INTRO

VIGNETTE: *La chance* makes a difference

> The university graduates I met in Bamako are working on the realization of their future – some of them have achieved their goals already, and some have not, or not yet. So, if personal effort is what they all invest, what is it then, to them, that makes the difference? *La chance* makes a difference, it is distinctive and it distinguishes. […] To provoke *la chance* is to look for *la chance* in the sense that individuals provide themselves with the skillset required in order to make sure they are able to identify la chance by the time it appears (extract from a round table presentation in Bamako, 9 January 2017).

I begin with the moment that marked the final stage of my research. In January 2017, our research group "Construire son Avenir",[1] met for a final workshop at the University of Bamako in Mali to discuss our findings and present results of our individual research within the project. We had also organized a round table with the thought-provoking title "La jeunesse d'aujourd'hui – et de demain?" (Youth today – and tomorrow?), during which local stakeholders would discuss the issues raised. The audience consisted of students, professors, and administrators – some of whom were my informants – and some external participants who happened to come across our minimal advertising. I was nervous and I was meant to talk for no more than five minutes to

1 The project "Construire son Avenir: Self-Conception and Career Practices of Young Graduates in Burkina Faso and Mali" was based at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel and funded from 2013-2016 by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The project was led by Prof. Dr. Elisio Macamo. The other team-members were: Dr. Michelle Engeler, Prof. Dr. Manfred Perlik, and Dr. Noemi Steuer. My PhD colleague Maike Birzle (MA) covered research in Burkina Faso.

present the core of my findings from ten months of fieldwork with university graduates in Bamako. I decided to present *la chance*.

During the round table discussion, a well-known politician responded in his first comment: "Moi, je n'accorde pas d'importance à la chance." ("I don't attach any importance to chance.") Later, he explained that in his own life, he "had *la chance* to study in France." His success though, he said, came once he started working fifteen hours a day. Another participant depicted university graduates as victims of a system that fails to properly educate them. If today's youth wanted to succeed, they only had to work hard. They could start businesses, move to the countryside in order to become farmers; they should stop demanding, stop complaining and stop doing nothing. The message was clear: a university degree is no guarantee; only hard work will pay off. However, those who "sit around waiting for *la chance*" will undoubtedly fail.

I felt misunderstood; it was neither my intention nor the point of my presentation to create an image of "university graduates sitting around waiting for *la chance*." I considered explaining my point again, but I decided not to. The audience predominantly affirmed the participants' remarks; some were thankful and presented themselves, their stories, their ambitions, and their efforts. Others asked how they might pursue a career in politics. However, a female student's comment "There are no jobs in Mali!" was completely ignored. The discussion did not reveal their thoughts on my preliminary findings on *la chance*; only later did I realize that this round table revealed a discourse based on the categorization of *la chance* as luck – and not as merit or something else.

On an earlier field trip to Bamako, I made a similar categorization myself:

> Coming from downtown Bamako, Moudou[2] and I are headed to the second bridge. On the driveway next to the administrative part of the city, dozens of young men are selling sunglasses. Everybody sells sunglasses, the exact same sunglasses. "Why are they all standing right there? All at one spot?" I ask. Moudou answers: "La chance will bring them clients. Every day, it's going to be someone else… and, you know, there are also some vendors walking around town all day" (field notes, September 2011).

2 All research participants' names are changed in order to protect their privacy and to ensure anonymity.

As a concluding remark, I jotted down: "Everybody's going to have *la chance* at some point in time. Apparently, selling is not about skill, but about luck. Making money is luck, not merit." Soon afterward, I recognized that I was wrong: the very fact that dozens of people sell sunglasses at this exact spot turns this driveway into a customer hot spot – which benefits every seller. I was also wrong in assuming that *la chance* is just the French word for luck. In fact, to my informants in Bamako, *la chance* is a type of common sense and it "lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see" (Geertz 1975, 25).

Jeunesse diplomée – "sans emploi?"

Universities change, graduates change.

