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Myth, memory, and political settlements in the city: compounded disadvantage and a path for plausible futures

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CONCLUSION:

THE ARCHITECTURE OF
DISADVANTAGE AND THE
POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY



CHAPTER

09

9. Conclusion: The Architecture of Disadvantage and the Politics of Possibility

This thesis has interrogated how political settlements and governance structures have historically produced and sustained compounded *disadvantage*³⁰⁸ in Bulawayo, and how this *disadvantage* is remembered, contested, and reimagined. It has argued that *disadvantage* is not merely a condition of economic decline or regional neglect, but an architecture: a historically embedded, symbolically charged, and experientially lived system of marginalisation. Notably, within this architecture, spaces of creativity, refusal, and imagination persist. This is what this study terms the politics of possibility.

The methodological design of this study was deliberately layered, combining process-tracing, qualitative interpretivism, and futures methodologies to interrogate the historical, lived, and imagined dimensions of *disadvantage* in Bulawayo. At its core, the research employed a case-centric process-tracing approach (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Mahoney, 2012; D. Collier, 2011) to uncover the causal mechanisms through which political settlements and governance structures have historically produced and sustained exclusion. This historical tracing was complemented by qualitative and participatory methods that foregrounded citizen experience, and by futures methodologies that extended the analysis toward reimagination and transformation. Together, these approaches formed a triangulated and iterative methodological architecture that mirrors the study's movement from diagnosis to possibility. Triangulation operated across methodological, data, and theoretical levels through: interviews, focus groups, archival and policy analysis, and futures tools such as Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) and the Futures Triangle (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004, 2008, 2023), which were combined to connect the historical, lived, and imaginative dimensions of Bulawayo's disadvantage. This multi-level triangulation not only grounded the study in empirical depth, but also allowed for a systematic movement from diagnosis to transformation by showing how structural, symbolic, and affective processes intersect across time. It also informed each phase of inquiry. The first analytical strand, examining the structural and historical production of disadvantage (as developed in Chapters 1.1, 4. 5 and 6), relied on process-tracing and archival analysis to identify causal mechanisms through elite bargaining, militarised governance, and clientelism, that underpinned Bulawayo's marginalisation. The second strand (seen in Chapters 5 and 6), exploring how disadvantage is negotiated and resisted in everyday life, drew on focus group discussions, individual interviews, and reflexive fieldwork, revealing how survival practices such as *ukubamba zonke* and informal urban governance embody dignity within constraint. The third strand (Chapter 7), interrogating silence, memory, and myth, employed life-history interviewing and discourse analysis, unpacking how repression, denial, and collective remembrance operate as both tools of subjugation and strategies of resilience.

The study began by asking the question: *How have political settlements and governance structures historically produced and compounded disadvantage in post-1980 Bulawayo, and how*

³⁰⁸ Ibid. footnotes 3 & 16

is this disadvantage cyclically remembered, contested, and reimagined? Through examining the structural underpinnings of *disadvantage*, it showed how ZANU-PF's post-independence settlements institutionalised exclusion through elite bargaining, militarised governance, and clientelism. This architecture has not only shaped material deprivation but has also produced a symbolic geography where Bulawayo is framed as rebellious, threatening, and undeserving of equitable development. Addressing the question: *In what ways have ZANU-PF's post-independence political settlements shaped the socio-political and economic marginalisation of Bulawayo?* (Chapters 2 and 5), revealed that marginalisation was deliberately manufactured rather than incidental, embedding *disadvantage* into Zimbabwe's political economy.

Foregrounding the lived experience of governance, the thesis then explored how citizens and local councillors navigate and resist *disadvantage* in contexts of economic insecurity and informalisation. Drawing on empirical material analysed in Chapter 6, everyday practices of survival captured in the idiom of *ukubamba zonke*, demonstrated the negotiation of dignity within constraint, where informal economies and tacit forms of citizenship contest the failures of formal governance. This answered the question: *How do Bulawayo's urban residents and local officials articulate, navigate, and resist urban economic (in)security in the context of informalisation and weakened local governance?* (Chapter 5, showing how *disadvantage* is actively negotiated rather than passively endured.

