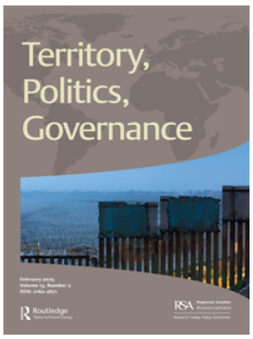

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The hard work of future-making: alienated futures, invisible labour and liberation

Theo Aalders and Detlef Müller-Mahn

ABSTRACT

This article proposes that future-making is hard work. Drawing on examples of work on and around infrastructure projects in East Africa, we show how people orient themselves towards the future through both imagination and material practices. We argue that work navigates between apparent opposites, and identify three antagonisms that are particularly relevant to our argument. First, we discuss how labour mediates between material reality and anticipatory imagination, extending this argument to include a mediation between material present and immaterial future imaginaries. Second, we show how labour can oscillate between visible, even spectacular, performance of labour and employment, and the invisible work of often marginalised people. Finally, we argue that while labour is often characterised by exploitative dynamics, it also offers possibilities for resistance – as well as promises of liberation – through organised labour in various forms. We conclude that (organised) labour, particularly around infrastructure projects, has the potential to make marginalised futures visible and real, thus challenging dominant imaginaries and material realities of the future inscribed by infrastructure master plans. These arguments are illustrated by vignettes collected during fieldwork on the Nairobi Express, along the proposed Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) corridor in Kenya and around a dam construction site in Tanzania.

KEYWORDS

Labour; resistance; future imaginaries; material practices; infrastructure; LAPSSET corridor; Kidunda Dam

JEL

J50; O18; N77; F66; P10

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we propose that future-making should be understood as labour, or 'hard work'. This, we suggest, draws attention to how futures are made in terms of both imaginaries and material practices. Despite the haptic and concrete implications of the word 'making', many studies that explicitly or implicitly refer to future-making seem to conceptualise it as immaterial, in the sense of vision or imagination (Appadurai, 2013). Even though every practice is eventually grounded in the material world, the illusive character of the future persuades many authors to describe it in terms of mental constructs such as (social) 'imaginaries' (Taylor, 2004) or 'fictions'

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(Beckert, 2016). Even when writing about future-making in the context of infrastructure – supposedly a clear case of solid materialism – scholars often conjure quasi-magical terms when describing the future, such as 'enchantments' (Harvey & Knox, 2012) or 'ghosts' (Aalders, 2020). Understanding future-making in terms of labour, and thus as both an imaginary and a material practice, ultimately helps to reveal how it is entangled in various modes of oppression and liberation that contend over the future. To that end, in this article, we concentrate on infrastructuring and infrastructured labour as an arena in which different futures are (un-)built.

The problem we want to address lies in the apparent juxtaposition between the imaginary realm of future-making – the dreams, hopes, expectations, and aspirations of imagined futures – and the very concrete practices that are necessary to make them real. This is not to say that materiality is entirely absent from the literature on future-making. While the term 'dreamscapes' (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015) suggests a rather ethereal conceptualisation of future-making, Jasanoff and Kim understand these dreams as socio-technical visions that enter 'assemblages of materiality, meaning, and morality' (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 4). Other scholars explicitly describe future-making as a 'material practice', for example in the context of home renovation (Cook, 2021). In a burgeoning critical scholarship on infrastructure, large-scale infrastructure projects such as development corridors are understood as 'showcases of future-making' (Müller-Mahn, 2020, p. 156), and are thus helpful in giving form to sometimes abstract notions of 'materiality'. Importantly, infrastructure is embedded in future-making practices, even if they do not materialise. For example, Müller-Mahn et al. (2021) argue that even though infrastructure projects may fail or be delayed, they are seen by many as 'beacons of hope'. Even before establishing his influential notion of the 'future as a cultural fact' (Appadurai, 2013), Appadurai described how 'the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and of culturally organized practice)' (Appadurai, 1990, p. 5; 2013). In this article we take this claim seriously and substantiate a conceptual argument for considering future-making as labour, or as we put it in the title, 'hard work'. For us, labour, is a practice that contains and mediates between both ideational and material aspects of future-making, allowing a better understanding of contentious acts of resistance that challenge dominant forms of future-making, while (hard) work refers to the physical efforts that are required to practice labour.

2. THE HARD WORK OF FUTURE-MAKING …

There exists a great wealth of studies that seeks to describe a common practice or phenomenon relating to the future as 'future-making'. Particularly design (e.g., Yelavich & Adams, 2014) and heritage (e.g., Zetterstrom-Sharp, 2015) are conceptualised as future-making practices, but also affect (Albuquerque & Pischetola, 2022) and even gambling (Schmidt, 2019). The diversity of these practices and phenomena suggests a vagueness in the understanding of what future-making means in practice. Is it an emotion or an action? Is it material or discursive? The ambition of this paper is to unpack and ground the practice of future-making by understanding it as a form of labour.

One central problem behind much of the literature on the topic of future-making is the fact that the future itself cannot be studied, because by definition the future is not present and is therefore not empirically accessible (Urry, 2016). What can be researched, however, is how the future gets folded into the present (B. Anderson & Adey, 2012), i.e., how it becomes an issue in contemporary politics, an object of hope or fear, and a mobilising force of social change – all of which happens in the present. Future-making, then, is the term used to encompass all sorts of human activities aimed at shaping the conditions under which we shall live in the time to come, with 'making' emphasising the importance of collective human agency, in contrast to other conceptualisations that highlight emerging futures in terms of destiny, doom or fate (see: Granjou, 2016, p. xx).

