

# Critical Dialogue

## **Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context.** By Daniel E. Agbiboa.

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The state can manifest itself in many ways to its citizens, but in northeast Nigeria it manifests itself mostly as a checkpoint operator eager to fill its pockets. In his outstanding new book, Daniel Agbiboa offers a perspective on the politics of logistics from the viewpoint of those who live in a part of the world where Amazon doesn't deliver to your doorstep. His interlocutors are the foot soldiers of global trade, stitching together places and markets and people. Based on years of research, his book provides an invaluable window not only into local troubles in northeast Nigeria but also the lifeworld and politics of small-scale and informal mobility around the world. Because everywhere where hawkers, peddlers, informal taximen, and other people get by on the margins of the economy and the law, they are subjected to harassment; by virtue of their informality, they are prime targets for the exactions of state agents. As Agbiboa puts it, quoting novelist Ben Okri (*The Famished Road*, 1992), Nigerian roads are infrastructures that “swallow people” (p. 47). His book is a fantastic and frantic exploration of how these propensities of roads and mobility in northeastern Nigeria lie at the root of the Boko Haram crisis.

While many studies of mobility in Africa focus on the challenges of transport on the continent drawing on the “new mobilities paradigm,” Agbiboa's ambition is to place mobility at the heart of power and politics. His main argument is that in a context where everything flows, immobilization is the main form of violence deployed by the state. This eventually ignites the Boko Haram crisis, and subsequently, subversive forms of mobility and mastery of terrain become the arsenal of that movement, only to be repelled when the state partners with local hunter societies that have an equal mastery of vernacular mobility and terrain. Each encroachment on mobility that is declared subversive mobilizes a new energy to circumvent it, either inventing a new form of mobility or unleashing a violent counterreaction; each prohibition in turn begets a

new landscape of enforcers making money out of its enforcement.

In Agbiboa's book the contradictory, layered, and entangled politics of mobility become evident—offering a captivating and unique window into the mobile basis of insurgency. To be sure, the counterinsurgency literature has long insisted on the fundamental role of mobility in the strategic arsenal of insurgents and guerrillas. Therefore, while Agbiboa purports to use the new mobilities paradigm to shed new light on the nature of insurgency, I believe his biggest contribution is actually the opposite: using fine-grained knowledge of the Boko Haram insurgency to speak back to the new mobilities paradigm, challenging its penchant for abstract theorizing by speaking back to it from the messy empirical contexts of complex emergencies. It is by drawing on his interviews with local transport operators and the often astute insights of area studies experts that the central role of the politics of mobility in the Boko Haram crisis become evident, more than through the theoretical inflections that the new mobilities paradigm offers. Instead, I think that the new mobilities paradigm can learn from the insights that emerge from Agbiboa's study of the politics of vernacular mobilities at the periphery.

The Lake Chad region is an awkward geopolitical accident, in that national borders were imposed on a social fabric that has always been mobile and in flux. The climate and terrain itself are inimical to sedentarization, instead urging on nomad and itinerant livelihoods. People there have always utilized this imposition of borders: for profit, by smuggling and using price differentials across tax jurisdictions, but also by hiding just away from where security forces can move, just on the other side of borders, until they desist and security forces on the opposite side get mobilized. These subversive mobilities—to speak with Jacob Shell (*Transport and Revolt: Pigeons, Mules, Canals, and the Vanishing Geographies of Subversive Mobility*, 2015)—thus make clever use of, and even thrive only thanks to, the restrictions that states impose upon them and their inability to fully achieve them. While Agbiboa quotes John Dewey's assertion that “Without roads which one is free to use at will, men might almost as well be castaways on a desert island” (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 1954, p. 60), many livelihoods here are instead built out of the frictions imposed by the difficulties of

using roads, by people profiting from circumventing impediments to movement.

The figure of the nomad is the antithesis of the sedentary state, of that slow, static machinery that thrives by constraining, channeling, administering, and leaching on mobility. Indeed, in the deep history of states, mobile populations and long-distance trade have been met with mistrust by sedentary states. But mirroring those who manufacture profit out of the incongruent legal terrain around mobility and disjointed regimes of prohibition are those who bank on these differences in another way. These are the agents of the state who are there to enforce these regimes, but who use their position to manufacture profit out of these prohibitions. As Agbibo notes, from this perspective government agents deployed from faraway centers of power turn roads into extractive spaces and mobility into an oppressive experience (p. 100). As in many other places, it is unfortunately a deep historical experience of Nigerian civilians with their state.

