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Introduction: Vigilance and the pursuit of better lives: Dilemmas and politics of upward mobility

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Abstract

In this introduction, we propose that people pursuing upward social mobility in uncertain and often adverse contexts must be watchful as a key condition of "moving up." We develop a conceptual framework that connects social mobility with vigilance—not in the narrow sense of state-driven surveillance, but as a broader constellation of watchfulness that aligns personal attentiveness with goals and responsibilities extending beyond individual advancement. In this sense, vigilance captures how aspiring individuals and groups monitor opportunities, manage risks, and navigate tensions in their pursuit of better lives. We examine social mobility through three key sites where vigilance and upward advancement intersect: education, family, and migration. Using vigilance as a conceptual lens allows us to illuminate the multifaceted dilemmas actors face as they strive for social advancement in contexts where belonging is contested, economic opportunities are constrained, and oppressive regimes persist.

Keywords

social mobility, watchfulness, vigilance, social stratification, education, migration, family

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Theorizing vigilance and social mobility

Anthropologists have approached social mobility by examining how people make sense of and navigate their everyday lives through social and cultural practices, values, and meanings—across a wide range of social and geographical settings (cf. Vaid, 2021). This sets the field apart from other disciplines, which seek to measure social mobility through quantitative methods and conduct statistical analyses primarily in Western contexts (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Breiger, 1990; Goldthorpe, 1980; Lipset and Bendix, 1959; Schneider et al., 2022). Furthermore, anthropology contributes to a better understanding of social mobility in what are termed developing countries—a line of work that has, according to Iversen, Krishan and Sen, not yet garnered sufficient attention (Iversen et al., 2021a). This gap is particularly relevant as these contexts are often shaped by challenging conditions such as recurrent crises and heightened uncertainty.

In this Special Issue, we take up this call and delve further into how people aspire to and practice upward social mobility in uncertain contexts. We explore how social mobility is pursued in highly competitive and demanding environments, where the risks of poverty, economic hardship, and unpredictable future developments remain ever-present. Specifically, we ask how individuals navigate and respond to their socio-economic environments, which may react in ambiguous ways to such aspirations. Drawing on ethnographic studies from Burkina Faso, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Singapore, Tunisia and the USA, we propose an innovative framework that identifies heightened watchfulness toward the dilemmas of social ascent as a key aspect of upward mobility—whether achieved through education, migration or economic accumulation. These forms of attention and watchfulness equally enable aspirants to become aware of emerging opportunities and possibilities.

In this vein, we analyze social mobility through the lens of vigilance, arguing that the pursuit of better lives requires intensified alertness. We contend that people in a wide variety of settings must carefully monitor and attend to their social environments, as well as to their own conduct and attitudes. Thus, we show ethnographically how various forms of attentiveness are mobilized in processes of social mobility both for individuals and larger groups—to overcome barriers, develop skills, enhance opportunities, identify prospects, and seize advantageous moments. Furthermore, pathways toward social mobility can be constrained by structural inequality and disparities. Given these challenges, individuals must remain attentive to the dynamics of political, social, cultural, economic, and technological contexts, and be prepared for shifting life circumstances and unforeseen events. This watchfulness includes both recognizing opportunities to stabilize or improve their own situation, while also identifying obstacles that might impede advancement.

Upward mobility may involve not only structural barriers but also a distinct range of intersubjective dilemmas and personal conflicts. Aspiring individuals must skillfully navigate communal tensions, allegations of disloyalty, and expectations of support from kin and peers. At the same time, they also face skepticism, pressure to assimilate, and heightened scrutiny from the social groups they seek to join. Social mobility involves a shift in status that can—and often does—strain existing relationships while simultaneously exposing individuals to new forms of social pressure (cf. Dickey, 2012; Liechty, 2003; Naudet, 2018; Van Wessel, 2004).