According to Marxist approaches, labour and class are central categories governing who gets access to infrastructural flows and the future imaginaries they symbolise, but in which the workers

often remain invisible. Our argument addresses the multiple ways in which class intersects with and exacerbates other forms of exploitation and oppression, but also resistance based on gender, race, immigration status, etc., which might be less visible. Feminist and Black labour theories have long established that conventional Marxist interpretations of labour relations tend to ignore how labour is experienced and performed differently depending on intersections with identity markers such as gender and race (Collins, 2000; Hernández Reyes, 2019; Robinson, 1983).

Our understanding of labour owes much to seminal interventions by feminist labour geographers and critical labour studies that have widened the understanding of labour to include not only wage labour, often imagined as male-dominated, to include usually unsalaried care work within families and communities, which is usually characterised by women's labour (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Secombe, 1974). As set out in more detail in the editorial to this special issue, Global South perspectives on labour geography are central to our arguments. For example, Madhumita Dutta's (2020) work on affective aspects of labour and their relation to the agency of female workers challenges established Western notions of women-at-work necessarily being co-opted by neoliberal capitalism (Chatterjee, 2012). With reference to Pratt (2004), Dutta argues that the multiple, overlapping identities of women at work can never be fully co-opted, and indeed provide a locus for resistance.

Lastly, the arguments of this paper draw on two related insights from Marxist analysis of labour. First, the paper is based on Marx's observation that labour functions as a translation or mediation between human and nature (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 283), which we extend to include other (apparent) opposites. Second, a Marxist understanding of labour helps to conceptualise it as a process that constitutes an essential aspect of power relations. Here, especially the concept of alienated or estranged labour is productive, as it helps us to develop an understanding of 'alienated futures'. Both insights – labour as mediation, and as potentially estranged labour – must be understood in relation to each other. As workers do not realise their own purposes and passions, their work mediates opposites and thus 'produces castles, but for the worker hovels […]; it produces spirit, but for the worker nonsense' (Marx, 1844/2005, pp. 58–59, author's own translation). Understanding future-making as labour suggests that labour produces futures, but for the worker 'futurelessness'.

The following sections are organised by three interrelated pairs of antagonisms that we found to be central to our study of future-making as labour: materiality/presence and immateriality/future; visibility and invisibility; oppression and liberation. We are aware of the limitation of such seemingly simplistic binaries, yet we use it here to reveal how labour shapes and operates in a field of tension between a multitude of contradictions rather than describing truly binary modes of either/or.

We expound our largely conceptual arguments through examples from extensive fieldwork between 2018 and 2023 on infrastructure projects in Kenya and Tanzania. The fieldwork was part of three projects exploring 'unbuilt and unfinished' (Carse & Kneas, 2019) infrastructure projects, namely the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) corridor in Kenya (fieldwork between 2017 and 2019, mostly along the unbuilt section between Isiolo and Lokichar), a minor study on the Nairobi Expressway (fieldwork in 2022) and the Kidunda Dam in Tanzania (fieldwork between 2022 and 2023). The vignettes that we draw from the empirical material function as illustrative examples rather than as the basis from which we develop our argument. They also illustrate the diversity of labour in East Africa, be it skilled or unskilled, temporary or migrant.

2.1. … between material presence and immaterial futures

Labour, writes Marx, is primarily a relation between people and nature, in which it 'mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between [humans] and nature' (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 283), changing not only their environment but their own physical condition. In this

interaction, labourers realise their own purpose in materiality (Marx, 1867/1976). To Marx, the ability to realise a particular purpose separates the productive activities of animals from human labour. He writes: '[A] bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his imagination before he constructs it in wax' (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 284).

The ability of workers to imagine the future of their own work is therefore not just a coincidental attribute of labour but defines it as such in the first place. Marx understands labour as a 'purposeful activity' (1867/1976, p. 284), meaning an activity whose aim only exists as an abstract imagination at the beginning of the labour process. In addition, labour relies on the material which is to be processed and the available tools. In this context, Marx (1867/1976, p. 285, footnote 2) describes labour as an 'intermediative action which, while it permits the objects to follow their own bent […], is nevertheless only working out its own aim'. Labour therefore functions as an intermediary between material substance and purposeful vision of what this material should become; simultaneously a material practice and an exercise in imagination. Present material activity meets imaginaries of the future in the process of labour, which thus mediates between future and present.

Marx´s primary concern lies with the production of commodities and not with the analysis of social processes of future-making; the direct conclusion we can take from it therefore remains rather limited. Furthermore, he presents the relationship between imaginary and material as a straight-forward movement from idea to labour process to product. In this form, the relationship appears in an uncharacteristically idealist form, giving the imaginary precedence over its material realisation. Yet, should not the material practice of production inform and shape the ideas one has about the product?

Here, Ingold (2011, p. 6) builds on Marx's above-mentioned observation: that labour does not only change the worked material but also the workers themselves. Labour, Ingold writes, 'does not start with an image and finish with an object but carries on through, without beginning or end, punctuated – rather than initiated or terminated – by the forms, whether mental or ideal, that it sequentially brings into being' (Ingold, 2011). The image of the future that workers have in mind is thus in constant negotiation with the material they encounter during the process of working it. Workers shape present material conditions to conform to their imagination of the future, as this imagination is in constant negotiation with these conditions and adapts to emerging restraints and possibilities afforded by the material.

All of this, as Marx (1867/1976, p. 290) points out, does not take into account the wider social conditions under which labour takes place. In the context of the above-mentioned realisation of labour in its product, he describes the conditions as follows: 'this realization of labor appears as *loss of reality* for the workers' (Marx, 1844/1988, p. 71, emphasis in original). As workers do not own the product of their work, nor the tools of production, they become alienated from their work, from other workers, and ultimately from themselves (Marx, 1844/1988, p. 75).

