Statebuilding challenged: unarmed resistance as a form of reinventing the future

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Abstract

The paper explores current unarmed resistance to statebuilding strategies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It builds upon the work of James Scott to argue that, in state-building contexts, resistance follows the same pattern of being covert, placing modest demands and working towards the mitigating or the denial of the claims pose by elites. Much of the literature on peacebuilding has concentrated on armed groups and other ‘spoilers’. This paper focuses on the ‘every day’ actions of populations that counter- pose a picture of how ‘things’ should look like against the reality that they are deemed to live. This symbolic picture constitutes a more fundamental, profound and possibly successful form of resistance to official statebuilding strategies. If these forms of resistance have the potential to bring insights into what a strategy that seeks to deliver peace as social justice looks like (through grounded grassroots conflict resolution strategies) not only these forms of resistance pose a challenge to existing statebuilding strategies, they may also bring a more grounded notion of emancipation.

The literature on state-building has proliferated and become increasingly nuanced and sophisticated in a relatively short period of time. Paris and Sisk, for instance, recently identified three generations in this literature in just a period of twenty years. These included: a first generation of heavily descriptive studies of the immediate post-Cold War years of the 1990s; a second one of more theoretically-minded in-depth analysis of different cases, targeting different aspects of the missions in light of the challenges faced in the late 1990s to mid 2000s; and a third one that problematised the interventions in a number of ways, mostly in light of the shortcomings and lack of success of the interventions (Paris and Sisk 2009, 6 - 8).

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1 This paper brings research carried out as part of a doctoral thesis, which is supported by a +3 Studentship from the Economic and Social Research Council, UK, and funding from the International Relations Department at the London School of Economics.
While this third generation mounted a strong critique to the now so-called ‘liberal peace’ and pointed also to the flaws and unreflective elements of some of the earlier literature (Heathershaw 2008; Chandler 2003; Mac Ginty 2008; Newman and Richmond 2006; Richmond 2006); there is perhaps a forth generation that has raised as a critique of the critique, embodied in those who have come to defend the liberal peace (Paris 2010) and those who have stated that the critiques have not gone far enough (Chandler 2009).

These refinements have also allowed for a more nuanced look at the ground. One of the main contentions however is still the representation of the “local”. Early but also recent literature has represented the ‘local’ either as a spoiler or as a recipient of this peace/development/security aid (Stedman 1997; Zahar 2008; Manning 2003). The other extreme, the local as a paradigm of emancipation has provoked its dose of critique too (Richmond 2010a). Indeed, current “critiques of the critique” complain that “the local” has been essentialised, creating empty dichotomies between the “global” and the “local”, as well as for presenting the missions as totalising quasi-colonial enterprises that miss the nuances of the actual deployment of the missions on the ground (Bendaña 2005). In this paper I first try to develop, or more accurately, to rescue a theoretical framework that can be put to observe the actions of subordinate classes in state-building contexts. Actions that I argue can be read as resistance in a way that they are not a spoiling factor, or mere recipients or consumers of peace and state building strategies, but actually transformative and creative agents. This standpoint is not only a way to mount a more grounded critique of the state-building missions, but also it is a way to read political alternatives to the models portrayed by the missions. In no way this paper attempts to make claims about what “all” people think, feel and do in any particular given war/ war-like environment. This is a proposal to engage into an analysis of a variety of experiences and discourses and a call to read state-building contexts in a much less dichotomised, more disaggregated way that we have been doing so far.

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2 This has also been a debate in the policy environments.
3 Previous literature that has looked at the transformative power of populations in statebuilding contexts (Mac Ginty 2008; Heathershaw 2008; Chandler 2006)
This paper then stems from two puzzles. One is that statebuilding, in its contemporary form, as a peace strategy, has not only found difficulties to claim victories but also that its development does not go without raising concerns. Second, even if statebuilding is something unproblematic for some, the fact that the missions are challenged from the ground raises the need to observe these challenges and who carries them out.

In the spirit of a proposal, this paper shows how a particular framework can answer a very particular question in the case, at least, of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Can the responses by populations to peacebuilding/statebuilding strategies be called ‘resistance’? If so, which of those responses? What and why are they resisting? What means do they use? What is the best theoretical framework that will allow us to discern some of these conundrums? Addressing these questions is thus a fundamental step to observe both how statebuilding is affecting the everyday lives of people on the ground, who these people are, and how these responses are affecting the state building enterprise.

A preliminary hypothesis is that resistance challenges the conditions of life that are imposed on the low strata of society. I argue that the main contention is about the changes that are to be made and about the models that are portrayed. Lower-end classes are not likely to portray radical models, not because they do not want them or do not think about them, but simply, because there is not the political space for it. Arguably, international organisations and violence shape and dominate the political space. Resistance is then put against conditions of life that are perceived as unjust or unwanted and as such it can be read as both a form of accountability as well as an articulation of political alternatives.

