Book review:
Delivery as dispossession: Land occupation and eviction in the postapartheid city
Zachary Levenson, 2022

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Abstract

Drawing on fieldwork over the course of a decade in two encampments in Cape Town, South Africa, Matthew Levenson's book uses a Gramscian framework to analyze the dynamics between the state and the organizational formations of encampments. His relational perspective on eviction considers the main factors influencing the likelihood of state-enforced evictions and underlines the effect of different organizing tactics, constructing land occupations as alternative housing versus social movements. In challenging and expanding our understandings of the politics of eviction, the book provides insights for housing movements globally.

Keywords

Land occupation, distributive democracy, eviction, squatting, South Africa

Matthew Levenson's book (Oxford University Press, 2022) challenges and expands our understandings of the politics of eviction. It offers a relational perspective on eviction, emphasizing the dynamics between the state and the organizational formations of encampments; his analysis suggests that these relationships may drive the likelihood of eviction over more frequently discussed factors like NIMBYism due to visibility, race, or political affiliation. Drawing from Gramsci's (1971) framing of the relational nature of civil and political society, Levenson argues that whether occupiers see the state as a partner in the delivery of housing or as an agent of dispossession—in other words, an agent disconnecting them from land—leads to different social formations of occupations, and that these consequent organizational formations then impact how they are perceived (and treated) by the state. His comparative ethnography is based on fieldwork over the course of a decade in

two encampments in Cape Town, South Africa: Kapteinsklip and Siqalo. There, he interviewed camp residents, Department of Human Settlements officials, private sector consultants, and housing policy and legal experts to then analyze civil and political society at both encampments. In the book he explores the question of why the residents at Kapteinsklip were eventually evicted, whereas those at Siqalo were not.

Levenson counters existing rhetoric around eviction which argues that evictions are driven by their visibility and complaints of neighboring residents or businesses, racism (response to occupiers of a different racial identity than the surrounding community), or the perceived attempt to sway political parties within a particular district. Though Kapteinsklip was ultimately evicted, Levenson (2022, p. 7) argues that this occupation was 'hardly visible to passerby, and in any case the land was municipally owned; no homeowners mobilized against the squatters; the occupiers were predominantly "Colored" in a "Colored" area; and there was no reason to suspect that they were not DA [Democratic Alliance political party] supporters moving around within DA territory.' Historically, the DA and African National Congress (ANC) were opposing parties in Cape Town, and proponents of a particular party would sometimes occupy the opposing party's territory to try to flip its party affiliation (Levenson, 2022). In response, members of the area's party had vested interest in evicting occupiers of the opposing party; it is notable at Kapteinsklip that political interests were not under suspicion, yet the camp was evicted regardless. On the other hand, Siqalo, which had not been evicted at the time Levenson wrote this book, was privately owned and neighboring residents who were largely 'Colored' homeowners mobilized against African occupiers. As the cases of Siqalo and Kapteinsklip defied prior understandings of the underlying motivations driving eviction, Levenson considers a more relational framework of the co-constructed perceptions, organizational formations, and actions taken by the occupations and the state.

As South Africa's post-apartheid constitution called the South African Bill of Rights established a right to housing, Cape Town offers a unique context for evictions and how they are managed (South African Constitution, 2021). This constitution gives judges the power to determine whether a proposed eviction violates people's constitutional rights, and it also delegates sole responsibility for supplying housing to the state, establishing a distributive democracy (ibid.). A distributive democracy depends on a politics of 'deservingness', in which housing officials control resource distribution and those perceived as patiently waiting their turn are seen as deserving of services while others are seen as 'queue jumpers' trying to skip their place in line. Levenson situates his understanding of evictions in how a distributive democracy —such as that established by the dominant political party of the time, the ANC— legitimates itself. Under a distributive democracy, he argues that 'it is government officials who produce queue jumpers in the first place, misrecognizing land occupation as a cause, rather than a consequence, of the state's failure to deliver' (Levenson, 2022, p. 16). As such, Leveson argues that while prior to apartheid, the South African government facilitated dispossession via segregated delivery of housing, they also facilitated delivery of housing post-apartheid via dispossession by evicting land occupations.