We argue that a similar alienation can be observed in the context of infrastructuring labour for large-scale development projects. As workers realise the vision of the future imagined by the planners of an infrastructure project, they become alienated from the very future they create. The future that construction workers build through their infrastructuring labour holds no place for the workers who built it (see also: Addie, 2021), creating an irreconcilable tension between spectacular promises of prosperity through infrastructure and the actually experienced ruination of urban landscapes and biographies.

Work on the recently completed Nairobi Expressway serves as an example for how workers are excluded and alienated from the very future they helped build. Damian[1] is the chairman for the *Kenya Concrete Structural Ceramics Tiles Woodply & Interiors Designs Workers Union* with the somewhat cumbersome acronym KCSCTWIDWU that organises many of the workers who

were employed at the construction of the highway. 'How many Kenyans are benefiting from [the Nairobi Expressway]?', he asks rhetorically, answering the question immediately: 'The majority of the people who build that road do not even have a bicycle!' (Interview, September 2022). While it is unclear whether all workers at KCSCTWIDWU share this assessment, several studies have found similar grievances. In this context, Addie (2021) coins the term 'infrastructural alienation' to describe workers' exclusion from the infrastructure they build, both in terms of its material shape and the imaginaries it engenders. In the remainder of this section we expand on this notion and argue that because of infrastructures' association with notions of modernity a similar argument can be made about workers' alienation from infrastructured futures.

The Nairobi Expressway inscribes a particular future onto the urban landscape. It runs, quite heavily symbolic, over the heads of the people, connecting the airport to the city's Central Business District, terminating at the wealthy Westlands neighbourhood. Charges range from 120 to 360 Kenyan shilling, many times over what most people spend on their daily bus fare. Prince Guma et al. (2023) describe the Expressway as a case of 'plug-in urbanism', that is 'a pre-packaged state-of-the-art development installation' (Guma et al., 2023, p. 1), which is 'financed and designed by foreign authorities, sustained in line with neoliberal and market-based ideologies as a public – private partnership, and promoted as the way of the future'.

In July 2023, protestors took to the streets to demonstrate against rising costs of living that were exacerbated by a new tax law, which was introduced by the recently elected government of William Ruto, to fulfil directives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Some protestors specifically targeted the Expressway, vandalising parts of the roadway as a symbol of a future built for elites and out of reach for many Kenyans. This act, while not directly linked to labour grievances, represented a broader protest against inequitable development and the exclusionary nature of such large infrastructure projects. This act also represented a protest against the erasure of alternative future visions coinciding with the demolition of entire neighbourhoods during its construction, notably the informal settlement Mukuru Kwa Njenga (Amnesty International, 2023), while influential investors and companies managed to protect their assets from destruction (Mito, 2022). Though those involved in the vandalism were not necessarily the same individuals who built the expressway, both groups share a sense of alienation from the future it represents – one marked by modernised infrastructure that they helped build through labour or taxes but are economically excluded from using.

We therefore argue that this too – sabotage and vandalism – is part of the hard work of future-making. Even though the protestors are not employed by a construction company, they are engaged in infrastructural work of future-making; not by building infrastructure, but by destroying it. In the translation of the imaginary future of plug-in urbanism to the material reality of the Nairobi Expressway, workers had to demolish existing structures, while ideas for alternative transport futures – those based on cheap public transport for the masses – had to make way for one based on seamless individual transport for 'kinetic elites' (Sheller, 2018, p. 23). This destruction of both material structures and immaterial future imaginaries is a taken-for-granted part of any kind of formal construction work. We consider subaltern practices of demolition as much a part of constructive future-making practices as formal demolition work is part of any construction project. Through their hard work, both construction workers and protestors mediate between the present materiality of infrastructure, and the future it symbolises. The difference is that in Kenya, and particularly in the case of the Nairobi Expressway, infrastructure construction is characterised by alienation, while the work of vandalism and sabotage is an attempt to re-appropriate the materiality of infrastructure as a stage for protest, and thus to reclaim a future from which the protesters feel alienated. Through infrastructuring work, previously abstract and immaterial corporate and state power becomes tangible. At the same time, infrastructure then becomes the locus where this immaterial power is assailable through material practices

such as sabotage. Even as this form of infrastructuring labour is usually framed as wanton destruction and apolitical vandalism,[2] we consider it to be a constructive practice of future-making, where saboteurs attack the material manifestation of the powers-that-be to create spaces where alternative futures become imaginable and realisable. Like other forms of labour, this infrastructuring labour-through-sabotage mediates between different and conflicting immaterial future imaginaries and their material manifestation; in this case in the form of unjust infrastructures and their destruction.

Infrastructure can simultaneously be understood as immaterial 'dream' (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Müller-Mahn, 2020) 'enchantment' (Harvey & Knox, 2012) and material reality (see for example: Haines, 2018). Construction workers do not only translate these dreams into material reality through their labour, they also dream about the very infrastructural reality they helped create. Damian describes how a worker might encounter the Expressway: 'They (…) tell their children: "You see that way, that highway?" And then, when your children ask you, "Daddy, what did you do with the money that you got from that highway?" "Yeah, I only paid school fees for you"' (interview, September 2022). The grand 'plug-in' vision of how a modern city should look and who it should serve is no vision of the future that this hypothetical worker can find himself in; it is a future from which he has become alienated. But that doesn't mean he's not building a future for himself, or in this case, his children. Even as infrastructure projects are 'emptying the future' (Groves, 2017; Tups & Dannenberg, 2021), rendering them invisible by realising a spectacular singular imaginary in the material form of the Expressway or other large-scale infrastructure project, workers and other people affected by work on and around infrastructure may insist on and realise their own visions of the future, refusing co-option (see also: Dutta, 2020).

