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Popular politics as transversal politics: A postcolonial approach

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16 September 2021

Paper for the Diversity & Inequality Research Seminar

organised by Anthropology & Development Studies (ADS) and Gender & Diversity Studies (GDS)

Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Anthropology's approach to politics and the political has often relied on Eurocentric understandings in which the state exists as a separate legal order and in which the social contract – in recent decades often analysed in terms of citizenship – is a central notion. In such an understanding, politics is considered a covenant between the state and the population, a set of practices and imaginings that (re)produce the state-subject relationship. In this approach, *popular* politics also remains conceptualized in reference to the state: most often as a politics through which underprivileged populations seek to contest or (informally) repair the state. In this paper, based on long term fieldwork in low income neighbourhoods in Recife, Brazil, I conceptualize popular politics differently, as a politics that relates *transversely* to the state and its institutions. This metaphor is borrowed from geometry, where a transversal line runs or lies across another one. While popular politics – comprising of practices through which marginalised people make do and give shape to their future – often intersects with the 'official' politics of the state, I do not see this intersection as its starting point or its central axis. Instead, I approach popular politics as a politics based in particular needs and aspirations that emerge in a situation of precariousness and a history of marginalisation. In so doing, I propose to further a postcolonial agenda of building a decentred political theory with relevance across the North-South divide.