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# The Materiality of State Failure: Social Contract Theory, Infrastructure and Governmental Power in Congo

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## Abstract

Congo's state failure is usually analysed in terms of a 'broken social contract', reflecting the degree to which mainstream understandings of state failure are conditioned by classical social contract theory. This article takes a different route to understanding Congo's predicament by building on insights from actor-network theory (ANT). ANT's insistence on society as a socio-material entanglement, it shows, translates into increasing attention to the role of material infrastructures in constituting governmental power. Conversely, this approach also allows the highlighting of the importance of the absence of the material underpinnings of rule in drawing up more nuanced accounts of state failure.

## Keywords

Actor-network theory, Democratic Republic of Congo, materiality, social contract theory, state failure

## Introduction

Take away the world around the battles, keep only conflicts or debates, thicken with humanity and purify of things, and you obtain stage theater, most of our narratives and philosophies, history, and all of social science: the interesting spectacle they call cultural.

Michel Serres<sup>1</sup>

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1. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 3.

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Congo's state failure is commonly analysed in terms of a 'broken social contract'. Further elucidating the classical theoretical underpinnings of the study of state failure, explanations of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s problems often directly invoke Hobbes to paint Congo as anarchical, a 'state of nature'. In this article, I want to suggest that in locating the source of Congo's predicament – and state failure more generally – in social processes or the absence thereof, mainstream approaches to International Relations (IR) present a distorted view of what state failure is about. Rather than a purely 'social' evil, Congo's state failure also needs to be understood in 'material' terms, that is, as a consequence of the absence of the physical infrastructure that is constitutive of modern government.

This article argues that we can better understand state failure and challenges to governmental power in the developing world by deploying insights from actor-network theory (ANT). ANT takes issue with the society/nature dichotomy that underpins social contract theory, arguing that societies have always already been entanglements of social and material, technical and natural 'things'. The work of, for instance, Andrew Barry, Jane Bennett, Sheila Jasanoff and Timothy Mitchell offers exciting examples of what it implies for our understanding of politics to reintroduce the absent 'things' that Michel Serres refers to in the above quotation.<sup>2</sup> Building on such advances, this article shows how ANT can help to articulate the role of materiality in accounting for governmental power and state failure in Congo.

However, taking ANT to Congo is by no means self-evident. ANT has hitherto largely been used to study complex socio-technical entanglements such as laboratories and other highly modern settings in Europe or the US, where the infrastructure of rule is so pervasive that we generally fail to notice it. ANT's focus on how technology is weaved through social relations has contributed to a better understanding of the intricacies of power in the 'developed world', but ANT has remained remarkably silent about its implications for politics and development in the developing world. What is specific about contexts such as Congo is not the ubiquity of technological infrastructures, but rather the relative absence, and progressive disintegration, thereof. In that regard, Congo's predicament presents a critical case for ANT. This article aims at turning ANT's gaze south, to open up a set of questions regarding state failure as a socio-material predicament and the kind of disparities in governmental power that result from differences in infrastructural capacity in Congo between the construction sites of global politics – the mining camps, humanitarian assemblages and similar complex socio-technical systems – and the surrounding landscape and people.

While IR thrives on importing ideas from other disciplines, ANT is still hardly accepted as an analytical approach to international politics. In order to articulate the contribution that ANT can make to the analytics of political power in relation to state

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2. Andrew Barry, 'Political Situations: Knowledge Controversies in Transnational Governance', *Critical Policy Studies* 6, no. 3 (2012): 324–36; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gabrielle Hecht, ed., *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); Sheila Jasanoff, *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and Social Order* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

failure, this article first gives an overview of ANT's approach to power by contrasting the work of one of its most vocal spokespersons, Bruno Latour, with one of the dominant set of assumptions underpinning 'state failure', social contract theory. This article foregrounds Latour's work out of the vast array of relevant ANT literature because Latour most explicitly positions himself in terms of, and vis-à-vis, social contract theory. Articulating in some detail where Latour's approach differs from social contract theory allows me to show that one way in which ANT differs from established approaches in IR is by insisting on the role of both humans and non-humans in governance arrangements. In order to understand state failure as more than a 'broken social contract' without, however, simply dismissing that argument, the article then compares how ANT would describe and analyse Congo's state failure with how extant work invoking social contract theory has interpreted it. As we will see, the main difference between existing accounts and the ANT-inspired approach presented here resides in the role that 'things' such as technology and infrastructure play in accounting for state failure and disparities in governmental power in Congo.

## The 'Social' Contract

This section contrasts ANT with social contract theory to offer an insight into how following IR's premises has led to a pervasive understanding of state power and failure that is oblivious to the physical health of the *body politic*. ANT offers an alternative understanding of the social contract, one that places the socio-material entanglements that make up political arrangements at the centre of attention. This allows me to subsequently 'visit' Congo with a distinct approach to complex situations of state failure.

### *The Social Contract and the State of Nature in IR*

IR as a discipline typically builds on the work of classical political philosophers and hinges fundamentally on understandings of sovereignty that derive from classical social contract theory. For the first and most famous of contract theorists, Thomas Hobbes, in the state of nature – a state of being where interactions between individuals were unmediated by the state – life was literally anarchy.<sup>3</sup> Upon encountering another individual in the state of nature, one could not be sure of what would happen. In the state of nature – which equals a state of war:

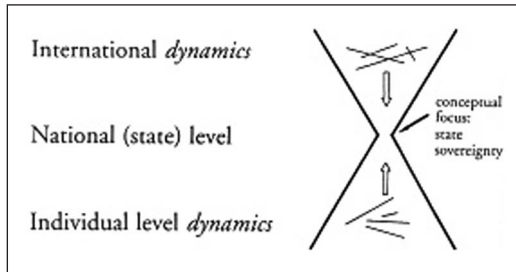
where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no

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3. Taking 'anarchy' in the etymological sense in which it first appeared in the 16th century: *an* (without) *arkhos* (chief, ruler).

Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals erect the Leviathan – the state – through a contract between each and every man as a way of escaping this state of nature. There are thus two central and opposed ‘states of being’ that make up a social contract theory: the idea of a state of nature (a hypothetical construct used to argue what the absence of the state would look like) and that of a political society – which differ by virtue of an enforced social contract that mediates human interactions in the latter.



**Figure 1.** Levels of Analysis in International Relations.

Source: Ole Waever, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 50.

