



BRILL

## Book Review



Levenson, Zachary. *Delivery as Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Postapartheid City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

In capitalist societies, participation in markets is socially mandatory because a great deal of what people need to thrive is only accessible through purchase. No capitalist society provides people with a guarantee of enough money to have a good life, and so conditions of deprivation are widespread. Just as participation in the market is mandatory, so too is participation in the state. For people in poverty that participation often takes the form of being forced to come to court and ordered to move by a police officer. That intrusion of the state into poor people's individual and collective efforts at survival is both shaped by and shapes people's actions. Economy, state, and society, then, are not so distinct in actuality as they are as categories. In his new book *Delivery as Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Postapartheid City* sociologist Zachary Levenson investigates these complex realities with both nuance and clarity, through the extended study of concrete conditions in South Africa.

Post-apartheid South Africa provides a rare degree of protection from eviction and a related guarantee of housing, created in attempt to reverse harms due to the apartheid regime forcing people to relocate as part of its racist population management policies. With that in mind it makes sense to associate the earlier era with forced removal—dispossession—and the later era with providing housing—delivery. As Levenson argues, however, this is too simplistic. For one thing, the apartheid regime had to construct housing in order to enact population removal because people forced to move needed somewhere to go. For another, the post-apartheid regime often removes people from self-provisioned housing, its efforts to provide housing notwithstanding. Furthermore, the government often justifies its actions of dispossessing people by appeal to the need to deliver housing.

Under apartheid, the government would act in openly authoritarian ways in forcing mobility via eviction and forcing immobility via racist laws indicating

who could live where. The post-apartheid government seeks to redress harms perpetrated under apartheid, yet as a capitalist state still must manage the population, and faces a different set of constraints about how to do so with some degree of popular legitimacy. As people exercise their freedom of mobility to a greater degree after apartheid, where they live is a matter of some tension. More simply, need for housing in many areas also massively outstrips the available approved housing and state capacity to provide housing. Yet people must live somewhere, and so there is a large quantity of unauthorized and informal housing. Unfortunately, under those conditions the post-apartheid government sometimes enacts evictions, removing people from places where they are unauthorized, and uses the right to housing and transition out of apartheid as ideologies to justify this removal. The people to be removed are often depicted by state personnel as selfishly trying to cut to the front of the queue for housing, as letting down the collective spirit of the transition to democracy after apartheid, and as causing delays in official efforts to provide housing.

Levenson's book analyzes the various connections between delivery and dispossession in the post-apartheid era through a detailed examination of two land occupations, the differences in institutional responses to each, and what those responses meant in the lives of the people affected. In about two years of fieldwork conducted over an eight year span in the 2010s, Levenson observed an occupation called Kapteinsklip and another called Siqalo, and each occupation is the subject of two chapters in the book (the remaining three chapters provide theoretical and historical background and extrapolation from his empirical observations). Levenson interviewed numerous participants in both occupations. Several also supplied him with their own notes and other documents. This provides his book with a rich source base for examining in detail the workings of the occupations as well as how they were treated by official authorities.

The first occupation, Kapteinsklip, occurred on public lands in an out of the way area, was guided by a political party-affiliated NGO, did not disrupt the local racial order, and did not elicit complaints from neighbors. The second occupation, Siqalo, seized space on two parcels of privately owned land, involved a mixed race population in tension with the surrounding neighborhood's racial make up, elicited complaints and protests from more well-to-do neighbors, opposed any involvement of NGOs and political parties, and treated the state as an antagonist. The obvious expectation for observers would be that the former occupation would fare better than the latter, but surprisingly the reverse was true, with Kapteinsklip evicted during Levinson's research and Siqalo still continuing. Much of Levenson's book is spent explaining these differences in

outcome, with the answer being a complicated dialectic between state personnel's understanding of the occupiers and occupiers' self-understanding and organization.

The Kapteinsklip occupation was initially organized by an NGO with ties to a political party, promising occupiers a degree of institutional legitimacy and explaining the activity to participants as simply receiving a plot of land in keeping with each individual's right to housing. This placed occupiers in an institutional context where they were individuals, with each person the recipient of a housing distribution effort. Within that framework, the occupiers were a group largely in the passive sense in which a set of people waiting for the bus is a group—individuals who happen to be doing the same thing at the same time. Levenson terms this a “serialized group,” borrowing from the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre (pp. 30–31). Unfortunately the residents later learned that they were in fact engaged in an illegal occupation, yet their condition as serialized never gave way to a more consciously collective effort - a “fused group,” in Levenson's Sartrean terms (pp. 30–31). The occupiers' serialized or atomized condition in turn created the basis for conflicts within the occupation to play out as residents competed for information and resources, such as access to the lawyer representing the occupation. That competition in turn strained the occupation's collective resources, as when the occupation's lawyer expressed frustration over having to have many interactions with individuals rather than having an official point person through whom to communicate with the group.

The Siqualo occupation, on the other hand, was not conceived of as enacting a right to housing so much as self-provisioning housing collectively because it was a basic human need. Residents knew their actions were illegal and they sought to evade the state: their goal was not to demand housing from the state, but to take land and provide their own housing on that land. The occupation involved numerous people with experiences in the anti-apartheid movement as well. These factors meant that Siqualo was more deliberately organized specifically as a collectivity and had a higher degree of internal unity—it was more of a fused group, in Levenson's terms. As part of this aspect of Siqualo, occupiers eventually formed a committee to govern the occupation as a whole and which served as a more orderly conduit for communicating with the occupation's lawyer.

