

Crime and Insurgent Citizenship: Extra-State Rule and Belonging in Urban Jamaica

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This paper focuses on the complicated relationship between the Jamaican state, criminal leaders and the urban poor. In marginalized neighborhoods, criminal leaders known as “dons” play an important role in maintaining urban order and they are often considered more legitimate than the formal state. Increasingly, these dons and their organizations have taken on various functions and symbols traditionally associated with the state. Drawing on recent ethnographic research in Kingston’s inner-city, I argue that these developments can be understood as a transformation of citizenship. This paper investigates the new ways in which inner-city residents understand and enact “substantive” citizenship: the rights, responsibilities and participation associated with governance structures. Through a discussion of the reworking of these relations in marginalized urban areas, I suggest a theoretical rethinking of citizenship that takes into consideration the active role that persons play in negotiating, alternating and combining their relationships with different power structures. Engaging with James Holston’s concept of insurgent citizenship, I explore the consequences of imagining a citizenship that relies so heavily on a non-formal, illegal power structure.

After discussing how the state-like power of criminal organizations can be understood within broader transformations of citizenship, I provide more detail on the Jamaican case, and specifically on how dons, state actors and the residents of inner-city communities became joined in a system known as “garrison politics”. Next, I demonstrate how this entanglement of citizens, state and criminal leaders has been reshaping citizenship through a closer examination of how rights, responsibilities and participation are enacted within this system. I consider the transformation of rights through a discussion of inner-city systems of don-led systems of security and “community justice”; responsibilities through the example of non-formal “taxes”, as extortion rackets are known; and finally participation in an annual dance held in honor of the local criminal leadership. Based on this analysis of citizenship transformed, I argue for a broader ethnographic and conceptual engagement with the extra-state governance structures that function as sites for alternative formulations of citizenship.