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## Housing struggles as political practice in post-apartheid Cape Town: reading Levenson's *Delivery as Dispossession*

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### ABSTRACT

Levenson's new book *Delivery as Dispossession* offers a careful reading of land occupations in Cape Town that takes us from landless communities in the city to courtrooms. His study focuses on two occupations in the Mitchell's Plain area with contrasting fates, which his empirically rich analysis explains in relation to the occupiers' strategies and self-representation to the state. It is an important political sociology that contributes to how we understand the post-apartheid state and contemporary Cape Town through the inadequacies of its public housing project. It also theoretically reframes understandings of the state-subject relations in a manner that demonstrates the importance of local political organisation and the refusal of the poor to be managed as populations without political voice, as objects merely of a planning apparatus. My review essay seeks to elaborate some of its key interventions, and to pose some questions of its framing of historical continuities and changes.

### KEYWORDS

Housing; occupation; Cape Town; post-apartheid; Historical Sociology

Zachary Levenson's new book on land occupations by the poor in Cape Town presents a compelling account of how the urban landless occupy, organise, and resist to remain on the land as well as the layered terrains on which such struggles are fought. It is a carefully researched study that moves from police raids and occupiers' meetings to courtrooms in analysing two occupations in an area far from central Cape Town. Levenson frames these occupations in terms of the difficulties of postcolonial democracies to maintain legitimacy while regulating marginal and poor populations. In so doing, he offers a theory of the very constitution of the post-apartheid state: that the state is continually formed and reformed through its struggles with the poor, struggles that take place with lawyers and police, with neighbourhood and residents' associations, and sometimes with political parties. Four intersecting chapters develop the account of these struggles, preceded by a rich discussion of post-apartheid housing, emphasising a neglected history to offer a provocative conceptualisation of the shift from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid, which for Levenson has become a political and legal battle over when occupation and eviction – dispossession – can be justified and how it might be resisted.

Levenson's book opens with a compelling conundrum: two land occupations in the same Cape Flats neighbourhood of Cape Town with two quite different outcomes.

Levenson describes in fine-grained details a range of actors involved, the strategies involved in both, and how these struggles evolved, with one resulting in a court-ordered eviction and the other obtaining a court judgement that halted eviction proceedings, granting an indefinite right to remain to those who were acknowledged as its residents. In explaining the differences between these occupations, Levenson demonstrates a concrete, consequential political practice, which, ironically enough, is successful partly in disproportionate relation to its involvement with formal political parties and even with established non-governmental organisations. He also shows how both politics and resistance have become judicialised; that is, how an engagement with the law and courts, previously a hostile ground for the poor, are now a key part of their terrain of struggle.

In this review essay, I will recount some of the major interventions of the book before moving to some of the more challenging aspects of the argument. These turn on the book's reading of what the post-apartheid state is and its relation to urban land occupation, and, indeed, how the failure to provide housing for all has become a central way to understand a challenge the South African government faces. At a more theoretical level, the book is a caution against too quick or general characterisations of "the state" or "land occupiers" in favour of an empirically detailed argument for how the terrain of politics has itself changed and must be taken seriously on its own terms. In my final section, I will explore some of the dimensions of his historical reading and suggest a way to elaborate this aspect of his generally convincing analysis.

## Two occupations in Mitchells Plain

The land occupations analysed by Levenson are Kapteinsklip and Siqualo, both situated in Mitchells Plain and occupied in 2011 or 2012. Both faced eviction and ended up in High Court. Centring research on struggles over land and housing on Mitchells Plain is in itself an important intervention because it is a neighbourhood established during late Apartheid as a periphery of central Cape Town and somewhat neglected by the literature on the city. To this day, its political economy and infrastructures are quite distinct from neighbourhoods much closer to the city, and thus quite different from occupations in Sea Point and Woodstock often held to be "Cape Town occupations," places where land is expensive and where occupations address present marginalisation of the black poor from proximity to the city (Herold and DeBarros 2020; Scheba 2023; Wingfield 2019). Mitchells Plain, as Levenson discusses in Chapter 2, was built in the early 1970s by the Apartheid state and projected as a space for the coloured middle class, including the construction of recreational facilities (Pinto de Almeida 2022, 929–930). Yet its distance from the city coupled with its residents being pushed into the area following forced removal from other parts of Cape Town and its lack of employment opportunities meant that government housing in the area never provided the economic stimulus that Apartheid-era city engineers and planners hoped it would (Levenson 2022, 43–46).

