

Oberseminar Institut für Ethnologie, LMU, SS 2009

27.04.2009, 18-20h, Raum 0.05

Between the Street and the State: Crime and Citizenship in Kingston, Jamaica

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Across the globe, the relationship between states and their citizens is under stress. In many and in particular postcolonial countries, state institutions and practices are informalized and criminalized. Simultaneously, criminal organizations become institutionalized and gain increasing legitimacy. As states, weakened by neoliberal policies and internal dissolution, fail to guarantee citizenship rights and enable social mobility, criminal organizations step in as new providers or brokers of essential services and social inclusion. This paper, based on ethnographic research in Kingston, Jamaica, explores how citizenship – understood broadly as the rights, responsibilities and participation associated with governance structures – is reconfigured through criminal actors and mechanisms. In contexts of urban social exclusion, criminal networks may offer a more viable, though nondemocratic, route to the civil, political and social rights and participation associated with substantive citizenship. The paper explores how criminal governance structures provide access to crucial urban services and resources, and offer a framework for social inclusion and belonging. In addition to providing material benefits, criminal governance arrangements craft new types of political subjectivities, replacing formal myths and rituals of statehood. I relate these governance arrangements to the inequalities of power and access embedded in the Kingston's social and spatial structure, asking to what extent they provide marginalized citizens a way to claim their right to the city. I am interested in when such arrangements provide an alternative to the state, working against it, and when they mediate clientelist access to the state, working through it.