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Theorising approaches to social movement spatialities: Local and global contestations of neoliberal water services

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Abstract

This paper examines different ways of studying – and thereby understanding – social movement spatialities. For more than a decade, literature on the geographies of social movements has explored the multiple spatialities of mobilisation, using concepts like scale, network, place, and territory. Drawing on existing contributions, the study provides a critical engagement that differentiates between several forms of research agendas involving contrasting epistemologies. This engagement contributes to opening up a conceptualisation of multiple analytical approaches by (1) analysing wider processes and political goals spanning different movements, characterised as 'cross-cutting spatialities'; (2) studying the more specific and diverse spatiotemporal realities within particular movement cases, which describe their 'complex-situated spatialities'; and (3) considering how inherent tensions arise between the different political practices of specific movements, displaying 'contradictory spatialities'. The reading of these approaches is framed within a relational perspective that employs them in an empirical study of local and global struggles against neoliberalised urban water services. The paper explores the spatial practices of an urban place-based movement struggle in Johannesburg and a global labour union federation for public service workers – representing two vantage points in the fight for water justice and the human right to essential services. The study demonstrates how the analytical approaches inform one another through complementary but also contrasting perspectives on movement politics.

KEYWORDS
geographies of social movements, multiple spatialities, neoliberal water services, public service unions, research epistemologies, water justice

1 | INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, geographers writing on social movements have explored the spatialities of mobilisation and contentious politics, combining multiple spatial concepts (e.g., scale, network, place) to better understand the specific practices of social movements (Leitner et al., 2008; Miller, 2013; Nicholls et al., 2013; Routledge, 2017). In doing so, they have developed general theoretical frameworks and provided accounts of various forms of mobilisation.

This study will examine different analytical agendas undergirding such research. It draws on existing literature to conceptualise what I argue to be three competing but also compatible approaches to studying the geographies of social movements. The first can be exemplified by Mayer (2013), who provides a broad conceptualisation that describes common tendencies across different urban-based movements faced with neoliberalisation. By contrast, Blank (2016) advocates a focus on in-depth accounts of specific movements and their diverse realities to avoid simplified theoretical understandings. A third angle is presented by Halvorsen (2017), who emphasises the contradictions and tensions that arise between different spatial practices when studying a particular movement mobilisation.

Each of these contributions asks relevant questions about how we study social movements through sometimes quite contrasting epistemologies that involve different ways of employing spatial concepts and thereby understanding mobilisation. I aim to explore the compatibility of these different perspectives through a relational analysis in an empirical study of global and local struggles against neoliberal water services. This study focuses primarily on the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and the Coalition Against Water Privatisation (CAWP), which the APF initiated within a local movement struggle for access to water emerging in the townships of Johannesburg, South Africa. Attention will also be given to Public Services International (PSI), a global trade union for public service workers that has opposed privatisation reform. This makes it possible to trace political processes and wider solidarities cutting across both movement struggles, especially their participation in the Global Water Justice Movement, while simultaneously providing insights into their particular political dynamics.

The study draws on interviews with activists and union representatives in both movements, asking questions about their strategic considerations. First, 23 informants were interviewed during fieldwork, including residents and activists participating in the CAWP, the APF and affiliated community organisations. This fieldwork took place in Johannesburg in 2010 and 2018. In addition, 11 representatives from PSI, its research unit and some national or regional union affiliates have been interviewed (sometimes repeatedly). The interviews took place at their offices in Ferney-Voltaire, London, and Brussels in 2014, in Brussels and Ferney-Voltaire in 2016, and while attending PSI's 30th World Congress in Geneva in 2017. The interviews were transcribed and analysed on the basis of information that emerged as relevant to the research themes. This paper also makes use of documents and notes from my involvement as an international activist and researcher in the Global Water Justice Movement from 2006 onwards.

The paper begins with a discussion of scholarly work in the literature on the spatialities of social movements, setting out three analytical approaches. These perspectives are then put to use within the case study on the contestation of neoliberal water services by the APF/CAWP and PSI.

2 | WAYS OF STUDYING SOCIO-SPATIAL PRACTICES

The work of Leitner et al. (2008) contends that different spatial concepts, such as scale, place, and network, are relevant to understanding socio-spatial practices of mobilisation. These concepts are combined to show how multiple spatialities come to be articulated in concrete cases. For instance, the mobilisation of wider networks between groups may strengthen scalar claims making vis-à-vis governments, which can be complemented by place-based collective actions held in symbolic locations. Building on this analysis, Nicholls et al. (2013) believe that contextual differences are a necessary consideration (see also Miller, 2013). They argue that 'all spatialities are important, but they are not always equally important at all times and in all kinds of conflict' (2013, p. 12). Particular political contexts – like the characteristics of specific places, certain moments in time, or types of conflict – can be conducive to particular spatial repertoires. Moreover, it is stressed that such movement spatialities are constituted relationally by different forms of power and, in effect, can transcend biased theoretical perspectives. Their actual spatial politics may include structural material dimensions, such as power imbalances stemming from the unequal distribution of resources, as well as discursive processes like the framing of common imaginaries motivating movement action. Collective actors come to employ different spatial tactics as 'technologies of power' in their ongoing contextual interactions with adversaries like the state or corporations (Miller, 2013).

While the recognition of specific contextual differences is useful (Nicholls et al., 2013), it is also necessary to differentiate between the spatial and temporal scopes found in different political studies. Attempts to conceptualise the spatial repertoires of social movements in current studies differ, sometimes considerably, in their analytical scale. For example, scholars theorise wider historical and geographical contexts that place movement groups in a broader totality, something that contrasts with accounts of particular movements related to their specific spatial and temporal circumstances (Blank, 2016; Mayer, 2013; for a critique concerning relevant contradictions, see Halvorsen, 2017).

I attempt to engage critically with such analytical practices, asking how particular ways of studying differ in their application of spatial concepts. This review proceeds by looking at three different analytical approaches in existing studies: 1) the use of spatial concepts to provide cross-cutting analyses that span across movements, 2) the application of spatial frameworks to understand the complex and situated realities of specific movements, and 3) the consideration of the spatial contradictions emerging from particular political moments. Of course, these analytical agendas are 'ideal types' and the studies exemplified are not necessarily confined to a single approach.

