universität koblenz
Philologie / Kulturwissenschaften

Democracy and the State: Post- and Decolonial Perspectives

International Workshop
Universität Koblenz, June 26-27, 2025

Convenor: Ina Kerner // Administrative Support: Nele Weiher, Mara Bierbrauer
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The term "postcolonialism" refers to contexts and constellations that temporally and formally come after European colonialism but are clearly shaped by it. Accordingly, postcolonial studies analyze the manifold facets of our postcolonial present. The assumption that colonial thought patterns and structures continue to have an impact even decades, or – as in the case of the Americas – centuries after the formal end of colonialism, is fundamental to this transdisciplinary field of research. Following Aníbal Quijano, one also speaks of "coloniality" in connection with these after-effects. Like postcolonial studies in general, the field of decolonial studies, the focus of which is particularly on Latin American contexts, emerged from the need to understand, and to critically address, such ongoing forms of coloniality, and to think about ways of getting away from them, or, in other words: to decolonize.

In the academic system, postcolonial studies have thus far been most firmly established within the discipline of Anglophone Literature and Cultural Studies (in Germany, Anglistik); decolonial approaches are until now most prominent in the realm of Latin American Studies. However, in recent years, there has been an increasing prevalence of social science research that incorporates insights from postcolonial and decolonial studies, including research in politics and political theory. The transdisciplinary workshop "Democracy and the State: Post- and Decolonial Perspectives" is situated in this emerging field of critical inquiry and brings together scholars whose work contributes to it.

At the center of the workshop are questions, conceptualizations, and contemporary problems of statehood and democracy. The workshop spans the fields of political theory, politics research and legal anthropology, to allow empirically informed theoretical reflections on strengths, new insights, but also potential limits of post- and decolonial studies approaches to questions of statehood and democracy. The topics addressed include phenomena of democratic crisis, right-wing radicalization, and authoritarianism, as well as manifestations and imaginations of statehood that diverge from the Western standard model and become apparent in connection with violence, migration, neoliberalism, and gender.

Day 1: June 26, 2025
Campus, Universität Koblenz, Room M 201

5:00 – 6:00 pm
Arrival, informal gathering at the tables in front of Menseria, Mikadoplatz

6:00 – 8:00 pm
Public Opening Lecture
Luciana Ballestrin (Berlin//Pelotas): *Democratic Crisis and Postcolonial Conditions*

Joint Dinner

Day 2: June 27, 2025
Obere Löhrstraße 78-80, Room OL 318

9:30 – 10:00
Introduction(s)

10:00 – 11:00 (Chair: Nele Weiher)
Francisco Carballo (London): *Can Anibal Quijano Make Sense of Nayib Bukele? Reflections on Coloniality: 25 Years Later*

11:15 – 12:15 (Chair: Lucienne Wagner)
Ina Kerner (Koblenz): *Towards a Postcolonial Theory View on Statehood and the State*

12:30 – 1:30 (Chair: Christine Unrau)
Marcial Suarez (Köln//Niterói): *Hybrid Governance and Criminal Governance on the Amazon Border: A Decolonial Interpretation of the Violent Context in Local Communities*

Lunchbreak

3:00 – 4:00 (Chair: Bahar Oghalai)
Veronika Zablotsky (Berlin): *The Nation as Colony: Diasporic Enterprise in Post-Soviet Armenia*

4:15 – 5:15 (Chair: Ina Kerner)
Katrin Seidel (Halle): *Pluriversal Encounters of Statehood and Stateness? Insights From African Contexts*

5:30 – 6:30 (Chair: Liane Schäfer)
Nele Weiher (Koblenz): *The Ambivalences of Transgender Politics in Pakistan*

6:45 – 7:30
Final Discussion

Joint Dinner

Abstracts:

Luciana Ballestrin (Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Berlin // Universidade Federal de Pelotas): Democratic Crisis and Postcolonial Conditions

Since 2015, political scientists around the world have been observing the democratic crisis as a quantitative trend. The distinguishing feature of today's democratic crisis is that it is driven by institutions, laws and democratic procedures themselves. The regressive and reactionary nature of this phenomenon is linked to right-wing radicalization, which promotes intolerance and hate speech against various social groups and minorities. In this climate of mistrust, social division and political polarization, "populist" politicians who violate democratic rules are coming to power and anti-democratic representatives have been elected with popular support.

Against this backdrop, the democratic crisis requires new analytical and normative efforts by political theorists and scholars. On should particularly ask how the Global South has been treated in the literature on democracy and democratic crisis, and why it may be important to recognize such specificities to understand and address the crisis.

In the context of a postcolonial global political order, we should consider the crisis of democracy as a global phenomenon influenced and overlaid by three factors: historical inequalities, ideological tendencies and economic structures. I identify two conditions that are related to a systemic view of the crisis of democracy: postcolonial globality and the post-neoliberal transition. The main aim of my presentation is to discuss the idea of "postcolonial democracies" in the democratic crisis context, namely by demonstrating the advantages as well as the limits of such a category.

Francisco Carballo (Goldsmiths, University of London): Can Anibal Quijano Make Sense of Nayib Bukele? Reflections on Coloniality: 25 Years Later

The widespread use of the term "coloniality" has obscured its origins, which can be traced back to the work of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano in the early 1990s. In this talk, I aim to explore coloniality as the basis of a critical theory that emerged from the specific circumstances of Latin America and responded to the left's concerns at a time when neoclassical economics, liberal democracy, and globalisation were dramatically reshaping the world.