Yet, as Agbibo shows, despite a constant anxiety of the state with mobility in Nigeria, the hold of the state over its transport network is heavily contested. In such a context, the right to the road and mobility can become a symbolic fight over other questions, pivoting around who can use the privileged space of circulation, showing how political this space and movement along it is (p. 97). It is hard to disagree with his thesis, and I believe it is a window into a more universal principle that has been most forcefully articulated by Fernand Braudel (*Civilization and Capitalism Vol. II: The Wheels of Commerce*, 1982, pp. 231-2): wherever wealth is concentrated in the sphere of circulation, politics will take the shape of people seeking to control its routes and the terms of movement along it. In this context, logistical space is a privileged space for political contestation, and Agbibo's work offers a wonderful case study of what Joshua Clover has aptly dubbed "circulation struggles" (*Riot, Strike, Riot. The New Era of Uprisings*, 2016, p. 144), or struggles over logistical space and the movement through it.

But can one really maintain the opposition between the static and anti-mobile logic of the state and the nomad logic of the guerilla and bandit? A key value of Agbibo's work is that he shows that up close, of course, one cannot. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have argued (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1987), the state absorbs the war machine and the war machine mimics the state. And this happens in very practical ways. The checkpoints that are often the only manifestation of states in their hinterlands get copied by their detractors, as Boko Haram did (p. 124). Vice versa, states often enroll mobile proxies in their battles against their nomad enemies—Sudan's Janjaweed and the hunters used by the governments of Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Nigeria to pursue highway bandits and Boko Haram are cases in point (cf. p. 146). Indeed, perfecting the challenge to the opposition between sedentary


states and its mobile enemies, rulers and rebels in the hinterlands and border zones of states in the Lake Chad basin often converge in their use of what Louisa Lombard calls a form of "raiding sovereignty" (*Hunting Game: Raiding Politics in the Central African Republic*, 2020) perpetually on the move, only temporarily mooring in static "garrison depots" (J. Roitman, "The Garrison-Entrepôt," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 38[150-152], 297-329, 1998). Today, the image of endless convoys of white Toyotas laden with armed men under the waving black banners of the Islamic State or Boko Haram epitomize this collapse of the state and its enemies into a similarly unmoored logistical war machine.

But there is another level of complexity in the challenge to the opposition of state and mobile enemy. The power of Agbibo's book lies in making a point and then offering us a glimpse into the truth of the opposite argument. Boko Haram was, ostensibly, ignited by something as ridiculously banal as a motorcycle helmet law, but in fact, Agbibo shows, something else was going on. The senator Ali Sheriff had funded Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf with the explicit purpose of converting his followers, *achaba* or motor drivers, into a political force that could help him win the elections; once that was done, he was quick to distance himself from his embarrassing entourage (pp. 73ff). But once mobilized in service of the state, this charged mobile force of the *achaba* drivers was unleashed and could now be turned against the state. The state prohibited them; once criminalized, they radicalized, turning into the vehicles of terror. But the prohibition and declaration of subversive mobility also mobilized something else. Those working for the state were empowered to use the prohibition on some mobilities as a pretext to increase their extraction of wealth from all mobilities. An instance of a pattern that occurs in many places, the declaration of Boko Haram as a terrorist force released and mobilized enormous financial resource flows towards the security apparatus, which gained a vested interest in perpetuating the threat that releases the operational fund for its lucrative deployments as well as the opportunities to extract wealth from road users (p. 133, 164). In the same way, the Congolese army doesn't defeat the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) or Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) any time soon, simply because the threat, however marginal, of these groups mobilizes lucrative funding. In more abstract terms, subversive mobilities thrive because of state-issued regimes of prohibition; the agents of the state thrive where its enemies manifest.

In sum, if Agbibo's "overriding objective ... is to demonstrate how mobility and mobilization are deeply intertwined in the context of insurgency" (p. 60), he has magnificently succeeded, even while challenging the new mobilities paradigm itself—perhaps despite his intentions. As such, the book is a treasure trove for anyone interested in questions of mobility and conflict.

**Response to Peer Schouten's Review of *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context***

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— Daniel E. Agbiboa 

Peer Schouten is correct in his observation that the main argument of my book, *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency*, is that “immobilization is the main form of violence deployed by the state.” However, that violent resource is not just the monopoly of “the state” but is also deployed by a phalanx of actors beyond the state, ranging from armed opposition groups (e.g., Boko Haram), to subversive workers (e.g., *achaba* [commercial motorcycle] drivers), to pro-government militias (e.g., the Civilian Joint Task Force). In fact, one of my primary aims was to show how forms of existential immobility—produced and maintained by state corruption, repression, and neglect—made it possible for Boko Haram to mobilize the multitude of immobilized and dispossessed for its jihadist “counter-conduct.” Absent critical attention to the “contradictory, layered, and entangled politics of mobility” that Schouten points to, especially its imbrication with mobilization and statecraft, the story of insurgency and counterinsurgency in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad region would be incomplete, nay, vacuous.