2.1 | Cross-cutting spatialities

Through a focus on *cross-cutting* spatialities, research pays attention to similar spatial strategy connections and political goals. Contributions can depict wider structures and agential practices, whether they be global in character (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012), have a national (Lois-González & Piñeira-Mantiñán, 2015) or relatively local extent (Katz, 2004). Examples of such studies may include similar discursive demands against neoliberal welfare policies across different places, or groups forging connections at the urban level around particular common environmental justice concerns. Studies found in the literature identify socio-spatial structures that cut across otherwise different movement groups, including shared scalar strategies, discursive networks, and territorial tactics (Halvorsen, 2017; Mayer, 2013; Miller, 2013). This approach allows scholars to see beyond fragmentations by applying multiple spatial concepts to describe – and theorise – relatively broad socio-spatial relations in terms of size or scale (Chettiparamb, 2013).

Consider, for example, Mayer's (2013) study that looks at transformation processes having occurred among social movements contesting neoliberal politics in cities in Europe and North America. She observes that urban social movements are increasingly compelled to use the global scale in 'harnessing scales of discourse and politics beyond their local one'. (p. 166). Besides this, transnational movements have become more local and urbanised in confronting global neoliberal reforms through protest actions in cities against the negative effects. Such different 'glocal' movements 'create a novel multi-scalar architecture of urban protest' (Mayer & Boudreau, 2012, p. 285). While the literature is depicting the expanded spatial repertoires of place-based movements, Mayer notes that wider shifts in political objectives and critiques of neoliberalism have received scant attention, highlighting that a social rights discourse appears to have gained a growing international prominence. It provides similar rights-based demands, for example, around housing and education, related to a trend towards 'NGOisation'.

In the context of changing urban politics, social movements are 'scaling upwards' to explore possibilities offered by new transnational networks, forums, and supra-national institutions (Mayer, 2013, p. 166). This exposes the limitations of local politics, given that urban authorities' capacity for public service provision is deteriorating. Literature theorising the 'rescaling' of statehood has described how local decision-making is affected by processes such as local growth imperatives fuelled by interurban competition and reduced public spending dictated by global neoliberal austerity and privatisation reforms (Jessop, 2000; Mayer, 2013). Mayer thus places the analysis of urban movements within this larger historical moment and context, entailing a shifting global–local scalar organisation. In many ways, the glocal character of movement agency *mirrors* therefore the socio-spatial reorganisation and constitution of state regulation.

Movements also adopt strategies that *invert* the present moment of global regulation. The Occupy movements, for example, utilised political opportunities afforded by place-based territorial occupations. They mainly challenged capitalist institutions and the financial system by targeting fixed spaces like the stock exchange (Halvorsen, 2017). These place-based movements were linked politically across space by associating with a wider discursive message – We are the 99% – which then constituted an expanded topological network (Halvorsen, 2017; Miller, 2013).

Work by Katz (2001) has underlined the relevance of analysing so-called 'counter-topographies', which *trace* how struggles across different places face similar structures, such as neoliberal rescaling and economic globalisation. The studies exemplified above have in common this counter-topographical outlook, abstracting the movements' politics to the larger historical moment of struggle (Halvorsen, 2017). However, movement agency also mirror and invert such adverse

socio-spatial structural processes. These different cross-cutting perspectives identify, in conceptual terms, 'recursive repetition of structural selections and agential calculations' that are manifested across space and time (Chettiparamb, 2013, p. 689).

2.2 | Complex-situated spatialities

The second analytical approach examines *complex-situated* spatialities by elaborating on particular movement cases. They thereby produce in-depth, detailed knowledge about the complex politics and spatial repertoires of mobilisations situated in specific geographical and temporal contexts. These studies can focus on specific movements embedded, for example, in certain places and scales – whether local (Blank, 2016), national (Leitner et al., 2008), or global movement networks (Routledge et al., 2013). Whereas cross-cutting relationships may provide generalised descriptions, Jessop (2005) highlights that more concrete empirical research is important. Broad structural relationships and agential strategies are constituted through specific spatiotemporal political interactions. They are affected by the dynamic struggles between, say, a particular movement and the state over time, in which specific reflexive agents pursue specific strategic actions.

No one is perhaps more explicit than Blank (2016) in calling for the use of spatial concepts to centre on the specific realities of movement politics. She expresses that simplified conceptual notions 'run the risk of misjudging and silencing the multifaceted reality of social movements' (2016, p. 1). The argument provided here favours the open use of a multi-spatial framework ('polymorphy'), seeing it as a tool for thorough representation, which can disclose different empirical practices and critique conceptual claims 'simplifying spatialities'. Taking inspiration from, for example, post-colonial critique, spatial concepts (like scale or place) possess de-fetishising qualities that can question 'dominant concepts of political space, which in turn have been generalisations of mostly European realities' (2016, p. 8). This approach seeks to avoid generalising specific circumstances and to prevent misleading theoretical translations. Attention is therefore also given to the specific histories of struggle leading to path dependency.

Blank illustrates this analysis with a study of Asamblea Florida Este, an urban neighbourhood assembly and community group in greater Buenos Aires. The study shows the group's different spatial practices and the specific political context of actions. International neoliberal rescaling led to the privatisation of public services and decentralised budget responsibility. However, these policies were also a source for expanded clientelistic structures in the regional and local governments, exchanging neighbourhood-based social provisions for support. The group protested first against the national government, but later shifted its struggle to local scalar practices like engaging the municipal council and territorial neighbourhood self-organisation. The latter included horizontal assembly networks that organised social work and promoted a people's community kitchen.

A similar analytical exercise is undertaken by Leitner et al. (2008) in their treatment of a national mobilisation to build a coalition fighting for immigrants' and workers' rights in the US. They explore how 'the complex ways in which the strategies pursued' involved 'various spatialities' (2008, p. 159). Although these two studies detail the practices of a particular urban or national movement, scholars can also examine broader connections to transnational activism. Indeed, we can understand how (local/national) territorialised movements and more extensive spatialities 'mutually constitute' one another (Nicholls, 2008, p. 856).

