



State, democracy and the promise of development South Africa in comparative perspective

SYMPOSIUM

15-16 May 2025

A joint PARI / Brown University symposium



BROWN

Concept

In the 2024 national elections, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its majority for the first time, and post-apartheid South Africa was launched into an era of national coalition-building with a 'Government of National Unity'. Despite significant expansion of public service delivery in the first two decades of democracy, recent regression in water and other service provision, deteriorating infrastructure, increasing inequality, and perceptions of high levels of corruption, have produced a decline in trust in the state, especially in local government. The country is at an inflection point. The ANC has been pushed into governing nationally alongside its erstwhile opponents, the Democratic Alliance and the Inkatha Freedom Party.

Starting from this new political situation, this symposium investigates the past and the future of democracy and the state in South Africa. This includes the state's role and capacities in social and economic transformation, the social and political costs of failure to deliver public goods, and how this might shift attitudes to the state and democratic institutions. The symposium adopts a comparative approach, examining how other countries face similar challenges, and identifying key parallels and differences with reference to the future of the state and democracy.

The event, a joint Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI) and Brown University two-day symposium, will be held at the University of Witwatersrand. Panels will be organised around the following themes:

- State building and state capacity
- Local government and urban crisis
- Democratic and anti-democratic practices
- Social activism, contentious politics, and claim making
- Development and redistribution



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Programme

Venue: Wits Club, University of the Witwatersrand

Day 1: Thursday 15 May

10.00–10.30 **Welcome and introduction: Federica Duca, PARI.**

10.30–10.45 Tea Break

10.45–12.45 **State building and state capacity**

What is shaping the form and character of the contemporary state? How do we develop and sustain effective and legitimate state capabilities in the current global and local moment? The panel will adopt a historical and comparative perspective, exploring histories of state building, the agency of various actors in these histories, and the prospects for a more progressive state project.

- 'Democracy, the State and (Il)legitimacy', José Maurício Domingues, Institute for Social and Political Research of Rio de Janeiro State University (IESP–UERJ), Brazil.
- 'Prudential State Building and Breakdown in Post-Apartheid South Africa', Ryan Brunette, City University of New York/ PARI.
- 'Towards Capacious Government Lawyering', Jonathan Klaaren, Wits School of Law, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, and PARI.
- 'Permanent Perpetual Instability: Revisiting Mogalakwena a Decade Later', Mosa Phadi, Stellenbosch University, and Joel Pearson, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research.
- 'Building State Capacity for Economic Inclusion and Equity within Privatised Terrains of Urban Infrastructuring: Reflections from India', Sudeshna Mitra, Indian Institute for Human Settlement, India.
- *Discussant: Sarah Meny-Gibert, PARI*

12.45 – 14.00 **Lunch**



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Day 1: Thursday 15 May continued...

14.00–16.00 Local government and urban crisis

The panel explores how local governments in the global South face long-standing problems of spatial and economic inequality and poverty, alongside new challenges of, for example, climate change. In South Africa, local government politics is now also defined by greater instability, affecting service delivery. What does this mean for the nature of local government, and for policy focused on development at the local level?

- 'Profiting from Inequality: Perverse Incentives, Development Rights and Residential Segregation in Mumbai', Hussain Indorewala, Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies, India.
- 'Re-thinking Decentralisation: Vestiges of Apartheid Inequalities in Urban Spatial Integration', Thina Nzo, Twende Mbele, Wits and PARI.
- 'Splintering Governance: Challenges to Building a New City', Federica Duca, PARI.
- 'How Basic Service Delivery Has Become a Tool for Entrenching Poverty and Inequality', Tracy Ledger, PARI
- *Discussant (online): Patrick Heller, Brown University.*

16.30–17.30 Keynote address (online): 'Urban Transformations: Governance, Citizenship and Inequality in the cities of Brazil, India and South Africa', Patrick Heller, Brown University.

The Keynote address will be followed by drinks and snacks.



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Day 2: Friday 16 May

9.00–11.00 Democracy, democratic and anti-democratic practices

What are the main challenges to the democratic project in contemporary societies? This panel explores the changing role of democratic institutions, the polarisation of politics, the rise of populism and authoritarian tendencies, the impact on electoral politics, as well as institutional and societal responses to such changes.

- 'Substantivism as a Problem for Democracy', Daryl Glaser, Wits.
- 'The Politics of Autocratization and/in the Southern Interregnum', Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Centre for Asian Studies in Africa, University of Pretoria.
- 'The Brazilian Supreme Court in/and Crisis: Guardian of the Constitution or Catalyst of Ruptures?', Marjorie Marona, Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), Brazil.
- 'Democracy on the Brink in the Sahel: Military Power, Electoral Illusions, and Institutional Collapse', Bonolo Makgale, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria.
- *Discussant: Sithembile Mbete, PARI.*

11.00–11.15 Tea Break

11.15–13.15 Social activism, contentious politics, and claim making

How are citizens and movements challenging power, demanding rights, and shaping political change? This panel explores protests, grassroots mobilization, and the role of civil society in advancing social justice and wider political change.

- 'Rethinking "Movement Beyond Movements": Democracy and Traversal in Johannesburg', Marcus Walton, Boston University, USA.
- 'Student Movements in South Africa and Brazil: Between Social Reproduction and Radical Politics', Josh Platzky Miller, Wits.
- 'Legal mobilisation as a legal, political and social claim to advance progressive social change', Thandiwe Matthews, Wits School of Governance.
- 'The Nexus between Organizing and Innovation: Snatching Victory from the Jaws of Defeat', Mondli Hlatshwayo, University of Johannesburg.
- *Discussant: Tasneem Essop, Society, Work and Politics Institute, Wits.*



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Day 2: Friday 16 May continued...

13.15–14.15 **Lunch**

14.15–16.15 **Development and redistribution**

What are the prospects for projects of progressive economic reform in the context of global shifts in economic policy and ideology, the polarisation of politics, and, in countries such as South Africa, limited state capacity? This panel will examine the role of the state and non-state actors in addressing inequality, development, and social justice in this context.

- 'Possibilities for Redistributive Development Today', Niall Reddy, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, Wits.
- 'Structural transformation in South Africa: who bears the cost? the invisible work of social reproduction', Basani Baloyi, Institute for Economic Justice.
- 'Weakening Power of the Organized Working Class and Rising Inequalities', Mametlwe Sebei, General Industries Workers Union of South Africa.
- 'Development and Redistribution in the Era of Trump, the Broligarchy, and Asset Manager Capitalism', Samantha Ashman, University of Johannesburg.
- *Discussant: Ruth Castel Branco, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, Wits.*

16.15–16.30 **Closing remarks – Sithembile Mbete, PARI.**