Crime and Insurgent Citizenship: Extra-state rule and belonging in urban Jamaica

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ABSTRACT *Through an analysis of the 'don' system in Jamaica, Rivke Jaffe explores alternatives concepts of citizenships. She argues that new definitions of belonging to a political community, and the rights and responsibilities associated with these memberships, can take shape within a shifting spatial logic of government and ambiguous frames of legitimacy and morality. She calls for a deeper focus on the role of sovereigns that stand outside the state, yet may function as legitimate sources of citizenship rights, meanings and practices.*

KEYWORDS *'dons'; citizen action; formal state; criminal organizations; insurgent mobilizitations*

Introduction

How can we understand forms of citizen action that mobilize in support of violent, oppressive or extra-legal forms of governance? How can we interpret these dynamics in light of broader transformations in citizenship and widespread disillusionment with the functioning of the formal state? In this short article, I address these questions through a discussion of the rule of so-called 'dons' in inner-city neighbourhoods in urban Jamaica, based on fieldwork conducted in the capital Kingston from 2008–2011. These dons, neighbourhood leaders who are often linked to criminal organizations, are central to what can be seen as alternative (or complementary) governance structures at the level of the neighbourhood: they provide a range of state-like services, from welfare and employment to security and conflict resolution. While their form of rule relies on the use – or at least the credible threat – of violence, many inner-city residents consider the dons' authority to be largely legitimate. The support that the most powerful dons enjoy has been evident in a number of public demonstrations in which inner-city residents protest against the imprisonment or extradition of dons.

This article begins with a brief discussion of recent anthropological work on transformations in citizenship, focusing on Aihwa Ong's work on neo-liberalism and graduated sovereignty and James Holston's concept of insurgent citizenship. I use these theoretical concepts to explore two distinct ways in which these approaches to citizenship are relevant in understanding the case of the dons. First, I want to suggest that the relationship dons have with inner-city residents can be understood, to some extent, as resembling a relation of citizenship. Recognizing the relationship between dons and their

constituents as one structured by rights and responsibilities allows us to think through the possibilities of citizenship outside of the rubric of the state. Second, this relationship does not mean that residents no longer engage with the formal state. I explore the ways in which the dons' power is strengthened through residents' continued engagement with state actors and institutions, specifically public protests directed at the state and formally democratic elections. These mobilizations by inner-city residents, which support dons' extra-legal rule, point to the unruly, uncivic, messy and paradoxical forms that citizen action – or more broadly, engaged citizenship – can assume.

Transformations in citizenship

In modern history, citizenship has referred to the relationship between nation-states and their citizens. However, recent scholarship has theorized the emergence of new and flexible forms and sites of citizenship, including an analysis of citizenship beyond the state. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006), for instance, has studied the ways in which sovereignty and citizenship have been reworked in East and Southeast Asia, as transnational corporations and humanitarian NGOs assume a number of functions traditionally associated with the nation-state (see Ferguson, 2006 for a related analysis). This involves a reconfiguration and differentiation of both the actors and the spaces of citizenship and governance. States actively encourage spaces of political and economic exception, for instance, by creating special economic and administrative zones. Such zoning technologies, Ong (2006: 103) argues, allow states to 'create or accommodate islands of distinct governing regimes within the broader landscape of normalized rule. The political outcome is an archipelago of enclaves, the sum of which is a form of variegated sovereignty'.

Where Ong's analysis focuses mainly on top-down processes, James Holston (2008) offers another recent, innovative perspective on citizenship, with a stronger emphasis on grassroots processes. On the basis of social movements in the peripheries of Brazilian cities, Holston theorizes the emergence of 'insurgent citizenship'. Through

appropriations of land for residence and struggles for urban infrastructure and services, the working poor of Brazil have come to claim their right to the city. In so doing, they came to participate in an alternative public sphere, gaining new understanding of their rights, and negotiating different state–citizen relations. Through these processes – which interrogate and redefine social incorporation and the distribution of resources – they imagine and enact a new, largely democratic kind of urban citizenship. Holston contrasts these insurgent formulations of citizenship with entrenched formulations, in the case of Brazil the inclusive yet thoroughly inegalitarian system of 'differentiated citizenship', in which membership is universal but rights are distributed unequally. Despite its various gains, insurgent citizenship cannot be seen as replacing the entrenched citizenship regime of inequality. Rather, urban space forms the site and the substance of a confrontation between these two citizenships: 'the two formulations coexist, unhappily and dangerously, creating the mix of contradictory elements that constitutes Brazilian public space today' (Holston, 2008: 18).