On one hand, transnational connections may *shape* the strategic agendas of particular organisations. For example, a local movement based in Philadelphia organised territorial support in impoverished communities while also pursuing national civil rights-based claims. Over time, though, it diversified its strategy by forging transnational networks with other groups focused on urban poverty issues, and adopted international discursive demands and actions (Mayer, 2013). On the other hand, transnational movement networks are also *shaped* by territorially embedded groups. Routledge and Cumbers (2009) study two types of global justice network: a global union focused on workplace-based politics in the sphere of production and a more diverse grassroots network concerned with alliance building through a broader social critique. Each movement constructed 'convergence spaces', articulating shared political visions and solidarities around international labour rights or wider opposition to neoliberal corporate power, respectively. Within such networks, geographical and place-based political divergences exist among the groups (e.g., favouring different strategic orientations). The differences may also lead to negotiated and articulated strategies that provide temporal changes within the global movement. Such processes can, for instance, be facilitated by information-sharing with dialogues among groups through decentred horizontal networking (Juris, 2008; Routledge et al., 2013).

While studies may specify the practices of both urban place-based movements (Blank, 2016; Mayer, 2013) and global justice networks (Routledge & Cumbers, 2009), I will explore their interactions further. As Mayer and Boudreau suggest, 'it is increasingly clear that the new dialectic between global and local sites of resistance' can be an important area for future research (2012, p. 285). We can, for example, better understand how local geographical politics have constitutive powers on broader global processes by combining different spatial relationships (Jessop, 2005; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012) or we can examine how they have inherent contradictory tensions (Mayer & Boudreau, 2012).

2.3 | Contradictory spatialities

The third analytical approach relates to Halvorsen's (2017) interest in movements' particular spatial *contradictions*. He argues that work on multi-spatial activism should focus attention on 'contradiction as a key factor in spatial mobilization' (2017, p. 1). Research perspectives based on spatial dialectics can depict specific tensions arising from – and thereby cutting through – different strategic spatial practices. Halvorsen welcomes rich empirical accounts of social movement spatiality, but cautions against approaches that downplay antagonisms. In this regard, he stresses that 'spatial dialectics points towards ... unfolding strategic dilemmas in spatial praxis' (2017, p. 8).

This process is illustrated through an empirical study. Occupy London emerged as part of the global Occupy movement by identifying with the common messages and wider discursive networks opposing the financial system. However, its actions became increasingly trapped in place as activists prioritised the physical territorial occupation of the protest camp itself at the expense of political identification and mobilisation across space. Strategic political tensions may exist between the particular geographical moment (e.g., place-based practices in London) and the historical moment (e.g., wider networks at multiple scales contesting the financial system). Another spatial contradiction was created by Occupy London's development from mass protests to community work in the post-camp phase. Rather than the previous scalar opposition against the government, such territorial work meant practical support like childcare in tackling austerity at the neighbourhood level. This spatial shift generated, however, new political dilemmas for the movement related to whether the 'state's crisis of social reproduction should be absorbed by community activists' (Halvorsen, 2017, p. 8).

More broadly, the geographical literature points to particular spatial tensions in forms of agency as diverse as urban grassroots movements (Halvorsen, 2017; Mayer & Boudreau, 2012) and trade union internationalism (Herod, 2003; Routledge et al., 2013). Trade unions may pursue, for instance, differentiated strategies that bring about a scalar mismatch. Specific geographical interests, such as saving a factory from relocation, can run counter to efforts at organising international solidarity (Herod, 2003). Likewise, constructing common ground in a global union network may limit the place-based interests of particular unions (Routledge et al., 2013). Moreover, labour's political networks and institutionalised partnerships with government parties can also be in tension with the forging of radical political connections with oppositional social movements that fight for better public services (Barchiesi, 2007; Upchurch & Mathers, 2012). Indeed, Jones and Jessop (2010) encourage research beyond analyses of the *possibilities* emerging by using different spatial strategies, since they may counteract and limit one another through political incompatibilities.

2.4 | Multiple analytical approaches

By drawing from the current literature, I have differentiated between analytical approaches studying social movements' cross-cutting, complex-situated, and contradictory spatialities. Each approach has a different spatiotemporal scope, thus inviting critical engagement by having distinct epistemologies. The cross-cutting theoretical understandings highlighted extensive perspectives on the wider spatial connections of movements. This analysis contrasts with efforts that focus on the situated realities of specific movement cases, with their diverse spatial and temporal characteristics. However, approaches examining extensive processes and specific articulated practices may lose sight of the spatial contradictions arising from movements' strategic practices. While these can represent competing analytical perspectives, the review also suggests that studies can be relational through the use of multiple approaches. The remainder of this paper explores how the perspectives can inform each other by providing complementary and contrasting insights when viewed together. To do so, the analytical approaches are applied to an empirical study of local and global struggles against neoliberal water services, as expressed in the practices of two movements.

3 | LOCAL AND GLOBAL STRUGGLES AGAINST NEOLIBERAL WATER SERVICES

From the 1990s onwards, international development discourse promoted neoliberal privatisation and commercialisation of urban public water services as a prominent strategy through new management models. There was a sharp growth in reform projects driven by multinational corporations (MNCs) and key international financial institutions, most notably within cities in developing countries. Consequently, unaffordable prices and exclusion from essential services ignited local popular protests around the world, making privatisation reforms highly politicised and increasingly difficult to carry out (see Hall et al., 2005; Magdahl, 2012; Sultana, 2018). The resistance also prompted groups to build a global counter-movement. It succeeded in becoming a broad anti−/alternative globalisation movement by representing workers, users, NGOs, and academics, championing improved public water services (Barlow, 2007; Terhorst, 2008).

The APF/CAWP waged a local, place-based struggle in Johannesburg responding to the city's reforms, which began in the early 2000s and limited users' access to water within communities. PSI, a global union federation (GUF), actively opposed the privatisation of water services from 1999 related to the threat to workers' jobs and work conditions. These two groups thus offer different empirical vantage points on the contestation of neoliberal water services. The study depicts political links cutting across both movements, such as engagement in the Global Water Justice Movement, while also giving insights into their particular political dynamics and contradictions. The period under study is primarily from 2000 to 2010, which corresponds with some of the most active years of the global water movement and ends with the APF/CAWP's decline.

