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Different means of protest, same causes: popular struggles in Burkina Faso

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The article examines the relationship of riots to more organised and sustained protests by trade unions and other established oppositional organisations. It focuses on protests related to the 2007–2008 food and fuel price crisis. In a case study on Burkina Faso, actors, means and achievements of the popular struggles are analysed. It is argued that protests by the trade unions on the one side and riots on the other relate to one another. Both present struggles by different segments of the popular classes that sometimes use different means but emerge from the same structural causes and address the same problem.

Keywords: riots; popular struggles; trade unions; food and fuel prices; Burkina Faso; social movements

[Différents moyens de protestations, même causes : les luttes populaires au Burkina Faso.] L'article examine la relation des émeutes avec les protestations plus organisées et soutenues par les syndicats et d'autres organisations établies d'opposition. L'article se concentre sur les protestations liées à la crise des prix alimentaires et des prix des carburants de 2007-08. Dans une étude de cas sur le Burkina Faso, les acteurs, moyens et réussites des luttes populaires sont analysées. Il est avancé que les protestations par les syndicats d'une part et les émeutes d'autre part sont liées les unes aux autres. Ces deux dernières présentent des luttes de différents segments des classes populaires qui parfois utilisent des moyens différents mais émergent de causes structurelles similaires et répondent au même problème.

Mots-clés : émeutes ; luttes populaires ; syndicats ; prix alimentaires ; prix carburants ; Burkina Faso ; mouvements sociaux

Strikes, mass marches, student protests, riots and other forms of political unrest: popular struggles currently occur all over the African continent (see Manji 2012; de Waal and Ibreck 2013). A common feature of virtually all protests is that a broad range of participants from various segments of the respective societies are involved, sometimes pursuing different goals, but acting within the same structural political-economic conditions. This article will examine the relationship of spontaneous insurrections – riots – to more organised and sustained variants of protests by trade unions and other established oppositional organisations in Africa. I argue that both can be understood as interlinked forms of contentious political action by different groups. The concept of class is appropriate to conceive these groups, whereby labourers and (other) poor people are not distinct classes opposed to one another but can rather be subsumed under the category of the 'popular classes'.

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Empirically, the paper will analyse riots and related protests against the high cost of living, notably in 2008–2009. In recent years, riots have occurred all over the globe, predominantly in the global South and particularly in Africa, over the course of the global food and fuel price crisis, when prices for staples more than doubled within a few months. In many cases, the riots were paralleled or followed by protest marches organised by trade unions, consumer organisations and other civil society organisations. Whereas the riots were almost always locally and temporally limited, the protests by the trade unions and the other organisations, at least in several cases, were remarkably persistent. I will analyse the case of Burkina Faso, one place that since 2008 has witnessed intense and persistent protests. In February 2008, riots occurred in all of the country's big cities, and immediately afterwards, trade unions and student and human rights organisations started to mobilise large numbers of people for demonstrations, strikes and other forms of protest. The study focuses on contention about the rising cost of living in the late 2000s but also relates them to the more recent uprisings in Burkina Faso in 2011 and 2013–2014 that in the end resulted in the removal of Blaise Compaoré from the presidency on 31 October 2014.

The case study reveals that riots on the one hand and protests by trade unions and other established oppositional organisations are related to one another. Without the trade unions taking up the subject of the high prices immediately after the riots, the protests would have remained limited to one week of riots. With the massive and continuous protests by the trade unions and other organisations, it was impossible for the government to simply present the riots as criminal acts and ignore their claims. The alliance of the trade unions, student groups, human rights and other organisations that, from March 2008 onwards, mobilised in Burkina Faso into the protests against the high cost of living could strategically refer to the riots in order to strengthen its position towards the government. However, this strategy is an ambivalent one: it has reinforced the trade unions' position as a negotiation partner of the government, but at the same time runs the risk of maintaining discourses that may function to legitimate repressive political measures.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section outlines significant waves of worldwide popular protests from the mid 1970s onwards that were all shaped by resistances against neoliberal politico-economical structures and claims for substantial political and economic change. It is argued that the latest riots and protest against high prices are a case in point for recent popular uprisings, and stand in the tradition of the previous ones. Next, referring to class-based analysis of social struggles from a radical political economy perspective in African studies, the concept of the popular classes is introduced. Methods used for the empirical case study research are elucidated in the following section. After that, the riots and subsequent protests against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso from February 2008 onwards are presented. The analysis focuses on the actors, means and achievements of the protests, and then on the relationship between riots on the one side and protests by the trade unions and their allies on the other. It is concluded that both relate to one another and present struggles by different segments of the popular classes, sometimes using different means, but emerge from the same structural causes and address the same problem.