Crime and citizenship

This recent anthropological work is helpful for understanding the role of dons and criminal organizations in Jamaica. In the marginalized neighbourhoods of the capital Kingston and other cities, criminal organizations assume the role that Ong ascribes to transnational corporations and NGOs. To a certain extent, they have taken on the responsibility of managing inner-city populations and spaces, displacing or complementing the activities of formal state actors. Their assumption of a governance function – in some cases actively facilitated by formal state actors – is accompanied by the development of a relationship with inner-city residents that can be seen as resembling citizenship, as I will argue below. Holston's focus on grassroots negotiations of state–citizen relations points to the active role the urban poor can play in imagining and enacting new kinds of citizenship, both within and outside the state. In the case of Jamaica, the structure of rule and belonging that connects dons and inner-city residents does

not mean the latter no longer see themselves as rights-bearing citizens vis-à-vis the state. A brief exploration of grassroots mobilizations that seek to defend donmanship by making claims on the state shows the entangled nature of citizens' allegiance to state and extra-state governance structures within contentious politics.

Citizenship beyond the state

In many inner-city neighbourhoods, dons and their organizations function in a state-like manner, providing citizens with access to crucial urban services and resources, and offering a framework for social inclusion and belonging. Donmanship functions as a system of governance because it provides – in a limited and undemocratic way – the rights, responsibilities and participation commonly associated with citizenship. Kingston's inner-city residents have come to understand their rights differently, looking to dons rather than to formal state actors for justice, physical and economic security, and for what many perceive as the protection of their rights, while perceiving the obligations these dons impose as more or less legitimate.

Citizens can make use of systems offering financial support, employment and, what appeared to be most important during my research, a measure of security and what is known as 'community justice'. In speaking of the most highly regarded dons, many residents emphasized their ability to 'split justice', that is to dispense fair justice, treating each individual equally without regard to status. Such descriptions of dons as fair and unbiased leaders must be understood in the light of inner-city residents' experience of Jamaica's formal system as deeply unequal and prejudiced. It is widely felt that state agencies such as the police and the judiciary discriminate against people from poor neighborhoods and against those with a darker skin colour. When inner-city residents depict dons as being committed to fairness and equality, they are contrasting a non-formal system that offers a (limited) form of equal rights and impartiality with a formal system that is known to be corrupt and biased. The don-led, non-formal system of governance, then, is narrated as distributing rights and resources in a more equal and just way than the formal state, protecting citizens' social and economic rights more effectively.

However, residents also have certain responsibilities that balance the don-based system of (allegedly equal) rights, such as the payment of 'taxes' (as extortion is broadly known), surveillance and conscription into silence vis-à-vis the police. The most important 'citizen obligation' is probably taxes, which must be paid by anyone who wishes to conduct business in the don's territory, from market vendors and wholesale shop owners to minibus drivers and larger businesses. Like formal state taxes, these extra-state taxes are an important responsibility citizens have towards the local governance structure. Many of those subject to paying these non-formal taxes were reluctant to use the term 'extortion', applying it mainly in cases where taxation was considered excessively high (in the case of greedy dons) or illegitimate (for instance, when freelance extortionists claimed to be associated with the don). In many conversations with inner-city residents, I found an acceptance of non-formal taxes. Most of those who discussed these payments with me did not speak of them as unjust. Rather, they referred to them in a matter-of-fact way, accepting them as part of life, but complaining in some cases that the rates were unreasonably high.

Insurgent mobilizations

Following Leydet's (2011) understanding of a citizen as 'a member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership', the relationship between the residents of Jamaica's marginalized urban areas and dons can be understood as resembling citizenship. Yet this does not mean that the urban poor no longer see themselves as belonging to the Jamaican nation-state. Rather, they recognize themselves as members of the overlapping political communities of donmanship and the Jamaican state. The entanglement of these forms of political belonging is evident in various ways. One well-known point of such an entanglement is elections. Historically, Jamaica's two main political parties, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP), 221

have engaged in a type of electoral turf politics known as 'garrison politics'. Both parties sought to create and maintain party-loyal 'garrisons' in low-income urban areas by concentrating their supporters in new housing developments. Politicians relied on dons to protect and strengthen these political strongholds: in return for money, weapons and government contracts, dons ensured that residents would vote for the 'right' party (Harriott, 2008; Sives, 2010). In many inner-city neighbourhoods, voting behaviour reflects a mix of deeply felt party-political loyalty and the pressure exerted by the don and his organization.