The occupations in Mitchells Plain are important cases because they are spaces where many of the occupiers come from surrounding areas and have been unable to access secure housing, challenging a commonly held assumption that land occupiers are frequently recent migrants to the city. Moreover, Mitchells Plain's particular history as a so-called coloured township is important: one part of the larger

neighbourhood, an area named Colorado that did become relatively stable and economically secure, if not middle class, features in Levenson's account of the Siqalo occupation; Colorado's ratepayers' association vehemently opposed the occupation and mobilised senior figures from the Democratic Alliance-led local government, often expressing "class concerns as naked racism" (Levenson 2022, 143). Despite the occupations raising the ire of residents in more stable settlements in their vicinity, Levenson shows how the mode of organisation in Siqalo also produces new kinds of solitary among the landless, including across apartheid-era racial divides.

Levenson's discussion of the two settlements departs from a fundamental impasse: the inability of the post-apartheid government to achieve its commitment to provide housing for all, as a human right. He tells us that, by 2017, the government had built at least 3.1 million formal houses and provided an additional 1 million housing opportunities, but that if the national demand for housing was 1.4 million in 1994, it today stands at between 2.1 and 2.7 million (50–51). This housing backlog – which has doubled during this period in Cape Town itself, from 165 000 to between 300 000 and 400 000 – has meant that those waiting for a house are often likely to wait far longer than a decade to receive it. In this context, either living in informal structures on the plots of formal houses – so-called "backyarding" – or occupying land and building informal structures has been a way to create some degree of shelter. While City officials view these attempts to claim land as illegal and "queue-jumping," Levenson (56) pointedly argues that "this is to invert the causal sequence. In making the argument, officials are claiming that squatters undermine the state's capacity to deliver rather than acknowledging the obvious fact that squatters exist in the first place because of [its] limited capacity."

The occupations at Kapteinsklip and Siqalo thus emerge in the wake of the failure to deliver on the constitutional right to housing with Levenson discussing their strategies to remain on occupied land amid the city's attempt to evict them. Kapteinsklip's occupation adopted a strategy of allocating individual plots and tying individuals to these plots in a manner that resembles government housing allocation and regarded their occupation as co-operating with the local municipal administration of human settlements. This produced, for Levenson, a set of "serial" individualised relations between occupiers, with factions eventually developing. By contrast, Siqalo emerged as a collective occupation. At the outset, it sought to evade the state and relied on a single leader, before a collective leadership committee emerged. Levenson characterised the relations in Siqalo as "fused," involving a strong sense of collective self-determination and a refusal to accept the participation of political parties, indeed adopting an openly hostile approach to governmental authorities. While Siqalo's occupation was on two privately owned plots, the occupation at Kapteinsklip claimed disused public land. Yet Kapteinsklip was unable to prevent the High Court granting an eviction order: the judge viewed the occupiers as individual "defendants" divided by competing interests and as selfishly occupying land. By contrast, in Siqalo's case the judge acknowledged them as "residents" who had to be dealt with collectively and who could not be evicted if the City was unable to provide them with comparable alternative accommodation. The Siqalo settlement successfully resisted the eviction.

## An argument about the state and politics

These two cases are the basis of Levenson's theoretical intervention, which is partially captured by his conclusion that "sociospatially marginalised populations do have politics, and they can represent themselves" (167). The targets of this intervention most explicitly are the theories of Partha Chatterjee's *Politics of the Governed* (2004) and of James Scott's *Seeing like a State* (1998), which I will discuss in turn. In levelling this critique, Levenson aims to reanimate a Gramscian-inspired understanding where the state is not an abstract entity, autonomous from civil society, but rather produced as the outcome of struggles across different spheres of life, from the most immediately political ones to spaces of culture and social life that are less obviously political (28–29).

Chatterjee (2004) argues that "in most of the world," political life is divided between those who participate as citizens with rights in civil society and those who are administered by postcolonial governments as populations. Roughly mapping unto a class division between a small middle and upper class in civil society and a mass of the poor in political society, Chatterjee suggests that while in civil society, individuals make claims on universal rights, the kind of politics of political society is one that turns on the ability of mass populations to gain exceptional entitlements. The two domains exist largely independently of one another. For Chatterjee, the emergence of political society is historically specific: it is connected to a transformation of state's role from expropriation of land from the poor most visible in colonialism to a governmental regime of the management of poor populations through welfare since the 1980s.

Levenson notes that he and Chatterjee share an appreciation for Gramsci; however, he identifies in Chatterjee's analysis a failure to recognise how land occupiers can meaningfully participate in civil society. While governments do attempt to manage the urban poor as populations, Levenson shows that the occupiers are able to shape the terms of how they are viewed. Their politics is thus meaningful not merely for claiming local entitlements, but because they can and do change the terms of how land and rights exist in postcolonial societies.