The changing role of higher education from being "valued as a public and intellectual good" to being made essential to the foundation of the nation state in its development (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004, 3) is a global trend. All over the world, young people are more likely to go to university than ever before (France 2007, 60). In the West, higher education has become "part of the normal, taken-for-granted, experiences" and due to its expansion, higher education is no longer exclusively accessible to middle- and upper-class students (Furlong and Cartmel 2009, 121). In the US, the role of the university has changed with globalization from promoting reason, to advocating culture, to today's emphasis "on the techno-bureaucratic notion of excellence" (Readings 1996, 54), which, according to the author, "lacks a referent".[3] With a particular focus on Africa, Zeleza and Olukoshi observe a shift from the "'development' university" of the 1960's and 1970's to the "'market' university" of the 1980's and 1990's, and with this development, "threats to academic freedom became less political and more economic" (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004, 43). Higher educa-

3 Bill Readings, The University within the Limits of Reason, 1996: "The characteristic of the modern University is to have an idea that functions as its referent, as the end and meaning of its activities. […] in general the modern University has had three ideas. The story begins […] with Kant, who envisioned the University as guided by the concept of reason. Kant's vision is followed by Humboldt's idea of culture, and more recently the emphasis has been on the techno-bureaucratic notion of excellence. The distinguishing feature of the last on this list is that it actually lacks a referent."

tion became more dedicated to meeting the demands of the labor market, and private universities grew (Thaver 2004) and ultimately led to the "massification of higher education" (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004, 3). In accordance with that global trend,[4] in Mali, too, the number of students in tertiary education has increased significantly during the last fifty years. In 2018, for instance, according to official government numbers, there are about 85,000 students enrolled at the public universities of Mali, which is almost one fourth more than a year before (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 2018, 20).

After independence, several key institutions took the lead in educating the nation's emerging elite, the so-called "grandes écoles". These included a university for public administration (l'École Nationale d'Administration [l'ENA]), university for engineering (l'École Nationale d'Ingenieurs [l'ENI]) and the university for higher education (l'École Normale Superieure [l'ENSUP]). Despite different training foci, these institutions participated in a common project: they produced "professionals who were being trained to operate the burgeoning machinery of the state" (Engeler 2017, 10)". These particular higher education institutions still exist today, and there are others that have also arrived on the scene more recently. For example, the University of Bamako was established in 2006, making its debut with five faculties,[5] two institutes, and 11,250 enrolled students in its first year (Imperato and Imperato 2008, 104). By 2010, there were more than 80,000 students (Diakite 2011), which exceeded the accommodations available in the university's infrastructure (Daou 2010). As a result, a government decree transformed the University of Bamako's former faculties into four separate universities. For instance, la FLASH, i.e. the faculty of languages and social sciences, became l'Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (U.L.S.H.B). During the 2015-16 term, a total of about 62,000 students were enrolled at the Universities of Bamako. Though most graduates I talked to found the quality of education provided by the professors satisfying, they all expressed dissatisfaction with the conditions at the

4 All over the world, young people are more likely to go to university than ever before (France 2007). "[I]n many western countries" higher education has become "part of the normal, taken-for-granted, experiences" and due to its expansion, higher education is no longer exclusively accessible to middle- and upper-class students (Furlong 2009) .

5 i.e. Faculté des Lettres, Langues, Arts et Sciences Humaines (FLASH), Faculté des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques (FSJP), Faculté des Sciences Économiques et de Gestion (FSEG), Faculté des Sciences et Techniques (FAST), Faculté de Médecine, de Pharmacie et d'Odonto-Stomatologie (FMPOS).

Universities of Bamako[6]: too many students, no library, insufficient resources, packed courses, power outages, slow administration, and unfairness regarding the distribution of grades and scholarships. Numerous strikes, held by personnel or students, became an everyday routine of university life, as staff and students voiced their discontent over their salaries, their scholarships, and the examinations. In 2011, classes were canceled for more than three months due to strikes. In response, the whole term was declared an "année blanche," an empty year in which no student advanced or graduated (Ludwig 2011, 9).