Waves of popular protest

On the heels of the struggles against colonialism und apartheid, several waves of popular protests in the global South in the last decades can be identified (Larmer 2010; Seddon and Zeilig 2005). Related to the economic crisis, massive protests against the international

financial institutions and their neoliberal policies of ‘structural adjustment’ occurred between the mid 1970s and the end of the 1980s. John Walton and David Seddon, in their hitherto most encompassing study on ‘austerity protests’, report 146 protests worldwide for the period from 1976 to 1992, with a peak in the years 1983–1985 (Walton and Seddon 1994, 39). Austerity protests can be defined as ‘large-scale collective actions including political demonstrations, general strikes, and riots, which are animated by grievances over state policies of economic liberalisation, implemented in response to the debt crisis and market reforms urged by international agencies’ (*Ibid.*).

Another important wave was unleashed in 1989–1990 with the end of the cold war and characterised by claims for democracy and political change (Larmer 2010, 255–257). Socio-economic aims never disappeared from the agenda of popular protests, and self-evidently, they are inseparably interwoven with political demands. The ‘IMF riots’ of the 1970s and 1980s already addressed material and democratic concerns at the same time (Seddon and Zeilig 2005, 9). Nevertheless, the 1990s protests were ‘more explicitly political and with more far-reaching aims and objectives’ (*Ibid.*, 18). Many political and academic debates on this period are shaped by hegemonic Western ideas of liberal democracy and ‘good governance’. In contrast, within many societies in the global South, social forces existed whose claims went far beyond liberal concepts of democracy and participation, thereby linking political to economic change (Ayers 2006).

Since the early 2000s, we have again been witnessing massive and continuous protests that claim substantial political and economic change similar to the protests in the decades before. For instance, South African post-apartheid politics has been shaped by workers’ struggles and service delivery protests since the early 2000s (Alexander 2010; Ballard *et al.* 2005; Pithouse 2008). In the course of the ‘Arab Spring’, since December 2010, mass protests have attempted, and at least in some cases succeeded, to overcome regimes in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen and several other states. Beyond these well-known events, myriads of uprisings, strikes and many other forms of protests both on the local and the national scale can be observed all over the globe and particularly in Africa (Bond 2014; Manji and Ekine 2012). Struggles against high food and fuel prices are a case in point. In early 2008, within a few months prices for food staples (e.g. grain, rice and cooking oil) on the local markets of many poor countries more than doubled¹ (cf. Bello 2009; von Braun 2008). Prices temporarily decreased in 2009 but rose again in 2011 and have since stabilised at a high level (FAO 2014). In 2007 and 2008, numerous major cities worldwide witnessed riots, most of them in Africa (e.g. Abidjan, Dakar, Douala, Maputo, Niamey, Yaoundé and many others; Amin 2012, 30–35; Maccatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet 2010; Patel and McMichael 2009, 22, 29).² In most cases, people gathered in the streets and markets and marched to symbolic public or private places, sometimes plundering shops or setting fire to buildings or barricades. Contrary to what the terms ‘food riots’ and ‘hunger riots’ suggest, food prices were not always the (only) matter of contention. In general, the enormous price increase was a trigger rather than the cause of the protests. In most cases, riots, demonstrations and strikes focused not only on the high cost of living but also on social inequality and political repression, as well as on ruling parties and presidents who had often been in power for many years or even decades (Bush 2010; Harsch 2008; Patel and McMichael 2009). The recent riots and other protests, in the same way as the ‘IMF riots’ of previous decades, are an ‘integral part of the process of global capitalist re-structuring’ (Seddon and Zeilig 2005, 10), hence ‘popular protests against particularly oppressive forms of capital accumulation’ (*Ibid.*, 24). Material concerns remain central to social struggles, in Africa as elsewhere. Thus, a class-based analysis of popular protests turns out to be worthwhile.

