisis offers a bitter epilogue to this work. In May 2014 the epidemic originating in Guinea spread to Sierra Leone and Liberia. At the time of writing, the virus had claimed close to 3,000 lives. The implications have been far reaching, as the onset of the emergency has slashed gains on growth and development, diverted public spending, closed down potential employers and led to significant increases in the cost of living (UNECA 2014). Aside from the very real economic and social costs of the virus itself, the crisis has laid bare a substantial level of mistrust in post-war institutions, as people avoided hospitals and expressed diffidence towards a state apparatus with limited penetrative capacity. As Leach (2014: 5) has noted, the conspiracy theories surrounding the Ebola response and what has been portrayed as local ignorance in the international media, may in fact better understood as anxieties surrounding the intervention of a usually distant state and as “logical reactions to a deep history and continuity of structural violence”. In attacking the very basis of intimate relations and sociality, the virus has furthermore been experienced as a threat to social cohesion reflecting concerns about what it means to live communally in contemporary Sierra Leone (Bolten 2014). The crisis thus presents a tragic testing ground for state-society relations as the country confronts the trials of collective mobilisation against the virus and of managing conflict and mistrust. Speaking to the microcosms’ youth from afar their assertions that “Ebola is like the war” starkly exposes the destructive potential of the epidemic beyond its infectiousness, and

raises important questions about what will be left behind and how Sierra Leone will approach yet another challenge of rebuilding and healing.

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