

Publication

Agency, Social Space and Conflict-Urbanism in Eastern Congo

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Keywords Agency, social space, conflict-urbanism, D.R. Congo, motorcycle taxis, Lefebvre, Goma War, a protracted humanitarian crisis and the omnipresence of an active volcano in eastern Congo's North Kivu province have had a massive impact on the formation of urban social space in Goma. Recent perspectives on urbanity in Africa echo complaints about the ungovernability of mushrooming cities and the appraisal of urban vitality and innovation. Studies that consider and reflect both the agency of the actors and the city as a structured setting are still rare and virtually non-existent in urban and conflict theories. Based on extensive anthropological fieldwork since 2008, this actor-centred approach provides insights into Goma's "conflict-urbanism" by examining the particular nexus of roads, rumours and roaming the city. Therefore, this paper identifies how urbanites or more precisely motorcycle taxi drivers (motards) engage in the formation of social space across the city and how dialectically the city is transformed by their practices. In particular, motards connect diverse urban landscapes and social networks while transporting people, goods and information in a fast transforming context. Furthermore, as urban infrastructure, roads provide or restrict access to certain urban areas, are used to transport conflict-related material or information, are spaces of trade and commerce, and their condition is part of everyday communication. This hints at my take on conflict-urbanism which is based on Lefebvre's "production of space" (1974). My contribution interrogates how conflict-cities can be conceptualized through paying attention to urbanites' imagination of Goma's social space. By investigating the dialectical processes of agency, the different actors' perceptions of urban space and their impact on the material and social environment, this paper demonstrates how the urban in Goma is lived, conceived and perceived and argues that an ethnography of motards' everyday lives provides an in-depth local-level analysis of the relationship between urbanization and protracted armed conflict in eastern Congo.

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