Popular protest and class struggles

Most studies on social movements avoid the concepts of class and class struggle (see Barker 2013; Hetland and Goodwin 2013; Alexander and Pfaffe 2013, 206). At the same time, neo-Marxist analysis of political-economic developments in Africa, mostly building upon dependency and world system theory, often omit to engage in empirical detail with concrete struggles between social forces and actors. Class-based analysis of social struggles in Africa should not be limited to the working class in a narrow sense (those selling their labour in the formal or informal sector) but include the whole range of poor people (Seddon and Zeilig 2005; for a detailed discussion of the concepts of the poor, see Alexander and Pfaffe 2013). As E.P. Thompson (1991) has demonstrated, rather than a fixed economic category, class is a social relation, and as such historically specific and context dependent (von Freyhold 1987, 27; Seddon 2002; Thompson 1991). For the purpose of empirically analysing social struggles in Africa, it is neither helpful to construe working and popular classes as opposed to one another, nor to simply give up the concept of class in favour of other, allegedly immaterial categories such as ethnicity and nationality. This is not to say that these categories were not central to the construction of collective identity, and to social relations of power and authority. However, focusing on cultural categories when analysing social conflicts and struggles may risk losing sight of material inequalities and the political-economic structures they are rooted in. Protests and resistances do not take place in free, deliberative spaces but within social and political contexts that are structured by unequal material conditions. This being said, in-depth empirical case study research on the micro level of protest actors, and analysing political-economic structures on the macro level, do not exclude one another but rather go perfectly hand in hand.

Such a micro-level analysis investigates who protests, how, and for which aims. Protagonists of popular protests in Africa are not limited to organised labourers but include what Seddon and Zeilig (2005) call the 'popular classes': students, employees, small-scale farmers, self-employed from the informal sectors, petty traders and the like. Struggles by African workers, at every point in history, relied on moral, material and political support from these groups. This variety of social groups were also involved in the austerity protests and 'IMF riots' from the very beginning onwards, and they were often characterised by a relatively small degree of political organisation (Zeilig and Seddon 2002). Typically, riots are not strategically planned by any recognised organisation, including that the protest is not (openly) announced in advance to its addressees (for instance, state authorities), potential fellows or allies. Being spontaneous and breaking with established 'rules of the game' of contentious politics is the main strength of riots, their 'disruptive power', as Francis Fox Piven (2006) has put it. Nevertheless, they frequently resulted in, or triggered, more sustained contentious actions by organised oppositional groups such as labour unions. And, as Seddon and Zeilig (Seddon 2002; Seddon and Zeilig 2005) have argued, and Alexander and Pfaffe (2013) with respect to South Africa's current 'rebellion of the poor', popular protests draw their effective power exactly from the fact that organised workers and other segments of the popular classes concur in their struggles.

The relationship between trade unions and those parts of the popular classes that are typically sparsely organised in formal terms is an ambivalent one: on the one hand, they are characterised by different forms of formal and informal organising, different means of protest and, at least partly and on a short run, different aims. Most prominently, Piven and Cloward (1977) have warned against rashly equating movement and formal

organisations, reminding us that organisations are not automatically entrenched in the classes they claim to represent. On the other hand, it is misleading to assume workers and other segments of the popular classes as distinct and detached from one another. Rather, they are linked to one another in various ways, and the ‘deeper structural conditions in which they are embedded, may reflect and reinforce the distinction presented by Piven and Cloward, or they may intersect and soften the contrast’ (Alexander and Pfaffe 2013, 206). And ultimately, it can be argued that the overall aim of overcoming unequal socio-economic relations is common to the different social groups in popular protests.

Methods of research

Evidence for the case study derives from two periods of field research (October–December 2011 and August–September 2012). Thirty-five semi-standardised interviews were conducted by the author with protesters and representatives from local and national government institutions at four locations in Burkina Faso that witnessed intense protest (Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, Banfora and Koudougou). Interview partners were current activists from youth organisations, trade unions, the student movement (university and high school students), human rights organisations, women’s organisations, and merchant and consumer organisations, all of them engaged in the protests. Seven representatives from state authorities (national ministries, province authorities, mayor), and one journalist and one opposition party politician, who were both important actors in the protests, were also interviewed. Other party politicians were not interviewed because the study concentrated on the riots and the subsequent protests, in which political parties did not participate. Rioters were not targeted, as the original research was mainly focused on the role the riots played for the mobilisation of the trade unions and of other organisations. Interviewees were predominantly male, reflecting the fact that men were largely overrepresented among both protesters and authority representatives. Interviewees were selected to include almost all member organisations of the alliance that organised the protests, as well as merchants and students, who played a key role in the protests. State representatives were selected from a range of institutions and political levels (local, regional, national). The interviews focused on the emergence of the 2008 riots and the subsequent protests, in particular the various forms of protest and strategies of mobilisation.³