Social contract theory – in its various guises – was fundamental in shaping the field of IR and continues to play a central role.<sup>5</sup> IR metaphorically transposed the individual in the state of nature to the ‘macro’ level of the state in the anarchical international system – consider Waltz’s famous assertion that ‘[s]tates in the world are like individuals in the state of nature’.<sup>6</sup> Social contract theory legitimises the spatial carving up of the world into mutually exclusive territories (states) that interact through diplomacy and armies towards the ‘outside’, while governing through bureaucracy and police on the ‘inside’,<sup>7</sup> for if the social contract concerned all in a given political territory, they would automatically belong to ‘domestic’ society. By extension, this reasoning gave rise to the parsimonious ordering of politics into ‘levels of analysis’, that is, levels with specific dynamics to be apprehended through different disciplines.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, classical political contract theory provided IR with the building blocks of a distinctively *social* political realm, and a *social* explanation of how modern societies can exist as stable spatio-temporal phenomena.<sup>9</sup> This ontological commitment to the ‘social’ in

4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or, the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 79.

5. Beate Jahn, *The Cultural Construction of International Relations: The Invention of the State of Nature* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

6. Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 160.

7. R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

8. Jahn, *The Cultural Construction*.

IR means that governmental power and its opposite, state failure, are understood exclusively in terms of pure human interactions.<sup>10</sup> Congo's predicament can, in the last instance, be explained in terms of a social contract in disrepair, the Congolese doing something wrong.

### *Embodying the Body Politic with ANT*

Actor-network theory has surged, in many ways, as a reaction against the separation between nature and society crafted in the same polemical 17th-century debates that also engendered social contract theory.<sup>11</sup> For ANT, it is exactly this Cartesian dualism that has led to the erratic conviction that, somehow, political society and nature are separate spheres, both with their own ontologies, following different laws and requiring distinct methodological approaches. Bruno Latour, one of the most vocal spokespersons for ANT, has spent much of his career fighting the assumption of a 'modern' nature–society divide, conducive as it is to the misconception that we are somehow not profoundly entangled with the material and natural world. As all societies are always already hybrids, the existence of different approaches to natural or technical concerns and social or political controversies (a corollary of the Cartesian mind–matter divide) is at the heart of his intellectual attacks. By extension, he denounces the construct of the state of nature as invented by people 'to avoid having to explain clearly the values to which they wanted to bring people'.<sup>12</sup> Yet over the years, Latour consistently makes use of the same vocabulary of social contracts, states of nature and the Leviathan to frame his arguments<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, his most explicit treatment of politics, *Politics of Nature* (2004), is concerned with overcoming the 'old social contract'.<sup>14</sup> In the following, I present a reading of Latour's work in terms of a 'political society' opposed to a state of nature. This allows me to put ANT in conversation with social contract theory about the nature of governmental power and state failure. As we will see, our resulting notion of 'the social' is different from that of conventional social contract theorists, and our version of the state of nature much more radically so.

9. Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 3–4.

10. Daniel Deudney, 'Geopolitics as Theory: Historical Security Materialism', *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2000): 77–107, 18–19; Maximilian Mayer, 'How IR Might Overcome Its "Lightness": Technological Innovations, Creative Destruction, and Explorative Realism', PhD thesis, University of Bonn, 2012, 204.

11. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110; also see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). See RBJ Walker, 'On the Protection of Nature and the Nature of Protection' in Jef Huysmans, Andrew Dobson and Raia Prokhovnik (eds) *The Politics of Protection* (London: Routledge, 2006): 189–202, for a discussion of the same problem from a perspective rooted in IR.

12. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 119.

13. Something Mark Elam consistently overlooks is his critique of Latour. See Elam, M (1999), 'Living Dangerously with Bruno Latour in a Hybrid World'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16(4): 1–24, 9.

14. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 8.

*The Social State of Nature*. Throughout his oeuvre, Latour consistently invokes baboons.<sup>15</sup> Why does Latour insist on the importance of analysing baboons in order to understand complex social arrangements? Exactly because they are themselves *not* capable of forming them. The social life of baboons is central to Latour as it provides him with an empirical example of his state of nature, as a state wherein social interactions are not mediated and stabilised with the help of non-human ‘actors’. Each time a baboon encounters another baboon, they have to re invent and re assess their respective relation, hierarchy and identities. This makes interactions strikingly unstable and, hence, *complex*:

A baboon’s life is not easy. ... He must constantly determine who is who, who is superior and who inferior, who leads the group and who follows, and who must stand back to let him pass. ... Who is calling? What is it intending to say? No marks, no costumes, no discreet signs. Of course, many signs, growls and hints exist, but none of them is unambiguous enough. Only the context will tell, but simplifying and evaluating the context is a constant headache.<sup>16</sup>

Latour’s state of nature can be visualised as a flat world, in which – as with Hobbes – each and every individual, each encounter, poses a potentially threatening question mark – ‘total disorder’, as he puts it.<sup>17</sup> Associations last only as long as individual encounters; social structure is ‘constantly decaying’;<sup>18</sup> there is no permanence, as social relations have to be re invented at each encounter. We can thus say two things about Latour’s state of nature: firstly, it is *real* – not hypothetical – and, secondly, it is essentially characterised by *unmediated interactions*.<sup>19</sup> In baboons, Latour found what comes closest to pure ‘society’, that is, devoid of objects that interfere with interactions. Baboons are to Latour what Amerindians were to the classics – Latour needed to find this purely social society in order to prove that sociology can *never* only concern human interactions: ‘When power is exerted for good, it is because it is not made of social ties; when it has to rely only on social ties, it is not exerted for

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15. Earlier in his career, he devoted significant efforts to the study of baboons, together with primatologist Shirley Strum. See Bruno Latour and Shirley Strum, ‘Human Social Origins: Oh Please, Tell Us Another Story’, *Journal of Biological and Social Structure* 9 (1986): 169–87; Shirley Strum and Bruno Latour, ‘Redefining the Social Link: From Baboons to Humans’, *Social Science Information* 26 (1987): 783–802.

16. Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, ‘Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So’, in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Towards an Integration of Micro- and Macro-sociologies*, eds K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel (London: Routledge, 1981), 277–303, 282–3.

17. *Ibid.*, 281.

18. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 70.

19. Term taken from Gregory Feldman, ‘If Ethnography Is More Than Participant-Observation, Then Relations Are More Than Connections: The Case for Nonlocal Ethnography in a World of Apparatuses’, *Anthropological Theory* 11, no. 4 (2011): 375–95.

long.<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, then, Latour's state of *nature* is purely 'social', that is, made up only of interactions between humans (or baboons). What we have here is Latour's reconstruction of 'society' as IR wants us to believe it is: entirely composed of social processes and human (or baboon) politics.<sup>21</sup> As in Hobbes' state of nature, without mediating entities, there can be:

no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society.