As a result, we contend that individuals must continuously navigate how to present themselves, whom to associate with, and how to position themselves within their socio-economic environments. Dilemmas and ambivalences arise around belonging, adaptation, and assimilation, as well as around both new and longstanding social ties, requiring heightened attentiveness from those pursuing social mobility. This vigilant self-formation unfolds amidst the tensions between aspiration and constraint—between a yearning for social mobility and the structural forces that define its possibilities—including state policies, economic conditions, and political change. It foregrounds vigilance as a crucial social practice in highly ambivalent situations—a dimension that, to date, has been largely overlooked in the study of social mobility.

We explore the phenomena of awareness, attention, and watchfulness through the lens of vigilance. Unlike the notion of surveillance—epitomized in the model of the panopticon (Foucault)—vigilance, as we theorize it, is based on the observation that:

> […] fundamental services in society like security, the rule of law, and healthcare have relied in the past and still today rely at least partially on observations made and communicated by regular citizens who neither observe 'from above' nor are representatives of any particular institution (Brendecke and Molino, 2018: 11).

This perspective underscores that human attention—when purposefully directed and appropriately channeled—can serve broader societal needs (Brendecke and Molino, 2018: 12).

Vigilance, in this sense, is understood as:

> […] a form of individual watchfulness, […] exercised by non-state actors, specifically ordinary individual citizens, whose observation is linked to a specific goal, beyond an individual task (Dürr et al., 2023: 12).

Vigilance plays a key role in responding to the "advent of potential threats," when it is "required from the community of citizens to thwart the dangers that threaten their lives and ways of being" (Ivasiuc et al., 2022: 57). Accordingly, it tends to emerge in situations of imminent or perceived threat, producing vigilant subjects who "are activated as security 'stakeholders' and are encouraged to monitor themselves, their communities, and others" (Emerson, 2019: 286).

In this context, vigilance involves recognizing or perceiving signals and clues that often point to specific dangers needing to be averted. The identification of potential threats and "suspicious subjects" indicates that attention may also be directed toward specific groups. Notably, however, these groups and individuals—aware of being under observation—respond with heightened watchfulness of their own. Ivasiuc, Dürr, and Whittaker note that there exist also "forms of counter-vigilance, or ways in which those who are watched in turn mobilize alertness for protective goals" (Ivasiuc et al., 2022: 66). They argue that vigilance can be understood as "the faculty of being attuned to one's social position in the world and to how that position may put one at risk, then becomes a coping strategy" (Ivasiuc et al., 2022: 66).

It is crucial to recognize that the concrete meaning of "vigilance" must be situated within its specific context and may manifest in a variety of ways. For instance, it may be

linked to responsibility assigned to specific individuals (cf. Gadebusch Bondio et al., 2023); it may follow its own temporalities, as the intensity of vigilant practices can vary (cf. Brendecke and Reichlin, 2022); and its precise meaning is contingent on linguistic and semiotic dimensions (cf. Butz et al., 2023). Vigilance may also be mobilized through pleas and appeals—that is, through calls to action for a specific cause (cf. Gadebusch Bondio and Förg, 2023: 79 f.; Lepsius, 2023). Furthermore, it is shaped by diverse materialities, technologies, and infrastructures (Aradau et al., 2014). This convergence of various dimensions and contexts gives rise to distinct practices and forms of vigilance, which we trace and analyze through contrasting ethnographic case studies herein presented.

The comparative perspective employed throughout this Special Issue enables us to generate insights that extend beyond the scope of individual case studies. As our ethnographic examples illustrate, attention is not mobilized solely to avert potential threats or protect against perceived dangers. Rather, it becomes evident that vigilance is also key to navigating situations of heightened uncertainty (cf. Whittaker et al., 2023: 8), and to identifying opportunities, developing potential, and initiating transformation. Vigilance, in this sense, emerges as an essential element of forward thinking—of striving for better lives and actively shaping the future (cf. Murray, 2024a, 2024b: 7).