Riots and subsequent protest in Burkina Faso

The student movement and the trade unions have a long tradition of political protest dating back to the 1960s. The first president of Upper Volta after independence, Maurice Yaméogo, lost power in 1966 after massive trade union protests (Englebert 1996). (The country’s name was changed to Burkina Faso only in 1984.) In the 1980s, students mobilised to turn over Yaméogo’s successor, General Lamizana. When Thomas Sankara, at the time prime minister, was arrested, students and the trade unions went on strike until Sankara was released (Hagberg 2002, 228–229). In 1983, again after a military putsch, Sankara became president himself. In 1987, he was killed during another coup, and Blaise Compaoré, a former companion of Sankara, took over the presidency, and was only forced to give it up in late October 2014 – again, after massive popular protests in which the trade unions and their allies played an important role.

The trade unions and the student movement had already been the main drivers of democratisation in Burkina Faso in the late 1980s (Englebert 1996). The trade union federation

Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina (CGT-B) was founded in 1988 and originated from the French *Confédération générale du travail*. It is the biggest trade union federation in terms of membership figures. Apart from the CGT-B, five other trade union federations exist: the *Confédération nationale des travailleurs du Burkina* (CNTB), the *Confédération syndicale burkinabè* (CSB), the *Force ouvrière – Union nationale des syndicats libres*, the *Organisation nationale des syndicats libres* and the *Union syndicale des travailleurs du Burkina Faso* (USTB). The six federations, together with 16 independent single trade unions, form an alliance, the *Unité d'action syndicale* (UAS). The trade unions in Burkina Faso are organised along ideological lines. The CGT-B is oriented towards Marxist-Leninist ideas (for more details on the Burkinabè trade union movement and its historical development, see Kabeya Muase 1989).

The student organisations, the *Union générale des étudiants Burkinabè* and the *Association nationale des étudiants burkinabè*, date back to the year of independence, 1960 (Bianchini and Korbéogo 2008; Sory 2012). Personal overlaps among the organisations are frequent, and almost all functionaries of the CGT-B and its member unions were previously engaged in the student organisations (Loada 1999, 149–150). Protests for democratic reforms, particularly by public sector employees (Bratton and Walle 1992, 423), emerged during the first phase of structural adjustment (Burkina Faso's first structural adjustment programme, the *Programme de facilité d'ajustement structurel renforcé*, was implemented from 1991–1993). The trade unions have always intervened in national politics also beyond labour-related issues. As far back as the early 1990s, they mobilised to protest against the disparity of increasing prices and stagnating incomes (Englebert 1996; Federici and Cafentzis 2000).

Burkina Faso was among the African states where, in the course of the 2007–2008 price crisis, riots were particularly intense and followed by continuous protests. Riots occurred in various cities in Burkina Faso (among them, the four biggest cities: Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, Banfora, Ouahigouya) in late February 2008. Public buildings, shops and petrol stations were damaged; road blockades were erected and set on fire; and numerous people were hurt and hundreds arrested. On the day of the Ouagadougou riots, trade unions assembled and called for other civil society actors to participate in a meeting the following week and a central demonstration on 15 March. On 12 March, all big trade unions, consumer and professional associations, human rights organisations, and the student and youth movements entered into an alliance and founded the *Coalition nationale de lutte contre la vie chère, la corruption, la fraude, l'impunité et pour les libertés* (coalition against the high cost of living, corruption, fraud, impunity and for basic freedoms, CCVC; CCVC 2008a). The coalition organised a countrywide general strike on 8–9 April and 13–15 April 2008, as well as repeated mass rallies (CCVC 2012; Fasozine 2011). Led by the trade unions, the CCVC was the main force in the mobilisation against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso that followed the February 2008 riots. The trade unions could easily take up the issue promptly after the riots because the high cost of living had already been on their agenda for some years.

The CCVC could be set up so promptly after the riots because it built, institutionally, personally and, in terms of content, upon an existing alliance, the *Collectif d'organisations démocratiques de masse et de partis politiques* (Collective of the democratic mass organisations and political parties, or 'Collectif'). The Collectif was formed in early 1999 by trade unions, human rights and student organisations, opposition parties, and women's and lawyers' groups following the death of journalist Norbert Zongo, who was killed in December 1998. Zongo had investigated the death of David Ouédraogo, a chauffeur of President Blaise Compaoré's brother François Compaoré. Ouédraogo was

accused of theft, and instead of being brought to trial, was taken by the presidential guard and finally died in the presidential palace's infirmary (Frère 2010; Harsch 2009; Hilgers 2010b). Up to now, the CCVC and the Collectif continue to exist simultaneously and with large personal overlaps, but differ insofar as the CCVC is led by the trade unions while the Collectif is dominated by the human rights movement, in particular the influential *Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples* (MBDHP). The president of the MBDHP simultaneously leads the Collectif and serves as vice-president of the CCVC.⁴ Since the CCVC was established in March 2008, the Secretary General of the CGT-B has been president of the alliance. However, not only the CGT-B and its member associations, but most trade union federations, are involved in the CCVC (e.g. the CSB, the CNTB and the USTB).