Schouten's perceptive review of my book demonstrates his astute capacity to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar—a hallmark of his own thoroughgoing treatment of mobility in *Roadblock Politics*—by, first accurately underscoring the double consciousness of my book: “[W]hile Agbiboa purports to use the new mobilities paradigm to shed new light on the nature of insurgency, I believe his biggest contribution is actually the opposite: using fine-grained knowledge of the Boko Haram insurgency to speak back to the new mobilities paradigm, challenging its penchant for abstract theorizing by speaking back to it from the messy empirical contexts of complex emergencies.” Indeed, by using the case of Boko Haram to underscore “the constitutive role of mobility in armed insurgency” (p. 17), a key motivating factor for me was to reconfigure the margins of the “new mobilities paradigm,” which takes Euro-America as the default site of research and interest (p. ix), and “rarely expand[s] beyond cultures and canonical discussions of mobility in Western societies” (p. 9). This habit reproduces entrenched imaginaries of non-Western mobilities as residual entities that offer nothing of value to the study of world historical movements or of the human condition writ large. So, Schouten is pinpoint in his observation that the new mobilities paradigm “can learn from the insights that emerge from Agbiboa's study of the politics of vernacular mobilities at the periphery.”

Second, Schouten is apt in his note that the very frictions of mobility in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad region constitute a vital site and form of livelihood for a range of actors dwelling in mobility, reinforcing my argument that mobility is at once resourceful and burdensome, agential and limiting (p. 36). Schouten should know. His own book is a remarkable testament to how the tensions inherent to the road complex in Central Africa open a lucrative if contested space for a *mélange* of publics (from soldiers to rebels to brokers), scales (from local to transnational, main roads to bush paths), and realms (from visible to invisible, spectacular to spectral), each leveraging its unique positionality “to manufacture profit” and to carve spheres of influence, action, and meaning out of connections and associated frictions.

To the extent that Schouten and I are both ultimately concerned about the embeddedness of mobility, power, and political economy in mycorrhizal relations that constitutes the grounds for collaborative survival (see Anna Tsing's *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, 2004, p. 138), we come from mutual worlds, even while sensitive to positions of difference. Through this intersubjective awareness, it is my hope that future studies of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Africa and beyond can allow themselves to be contaminated by the calculated and chance encounters in *Roadblock Politics* and *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency*; and perhaps more importantly, to grasp the power of mobility to mean and to be more than.

**Roadblock Politics: The Origins of Violence in Central Africa.**

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There is much to like about Peer Schouten's fine book on *Roadblock Politics*, which offers readers an innovative approach to studying violence in Central Africa—the war capital of Africa. The multiple intersecting mobilities analysed by Schouten challenge sedentarist and blinkered narratives of violent conflicts in that region (including apolitical imaginaries of roadblocks). The figure of the roadblock signals immediately a contradictory, even subversive, space that is at once mobile and immobile, accessible and inaccessible, ubiquitous and elusive, connected and frictioned, everyday and political. In short, at the epicentre of *Roadblock Politics* is the imbricated logic of logistics and power as enacted and contested on the fast and slow lanes of mobile life. Beyond the parochial attention to territory and population, Schouten invites readers into a world of *perpetuum mobile* in which control over circulation and *hongo* (transit levies), as well as the

strategic use of brokers—“dubious middlemen” (p. 147) and “armed escorts” (p. 164)—constitutes the source and summit of power, profit, friction, and political agency writ small and large. What emerges from this textured narrative of entangled lifeworlds is the strength of so-called weak states and the “consistent rules” (p. 115) of chaos. As Schouten notes, “While Central African trade routes seem chaotic and under-governed to the uninitiated, a whole set of rules, formal and informal, shapes the flow of traffic” (p. 120). What do these insights reveal about the nature of the postcolonial state in Central Africa?

It is seemingly strange to claim that violent conflict and political order could originate from something so generalized and banalized as roadblocks. But it is precisely this strangeness that Schouten sets out to make familiar in this seminal book on the centrality of “roadblock politics”—or rather, roadblocks *as* political—to the *longue durée* of violence, order-making, and statecraft in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). Schouten’s overarching aim is to reconfigure the margins of violence through the obvious but oft-overlooked infrastructure of roadblocks in Central Africa, a region where “hardly any footpath is spared the presence of roadblocks” (p. 206). What if we see the conflict economy in Central Africa through the eyes of roadblocks rather than “conflict minerals”? What do we find when we think conflict with roadblocks? These vital questions are front and centre in *Roadblock Politics*.