Building on the argument that vigilance refers to individual attention aligned with supra-individual goals, the case studies presented in this Special Issue underscore that social ascent can constitute such a goal—one that extends far beyond individual aspirations. We show that the vigilance required to climb the social ladder is not solely directed toward personal advancement but is also deeply embedded within broader social expectations and dynamics. While social mobility is shaped by structural barriers and unequal distribution of opportunities, it can also be a collective endeavor involving various actors who aim to promote—or hinder—the social advancement of specific individuals, larger groups, or even entire segments of society.

This raises a set of guiding questions: What role does individual alertness play in efforts to "move up"? What, exactly, are people watchful about—and why? Which imaginaries of opponents fuel this vigilance, and what problems arise from them? To what extent do social conditions—such as family background or class and institutional contexts such as educational systems or state initiatives—structure how individuals pursue better lives with a watchful eye? Finally, how do practices of vigilance enable, complicate, "do" and "undo" personal success in ambivalent or even hostile environments?

Through their specific foci, the individual contributions to this Special Issue engage with key areas of research on social mobility. Over the following sections, we outline the overarching orientations and foundational considerations that define these areas, while also highlighting the unique anthropological contributions and debates within them. This overview provides the basis for our own engagement with these domains—building conceptual bridges, drawing on existing arguments, and, at times, even extending or challenging established ideas and frameworks.

At the same time, our review of current scholarship aims to trace the connections between these key areas and the concept of vigilance. Anthropology has contributed to the study of social mobility by offering insights and empirically grounded analyses in key research fields that were originally shaped, and continue to be dominated, by other disciplines, most notably sociology. These areas—education, family, and migration—are

central to the everyday negotiation, imagination and contestation of social mobility. Underlying all of them is the persistent issue of social stratification, which not only shapes the study of mobility but also highlights the tensions between aspiration, inequality, and the vigilant practices that sustain or challenge these divides.

Social stratification

Any meaningful discussion of social mobility—and of the permeability of social hierarchies—must begin with an acknowledgement of social stratification: the organization of societies into hierarchically arranged groups with unequal access to resources such as income, education, power, prestige, or social recognition. Social mobility refers to the ability of individuals to change positions within a social stratification system. While social stratification is foundational to the production and reproduction of social inequalities, Nico notes that the relationship between social mobility and social inequality only emerged as a central concern in scholarly debates from the 1990s onward (2021: 472). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that early sociological interest in social mobility was already closely tied to questions of socioeconomic class and, by extension, concerns with social inequality (Blau, 1956, 1957; Nisbet, 1959; Sorokin, 1927, 1959; Young, 1959).

While social class has also played a key role in anthropological research and theorizing, the discipline—through its broader engagement with diverse geographical regions and heterogeneous societies—has often emphasized other social categories and their intersections, which are equally critical for understanding social stratification. Ethnic affiliation, race, and caste have been identified both as barriers or enablers when it comes to social advancement (Faming, 2019; Geschwender and Guppy, 1995; Jeffrey and Young, 2012; Levesque and Niazi, 2023; Rajagopal, 1990; Slootman, 2018; Viveros Vigoya, 2015).

Anthropological research has also foregrounded gender and its relationship to upward mobility (Abelmann, 1997; Näre and Akhtar, 2014), although some scholars note a persistent imbalance in the literature—notably the limited attention to female actors' experiences of social mobility in what are termed developing countries (Iversen et al., 2021b: 5). The barriers to mobility resulting from the marginalization along these social lines are often framed through the lens of inequality, yet anthropological studies also probe how such inequalities can be challenged or transformed in practice.

