

## BOOK REVIEW

Michael Levien, *Dispossession without Development Land Grabs in Neoliberal India*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 332 pp., ISBN: 9780190859152.

### On the sociology of dispossession in contemporary India

Dispossession and its relationship with the origins of capitalism comprise an immense amount of literature in historical sociology. Starting with Karl Marx's 'primitive accumulation' conceptualization as a prerequisite for the emergence of a capitalistic world-system, dispossession has always been at the very centre of the transition debate. Michael Levien's *Dispossession without Development Land Grabs in Neoliberal India* (2018) provides a defiant analysis of the mechanisms and outcomes of land dispossession in contemporary India. The book not only offers a deepening understanding of on-the-ground effects of dispossession with its immense ethnography, but it also challenges three main perspectives of dispossession theories dominating the 20th century: (i) modernization theory; (ii) the proletarian redemption theory; and (iii) dispossession as predation theory. Levien also frames his novel theoretical framework as an alternative to the existing literature while historicizing the Indian state and caste, gender, and class dynamics.

Levien's book is a 9-chapter ambitious study that critically engages with the existing literature on dispossession based on a robust ethnographic study in a north-western India village, Rajpura. In Chapter I, Levien discusses earlier theories of dispossession and highlights his position on this issue. Starting with the modernization school, whose representatives include scholars such as J. M. Neeson and Raymond Williams, it is argued that, from at least the English enclosures, dispossession is a 'pre-determined price' of development since land should be open for use in the most efficient way as possible (pp. 11-12). Since agriculture has a low-profit margin and is insufficient in spurring nations' development, peasantry dispossession is an inescapable fact and the irrepressible result of development. However, Levien bravely opposes the idea that dispossession deterministically results in development; indeed, dispossession commonly reproduces inequalities. The second critique targets the proletarian redemption theory since, according to

Levien, Marx shares the same insights as modernists have that peasantry's annihilation is unavoidable; as a matter of fact, it is desirable since a dispossessed agricultural population can generate a large number of the working class with a potentially explosive capacity who will ultimately lead to a socialist revolution. Levien criticizes this by pointing out that this evolutionary pathway has historically not led to what Marx and modernists conclude. Additionally, this analysis is very similar to that of the modernization school.

Lastly, a third approach has been presented by David Harvey, who views dispossession as a bi-product of neoliberal capitalism and establishes the novel theory of 'accumulation by dispossession' (2003). Furthermore, Levien argues that precedent theories to Harvey's can be found in Polanyi's concept of 'fictitious commodities' wherein land commodification is essential to laissez-faire capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg similarly concludes that dispossession is crucial to fulfilling the capitalistic demand for land, not labour (p. 15). However, Levien argues that none of these theories fully engage with social mechanisms, containing deficiencies. Levien argues that modernist trajectory, opening up the most efficient land use to develop, only constitutes one of the consequences of dispossession.

Similarly, Marxist theory offers gradual elimination of agrarian milieu to create proletarian classes with more explosive capacity, leading to a socialist revolution. According to the Levien, this trajectory is also only possible under particular social context. He proposes an alternative approach that he terms 'regimes of dispossession' – dispossession as a social relation of coercive redistribution mediated by states (p. 17). The book presents the historical mechanisms, and consequences of land grab in Rajpura before and after establishing a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and construction of the Mahindra World City (MWC).

In Chapter 2, Levien historicizes how the Indian state transforms itself as a land broker from 1990s onward. Unlike Nehruvian developmental policies in post-independence, structural changes in the global economy have revealed themselves in the Indian state with its pro-business tendencies. Earlier raised by Harvey Molotch (1976: p.312), Levien displays the 'public-private partnership' dynamic, illustrated with the MWC the collaboration between the Rajasthan State Industrial and Investment Corporation and the Jaipur Development Authority (JDA). The Indian state adjusted policies from developmental to the neoliberal regime of dispossession. The mechanisms behind the neoliberal transformation are (i) the increasing demand for the land; (ii) insufficiency of the capitalistic land market; (iii) increasing pressure due to inter-state competition; and (iv) the rent which land broker state derives legally and/or illegally (pp. 60-62). Levien proposes the concept, 'the rate of accumulation by dispossession' to quantify the motivation empirically behind changing state and private actor actions. This chapter is a perfect

illustration for synthesizing Harvey's (1989) managerialism-to-entrepreneurialism concept (although Harvey's analysis is on the urban sphere) and Levien's historical analyses.