Informed by the analytical approaches already described, this study contributes to the literature on water justice by exploring the spatialities of global and local movement struggles for fairer access to urban water. Besides depicting common neoliberal water governance and demands of resistance (McLean, 2007; Mirosa & Harris, 2012), the water justice literature examines the heterogeneous power relations at play in specific contexts and the various pathways that actions may take. Studies analyse, for example, the role of spatio-historical racialised structures, post-colonial systems of inequality, and indigenous values (Clark, 2020; McLean, 2007; Meehan, 2020; Sultana, 2018; Sultana & Loftus, 2020). Sultana and Loftus (2020) call for attention to be given to both the contextual specificities related to particular sites/places and the possibility for the development of shared struggle. We may consider how struggle around the right to water 'articulates with and through' the politics of particular contexts in a relational way (p. 9).

The APF was established in 2000 as an anti-privatisation activist forum that challenged the restructuring of municipal services in Johannesburg and had links to the emerging anti-globalisation/global justice movement. It developed as a post-apartheid social movement, prioritising concrete action to support poor working-class community struggles with issues like evictions and electricity and water cut-offs (McKinley, 2012; Paret, 2017). The APF grew to around 30 affiliates, including community-based organisations in different parts of the Gauteng region. It had elected office-bearers and joint meetings and working committees. From 2003, the water struggle became a key campaign for the APF, resisting pre-payment meters first introduced in two poor townships (McKinley, 2012). That same year, the APF formed the CAWP to strengthen the struggle through a coalition specifically focused on water, aiming to involve progressive NGOs, unions, and new activists (CAWP, 2004). The CAWP and the APF would be at the forefront of the water struggle, launching a legal court case, for example. They also had affiliated community groups, such as the Orange Farm Water Crisis Committee and Phiri Concerned Residents (McKinley, 2012).

Founded in 1907, PSI struggles for workers' rights and the provision of quality public services. Headquartered near Geneva and with offices in different regions, it currently has 154 national union affiliates and represents 30 million workers. Its members provide public services in sectors like water, electricity, education, health, and social services. PSI has a relatively formalised structure, with paid-up national union members, a world congress, and an elected leadership headed by a general secretary. From the late 1990s, PSI and affiliated unions became increasingly concerned with the rise of privatisation projects worldwide, particularly in sectors like urban water delivery (Keller & Höferl, 2007).

In what follows, the empirical discussion uses the three analytical approaches to consider different aspects. First, it explores the cross-cutting political relationships that united the APF/CAWP's community orientation and PSI's worker-based politics into a broader global movement struggle around the 'right to water'. Second, it examines the locally situated politics in Johannesburg and considers the dynamic implications of the APF/CAWP's context for international strategies like the discourse on the right to water. Third, it focuses on some of the global–local contradictions emerging within the specific politics of the APF/CAWP and PSI, including challenges to the development of worker–community alliances across different scales.

4 | CROSS-CUTTING RELATIONSHIPS OF WATER COMMERCIALISATION: UNITING COMMUNITY AND WORKER POLITICS

In 1999, against the backdrop of a municipal financial crisis and considerable macro-economic cuts in national funding at the local level, the ANC-led government in Johannesburg launched the 'iGoli' programme (Beall et al., 2002). In the quest to make Johannesburg a so-called 'world-class African city', these plans combined two interrelated purposes: to create economic development by attracting international investments and jobs and to restructure municipal services to run like a business and become more efficient (e.g., GJMC, 1999). The water service was commercialised by creating a 'corporatised' public company, a separate legal entity, advancing cost-recovery policies. Receiving advice from the World Bank, the company also signed a short-term private management contract with the French multinational Suez in 2001 (Magdahl, 2012; World Bank, 2006).

The company established the *Operation Gcin'amanzi* ('save water') programme, which targeted widespread non-payment practices in townships. These practices originated in the 1980s and had been part of an anti-apartheid boycott in the poor, racially segregated areas (e.g., Beall et al., 2000). The Operation installed pre-paid water meter devices that automatically disconnected household services for non-payment. The project was piloted in Orange Farm in 2002 and in Phiri in 2003 (CAWP, 2004), meeting resistance in both places. Concerned-resident groups and APF activists organised local actions, but also began early on to connect with international water activists engaged in the anti-privatisation struggle. The community organiser in Orange Farm, Richard Mokolo, explains:

> [In 2002] we met with international social movements, started building relationships and international solidarity. That was when we realised that anti-water privatisation is an international struggle; it is not only local. There we had people from Canada, Japan, Brazil, Mexico, you know. [...] we realised that this is more influenced by multinational corporations like Suez and Biwater, as well as the World Bank, the IMF. This is not just a small thing, it is big. And alone we cannot make it. We need to partner with others abroad. [...] [We had] relationships with many other international organisations.
>
> (Interview, 2 August 2018)

In 2002, water activists gathered with international groups during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and arranged a visit to the emerging project in Orange Farm (Barlow, 2007). The APF/CAWP participated in protests at the corporate-oriented World Water Forum (e.g., held in places like Istanbul and Kyoto), but also joined counter-forums organised by civil society, several international water strategy meetings, and some World Social Forums. Moreover, in 2006, the APF/CAWP co-founded a regional water network for groups in Africa established through a meeting hosted in Johannesburg. Hence, activists participated in the Global Water Justice Movement (GWJM), related to the so-called Reclaiming Public Water (RPW) network, and attended some of its most notable events (e.g., APF, 2009).

