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Stories of city strife in Johannesburg: agonism in local democracy and service delivery

Pernegger, Li

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Abstract

One-Sentence Summary

This study assesses agonism's practical possibilities for constructive, rather than destructive, outcomes arising from state-society strife, by drawing on the case of the Johannesburg city administration.

250-Word Summary

Increasing citizen protest against the state in recent years seem to point to the 'failure' of the state and democracy globally. Particularly in South Africa, the 'miracle' of the transition from apartheid highlights the apparent shortcomings of the new democracy in serving all its citizens, especially low-income communities, but also middle-class ones.

The story behind protest is complex, with many forms of state-society strife unfolding in the public realm – not only those staged in the streets. In a world largely based on consensus-seeking western democratic governance practices, the state makes every effort to implement participation processes targeting citizen agreement for plans, policies and projects.

Using agonism as a prism to view state-society strife, conflict is shown to be not necessarily a destructive force but an inevitable and sometimes constructive agent for democratic change. The main question asks what the practical possibilities are of applying concepts of agonism to the state-society relationship in cases of conflict, from the perspective of those working within the state.

Stories of city strife about urban governance issues in Johannesburg are told through a case study based on documentary analysis and interviews with state-affiliated respondents. The investigation into these conflicts, through the previously unapplied lens of agonism provides fresh insights into protest, potentially contributing to a new narrative showing that actualising agonism has real possibilities for considering conflict as a constructive force for change. Further, this has implications for both the national South African and global democratic discourse on the intersection between governance practices and protest.

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