Regular readers of the *Journal of Labor and Society* may be nodding along, thinking “ah, yes, of course, the more well-organized effort fared than the more disorganized effort, as we all know when people organize they can better exert power” and to a limited extent this is part of Levenson's claim. That said, the heart of his explanation for the different fates of the two occupations

is elsewhere. The point here is not so much that those who are better organized fight more effectively, but rather that the specific way in which a group is organized shapes the manner in which the government treats them. How a group organizes themselves (or fail to organize themselves) shapes how state personnel understand and respond to the group. In Levenson's Gramscian terminology, the occupiers' civil society articulation necessarily takes on a political society articulation which in turn influences how the state responds to the occupation (p.19).

As Levenson explains clearly and concisely, state personnel, and especially courts, play key roles in enacting contemporary South Africa's legal right to housing and limitations on evictions (pp. 58–66). That means occupiers become in effect forced to enter into legal proceedings in order to have any chance of not being evicted. As a result, different approaches to organizing an occupation shape judges' perceptions.

In the case of the Kapteinsklip occupiers, Levenson argues, they were not well organized and became internally fractious (p. 117). They were serialized, in Levenson's terms, and formed factions that competed for resources and power within the occupation and over the occupation's fate. Levenson stresses that these problems lay in the political vision the occupation began with, which it inherited from the instigating NGO. The Kapteinsklip occupiers had a vision of themselves, the state, and housing rooted in a conception of individual citizens as recipients of goods provided to them by the state as part of democratic governance. As such, the occupiers were individualized and the occupation was relatively non-combative in relation to the state. As they faced repression from the police, the occupiers sought to hold on to their individual chances and to defend their own allies within the occupation rather than the occupation as a whole. The result was relative disorganization, which judges saw as disorderly and cynical attempts to circumvent the orderly processes of getting housing via normal state mechanisms (mechanisms which could leave people homeless for many years, a reality judges tended to ignore).

The Siqalo occupiers, on the other hand, distrusted the state and to an important degree sought to avoid interacting with state personnel. That attempt at evasion failed but it still fostered greater internal organization and discipline, as did the organizers' experiences in the anti-apartheid movement. In important respects, the Siqalo occupiers' sense that they were on their own meant that they did not attempt to rely on anyone else and encouraged them to govern themselves collectively to a greater degree. Thus, as Levenson argues, occupiers' attitudes toward the state informed their self-organization which in turn informed state personnel's understanding of these occupations. This

means that occupiers' self-activity and state regulation of the occupiers were not absolutely distinct but rather fed back upon one another in complex ways. In Levenson's Gramscian terminology, each occupation's civil society articulation and its political society articulation interacted in one continuous process that unfolded over time (pp. 174–175). The state is a terrain of struggle, he argues, and struggles within the terrain of the state are both shaped by conflict and organization that is ostensibly outside the state. At the same time, groups of people often find themselves forced onto the terrain of the state by circumstances, and represented to and by the state in ways they did not choose. Those conditions in turn can react back on social struggles. This is, as Levenson stresses, part of how hegemony operates (p. 175).

Toward the end of the book Levenson speculates on how his analysis might travel and sketches out some directions for possible further research on housing struggles. Postcolonial societies, he argues, have often tended to see similar tensions between providing housing and displacing people who provide housing for themselves without government authorization. In addition, social conflicts in capitalist democracies have often faced the kinds of tensions Levenson found in South Africa, being compelled to interact with the state and finding their self-understanding reflected back at them by state personnel, especially judges and the police. Over all, Levenson's book is very thought provoking regarding state-society interaction in other contexts. For example, as I read I found myself repeatedly wanting to apply Levenson's insights to what I know about the labor movement in the early twentieth century United States. Specifically, I would argue that scholarship by the historians of labor law Christopher Tomlins and Charles Romney shows the role of courts in exercising hegemony in a way similar to what Levenson shows, though the former authors do not use Levenson's theoretical framework (see Tomlins, 1985; Romney, 2016). Further research drawing on Levenson's insights to examine labor movements around the world would likely be very generative.

After finishing Levenson's fine book I was not entirely convinced by his Gramscian theoretical framework, in the mild sense that I did not feel after reading it that I should myself be a Gramscian. I wondered if other perspectives might be equally effective for illuminating his empirical findings. That said, the book's narrative account of the events he examined is powerful, the research is vigorous and rigorous, and his findings are important and generalizable, all of which testifies to the utility of the theoretical tools he used to conduct this study. Over all, Levenson's argument is cogent, nuanced, and well-supported by his evidence. He also does impressively well at threading the needle of generalizing about the significance of his research findings and

specifying the particularity of the people and events he engaged in a concrete time and place

I will add that his account is unsurprisingly (though laudably) sympathetic with the occupiers, yet Levenson never allows his deep sympathies to pull him toward romanticizing. He does not shy away from depicting tensions, conflicts, and people's often selfish and short-sighted responses to their situation, nor does he ever become condescending. Indeed, part of the force of his account is to stress that in hard circumstances unpleasant and collectively self-defeating behaviors are often situationally reasonable, and unfortunately often amplified by the state. That struggles of people at the bottom of the social food chain often begin on the wrong foot due to people's immediate hard circumstances is a reality that Levinson depicts unsentimentally though with clear outrage at the social systems that treat people so badly. Over all, any reader interested in popular struggles and their interaction with state institutions will learn a great deal from Levenson's admirable book.

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