In 1999, a few years before the APF/CAWP, new staff at PSI initiated a campaign against water privatisation. While privatisation was directly driven by the agenda of global financial institutions, PSI representatives have also stressed that these reforms stem from an underfunded mandate through the increased devolution of responsibilities for financing service delivery to local municipalities, which created a lack of alternatives. The privatisation projects externalised workers from public sector employment into MNCs. As the former director of PSI's research unit (PSIRU) notes:

> Nearly all the conflicts over water privatisation involved the same two or three [global] companies [...] The two common threats were to public services as well as the public services sector employment.
>
> (Interview, David Hall, 29 January 2014)

Privatisation raised concerns about cuts in jobs, pay, and services. PSI's campaign therefore forged transnational connections with groups beyond workplace politics, such as the APF/CAWP. This approach is motivated by the need to gain broader support and leverage based on the political nature of PSI's employer counterpart, namely, governments. PSI's policy director explains:

> Our employers are largely democratically elected. [...] the industrial logic in the [public] sector is that we need to harm their [the governments'] political interests. And the way you harm their political interests is by looking to the users of the services.
>
> (Interview, Daniel Bertossa, 26 June 2014)

Hence, PSI connected with citizens and their different groups to change public policy. Its water campaign worked with the global water movement, for example, mobilising through the key international events mentioned above. PSI brought national or local union affiliates into this movement's activities but also encouraged alliances with local groups in places where reforms were implemented (Conant, 2010). The leader of PSI's water campaign elaborates:

> We [public unions] no longer have enough muscle on our own and need to work with civil-society groups. That is something I learned very early in the fight against water privatisation. If we attempt to fight on the basis of our [labour] rights and interests, we lose. If we join our fight to the broader concerns of the communities and a broader rights-based approach, then we stand a chance of winning. [...] For us, a social mobilisation unionism is a practical fact of life. We have to deal with the communities [and the people involved in our production of services].
>
> (Interview, David Boys, 28 November 2016)

Positioning water as a human right and emphasising the needs of users helped PSI build wider global relationships. The transnational water movement represented a loose global network of different movements with linked strategies, information-sharing, and research (Barlow, 2007). Working with PSI and its research unit, this movement has highlighted alternatives such as 'remunicipalisation' to bring privatised services back under public control. As with the position taken by PSI above, one CAWP coordinator stated that 'the rights-based approach was the main one' in terms of strategy and messaging (Interview, Virginia Setshedi, 9 July 2018; see also APF, 2009). A shared human rights discourse, focusing on goals around universal access and minimum levels of water services, was often the most prominent theme shared by the groups within the network. This theme resonated across different contexts and had the ability to 'attract a large cross-section of activists', as was observed at international meetings (Mirosa & Harris, 2012, p. 943). The discourse mobilised opposition against neoliberal policies as well as instigated legal-political campaigning at different scales. As Maude Barlow, a prominent international water activist, notes:

> The global water justice movement is demanding a change in international law [...] water is not a commercial good [...], but rather a human right and a public trust. [...] states have the obligation to deliver sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water to their citizens as a public service. [...] So groups around the world are mobilizing in their communities and countries for constitutional recognition of the right to water within their borders and at the United Nations for a full treaty that recognizes the right to water internationally.
>
> (Barlow, 2007, p. 164)

One of their main international achievements was a 2010 UN resolution recognising the right to water.

4.1 | Global spatial connections and solidarity

The cross-cutting perspective analyses similar structuring processes that span different movements. Several such socio-spatial processes emerged in the water struggles of the APF/CAWP and PSI. First, they shared a similar spatiotemporal historical moment through the global spread of privatisation and neoliberal management models within water services, particularly in urban areas (Magdahl, 2012). This development was linked to trans-scalar political economic processes concerning the expansion of profit-seeking global MNCs representing 'accumulation by dispossession' within essential public services (Harvey, 2005; Spronk & Terhorst, 2012). Both the Johannesburg case and PSI's struggle responded to the changing geographies of the state, entailing a cross-cutting rescaling of regulation (e.g., Mayer, 2013). The reforms were influenced by neoliberal policy institutions and the competitive economic environment at the global level, along with the transfer of financial responsibilities for service delivery and entrepreneurial economic growth 'down' to the local level. In Johannesburg, macro-economic austerity cuts in national transfers contributed to service restructuring, and PSI representatives focused similarly on underfunding at the local level. In such contexts, institutions like the World Bank have besides privatisation come to promote a network-based transfer of corporatisation/commercialisation and cost-recovery models within public sector utilities across cities (Magdahl, 2012; World Bank, 2006).

While Katz (2001) may encourage us to *trace* 'counter-topographies' by exploring structural challenges like those linking water struggles across different places, these structures prompted also similar forms of agential claims-making. The groups studied here mobilised around a well-established political dichotomy, anti-privatisation, something the water justice literature has noted led to uniformity within the struggle regardless of local differences (McLean, 2007). Beyond this,

they also pursued a rights-based discourse that made norms and legal principles around minimum standards of service delivery the main alternative counter-hegemonic frame (e.g., Barlow, 2007; Mirosa & Harris, 2012). These imaginaries formed the basis of a 'convergence space' (Routledge & Cumbers, 2009), as solidarity between diverse groups constructed a wider global water movement with collective visions and activities. We saw, for example, how APF/CAWP engaged with the movement at the global scale. Its engagement supports Mayer's (2013) identification of a glocal tendency in the organisation of urban movements and the involvement of a socio-economic rights discourse. Rather than mainly inverting global economic structures via fixed localised tactics (Halvorsen, 2017), the movements' contestations *mirrored* the state's global–local reorganisation by scaling upwards.

Beyond this conceptualisation of urban movements, the GWJM's network also included labour movements. It represents an interesting empirical case, connecting what Routledge and Cumbers (2009) studied as two contrasting forms of 'global justice networks', namely, a global union concerned mainly with workplace issues and a diverse transnational grassroots movement around a broad neoliberal critique. By reframing the strategy from workers' rights to human rights, PSI managed to shift its message to a higher level of abstraction, which formed the backbone of a joint global social movement unionism. These network connections are based on the specific political labour relations of public service workers (Magdahl & Jordhus-Lier, 2020). PSI's material employment interests, tied to the state, offered distinct opportunities for articulating common political interests with users. The contestations against neoliberal reforms were borne out of concerns over reproductive access to services in the sphere of consumption and threats to workers in the sphere of production. Urban water services were, in many ways, joint 'spaces of dependence' for realising essential interests (Cox, 1998; Jordhus-Lier, 2012). PSI sought to scale up alliances to the global level, motivated by this perceived mutual (self-)interest (Tattersall, 2010) at the local urban scale. While it is perhaps no surprise that cities can become strategic spaces that drive larger movements (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2017), the network here was able to extend as far as to global labour.