Several factors influenced the likelihood of state-enforced evictions. Levenson suggests that occupiers were less likely to be evicted on private land, as the owners of private land need to file for eviction, whereas city officials can act immediately, and legally, on public land. The amount of time it took to file complaints also mattered as state officials were obligated to provide housing alternatives for long-standing occupiers prior to eviction. The time to file complaints was impacted by whether occupiers joined gradually versus all at once, as more gradually developing occupations were less likely to be noticed and considered disruptive. For instance, the occupation at Siqalo started with only seven families and grew to host thousands.

Further, Levenson notes the effect of different organizing tactics, constructing land occupations as alternative housing versus social movements. Levenson (2022) uses the notion of 'social non-movements', arguing that the occupiers were not taking land 'to put pressure on authorities to meet their demands[;] in nonmovements actors directly practice what they claim, despite government sanctions. Thus, theirs is not a politics of protest, but of practice, of redress through direct and disparate actions' (p. 13). He argues that the state then pushed the occupation from a social non-movement to a social movement by taking action against it.

Levenson situates each of these dynamics in a larger framework of the occupations' relationships with the state. In Kapteinsklip, an organization called Mitchell's Plain Housing Association resembled the state by recruiting occupiers to 'receive' their own property in a manner similar to that of the waiting list for housing under the South African Bill of Rights but without any government affiliation or authority. In this context, however, residents competed for resources and formed factions which the state then perceived as a threat. On the other hand, Siqalo perceived the state as a threat and therefore built an oppositional collectivity: the founding leader of Siqalo fostered a politics of unity and inclusiveness, recruiting new occupiers bound together in their opposition to the state. Ultimately, the state then read Siqalo's organizational formation as a collectivity and therefore saw them as a 'deserving poor'. As described by Levenson (2022, p.12):

> 'In Kapteinsklip, occupiers saw themselves as recipients of land, as homeowners in the making. But in Siqalo, the occupation was understood to be a collective political project of realizing their constitutionally guaranteed right to housing. No one was going to simply give them land; they had to obtain it through their own self-activity.'

As described previously, Levenson situates his writing within a Gramscian theoretical framework on the relationship between occupiers and the state. Further discussion could include whether the occupiers were involved in the meaning-making process around his choosing these particular theories to describe the dynamics of eviction playing out on the ground. Additionally, Levenson discusses wanting to minimize his impact and therefore limited his time at both encampments. As a white man from the United States, he explains that he did not want to appear to favor particular occupiers or partisan affiliations, as was often the perception of nonprofit and political workers who visited the encampments with resources. At the same time, he recognizes that his presence inevitably bore an impact and argued that this impact was not necessarily negative as long as it was critically reflected upon

in context. Building on Levenson's mindful positionality, a further critical line of methodological inquiry on how to engage in the field might include approaches to stepping *in* rather than just stepping *away*. He also describes his use of occupiers' diaries to fill some of these gaps, but it would be important to discuss the process of interpreting these diaries alongside their writers and the role of trust in bearing these stories.

As noted previously, this book challenges existing assumptions around eviction and poses formations of land occupations as relational and co-constituted with the state. While this analysis was set in a South African context, it offers a nuanced understanding of eviction grounded in social theory for other housing and houselessness scholars and activists – even if they study other locations or other forms of eviction. For instance, in a United States context, the Supreme Court case 'Martin v. Boise' (2018) determined that police could not make arrests before offering adequate shelter as doing so would violate the eighth amendment as cruel and unusual punishment. Yet, Herring (2021) argued that this ruling increased policing and control of unhoused residents, as police justified their arrests if people refused to go to a city-sanctioned encampment which was often segregated in a particular part of the city, separating people from their belongings, partners, pets, or jobs. Here, a form of the right to housing was weaponized by state officials to dispossess unhoused residents. Therefore, scholar activists in the United States and elsewhere can learn from Levenson's discussion of the civil and political societies of Siqalo and Kapteinsklip to critically consider how encampments are in ongoing relationships with the state and how their organizational formations matter to the way these relations play out over time. In this creative and critical work, Levenson offers us a challenge to move beyond prior understandings of the drivers of eviction to consider a more relational perspective.

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