Levenson's critique of Scott follows from this. Scott (1998) famously suggests that states attempt to render populations legible as a means to govern them, including through massive re-engineering of cities through urban planning and the standardisation of language and naming practices. Such attempts to "see" populations in order to govern them can and does shape urban policy, including in Cape Town, but for Levenson such a view misses how occupiers' own politics reflect back on how they are seen, and indeed, how the state can govern. The divergent trajectories of Kapteinsklip and Siqalo are evidence that such struggles are meaningful in defining political futures.

Indeed, Levenson's ambition is even greater here: these land occupations and their political acts, on the ground and in court, not only shape how the state sees but also shape what the state is. For he insists that the "state is not a thing but a social relation" (164), more than an institution or a top-down assemblage of power, it is an outcome of shifting forces in society, where whatever blueprint motivated its existence, including a document like the Constitution, its actual existence is the matter of struggle over its terms, not only between elite factions but also between a range of forces able to articulate themselves politically. Hence the sphere of what counts as politics is enlarged and not known in any *a priori* fashion: in the South African context – and perhaps in other postcolonial

countries, too – seemingly mundane tactics of local organisation matter politically, particular terms of collective claim-making shape not only how a movement is seen by the state, but how the state will act, and the engagement with the law further sets in motion state actions, producing different kinds of states.

This is an important conceptual intervention, carefully grounded in a detailed exposition of the struggles in these two occupations. It raises critical questions for how we understand the importance of contemporary South African struggles and the limits and scope of government action. It certainly can be applied comparatively to different postcolonial contexts, and Levenson does suggest connections to Brazil as well as drawing theoretically on work emerging out of housing struggles in India.

In a study elsewhere in South Africa, I suggest that how state “sees” involves different agents of state – from the municipal planner to the local government official, levels of state that “see” quite differently, for instance – as well as the articulation of this vision with those on whose behalf the state planned (Dubbeld 2013). If the unity of the post-apartheid state – its “thing-like” character – is put under pressure both in Levenson’s study and my own, I grounded this pressure in the particular political economy of the dire need for employment amid its mass absence. Levenson does identify “surplus populations” and their influx as a fundamental challenge facing the delivery of housing in post-apartheid South Africa (and even in postcolonial contexts generally). To understand what he means by this, we must turn to his provocative characterisation of apartheid and post-apartheid housing.

### **Dispossession, delivery, democracy: historical sociological thoughts**

Levenson’s second chapter offers an extensive reading of historical and contemporary literature on housing and urban struggles during Apartheid and Post-Apartheid. The discussion of housing delivery during Apartheid sets up a key dynamic for him and helps to explain the title of the book as well as the key terms “delivery” and “dispossession.” He writes

Delivery, I argue, is inseparable from dispossession. Rather than map each concept onto a bounded period – dispossession under apartheid and delivery under democracy – I want to explore how the two are articulated in novel configurations in different historical conjunctures. (Levenson 2022, 40)

Levenson argues that for the achievement of Apartheid’s logic of dispossession, housing had to be delivered: this saw the development of townships including mass housing projects in Mitchells Plain in the 1970s and Khayelitsha in the early 1980s. Such housing projects were conceived to absorb those forcibly removed from areas designated white closer to the centre of the city. Amid an understandable focus of Apartheid as logic of dispossession, Levenson (42) suggests that this aspect of housing delivery is often neglected. Assembling key insights from Ivan Evans and Bill Freund of the scale and design of this housing, Levenson stresses how such delivery was a key mechanism of the logic of dispossession.

Post-apartheid housing offers a different, in many ways reversed configuration: the logic has been one of delivery, of building houses as a remedial project of overcoming the dispossessions enacted by Apartheid. Yet because housing cannot be delivered quickly

enough – the government’s ambition is too great, its resources too limited – occupation of land is inevitable. As his book shows, the character of land occupation varies, but such occupations prompt the government to act, whether due to pressure from private land owners, from adjacent more established neighbourhoods that feel threatened, or simply because it represents a threat to the orderly process of the progressive realisation of democratic rights that the Constitution promises and on which the post-apartheid government stakes its legitimacy. Hence the logic of delivering houses has in practice been accompanied by the dispossession of those judged to have acted on their own terms, “jumped the queue”, etc., a judgement that ultimately serves to reproduce an idea of the state as the guarantor of fair process and democracy.