My second and most significant objective is to examine how we can approach "(de)coloniality" in the present context. We live in a time when democracy seems to be losing its appeal, statecraft appears to be abandoning its alleged commitment to the rule of law, and extractive capitalism is discarding its mask of sustainability. Should we modify Quijano's original premises to respond to this new historical context? Can the term "coloniality" still help us make sense of today's world and create opportunities for emancipatory politics? or should we entertain the hypothesis that We may be witnessing a Lampedusa moment where coloniality is only transforming itself to ensure its survival?

Ina Kerner (Universität Koblenz): Towards a Postcolonial Theory View on Statehood and the State

Is it possible and does it make sense to formulate a postcolonial theory view on the state that goes beyond case studies and the reflection of concrete examples? And if so, what might such a perspective look like? In my paper, I present some preliminary considerations in this direction.

The focus is initially on two aspects of colonial statehood and their lasting consequences in the present. The first aspect concerns dual statehood, parallel state structures for different constituent groups: rule-of-law-based structures for Europeans, and arbitrary rule as well as violence-based forms of governance regarding the colonized. The second aspect is state racism, i.e. racism institutionalized in the state apparatus, practiced by the bureaucracy and exercised by state agents.

In a second part of my paper, I briefly address ideas and concepts of anti- and postcolonial governance that transcend the nation-state model in different ways: pan-African federalism on the one hand, and North American indigenous forms of self-rule on the other hand.

Marcial A. Garcia Suarez (Universidade Federal Fluminense): Hybrid Governance and Criminal Governance on the Amazon Border: A Decolonial Interpretation of the Violent Context in Local Communities

This proposal analyzes the correlation between the porosity of state borders, the presence of criminal actors, and the modes of governance established between state and non-state actors. Such governance directly influences the levels of crime that affect local communities in the Amazon region, particularly in the triple border region among Brazil, Colombia, and Peru.

In this context, socio-environmental conflicts emerge as a central theme, with harassment and violence against traditional communities serving as early signs of rampant exploitation in the Amazon. Public security plays a crucial role in these areas, safeguarding both local inhabitants and their territories. Borders become arenas where many dynamics of illegality and violence manifest.

The Amazon region encompasses multiple languages, ways of life, and interactions among indigenous and traditional peoples, migrants, nomadic miners, biomes, mythologies, beliefs, and nation-states. The proposed analytical challenge lies in interpreting the local reality of violence, striving to convey the context through the very voices of those living in these settings, rather than merely applying the notion of crime or criminal from a legal-penal framework that holds little significance for these communities.

Veronika Zablotsky (Freie Universität Berlin): The Nation as Colony: Diasporic Enterprise in Post-Soviet Armenia

Through a case study of diasporic “extrastatecraft” in the Republic of Armenia, this talk offers an ethnographically informed political theory of neoliberal governmentality that accounts for the impact of circular migrations and overlooked colonial histories of globalization in West Asia. It retraces how the formerly “stateless” Armenian diaspora – linked to the Ottoman dismemberment of the Armenian nation-body a century prior – has adopted the post-Soviet state as a “national enterprise” in which all self-identified Armenians are incorporated as

shareholders and potential investors. In this “global” vision, sovereignty is vested in the corporate nation, rather than a given state, resulting in efforts to reconstitute Armenia as a “start-up country” – a joint venture – after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The talk connects the neoliberal present to the longue durée of global coloniality in the region by retracing how English East India Company rule in South Asia first led Armenian merchants to envision secular/modern Armenian statehood as a corporate/colonial enterprise.

Katrin Seidel (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle // Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg): Pluriversal Encounters of Statehood And Stateness? Insights From African Contexts

The presentation problematises hegemonic Anglo-Eurocentric conceptions of statehood and sovereignty, particularly the Westphalian model and its categorisations of deviations as “failed” or “weak” states. It explores the violent and contested nation-state trajectory against the backdrop of a multiplicity of political ordering in post-colonial African contexts; illustrating political experimentation beyond the imaginaries of the nation-state model. It also sketches debates on recentering the meanings of statehood and stateness within the broader attempts at ‘African democracy’; seeking historicised and contextualised understandings of power, authority and legitimacy. Drawing on sociolegal and postcolonial insights, the presentation critiques normalised power-knowledge hierarchies and searches for pluriversal and transformative encounters of statehood and stateness.

Nele Weiher (Universität Koblenz): The Ambivalences of Transgender Politics in Pakistan

The case of Pakistan illustrates the paradoxical dynamics of state legal policy: while the “Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act 2018”, one of the world's most progressive laws for the protection of transgender people, was passed in 2018, this did not lead to less social marginalization and discrimination. The focus is on this fundamental ambivalence between progressive legislation and social reality. On the one hand, the law guaranteed basic rights such as self-determination of gender identity, education and healthcare - on the other hand, one can see an increase in violence, hate crimes and social exclusion. In 2023 then, the Sharia court overturned key provisions of the law and revoked the right to self-determination for transgender people on the grounds that this contradicted Islamic principles. This development illustrates the tensions within the republic, in which state legal principles and religious jurisprudence compete for interpretative sovereignty. It also seems interesting that the court's ruling followed the example of the former colonialist Great Britain instead of other Islamic countries, revealing how colonial frameworks continue to shape contemporary gender policies. The aim is to show how this ambivalent legal policy further marginalizes traditional gender concepts. Furthermore, this raises the question of the role of the state in the strategic granting and denial of minority rights. This case demonstrates the complexity/challenges of post- and decolonial analysis, particularly when colonial legal structures become entangled with religious jurisprudence and local power dynamics.