Experiencing university today is significantly different compared to the times of the protesters against the Moussa Traore military regime in the 1970s (see Steuer 2017) and the student movement of the 1990s (Smith 1997). In other words, for their parents' generation, a university degree secured public sector employment and elite status (Behrends and Lentz 2012, 139), but those days are long gone (Engeler 2017, 14). So, rather than age, gender, class or subculture, my informants share the experience of university education and of uncertainty with regard to the current labor market situation. The idea of a shared and, therefore, connecting experience relates back to Karl Mannheim's concept of generations, which consists of multiple and even opposing units of people, united by a common overarching experience that significantly differs from experiences of the former generation (Mannheim 1928). Academics in Mali constitute a small, yet, due to their elite qualification, highly relevant generational unit of people.

La jeunesse diplomée. Sans emploi.

Whenever I introduced myself and what I was doing to neighbors, relatives, secretaries, taxi drivers or government officials, I said that I was conducting research on university graduates in Mali – "une étude sur les jeunes diplomés ici au Mali". The reaction was usually this: "Sans emploi? Sur les jeunes sans emploi." – "Unemployed? The unemployed youth?" In the beginning, I always passionately corrected people, saying "No, no. Young univer-

6 Students enrolled at the Universities of Bamako as of term 2015-16: l'Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako (U.S.G.B) 16,350; l'Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (U.L.S.H.B) 20,980; l'Université des Sciences, des Techniques et des Technologies de Bamako (U.S.T.T.B) 9,300; l'Université des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques de Bamako (U.S.J.P.B) 15,989. (Source: Scolarité de l'ULSHB in private communication 2017-10-18).

sity graduates!" but they would almost always respond sweepingly, "Yeah, sure, the unemployed young people". At some point, I accepted this response, maybe because I experienced similar responses when I spoke to university graduates. I was interested in what they were doing after graduation, and they answered, "Rien" – "Nothing". However, as the conversation progressed, they talked about all kinds of activities in which they engaged (see also Langevang 2009, 748; Hansen 2005, 6).[7] While most of them were not working on a fixed or secure contract, they were working for a living or in an internship that was directed towards some future opportunity. Some helped their parents, and some worked on their vocational training. No matter what they did, most of them were busy doing something: they were busy opening up *la chance*.

This relates to what Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren analyzed as "doing nothing" (Ehn 2012). By questioning everyday phenomena such as waiting, routines, and daydreaming, they challenge the notion of "doing nothing". People always do something, they say. However, we refer to "doing nothing" whenever nothing appears to be happening, or when something just happens too fast for us to recognize, when something happens in disguise, or when something that is happening is not considered to be worth mentioning for some reason.

"Employment may not be normal worldwide, but it is normative" (Kwon and Lane 2016, 5). Unemployment being the negatively connoted counterpart of employment arguably puts everything we value at stake, i.e. health, life in our societies, the future (ibid. 17); it leads to long-lasting disenfranchisement (ibid. 3) and compromises to social recognition and blocks young people's path to gaining adult status in their societies (ibid. 6).

With university graduates in Bamako, however, the situation seems to be quite different. They are busy, healthy and happy. They start building their own houses, marry and have children, they are respected by their families and peers regardless of their employment situation, but with regard to what they do on an everyday basis.

7 Both describe "doing nothing" as a discursive metaphor, which symbolizes a young people's feeling of "being stuck" (Sommers 2012), i.e. in "social and physical immobility" (Langevang 2009)

Doing nothing?

Unemployment is a global phenomenon, but it is experienced locally and, therefore, made sense of in different ways (Kwon and Lane 2016, 5). Looking closely at these experiences and practices, unemployment emerges as "a site for forging new ways of working, being, and thinking in these precarious neoliberal times" (Kwon and Lane 2016, 7) and we are able to see what people do when they do not find work: they work (see Lane 2016, Mains 2016, Fisher 2016).