Rather than looking at politically organised or ideologically-motivated movements, the project is inspired by the work of James Scott in an attempt to unmask the everyday actions of anonymous people in shaping the future of their communities (Scott 1985, 1990). Scott argued that subordinate classes carry on a permanent latent struggle against power/domination. He also argued that these classes are more radical in their ideas than in their actions, and that the limited capacity for contesting power/domination pushed them both to
act as if they consented to power as well as to construct their demands in conservative and modest ways. This model fits quite neatly the spectrum of actions of the Congolese grassroots population in regards to their war-like environment. This environment, builds upon a tragic history in which there are not many arguments on which to claim “the good old days” in light of breakages of the social contract, as in other places. Further, the DRC context is one where not only is there war but also poverty and high levels of repression. Thus, people have little chances to show dissent except for covert and relatively disorganised strategies or the joining of an armed group. That is, because of the war environment and the flow of weapons into the region, there is a mixture of what could be called ‘weapons of the weak’ (Eg. gossiping, bad-mouthing, foot dragging) together with real guerrilla warfare by armed groups.

However, whereas armed resistance provides a justification for elites to further their authority, unarmed resistance unmask the incapacity and hypocrisy in how elites justify the need for populations to keep suffering. This unmasking is a more challenging critique of both the processes and outcomes of statebuilding, as enacted by national and international actors. Challenging the reality of “what is being done” as it is being experienced on the ground, through a symbolic construction of “what should be done” is not only a form of resistance it is also an articulation of political alternatives.

The paper will proceed as follows. It will first provide a literature overview of previous relevant theorising on resistance, it will then move on to expand on the theoretical framework of the ‘everyday resistance’ and the work of James Scott, and will finish with some empirical development of this framework from field observations, interviews and analysis of policy documents.

1. Defining characteristics of resistance: a brief overview of the literature

The concept of resistance has a very long historical and philosophical baggage. Broadly speaking it is possible to identify descriptive, normative and explanatory approaches.
Descriptive approaches are represented by anthropological and historical studies and have generally enquired about the instances in which there have been processes of resistance and rebellion (Eg. Cohn 1957; Gluckman 1963; Wolf 1971; Tareke 1991; Bhabha 1994). This literature has been able to identify the locus of resistance in the relations of domination between at least two sectors of the population, essentially the winners and losers of any given circumstances, in light of changes in the social contract.

Studies of political theory, philosophy and political writings from the resisters and revolutionaries themselves, in contrast, have focused on whether people should resist/ revolt or not. They represent a normative approach examples go as far back as Greek political thought to contemporary research and political writings (Eg. Coleman 1990; Languet 1994; Fanon 1991; Guevara 1964; Shantz 2009; Allen 1999; La Boetie 2007; Newman 2001; Stirner 1912; Marcos 2001).

What can be called an explanatory approach is concerned with what resistance is, how and what is resisted? Who is resisting, and Why? (Sartre 1969; Zola 1980; Moore 1978; Scott 1985, 1990; Foucault 1990, 1980; Wolf 1971). Authors in this framework have attempted to define resistance, whether it takes place within the area of political activity and in particular, political organisations, whether it is politically minded, whether it has an emancipatory ideal in mind, whether it is armed or unarmed, collective or not, whether it is generated by the power that is resisted or whether it exists as a category in itself, previous to such power.

Categories have porous borders and some authors may well suit more than one and even all of them at once. This paper follows an explanatory approach, resting on the assumption that people should resist against circumstances that they find unfair or unwanted, and that, generally, it has historically been this way. The problem with normative approaches is that they have traditionally understood resistance as an overt contestation of power. As such, theorists have traditionally advocated for resistance, with some exceptions such as St. Augustine or Hobbes. Resistance has in this sense not been very well identified as different
from rebellion or revolution. The means for it have tended to be thought of as overt and have threatened power directly. Descriptive approaches, as seen, have manifested that the locus of resistance rests on the relations of domination and more in particular in light of breakages of the social contract, but they still need to apply an analytical perspective to abstract what the nature of resistance is.

The advantage of explanatory approaches is that rather than focusing on the rare event of the revolution or the overthrowing of government, they have identified resistance as a permanent feature of relations of power and domination. Scott, for instance, preferred to speak of ‘relations of resistance’, emphasising this permanent element, but also arguing that these relations are fundamentally about how much each member in the relationship could get away with. So, resistance may be very simply identified as guidance to show our disagreement and to measure how much we can and should put up with. But more accurately, resistance, for our purposes and, in light of the literature, is about challenging the reality as is being imposed and aspiring for a different one. It is a way of putting forward alternatives to be achieved even if using the same language as power.

Primary exemplars of this category are James Scott and Michel Foucault. As stated, whether as ‘relations of resistance’ or ‘relations of domination’, these authors identified resistance as a permanent element in these relations. This is not to say that domination has always existed; rather it is to say that, when in place, there is a contention about what one attempts to impose on the other. Not everyone would agree with this. Barrington Moore saw this relationship as something that has always existed and will always exist (Moore 1978: 24). The risk with this approach is to naturalise injustice and then disregard it. As Enloe notes:

‘Warning lights now start flashing in my head whenever I hear someone wielding “always.” Too often it is to cut short an awkward discussion… Thank goodness, the fans of “always” imply, now we don't have to invest our scarce energy in exploring that topic. Phew.’ (2004, 2)
Of course, Moore is one of the authors who has best captured the way in which consciousness operates at the level of identifying what is just, what is unjust and what we should and can do about it. That is, his naturalisation of the relationships of power and resistance did not prevent him from undertaking a detailed study of it. Žižek criticised Foucault for the same reason. He argued that Foucault had not allowed for a category of resistance that is able to subvert the power that created it in the first place (Žižek 1999, 250 - 256). That is, for Žižek it was hard to move forward from this relation of master – subordinate in light of Foucault’s theorising of resistance.