5 | SITUATED POLITICS AND THE RIGHT TO WATER IN JOHANNESBURG

If we examine the APF/CAWP in Johannesburg more closely, their local politics went well beyond the rights-based claims expressed by the global movement. At international gatherings, the group's activists stood out with vocal slogans against the pre-paid meters in South Africa, reflecting the specific character of the programme implemented in their communities. In a counter-campaign called Operation 'Vulamanzi' ('water flow'), activists encouraged people to bypass the pre-paid meter devices. As the community group organiser in Orange Farm, Richard Mokolo, notes:

> The simple way of avoiding the pre-paid meters was to give people alternative water access through the defiance of pre-paid meters with reconnections. People started bypassing water pipes [...] The organisation in Orange Farm encouraged them because we had our own 'plumbers' [...] they were skilled to bypass following [the installation of] pre-paid meters, so people can access water [...] We organised it. [...] you don't need to wait for someone to give you the right [to water]; you need to take it.
>
> (Interview, 2 August 2018)

In addition to protests like organised marches and political meetings, activists and residents directly re-appropriated water themselves in Orange Farm and Phiri through reconnections. Moreover, in a confrontational battle in Phiri, lasting from 2003 to 2004, activists sabotaged the installation of meters by stopping the work and breaking pipes at night (Von Schnitzler, 2016). These actions were supported by the APF and its affiliate, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee.

However, confrontational resistance in Phiri became difficult to sustain because of arrests and a court interdict (CAWP, 2004; McKinley, 2012). Following this criminalisation, resident activists in Phiri and the APF pursued a rights-based litigation tactic. They initiated a constitutional court case against the city in 2004, assisted by two legal organisations. The South African constitution adopted by the ANC government after the liberation from apartheid in 1994 promised rights like the right to water. The newly formed CAWP coalition initiated by the APF attempted to claim this legal right, which had historical roots. As one of its former leaders explains:

> They [the people in Phiri] wanted to test the legal tactic [...] There was a lot of political capital invested in the notion that the anti-apartheid struggle was about securing certain [socio-economic] rights for people. [...] Politically, the constitution was always a reference point. [...] community organisations came out of that

tradition because they were disappointed that the ANC had shifted – had started violating their promises and our rights.

(Interview, Dale McKinley, 20 June 2018)

Similarly, an anonymised resident activist from Phiri refers to the post-apartheid promises:

According to the ANC's promises in the first election in 1994, it was going to be free basic services for all. [...] If the pre-paid meters were good, as they said, they should have also started to install them in the [wealthy] suburbs.

(Interview, 22 February 2010)

While the CAWP won the first two court cases against the pre-paid meters and to secure sufficient free basic water services from the city, it lost the final ruling in 2009.

The APF/CAWP received attention within the global water movement for its distinctive struggle against pre-payment meters and for the court case against the state by having an unusually progressive constitution (APF, 2009; Conant, 2010). One CAWP coordinator describes also how the situation in Johannesburg led it to raise a more critical perspective on the right to water within the global network:

They [rights] became the slogan internationally because in some countries the right to water was not explicit in the constitution [...]. This was different from South Africa, where it was part of the constitution [...] [and] the state argued it didn't have available resources to provide that right. So, in [international] meetings, I was saying, 'even in other countries where there is no [legal] right to water, let us not allow the fight to be just about the right to water. We need now to also encompass the experiences of South Africa, where there is a right but it is taken away by the neoliberal agenda.' [...] The South African case highlighted that.

(Interview, Virginia Setshedi, 9 July 2018)

The CAWP articulated this argument in the international network. In notes summarising the global strategy meeting held in Brussels in 2010, emphasis is given to the open discussion that took place within the RPW network. This allowed 'those who have witnessed the wholesale betrayal of their struggle for constitutional human rights to discuss with their allies the implications of this betrayal' (p. 7). Here, an increasingly cautious perspective around the right to water is related to the experiences of activists in specific places:

Even those who promote the human right to water view it sceptically [...]. Such caution toward a single approach is likely a result of the network's diversity. [...] Activists from Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay and South Africa have seen the human right to water enshrined in their constitutions – indeed have won this achievement through their struggles – only to see it broadly disregarded (and in the case of South Africa, violently abused).

(Published notes from the RPW-strategy meeting by Conant, 2010, p. 7)

5.1 | Local and global spatiotemporal dynamics

The complex-situated perspective brings into view the diverse spatiotemporal realities and articulated practices of specific movements, including the activities of local place-based water activists in Johannesburg discussed below and the different strategies of coordinating a global union considered in the next section, which focuses on contradictions.

In Johannesburg, the city government and Suez followed the global neoliberal tendency when ushering in increased cost-recovery and user payment at the urban scale. However, the cost-recovery policy was adapted to address historical conditions in South Africa. The policy was combined with specific measures for targeted social and territorial control by introducing innovative pre-paid meters developed in South Africa (in the mid-1990s). This roll-out of reinforced neoliberalised state power (Peck & Tickell, 2002) entailed distinctive discipline mechanisms that also reflected the city's post-colonial urban apartheid context, as poor racially and territorially segregated townships had a legacy of non-payment (e.g., rooted in the Soweto rates and services boycotts during the anti-apartheid struggle) (Beall et al., 2000). Resident groups and APF activists

responded with their own alternative programme by sabotaging and illegally reconnecting pre-paid meters to maintain non-commodified water services. Territorial self-organisation can involve direct actions within the community and decentralised solidarity networks (e.g., Blank, 2016). Activists went beyond the global water movement's centralised rights-based claims focused on the obligations of the state, as they are 'exercising' these rights themselves through dispersed actions. These practices can be relevant to the literature on water justice by charting alternative pathways towards realising the right to water (Sultana & Loftus, 2020), showing practical action at the margins of state power (Meehan, 2020) by grassroots resistance.

Nonetheless, the punitive response from the city and the state, particularly in Phiri, contributed to the CAWP pursuing a rights-based litigation tactic. This strategic development was also informed by activists opposing that their hard-won historic rights were being undermined. They employed a strategy of jumping scale (Smith, 1992) to explore distinct opportunities offered at the national level by the progressive post-apartheid South African constitution. The CAWP's rights tactic thus took on the particular form of a ground-breaking court case and litigation, enabled by institutional victories of past struggles. In addition, a rights-based discourse was combined with place-based scalar demands against the distinctive pre-paid meters.