This resonates with a great body of research on African youth focusing on practices in response to the challenging and uncertain labor market situations in their countries and, as a result, the "prolonged decline and drastic reduction of social possibilities" (Vigh 2006, 96). Liberian youth hustle (Munive 2010, 323; Kaufmann 2017), youth in Accra manage (Langevang 2008, 2046), youth in Cameroon muddle through everyday life (Waage 2006), and youth in Mali engage in small businesses (débrouillage) (Ludwig 2013). A few publications on university graduates in Africa relate their present practices to imagination and anticipation, carving out a future-oriented way of dealing with uncertainty. In Goma, Congo, a university diploma affords young academics the ability to imagine "a better future and provides the belief that [...] opportunities to find work are better than without it (the diploma)" (Oldenburg 2016, 17). Imagination also informs graduates in Burkina Faso presenting responses to uncertainty, who actively "hope and thus create accessible gateways" (Birzle 2017, 54). University graduates in Tanzania respond to career uncertainty deploying various practices, such as attracting potential employers, running businesses, changing careers, and accepting temporary jobs (Sambaiga 2017). Female Guinean graduates' take agency as they stay flexible in their progress towards heterogeneous future goals (Ammann 2017, 116). Similarly, male Guinean graduates strive for economic and political participation as "political entrepreneurs" (Engeler 2016).

In this book, I do not argue for the value of what graduates in Bamako are doing, neither do I contrast their practices to something I think they should be doing, instead I focus on graduates' knowledge of their situation and describe what they are doing based on that knowledge.

This book is about "*la chance*"

This book is about "*la chance*" (French for luck, chance). *La chance* is a concept which accounts for everyday knowledge production in uncertain contexts in Bamako, Mali as well as in the social sciences.

In Bamako, university graduates constitute an educational elite strongest affected by unemployment. With reference to *la chance*, university graduates make sense of their situation and they play what I call "the game of *la chance*".

Examining graduates' knowledge about their situation, we see that *la chance* is much more than its translation of "luck" or "chance" reveals. Throughout the book, we see how *la chance* emerges as a product of graduates mending the intersection between what graduates know and what they know they do not know. *La chance* is known to make a difference between those who get employed and those who do not. *La chance* makes sense. However, *la chance* is elusive in the sense that it appears to be self-explanatory in concrete contexts, but it escapes our grasp as soon as we try to approach its essence.

In 2015, about seventy percent of all university graduates in Mali were registered at the country's agency for the promotion of youth employment (APEJ 2015). Undoubtedly, the employment situation in Mali is challenging. For years, the public employment sector has been saturated, while the bulk of the country's economy continues to be based predominantly on agriculture. Young academics encounter severe difficulties entering the labor market, let alone finding a job that corresponds to their qualifications.

Against this background, three consecutive questions arise:

1. How do university graduates deal with uncertainties?
2. What is *la chance*? The phenomenon: *la chance*.
3. Why do graduates keep opening up *la chance* despite their knowledge of the circumstances?

Let me explain:

(1) Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a fundamental paradox that "humans live in history, in a situation where the future cannot be known and the past cannot be changed and, therefore, where the unpredictable is constantly turning into the irrevers-

ible" (Graeber 2012, 25; see also Luhmann 1991, 4; Macamo 2017, 184; Whyte 2009, 215). Since the outcomes of our actions are never fully predictable (e.g. Calkins 2016, 3; Luhmann 1991), uncertainty is a universal human phenomenon, however, in the 21st century, uncertainty has come to be considered a resource of creativity, innovation, growth, but also a source of precarity and insecurity (Leccardi 2005, 131}. Especially in African contexts, uncertainty is used to either "imply unpredictable outcomes, often of a negative kind that make life precarious" (Haram 2009, 13) or as a simple umbrella term for contexts characterized by poor conditions shaped by societal hardship, such as economic crisis (Langevang 2008), political change (Vigh 2009), conflict or post-conflict or war (Kaufmann 2011; Vigh 2015), unemployment (Langevang 2008), disease (Whyte 2015), migration (Nunzio 2015), existential needs, shortage of food supplies (Calkins 2016; Gilbertson 2015) or material – insufficient monthly salaries (Archambault 2015). Nevertheless, "we all navigate"[8] (Vigh 2009) and, yet, the extent to which we do so and the way we do so varies (Calkins 2016, 2) depending on the environment around us.