However, the other end, that is, theorising resistance believing that there is an emancipatory end point, is also problematic. It is not that resistance cannot generate emancipatory political orders, it is that the existence of resistance does not necessarily take us there. This is what Foucault made clear when he stated that there are practices of resistance that simply generate more power. Within members of the MONUC, there are those who are ‘fans of “always”’, as Enloe suggested. ‘You can’t have everyone happy’, stated an interviewee from MONUC (Field interviews 2009). This type of assertion, I argue, denotes a position of power: the power to decide what gets done, and whose opinions you disregard to go ahead with your plans.

The problem of relying on Foucault to theorise resistance is that he provided, more than an explanatory theory of resistance, he provided a theory of power. His maxim ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ has more to do with the character of power than that of resistance (Foucault 1990, 95). The interesting thing of analysing Scott and Foucault together is that while Foucault tends to consider resistance within power or to power, Scott analyses the means and the spaces out of power in which resistance takes place.

For Foucault,

‘the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions,
manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functioning; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory… In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated.’ (1995, 26)

Contrary to common wisdom by which power may be equated to “the government” or “elite classes”, he stated that power was a much more abstract category that was recreated, more than by concrete individuals and rules, by the effect that it had when operated on those who are deemed dominated. Whether he meant inescapability from power of those who are dominated is still debatable (Armstrong 2008).

Foucault was able to identify defining elements of a theory of power, not of political power, or economic power, but power in itself, in all its complexity, regardless of who exercises it. After reading Foucault one sees that power exists in the disciplinary regiments of prisons, hospitals and schools; in the liberation movements that jump into government and continue the same processes that keep generating a category of dominated people; in the controls over sexuality that promoted behavioural roles for men and women, etc. All this is power, and one of its most important features is its capacity to generate reality, the truth of things, the conditions of living. As such, the most valuable conclusion that we can extract from Foucault’s theory is that, statebuilding, as a complex composite of national, international, governmental and non-governmental elites, can be read as domination in so far as it sets the terms and shapes the reality to which people need to adapt. Foucault did not analyse concrete acts of resistance as much as he analysed the concrete acts of power. The result is that the kind of foucauldian theory of resistance that can be extracted is one of a “macro” theory; one that identifies resistance as one that challenges the way reality is shaped, but does not tell us much about where to look to identify it. It does not tell us how it is exercised, or, if we are involved in the reality of power and its mechanisms, how is it possible to challenge that, what are the mental processes that resisters go through.
For Moore resistance is something that comes about once one is able to challenge ‘the moral authority of suffering’ (1978, 54). Moore actually set his study on the basis for social revolt wondering why people put up with suffering. For him, identifying reality as unjust and not inevitable was both the starting point for resistance and revolt. As such, Moore did not emphasised the line between resisting and revolting. Scott more than anyone else established that subordinate classes did not necessarily interiorise domination as much as they seemed to, but that the possibilities of action were limited due to a lack of means and a context of repression (Scott 1985, 1990). More so, he argued, that he found no evidence to suggest that even when the dominant ideology was to a certain extent internalised, that there were no possibilities for conflict (Scott 1990, 77). He was also able to see how resisters targeted the everyday, the physical, and the tangible, even if it is in the form of a discourse, rather than abstract concepts such as “power” or “capital”. Scott is also a good framework because he already states that the existence of resistance does not mean that things change, indeed, most of the time, the changes promoted by elites and dominant forces are most likely to be successful. That is, the existence of resistance does not naturally evolve in revolution or emancipation.

Henceforth, the common defining elements of resistance from this brief interdisciplinary overview relate to its permanency, its agency and its targets. As such, firstly, we can establish that resistance is a permanent feature of relations of domination, that whether successful or not in overcoming such domination, it does not undermine its existence and permanent practice. This does not mean that domination has always existed. Rather, it means that in the instances when there is domination or injustice, resistance and the challenge to it is a permanent latent feature. Secondly, it is also possible to establish that the agents of both power and resistance can be singled out, not because of what power and resistance are in an ontological manner, but because they symbolise the targets on which both power and resistance operate. Finally, this agency on the part of the resisters is fundamentally concerned with challenging the reality in which they live, the conditions of life, the truth of their fate that power constructs, mostly, the morality on which their suffering is justified and on which power rests. This may be done by different means,
whether by gossiping, pilfering or guerrilla warfare, but what it defines resistance as such is the counter-posing of a symbolic picture of what reality ‘should be’ against what ‘is’.

2. ‘Everyday resistance’ as a framework to theorise resistance

As highlighted earlier, the ability to observe resistance in its everyday context is what allows us to identify the actions, the agents and the defining characteristics of resistance. James Scott stands out for facilitating and theorising this framework and, part of this section is both to provide an overview of his theory as well as to justify its usefulness for study of resistance in the DRC, and hopefully other state-building missions. There is already a body of literature that is building up on the everyday framework, not only for the study of conflict and conflict resolution, but also as for international relations as a whole. Oliver Richmond has already applied this framework for the study of resistance in East Timor and the Solomon Islands (2010b, 2010a). He has conceptualised and theorised the ‘everyday’ as a site of resistance and of emancipatory activity towards a more contextualised peace, closer to real people and real needs, than to the needs of geo-strategic interests, international agendas and international liberalism. His argument is that even without the state builders/peace builders realising, people on the ground are changing the strategies to adapt them to something that fits their reality better (2010b). Richmond makes several useful arguments, for instance, about the conditions of hybridity in state building contexts – the capacity of “locals” to influence the outcome of the state building project. He also makes a very useful case about how “local” agency re-politicises the everyday environment of state building. However, he does not make a clear case about the nature of resistance or who the “local” is, and, as a result, what is being resisted and who is resisting.

*Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985) is a detailed study of the strategies followed by subordinate classes to placate the effects of domination and to strive for what they consider just conditions. In this process Scott shows what goes on in the everyday lives of peasants in a small village in Malaysia, focusing on class relations. In this regard he finds that rather
than open confrontation, this struggle is more of the type of nocturnal low key guerrilla style, following quiet strategies and placing modest demands. This is then expanded in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (Scott 1990), outside class relations. He finds that subordinate classes tend to be more radical at the level of ideas than at the level of action. Symbolic resistance operates within the confines of hegemony but it sets how much subordinate classes are prepared to cope with. Thus he challenges the notion of hegemony as consent and inevitable and presents the continuous challenge that ‘everyday forms of resistance’ put to the dominant ideology. He challenges the traditional notions of resistance as elitist and partial. He argues that to see resistance only as a collective enterprise with a revolutionary end in mind is to subject millions of actions to the obscure records of history. Rather, he argues, we shall see in the modest, conservative, individual actions a permanent layer on which struggle against domination takes place and on which class consciousness and even revolutions may take root.

For Scott, resistance is

‘*any* act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes.’ (1985, p. 290).

The advantages of this definition, as he already notes, is that it identifies the material underpinnings of class relations and class struggle; it allows resistance to be both individual as well as collective acts; it identifies forms of ideological resistance; it asserts different

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4 Hegemony in a Gramscian sense, *Weapons of the Weak* is in many ways a response to that body of Gramscian literature that argued that power rested on coercion and consent and that subordinate classes internalised their condition.

5 In a later publication he generalized this definition to be a general theory of resistance and not just related to class, but any other relation of domination. For that purpose, he argued that ‘similar structures of domination, other things being equal, tend to provoke responses and forms of resistance that also bear a family resemblance to one another.’ (Scott 1990, p. 21)
standards of justice and equity; and it finally focuses on intentions rather than consequences, recognizing that many acts of resistance may fail to achieve their intended result (Scott 1985, pp. 290 – 291). But there are three more elements worth highlighting.

Firstly, Scott also stated that:

‘To ignore the self-interested element in peasant resistance is to ignore the determinate context not only of peasant politics, but of most lower-class politics… When a peasant hides part of his crop to avoid paying taxes, he is both filling his stomach and depriving the state of grain… When such acts are rare and isolated, they are of little interest; but when they become a consistent pattern (even though uncoordinated, let alone organized) we are dealing with resistance.’ (1985, pp. 295 – 296, emphasis added)

This selfish element that is consistently targeted at satisfying one self through challenging a symbol of power is part of analysing what the everyday acts of resistance are, but also a way of confronting that resistance has to be organised and politically minded to be resistance. However, then the defining element is not just the act but that this act is a pattern and a constant element in these types of relations.

Arguably, for Scott, there are two different types of resistance depending on the kinds of means they use. For him, ‘[w]here institutionalized politics is formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change, everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains.’ (Scott 1985, pp. 33). This can actually be challenged in a context of war for it is not clear that the ‘weapons of the weak’ are only the ‘foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on’ and not the holding of a real weapon (Scott 1985, pp. xvi). For it is not only the means that count, but as Scott himself states, more fundamentally, that they are not concerned with the construction of a movement, in fact they avoid being seen as confronting authority directly, that they use their informal networks and subterfuge
symbolism behind the backs of such authorities and that there is an element of self-
advantage in the activities they undertake (1985, pp. xvi). By all means, this can apply to
some armed groups and not just to unarmed populations. More so, it can be argued that there
are elements of the populations that see in joining the armed groups the capacity to reverse
their fate without having to confront a full state of war against the authorities but rather
exploit the unarmed civilian populations.

A third and final feature is how the construction of this counter- pose is done. For most of
our authors in the explanatory approach, this construction is done by idealising the past.
What the process of this idealisation means is the creation of ‘a shared worldview
embodying both standards of justice and their application to events past and present.’ (Scott
1985, pp. 147). To claim “the good old days” is not just a nostalgic expression for the
changes in place, but the construction of a picture that challenges the present reality on the
ground. The problematic element of defining resistance as constructing an idea of justice by
idealising the past is that, in Congo, there is no possibility to look back at a past that is any
better. Thus, as we will see, people construct an idealised vision of the future and an
idealised vision of what the state builders should be doing.

On the whole, and in light of the literature, five important features are worth highlighting out
of a conception of an everyday theory of resistance. Firstly, that there is a double effect of
the actions of the resisters, which include both a selfish as well as a rebellious element.
Secondly, that there is a pattern, which makes up the permanent feature in the relations of
resistance. Thirdly, that the means used are those that are most sustainable, that is, there is a
tendency towards covert, low-intensity means than the overt, highly risky ones, although in
a context of war this has to be reconsidered. The question of means used relate to the
question of targets. What is resisted is also the immediate, whatever symbolises injustice in
our close environment. Fourthly, that one of these means is the construction of an idealised
past or future. Finally, the reality that is confronted tends to take place in a context of change
and repression. That is, it is not simply in the arena of a relation of unequals, but that such
relationship is sustained on the use of repressing mechanisms to assure compliance, as well
as in the context of a relation in which such inequality has been pushed further, or when increasing expectations or pressures have been placed on the subordinated individuals. However, it is worthwhile to observe these more closely in order to provide a framework that clearly fits the circumstances of state building and of Congo in particular.