Since the 1990s, Burkina Faso's 'semi-authoritarian regime' (Hilgers and Loada 2013) has been persistently under pressure by social movement and civil society activists (Chouli 2012a; Harsch 2009; Hilgers 2010a, Hilgers and Mazzocchi 2010; Loada 2010). The protests reached a peak in 2011, when massive protests arose after the death of Justin Zongo, a young man who died in the town of Koudougou on 20 February after being detained by the gendarmerie several times. These protests triggered one of the most severe political crises in the country since Blaise Compaoré had seized power in 1987: soldiers mutinied in Ouagadougou in March, and one month later even the presidential guard revolted. Compaoré temporarily escaped the capital and could only re-establish his authority by dissolving the government and discharging the prime minister (CNP 2011; Hilgers and Loada 2013). Most CCVC organisations were involved in the 2011 protests. The 2011 crisis also enabled the protests against the high cost of living to be revitalised. After large protests in 2008, there was relatively low mobilisation in 2009 and 2010, but subsequent to the struggles related to the death of Justin Zongo, the CCVC succeeded in organising one of its largest marches on 8 April 2011 (Chouli 2012b). A year later, when petrol prices increased by 50% and caused local transport fares to rise by 25 to 35%, the coalition resumed its protests against the high cost of living. A central demonstration was organised in Ouagadougou on 26 May 2012.

In 2013 and 2014, the trade unions and civil society organisations played a central role when tens of thousands of people took to the streets on a number of occasions and protested against Compaoré's attempt to revise article 37 of the Burkinabè constitution in order to enable himself to run for a fifth term (Loada and Romaniuk 2014). The CCVC organised mass demonstrations on 20 July 2013 and 29 October 2014 (*Jeune Afrique*, July 20, 2013; *Sidwaya*, October 29, 2014). The UAS announced a 24-hour strike for 11 November 2014, and in case the government did not agree to its substantial claims, another 48-hour strike on 25–26 November (UAS 2014). However, the strike was suspended after Blaise Compaoré was removed from the presidency on 31 October (*Le Pays*, November 9, 2014).

It was announced that the constitutional revision would be voted on by the national assembly on 21 October. In consequence, students went on strike first, and workers and other segments of the popular classes soon joined them. When the proposal finally was supposed to be adopted on 30 October, protesters stormed into the parliament building. Security forces used tear gas, truncheons and firearms; at least 30 people were killed. Compaoré withdrew the constitutional revision request and suspended the government. On 31 October, he was forced by the military to resign from the presidency. By the time of writing, the army commander-in-chief had taken over power transitionally – leaving the trade unions and other civil society organisations frustrated: 'The army must give back the power, which it has usurped, to the people, which has wrested it,' the

CCVC vice-president declared. ‘The army committed a *‘coup d’etat*’ and arrogated the fruits of the people’s heroic struggle’ (CCVC 2014).

Actors, means and achievements of the protests

From March 2008 onwards, protests against the high cost of living were dominated by the institutionalised, but non-parliamentary, opposition, notably the trade unions, human rights organisations and the student movement, which have all been important political forces in Burkina Faso since independence, especially over the course of the – still ongoing – democratisation process since the late 1980s (human rights movement) (Federici, Caffetzi, and Alidou 2000; Hagberg 2002; Harsch 2009). Activists in these organisations are mainly wage-dependent employees, or university and high school students. Owing to structural adjustment policies, many trade union members and activists (in Burkina Faso, as in many African states, primarily public sector employees) have become impoverished. Thus, though one could say that most activists of the CCVC member organisations belong to the urban middle classes, most of them are equipped with middle-class expectations and formal education rather than with material wealth. Notwithstanding, the CCVC’s demands reflect the dominant role of trade unions within the alliance, which count public service employees as their largest clientele group by far.⁵ For instance, the first demand in its central declaration is ‘a rise in the salaries and pensions of state employees and workers in the private sector’ (CCVC 2008b, my translation). Consequently, one of the central achievements of the CCVC’s protest was that the government reduced wage taxes and increased salaries in the public sector (*L’Observateur Paalga*, April 28, 2012).