On an everyday basis, uncertainty is a matter of knowledge.

Uncertainty can be described "as a structure of feeling – the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility" (Cooper and Pratten 2015, 1), but uncertainty is also a matter of fact rooted in the unpredictability of the future as well as in the lack of knowledge in present situations (see Cooper and Pratten 2015; Beck 1986). The core of uncertainty is the unknown: the unknown future and the unknown present.

We cannot know the outcomes of our actions for certain. With everything we do, we take risks inherent to action itself and, therefore, impossible to avoid (Luhmann 1991, 37). To calculate risk means to calculate the unpredictable "and it is by these calculations that societies create frameworks of pre-

8 According to Vigh, "[T]he concept […] highlights motion within motion; it is the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to illuminate social life, it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along" (Vigh 2009). Vigh uses the concept of social navigation in order to grasp empirical action such as *dubriagem* (*debrouillage*, muddling through) analytically.

dictable social action"[9] (Krüger 2003, 51). The foundation of these calculations is knowledge. So, the more that is known in the present, the easier it is – or seems to be – to predict the future outcome of an action. Conversely, the less that is known in the present, the poorer the ability to predict the future.

University graduates in Bamako face three kinds of uncertainty: everyday uncertainty, immediate uncertainty, and no uncertainty.[10] These uncertainties vary in their relationship with knowledge: everyday uncertainties describe situations in which current knowledge is evaluated, part of that knowledge is the awareness of conditions which are impossible to know. Immediate uncertainties are triggered by ruptures or new situations which require new knowledge. Situations with no uncertainty are defined by a present which is sufficiently known.

(2) Knowledge production

Accounting for *la chance*.

Against uncertain backgrounds in Bamako, *la chance* answers the question of what creates the difference between graduates whose imagined futures become reality and those whose imagined futures do not, or have not yet. Individual effort, qualifications, creativity, persistence, flexibility, hope, networks, structural conditions, and God also provide answers; *la chance* embodies all of these factors.

Through the documentation and problematization of the relationship between *la chance* (layer one: empirical phenomenon) and *la chance* (layer two: concept), this book explores uncertainty as a social phenomenon in Bamako as well as a conceptual conundrum for me as a social scientist.

The phenomenon: *la chance*.

Chances are present from the very start. We have a very clear idea of what *la chance* is. Some think of chance, luck, opportunity and others more familiar

9 My translation. Original quote: „Risikokalkulationen sind Formen des Umgangs mit Unsicherheit, anhand derer Gesellschaften Rahmen für berechenbares soziales Handeln schaffen" (Krüger 2003).

10 Please note that "no uncertainty" does not equal "certainty".

with the Malian context might associate *la chance* with Muslim religion and humbleness. The aim of this book is to make *la chance* visible by opening it up for complication and, thereby, allowing for *la chance* to reveal its own meaning throughout the process of analysis. *La chance* is not simply out there, on the contrary, *la chance* is accomplished by graduates. So, rather than rely on our own assumptions, we get to listen and explore graduates' descriptions of *la chance*.

> *Le bonheur* exists, but you have to work for it. Work is preconditioned by *la chance*. And if you're working, you're going to have thousands of chances to be happy. […] 'Inchallah', the reason for saying 'inchallah' means 'If God likes it, it will happen'. And it's true, whatever God does not decide is impossible. […] In Islam, God says 'Help yourself and heaven will help you, too.' So, those who do not help themselves, those who do not work, those who tell themselves 'I have my diploma, so I will stay home and *la chance* will come.' … But seriously, do you think that *la chance* will come? *La chance* won't come! […] You've got go out and look for *la chance* first, and if you're looking for it and with the help of God, you're going to have a job. (My translation, 2014, interview with Moussa, Physics graduate.)