Researchers have, however, criticized this focus on experiences of marginalization as presenting an overly lopsided view of social mobility. In response, growing attention has been directed toward the middle classes, privilege, and the significance of social class across geographical boundaries (cf. Robertson and Robert, 2022: 1). Similarly, anthropology has experienced a shift toward the study of the middle classes and elites—groups capable of mobilizing networks and maintaining their grip on socioeconomic and political power (Donner, 2008, 2017; Frykman and Löfgren, 1987; Kroeker et al., 2018; Pellegrini Calderón, 2016; Shakow, 2014; Sumich, 2018).

In line with sociological studies, recent anthropological research has examined how class privileges are reproduced and transformed, particularly in the context of migration (Alloul, 2021). Other studies focus on the experiences of upwardly mobile individuals,

noting how they often feel pressured to meet community expectations and the demands of consumer culture (Liechty, 2003; Van Wessel, 2004). These accounts also trace the emotional and relational costs of upward social mobility, underscoring how aspirants may suffer from anxiety (Dickey, 2012), encounter tensions within their class of origin or new social circles (Naudet, 2018), and grapple with the ambiguous and often challenging question of where—and whether—they belong.

In this Special Issue, we argue that becoming aware of one's position within social stratification—and identifying opportunities to change it—requires attentiveness. Vigilance thus both precedes and accompanies processes of social mobility. At the same time, we emphasize the tensions and dilemmas faced by individuals moving upward in the social hierarchy—dynamics often marked by heightened scrutiny. Using vigilance as a conceptual lens enables us to shed light on the multifaceted dilemmas actors face in their pursuit of social advancement within contexts where belonging is contested, economic opportunities are limited, and oppressive regimes persist. As noted earlier, the contributions presented here examine social mobility through three key sites where vigilance and upward advancement intersect: education, family, and migration.

Education

Given that education is widely regarded as one of the most crucial factors influencing an individual's capacity to improve or alter their social position, research on social mobility has developed a strong focus on understanding how educational systems are organized, what structural barriers exist for specific population groups, and how access to education can be improved in order to overcome educational inequalities (Breen and Jonsson, 2005; Saar, 2010). In examining the nexus of social mobility and education, anthropological studies have used qualitative methods to document experiences within educational systems, often highlighting barriers to access (Froerer, 2012; Froerer and Portisch, 2012; Jayadeva, 2019; Naji, 2012; Ortner, 2006; Rutz, 2009; Shaw and Coleman, 2000; Valentin, 2012). Another line of inquiry has focused on educational programs targeting ethnic minorities (Faming, 2019; Froerer, 2012) who often face distinct challenges to upward social mobility. Related studies emphasize the pursuit of professionalism as an important prerequisite for social mobility (Freeman, 2000; Hoffman, 2010; Hull, 2017; Ipek, 2022). Most of these contributions demonstrate that the belief in formal education as the requisite path toward upward social mobility remains a persuasive and enduring narrative, extending beyond educational institutions. A growing body of research, however, exposes the limits of this narrative—untenable promises that better education automatically translates into enhanced economic or social status. Drawing on examples from regions with high levels of unemployed graduates, these studies critically interrogate the widespread belief that educational attainment inevitably leads to upward social mobility (Bartlett et al., 2018; Birzle and Ludwig, 2015; Jeffrey, 2010; Schielke, 2012).

Overall, we are convinced that vigilance plays a continuous role in developing awareness of educational opportunities, in weighing the possibilities and barriers inherent in both formal and informal education, and throughout the process of knowledge acquisition within educational systems. Accordingly, we believe that research on the nexus between education and social mobility would benefit significantly from a closer focus on

these dynamics. Our contributions reveal multiple dimensions of vigilance, showing that individuals striving for upward mobility are not only attentive and self-monitoring but also acutely aware of being observed—scrutiny is exercised not only by institutional actors but also by peers and family members.