So what could elevate humans out of this social state of nature?

*Material Political Society.* ANT posits a different exit option than classical social contract theory. In order to render interactions stable, Latour does not recur – as Hobbes does – to a 'common power to keep them all in awe', but to the stabilisation and mediation of social interactions by *other* entities that 'act in a more durable way' upon bodies:

if you transform the state of nature, replacing unsettled alliances as much as you can with walls and written contracts, the ranks with uniforms and tattoos and reversible friendship with names and signs, then you will obtain a Leviathan.<sup>22</sup>

ANT's Leviathan – or political society – is in the first place the result of introducing *non-human* entities that give durability and 'body' to social arrangements. ANT's social contract is thus not a contract between different human individuals, but rather concerns collectives made up of, or alliances between, humans and non-humans. Such entanglements allow us to 'black-box' (or stabilise) part of the hesitations and anxieties that are inevitable in unmediated encounters. By introducing non-humans, the vast, flat expanse of the Latourian state of nature can now become populated with elevations constituted by novel entanglements – 'macro-actors' – arising out of the interweaving of individuals with things, and the mediation of interaction by symbolic and material entities. Instead of considering a human-only 'politics of the political', describing both the humans and the non-humans involved in political arrangements allows us to account for differences in size and power disparities between actors.<sup>23</sup> To contrast political society with the

20. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 66.

21. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 53; *Reassembling the Social*, 198.

22. Callon and Latour, 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan', 284. Mark Brown has noted that there are important ways in which this resembles Hobbes' understanding more than Latour seems to acknowledge. As Brown notes, Hobbes' Leviathan, too, depends on the 'Arts of publique use, as Fortification, making of Engines, and other Instruments of War'. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 55, cited in Mark B. Brown, *Science in Democracy: Expertise, Institutions, and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 113.

23. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 59; *Enquêtes sur les Modes d'Existence: Une Anthropologie des Modernes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012), 407.



social state of nature, Latour characterises the former as ‘complicated’ and the latter as ‘complex’.<sup>24</sup> In the former:

language, symbols and material objects can be used to simplify the task of ascertaining and negotiating the nature of the social order. Bodies continue their social strategies in the performance of society, but on a larger, more durable, less complex scale. Material resources and the symbolic innovations related to language allow individuals to influence and have more power over others thereby determining the nature of the social order.<sup>25</sup>

All of a sudden, we see unfolding differences in power, in the size of actors and in the capacity to act collectively or at a distance. Thus, ANT is not indifferent to power, but rather conflates it with mediated connection – in ANT’s political society, interactions are mediated by *apparatuses*, purposeful entanglements of humans and non-humans.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, calculative devices and state abstractions are vital conduits of power that, in mediating our interactions, separate us from a state of nature. Artefacts such as statistics, vessels, maps and sextants start to explain how humans can arrive at keeping relations stable and controlling them from a distance, allowing colonial expansion, state domination and 19th-century empires.<sup>27</sup> With this sensitivity to what Michael Mann has called ‘infrastructural power’,<sup>28</sup> political society is thus a society assembled, infused, kept together and emergent out of the mediations of human interaction by *other* things. Where critical approaches to IR theory consider the state of nature a *cultural* construct,<sup>29</sup> ANT retorts that political society is a *socio-material* (or material-semiotic) construction.

If the natural state of things is to be unconnected, and for interaction to be unmediated, then the central research problem for ANT studies becomes accounting for mediated interaction. In line with ANT’s approach to the ‘social contract’, its

24. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 198; Strum and Latour, ‘Redefining the Social Link’.

25. *Ibid.*, 791–2.

26. ‘Purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are not properties of humans either. They are properties of institutions, of apparatuses, of what Foucault called *dispositifs*.’ Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 192.

27. Patrick Carroll, *Science, Culture, and Modern State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Matthew G. Hannah, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 211; John Law, ‘Technology and Heterogeneous Engineering: The Case of the Portuguese Expansion’, in *The Social Construction of Technical Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, eds Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes and Trevor J. Pinch (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 111–34.

28. Michael Mann, ‘The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results’, *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185–213.

29. Jahn, *The Cultural Construction*.



methodological dictum to trace how politically powerful collectives are shaped is to ‘[f]ollow the actors in their weaving through things they have added to social skills so as to render more durable the constantly shifting interactions’.<sup>30</sup> This is indeed ANT’s central research problem: ‘how are the solid, durable macro-actors which we see forming everywhere in human societies, actually constructed?’<sup>31</sup> Where Hobbes would answer, ‘through the mutual transference of right’, ANT considers the establishment of a social contract as a mere instance of a more general phenomenon – translation, or the entanglement of social relations with non-human entities. The Latourian body politic is thus not called into being and maintained through a social contract alone, but through the hard work of structuring interactions by stabilising them through attachments involving non-humans. The difference between baboons and their observers, and by extension between weak and powerful actors, resides in the difference in *equipment* they dispose of.<sup>32</sup>

The sceptical political philosopher can of course wonder what is so *political* about adding technology to social relations. Rather than being apolitical, a whole rich tradition of Science and Technology Studies stands to show that weaving technology through social relations – also called translation, association or assembling – thrives on controversy, concerning as it does ‘all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion or violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor of force’.<sup>33</sup> Contrary to Hobbesian versions of social contract theory, however, even in ANT’s political society – a world infused with non-human beings – the situation of war of all against all continues; ‘we have never *left the state of war*, the *state of nature* that Hobbes thought the Leviathan had gotten us out of’<sup>34</sup> – interactions will keep shifting and established associations will continue to be tested.

From this perspective, the state is not a point of departure, but rather an admirable achievement. ANT acknowledges the hard work required to assemble a modern state through the redistribution of agency over networks composed of human and non-human ‘actors’, and to act upon the conduct of citizens by creating a series of difficult-to-contest obligatory passage points through which they have to pass.<sup>35</sup> In effect, by not presupposing the power of the state to simply pre-exist (as the result of a ‘social contract’), ANT is similar to Foucault in foregrounding the many shifting socio-material entanglements

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30. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 68.