3. Accountability and Political alternatives from the field.

From the above discussion we can establish two foundational starting points for this final section. Firstly, that the symbolic articulations of how things should be is a major challenge to the state-building missions. This can be read both as a form of accountability for what they are not doing, but also as an articulation of political alternatives of what things should look like, and mainly, which conditions of living should be more bearable than the one the missions are bringing. Armed resistance, although another major challenge to the mission in that it denies the state its subjects, its distributive power and its monopoly of violence, does not ultimately challenge what Moore called the ‘moral authority of suffering’. Armed resistance not only becomes a justification for all sorts of civil and military interventions to continue, but it also becomes a form of domination over the populations it ravages, plunders, enslaves, rapes, recruits and steals. Secondly, that the state-building mission should be looked at as a composite of local-national-international authorities. Subordinate classes resist not the actual ‘internationality’ of the actors or the strategies, but fundamentally, the processes in which they are marginalised and demanded to patiently bear their experiences of poverty, violence and disempowerment until such time the realisation of the promises of peace, security and development is done.

How can we put all this to work? To start with, it might be necessary to make a few remarks on Scott’s framework so that we can put it to work in a state-building context. These remarks fundamentally pertain to the actual definition of resistance and kinds of claims made vis-à-vis; the armed/unarmed divide as well as the articulation of resistance through a symbolic picture. This brief section is based on preliminary findings from fieldwork in the
cities of Kinshasa, Goma and Bukavu. As such, in providing further empirical elaboration to how resistance manifests itself, this section shows how resistance speaks the language of power. This is not because resisters are consenting to that domination, or because they do not have other alternatives to the construction of “peace”, “development” and “security”, but, firstly, because they demand accountability on what power promises to deliver, and, secondly, because it has not enough political space to articulate alternatives.

1. Elite claims and moral authority

As seen, Scott defined resistance through three main elements: the claims made by elites on low classes, the acts by which low classes ‘mitigate’ or ‘deny’ those claims and, finally, the advancement of low classes’ own agenda. The major claim that elites make on the low strata of society in state building contexts is that people need to wait and keep ‘fending for themselves’ until such time the state is built. The famous claim made by Mobutu in the 1970s by which he literally meant that the state was not going to take care of the population anymore, keeps operating business as usual. So much it operates that, in many parts of Congo, peace strategies are also a matter of the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) framework. But this is not all, and we will come back to this later.

The population in Congo is asked to feed the army, the armed groups and the politicians; to provide sexual services to all of them, including MONUC officials; to put up with a situation of extreme poverty in many areas of the country and to get by without access to education,

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6 The findings from this chapter are based on semi-structured interviews as well as participant and field observations. I carried out 30 interviews with a broad spectrum of actors including representatives of MONUC, diplomatic missions, internationally-funded NGOs and non-funded NGOs, party representatives, journalists, union representatives, students and university professors. I sat through MONUC security and humanitarian update meetings as well as in NGOs activities in Bukavu. I also had numerous informal conversations with blue helmet soldiers, diplomatic representatives, a broad spectrum of people on the streets, workers at the mission I was staying, workers at the airports I transferred flights, market and street sellers, shop-attendants, business entrepreneurs and priests.
health and clean water. So, in many ways the question remains, why is there not a revolution in Congo? The only threat the population poses is when it organises to advance its own claims either by following possible official channels for influencing power or by joining an armed group. However, for the most part, Congolese low-classes bear patiently the process of transition, although this does not mean that they do not question, critique or have other vision besides just looking at how circumstances unfold in front of their eyes. It is the fact that state-building strategies act or fail to act upon their lives every day that populations have quite an accurate perspective of what these strategies are.

The claims made by the national-international elite complex is very well exemplified in the most recent report on MONUC’s development from the Secretary General to the United Nations Security Council, dated December 2009. It starts with the following:

The overall situation in the east, especially in the Kivus and in parts of Orientale province, remained fragile during the reporting period. Military operations conducted by the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC) in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, with the support of MONUC, continued to dislodge foreign and residual Congolese armed groups from their strongholds and enabled the Government to extend its control into previously inaccessible areas, including a number of important economic zones. MONUC also supported efforts to extend State authority, including through the deployment of national police elements to areas from which the Forces démocratiques de liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) had been dislodged. Despite the enhanced and innovative measures taken by MONUC to protect civilians, the operations also took a heavy toll on civilians, who were displaced

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7 For the army living off the population and (forced) sexual services provided for different actors (army, armed groups and MONUC) see, for example, UN Secretary General Report (2009); Global Witness Report (2010); Human Rights Watch (2009). For Human Development Indicators see World Bank (2009). For complaints against Operation Kimia II, the main operation to expel FDLR elements as a joint operation between MONUC, Rwandan and Congolese armed forces see EURAC (2009) and UN Secretary General Report (2009); in this regard, a confidential report was presented at one of the MONUC Security and Humanitarian briefing meetings in which I did participant-observation; several interviewees raised concerns about this operation too.
and subjected to reprisal attacks by retreating armed groups. Furthermore, the actions of undisciplined and recently integrated FARDC elements seeking to settle old ethnic scores resulted in serious violations of international humanitarian law, including killings of civilians (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon 2009 para. 2).