The questions: *What forms of silence, memory, and myth have emerged as tools of both repression and resilience in Bulawayo's inhabitants' pursuit of peace?*, as well as: *How does Bulawayo's mythicised status as a 'dissident city' intersect with everyday practices of citizenship, survival, and affective agency?* (addressed in Chapter 5 and 7), extended the analysis to the symbolic and affective terrain: the ways in which silence, memory, and myth both repress and preserve trauma. Here, the ghosts of Gukurahundi and the enduring myth of Bulawayo as a "dissident city" emerged as central to understanding how *disadvantage* is narrated and embodied. Silences were revealed as strategic – sometimes imposed, sometimes chosen – while myth became both a weapon of exclusion and a vessel of counter-memory. In this sense, as argued in Chapter 7, *disadvantage* is also affective, shaping how citizenship futures are felt, denied, and reclaimed.

The question: *How can participatory, justice-oriented urban governance challenge narrow political settlements and open pathways for inclusive development in Bulawayo?* (developed in Chapters 6, turned toward normative concerns, considering what forms of governance might enable more inclusive urban futures. The thesis argued that transcending *disadvantage* requires bureaucratic transformation, visible in the reconfiguration of settlements, acknowledgement of past violence, and genuine devolution of power. Without reckoning with history, as seen in Chapters 4 and 7, institutional reforms will remain superficial.

Finally, the question: *What futures are both plausible and actionable for Bulawayo when historic grievances, current governance failures, and grassroots resilience are brought into dialogue?*, (addressed in Chapter 8) engaged a futures lens, probing how alternative trajectories might be imagined. Using the Futures Triangle to balance the weight of history, the push of the present, and the pull of the future, and deploying Causal Layered Analysis to interrogate litany, systemic causes, worldviews, and myths (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004, 2008, 2023), the study located possibility within constraint. The chapter found that futures are most plausibly and meaningfully

articulated when grassroots resilience, historical grievance, and civic imagination are brought into dialogue. It is in this intersection that the politics of possibility becomes visible.

Reflecting on the Architecture of *Disadvantage*

Post-independence Bulawayo's journey from an industrial powerhouse to a marginalised city reflects the deeply intertwined legacies of colonialism, governance practices, and socio-political dynamics in Zimbabwe. This thesis interrogated the concept of *disadvantage* not merely as a static condition but as a dynamic process which is rooted in historical violence, institutional path dependency, and discursive framing. As signalled in the introduction, the compounding effect is what distinguishes Bulawayo's *disadvantage* from that of other Zimbabwean cities facing similar informalisation and governance strain. Harare's residents, for instance, negotiate comparable political and regulatory friction, but without the added weight of a mythicised 'dissident' identity, an unresolved Gukurahundi memory, nor the ethno-linguistic tensions this thesis traces in Bulawayo's political economy and its settlements. It is the historical and symbolic layer that renders Bulawayo's *disadvantage* architectural rather than incidental. By anchoring the analysis within the theoretical framework of political settlements, particularly Khan's (2010, 2018) typology of narrow versus broad settlements, the thesis transcends simplistic attributions of urban decline to mismanagement or modernisation failure. Instead, it demonstrates that compounded *disadvantage* in Bulawayo is structurally embedded in Zimbabwe's elite bargaining processes, clientelist networks, and militarised governance.

Political settlements theory, introduced in Chapter 2 and sustained through Chapters 5-8, provided the structural spine of the thesis. Its explanatory power lay in linking elite accumulation, rent-seeking, and exclusionary governance directly to the lived realities of urban citizens. Chapter 6 showed how ZANU-PF's narrow settlements manipulate informal economies not merely for subsistence but as instruments of elite survival. The weakening of Bulawayo's local governance is thus not a failure of capacity, but a political strategy grounded in the logic of exclusionary settlements. This reading challenged dominant development discourses that often treat local governance deficits as technical problems to be solved through capacity building, rather than as outcomes of deliberate political strategy.