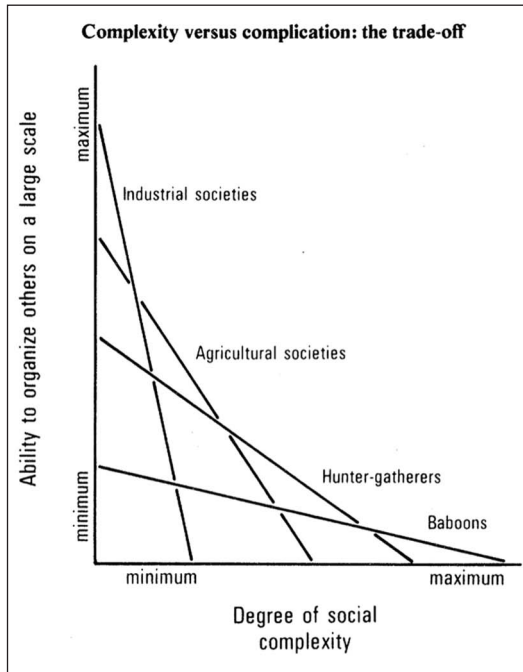
31. Callon and Latour, ‘Unscrewing the Big Leviathan’, 283.

32. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 197–8.

33. Callon and Latour, ‘Unscrewing the Big Leviathan’, 279. See the contribution of Barry in this issue.

34. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 218, emphasis in original; see also Callon and Latour, ‘Unscrewing the Big Leviathan’, 293.

35. Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Present: Administrating Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Jan-Hendrik Passoth and Nicholas Rowland, ‘Actor-Network State: Integrating Actor-Network Theory and State Theory’, *International Sociology* 25, no. 6 (2010): 818–41.



**Figure 2.** Complexity versus Complication: the Trade-off.

Source: Shirley Strum and Bruno Latour, 'Redefining the Social Link: From Baboons to Humans', *Social Science Information* 26 (1987): 792.

making up modern governmental power, thus turning the traditional understanding of the state on its head. However, while ANT's political society is not necessarily social – for what distinguishes it from the state of nature is its materiality – nor is it necessarily tied to the state apparatus – as socio-material entanglements can proliferate beyond the state. This means that multiple entanglements of humans and non-humans – scientific laboratories, armies, colonial mines and humanitarian interventions – co exist at the same time, and that their interactions – as far as they co exist as distinct ontologies in 'reality-multiple' – cannot necessarily be settled by an 'overarching' mediating principle or entity.<sup>36</sup>

*From Levels of Analysis to Levels of Entanglement.* As an alternative to the levels of analysis in IR that are brought about through the distinction between political society and the state of nature, ANT offers us a continuum of different levels of entanglement that result from alliances with non-human entities. In its most radical articulation, this leads to the following hypothetical typology. Taken from an early Latour article,<sup>37</sup> it concerns a typology of societies according to the level of 'complexity' versus the level of 'complication'.

36. John Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World', Center for the Humanities (Wesleyan University) Working Paper, Middletown, 2011; Annemarie Mol, 'Ontological Politics: A Word and Some Questions', *Sociological Review* 46 (1998): 74–89.

37. Taken from Strum and Latour, 'Redefining the Social', 792.

The former refers to societies where interactions are *not* mediated by material-semiotic entanglements (or ‘apparatuses’); the latter refers to societies characterised by a high level of entanglement. At one end of the scale, we have the state of nature, inhabited, as we might expect, by thoroughly social baboons. We are then introduced to the type of human society that has historically been least entangled with material and technical entities: hunter-gatherers. While interactions are heavily mediated in hunter-gatherer societies, they are mediated less by durable material actors and more by multi-interpretable, unseen, actors such as gods.<sup>38</sup> As we move across the figure and along history, more material ‘stabilising tools’<sup>39</sup> get added to human relations in order to stabilise them, and we gradually arrive at our present-day condition, that of ‘industrial society’. According to Latour and Strum, it forms the most complicated society in terms of its high level of entanglement with non-humans: humans and technologies, nature and society, are entangled to an unprecedented degree.

The purpose of introducing this hypothetical typology is not to hierarchise societies, but rather to argue that IR has been oblivious to the significance of material civilisation for the constitution and transformation of political order.<sup>40</sup> Hierarchising industrial societies as somehow historically more advanced – and hence entitled – than less entangled ones would be thoroughly contrary to ANT’s principles; the goal is rather to replace dichotomies deriving from a *social* version of contract theory by a focus on the qualitative and quantitative differences between concrete historical entanglements. Where Hobbes’ state of nature populated by naked individual humans was assembled into IR to create a ‘horizontal’ space occupied by equal individuals,<sup>41</sup> Latour offers a reading of humans as always entangled with nature, technology and things, albeit to different degrees – which introduces a ‘volume’ to politics that is inextricably linked to disparities in governmental power.<sup>42</sup>

## Reassembling Congo’s Social Contract

Before we take this approach to Congo, let us briefly summarise how Congo is analysed through the conventional lenses IR provides us with. We then turn to a – more

38. See George E. Marcus, ‘The Problem of the Unseen World of Wealth for the Rich: Toward an Ethnography of Complex Connections’, *Ethos* 17, no. 1 (1989): 114–23.

39. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 198.

40. Cf. Claudia Aradau, ‘Security That Matters: Critical Infrastructure and Objects of Protection’, *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 5 (2010): 491–514; Maximilian Mayer, ‘Chaotic Climate Change and Security’, *International Political Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2012): 165–85; Maximilian Mayer and Peer Schouten, ‘Energy Security and Climate Security under Conditions of the Anthropocene’, in *Energy Security in the Era of Climate Change*, eds Luca Anceschi and Jonathan Symons (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13–35.

41. Karena Shaw, ‘Knowledge, Foundations, Politics’, *International Studies Review* 6, no. 4 (2004): 7–20, 8.

42. Stuart Elden, ‘Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power’, *Political Geography* 32 (2013, forthcoming).

differentiated – description of Congo’s recent history in terms of ANT’s gaze, by adding materials as a matter of concern in our account of governmental power and the lack thereof.

### *Congo as the Classical State of Nature*

‘In the late 1990s, the DRC was an anarchic, Hobbesian state of war.’<sup>43</sup> Thus start many analyses of Congo; both mainstream political scientists and those of a more critical inclination invoke Hobbes to describe Congo.<sup>44</sup> Congo epitomises the ‘failed state’, which is explained in terms of ‘bad governance’, that is, continuous bad choices by government, leading to a situation where the state can neither provide internal order nor protect its borders – it means that ‘central state authority and control does not de facto exist’.<sup>45</sup> Scholars and practitioners alike analyse the breakdown of order in Congo in terms of a broken social contract between the state and its citizens, attributing Congo’s state failure to the absence of viable ‘institutions’.<sup>46</sup> This understanding translates into international efforts geared towards fixing the country’s broken institutions that are to be responsible for re-establishing the social contract. The pervasiveness of social contract theory for the framing of state-building efforts in policy circles is illustrated, for instance, by the fact that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) explicitly subtitles its 2012 policy framework report ‘Securing the Social Contract’.<sup>47</sup> This dominant social lens only allows political scientists to see state failure in social terms, which presupposes the impossibility for, or unwillingness of, the Congolese people to arrive at a social contract to exit the state of nature.<sup>48</sup> Even the late Patrice Lumumba – a staunch anti-colonialist

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43. James Dobbins et al., *The UN’s Role in Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 133.

