

The urban land question. Dis/possessive collectivism: property & personhood at city's end

Ananya Roy

*Professor, Urban Planning and Social Welfare
Director, The Institute on Inequality and Democracy
University of California, Los Angeles
ananya@luskin.ucla.edu*

Well after the Great Recession has supposedly ended, foreclosures and bank-led evictions continue in American cities. In this paper, I examine the work of one poor people's movement, the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, which resists evictions, occupies foreclosed homes, negotiates loan modifications with banks, and seeks to create new policy frameworks for housing rights. Organized around a simple but elegant motto, "Homeless People in Peopleless Homes," the movement is an unusual combination of militant activism and a human rights framework. Inspired by housing struggles in different parts of the world, especially Brazil and South Africa, it serves as a node in a globally interconnected geography of urban protest. At the same time, the movement works with an explicit understanding of segregation, situating ongoing evictions not just as a symptom of neoliberalization but instead of long histories of racial banishment in the U.S. context.

The study of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign raises issues that I believe are of pressing importance in planning theory as well as in struggles for spatial justice. I am interested in how poor people's movements fighting displacement and dispossession assert a logic of ownership and possession over land. In other words, how do they simultaneously contest and consolidate the category of property? I call such claims to property the politics of emplacement, a politics of defending territory and home. The dilemmas at stake in such claims have been very useful highlighted by Libby Porter in her work on "possessory politics." But Porter also asks if it is possible to craft "a different language of property," a point to which I will return in the conclusion of this abstract.

I seek to understand these processes in territories that I designate as “city’s end.” In her important, recent book, Tania Murray Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* examines how indigenous highlanders in Sulawesi, Indonesia, privatized their common land to plant boom crops and how in doing so they set into motion processes of prosperity and impoverishment. She means land’s end in a dual sense: as the end of land as a commonly held resource as well as a dead end where the promise of development was scarcely fulfilled through the private ownership and use of land. Most interestingly she locates her analysis in a context where the enclosure of land did not take place through land grabs or evictions or a large development project. I propose the concept “city’s end” as a direct reference to Li’s analysis to indicate urban territories that are *not* being shaped by spectacular processes of primitive accumulation. The South Side neighborhoods of Chicago where evictions are afoot cannot be easily understood as the inexorable march of global finance and its neoliberal tendencies. Instead, the financial gains to be made from evictions are petty. Put another way, the foreclosed homes in these neighborhoods are not in the crosshair of new plans and projects for urban growth and expansion that might require a “blank slate” strategy of emptying out homes. These territories also marks city’s end in a second sense of the term: that the struggles against evictions and foreclosures at this location may very well seek “resolution,” for example the repurchase of property. It is this that I am calling a politics of emplacement.

I argue that the case of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, and the issues it raises, contributes to planning theory in three ways. First, it focuses analytical attention on property and thus on relations of ownership, and the exclusions thus wrought. Second, it foregrounds poor people’s movements and their role in producing new meanings and practices of space and place. Third, and most important for the purposes of this session, it provokes a discussion of liberalism and its legacies. The category of property requires attention not only to neoliberalization but also to the ontological and epistemological project that is liberalism and its understandings of personhood. City’s end understood as racial banishment reveals the limits of liberalism. For example, what does the category of property mean as the basis of human freedom when certain human bodies were owned as property? Keeping in



mind this foundational racial banishment, I propose the analytical concept of “dis/possessive collectivism” as a way of understanding collective claims to property by social movements that are rooted in histories of racial struggle.