



RESEARCH WORKSHOP
SEMINAR SERIES 2025

A multidisciplinary approach to the study of Urban Crisis:

A focus on the City of Johannesburg

31 JULY

Time: 1-3pm

Venue: PARI OFFICES

Register to attend in person

AND ONLINE

<https://rebrand.ly/j9hov7u>

South Africa's Electricity Crisis

by ZACHARY KLAMANN

How are we to understand the current electricity crisis in Johannesburg? Two forms of accessing electricity are destabilising the post-apartheid business model of electricity utilities: on the one hand, many households bypass meters to appropriate electricity from the grid without payment, and on the other, many wealthy households and businesses have acquired rooftop solar systems to generate their own electricity supply.

Both of these are detrimental to the fiscal viability of utilities, but the response of the government has largely been to expand incentives for the former while finding new ways to criminalise and contain the latter. As utilities search for new business models in the changing regulatory environment, the costs of current instability fall disproportionately on the poor, who face higher costs as the wealthy flee the grid and new, more punitive forms of disconnection.

Based on archival and ethnographic research, this presentation situates contemporary instability, popular practices, and governmental responses in the contradictions unleashed by four decades of expanding market reforms in the electricity sector. It suggests that contemporary instability is likely to be exacerbated as the government expands the scope and role of markets practices in the generation and distribution of electricity.

ZACHARY KLAMANN is a PhD student at the University of Chicago affiliated with the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. His doctoral work concerns the electricity crisis, situating it in and relating it to the broader crises of democracy and development in post-apartheid South Africa. Over the previous four years, he has undertaken ethnographic research with environmental and climate justice movements in Mpumalanga and done research on electricity struggles in and around Soweto.

DISCUSSANT

DR CHRISTINA CULWICK FATTI leads the Urban Governance Programme at the Politics and Urban Governance Research Group (PUG), University of the Western Cape. She has over ten years of experience in policy-facing urban research, and has led numerous projects at the intersection of environmental sustainability and social justice in South African cities.