Family

Scholarly interest in familial contexts stems from the fact that social mobility is frequently assessed through intergenerational comparisons—specifically, by examining how children's life trajectories diverge from or align with those of their parents (cf. Heath and Li, 2024: 31f.). Beyond this, the emphasis on the family reflects the assumption that parental background and the home environment shape children's initial life chances. This is evident in the substantial growth of research on concepts such as the "reproduction," "transmission," and "persistence" of social status across generations (DiPrete and Eirich, 2006; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2002; Fergusson et al., 2008). Furthermore, the family plays a key role in mobility not only as a site of socialization but also as a mechanism through which social positions are consolidated or transformed—for example, through marriage and family formation. These multifaceted dimensions have also been extensively explored in historical scholarship (Breschi et al., 2010; Campbell and Lee, 2008; Dribe et al., 2019; Padgett, 2010).

Anthropologists have built on sociological theories that identify family and kin as salient determinants of intergenerational mobility (Aiken and Goldberg, 1969; Becker and Tomes, 1986; Solon, 2004). In this vein, studies have shown that the family often serves as the starting point for the development of upward aspirations, while simultaneously providing economic, social, and cultural capital needed to realize these opportunities (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). Scholars have investigated how class aspirations are reproduced within families (Donner, 2017; Portisch, 2012; Sancho, 2015), and how children are regarded as real "assets" for upward mobility and are therefore "managed" accordingly (Katz, 2012). These studies also show how the potential for investments in the future of one's children shapes marital strategies, values, expectations, and intergenerational relationships (Donner, 2008; Freeman, 2014). Kinship and family are central concerns in anthropology—not least because in many societies, marriage is a key route toward social mobility. Reflecting this, a range of emerging studies has explored these phenomena and tracked how marriage patterns and strategies have evolved over time (Boëtsch, 1996; Lamb, 2018; Osella and Osella, 2000; Pauli and Van Dijk, 2016).

All these studies reveal the degree of care, strategic thinking, and consideration with which individuals engage and monitor the social mobility of their close social circles—particularly their children's. In other words, directed attention invariably plays a role in managing upward mobility potential. We argue that vigilance in these relational dynamics warrants closer examination, particularly in terms of when watchfulness extends beyond the core family. This Special Issue builds on these insights to reveal how reciprocal vigilant scrutiny can often exacerbate intra-familial tensions and even give rise to internecine conflicts. These dynamics of vigilance and intra-familial management also extend beyond national boundaries, as migration often becomes a key strategy for securing or enhancing social mobility.

Migration

Current research on migration shows that spatial mobility can act as a catalyst for social mobility—particularly where countries or neighboring border regions differ in terms of labor market conditions and opportunities or class structures (Bonfert, 2024; Platt, 2005; Recchi and Favell, 2011). Rather than focusing solely on identifying such structural differences, scholars have increasingly turned to examining the specific challenges and opportunities migrants face in their pursuit of upward mobility (Fielding, 1992; Platt, 2005), and to analyzing how migration intersects with social class (Cederberg, 2017; Panichella et al., 2021; Robert and Robertson, 2022; Rye, 2019; Scott, 2019; Van Hear, 2014). Anthropologists have contributed to this body of work by offering insights into the motivations and driving forces behind migration as a means of social mobility. Constable, Shah, and Sharma, for instance, have individually pointed out that for many young adults, migration may be a transitional phase before eventually settling down and is often seen as an initial step toward achieving upward mobility (Constable, 2007; Shah, 2006; Sharma, 2019). Other scholars have focused on shifts in habitus and the transformation that migrants experience when spatial mobility and class mobility coincide (Alloul, 2021). While these studies highlight aspirations, transformation, and success, other researchers have noted that migration does not necessarily equate with social advancement. Rather, more often than not, it sets in motion processes of downward mobility—particularly in the context of forced migration, where displacement and dispossession come into play, triggering socioeconomic and political decline (Jeffery, 2011; Loizos, 2008).