In the same report UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon reports that FARDC carried out ‘massacres and gross human rights violations… against civilian populations’ (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon 2009, para. 9). While, UN Secretary General also confirms how certain armed groups like CNDP continue its control over mines in the same report, Global Witness asserts that these armed groups have gained further control once incorporated in the national army (Global Witness 2010, 26). However, UN Secretary General ultimately puts the blame on the government who fails ‘to make progress on the implementation of the political aspects of the 23 March Agreements’ (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon 2009, para. 15).

Other claims relate to the lack of a judicial system. So, until such time the state is built, justice could not be expected to function properly. This also adds to the continuation of repression against elements of the population who are more vocal. As Ban Ki-Moon highlights, just in his last three months of reporting there were continuing imprisonments for human rights advocates and prosecution of journalists. A shocking case has been the charge of ‘rebellion and defamation’ made against a human rights advocate for a ‘communiqué written condemning inhumane working conditions in a company in Bas-Congo’.  

So, while the state is being built at the expense of the suffering of the population, the morality of it is that it is for its own benefit. The words, again from the Secretary General to

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8 The report acknowledges the protests against and concerns raised by populations to end operation Kimia II by which joined operations were carried out between MONUC’s blue helmets and FARDC (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon 2009 para. 9)
9 Robert Ilunga Numbi, chair of human rights NGO Les Amis de Nelson Mandela (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon 2009 para. 9). The environment of repression was also reported by several interviewees from different community organisations (Field interviews, Kinshasa, Goma and Bukavu, July 2009)
finish the same report, are revealing:

I urge all parties to the Agreements, particularly the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to accelerate the implementation of the commitments that they have undertaken, which will be important in ensuring that the long-suffering population of the eastern part of the country can enjoy the fruits of peace at last (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon 2009 para. 99).

What this reveals is that state-building strategies are implemented with the authority to cause suffering on the population. In other words, that those who bear the worst consequences of the war and the slow reconstruction are not the war-mongers and the state-builders themselves does not seem to be a failure of how war and state-building are carried out, but the processes of war and state-building themselves. This can be equated to what Moore called ‘the moral authority of suffering’ (Moore 1978). For Moore:

cultural formulae define socially acceptable and unacceptable needs, the meaning and causes of human suffering, and what, if anything, the individual can or should do about such suffering. In asceticism, Hindu caste, and […] concentration camps, it is possible to discern a general pattern of cultural explanation that stifles the impulse to do anything about suffering. The explanation produces this effect by making the suffering appear as part of the cosmic order, hence inevitable, and in a sense justified (1978, 78).

State-building is both deployed and received with a sense of inevitability. Moore argued further that ‘the available cultural definitions of social reality limit the range of possible responses to this reality’ (1978, 79). That is, it is not only that the capacity of the population to raise its concerns is limited, it is also that there is a cultural and social explanation for one’s suffering that links to how authority and power are justified in their failures to prevent such suffering or actually relieved of such responsibility. Congo proves to be a very hard case for resistance. Additionally, not only, as stated, do people face a climate of repression
and poverty and almost extortionist demands to ‘fend for themselves’, they are also given a very specific mandate to fulfil their part on this state building mission: provide for yourself, wait, obey and risk jail by demanding the government do their responsibilities. The statement made by a MONUC official in an interview is representative:

What we do is to make sure that civil society lives up to their goals and statutes. Their role is to check the government… In Sun City they were given seats. These have been the main constraints for civil society to stay away from politics and stay loyal to their own statutes and to safeguard the interest of the population: demanding improvements in social services, demanding accountability from politicians; fighting for rights; development, advocacy… some political advocacy is ok, but not exclusive! We got to the stage where civil society was doing 90% of political activity: questioning processes, questioning things and advocating for appointment – actual advocacy and position, that was all they were doing! They were not doing such things as demanding services or rights, but actually questioning processes, that is, typical things that should be done by political opposition. (Goma, July 2009)

Although focused on ‘civil society’, the quote is representative for several reasons. ‘Civil society’ is a contested concept. In Congo, it broadly refers to a wealth of organisations that had been set up by a variety of individuals whether elite or non-elite either to lobby elites, to provide services in the community as well as/or as an income-generating activity for one self/ one’s family. For our purposes, this statement reflects the vision of a society stratified in its different spheres according to a division of labour. Civil society in this sense could be seen as following class lines, by which only certain classes are entitled to question the processes. So, if one happens to make it to be a politician, one is legitimated to question processes, but if one just makes it to be in a NGO, then the role is to lobby the government to fulfill their responsibilities, even if one risks jail and death in the process.

A claim not to be questioned then goes in line with a claim to have ample space for operations. As such, MONUC has recently emphasised that it:
Demands that all parties cooperate fully with the operations of MONUC and that they ensure the security of as well as unhindered and immediate access for United Nations and associated personnel in carrying out their mandate, throughout the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and requests the Secretary-General to report without delay any failure to comply with these demands (UN Security Council 2009 para 38, italics in the original).

