
Literature on global land-grabbing is flourishing remarkably, both in the social sciences but also in more militant and activist sections of civil society as pressure for land massively increases in southern contexts with respect to energy and food issues. Michael Levien’s *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India* deals with questions of land appropriation in the Indian context of economic liberalization, and more precisely with a local dispossession situation in Rajasthan’s first and largest Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the Mahindra World City (MWC). This information technology services space required more than 3,000 acres of both private and public (grazing) land taken largely from the village of Rajpura through a complex process of compliance using mainly market-based compensation and real estate speculation.

In his introductory remarks, Levien presents briefly the different theoretical debates around dispossession and capitalism and situates himself within them: he doesn’t comply with the modernization theories or the Marxist theories, as both see dispossession as a structural process leading either to development and progress or to the end of capitalism and the rise of socialism. On the contrary, David Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession (ABD) might be more relevant to understand contemporary dispossession situations, as it integrates land alienation into the over-accumulation crises that neoliberal capitalism is currently experiencing. But Levien rejects the assumption that dispossession is a mechanic and structural “new imperialism” driven by a global capital in crisis. Instead, he tries to assess the specific role of states in this process, and the historical and geographical particularities driving each dispossession situation. He comes therefore with this original concept of “regimes of dispossession”, where land dispossession is in fact a complex political mechanism orchestrated by state forces for different social classes and different economic purposes over time and space, each regime serving a specific phase of capitalism’s
development. In that perspective, the author establishes two main regimes of dispossession in India since 1947: first, the Nehruvian dispossession regime, from 1947 to 1991, that dispossessed for productive, labour-intensive and public infrastructures (heavy industry, irrigation projects, urbanization, etc.). It overly used coercive mechanisms of compliance but was driven by a sense of national development and life improvement. After 1991 liberalisation reforms (private participation in new economic sectors was authorised, like power, road or ports, liberalization of the finance sector, extensive use of public-private partnerships, etc.) and the suspension of the industrial licencing system (sets of regulations, restrictions and mandatory licenses regarding the establishment of industries in certain categories) lead to massive capital mobility across subnational states, which had to compete with each other and increase concessions to attract investors, particularly in terms of land availability. In this regime, land dispossession is therefore mainly operated for private interests in the IT sector, highly capital intensive and speculative but less labour intensive.

In Chapter 3, Levien takes precisely the case of Rajpura’s agrarian situation to show how some historical and social features have largely facilitated the compliance and acceptance process with dispossession. Divisions and social fractures along class, caste and gender lines coupled with an agrarian structure shaped by “big man” politics have established an unequal distribution of economic assets between villagers and have provided a strong basis for further inequalities. The next two chapters assert that villagers have been hit by dispossession and the induced disaccumulation and devaluation of their agricultural assets in very opposite ways: while landed upper castes lost surely the most in absolute terms, they had enough economic capital to face dispossession and adapt themselves, whereas a lower caste semi-proletariat lost the most in relative terms. In that same logic, villagers have neither benefited equally from the real estate speculation induced by the SEZ’s arrival, mainly because the government used a market-based compensation system that consisted in giving 25% of the original dispossessed land into plots situated near the SEZ. By doing so, each family reacted differently depending on their socio-economic status: some were forced to sell directly the plots allocated because of lack of information about the real land value or
because they didn’t have enough economic means to wait for land speculation; others were able to wait and speculate on the added land value. In other words, this “differentiation by speculation” clearly highlights that Rajpuran’s ability to profit from land commodification and real estate boom has been entirely shaped by a long history of unequal distribution of economic, cultural and social capital along class, caste and gender lines. By contrast, Levien describes a massive process of capital accumulation for other actors involved in the dispossession: states agencies and the SEZ’s developers, mainly the Mahindra company, benefited from a considerable rate of ABD by acquiring land well below market value and then selling it to private investors at a higher price, and IT companies also could accumulate more capital thanks to tax concessions granted by the subnational state and a low-cost labour market.