However, the protagonists of the food riots were precisely those who are hardly represented in the trade unions or the other organisations: the marginalised, urban sub-classes, mostly youth, who struggle along without regular, gainful employment. The range of people involved in the riots was however broader than in the more recent riots in European cities such as Paris, Stockholm, London or Greater Manchester. It was not only youth who participated in the riots. Artisans and petty traders were also involved, and once riots broke out, numerous students and workers joined them. But, according to the interviewees, the informal sectors were clearly the most important group. Mobilisation for the riots proceeded in informal networks within the urban neighbourhoods by passing information from person to person or via text messages without any formal organisational structures. This is not to say that the informal sectors and urban sub-classes are not ‘organised’ at all, but they are significantly less organised in formal collectives such as trade unions, associations, non-governmental organisations and the like.

Consequently, the means of protest differ between protests organised by trade unions and similar actors on the one hand and ‘unorganised’ groups on the other. Typical ‘organised’ forms of protests are demonstrations and strikes, mostly regulated through formal (state) institutions such as the right to strike and the right of assembly. This also holds true for the case of Burkina Faso. There, the march⁶ is a central element of the protest repertoire with the handover of written claims (the *note de protestation*) as its climax. Protestors only perceive the march as successful if the document has effectively been handed over. On the other hand, riots are a specific form of political protest by ‘unorganised’ groups that in Burkina Faso in early 2008 was triggered by the price increases but had become part of the local protest repertoire over the course of past conflicts. All larger towns had witnessed similar riots several times in previous years. In 2006, for instance, youth in Ouagadougou rioted against the government’s attempt to introduce a requirement for moped drivers to wear a helmet (Chouli 2012a, 134).

Relationship of the riots and trade union protests

In March 2008, the trade unions and other institutionalised protest actors took up the issue of the high prices also as a reaction to the riots. With their socio-organisational, personal and material resources, they were able to maintain a relatively steady level of contentious action, whereas the riots were a more fragmented and short-term event. For the trade unions, the February 2008 riots were a central point of reference in their argumentation towards their state adversaries. It is possible to identify two main arguments that functioned to strengthen the organisations' own positions vis-à-vis the Burkinabè government and to legitimate their claims and strategies: first, representatives of the CCVC and several of the alliance's member organisations, as well as state authorities, argued in interviews that the February 2008 riots were 'spontaneous movements' but in fact resulted from years of steady mobilisation work by the organisations affiliated with the Collectif. As one representative declared:

People are fed up, and they react. This is the result of years of work building political consciousness through the Collectif. The Collectif has done a great job ... Nowadays, people no longer put up with everything. The spontaneous movements are not vandalism, they are political consciousness! (Interview, Ouagadougou, 2 September 2012)

This perspective towards the riots is hardly surprising considering that a Marxist ideology is dominant among the many protest organisations in Burkina Faso. It is reflected in the idea that the masses will be led to revolution by organised collective actors: 'The struggle is made by the masses, and for the masses. ... We understand ourselves as a democratic mass organisation; our place is alongside the people,' as one student movement activist put it (Interview, Ouagadougou, 16 November 2011). Another explained that 'the masses have gone out onto the streets because of the high prices' (Interview, Ouagadougou, 3 December 2011) but this 'spontaneous movement' had not been well organised; hence the need for the CCVC: 'The organisations react to the desires and problems of the masses.' (*Ibid.*)

Second, a central element in the protest organisations' discourses is the dichotomy between their own 'organised', 'controlled' and 'peaceful' protest activities with 'clear aims' on the one side, and 'spontaneous', 'uncontrolled' and 'aimless' riots by 'unorganised' youth on the other. The latter are linked to material damages and a lack of persons or organisations in charge and, therefore, to the non-existence of negotiation partners. This dualism is crucial to the protest organisations' strategy to legitimate their own activities and present themselves as negotiating partners of the government and state authorities. Until 2008, the government had been against them, one leading CCVC activist explained (Interview, Ouagadougou, 16 November 2011). After the 'spontaneous riots', the authorities understood:

If it is the Collectif or the CCVC, everything is under control, and one knows who is responsible. When we rally, we have clear demands. ... In Mooré language, we say: The government is like a donkey. If you do not beat it, it does not move forward. (*Ibid.*)

Indeed, since the 2008 riots, the government has preferred to negotiate with the trade unions and the CCVC, to at least have someone to negotiate with. After all, the trade unions were 'the "a authorities" natural counterpart', as one unionist stated (Interview, Ouagadougou, 1 December 2011).