The empirical findings highlighted the weight of colonial legacies in shaping Bulawayo's socio-economic decline. From its inception as a regional industrial hub, the city's fortunes were eroded by policies that prioritised centralisation and rent-seeking. The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme of the 1990s catalysed deindustrialisation, while later policies such as the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act of 2007 deterred investment and deepened economic malaise. Despite policy efforts such as the Social Dimensions of Adjustment Programme (1990-1994), implementation failures and disconnects from local realities rendered interventions largely ineffective. This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding the present political economy of abandonment, where state withdrawal is neither neutral nor apolitical, but part of Bulawayo's long-standing trajectory of strategic neglect.

Crucially, the thesis avoids reducing Bulawayo's story to structure alone. It deploys a constellation of concepts – silence, denial, myth, trauma, militarisation, and *ukubamba zonke* – to animate the affective, symbolic, and embodied dimensions of urban life. These concepts are not

appended to the empirical material, but tightly interwoven into the analytical scaffolding of each chapter. They allow for a reading of the city that is not only institutionally informed, but also attuned to the textures of everyday life – the whispered conversations, the half-told stories, and the gestures of endurance that define marginal urban existence. For example, Chapter 7 reveals how the *uneasy peace* in post-1980 Bulawayo was not a clean break from settler colonial urbanism but a reconfiguration of its racialised and militarised logics. Here, the ZANU-PF state's monopoly on memory and surveillance imposed a fragile, conditional peace, yet residents sustained alternative imaginaries through remembrance, refusal, and mourning.

Militarisation, first introduced in Chapter 3 and traced historically in Chapter 4, has emerged as a central motif. It is shown to underpin not only the violent legacies of the 1983-1987 Gukurahundi Massacres but also the everyday governance structures that suppress dissent and centralise authority even in 2025. Militarisation is revealed not as a discrete historical event, but as a political grammar that persists in shaping spatial order, economic control, and psychological repression. In Chapter 7, the production of *uneasy peace* rests on this militarised logic, where silence and surveillance supplant justice and reconciliation.

Silence, denial, and myth function as affective extensions of political control. Chapter 7 theorised how collective memory is reshaped, grievances muted, and truth repressed through state-sponsored denial and cultural myth-making. The mythicisation of Bulawayo as a “dissident city”, introduced in Chapter 3 and threaded through subsequent chapters, reinforces its exclusion while simultaneously cultivating a shared urban identity. This ambivalence is handled with nuance, revealing how myth can both justify repression and sustain communal resilience. The dual function of myth – as both an instrument of marginalisation and a source of symbolic power – highlights the complexity of collective identity formation in the shadow of trauma.

Intergenerational, structural, and historical trauma were embedded in Chapters 5-7 to amplify the collective condition. They emerge through narratives of survival, the politics of memory, and the strategic quietude of citizens navigating state suspicion. The thesis reads the city not simply as a space of suffering, but as an archive of affective endurance. The concept of silence, in particular, is employed not only analytically but also methodologically, shaping how the researcher engages with participants and interprets what is left unsaid. In this way, silence becomes both a research finding and a methodological ethic: for participants, it reflects the burden of telling and the weight of unspeakable histories; for the researcher, it signals the limits of representation and the responsibility to respect what remains unsaid.

Chapter 6 introduced the BCC's voice and their lament of *siyabancenga* to describe the precarious negotiations between citizens and local authorities in the absence of rights-based governance. Here, Bulawayo's residents operate within a system of uncertain reciprocity, where formal entitlements give way to moral appeals, delayed action, and informal supplication. This chapter illustrated that economic (in)security is not merely a condition of poverty but a deeper political problem: one where the retreat of the state forces citizens into performances of vulnerability that displace accountability and erode democratic structures. This reading situates informal practices not as spontaneous responses to crisis but as deeply political acts shaped by asymmetries of power and legitimacy.

These dynamics culminated in the application of futures methodologies of Chapter 8, where the thesis transitioned from examination to imagination. The Futures Triangle and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) expand the utility of political settlements theory, synthesising structural, affective, and symbolic insights. Silence, myth, and trauma become integral to CLA's deeper layers of worldview and metaphor, while *ukubamba zonke* and elite bargaining shape the weight of history and the push of the present. The pull of the future as framed through the ideation of "Bulawayo 2.0", is not a technocratic vision, but a decolonial imaginary rooted in memory, resilience, and collective aspiration.