La chance is contrasted to the concepts of '*bonheur*' (luck') and '*être heureux*' (being happy, happiness). *La chance* is further connected with the ideas of accessibility, i.e. 'work' and 'God', as well as the ideas of success and failure. The relationship between work and luck is causal. "Happiness" is associated with what happens after or because of "work". In other words, there will be luck only if you work. Thus, "work is also a result of *la chance*". There is an order: first, *la chance*, then work, followed by *bonheur*. In other words, luck and happiness are preconditioned by "work", which is again preconditioned by "la chance". It all starts with *la chance*. "Inchallah", as explained, "means that if God likes it, it is going to come true". Put differently, God's word is the ultimate word; God's decisions precede *la chance*, work, and *bonheur*, as well as happiness. "*Dieu* said: 'Help yourself and heaven will help you, too.'" Individual effort represents a way to indicate your preference for the future. People who rely only on the power of the acquired diploma do not seem to gain God's recognition. "*La chance* is never going to come!" Not making an effort leads to failure, while making an effort leads to success.

Conceptualizing *la chance*.
***La chance* is many things and *la chance* does not equal *la chance*.**

Analyzing graduates' common sense understanding of *la chance*, I identified three different kinds (see Chapter 4, Layer 1), which I call prerequisites, sprouts, and outcomes. Prerequisites of *la chance* constitute the context into which individuals are born and socialized, e.g. family, environment, education. They are often referred to as *ma chance* (my chance) – *la chance* in possession and are considered to be a privilege that potentially enables further *la chance*, i.e. sprouts. Sprouts of *la chance*, like a sprouting plant, are what university graduates refer to as an opportunity or coincidence. A sprout of *la chance* needs to be identified by an individual who is prepared. Sprouts can be transformed into outcomes of *la chance*, such as a work contract that follows an internship or a position in the civil service following a passed *concours* (the government system distributing public sector employment). Outcomes constitute the product of individual effort, a result of personal effort. Unlike prerequisites, outcomes of *la chance* are connected with the idea of merit.

Moreover, graduates know how to attend to *la chance* (Chapter 5, Layer 1): "looking for *la chance* (*chercher la chance*)"; preparation, "finding *la chance* (*trouver la chance*)"; identification, "working with *la chance* (*bénéficier de la chance*)"; or "transformation." To look for *la chance* means to be prepared, in order to create or identify *la chance* when it appears, and to transform *la chance* into something one could possess.

We see that *la chance* is not another word for a concept we already know. *La chance* is not the same as, for instance, 'luck', which is philosophically conceptualized as hazard that is either perceived as positive or negative; it is not a product of individual action (Rescher 1990), nor does *la chance* capture the idea of 'hazard' or 'fate' towards the result of strategic action (Pankoke 1997, 75). *La chance* is not the same as the feeling of being lucky or happy (Bargatzky 2010; Gilbert 2006), nor is it exclusive to events or circumstances shaping individual biographies (Becker 1994; Chimanikire 2009; Bandura 1998). And even though there are similarities to 'serendipity', a 'happy accident happening by chance', an unanticipated but appreciated by-product of an action (Merton 2004; Chimanikire 2009) or the idea of 'luck' being based on a timely,

or perhaps life-long preparation for opportunities (Hettlage 2010, 11)[11], neither of these concepts fully capture *la chance*.

Knowing *la chance*.

University graduates know that:
La chance makes the difference.
La chance makes sense.
La chance accounts for uncertainty and certainty.
La chance is common sense and extraordinary.
La chance accounts for the past and the future.

What sounds contradictory or confusing actually makes a point of *la chance* being both stable and unstable. As soon as we think we got it, it escapes our grasp. Only for us to find it in a new and different shape. Again. And again.

Consequently, the follow-up question is:

What is *la chance?*

This simple question is relevant, because of the very relations and questions it provokes, for instance: what does *la chance* do and what do graduates do with *la chance*?

La chance is how things work in Mali.