2.2. … between visibility and invisibility

The struggle for and against visibility is a central concern to the scholarship on infrastructure (e.g., Star, 1999). Similarly, and as part of ongoing debates on 'not excluding half the human in human geography' (Monk & Hanson, 1982), feminist labour geography has done much to make hitherto-invisible forms of work visible, including not only care work within the family but also the work involved in activism and volunteering (England & Lawson, 2005). In critical engagements with future-making, the question of (in-)visibilities has likewise been discussed in great detail, especially in connection to infrastructure (e.g., Aalders et al., 2020; Bissell & Fuller, 2017).

This paper builds on the politics of visibility from different literatures as a tool to analyse how infrastructuring and infrastructured future-making are both a result and a producer of in-/visibilities. We first explore what kind of future-making work is made visible. The illustrative example here is drawn from often quite spectacular promises of creating employment through large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the LAPSSET corridor in Kenya (Browne, 2015). Secondly, we explore less visible forms of the hard work of making futures, focusing on *infrastructured* care work that supports more visible forms of infrastructuring labour. This argument is illustrated by the case of a woman at an informal labour camp in Tanzania, who performs vital care work both to strengthen the community and to secure an economic future for herself.

Construction work on infrastructure projects exists in a vexing state oscillating between hyper-visibility and invisibility. On the one hand, construction work is often part of a performance – either as a way the promise of modernity becomes accessible to common people, or as a form of showcasing attachment to the working class. On the other hand, this performance is often accompanied by a concealment of real working-class people, their labour, their visions for the future, and ultimately their political influence.

Work in the context of infrastructuring can be highly visible, not only because construction sites constitute such an unignorable part of urban life, but also because it figures prominently in

the public imagination, as the hard-hatted construction worker has come to epitomise work itself. Or rather: it has come to epitomise one very particular kind of work. As Freeman (1993) points out, the image of construction workers in the US was and arguably still is deeply entangled with notions of whiteness and manliness, as portrayed by Lewis Hine's series of photographs, aptly named *Men at Work*. Its most iconic photograph shows a dozen (white) men having lunch on a steel beam 260 metres above ground. It is an extremely visible depiction of what an idealised version of work ought to look like, weaving in notions of (white) masculinity as defined by hard work in defiance of deadly hazards. This image of the white, male construction workers is prototypically American as much as it depicts prototypical workers. However, the underlying entanglement of capitalist modes of production with constructions of race and gender, and the subsequent interplay of visible and invisible work, are quasi universal phenomena, even as these entanglements emerge in idiosyncratic ways in different circumstances. To understand the ways in which labour in Kenya mediates between visibility and invisibility, we must first briefly explore the unique entanglements of class, race and gender in Kenya's colonial and post-colonial past.

As in other colonies (e.g., Sherman, 2022), colonial labour politics in Kenya were not only racist, they produced 'the colonial grammar' (Lesutis, 2023) of race in the first place, by unequally integrating different ethnic groups in Kenya into the labour market. These racial differences were not merely ideological, but were also materially inscribed in starkly unequal salaries based on the workers' race (Maloba, 1998, p. 37). Kikuyu in particular were employed in large numbers by British colonialists, who worked with local elites among the Kikuyu, whose 'capabilities were gauged by the number of boys [a term used to describe all male African workers]'(Mungeam, 1970, p. 139, quoting C. Dundas 1912/1913) they could provide.

Almost diametrically opposed to the Western imaginary of workers as white men, Kenya's colonial labour regime produced an image of workers as Black 'boys'. Even as the demand for labour grew and more dispossessed and desperate former peasants moved to urban areas to find work, the colonial government in Kenya maintained that Africans as a whole were racially incapable of a proletarian urban life. 'Neither the government nor the municipal authorities officially acknowledged their presence, although they relied on these forgotten people for survival and existence' writes Wunyabari Maloba (1998, p. 35) in his history of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. The 'forgotten people', Kenya's urban proletariat, were effectively invisible to the colonial government. It assumed that their livelihood would be supported by their families through small-scale agriculture in rural areas, even though the reason for urban migration in the first place was usually the dispossession from the very land that was supposed to feed them. According to Maloba (1998), this justified punitively low wages and a general negligence of workers' welfare in the colonial labour regime; a callous 'politics of disavowal' (Lesutis, 2022b). As we will show below, the ruins left by colonial labour regimes persist today in altered forms.

Until 1947, the 'kipande', a small book containing name, finger print and employment history, which had to be worn around the neck in a metal case, was a way for (white) employers to govern the movement of African men in Kenya (Karari, 2018, p. 6 et seq.). Without a signature from the former employer, the kipande wearer could not move to another employer, and any negative remark by an employer could effectively prevent future employment (D. M. Anderson, 2000, p. 459). The kipande and its associated central registry not only helped to control workers and gave employers quasi-despotic power over them, it also constituted the only way for the colonial bureaucracy to acknowledge its Kenyan subjects. Paradoxically, while the working class was virtually invisible to the colonial regime, individuals therefore only became recognisable to the same regime by virtue of being workers.

In today's Kenya, 'jobs' are often more visible than the workers themselves. The promise of employment accompanies most infrastructure projects, especially for large-scale development projects such as the LAPSSET corridor. The LAPSSET corridor is a partially completed

development corridor that consists of a network of 'entangled' (Aalders et al., 2021) infrastructure projects such as highways, pipelines, communication lines, so-called resort cities, railway lines and even large-scale hydropower dams (Browne, 2015). The project is sometimes described as a 'ghost' (Aalders, 2020), which exists more as a set of plans and promises than as completed structures.