Of course, these demands come under the assumption that maintains the whole state-building apparatus: that the reconstruction of state authority is the cornerstone for sustained peace, democracy and development. This is ultimately the legitimation of authority and the justification for populations’ suffering. Further, a context of repression and lack of means results in that the symbolic is, as Scott already pointed out, a sphere of resistance out of power. For Scott, it was in this sphere where the development of the hidden transcript took place: a pattern of ideological insubordination, generally originated out of the reach of power, following the pattern of low risk, low key, covert strategies followed by subordinate populations, but that ultimately creates ‘a critique of power’ (Scott 1990, xii).

2. Armed/unarmed divide

In a context of conflict like the one in Congo (several years of international war on top of earlier armed conflicts and a significant flow of weapons) it is not possible to disregard violent resistance, even if they also justify their means on the basis of what they interpret as just and unjust. The ‘weapons of the weak’ in Congo is not just the gossip or the pilfering, it is the capacity to form an armed group with real bazookas and AK-47 rifles (Graduate Institute Geneva 2007, 98 - 101).

A question this brings up is whether different means of resistance amount to different types of resistance. For instance, the mai-mai militias were set up at the very early stages of the conflict in 1994-5 as civilian self-defence militias against Hutu genocidaires that were
settling in Congo. In the process of over 15 years some of these militias have become a destabilising element themselves in the Eastern Congo, now operating as a violent actor against the populations, with different alliances in different parts of the provinces even to the FDLR. On the one hand, it is tempting to try to build a typology of resistance by for example looking at means and aspirations. However this will still be affected by whether the context is one of ‘peace’ or war. For instance, the everydayness of war and the use of weapons as a form of resistance can be equated to the use of nicknames and small stealing during peacetime. Additionally, we would run the risk of creating categories of a sort of “good resistance” / “bad resistance” without making any sense of the realities on the ground.

Of course some of the violent resistance in Congo is very problematic. To start with, the targets of this resistance become obscure when armed groups raid into villages, pillaging, raping, kidnapping and killing. However, as noted, we are more likely to see resistance operating in a way that does not defy authorities directly. As such, this resistance operates in the overt public arena of power. It both fulfils its purposes while denying the state its subjects. It denies the government and the whole state building apparatus, the claim to the monopoly of violence. In occupying mines and exploiting them, it denies the state and legitimate extractive mechanisms its capacity to organise economy. So, on the one hand, this resistance fits our definition, because it challenges imposed conditions of life. However, it does so in a way that imposes certain conditions of life on to other groups of people. So by all means, they are establishing themselves as another power. As such, armed resistance plays a double role of resisting certain elements of the statebuilding enterprise, but they become part of the spectrum of domination that other subordinate classes confront on their everyday lives. In any case, we must see not just the outcome of their actions, but rather how porous are the borders between the gossiping and the holding of an AK-47 in a context of war.10

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10 This also raises the issue that whether armed resistance is fuelled by the internationalised context and the context of war in which the Congo finds itself.
3. Symbolism and challenge

Symbolism is a form of challenge on the same grounds that power operates. The same way that domination is justified on the basis that it will promises symbolic ideas such as “peace”, “development” and “security”, resistance counter-posing an ideal of what these very notions really mean and should look like. Holding power to account on its own grounds is a powerful way of confronting such power. Further, the asymmetry of forces between lower classes and elites, and their capacity for repression is such that the symbolic is almost the only space out of this domination. Additionally, this asymmetry of forces makes people on the ground almost impossible to compete with the imposition of ways of achieving “peace”, “development” and “security”. Two elements stand out in this contention: who is legitimate to make changes and what those changes should be.

So, for instance, a MONUC representative affirmed that: ‘We are dealing with people who are helpless… The mass of this people’s country is illiterate… there are no real political parties here, we are trying to build this country from scratch, there is no real civil society… it is in a state of infancy’ (MONUC Representative Kinshasa, July 2009) In contrast, a representative from a grassroots organisation in Kinshasa said in relation to rebuilding the country and sustaining peace that ‘we are the ones who can do it’, ‘they are here to get our wealth, it is our job, they can’t even do their responsibility, they do nothing, it is our job to set up democratic institutions etc.’ (Group Jeremie Bukavu, July 2009).

Resistance not only claims that something different is being done but it also acts as a form of accountability because what the mission claims to be doing is not done. On the streets, the common statement: ‘everything goes to the pockets of the authorities’ portrays the image that the authorities, including here the MONUC and the government, actually work against state building. Several times when I asked whether people agree with the strategies of state building, they tended to respond: ‘state building? But where is the state? I can’t see it? Can you see it? Look around you!!’
When I put this to some representatives of both government and international authorities they lay the blame on each other. For instance, a former MONUC representative stated:

The Congolese elite, that is, the political, economic and military elite have destroyed the state. Some times in a concerted way, some times bilaterally, but sometimes as an individual strategy. Today, after of decades of absence of the state, there is a lack of trust in the state by the elite. (Kinshasa, July 2009).