44. Séverine Autesserre, ‘Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, Local Violence, and International Intervention’, *International Organization* 63, no. 2 (2009): 249–80; World Bank, ‘Document stratégique pour la croissance et la réduction de la pauvreté de seconde génération – Congo’, Washington, DC, 2006, 456.

45. Edward Newman, ‘Failed States and International Order: Constructing a Post-Westphalian World’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 3 (2009): 421–43, 422.

46. Patience Kabamba, ‘In and out of the State: Working the Boundaries of Power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’, Open Anthropology Cooperative Press Working Paper Series, no. 15 (2012); David K. Leonard et al. ‘Social Contracts and Security in Sub-Saharan African Conflict States: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Somalia’ (paper presented at the African Studies Association Conference, Washington, DC, 2011).

47. UNDP, ‘Governance for Peace: Securing the Social Contract’, New York, 2012.

48. Speaking of a broken down social contract presupposes that, at some point in time, a ‘social contract’ between all the Congolese was established. As the famous Africanist Ali Mazrui argued, Congo indeed came about through a social contract, ‘only that agreement was not between the Congolese, but between European powers out to settle their own rivalries in their scramble for the continent as a whole’. Ali Mazrui, ‘Edmund Burke and Reflections on the Revolution in the Congo’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 2 (1963): 121–33, 124.

and independence martyr – echoed the colonial viewpoint that the Belgians had helped the Congolese to exit the state of nature and enter into society:

Idolatry and superstition governed all. Ignorance was hereditary. Hygiene was unknown. Epidemics were rife. Cannibalism was of daily occurrence. Under-nourishment, due to unproductive methods of cultivation, was the lot of several regions. ... In short, we were a backward people, overwhelmed by all the evils of nature and remote from world civilization.<sup>49</sup>

### *Congo as ANT's State of Nature*

In order to understand the particularity of political socio-material entanglements in the contemporary DRC, it is first necessary to briefly reiterate how Congo's infrastructure of rule was wrought in the first place. In historical accounts of the colonial enterprise, what is noticeable is that from the outset the battle was 'directed mainly against the territory's forbidding landscape, not its people'.<sup>50</sup> In the absence of road structures or railways, in 1890, journeys of a few miles could take weeks and cost the lives of thousands of porters. The Belgian colony, far from being a state, could rather be characterised in these early decades as a network of outposts – connected by river steamboats and later trains – from where trade, forced labour and violence were organised. In the subsequent decades, King Leopold had thrust extensive – forced – modernisation upon Congo through his (private) colonial apparatus, which was closely intertwined with Belgian concession companies. Pivotal in these schemes was infrastructure, both for purposes of extraction and also in order to be able in effect to rule a territory 80 times the size of Belgium. By means of the developing infrastructure, Belgians were exponentially able to add machinery to their relations to the Congolese soil and populations. In the 1950s, 'there was no good reason to believe that Congo would do otherwise than continue to assemble the components of a modern industrial economy'.<sup>51</sup> At independence, the territory was mapped and translated into statistics that revealed its constituent parts as predictable and legible aggregate entities, and carefully maintained infrastructures allowed efficient governance at a distance. We then have a Congo that seems to conform to Latour's criterion of 'political society': it was endowed with a state apparatus, consisting of an entanglement – albeit exploitative – of humans and non-humans, bodies and copper, concession companies and rubber, bureaucracies and infrastructures.

Yet a Latourian investigation of the nature of the 'social contract' would ask more specific questions regarding the *kinds* of entanglements that existed between humans and non-humans in colonial Congo. The most striking aspect of the Belgian colonial state

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49. Cited in *ibid.*, 46.

50. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 125.

51. William Reno, 'Congo: From State Collapse to "Absolutism", to State Failure', *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2006): 43–56, 45.

was precisely that it was most firmly entangled with those material entities that formed part of what the Belgians considered *l'Afrique utile*. The colonial state was an apparatus geographically concentrated around the spheres of activity that were of 'rational' interest to the regime.<sup>52</sup> Hochschild speaks of an 'apparatus of exploitation'<sup>53</sup> to highlight that the socio-material entanglements of Congo's political economy formed a transnational extractive assemblage that forcibly translated Congolese *natural* products into *economic* commodities through complex machinations composed of Congolese labour, machines, colonial law, shipping and so forth. The Force Publique – 'la police privée des colonisateurs' – was to 'insure tranquility and security where foreign nationals were found',<sup>54</sup> which in practice coincided with the technical assemblages of extraction. In Latourian terms, then, we would see Congo as a rather flat geographical relief – with large numbers of Congolese not intensely entangled with technological entities of governmental infrastructures – peaking in the more intense socio-technical entanglements of extractive assemblages which were draped around the country's edges.<sup>55</sup>

Importantly, these entanglements never stopped at Congo's borders. During the First and Second World Wars, for instance, the extractive apparatus, Congolese labourers and the many mineral resources – such as copper, rubber, industrial diamonds – were assembled literally into the heart – and wheels and bullets – of the Allied war machines: 'In both the quantity and wide range of forest and mineral products which it supplied, the Belgian Congo contributed more to the Allied strategic raw materials drive than any other African country.'<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, Congo's uranium exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and gave a head start to the US in the post-war nuclear arms race.<sup>57</sup> The entanglement of Congo in the war effort also led to a surge in the development of the extractive apparatus in Congo itself, amounting to an increase in the flow of American and British machine tools into Congo's mineral-rich regions, intensifying the material entanglement of the extractive apparatus in mines newly opened for the world wars. As a result, at independence (30 June 1960), Congo was Africa's second most industrialised country;<sup>58</sup> it boasted infrastructures that filled even South Africans with envy at the time. A big part of Belgium's colonial legacy is thus material – both in terms of what was removed from Congo (the extraction of mineral resources and human bodies) and also in

52. Roland Poutier, 'Les états et le contrôle territorial en Afrique centrale: principes et pratiques', *Annales de Géographie* (1989): 286–301.

53. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 185.

54. Bryant P. Shaw, 'Force Publique, Force Unique: The Military in the Belgian Congo, 1914–1939', PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1984, 57 and 17.

55. André Badibanga, 'L'urbanisation mimétique et l'extraversion des villes africaines', *Tiers-Monde* 26, no. 104 (1985): 849–59; James Fairhead, 'Paths of Authority: Roads, the State and the Market in Eastern Zaire', *European Journal of Development Research* 4, no. 2 (1992): 17–35.