Chapter 3 summarizes the historical agrarian milieu of Rajpura from early times of monarchy in the 16th century to post-independence. Levien successively presents historically existing inequalities in Rajpura based on caste, class, and gender and how post-independence policies failed to establish a more egalitarian land distribution. Rajpura's economy depends on livestock trade in a relatively profitable size before MWC. However, unequal caste relationship sustains itself in the speculative land market after the MWC. The winners are historically privileged Jats and Brahmins; thus, the SEZ, Levien claims, neither generates solutions nor proceeds to development but transforms historical stratification manifestation.

Chapters 4 and 5 seem to be the most striking part of the book where Levien displays most of his ethnography on Rajpura during and after dispossession. After the announcement of the MWC, the Indian state uses compensation lands near the proposed SEZ to get Rajpura residents involved in the speculative land market. According to Levien, this avoids an organized opposition to the state by individualizing the stakeholders of land and initiates compliance processes (p. 83). Levien's novel analysis strikingly reveals the differentiation of Rajpura residents through land speculation and how ex-agriculture population transforms into four different categories: (i) neo-rentiers, (ii) petty asset managers, (iii) proletariat, and (iv) the excluded. Despite exceptions, his ethnography convincingly underlines that land speculation only adjusts the manifestation of historically transmitted caste and class divergences. In other words, Rajpura's feudal lords of yesterday have become land moguls of today, -principally Jats and Brahmins- who are successful in land speculation and brokerage as neo-rentiers and petty asset managers. Simultaneously, lower castes who relatively have less social and economic capital and are pushed into land speculation with less information and economic resources dispose of their lands very cheaply and fast; ultimately proletarianized and worse-off their previous life based on livestock economy. Dalits who have no land to lose and women are excluded from the upward mobility via land speculation while some who can get compensation are even worse off. Even though it is about the transition debate, 'formal and real subsumption' is useful in this phase of the book as it gets into divergences and different technologies innovated by capitalists to suppress the subaltern (Banaji, 2010: pp. 280-282).

Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate the changing position of Rajpurans in the knowledge economy. MWC is predominantly an IT/ICT-based project where the Indian state highly subsidizes tax reductions, compensations, credits, and infrastructural investments. Levien argues that the IT sector in MWC requires land

from Rajpura, not people. Even the most educated population of Rajpura is unemployable in the IT sector, while some are lucky enough to work in semi-proletarianized jobs such as security guards, gardeners, and drivers. The author critically engages with this situation and explains that although the Indian IT sector has skyrocketed in recent decades, this immense growth is highly exclusionary and does not necessitate a 'development for all.'

Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 demonstrate the changing political sphere of Rajpura and India after dispossession. Levien underlines that marginalization of the dispossessed from the knowledge economy creates an outrage not only in Rajpura but nearly all-around India. Thus, the Indian state innovates the rural population's victimization discourse due to urban generated forces that push the rural population into impoverishment and dispossession. Combined with 'agrarian populism' and differentiated interests of the agrarian population, Indian state can manage possible collective movements. Lastly, Levien convincingly concludes with three premises: (i) exclusionary neoliberal policies of dispossession initiates the primary impulse for agrarian-based protests; (ii) most of the time, land prices do not rise enough to compensate agrarian-loss, in other words, even though growth protectors of neoliberal policies are successively implemented, the agrarian population is not better-off; and (iii) neo-liberal land dispossession may get a more brutal response in the agrarian milieu where the peasantry is historically pro-active and tends to be more militant (pp 20; 23; 216).

Although the book is recently published, it promises much to be one of the classics of political economy with its defiant analysis of markets, state, class/caste, and gender from a critical sociological perspective. Levien successively supports his hypothesis, which regards dispossession as a contemporary way of coercive distribution instead of three main perspectives of dispossession, with his robust ethnography. His findings empirically challenge modernist, Marxist and predation theories of dispossession, broadening our understanding culture-specific-ground effects of neoliberal capitalism. The book also displays a balanced portrayal of actors and historical/structural underpinnings in the dispossession debate. Furthermore, Levien forms a causal relation between agrarian politics and land grabs while elaborating on changing political sphere through dispossession. Although the book does not achieve a similar degree of success in examining the effect of the 'international' on land grabs in neoliberal India as well as a comparative effort to verify his hypothesis of *regimes of dispossession*, it offers a new agenda for scholars who are interested in dispossession for further research.

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