

Book Review:

Desmond, Matthew. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Luis Flores
University of Michigan

“Exploitation. Now, there’s a word that has been scrubbed out of the poverty debate,” writes the Harvard sociologist Matthew Desmond in his bestselling ethnography of eviction in Milwaukee. “It is a word that speaks to the fact that poverty is not just a product of low incomes. It is also a product of extractive markets” (Desmond 2016: 305). Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* is a deeply important contribution to urban poverty scholarship and ethnographic methodology—its engrossing style concealing the depth of its research that included the study of court and city documents, two representative surveys, and Desmond’s “relational ethnography” (Desmond 2014). The praise for Desmond’s timely book is appropriately widespread; rather than reiterate that praise here, this review interrogates the contributions and limitations of Desmond’s characterization of evictions as symptomatic of exploitative markets—what form of *exploitation* and what kind of *markets* does Desmond conceive of, and how does this inform his advocacy for a universal housing voucher program?

Evicted follows eight families living in Milwaukee as they experience housing vulnerability under one of two landlords: Sherrena Tarver, the former schoolteacher who bought her first rental property in 1999 and came to oversee 36 rental units in addition to operating a credit repair and investment business and a bussing enterprise connecting women and children to nearby prisons. Then there is Toby Charney, the second-generation slumlord operating one of the city’s largest mobile home parks, populated by poor whites—which at the time was targeted by city officials as a health hazard. Desmond foregrounds the relational character of exploitation in local rental markets; evictions are mediated by informal contracts (Sherrena often allows tenants to perform repairs on properties in lieu of rent, even if the value of the labor was hotly contested), affect, and often, physical coercion (according to Desmond 48 percent of evictions occur “off the books” as “informal evictions”). As he

demonstrates, “the relationship between nonpayment of rent and the eviction was anything but straightforward” (2016: 128).

Desmond’s book is packed with insights, even if these are not always formally elaborated. Desmond shows how macro-economic or state institutions and legal procedures structure the interpersonal relations of exploitation he vividly depicts. In an attempt to justify her actions against a tenant, we see Sherrena discuss own debts; as Desmond shows, 23 percent of forced evictions (equal to the proportion of “formal” evictions) occurred due to landlord foreclosure. This is a reminder that Sherrena is partially a conduit, securing the revenue streams that lead to the world’s financial capitals. We see how the court system burdens tenants with two types of lawsuits: one for debt and the second for property. With tenants often unable (or unaware of the first court date) even fewer contest alleged property damage. Uncontested property damage debts are added to the total money judgment that grows at an annual rate of 12 percent, and haunts tenants as they apply for housing years after. Even in the cases where tenants attend court dates, 90 percent of them go unrepresented by an attorney while 90 percent of landlords have legal representation. Desmond’s book relates shelter instability to other elements of a person’s life: family, work, and community. Childbearing, Desmond finds, adds to housing instability as landlords are often unwilling to rent to tenants with children, and the harmless attention attracted by children, say, throwing snowballs at passing cars, is sufficient to cause eviction. The relationship between labor and shelter instability was also counterintuitive: “Job loss could lead to eviction, but the reverse was also true. An eviction not only consumed renter’s time, causing them to miss work, it also weighted heavily on their minds, often triggering mistakes on the job” (227).

If Desmond gives us a heartbreakingly close view of the process and effects of eviction, illuminating *why* they are pervasive requires an elaboration of his conception of “exploitative markets”. While there is much that is learned from the ethnographic focus of Desmond’s study, not to mention his exhaustive survey data, readers will find an unsatisfying elaboration of this question of the dynamics of exploitative housing and rental markets. I fear that exploitation *in* markets remains unexplained and often reduced to interpersonal transactions, neglecting institutional and political elements of the markets. In Desmond’s account, the housing market is depicted as contained by the local networks of owners and tenants, with only the exogenous appearance of government in the form of welfare checks, courts, and the eviction warrant—conspicuously missing are investors and political actors, elite and grassroots.