When reporting about the riots and the subsequent protests against the high cost of living, both the CCVC member organisations and their state adversaries (government,

administration, security forces) construct a dualism of ‘march’ (*marche*) versus ‘riot’ (*émeute*), whereby march denotes a planned, well-managed demonstration observing the law of assembly, organised by identifiable collective actors and proceeding ‘without any problems’. ‘Problems’ refer to material damages and violent confrontation between security forces and protestors. ‘Riots are when people just go out to break things,’ one activist explained. ‘A demonstration is when there are clear aims’ (Interview, Bobo-Dioulasso, 25 November 2011). Activists and state authorities present the riots as lacking intent (without ‘clear aims’) and equate them with material damages (*casses*),⁷ whether intended or unintended. In contrast, the protests by the trade unions and their allies are presented as controlled and well managed.⁸ Both protest organisations and state authorities accept the ‘fact’ that violent confrontations occur when security forces are deployed at protest actions. Thus, security forces are not sent to ‘controlled’ marches organised by the trade unions and other organisations, but they ‘must’ be deployed at ‘spontaneous’ protests. One trade unionist stated:

The trade unions’ authorities know how to control the activities so that violent outbursts will not occur. Our advantage as a formal structure is that we can avoid *casses* and any trouble to the public order. If *casses* occur, the security forces are needed to re-establish public peace – with all the problems that come with it, such as people injured and killed. (Interview, Ouagadougou, 1 December 2011)

Of course, it is not objectionable for activists to be against material damages or for trade unions and social movement organisations to want to prevent violence in order not to give the authorities any reason to delegitimise their activities. Nevertheless, the objection can be raised that the discourse of damage, linked to riots and ‘spontaneous movements’ as opposed to ‘peaceful’, ‘controlled’ marches, implies a mutual acceptance of formal and informal rules of contentious politics and political protest between established protest actors and state authorities.

Following Herbert Haines (1984), it can be stated that for the trade unions and the other protest organisations, the riots had a ‘flank effect’. Haines examines the consequences for a social movement if parts of it begin to radicalise, and identifies both positive and negative ‘radical flank effects’. A negative flank effect can be observed if moderate wings of a movement encounter decreased external support following radical activities. Positive flank effects, in contrast, arise if the emergence of radical groups and their activities strengthens the position of moderates in negotiations with state adversaries. Such an effect can occur either because radical actions trigger a crisis whose resolution benefits moderates as well, or because radical groups serve as a contrast that moderate actors refer to in order to discursively normalise their demands and strategies and present them as ‘reasonable’ (*Ibid.*, 32). The protests against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso following the February 2008 riots exemplify the latter. By referring to the riots, the trade unions and other established organisations succeeded in enhancing their own position vis-à-vis the government. Hence, the ‘spontaneous movements’ served to legitimise rather than delegitimise the protests by institutionalised actors. Since that time, the trade unions have been in a better position because they ‘matched the legal framework’, as one union functionary explained. ‘The informal groups do not respect the law. . . . [Now] the government has understood that it is better to listen to the trade unions’ demands’ (Interview, Ouagadougou, 10 November 2011). Listening to the trade unions’ demands does not mean, however, that these demands were fulfilled by the government: after all, listening does not necessarily imply to act accordingly.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the relationship of two forms of popular protest: riots and more sustained struggles by trade union and other organised oppositional actors. I have argued that both are related to one another, though this relationship is an ambivalent one, and that the concept of the ‘popular classes’ is useful to understand this relationship.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the trade unions and other organisations took up the price issue promptly after the riots. In building upon existing networks and experience and framing the issue of price increases in a way that fitted their previous struggles and demands, they succeeded in mobilising their clientele and broadening their social base. The government made some remarkable concessions such as reducing wage taxes and increasing public service salaries. This success of a long-standing and intense struggle also became possible because the trade unions and their allies could strategically refer to the ‘spontaneous movements’ when negotiating with the government. I have argued that this can be portrayed with Herbert Haines’s notion of ‘flank effect’. This is, however, neither to say that without the riots, the trade unions would not have taken up the issue of the price increase, nor that they would have agreed to compromises with the authorities undermining the interests of the non-organised segments of the popular classes. This is because Burkinabè trade unions are organised along ideological lines. According to its self-understanding, the CGT-B intervenes in national politics limited neither to labour-related issues nor to the interests of wage-dependent groups. It was thus not so much that the riots pushed the trade unions to react to the price crisis but most notably, that they could strategically refer to the ‘spontaneous movements’ when negotiating with the authorities.