Importantly, these methodologies do not displace the thesis' core analytical commitments but enhance them. They foreground the political agency of youth, women, and marginalised actors, whose narratives challenge nationalist historiographies and reclaim futurity as a space of struggle and innovation. The city then becomes a crucible of future-making, where waiting, nostalgia, and disidentification do not signal resignation, but radical possibility. These temporal strategies complicate linear narratives of decline and development, instead opening space for alternative futures grounded in situated knowledge and collective memory.

The recommendations that emerge emphasise structural reform, decentralisation, and inclusive governance. Yet they also insist on the need to reckon with history, not just in technocratic terms, but through participatory processes that centre community narratives and foster trust. Supporting informal economies, investing in human capital, and reconfiguring the distribution of resources are all vital, but must be situated within Bulawayo's unique socio-political terrain. Policy must be embedded in the lived realities of those it purports to serve, and grounded in a historical awareness of how those realities came to be.

In drawing these threads together, this thesis offers more than a historical account or political commentary. It is a reclamation of narrative, agency, and urban possibility. By tracing how Bulawayo's marginalisation has been structurally produced, symbolically reinforced, and affectively lived, the study situates the city not as a peripheral casualty of national politics, but as a central site through which to understand the mechanics of exclusion and the contours of resistance. The integration of political settlements theory with concepts of trauma, silence, myth, and *ukubamba zonke* has enabled a multi-scalar reading of *disadvantage* – one that accounts for both elite-driven structures and everyday experiences of governance. Yet, it is in its turn to futures thinking that the thesis most forcefully disrupts the inevitability of decline. In imagining "Bulawayo 2.0", not as utopia but as a grounded and historically conscious vision, this work insists that transformation is both necessary and possible. It stands not as a utopian fantasy, but as an invitation to policymakers, scholars, and residents alike, to build a city that honours its past while daring to imagine its future anew. If the city has long been rendered silent by design, then this thesis is a deliberate act of amplification by centring those voices, memories, and aspirations that are too often excluded from formal accounts of development. In doing so, it offers a framework not only for understanding urban marginality, but for collectively imagining and enacting its undoing.

Contributions and Possibilities

By weaving history, governance, memory, and futures thinking together, this thesis makes three overarching contributions. First, it conceptualises *disadvantage* as an architecture that is structural, symbolic, and experiential. Second, it demonstrates how silence, myth, and everyday practice sustain *disadvantage* while also enabling forms of agency, resilience, and reimagination. Third, it advances a futures-oriented approach to urban political economy, showing how even historically marginalised cities can be theorised through their capacity to generate critical, justice-oriented alternatives. The archetypes proposed here offer a typological and narrative lens for diagnosing Bulawayo's present condition, yet they also highlight that possibility resides in unexpected spaces: in silence, in memory, in informality, in imagination. The politics of possibility emerges precisely within the cracks of *disadvantage*, where citizens resist, and re-narrate and reimagine their city.

To reiterate, the thesis affirms that Bulawayo is not merely a victim of historical and structural neglect. It is also a city of endurance, of strategic survival, and of visionary dreaming. The architecture of *disadvantage* remains deeply entrenched, but within it lie seeds of transformation. Whether these seeds can take root depends not only on the state's willingness to reckon with its past and restructure its governance, but also on the continued creativity, resilience, and critical imagination of Bulawayo's people.

Closing remarks

This study ultimately illuminates that the enduring *disadvantage* of cities like Bulawayo is neither accidental nor incidental; it is a product of deliberate political design, sustained through both overt and covert mechanisms of exclusion. What emerges across the chapters is not merely an account of decline, but a nuanced narrative that excavates the structural, symbolic, and affective architectures of *disadvantage*. Yet this thesis does not stop at diagnosis. It insists that visioning is a political act, and that futures thinking, when grounded in local epistemologies, can serve as a generative tool for reimagining the city otherwise. Urban *disadvantage* in Bulawayo, then, is not simply a condition to be alleviated but a process to be understood, contested, and transformed. This thesis contributes to that project by centring citizen voices, thoughtfully deploying theory, and crafting an analysis that is both historically literate and politically urgent.