In his concluding chapter, Desmond notes the political and national characteristics of exploitative housing markets, explaining that “exploitation within the housing market relies on government support”, through the court system, through subsidies and tax benefits, and through law enforcement and the publication of eviction records (307). Yet for most of the book, Desmond treats the political as largely bureaucratic, devoid of interest and even struggle. Particularly absent is the political power of landlords, whose influence over municipal governance has been noted by scholars of housing markets (Freund 2007; Self 2003; for a particularly revealing account of the political power of “black capitalists” in local rental markets, see Connolly 2014), and only twice are we reminded that the period Desmond is studying (May 2008 to December 2009) was the period of the Great Recession, which oversaw a dramatic transfer of property from the hands of local owners to institutional investors, who snatched up foreclosed properties at low prices and turned them into rental units and by 2012 even offered “rental-backed bonds”. The case of the Blackstone Group is exemplary. In 2013 alone the private equity group bought 1,300 properties just in the Chicago area. It is this experience that drove one activist from Boston’s Tenant Coalition, present at the Desmond’s book launch at the Harvard Kennedy School, to assert that they sought not to vilify local landlords, but to build alliances with them to protect neighborhoods under threat from outside speculators. In a state that has outlawed rent control in 1994, Boston housing activists hoped to pass restrictions on “no-fault evictions” in an upcoming city council meeting. For housing and tenant activists across the nation, the political power of investors and speculators continues to be a central opponent to housing stability.

The book’s central policy prescription for a universal housing voucher, capping housing expenses at 30 percent of household income, is perhaps most revealing of Desmond’s conception of exploitation in markets—it is one that treats market disempowerment as the key problem. Desmond’s all-out support for universal housing vouchers risks flattening relations of exploitation to an asymmetry in purchasing power. This transactional lens on exploitative markets leads him to interpret the *moment* of market exchange (the transfer of shelter for rent) as *the* site of exploitation: “a universal housing voucher program would carve a middle path between the landlord’s desire to make a living and the tenant’s desire, simply, to live”, writes Desmond, omitting completely the motives that drive institutional investors and housing speculators, who represent a central actor in the current housing crisis. This policy prescription, clearly pragmatic, reveals that analytically, Desmond’s conception of extractive markets is transactional, localized, and to the extent that they are political, they are bureaucratic.

Desmond is by no means wrong to focus on the purchasing power of tenants. This focus recognizes that evictions are *not* principally a result of tight housing stocks, but rather of a condition of dramatic inequality that allows for the maintenance of segmented housing markets and for the bidding on housing stock to quickly price out most with modest incomes. Yet housing vouchers will only marginally affect the purchasing power of tenants if inequality persists. Most problematic in my view, in his convergence on a universal housing voucher, Desmond dramatically underplays the supply and pricing functions of housing markets—markets not only enable exchange, *they establish prices for commodities*. If this function of a housing market is left unaddressed, vouchers may end up incentivizing landlords to increase rents to be picked up by federal dollars. Desmond is anything but naïve about this. “In fact”, Desmond argues anticipating criticism, “economists have argued that the current housing voucher program could be expanded to serve all poor families in America without additional spending *if we prevented overcharging and made the program more efficient*” (311, emphasis added). One is left to wonder if this is Desmond’s tacit way of explaining that universal housing vouchers would work only under the partial decommmodification of shelter—the price of housing cannot float freely in markets if housing vouchers are to be sustainable and effective, yet Desmond does not elaborate on what these essential regulations would be. This is a significant omission for a book concerned with both “poverty” and “profit”.

Addressing the effects on housing insecurity derived from profit making through extractive markets must mean intervening on the unconstrained distribution of housing through markets, and placing restrictions on speculation in housing markets—rent control ordinances, land banks (which place under municipal ownership the land on which homes stand), and inclusionary zoning, for example, have the effect constraining the tendency for speculation—addressing the “profit” that is ignored by voucher programs designed for to bolster purchasing power.

These comments notwithstanding, Desmond’s project is an invaluable contribution to poverty research and policymaking, one that powerfully asserts the role of shelter as a precondition for social stability. My criticisms are made the spirit of Desmond’s conviction that “housing is a basic right” (Desmond 2016: 305). But it is for this reason that I suggest that addressing not only the unequal market transaction for housing in exploitative markets, but also the *commodity status of shelter* required by a housing market, is necessary to securing its protection as a basic right.

References:

- Connolly, N. D. B. 2014. *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Desmond, Matthew. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Desmond, Matthew. 2014. "Relational Ethnography." *Theory and Society* 43(5), 547-579.
- Freund, David. M. P. 2007. *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Self, Robert O. 2003. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.