A MONUC representative, talking about the protests in Goma early in 2009 he said:

In Goma we had the manipulation of almost all branches from the top. It is hard to say whether manipulation or frustration because there was war and populations felt MONUC wasn’t doing enough. The government was inexistnet, never responded, but MONUC was there. Some times even acting as a de facto state. That could explain why MONUC was targeted. The fact that MONUC listens and the government is sometimes inexistent is what makes MONUC a target. (July 2009)

On the other hand, a representative from the government stated that

the DRC needs social democracy but it is not possible because of lack of investment and lack of financial means. The DRC is asphyxiated because the policy from the big powers is ‘you pay us first before we give you the money’... also everyone is having a piece of the cake here. The US and France take the petrol, the US and Belgium take the Cobalt, Germany operates in the Katanga mining, the gold is taken by Canada and GB and a bit by the US, diamonds are taken by Israel, Holland, South Africa. I have no problem with investment in resources, but in the context of a neo-colonial model, there is no hope for the Congolese. (Kinshasa, July 2009)

So while the elites blame each other for who is obstructing the construction of the state with its subsequent social benefits for the populations, on the streets, this is almost irrelevant and
the international-national elite complex is demanded accountability. The constant claim ‘they do nothing’ is symbolic of an overall picture that was put most clearly by another interviewee: ‘while they just run their cars up and down all day, people here, the people suffer, you know’ (Kinshasa, 2009)

Statebuilding strategies need to be seen is less absolute ways, whether benign or totalising enterprises. In the end, one way or the other, people on the ground demand accountability and it is here that we can start reading political alternatives.

A charity worker stated:

‘We must start from the proposals that are made at the grassroots. What we want and what the international community wants is diametrically opposed. I am from Kinshasa, here in Kinshasa things don’t go, people suffer. Peace has multiple dimensions: social, environmental, economic... We are oppressed, exterminated, our women are raped, the children abducted by the military... The peace in Congo is a global thing, we need a global approach and not a sectored approach like the MONUC does. It reforms the justice sector here, it does democracy promotion there... Peace here is less important than money. The Congolese context is unique... But you, the internationals, you come here with laboratory theories, preconceived models and try to impose them on the Congo. No, that is not peace.’ (Kinshasa, July 2009).

The problem of identifying a political alternative from a picture that demands accountability and that essentially speaks the language of power is problematic. As this NGO representative just highlighted, the alternative is not constructed as a radical ideological articulation of structural changes or sophisticated analysis of socio-political international contexts, the alternatives are constructed, as Scott already saw, in modest and seemingly conservative claims. This, I would argue, is not representative of people not having radical ideals or alternatives, but actually because there is a lack of political space. The political
space in Congo is taken by gangsters; men; militarism; multinational corporations; NGOs that follow the dictates of governmental policies; elite’s discourses about democracy and peace and development but first and foremost, the space is occupied by poverty. The constant concentration on providing food for the family is a big hindrance towards the creation of more articulated and more organised political alternatives. Still, this is not to say that political alternatives do not exist, is that they need to be read differently.

4. Conclusion

The responses that populations have posed to statebuilding strategies have had to adapt to a climate of change, violence and repression brought from the war and war-like environments, but also from the shortcomings of the statebuilding strategies themselves. These responses, and despite the limitations, can be read as a form of resistance as well as a way of articulating ideas about possible and more enjoyable futures. Following the framework of ‘everyday resistance’ and specifically that of James Scott we have identified resistance as a permanent element in relations of domination, which systematically attempts to challenge such domination by confronting the claims made by elites through a variety of means. In Congo, this is fundamentally done at the symbolic level by confronting the morality on which a reality of everyday suffering is justified and by counter-posing an ideal of how things should be.

Individuals joining armed groups form part of a motley crew of resisters. Indeed, precisely because one of the elements of the theory is that resistance does not need to be politically minded and that, as Scott himself pointed out, the notions of the self in resistance politics need to be taken into account, one cannot disregard the armed elements in the context of DRC. This has several implications. It has been stated that one of the best contributions of Scott was to have created a theory of the everyday resistance out of the everyday constant and permanent actions of subordinate classes, whether by gossiping, pilfering, character assassination or similar. It has also been stated that this is able to capture the everyday
relations of domination and that part of the success of their permanency is that they are sustainable, not very risky, attempted to avoid repression and used the language of power. However, although this also captures the relations of domination in Congo in their everyday, it is not possible to disregard the armed elements. In a context of war, and, in particular, a country that has suffered over 100 years of continual high intensity poverty, colonialism and repression and war, there is a fine line between the armed and the unarmed divide.

However, the purpose here is not to identify a pure ethical resistance. In fact, it could be argued that the task could be close to impossible. As Moore states ‘Human beings can have the courage of their convictions and be willing to stand up to overwhelming social pressures at the same time that they are behaving in a cruel and oppressive fashion.’ (1978, p. 90). Establishing a pure ethical ‘ideal’ resistance is not the point. Wolf also argues that not all rebellions attempt ideal emancipatory orders but the overriding of old social order. If we agree with Coleman that ‘[i]f we define terrorism as a crime it tells us nothing’, we might need to be prepared to examine the political motivations in the kinds of actions of armed groups (1990, p.196). And these, in Congo, are very much still ‘weapons of the weak’. All kinds of means of resistance ultimately create what Scott called the hidden transcript, and what we have identified as counter posing a picture of what should be. This area of the symbolic relates also to how justice and injustice are defined. Ultimately then, we might like to think that the transformative power of populations might not just be the hybridisation of the outcomes of the statebuilding strategies, but actually a redefinition of justice, good government and political community and the legitimacy of the actors to operationalise them.
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