56. Raymond Dumett, 'Africa's Strategic Minerals during the Second World War', *Journal of African History* 26, no. 4 (1985): 381–408, 389.

57. *Ibid.*, 392.

58. Fairhead, 'Paths of Authority', 17.

terms of what was put in place; it would be hard to deny the significance for governmental power of colonial towns, prisons, garrisons, railways and other infrastructures of extraction and rule.

### *The Materiality of State Failure*

Contrary to what one might expect, the post-colonial moment did not result in a radical rupture of this topography. While Congo became politically independent during the political roundtable in February 1960, an economic roundtable two months later broke up the colonial extractive apparatus. In effect, it entailed the disentanglement of much of the economic infrastructure and many of the mineral resources and other sources of wealth (the whole of Congo had practically been carved up between concessionary companies) from the political apparatus – now an empty bureaucracy with significantly reduced funds to maintain its infrastructure of rule.<sup>59</sup>

On closer inspection, the Congolese state the Belgians left behind resembled more a ‘social contract’ in the classical sense than it did in Latour’s sense – meaning that the efficient apparatuses that made up Belgian rule had been largely disassembled. Only 16 Congolese graduates existed at independence, and since the Belgians had been careful to assemble the Congolese as ‘passive’ parts of the extractive apparatus during colonial rule, the Congolese inherited an apparatus they had little experience with. The separation of the (now Congolese) state apparatus from the core of the Belgian economic apparatus meant that shortly after Congo’s independence, with the assassination of Lumumba on 16 January 1961, ‘the State apparatus began to crumble’.<sup>60</sup> This delinquency was most notable in the transport sector, crucial infrastructure not only for the economy, but also for the bureaucracy to function as well.<sup>61</sup> In the 1970s, Mobutu, under the header of ‘zairianisation’, nationalised Zaire’s economic infrastructure and redistributed it amongst his peers, who, lacking any corporate management experience, sold off much of the material assets and lived on easy rents generated by steadily disassembling ‘state’ enterprises.<sup>62</sup> Mobutu, very wary of challenges to his power, also actively weakened the state security apparatus. He would create a plethora of (de facto private) security forces, each to spy on the previous one, and others to be mobilised

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59. Jacques Depelchin, *From the Congo Free State to Zaire: How Belgium Privatized the Economy. A History of Belgian Stock Companies in Congo-Zaire from 1885 to 1974* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1992).

60. Jean Philippe Peemans, ‘The Social and Economic Development of Zaire since Independence: An Historical Outline’, *African Affairs* 74, no. 295 (1975): 148–79, 154.

61. Roland Pourtier, ‘Désorganisation des transports et spirales du sous-développement au Zaïre’, in *Dynamique des Systèmes Agraires: Politiques Agricoles et Initiatives Locales – Adversaires ou Partenaires*, ed. C. Blanc-Pamard (Paris: ORSTOM, 1993), 49–69.

62. Michael G. Schatzberg, ‘The State and the Economy: The “Radicalization of the Revolution” in Mobutu’s Zaire’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 14, no. 2 (1980): 239–57.





**Figure 3.** Navigating Decrepit Infrastructure.

Source: Picture taken by author, Ituri (DRC), November 2011.

around strategic spaces. This bypassed state security forces – which gradually stopped receiving pay or training all but in name – in favour of personalised rule over critical infrastructure. Yet Mobutu eventually also conceived of economic infrastructure as a site of possible entanglements *against* him:

Mobutu believed that investments in economic infrastructure, including those as simple as maintaining the network of roads left by the Belgian colonials, would pose a threat to his hold on political power by facilitating collective mobilization against his regime.<sup>63</sup>

Mobutu was kept in place financially by Western powers, so he did not depend on domestic revenue. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, he increasingly let the state apparatus crumble; its bureaucratic infrastructure fell prey to unpaid civil servants, and the roads and machines of the large mining firms of yore rusted in disuse while the economy informalised nearly completely. The two Congo Wars, between 1997 and 2003, further destroyed much of what was left of the material infrastructure of the country. People have turned to walking with bicycles loaded with goods as the main means of logistics on what used to be the country's main roads; for a Ministry of Mining official, a visit to a single mining site to levy taxes can take up to five days on foot through the jungle. According to a recent World Bank report on infrastructure in Congo:

The Democratic Republic of Congo faces what is probably the most daunting infrastructure challenge on the African continent. ... Road and rail infrastructure are in dilapidated condition,

63. Thad Dunning, 'Resource Dependence, Economic Performance, and Political Stability', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (2005): 451–82, 465.

and the rail network has fallen into disuse. ... The DRC's infrastructure backbones have yet to form a national network.<sup>64</sup>

It is thus only selectively true that '[t]he social and cultural relations between individuals in late modern societies would seem to be, more than at any time in the past, mediated via material objects'.<sup>65</sup> As of 2012, Congo – two-thirds the size of Western Europe – only has around 3000 km of paved roads.<sup>66</sup> Social relations in Congo – including government – are to a large degree *unmediated* by entities that would render them durable. This means it would be an ideal site to encounter interactions not mediated by the apparatuses that Latour describes – yet ANT, in its focus on the ubiquitous presence of materiality in social relations, has been extremely bad at dealing with the significance of *absences* of these very same material conduits of power.<sup>67</sup>

### *A Topography of Apparatuses in an Unmediated State*

Life in Congo is extremely complex. In response to the material disassembly of the state, the number of human intermediaries has proliferated, to the extent that in the 1990s, it was estimated that up to 1,000,000 state functionaries made up Congo's baroque bureaucracy.<sup>68</sup> 'There is not the deficit of state but an excess of statehood practices: too many actors competing to perform as state.'<sup>69</sup> There are hardly any socio-technical systems of rule to monitor and account for them; as a result, nobody knows how many individuals constitute this choreography of bureaucrats and security forces, nor would it be possible to keep track of them. If Wasinski's analysis of the importance of socio-technical mediators for military chains of command is correct,<sup>70</sup> then many of the disciplinary problems of the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) could also be interpreted in terms of the absence

64. Vivien Foster and Daniel Alberto Benitez, *The Democratic Republic of Congo's Infrastructure – A Continental Perspective*, (New York: World Bank, 2011); 1 & 5.

65. Tim Dant, 'Material Civilization: Things and Society', *British Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 2 (2006): 289–308, 290.

66. Eddy Bynens and Gary Taylor, *Supporting Infrastructure Development in Fragile and Conflicted-Affected States: Case Study – Dr Congo*, (London: DFID, 2012); 4.

