

Presentation 3

‘We Have the Rights’: Popular Rights and Traversal in Three African Cities

21 September 2023 | 3-4.30pm

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Abstract

Does democracy matter for contestation over public goods? For many urban residents of the global south, struggles for essential, or public goods and services (e.g. housing, electricity, food, water) are part of everyday life. In order to meet these needs, communities often utilize a variety of contentious practices, some of which may be illicit or potentially even violent. This can include, for instance, street protests, riots, illegal connections, or land invasions. Democracy’s institutions were once touted by African political leaders, the U.N., and others as a solution to transform the power and participation of the urban masses. So for urban residents trying to access these goods, does democracy actually make a difference? Using three histories of urban protest in starkly different regime types (Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa) I argue that democracy does matter, though not in the way we might think. I find that democratization does not alter the dominant practices citizens use to contest for public goods. However, by expanding the scope of legitimate forms of participation, democratic cities can allow for greater pathways between these illicit protests and formal processes of claims making.

Presenters

Marcus Walton is an assistant professor of political science at Boston University. His research covers the fields of comparative and urban politics as well as social movements, with a regional focus on the African continent. His current book project, “We Have the Rights!” looks at patterns of contestation over public goods across democratic and non-democratic cities.

Discussant

Marie Huchzermeyer is a professor in the School of Architecture and Planning at Wits University and the current Director of CUBES, the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies, in the School (see www.wits.ac.za/cubes). Marie’s research and teaching have focussed on housing and informal settlement policy and politics from a rights-based perspective and more recently through the lens of the right to the city and the right to development.