Elections are an important example of how different political subjectivities have become entwined. The state-directed mobilizations on behalf of dons are another illustration of the complicated relation between dons, state actors and the urban poor. The protest march held in May 2010 to protest the pending extradition of one of Jamaica's most prominent dons, Christopher 'Dudus' Coke – the leader of the West Kingston neighbourhood of Tivoli Gardens and closely aligned to the JLP – is the most recent illustration of such a mobilization. On 17 May, then Prime Minister Bruce Golding announced in a public broadcast his decision to comply with the United States' request to extradite Dudus. This decision came after nine months of stalling and attempts to influence the United States' position on the matter. Tension began to rise once the government's change in position became known and armed men began to block the entrances to Tivoli. The security forces expressed their concern, but did not act to remove the roadblocks immediately. Three days later, some 400 residents of Tivoli Gardens and neighbouring Denham Town came out in a peaceful and apparently highly organized protest march. The crowd, which consisted of mostly women, marched to the Jamaican house of parliament, where they were stopped by the police. Most were dressed in white and many waved cardboard signs with slogans such as 'Dudus is a better security officer, give him his props', 'After God, Dudus comes next' and 'Dudus is the way!!! We will die fighting'. The atmosphere during the march appeared to be quite festive, with many of the women smiling and laughing broadly as they waved their placards for the news cameras that quickly appeared on the scene.

This demonstration echoed earlier mobilizations in support of well-known dons. In 1998, the West Kingston don Donald 'Zeeks' Phipps, associated with the PNP-affiliated Spanglers gang, was arrested by the police and taken to the local police station. By this time, a peace treaty between Zeeks and Dudus had ended the historical rivalry between their two garrisons and allegedly even JLP-affiliated gunmen came out to support Zeeks. Enraged residents blocked off the roads with barricades and marched to the police station. In a similar strategy to the white-clad Dudus supporters in 2010, the 1998 protestors held up placards with slogans such as 'Justice for Zeeks' and chanted 'No Zeeks, no peace!' This march, though, was not peaceful, and the protestors threatened to storm the police station if their leader was not released. The crowd only calmed down after Zeeks was led out onto the building's balcony, where he convinced his followers that he was unharmed and persuaded them to go home, although riots shut down Kingston's main commercial area in the days that followed. In 2005, the fatal police shooting of Donovan 'Bulbie' Bennett, leader of the PNP-affiliated Clansman gang in Spanish Town, was followed by nightly candlelight vigils as well as armed riots. Similar violent disturbances took place in the same city a year later when Andrew 'Bun Man' Hope, leader of the rivalling One Order gang, was killed by police as well. To a certain extent, all these mobilizations – unruly and often violent – resemble James Holston's insurgent citizenship, in which counter-hegemonic actions of marginalized citizens destabilize entrenched formulations of citizenship.

Conclusion

In Jamaica, the governance structures surrounding criminal dons cannot be understood properly without paying attention to the different forms of citizen action that sustain them. This citizen action involves, first, the active role that persons play in negotiating, alternating and combining their relationships with different power structures. Inner-city residents actively narrate and enact

relations of rights and responsibilities with organizations outside the state, although their agency is always constrained by historically shaped contexts of coercion and reciprocity. It is disturbing that these alternative or complementary governance structures rely on violent and extra-legal means, that this citizenship beyond the state is reconfigured through, and embedded in, a non-formal and often illegal power structure. However, in their interaction with representatives of different power structures, and their representations of these structures, residents make distinctions on the basis of not so much formality and legality, but rather legitimacy. The fact that many inner-city residents perceive the dons' rule as legitimate in relation to the formal state must be situated with the broader context of institutionalized inequality and associated disillusionment.

In addition to this legitimacy-granting form of citizen action, the relationships of rule and belonging that have developed between dons and residents have occasionally given rise to unruly or even violent forms of mobilization in support of dons. The dons' extra-state governance structures both stem from and nurture insurgent formulations of citizenship. Donmanship counters Jamaica's entrenched regime of differentiated citizenship and 'works against' the formal state, yet in the riots and demonstrations, the dons' supporters also mobilize as rights-bearing citizens who lay claim on the Jamaican state.

This is the paradoxical nature of much citizen action in today's world: new definitions of belonging to a political community, and the rights and responsibilities associated with these memberships, take shape within a shifting spatial logic of government and ambiguous frames of legitimacy and morality. Through my discussion of the case of Jamaica's dons and the role of citizen action, I hope to have demonstrated that our analyses of transformations of citizenship would benefit from a focus on the role of sovereigns that stand outside the state, yet may function as legitimate sources of citizenship rights, meanings and practices.

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