67. Severin Fowles, 'People without Things', in *The Anthropology of Absence: Materialisations of Transcendence and Loss*, eds Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen (New York: Springer, 2010), 23–41, 31.

68. Malikwisha Meni, 'L'importance du secteur informel en RDC', *Bulletin de l'ANSD* 1 (2000): 21–40, 13. They are further complemented by informal 'facilitators' claiming access to relevant individuals in state institutions. See Pierre Englebort, 'A Research Note on Congo's Nationalist Paradox', *Review of African Political Economy* 29, no. 93 (2002): 591.

69. Begoña Aretxaga, 'Maddening States', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 393–410, 396.

70. Christophe Wasinski, 'On Making War Possible', *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 1 (2011): 57–76.

of material conduits of hierarchy.<sup>71</sup> More generally, if such categories as ‘national population’ and ‘the economy’ only exist as governable objects by virtue of statistical tools, then the absence of aggregate national data in Congo means that we can hardly speak of such entities in Congo.<sup>72</sup>

In the face of the human over-presence of the state, ‘être branché’ – to be connected – has become the main tactic of survival, while wads of money are the central material lubricant for social relations. Contemporary ways in which Congolese state representatives act were shaped in response to the lower level of entanglement inherent in the material disassembly of the state apparatus. It is a ‘mediated state’,<sup>73</sup> constantly negotiated and reproduced in individual interactions; it is thus not a state of atomic disentanglement, but one of intense human entanglement. To say that governance in Congo is ‘networked’ is thus to state the obvious; yet seeing this as fundamentally different and an aberration from our own ways of governing – often performed within imaginary institutional spaces – would be to mistake a lack of material conduits – the infrastructure of rule that crumbles with state failure – for qualities or the absence thereof inherent in Africans themselves. In Latour’s terms, Congolese navigate a *complex* society rather than a *complicated* one – as a Ugandan frequently doing business in Congo strikingly joked: ‘In Congo, you don’t need technical know-how, you need technical know-who.’<sup>74</sup>

This replacement of technical mediators by human ones is perhaps most visible in the mining sector. In response to the collapse of the industrial mining industry, Mobutu legalised artisanal mining in 1982. Currently, in mining provinces such as Province Orientale, over a hundred thousand artisanal miners collectively perform what machines used to: the unearthing of gold ores with rudimentary tools and the transformation of ores in micro-chemical processes to crudely refined nuggets, and, finally, the flow of gold to world markets is mediated by a long chain of human intermediaries – pit bosses, traders, army road checkpoints, border agents – that greatly reduce the profits to be had from

71. Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, ‘Why Africa’s Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood’, *World Politics* 35, no. 1 (1982): 1–24, 10.

72. See, for instance, Stuart Elden, ‘Governmentality, Calculation, Territory’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 3 (2007): 562–80; Donald A. MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). The last comprehensive population census took place in 1984, but a biometric census of Congolese state functionaries, currently performed by international organisations, is to remedy the uncertainty over numbers of state representatives. That said, a more elaborate analysis would have to engage with Mark Brown’s reading of *Leviathan*. If, as he argues, the social contract calling into life the Leviathan might be read as *constituting* civil society, then the absence of aggregate quantification in Congo might be compensated somewhat with the performativity of Congolese and international actors qualifying Congolese politics *in terms of* a state, a question Englebert tentatively explores. See Brown, *Science in Democracy*, 118ff.; Pierre Englebert, ‘A Research Note’, 591–4.

73. Timothy Raeymaekers, Ken Menkhaus and Koen Vlassenroot, ‘State and Non-state Regulation in African Protracted Crises: Governance without Government?’, *Afrika Focus* 11, no. 2 (2008): 7–21.

74. Interview with gold trader, Arua, April 2012.

gold mining.<sup>75</sup> Rather than purely unmediated human interaction, however, artisanal mining is heavily entangled with the Congolese soil and involves vast quantities of cheap tools, sturdy bags with faded UN logos, Chinese mobile phones, rubber boots, beers and chemicals illegally imported from India. It is furthermore deeply entangled in global markets; just like colonial labour, it is tied into global assemblages of extraction and accumulation in a silenced, evasive, way, without the accountability that mediation by large socio-technical systems might provide.

Yet contemporary Congo is not completely devoid of the high levels of socio-material entanglements that Latour associates with modern industrial societies. However, such nodes of infrastructural power are spatially bounded and not necessarily tied to the state – in Congo, most infrastructure is privately laid out and maintained by foreign firms.<sup>76</sup> It is in this context that one should understand what has previously been called the ‘political topography of private security’.<sup>77</sup> The term refers to the political landscape that emerges when one focuses on the geographical spread of private security companies (PSCs) throughout the Congolese territory, and their spatial concentration around certain spheres of activity. Most PSCs are concentrated in Kinshasa, the capital in the west of Congo. The rest are in the eastern belt of the country, which stretches from Katanga in the south to Haut Uele in the north. Main hubs are, after Kinshasa, Lubumbashi in Katanga and Goma in North Kivu – places where technologically highly mediated and hardly mediated modes of existence uncomfortably rub shoulders.<sup>78</sup> That is to say, PSCs are not spread out equally over the Congolese territory, but are concentrated in specific parts of the country. The main focus of PSCs, according to one interviewee, is the market of ‘critical national infrastructure’, which in Congo is composed of the mining sector (including nascent oil explorations), humanitarian compounds, airports and ports (as we have seen, there is no road or rail infrastructure left to speak of)<sup>79</sup> – exactly *l’Afrique utile* around which colonial infrastructure was clustered, composed of those spheres of activity that are marked by a high capital accumulation and high concentrations of socio-technical systems. Beer and telecom companies – arguably the critical infrastructure of Congolese popular life – complement this colonial infrastructure as the referent object of private security. As Derek Warby of G4S Risk Management puts it:

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75. Ken Matthysen et al., *A Detailed Analysis of Orientale Province’s Gold Sector* (Antwerp: IPIS, 2012).

76. Kevin C. Dunn, ‘Madlib #32. The (Blank) African State: Rethinking the Sovereign State in International Relations Theory’, in *Africa’s Challenge to International Relations Theory*, eds Kevin C. Dunn and Timothy M. Shaw (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 46–64, 53.

77. Peer Schouten, ‘Political Topographies of Private Security in Sub-Saharan Africa’, in *African Engagements: Africa Negotiating an Emerging Multipolar World*, eds Ton Dietz et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 56–83.