Rajpura’s villagers nonetheless share some common features in this dispossession process, as suggested by Chapters 6 and 7. The vast majority of peasants have been completely excluded from the IT economy: these unskilled and uneducated populations couldn’t match the required social and cultural capital required for the jobs, and the IT workforce is mainly urban, middle-class and upper-caste. Employment in the SEZ has been largely filled by migrant workers through a complex system of contractors, revealing at the same time a situation of under-exploitation for the dispossessed villagers where “their land is needed but their labour is not” (Li 2011: 286, cited in Hall 2013: 1596). This logic is having the opposite effect of reinforcing the value of even small agricultural assets compared to wage labour and underlines the social importance for all villagers to remain semi-proletarian. Moreover, all villagers from Rajpura have been contained into a “disinvested urbanizing village on the margins of a ‘world city’, a potential ‘slum’ in the making” (p.162) without any public services and a zoning geography that disconnects the SEZ from its surroundings. They have been trapped and confined to a peripheral informal economy used either for capital circulation or for survival, mainly because the SEZ didn’t generate any productive linkage with Rajpura.
The last chapter deals with politics after dispossession and the several resistance or acceptance strategies that were developed. If grievances and hostility are shared by the overwhelming majority of villagers through an “agrarian populist” framework that tends to present the farming community as united against dispossession, they in fact differ radically from one class and caste to another and are heavily dependent upon the extent of advantages each villager could take from real estate speculation. Finally, the market-based compensation plot system used by the government has purposely deteriorated pre-existent solidarities within the same caste and the same family and has oriented resistance into a personal and individual fight.

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This work represents a major contribution to dispossession studies. First of all, it successfully avoids any binary or polarized analysis of dispossession that generally opposes progress and modernity discourses to rural romanticism, where the village is presented as self-sufficient and harmonious, or opposes benefits to the costs of dispossession. The extensive ethnographic study of Rajpura’s agrarian structure and existing power dynamics is crucial to the understanding of the very diverse and unequal causes and consequences of dispossession politics happening on the ground, while also looking at the exploitation, domination and exclusion processes underlying it. This investigation is crossing and superimposing multiple socialization networks ranging class, caste and gender to the very limited circle of family group. It adopts a multi-scalar perspective from very concrete spaces like *chai* (tea) stalls in Rajpura, the SEZ and its surroundings to the places of power and control in Jaipur and Delhi. On the theoretical aspect, the concept of “regime of dispossession” is clearly revisiting some older Marxist theories about dispossession and capital and profoundly deepening notions like primitive accumulation and ABD with the specificities of Indian politics. On the other hand, this very same concept does not go without any criticism as it assumes some problematic elements. Levien seems to take the neoliberal turn in India for granted, and particularly its
radical tipping point in 1991 with past policy orientations. Indeed, many scholars have questioned the veracity of this point of no return because “even the seemingly uniform and all-powerful Nehruvian state, often invoked in anthropology as the radical other of post-1991 India, already included significant and powerful institutional arrangements that may well be labelled neoliberal” (Münster and Strümpell 2014: 4), as suggested by India’s first special economic zone, the Kandla Free Trade Zone, from 1965 to the late 1980s (Neveling 2014). Moreover, Levien seems to glorify the dispossession process taking place under the Nehruvian state, although he absolutely doesn’t defend this regime: if dispossession was probably supporting “backward” areas’ development, couldn’t we also assume that these areas were precisely targeted for development projects because they were easier to dispossess as occupied by tribal communities already isolated and marginalized in the Indian society? If Levien surely recognizes some continuities between both regimes of dispossession, he does so only partially and briefly at the end of the book.

To conclude, this book is highly recommended to anyone interested in land issues, power dynamics in development projects, and agrarian structures in India and the global South. The concepts developed here by Levien are of great value for any research investing the functions of dispossession in modern capitalist societies and could be operationalized in new geographical contexts.

References


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