In Bamako,[12] I met university graduates at different points in the process of realizing their futures – some of them had already achieved their goals while others had not or not yet. Degrees, internships, and efforts are important, but they are not enough to make a difference. Graduates know that *la chance* makes the difference: it determines the future outcome of their present actions.

11 Original quote: „Je nachdem, wie man sein Leben in die Hand nimmt, wachsen die Chancen, etwas Vernünftiges oder wenigstens Tragfähiges daraus zu machen. So gesehen wäre Glück eine Art rechtzeitige, oder vielleicht lebenslange Vorbereitung auf Gelegenheitsstrukturen oder – wie Novalis es zuspitzte – ‚Talent für das Schicksal'" (Hettlage 2010). Note that in his description of luck, he uses three different concepts, i.e. chance, fate and opportunity (Chancen, Schicksal, Gelegenheit) in order to describe 'luck' ('Glück').

12 The setting of my research is Bamako, a West African capital city. However, I do not consider my work as research on the city (see Förster 2013), nor do I conduct research in the city of Bamako as the center of higher education in Mali.

Everyone looks for *la chance*, but it does not appear for everyone – it is distinctive and it distinguishes. Using *la chance*, graduates make sense of what does not make sense. *La chance* reveals how graduates make sense of their experiences and observations in Bamako. For instance, if 100 graduates apply for one job, 99 of them will not get the job. Graduates understand that; they know they have to work hard in order to get the job, but they are also aware of the fact that not every hard-working person is going to succeed. For the one applicant who gets the job: "It is *la chance*!" That is common sense. *La chance* explains the difference between 99 and one, it explains randomness and why things happen the way they happen. *La chance* explains "how things work in Mali."

La chance works.

> "The reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality. It does not require additional verification over and beyond its simple presence. It is simply there, as self-evident and compelling facticity. I know that it is real" (Berger 1991, 37).

La chance is common sense knowledge.

La chance is many different things, but what exactly are these? And how do graduates know that "getting a job" and "meeting someone", for instance, is *la chance*? What exactly do graduates categorize as *la chance*? To graduates in Mali, *la chance* is common sense. Common sense is "just life in a nutshell" (Geertz 1975, 7) and it "lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see" (ibid 25).

Common sense constitutes a starting point for investigation (Francis 2004, 26). Common sense is considered a "practical accomplishment" (ibid. 25) produced by its members, i.e. graduates. Therefore, graduates are experts on *la chance*. Drawing from that idea, this chapter will illuminate the ways in which *la chance* is "'produced' to be recognizable" (ibid. 33) as common sense. This will allow me to turn the "normally taken for granted" categorization of an employment opportunity "into an object of reflection" and analyze the categorization of *la chance* as a "practical accomplishment" (ibid 25). Following that approach, *la chance* appears as a practical accomplishment of graduates' making sense of uncertainty. *La chance* reveals how graduates make sense of their experiences in Bamako as they "produce and gain knowledge, and thereby make a situation more predictable and meaningful" (Hänsch 2017, 8). As a systematic explanatory framework, *la chance* creates certainty in uncertain situations with regards to opportunity for income and arbitrariness with regards to selection processes. Graduates understand the randomness of the situation they live in.

(3) Gameplay

Ultimately, my work on the previous two questions allows me to approach an overarching and probably even more puzzling one:

Why do graduates keep opening up *la chance* despite their knowledge of the circumstances?

As much as this question seems specific to the study of youth in Africa, in this case university graduates in Bamako, it also is a general question concerning the absurdity of life (Camus 2014). Graduates are like Sisyphus trying to push a rock up a mountain, however, I argue that this is neither a punishment nor fun. They are opening up *la chance* voluntarily and they are happy. This is similar to the work of social scientists who keep working on the description of phenomena despite acknowledging the elusiveness of that endeavor.