In contrast to Haines’s study of the US civil rights movement of the 1960s, in the case of the Burkinabè protest against the high cost of living, the positive flank effect was triggered not by radicalisation within the movement but by riots of social groups sparsely represented within the movements and organisations. Although the social basis of the protest against high living costs was broader than former struggles (since small merchants joined the CCVC’s actions), the trade unions and other organisations did not generally succeed in integrating the numerous unemployed youth and those working in the informal sector who formed the bulk of the rioters. What matters in this respect is not simply the question of representation – a well-known problem among leftist (and other) movements in Europe and North America, which are often grounded in an urban, intellectual, middle-class milieu and in many cases have few ties to subaltern classes (homeless, sub-proletariat etc.) even though their demands address questions of social and economic justice. The CCVC and its member organisations are very aware of the problem of representation. However, this issue is paralleled by a kind of tacit agreement among the established protest actors and their state adversaries to refer to the dualism of ‘peaceful protest’ and ‘*casses*’ when negotiating political demands. This is definitely not to say that this intention of the trade unions and other organisations was illegitimate or strategically unwise. However, their portrayal of the riots runs the risk of maintaining arguments that may unwillingly function to legitimate repressive political measures. Nevertheless, it must be noted that in the specific case of Burkina Faso, the national government could hardly adopt such repressive measures, given the fact that since 2011 at least, it was only weakly supported by the state security forces.

The ambivalence characterising the relationship of riots and ‘organised’ protests is inherent to the trade unions and other organisations acting as part of the popular classes: the latter have overall common interests, but at the same time, the trade

unions also pursue their own aims. These aims are neither contradictory to the rioters' interests, however nor are they necessarily congruent with them.⁹ Food riots and the following protests against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso differ from each other in terms of the social groups involved. However, both can be conceived as two sides of the same coin, as different segments of the popular classes protesting with different means against the same problem. At the present time, a broad range of vibrant protests can be observed in Africa, encompassing various segments of the popular classes, struggling in different ways and with sometimes different means but for common overall aims.

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Notes

1. The FAO's food price index increased one and a half times from February 2007 to February 2008 (FAO Food Price Index, FAO 2014). The causes of the global food price crisis are high oil prices, the expansion of biofuels production (which is, of course, closely linked to oil prices) and speculation.
2. *Africa News*, August 12, 2008, July 18, 2008, December 16, 2008, February 12, 2009, May 28, 2009, June 12, 2009 and August 8, 2009; *The Guardian*, April 9, 2008; *IRIN*, March 31, 2008; Harsch 2008, 15; Janin 2009; Maccatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet 2010; Schneider 2008.
3. A list of the interviews referred to in the case study analysis is published at the end of the article, after the references.
4. Furthermore, political parties are excluded from the CCVC. Representatives of the coalition justify this by stating that one lesson learnt from the Collectif was that party representatives often use civil society action for the purposes of individual power (Interviews, Ouagadougou, 16 November 2011, and Koudougou, 8 December 2011).
5. Resulting from weak industrial development, large industrial trade unions are less common in sub-Saharan Africa than in Europe. Within the Burkinabè trade union federations, trade unions from the fields of education and health are the most influential and strongest in members. In Burkina Faso, similar to several other countries, and following the colonial example, university and high school students are organised into trade unions, too.
6. The term *marche*, in French-speaking Western Africa more common than *manifestation* (which is also in use), as a form of protest refers to a demonstration announced in accordance with the law of assembly (cf. Siméant 2011).
7. *Casse* is the substantive form of the French verb *casser*, literally meaning to break something. In the Burkinabè discourse, it is deployed as an umbrella term, encompassing all kinds of violent acts against material or persons, particularly targeted or accidental damage done to buildings, for example by fire or throwing stones.
8. Activists typically describe the trade unions' and other organisations' protest marches as *cadré* (literally 'bookended' or 'nestled in'), referring both to the strict control of the demonstrations by the organisations and to the physical enclosure by activists walking along both sides of the demonstrations in order to prevent unwelcome participants from infiltrating the march.
9. I am particularly grateful to one anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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