Yet these promises, including those to create 'thousands of jobs' (LCDA, 2016, p. 4), still have real, tangible impacts. In reports and other publications, promises of creating jobs are as abundant as they are vague. A *Brief on the LAPSSET Corridor Project*, for example, announces that 'It is envisioned in the short run, the LAPSSET corridor project will triple investment and employment space and opportunities in the country […] and bring to reality the dream of a social-economic rebirth of the Kenyan nation' (LCDA, 2016, p. 17). In such 'dreams' of 'Infinite possibilities' and 'Endless Opportunities'[3] associated with large-scale infrastructure investment, the promise of employment plays a highly performative role, for example in LAPSSET investment prospectuses, news stories, speeches, and advertisements for so-called 'local content'.[4]

Similarly, in a time-honoured tradition of politics anywhere in the world, political leaders in Kenya are regularly photographed in hard-hats and high-visibility vests in an attempt to signal a can-do mindset and closeness to the working class. For instance, a photo of former president Uhuru Kenyatta wearing a hard-hat during an inspection of Lamu Port adorns an article in The Star with the auspicious headline 'Pipeline construction to employ 600 youths' (Praxides, 2019). The pipeline in question, however, has not been built; the fulfilment of the promise of employment appears as unlikely as the notion of the former president actually doing manual labour. Yet, images of labour – as redemptive promise and political performance – are an essential component of future-making practices by state and corporate actors. As a contra-point to the alienated futures of the de-/construction work around the Nairobi Expressway, these performances of labour promise participation in the future by virtue of getting a job in the first place.

In direct opposition to these hyper-visible performances, and as a direct consequence of the shattering of trade union power in post-independence Kenya, construction workers enjoy little political representation; neither through governmental support nor through the structural power of labour unions. A considerable part of construction work in Kenya is done by so-called jua kali workers, named after the 'hot sun' under which informal workers toil. Yet, this work is often rendered invisible (Gadzala, 2009), to the extent that even people engaged in jua kali don't see themselves as workers (Riisgaard, 2022). (Note the ghosts of the 'forgotten' (Maloba, 1998, p. 35) urban labourers during colonial times.)

While infrastructure projects, and particularly the jobs they promise, become almost synonymous with *the* future, (Aalders et al., 2021), they also constitute 'foreign-produced visions [that] are marginalizing African imaginations, dominating local capacities to aspire, and conquering the future' (Müller-Mahn, 2020, p. 158), thus making them invisible. In the remainder of this section, we therefore explore a less visible form of *infrastructured labour* and care work around an informal labour camp close to a prospective construction site for a hydropower project near the village of Kidunda in Tanzania.

The only way to get to Kidunda during the time of research in 2023 is via a temporary dirt-road through thick dry forest towards the Ruvu river, where a new construction site is about to be put in place to build the Kidunda Dam. The pylons continue further south to meet the almost completed Nyerere Dam close to the town Kisaki, while the road takes a sharp left turn towards Kidunda. Before reaching the village, the road first passes a large, virtually empty, rectangular field, followed by a collection of small, improvised stalls and wooden scaffolding adorned with blue plastic tarps. The air is full of the smell of burning wood and simmering food, as well as the sounds of banging hammers and men in conversation. This informal labour camp – or just 'the camp' as its inhabitants call it – sprang up in the weeks before our arrival. In July 2023, we conducted a collaborative painting workshop with six of its inhabitants and a Tanzanian

Figure 1. 'The camp', as portrayed by a group of its inhabitants, in a collaborative painting workshop in July 2023. Source: Artwork by: Lyombo; Photograph by: Theo Aalders. CC BY-NC 4.0.

painter, which makes the invisible life of 'forgotten' workers visible (Figure 1). Almost every day new workers move here in the hope of finding employment with the Chinese company SinoHydro contracted to build a hydropower dam at Ruvu river. Once completed, its primary purpose is to secure a future for Dar es Salaam, which is threatened by serious water shortages. According to the Italian company Studio Pietrangeli, which conducted the feasibility study for the project, the dam's two turbines will produce 20 MW of power, drawing water from a 78 km^2 reservoir that is expected to displace 5000 people.[5] It is a large project, requiring up to 1500 construction workers at its peak, according to the company's human resources officer. At this time, however, the employment process has not yet begun, the dam itself so far exists only on paper.

Construction sites are spaces of open futures, either understood as 'disquieting ambivalence' (Lesutis, 2022a) or possibility, depending on one's position. For the hundreds of wasoteaji, Swahili for people waiting for a job (or, more literally, 'the penniless'), the Kidunda Dam constitutes a chance for a good job, even as the interim time of waiting means significant financial insecurity. While some villagers are sceptical of the imminent changes brought about by the dam project in general and the newcomers in particular, business-minded people see 'the camp' as an opportunity. One of these people is Inaya, a middle-aged woman, a farmer and owner of a small shop in Kidunda. The promises of the dam – water-security for Dar es Salaam and employment for construction workers – were not made for her. The future imaginaries of the dam do not include her, yet she works hard to secure a place for herself and her family in this infrastructured future. Just recently, she opened a second shop at the camp, which is already doing quite well.