Hence, the rights-based tactic followed not simply from a process of adopting a global 'up-scaling' strategy that connected different urban struggles in spite of contextual differences (Mayer, 2013; Miller & Nicholls, 2013). It was in line with conceptions of social movement practices seen as a distinct *mixture* of wider cross-cutting and more local socio-spatial relations, together representing combined articulated moments (e.g., Nicholls & Uitermark, 2017; Routledge et al., 2013; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012). The findings highlight how wide relational practices that pursue the right to water are constituted and explained by the particular spatiotemporal politics of specific places that include historical depth, which is a perspective called for in water justice literature (Clark, 2020; Sultana & Loftus, 2020).

However, the specific realities confronting the CAWP's local struggle in South Africa also *shaped* the broader global water network's politics. The experience of specific groups like APF/CAWP raised questions about the efficacy of an institutional legal rights-based strategy in the context of neoliberal statehood, which in turn cautioned against the simplified copying and repeating of movement tactics across space (Routledge, 2017). Place-based geographical experiences helped inform a critical understanding within the wider movement network, something that was facilitated by horizontal bottom-up information-sharing and knowledge exchange among participating groups. This showed how global cross-cutting and convergence spaces can also represent ongoing political processes with spatiotemporal dynamics over time (Juris, 2008; Routledge et al., 2013).

6 | CONTRADICTIONS IN THE POLITICS OF THE CAWP AND PSI

Within the diverse politics of both the CAWP/APF and PSI, different practices contributed to creating global and local strategic tensions. For example, the CAWP had close relationships with the APF, a radical political network in Johannesburg that adopted an anti-capitalist and socialist platform following internal discussions. Many of its leaders and seasoned activists were also brought up in a similar ideological politics. As one activist leader notes:

> So, let me just say we accommodated the international rights position but at the same time, within the country [South Africa], we were very clear about where the politics are. [...] we talked not just about pre-paid [meters] being wrong [...] [but also about] the government allowing companies from the outside to make more profits at the expense of their lives. [...] We felt the need to bring the two together, where the rights-based approach is actually complemented by deeper political understandings of why this right is not real and where that comes from.
>
> (Interview, Virginia Setshedi, 9 July 2018)

These anti-capitalist activists sought to connect the specific resistance against pre-payment and lack of rights to the broader political economic privileging of global corporations' interests by the state in South Africa.

Nonetheless, when forging mutual solidarity within the global movement, CAWP/APF activists concentrated mainly on building alliances around issues where groups could agree. The international rights-based approach to water was considered to have been initiated primarily by important western NGOs, and it was unrealistic to believe that these organisations could take an explicitly anti-capitalist position. This broad social critique received limited attention also as the global network's seminars and activities often revolved around a more issue-specific sectoral focus on water privatisation and possible alternatives in operating water services.

Moreover, CAWP/APF leaders observed that their movement was more radical and activist-oriented than other African groups. This was experienced when establishing a joint regional network in 2006:

> It was clear that we, the South Africans, were the most radical, the most confrontational. [...] [many of the other groups] had no mass movement, really – they were mostly NGOs and therefore dependent on and talking this similar foreign liberal rights discourse that was dominant.
>
> (Interview, Dale McKinley, 20 June 2018)

The APF/CAWP saw itself as an oppositional social movement that pursued popular protests, something it encouraged other African groups to adopt.

In contrast to the APF/CAWP activists' experiences, PSI's engagement with the human rights-based alliance at the global level meant a shift towards a more radical politics. From 1999, the federation demonstrated a strategic renewal by actively building common opposition to neoliberal water policies. However, within PSI's practices more broadly, the main approach for advancing workers' interests remained a social dialogue-based model with employers and political institutions. PSI's current deputy general secretary, who led the water campaign, recalls:

> The assumption [in PSI] has been that we can do more with the notion of win-win [...] because in the [dialogue] model everybody is a winner. [...] They [the organisational and leadership priorities] let us do this binary anti-privatisation campaign in water [...] and maybe saw the need to do something like that. But they weren't making it [such campaigns] part of their core. There was not a [sufficient] willingness, I think, to develop the analysis and the tools to fight a global machine that was aimed to destroy the public sector trade unions.
>
> (Interview, David Boys, 28 November 2016)

Overall, oppositional campaigns with activist alliances received limited attention in PSI's work, beyond efforts in the sub-sector of water and to fight free-trade agreements concerning public services in the WTO. PSI had a history of positioning its unions as social partners in decision-making within governmental and intergovernmental forums. This includes dialogues within the International Labour Organisation (ILO) around minimum labour rights and standards, representing an institutional mechanism in which union representatives meet employers and politicians from governments (Keller & Höferl, 2007). Engagements were also prioritised with institutions such as the World Bank, regional development banks, the IMF, and different parts of the UN system in order, for example, for them to adopt labour conventions or to lobby on policies related to public services delivery. From 2012, however, PSI extended its focus on forging campaigns and international coalitions to include issues like the right to health services and global tax justice (for a discussion about later alliances, see Magdahl & Jordhus-Lier, 2020).

Moreover, PSI's water campaign stands in relation to the political practices of its national affiliates and local unions. Some unions have been more aligned with PSI's approach than others as it encouraged joint struggles with civil-society groups at both the global and local level. If we return to the local politics in Johannesburg, for example, the provincial branch of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) initially became part of the APF coalition that constituted a mobilisation contesting the city's neoliberal restructuring of municipal services (Barchiesi, 2007). The SAMWU also used PSI's research unit, serving as an expert in the form of a visit to criticise the city's plans based on experiences with privatisation projects globally.