Schouten’s book may be divided into two main parts. The first part sheds light on the “prehistory of the roadblock,” focusing specifically on “how [and why] control over logistical space has formed a pivot of patterns of contestation and order-making in Central Africa’s turbulent history” (pp. 114–5). The second part takes a deep dive into the messy politics of contemporary roadblocks, with particular attention to “the role of control over circulation for local patterns of order-making, the entanglement of global supply chains with such patterns via roadblocks, as well as the different spatial patterns of control and contestation that emerge at the confluence of both dynamics” (p. 115). Schouten’s central argument is that the conflict economy in central Africa is not so much about control over natural resources (i.e., “conflict minerals”) as about the struggle for control over strategic spaces of circulation (i.e., checkpoints). In other words, roads constitute the organizing logic of (negotiated) violence, profit, and political order in Central Africa. Roadblocks become a mirror that reflects the fiscal character of the state in Central Africa. Schouten declares his intention early on (p. 2): “This book is about ... roadblocks, about how control over passage points along trade routes embodies a key form of power and an object of struggle in Central Africa,” from the past to the postcolony. From Schouten’s vantage point, roadblocks reflect and reinforce power. Schouten’s approach to “infrastructural power”

(p. 84) echoes Michel Foucault’s non-elitist notion of power as coming from everywhere, to wit: dispersed and pervasive.

To make sense of his central argument, Schouten undertakes what may be described as a mobile ethnography, which involves travelling with mobile subjects and experiencing their lived realities en route. Through such co-present immersion, Schouten was able to directly experience the workaday world and struggle economy of mobile people getting by and getting ahead on major roads and footpaths. This going along approach allowed Schouten to defamiliarize and refamiliarize a shifting and contradictory world of flows and fixities—one that is too often simplified, reduced, conflated, and shunted to the anarchical margins of the conflict economy in Central Africa. Given that the fieldwork that underpins *Roadblock Politics* was undertaken by “a sizeable team of human rights activists and local researchers” (p. xvi), the reader is not entirely clear about what specific role Schouten played in the data collection process, and how much agency and oversight Schouten had over the field data. Schouten could help shed light on this.

Through an empirically grounded and analytically sound discourse of roadblocks, Schouten drives home the neglected yet fundamental linkages between the everyday and the political, the global and the local, the formal and informal, the visible and the invisible. The roadblock emerges as an exceptionally dense space of negotiation, resistance, collaboration, profit and loss, connivance, even ambush. At the roadblock, rebels and soldiers participate in a “complex choreography of predation” (p. 114). What insights does the roadblock—as a theatre of ceaseless suspicion and negotiation (p. 121)—furnish about perennial tensions between the extortionist and the extorted, between the centre and the margin? Schouten usefully (if briefly) speculates on a trickle-up economy that governs roadblock politics in Central Africa, offering readers a fascinating inlet into patterns of wealth redistribution. He surmises that proceeds from roadblocks often find their way “into the pockets of figures in the upper echelons of power” (p. 129)—a rumoured reality that I have also encountered during my fieldwork on checkpoints in Nigeria. Related to this is “the profound way in which roadblock taxation structures military deployment and internal hierarchies within the state” (p. 131).

Schouten could have drawn more contiguous examples and, perhaps, richer empirical and theoretical insights from cases in West Africa and the Lake Chad region (e.g., the Tuareg rebellions and desert wars in Mali and Niger in the 1990s; the mobile strategies of Islamists in Mali and Nigeria), where the dramaturgies of control over movement and crossroads could have expanded and complemented the original insights offered in *Roadblock Politics*. For instance, the discourse of “paid armed escorts” and “dubious middlemen” resonates very much with a rich

literature on real governance, practical norms, smugglers, fixers, “men in arms,” and “marginal gains” on the predatory roads, junctions, and terminals of West Africa. Instead, Schouten sometimes appears too wedded to “long distanced” examples offered by Western scholars like James Scott rather than closer examples from elsewhere in the Sahel-Saharan.

Given “the threat implicit in roadblock politics” (p. 40) in Eastern DRC and the CAR, I would like to know how Schouten was able to (socially) navigate the real threat of violence, disappearance, and death. How was Schouten able to move around this dangerous space to conduct fieldwork? We learn little about Schouten’s emotions on the move (e.g., are there times when he feared for his life? Was he ever detained on the move? Did he require “paid armed escorts”?); about how his mobile subjects perceived his identity as a white male navigating a Black space marked by infrastructural voids; and to what extent that identity (as property) rendered certain spaces (in)accessible to him. I wanted to know more about how Schouten was feeling when “a boy armed with two Kalashnikovs suddenly emerges from the bush and appears at our side” (p. 209). Surely, this is not a normal, everyday occurrence. In short, the linkages between the mobile and the personal needs further attention.