Inaya explains why she opened a shop despite the tough competition at the emerging camp site. The other shop-owners are mostly women from Kisaki, a town only a few hours' drive away from Kidunda that experienced a bonanza during the recent construction of the large-scale Nyerere Dam. These women witnessed first-hand the economic opportunities that come with labourers working at the nearby construction site. Many of the wasoteaji also come from Kisaki, so the other shop-owners were not only first but also had pre-existing relations with the potential customers. Yet Inaya persisted, chatting with the men, regularly giving out food, soda and beer on credit, to slowly establish her own customer base. Giving out merchandise on credit is an

expression of empathy for the penniless wasoteaji, but also a business strategy. Once the people to whom Inaya extended credit get employed, they will not only pay back their debts, but become loyal (and now flush) customers. Her work is a bet on the future.

Life at the informal camp is hard, but without the essential services provided by Inaya and other women like her, it would be almost unbearable. These female entrepreneurs don't only feed the wasoteaji and provide potable water but also washing facilities and even shelter. Their largely invisible *infrastructured labour* is shaped by – even exists because of – the imminent start of a large-scale infrastructure project. At the same time, it could be considered *infrastructuring* labour, as Inaya provides for the survival of the wasoteaji who constitute a vital labour reserve for the construction company. Even the construction and maintenance of the informal camp itself, in which Inaya plays a crucial role, can be understood as a form of heterogenous infrastructure configuration (Lawhon et al., 2018), which provides wasoteaji with the basic necessities of life. Inaya's work provides 'life in the shadow of infrastructural death' (Addie, 2021). Around Kidunda, 'infrastructural violence' (Rodgers & O'Neill, 2012) does not materialise through the brutalism of 'dead labour' (Addie, 2021, p. 1345; see also: Marx, 1867/1976, p. 60) ossified into infrastructural forms that directly inflict bodily harm on marginalised people. Instead, as mentioned above, the wasoteaji experience violence as a 'politics of disavowal' (Lesutis, 2022b). Inaya and her shopkeeper companions ameliorate this harm by omission in a way that doesn't replace centrally planned physical infrastructure. To the contrary, her labour *allows* its construction as it sustains a group, whose labour will one day ossify into the construction of the Kidunda Dam in the form of dead labour. As invisible as the wasoteaji and their struggles are to planning authorities, so is the labour that Inaya provides to sustain the forgotten denizens of the camp; both, however, are necessary for the project to succeed ultimately.

In addition, Inaya tells us that running her small stall does not only provide victuals, but also emotional support:

> I'm encouraging them: 'Don't give up, good things don't come quickly! Don't be in a hurry to give up, be patient. Later, things will be good, you'll get a job, you'll live well.' [6] (Interview, 7 July 2023)

Feminist scholarship provides several examples of invisible and often gendered forms of care work or emotional labour that are often community-oriented (England & Lawson, 2005; Riedman, 2021). However, Inaya points out that the men are also supporting and encouraging each other emotionally. Similar to the 'emotional bonds' studied by Dutta (2020), wasoteaji and people from Kidunda build invisible networks that endure the hardships of the informal labour camp and help maintain hope for the future.

None of these forms of labour – the provision of basic necessities, the construction of a support infrastructure, or the care of emotional labour – are immediately visible to outsiders: they do not appear in the planning documents of Studio Pietrangeli; they are not mentioned by announcements from DAWASA (Dar-es-salaam Water Supply and Sanitation Authority), who commissioned the dam; or in newspaper articles about the project. Yet, this invisible labour is essential for the wasoteaji and consequently for the project as a whole. Inaya's quiet work makes futures: she builds a future for herself by making shrewd and well-timed business decisions; she constructs a future for the camp in the form of a small stall with a blue plastic tarp to provide food, water and shelter; and she makes a future imaginable by emotionally supporting the people who come to her as friends and customers.

2.3. … between oppression and liberation

In the previous section, we mentioned the invisibilisation of Kenya's workers by both colonial and postcolonial governments, as well as fights for visibility in attempts to assert alternative futures. This section builds on these arguments by relating them to the ways in which labour can be a tool

of oppression as well as one for liberation. The exploitation, humiliations and invisible-making of workers in Kenya, their emasculation and dehumanisation, had direct consequences for Kenya's later struggle for independence through the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA). The KLFA was mainly initiated and carried by landless Kikuyu peasants, but was also strongly supported by proletarianised Kikuyu in urban areas (Stichter, 1975), who suffered under the kipande system. Even though the relationship between the KLFA and urban workers was characterised by internal contradictions and conflict, the struggle between peasants and urban proletariat was not entirely distinct either, as both groups initially formed around the common demand to restore the stolen land (Maloba, 1998, p. 46), and were united by their demands for Black majority rule and self-determination. The invisibility and impotence of the 'forgotten' urban proletariat was directly associated with the dispossession of land, which 'came to represent power, integrity, and security' (Maloba, 1998, p. 45). This connection between land and workers' rights is evident in the biography of independence fighters such as Pio Gama Pinto, who was equally committed to the struggle for land rights, and trade unions (Wanga-Odhiambo, 2021). His assassination in 1965, only two years after Kenya's independence, signalled the victory of conservative, Western-aligned post-colonial forces in Kenya. As a result, many of the issues the KLFA and activists like Pio Gama Pinto had fought against, persist today.