A specific case is that of borderland regions, where increased attention from national security regimes seeks to regulate migration, while local populations must constantly adapt to ever-shifting regulations and cope with the specific challenges that migration hubs pose to their communities. At the same time, these zones are characterized by long-standing cross-border relationships and opportunities for social mobility—for instance, whenever children attend school or university across the border (Leung and Waters, 2022; Mezgec, 2019; Nunez, 2021; Orraca et al., 2017; Yuen and Cheung, 2014), or when local businesses and individuals seize the opportunity to offer products and services transnationally—whether formally or informally (Andersson, 2014; Bolt, 2012; Brown et al., 2024; Dascher and Haupt, 2011; Heyman, 2012; Humphrey et al., 2012; Kuépié et al., 2016; Meehan and Lawn, 2024; Turner et al., 2015). Although anthropologists have paid close attention to such cross-border economies, the specificities of border regions and the ways they impact migrants' social mobility remain largely underexplored in current research—a lacuna this Special Issue seeks specifically to address.

A similar observation can be applied to the emerging field of return migration. While scholars have studied this phenomenon, the focus has been largely on economic advancement and questions of belonging (Cassarino, 2004; Elijah, 2013; Gmelch, 1980; Pauli, 2022; Percival, 2013; Rogozen-Soltar, 2020; Wen, 2013); less attention has been directed to how returnees readjust to the social environment in their home communities and the myriad challenges they face. By placing particular emphasis on these areas of inquiry, we demonstrate that analyzing the relationship between migration and social mobility—through the conceptual lens of vigilance—cannot only significantly enrich and advance existing scholarship, but open new avenues of research.

Individual contributions

As outlined in this Introduction, the articles presented in this Special Issue illustrate how vigilance shapes the pursuit of better lives and the dynamic processes behind social mobility across diverse contexts. Drawing on ethnographic research from around the world, these studies explore the watchful strategies individuals employ as they strive for upward mobility. Taken together, they offer a cumulative understanding of how vigilance both enables—and at times complicates—individual and collective efforts to improve life prospects, particularly when confronting structural and interpersonal challenges. By placing various practices, articulations, and dimensions of vigilance at the center of analysis, this Special Issue underscores its importance not only in achieving upward social mobility but also in carving out new pathways for future research. The approach developed here broadens existing scholarship, all while offering fresh perspectives on how individuals and groups navigate these complex and often contradictory dynamics. What follows is a brief overview of the individual contributions and their key arguments.

The contribution by Ilaria Lesmo, Silvia Aru, Giulia Chiccoli, and Francesca Morra examines the educational experiences of overseas students in Italy who pursue academic mobility as a route to social advancement, underscoring the associated stress, strain, and psychological pressure. Drawing on counseling sessions and ethnographic interviews conducted within a university mentoring program, the authors jointly trace the contours of vigilance among a cohort of upwardly mobile individuals. They demonstrate how perceived scrutiny from administrative bodies, peers, and family members compels overseas students to adopt counter-vigilance strategies. Emphasis is placed on "the gaze" and "rumors" as forces shaping these reciprocal dynamics. Positioned in a liminal space as migrants within a foreign educational system, these students may also exhibit symptoms of "hyper-vigilance." Finally, the paper foregrounds the ambivalence of familial expectations and monitoring—often exerted from a distance—as a salient stress factor, framing the family unit not only as a potential source of support for social ascent but also as a locus of pressure, unmet demands, and internecine strife.

Kristina Göransson's paper contributes to the study of family contexts and aspirations for upward mobility by highlighting how families experience stress while managing their children's trajectories of social advancement. Drawing on fieldwork with Singaporean families, Göransson explores the affective and productive labor of parents as they navigate emerging tensions between aspirations for their children's academic achievements and the desire to maintain a balance between school and life, and overall happiness. Her analysis focuses particularly on middle-class parents who engage in what Faircloth terms "intensive parenting," (2023) investing considerable time, resources, and emotional energy to ensure their children's academic success while also helping them acquire social and cultural capital. By exploring how parents resist, (re)negotiate, and seek to reconcile these ambivalent aspirations for their children's education, this article sheds light on the affective terrain underpinning parental vigilance and informs the evolving reconfiguration of upward social mobility. In this context, Göransson develops the concept of "vigilant parenting."