As opposed to game theory, playing games is not about the strategic decision-making in anticipation of a desirable outcome prior to action, but rather about the continuation of action itself. Playing games is the "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 1925). In a utopian world in which everything were accessible to us, one could argue, all we would do is play games. Considering the Malian situation of university graduates, the situation appears much more like a dystopia in which graduates are forced to draw on the elusive promises of *la chance*, rather than engage in it voluntarily. And yet, every graduate I met seems to be living a fulfilling life. That is a paradox. But only if we assume that the key to a life like that is a successful career. Claiming that graduates are playing the game of l*a chance* seems like a provocation, however the graduates are not the ones targeted, but rather our own scholarly assumptions. I argue that graduates' practices are not a response to the precariousness of their situation, but a voluntary action. In other words, graduates are not playing because they have no other option, but they play because they want to.

I argue that the practice of opening up *la chance* is a game, a "voluntarily attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 2014 (1925), 43). To say that graduates are playing the game of *la chance* has three implications: (1) *La chance* matters within the game only (prelusory goal). (2) The game of *la chance* has constitutive rules. (3) The game of *la chance* is played voluntarily (lusory attitude).

Anticipating Criticism.

To say they are playing a game of *la chance* invites criticism:

It might come across as if I were diminishing their actions and their agency and not taking them seriously. And given the difficulty of their situation, it seems graduates have no choice but to play. To say they are playing a game, sounds almost like their actions did not matter anyway. Yet this is only true if we assume that the fixed goal is an employment that corresponds to their qualifications, for instance.

It might also seem as if I were romanticizing their difficult situation and at the same time being too lenient with those responsible for causing it. However, due to their particular circumstances, university graduates actually know and do something from which we can learn.

Graduates find themselves in a situation in which they can really say for sure that they are not going to get the job they had been promised when starting their university studies. They do not believe in the promises the labor market or the society once made to them. They know these promises are not true. Rather than being in denial about that, they deal with the situation and do not focus on a fixed goal. They do not try to run for that carrot. They just refuse to have that version of success and failure imposed on them. Precisely because it seems almost impossible to ignore that reality.

Gameplay is not game theory.

Whereas game theory is about acting as a result of strategic decision-making in anticipation of a desirable outcome, the idea of gameplay (see Suits 2014 [1925]) is about the action itself, in which the goal of playing games is the action. So, there is no strategy other than – one could argue – the decision to take a particular route of action.

Game theory is about competition and about strategy. It is about the logic justification of players' actions with reference to expected outcomes. It is about maximizing utility, about intention.

The setting of game theory is the unknown. Precisely because the players assume they are dependent on other people's actions, they cannot fully know the outcome of their own actions. Therefore, they are forced to strategize about their moves. So, one might argue that the fact that graduates play games is a strategic decision in response to the unknowns they face. How-

ever, the decision itself is not directed towards employment as the outcome, but towards playing games. In other words, their strategic decision is to play games. In doing so, they deploy an option game theory does not consider in its models.

In the infamous "prisoners' dilemma", for instance, the goal is to be able to leave the prison as a free person, and the two ways to reach that goal are defined by either confessing the crime or remaining silent. The players strategize or gamble based on probability, but they do not play. Game playing is not even an option in that particular situation. The reason is because the player is committed to being able to win the game. In game theory, the player wants to win. Therefore, the actions are directed towards winning.

But what if the prisoner played the situation by storytelling (see the 2015 movie *True Story* by Rupert Goold)? What if the prisoner fell in love with the detective? In both cases, the goal of the game shifts from getting out of prison towards continuous play and, therefore, maintaining the situation, which allows the prisoner to keep telling stories or keep flirting, for instance. The goal is no longer getting out of the situation and consequently out of the game. Rather, the goal is the situation itself. It might be hard to imagine that a person would voluntarily want to remain in interrogation. But it might be easier to imagine if we acknowledge that the prisoner understands that the interrogation is a set-up and, therefore, will most likely not get him out of prison. Thus, this understanding renders the goal of being set free simply not worth strategizing for. Game playing is not primarily about pleasure and fun, but more importantly, it offers an alternative option which both responds to the setting and corresponds with an individual's understanding of it.