Labour in modern Kenya is still haunted by the only superficially exorcised ghosts of colonial labour regimes. Yet, these colonial continuities are not obvious, and instead take idiosyncratic form in a modern capitalist country. In today's Kenya, salaried labour is both a promise of salvation from illiteracy, unemployment and supposedly 'backward' lifestyles such as pastoralism, as well as a threat to those pastoralists who don't consider their lifestyle as 'backward'. The LAPSSET corridor promises (and threatens) to bring 'ungovernable' (Scott, 2009) pastoralists under the control of the state by 'fixing' (Pas, 2019, p. 9) them, both literally through sedentarisation, and figuratively though proletarianisation. Gaining control over the margins is one of the implicit goals of the LAPSSET programme, even though sedentarisation is not explicitly mentioned (Mosley & Watson, 2016). Even as the Kenyan Government has ostensibly shifted its rhetoric, no longer depicting pastoralists as a problem to be solved, the material impacts of infrastructure projects like the LAPSSET corridor on local communities remain largely unchanged. One middle-aged man in Isiolo county, who grew up as a pastoralist but later went to university and got a well-paid job, said about the planned development:

> When the LAPSSET will come, so many people will be employed and with that time, no children will go to graze the animals, they will all go to school because now everyone will be working, the parents will be working so they will have fees to pay for their children [that is, money for school fees]. (Interview, January 2018)

For others, the arduous work of pastoralism is a form of resistance (Pas, 2018) defying the future vision of projects like the LAPSSET corridor that allow no space for them (Aalders, 2020).

Formal, salaried labour, too, is a form of future-making that negotiates between oppression and liberation. Even in neighbouring Tanzania with its socialist history, the power of trade unions has gradually reduced over the past decades (Babeiya, 2011). Nevertheless, workers are still resisting the oppressive tendencies of neo-liberal labour policies, both by fighting for better conditions of salaried labour, as well as by escaping it altogether. We argue that studying these struggles in terms of the hard work of future-making allows us to focus on the agency of workers to make their own future in defiance of the alienated futures inscribed into landscapes and biographies by large-scale infrastructure projects. This perspective has faced criticism from scholars advocating for 'resisting resistance' (Kliger, 1996) due to its excessive focus on individual agency. Yet we emphasise that resistance within labour struggles inherently connects the actions of each worker to systemic, rather than solely individual, agency. The remainder of this section focuses

on one of these labourers, a trade unionist and aspiring independent farmer who was waiting for work at 'the camp' near Kidunda when we met him.

Mayombi is one of the wasoteaji mentioned in the previous section. He introduces himself as 'a driller, a blaster. I am operating a lot of machines'. 'But', he adds with a gaze over the labour camp that has sprung up during the previous weeks, 'for now, I am here because I am just waiting for the project. We don't know when it starts'. Mayombi and many of the job seekers have come from other construction sites, hoping to apply the skills they learnt in previous employments at this new project. Each job only lasts a couple of months or years with no guarantee of follow-up work. These are precarious grounds upon which to build a future, so some, like Mayombi, start building their own. We talked in a half-finished wooden shed that he was currently carpentering; a butchery, as he says, for a time when more people live around Kidunda, following the call of employment.

Even though construction on the Kidunda Dam had not yet started when we conducted our fieldwork, the multiple work of future-making was well underway. Apart from the bustling around the improvised labour camp, there was a palpable atmosphere of anticipation in the air that contrasted with the serene ambience we had witnessed the first two times we visited the village of Kidunda in the previous year. Back then, the dam had been no more than a rumour; many people we talked to had never heard of it. Now, even though construction of the actual dam had not yet begun, it was omnipresent. Despite the consistent lack of employment for the workers at the construction site, resulting in daily depletion of their savings and their families having to sell belongings to support them, hope continued to propel most people forward against a powerful undertow of disappointment.

The waiting workers at the Kidunda camp are playing for high stakes. Most of them depend on remittances from family members; some, we were told, had asked their wives to sell off land, a cow, a motorbike – anything to extend the time spent in limbo at the camp. The hope is that their persistence would eventually be remunerated with the very first jobs the contractor offered. One worker explained how they encourage each other: 'Sometimes we stay together, [and say]: "Hey, let's not give up! For us boys, life is as hard as it gets, my son. This is life"'[7] (Interview, 7 July 23). Even the slight chance of employment in the future is seen as a means of liberation from the oppressive realities of unemployment.

However, it remains to be seen whether the gamble will pay off. We visited the HR department of SinoHydro in a nearby town, three hours away by car along the rough road that was newly built in preparation of the dam construction. In a small office just outside of town, two clerks perch on low chairs surrounded by perilously stacked columns of application files. 'We will call them when the time comes' the clerk tells us and ensures us that there is a system in place to decide who to employ and who to reject. Each application is tucked in a manila envelope, a name and phone number scribbled on the outside; each application a worker in waiting, trying not to lose hope. 'You see', Mayombi explains when we talk about the uncertainty of the application process, 'even me, I can't lose hope, even two years I will wait because I know the project is going to start soon. […] I have hope, I can't lose hope even the people who are here, […] they can't lose hope because they trust: "tomorrow, maybe"'.

While Mayombi waits for tomorrow, today he is organising people. When working at the nearby Nyerere Dam he was elected chairman representing workers employed by SinoHydro with the *Tanzania Union of Industrial and Commercial Workers* (TUICO). He worked at many different construction sites, always taking responsibility to organise workers: 'Everywhere when I go to start a work, I have to find a union and if there isn't [one] I will try to convince my head office'. Once the work at the dam begins, he wants to be ready: 'we will start the seminar, start to train people, why you are supposed to join the union, what the profit, what an advantage'. Even now Mayombi organises people; encourages them to find odd-jobs and get busy: 'I arranged all the people here; I called all the people one day I told them that don't just live as you are just waiting a work and you don't know tomorrow where are you going to eat'.

Hard work, Mayombi keeps repeating throughout the interview, is the key to a good life. But it does not constitute the good life itself. 'My first eyes will be here', he says, gesturing at the future butchery he's currently building, 'because there [gesturing at the construction site] I know that my employer is only just looking for me that Mayombi is already come to work today. But here is mine! There I am just employed, so my eyes will be here'. His eventual dream, however, is far away from any construction site and the surveillance of wary supervisors. 'In my heart, I like to be a big farmer', he tells me, 'to have a ranch, to have a pig ranch. But a pig ranch is not for now. This is going to be the end of my project'. To Mayombi, salaried labour is a means to an end; a way to accumulate enough capital to escape it. He works hard for the company, if he gets employed, but only so that one day he doesn't have to work for anyone but himself.