Furthermore, I found myself wanting to learn more—beyond the “coping strategies of evasion and withdrawal” (p. 101)—about the various arts and strategies devised by road users in Central Africa to “deal with” roadblock shakedowns, including humour, strategic ingratiation, situational friendship, appeal to ethnicity, etc. From my own study of transport workers in southwest Nigeria and northeast Nigeria, it is often when such strategies fail that violence ensues. My invitation here is for Schouten to draw more attention to the human character of roadblocks. This is particularly important since, as Schouten writes *en passant*, “frequent circulation along a same road means that faces become familiar; road-block operators and drivers get to know, or to solve things ‘on friendly terms’ once in a while” (p. 125). It would be particularly revealing to hear more about the affective logic and socially charged life of checkpoints that surely constitutes what Schouten calls “roadblock geographies” (p. 116).

In *Roadblock Politics*, the mobile appears as coextensive with the masculine. The reader is left to wonder about what (subversive) role, if any, women play in the “friction of terrain” (p. 72). Are roadblocks in Central Africa exclusively phallic spaces? In short, the gendered dimension of the political economy of roadblocks seems missing from the story of *Roadblock Politics*. How do women figure in the “roadside sense of community” (p. 125) taking shape in Central Africa?

Overall, Schouten has written a remarkably innovative and generative book about a subject—roadblocks—that is too often taken for granted yet central to the political

economy of everyday life in conflict zones. *Roadblock Politics* is, in my view, an instant classic.

**Response to Daniel E. Agbiboa’s Review of  
*Roadblock Politics: The Origins of Violence in  
Central Africa***

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— Peer Schouten

I want to begin by thanking *Perspectives on Politics* for organizing this Critical Dialogue. Daniel Agbiboa and I share many commitments—to the politics of mobility, to the vagaries of armed mobilization, and to approaching the world from the viewpoint of those who have to move around in it. His review raises many good points, only a few of which I’ll be able to address given constraints of length—the rest will surely inform my future research and hopefully a more sustained conversation between our research agendas.

First, I surely have only scratched the surface of what there is to say about the politics of circulation in Central Africa. In the book, and the collective reports that gave rise to it, my closest local collaborators and co-authors—particularly Janvier and Saidi in Congo and Soleil-Parfait and the late Igor in CAR—and I have tried as much as possible to give voice to the concerns of “ordinary” Central Africans like *Maman* Josephine. I do hope that future research on the politics of roadblocks is able to delve more into the questions that Agbiboa raises, for they are incredibly important. Some of the glaring gaps that Agbiboa astutely identifies in my book are being addressed as we speak by much more able scholars, such as in the report by Godefroid Muzalia et al. (*Roadblocks ‘at the rhythm of the country’*, 2021) on the dense social fabric around roadblocks in South Kivu.

Second, it is exciting to hear that many of the dynamics I describe for Central Africa resonate in West Africa. But Agbiboa thinks I “could have drawn more contiguous examples and, perhaps, richer empirical and theoretical insights from cases in West Africa ... Schouten sometimes appears too wedded to ‘long distanced’ examples offered by Western scholars like James Scott rather than closer examples from elsewhere in the Sahel-Saharan.” There is, of course, a limit to how much ground one can cover, and I believe the politics of mobility in Central Africa and the sophistication with which its inhabitants reflect on it to be rich enough for one book. Surely his reflection about “long-distanced” theories wasn’t to discourage using theories and examples from further away: after all, Agbiboa himself draws on a vast and eclectic range of “long-distanced” ideas in his book. The study of mobility should *par excellence* involve traveling concepts, however long-distance: our subjects and their goods, after all, travel just as far and widely,

despite the many efforts to hinder or slow them down. Any conversations between Central Africa and the Sahel, I think, could start with the similarities and differences in how people forge power—political, economic, and symbolic—out of the capacity to locally disrupt such movements. I believe the roadblocks I have focused on sit on a continuum of tactics in this broader field of

power, one that encompasses the intersections of pastoralism, highway banditry, and mobile warfare studied by Saïbou Issa, Christian Seignobos, and others. It goes to show that Sahelians are just as well versed in such politics as Central Africans, and that Agbiboa and I fortunately have many paths to travel to understand how mobility and armed mobilization interact.