

Review of “Delivery as Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Post-Apartheid City”

By Zachary Levenson

Oxford University Press, 2022. 294 pages. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/delivery-as-dispossession-9780197629246?cc=us&lang=en&>

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How do postcolonial states manage increasingly urbanized surplus populations, or those rendered superfluous to global capitalism? Zachary Levenson's *Delivery as Dispossession* tackles this question from the vantage point of land occupations in South Africa. This is an extreme case: unemployment is dramatically high, often hovering around 40 percent (including discouraged job-seekers). Under apartheid, policies of racial exclusion restricted urbanization, but with the lifting of influx control restrictions, the poor and jobless today concentrate in urban areas. In post-apartheid cities, a sizable housing backlog remains, informal settlements proliferate, and overcrowding defines low-income residential areas—all this, despite the fact that the democratic state has delivered approximately four million homes in less than three decades (Levenson 2022, p. xi).

Levenson's account focuses on two land occupations in Cape Town: Kapteinsklip and Siqalo. Both represented attempts by residents to escape overcrowded conditions in nearby townships and informal settlements, and to build new communities where they could find some dignity and autonomy in their living situations. Yet, the two land occupations met with varied success: Kapteinsklip was evicted, Siqalo was not. The cases raise two important questions: first, why is the post-apartheid state, committed as it is to redressing the ills of apartheid and colonialism, evicting poor Black residents—including so-called “African” and so-called “Colored” residents—from vacant land; and second, why are some evicted but others not?

The short answer: order. In contrast to the vast literature on evictions, which typically explains dispossession in terms of land grabs and profit, in post-apartheid South Africa the “logic of eviction” is primarily political rather than economic (Levenson 2022, p. xi). From the perspective of the state, land occupations appear to disrupt the orderliness and effectiveness of housing delivery. In turn, Levenson suggests, it is precisely those land occupations that appear the most *disorderly* that become most vulnerable to eviction.

The first two chapters of *Delivery as Dispossession* lay out the overarching argument. They are impressively clear and compelling, and make for excellent course reading if one only has room for a couple chapters on their syllabus. Chapter 1 lays out the two cases, introduces the Gramscian theoretical framework, summarizes the arguments, and describes the methodology. Chapter 2 zooms outward, contrasting the dispossession/delivery relation in the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. Under apartheid, Levenson argues, housing delivery enabled dispossession:

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the construction of racially segregated townships made possible forced removals from white-designated city centers. The dynamic reversed in the post-apartheid period, leading to a process of delivery through dispossession: the eviction of land occupations is about containing threats to the rational-legal order of the housing delivery process, which operates through a waiting list.

It is in the four core chapters of the book, however, containing two in-depth chapters on each of the two land occupations, where Levenson demonstrates the classic sociological combination of ethnographic rigor and theoretical innovation. This is ethnography at its best. Levenson conducted 20 months of fieldwork between 2011 and 2019, including frequent visits to the two land occupations as well as interviews with both participants and various actors in the world of housing policy—government officials, private sector consultants, legal experts. Based on this extensive fieldwork, he unpacks the story of each land occupation in great detail, showing a keen ability to understand both the internal political dynamics of the occupations themselves, and the ways in which state actors viewed and responded to the residents. Indeed, it is the deep entanglement of state and society that lies at the heart of the narrative.

For Levenson, it is most useful to understand land occupations through the lens of Antonio Gramsci, who defines the “integral state” as a combination of civil society and political society. The two work together as part of a single integrated process, as Levenson is at pains to show, but they reflect different aspects or lenses: civil society reflects the perspective of residents from below, political society that of government actors from above (38, 115). Yet the former inevitably permeates the latter, often unintentionally so. As Levenson puts it, “Every civil society articulation is also a political society articulation” (173, see also 18–19).

Drawing on detailed and politically savvy ethnographic fieldwork, chapters 3 and 4 uncover the civil society articulations of the two land occupations, while chapters 5 and 6 turn to their corresponding political society articulations. In Kapteinsklip, the key organizing group portrays the occupation as a legal process, leading residents to understand themselves as partners of the state, but also as atomized recipients of land/housing delivery (chapter 3). Conversely, due primarily to their activist backgrounds and experience in the anti-apartheid movement, residents in Siqalo organized themselves more like a social movement—viewing the state as enemy rather than partner, they prioritized inclusivity and solidarity (chapter 4).

These very different forms of self-organization (civil society articulations) led to very different engagements with the state, as both land occupations came under the threat of eviction. Whereas in Kapteinsklip, atomized recipients turned into factions competing for government favor (chapter 5), in Siqalo, residents formed an elected committee that presented the land occupation as a unified community (chapter 6). These very different political society articulations produced divergent outcomes: factionalism in Kapteinsklip appeared disorderly, prompting eviction; the community in Siqalo appeared orderly, allowing the occupation to remain (for the time being). In the former case, the judge excoriated residents as opportunists and implored them to show discipline: “The only way democracy will work properly, in my opinion, is in a disciplined and orderly manner in terms of the law ... if you want to work to satisfy your rights, it begins with discipline, and this starts with yourself and then your organizations and your community” (Levenson 2022, pp. 133–134).

By way of conclusion, I would like to raise two questions that emerge from the analysis. One regards the character of resistance and the state. Levenson rejects the idea of an autonomous and active state that simply imposes its will on passive marginalized populations, a view that he traces through early liberal political theory, the Chicago school, modernization theory, marginality theory, and more recent postcolonial and Foucauldian theory (167, see also 20–25). Yet, his account also demonstrates the operation of capitalist hegemony, by which he means the ways in which civil society articulations get thrust into political society, and particularly the judicial logics of courts that protect private property (xiv, 32, 59–71). If “sociospatially marginalized populations do have a politics” (167), as Levenson suggests, to what extent does it become agency and change? What are the possibilities for a transformative politics in the face of capitalist hegemony?

Related to this is a second question regarding self-organization among surplus populations. For Levenson, a key to success in Siqalo—however temporary it may be—was their rejection of outside forces such as political parties, which neutralized the threat of factionalism. At the same time, however, this kind of politics reinforces isolation, and in turn the potential for working with others to build a broad transformative project. This became clear when tensions arose in Siqalo around potential alignment with a Cape Town social movement, the Housing Assembly (145-152). The question, then, is how do organizers balance the competing demands of building solidarity locally and extra-locally, given that the one seems to undermine the other?

Delivery as Dispossession is an impressive achievement, drawing together empirical rigor, theoretical innovation, and a compelling story about surplus populations. It will be of great interest and value to scholars and teachers interested in urban sociology, political sociology, and the sociologies of development, race and social movements.