For Mayombi and other wasoteaji like him, employment is both an oppressive force, and a means for liberation. Not only is his future at the mercy of a company's inscrutable and seemingly capricious employment policy, even employment means submission to the surveillance of the construction company. As chairman of the SinoHydro workers' group in the TUICO union, he is aware of the potential of organised labour to take the future into one´s own hands. He is a man with a vision using the time he spends in the employ of others to build a future that is actually his own.

3. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued for the merits of analysing future-making as a form of labour. Concentrating on two large-scale infrastructure projects in Kenya and Tanzania, we have brought together scholarship concerned with a critical analysis of infrastructure, future-making, and labour. Our arguments are illustrated by several vignettes based on fieldwork conducted in these two countries between 2018 and 2023. Starting from a Marxist analysis of labour relations, we argued that labour has a unique ability to mediate between antagonisms and structured the text along three of these antagonisms: between material presence and immaterial future; between visibility and invisibility; and between oppression and resistance.

The first antagonism implies an association between materiality and the present, as well as between immateriality and the future. We argued to include infrastructure sabotage as a form of hard work of future-making, as it aims to clear material obstacles to imaginaries of alternative futures. We see the need for future studies to expound on how the past interfaces with this dynamic, both through material ruins (Aalders, 2021; Greven, 2023; Stoler, 2013), as well as through immaterial visions of 'past futures' (Jackson, 2021). Even if the addition of the past does not entirely dissolve relations between material present and immaterial future, it may yet complicate and deepen the discussion we present in this section.

The second section took up important discussions of visibility and invisibility from a variety of different literatures. We showed that construction work constitutes only the visible tip of the metaphorical iceberg (Gibson-Graham, 2006), while the infrastructure project in question relies on a much broader heterogenous (Lawhon et al., 2018) network of reproductive and care work as well as emotional labour, which produces equally heterogenous and equally invisible futures that refuse to be co-opted (Dutta, 2020) by future visions produced through dominant master plans (Müller-Mahn, 2020). The argument in this section relies on previous intervention by feminist and Black scholarship on the topic. Our contribution is therefore not an innovation, but rather a recognition and affirmation that a combination of critical engagements with (infrastructure) labour and future-making is a highly promising approach.

Lastly, we explicitly juxtapose a topic that ran through the previous two sections: oppression and liberation or resistance. The aim of this section is to strengthen our argument about the (conditional) transferability of Marx' alienated labour to 'alienated futures', and to highlight the

agency of workers to reappropriate their own futures through both organised labour, or an outright refusal of capitalist labour regimes. The translation of Marxist labour theory remained largely metaphorical, as the specific characteristics of capitalist and industrial commodity-making cannot be applied to future-making directly. Nevertheless, we show that one important aspect of Marx's analysis of alienated labour is indeed transferable to alienated future-making, namely resistance through organised labour, both in unions and communities. Further studies that explicitly sound out the analogies and differences between labour and future-making in the context of alienation may be able to elaborate on our suggestion, particularly as part of a discussion of contentious and emancipatory future-making strategies.

In defiance of singular visions of the future, which are produced by large-scale infrastructure projects, our local respondents share diverse ways in which alternative futures are possible. Some scholars have shown that a key challenge for solving many of humanity's problems can be tracked back to a 'crisis of imagination' (Fotaki et al., 2020; see also: Fisher, 2009). We argue that this analysis benefits from an examination of the material reality and practices that are able to change the boundaries of what is imaginable, including (construction) work, community-building and sabotage. To malappropriate Marx one last time: 'people make their own future, but they do not make it under conditions of their choosing' (cf. Marx & Engels, 1960/2009, p. 115). Those conditions, however, can be changed, and any vision for the future must consider the material practices necessary to do so. This is indeed hard work!

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper is not based on a publicly available data set.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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ETHICS

Consent for the publication of information shared with me during interviews with people in the study areas was given verbally before the beginning of each interview. The following information was explained to the research participants: (1) The interview will be recorded if they agree. If the interview partner does not wish to be recorded, it is possible to rely on written notes. (2) The interview will be transcribed and, if conducted in a language different to English, translated by the researcher himself or a research assistant. (3) If there are any passages the interview partner does not feel comfortable with, they can be struck from the record after the fact. (4) The interview data will be stored in an encrypted. (5) Direct or indirect quotes from the interview might be used later in academic articles and publications for the general public, but all names will be changed (unless the interviewee explicitly wishes to be named).

NOTES

1. This and all other names of respondents have been changed.

2. For example, according to The Star, National Assembly Majority leader Kimani Ichungwah declared that 'This madness must stop!' in reference to the 'vandalism' inflicted on the Expressway. Source: https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2023-07-12-this-madness-must-stop-ichungwah-as-protesters-vandalise-parts-of-expressway/ (last accessed: 2 September 2023)
3. LAPSSET homepage, https://www.lapsset.go.ke/ (last accessed: 1 September 2023)
4. The definition of 'local content' was laid out by Parliament of Kenya in the 2018 'Local Content Bill' (Parliament of Kenya, 2018), which puts considerable emphasis on the creation of employment opportunities for local communities.
5. https://www.pietrangeli.com/kidunda-rockfill-dam-with-bitouminous-face-tanzania-africa (last accessed: 30 August 2023)
6. Translated from Swahili by the authors
7. Translated from Swahili by the authors.

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