However, the local collaboration with the APF was abandoned because the union had a close relationship with the ruling ANC party and also was an official partner in its national tripartite government alliance (through the union federation 'COSATU'). According to this anonymised APF/CAWP leader, the split was a lost opportunity:

> The unions left [the APF] formally as an organisation quite early because of the pressure from the ANC and the alliance. [...] This prevented what could have been, for us, a very powerful alliance between the community and workers. [...] We never understood and have asked how a union can tell its own workers living in the same communities that are being cut off from services that it cannot work with an organisation trying to fight that. Just because politics trumps the interest of its own members. Purely because it is a sense that the APF is 'anti-government'.
>
> (Interview, 18 February 2010)

With longstanding ties to the liberation movement, the SAMWU's regional branch protected the ANC politically. Moreover, it wanted to leave the broader politics aside to concentrate more directly on workers and labour-specific issues. The union favoured the more pragmatic option of institutional negotiations over its constituency's jobs and benefits (Barchiesi, 2007). Nevertheless, the SAMWU's national office supported the community–labour alliance and even attended international events within the global water movement with PSI and the APF/CAWP (APF, 2009).

6.1 | Spatial differentiation and dilemmas in building alliances

While situated studies develop insights into specific groups' diverse relationships and strategies, an enhanced perspective may also consider ongoing spatial contradictions emerging from the practice of heterogeneous agency. In the politics of the APF/CAWP and PSI, different spatial practices counteracted one another, revealing global and local political dilemmas in the building of broad alliances.

The APF/CAWP's global engagement was shaped by cross-cutting movement connections. This involvement in the transnational movement based on a rights discourse simultaneously limited the anti-capitalist message related to their local network. The pursuit of common ground within wider networks can cause spatial tensions with more place-based movement networks and ideological beliefs (Routledge et al., 2013). While not a movement 'trapped' in place (e.g., Halvorsen, 2017), the CAWP's agency was limited through a scalar political differentiation whereby socialist critique was a rather militant particularistic identity attached to specific places and groups – as opposed to its ability to reach across space/scales (cf. Harvey, 1996).

Although both the CAWP and PSI supported a rights-based approach, the broad movement against neoliberal water services encompassed quite contrasting political dynamics. For CAWP/APF activists, this meant a less radical and more confined political agenda driven particularly by NGOs, and related to NGOisation among social movements (Mayer, 2013). Conversely, from PSI's position, aligning with the global water movement represented a shift towards a more radical and broader political agenda. Such oppositional alliances constituted a radical political unionism (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012) that diversified its labour internationalism and provided strategic renewal.

Much like the APF/CAWP's complex-situated politics, the different combined strategies of PSI caused tensions. PSI was rooted in a labour tradition, which meant that an orientation towards industrial relations remained dominant through political-institutional engagements with the ILO and other multilateral institutions. These political networks at the global scale, reflecting a social dialogue ideology, were preoccupied with workplace rights and public service policies. This orientation contributed to restrict the building of wider campaigns and external movement networks opposing neoliberal policies (Lambert, 2002), which was not increasingly scaled up across PSI's strategy until 2012.

There were also diverging priorities among unions. While PSI's glocal water struggle relied on local alliances against neoliberal reforms on the ground, the politics in Johannesburg drove SAMWU to limit its solidarity to workplace issues. This decision was tied to its place-based history and institutionalised relationships through political unionism with parties in government (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012). Such practices construct strategic contradictions around whether unions are more effective in simply managing their members' core interests in the workplace or need to contest broader social policies (Barchiesi, 2007). Hence, the scalar *mismatch* – with incompatibilities between local and global strategies (Herod, 2003; Jones & Jessop, 2010) – made it more difficult for the APF/CAWP to form alliances with labour in Johannesburg.

7 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have paid attention to multiple ways of studying – and thereby understanding – the spatialities of social movements, as expressed through local and global struggles contesting neoliberal water services. It outlined three analytical approaches oriented towards cross-cutting, complex-situated, and contradictory spatialities. The findings emphasise different contrasting epistemologies in the use of spatial concepts, which in turn can invite critical engagements, informing new studies and future research questions.

First, the findings encourage different forms of research agenda. A broader analytical repertoire opens up several agendas, whether these direct specific attention towards wide theoretical observations (Mayer, 2013), provide in-depth movement studies (Blank, 2016), or highlight particular studies of movements' contradictions (Halvorsen, 2017). Here, researchers may orientate their studies more towards some types of contribution than others. Taylor (2016)

notes also that researchers can face methodological trade-offs between pursuing intensive 'depth' and extensive 'breadth' in designing case study research within geography. While avoiding overly biased ontological/epistemological positions (Miller, 2013), we can utilise analytical agendas with distinctive qualities to better understand social movement politics.

Second, the use of multiple approaches enables increasingly relational perspectives. The empirical study demonstrated how these approaches informed different lenses through which to examine the spatial politics of mobilisation. These were complementary but also contrasting in character. Together, the lenses can explore agency and political relationships at different analytical scales, as well as the contractions they produce. Furthermore, what Hart (2018) has referred to as a dialectical 'relational comparison' may be used to analyse both interconnections and specificities within struggles in different places (e.g., for illustrations of translocal or transnational comparisons see also Sultana & Loftus, 2020; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012).

The study used multiple approaches to describe *spatiotemporal* dialectics in the interaction(s) between global and local urban resistance to neoliberalisation (Mayer & Boudreau, 2012) in relation to the right to water services (Sultana, 2018; Sultana & Loftus, 2020). This global rights struggle can extend contemporary perspectives on mobilisation by traversing a wide cross-cutting social movement landscape, from urban movements to transnational networks including global unions (Blank, 2016; Mayer, 2013; Routledge & Cumbers, 2009). However, zooming in on the complex-situated politics in Johannesburg revealed constitutive powers in the articulation of the rights-based strategy according to the specific spatiotemporal and post-colonial context. The local realities also contributed to (re)shaping the global cross-cutting water movement's understanding over time through a 'feedback' process that addressed emerging strategic spatial tensions. A further critical reading uncovered still ongoing spatial contradictions that caused relevant limitations in alliance-building around public services tied to specific place-based and worker politics.

More broadly, the proposed concepts can be employed in different ways, such as to understand the spatial relationships of the state as well as contentious politics within and across space. These concepts can serve to approach the political conjunctures of specific movements, whether it is the struggles of community groups and/or wide mobilisations, along with their ongoing strategic tensions. Perhaps more importantly, the pursuit of spatial and critical relational conceptions may help to provide new understandings of the possibilities for social change in nuanced ways (see also Hart, 2018, p. 375).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The sharing of data supporting the findings of this study may be restricted due to privacy or ethical considerations.

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