78. See James H. Smith and Jeffrey W. Mantz, ‘Do Cellular Phones Dream of Civil War? The Mystification of Production and the Consequences of Technology Fetishism in the Eastern Congo’, in *Inclusion and Exclusion in the Global Arena*, ed. Max Kirsch (New York: Routledge, 2006), 71–93.

79. Confidential interview, Kinshasa, spring 2011.

We provide a secure space in which [clients] feel free and safe to make business-critical decisions. That 'space' is both physical and time-defined. We help clients protect their assets – personnel first but also buildings, plant, product, revenue as well as intangibles such as reputation and the timeliness of product delivery.<sup>80</sup>

In terms of Latourian political philosophy, PSCs sell themselves as agents able to provide the 'social contract' that lifts clients out of a potential state of nature, guaranteeing the stabilisation of interactions within a given space. In short, they provide a service of disentanglement, making it possible that, as Oliver Richmond puts it eloquently, 'liberal bubbles have formed ... with little reach beyond them'.<sup>81</sup> Yet PSCs are only one 'actor' making up the security apparatus around, for instance, mining camps. The apparatus itself is a heterogeneous entanglement made up of disparate elements. Mining camps are secured materially through 'perimeter security' consisting – besides 'human' elements – of fences, barbed wire and guard-towers that mimic military architecture. The material infrastructure of the assemblage also comprises road networks rehabilitated and maintained by mining companies for the purpose of securing lines of flight and export of ores.<sup>82</sup> Governmental power – to stabilise relations and render them predictable – is thus not something non-governmental organisations or mining companies possess because they are somehow inherently superior to Congolese; such disparities are rather attributable to whether or not infrastructural systems are woven through interactions. The role of PSCs in this apparatus should be seen as that of a 'boundary actor' mediating circulations in and out of mining enclaves, upholding the border between an internationalised and highly entangled 'inside' conforming to global standards, norms and regulations and a deviant and potentially dangerous 'outside'.<sup>83</sup> Such private security apparatuses converge around Latourian 'political society'; that is, private security clusters around – and makes possible – higher levels of socio-material entanglement in a landscape where the asymmetries in power and accumulation resulting from such entanglement are highly contested.

## Conclusion

The social bias of IR vis-à-vis power relations in Congo is pervasive. Congo's state failure is commonly explained in terms of a 'broken social contract', foregrounding

80. Cited in *African Review of Business and Technology*: 'Managing Risk with Armorgroup' (2007) – no further details available.

81. Oliver P. Richmond, 'Resistance and the Post-liberal Peace', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2010): 667.

82. As such, AngloGold Ashanti, together with the UN, refurbished the Mongbwalu–Bunia road in 2004, reducing the 90 km trip from four days to approximately four hours. The Chinese infrastructure in the south of Congo is also directly geared towards servicing exports of minerals.

83. PSCs thus safeguard the spaces and circuits through which the concept of the failed state itself circulates and the failed state itself is constantly performed. See Christian Büger and Felix Bethke, 'Actor-Networking in the "Failed State": An Inquiry into the Life of Concepts', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 16 (2013, forthcoming).

*social* dynamics as the source of its regression into an anarchic state of nature. Contemporary critics of humanitarian intervention and development aid in Congo, too, have kept technology exogenous in assuming an asymmetry in what Foucault has labelled 'governmental power' between intervener and intervened.<sup>84</sup> In this article, I have tried to take a different route to understanding Congo's current predicament by following ANT through as a serious alternative way of analysing Congo's state failure.

The article has illustrated the way ANT understands power and social order by contrasting Bruno Latour's explicit deliberations on the role of materiality in constituting society with social contract theory. Contrary to social contract theory, Latour's hypothesised state of nature is a state wherein interactions are not mediated and stabilised by things, making it difficult for actor-networks larger than initial agents to form. This hypothetical image of purely human interactions in a state of nature, as opposed to mediated interactions in a society infused with 'things' and apparatuses, places ANT in dialogue with IR over the nature of political order and raises a series of interesting questions regarding the role of infrastructure and technology in the constitution of power in Africa and beyond. ANT offers a politics of volume understood in terms of levels of entanglement as a full-blown alternative to IR's politics of verticality understood in terms of scale or levels of analysis.

So what exactly is the materiality of state failure? This article suggests that the gap between juridical and empirical sovereignty<sup>85</sup> implicit in state failure can be largely accounted for by the absence of the technical infrastructure of rule that makes it possible to stabilise social relations. This sensitivity to socio-material relations rather than social relations alone offers an utterly different description of what matters in state failure and what accounts for differences in governmental power. This is because ANT entails the recognition of the importance of material underpinnings of rule – technological and infrastructural power, which in Congo, as in colonial times, resides largely with external actors. Airports, oil extraction arrangements and mining camps stand out as vast yet fragile 'technological zones' or 'global assemblages', where social relations are more thoroughly entangled with technologies, which are increasingly sealed off from surrounding landscapes that are more and more disentangled, yet thoroughly interconnected one to another through material-semiotic mediation. Rather than mere technical concerns marginal to political power, such socio-technical systems constitute the critical infrastructure of political order and accumulation.<sup>86</sup> The darker side of this productive power of infrastructure is that it co-produces a geography of inequalities involving the extra protection measures surrounding technological zones and the exclusion of their less-developed surroundings through equally sophisticated socio-technical

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84. See, for a similar point, Hecht, *Entangled Geographies*, 2.

85. R.H. Jackson, 'Quasi-States, Dual Regimes, and Neoclassical Theory: International Jurisprudence and the Third World', *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987): 519–49.

86. See, for instance, A. Barry, 'Technological Zones', *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2: 239–53; Stephen J. Collier and Andrew Lakoff, 'On Vital Systems Security', *International Affairs Working Paper* 2009-01 (2009); Timothy Mitchell, 'Carbon Democracy', *Economy and Society* 38, no. 3 (2009): 399–432.



arrangements. More broadly, ANT uncovers as profoundly political the ‘technical’ issues revolving around who owns, controls and builds Congo’s infrastructure, and sheds a different light on the concerns of development programmes. Conversely, while IR has had little to say about the difference ‘things’ make to political power, taking ANT to Congo shows how science and technology studies and ANT fall short in studying technology where the possession of technology makes most difference to relations of power. While it is often heard that ‘science and technology are everywhere’ or that ‘our everyday physical environment has become peppered with the tools and techniques of surveillance’,<sup>87</sup> in fact, radical disparities exist in the spatial distribution and concentration of complex infrastructures, disparities that may ultimately correlate with matters of life and death.

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87. Katja Franko Aas, Helene Oppen Gundhus and Heidi Mork Lomell, eds, *Technologies of Insecurity: The Surveillance of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2009), 258.