In Eveline Dürr's paper, the context of migration is brought sharply into focus, with particular attention given to return migration. The paper illustrates how Mexicans who

have sought social mobility through migration to the United States return to their communities of origin, where they often find themselves under critical scrutiny. In response to being watched and often perceived as "different," returnees develop strategies involving varying degrees of introspection and self-reflection, suggesting that practices of self-observation play a crucial role in the pursuit of upward mobility. Returnees carefully choose what they share—and what they withhold—about their individual migratory experiences and with whom they form relationships. By exploring these dynamics, Dürr's paper sheds light on how returnees readjust to their social environment by either articulating or concealing aspects of their migration experiences as they continually navigate their shifting social realities.

Migration equally plays a pivotal role in Ingo Rohrer's contribution; here, however, the focus is on "successful" migrants. Rohrer conducted ethnographic research among first- and second-generation Latinx in Southern California who strive for—or have already achieved—upward mobility. He examines how successful Latinx feel compelled to advise others on how to achieve success, strongly emphasizing the necessity of acquiring the requisite skills to increase opportunities for social advancement. They stress the importance of skill building, advising aspirants to "surround yourself with the right people." Aspirants are encouraged to be selective about whom they associate with and to seek out experienced individuals who can provide support and share expertise in skill acquisition. Set in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Rohrer's article not only underscores the cultural significance of identity and prevailing social values in shaping transnational mobility but also exposes the shadowy side of success: how normative expectations around developing the "right" skills can evoke feelings of inadequacy and a reliance on mentors.

Building on the exploration of border regions and mobility, Lydia Letsch's paper shifts the focus to the Maghreb region, specifically examining how enhanced migration control, along with efforts to combat illicit trafficking and cross-border terrorism in the region between Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, has profoundly impacted communities in these borderlands. State-imposed security measures disrupt long-standing economic and sociocultural structures across the border, thereby altering prospects for social mobility. Letsch illustrates how border communities develop vigilant strategies, everyday geopolitical imaginaries, and senses of belonging that counter state-driven border policies and practices. In doing so, she demonstrates how these strategies constitute proactive efforts to sustain livelihoods and imagine more livable futures on the social periphery of the state.

Turning to questions of social stratification and class, Lena Kroeker demonstrates through her research in Kenya that watchfulness and attentiveness are not merely features of the upward mobility process. Drawing on fieldwork conducted among the Kenyan middle class, her case study reveals that social mobility should not be viewed as a unilinear progression from one social position to the next. Instead, Kroeker's contribution highlights the ever-present risk of downward mobility, which looms even when individuals have climbed the social ladder. Her example illustrates the constant oscillations in people's lives, marked by both upward and downward shifts.

Melina Kalfelis' article presents a highly distinctive contribution to this Special Issue, as her fieldwork in Burkina Faso demonstrates how participation in vigilantism can serve as a means of upward social mobility. While scholarship typically highlights vigilantism—understood as individuals or groups taking law enforcement into their own

hands without legal authority—as a coercive project that seeks to consolidate power and dominate resources, this article shifts the focus to the relationship between vigilantism, violence, and social mobility. Drawing on fieldwork with Koglweogo self-defense groups in Ouagadougou, the article examines the rise and fall of a Koglweogo group in the Yamtenga district by exploring how the vigilantes' social ascent is contingent upon maintaining an ever-shifting and multidirectional "hyper-vigilance"—both toward the group's internal conduct and their social and political environments. Based on these findings, Kalfelis argues that vigilante violence generates a distinct form of upward mobility—one precariously balanced on the brink of social collapse, yet often resulting in feelings of remorse, stagnation, and alienation.

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