This sets up the focus of the book on battles over dispossession of those occupying land in an era of delivery, the democratic era. Such a neat characterisation of delivery as dispossession does give us pause to think about the dynamics between the past and present. Levenson suggests that in the final years of Apartheid, with the repeal of influx control regulations in 1986, “Black residents returned to cities in large numbers” and “produced a Sisyphean demand” for housing on the new government (47, 179). Certainly urban populations have grown tremendously since the mid-1980s, but as literature from the time suggests, African urbanisation prompted the repeal of influx control regulation, rather than being simply enabled by it (Gilomee and Schlemmer 1985; Moodie 1986). For instance, in 1977, it was estimated that Cape Town had at least 150 000 squatters, many of whom were attracted to Cape Town by the prospect of employment, while some were victims of forced removals (Ellis 1977, 2–5).

This longer history of “surplus populations” and informal housing in Cape Town does not contest Levenson’s characterisation of Apartheid being primarily concerned with “dispossession” and of the importance of recognising an Apartheid programme of delivering houses on managed urban peripheries that facilitated forced removals. But it does require us to consider that Apartheid did have at least two distinct moments in relation to urban housing and influx control: the first which involved the building of Apartheid’s urban architecture, perhaps stretching from 1948 to the early to mid-1970s and a second period where the continued implementation of Apartheid ran into a range of resistances that forced concessions from the state, including the eventual repeal of Group Areas and influx control regulations, amid heightened government violent repression.

Such a concern with changes during the 1970s and 1980s is flattened by a neat characterisation of Apartheid as “dispossession by delivery” and Post-Apartheid as “delivery by dispossession.” Recognising these historical shifts can also help us to engage the concept of “surplus populations,” which Levenson considers important to explaining why the post-apartheid state housing programme has failed, but whose origins require more explanation. Are “surplus populations” largely an outcome of population growth, or do they have to do with transformations in capital and labour?

While Levenson (55) seems to find Gramsci’s concrete attention to politics more useful than Marx’s more abstract analysis – which Levenson suggests is focused on the creation of “free” labour – Marx used the concept of “surplus population” in *Capital* in relation to the extent of technological innovation within production. While capitalism initially generates a demand for more people to be incorporated into production as workers, its advancement eventually renders more and more people redundant to

capitalist production, as he puts it “a population which is superfluous to capital’s average requirements for its own valorisation . . . a surplus population” (Marx [1867] 1976, 782). While it seems to me that such a general concept could be useful, especially if combined with a recognition of the shifts in capitalist production during the late Apartheid period, such an explanation seems quite far away from the focus of Levenson’s book on contemporary housing struggles.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

Zachery Levenson has written an important book. Its careful engagement of urban land occupations develops a powerful analysis that deftly avoids reifying an urban administration and state or endowing occupiers with the status of self-conscious revolutionaries. His reading of the more modest political ambitions of the residents of these informal settlements shows how their strategies and tactics are nevertheless worthy of attention, in the first instance decisive in whether they are able to remain and, second, in how they contribute to making and remaking what the “state” is and will become. Without accepting summary accounts of the nature of post-apartheid South Africa assuming its character is already decided, he shows how the contemporary terrain is contested, how the courts and the Constitution are important and how the politics of the poor has changed since Apartheid. It is a convincing, wonderfully grounded argument that demonstrates that political practice matters.

The book’s theoretical allegiance is ultimately Gramscian, but this is not a heavy-handed theoretical treatise. Yet its reading of the literature on Cape Town and on land and housing struggles across the global South is impressive, and in the moments when it does engage theories like Chatterjee or Scott’s, the writing is lucid and follows very obviously from the empirical material under discussion. My comments suggesting the importance of examining the late Apartheid period and the accompanying transformation are not the focus of this book, but rather a series of questions that Levenson’s fine analysis of present struggles generated. It is a book that should inspire more research on contemporary and historical questions and produce debate, not just in South Africa, but also across many postcolonial contexts.

## Note

1. To do this, I would begin with Wolpe’s ([1972] 1995) foundational analysis of capitalism in South Africa and the exploitation of cheap Black Labour. Wolpe does acknowledge a shift in Apartheid policy that gains special impetus in the early 1970s towards the building of “border industries,” with the logic shifting from taking production to sources of cheap labour, enabled by government subsidies, rather than bringing Black workers to cities. One can think of production developed in Atlantis some forty kilometres north of Cape Town. This shift suggests a response to a crisis in urban capitalist production, and perhaps this is also the moment where we could think of emergence of populations “superfluous” to capital, in the sense that there is no demand for their labour power, with of course other modes of non-capitalist modes of rural production utterly destroyed through a century and half of colonial dispossession. Moodie’s (1986) critical review of Gilomee and Schlemmer makes the point that the labour bureaux system collapsed due to the absence of jobs and the extent



of mechanisation undermining cheap labour, and I have suggested elsewhere that in the Durban Harbour, the late 1970s saw a reorientation away from cheap labour power (Dubbeld 2015).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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