



ISSN: 2452-5162

HAAL

Historia Agraria de América Latina

<https://doi.org/10.53077/haal.v2i01.106>

Michael Levien. *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 300 pp. ISBN 978-019-085-915-2.

Land prices surged across India in the opening decades of the twenty-first century as vast swathes of agricultural and pastoral land were converted into special economic zones, shopping malls, office blocks, and residential housing (Chakravorty, 2013). Frenzied land market activity enabled speculators, brokers, and construction firms to realize spectacular profits. Well-positioned farmers also benefitted, using profits from land sales to purchase other plots of rural land or diversify into other economic sectors. However, most smallholders were excluded from the boom and left facing uncertain agrarian futures. In response to this threat, thousands of farmers mobilised to protect their land, and intense local protests – or ‘land wars’ - waged across India. In some cases, however, broad-based resistance was muted or absent and farmers seemingly acquiesced to the obliteration of agricultural and pastoral land.

Michael Levien examines one such case in his impressive book *Dispossession without Development*. His analysis shows how the state engineered the dispossession of farmers in Rajasthan, North India to enable the construction of a ‘special economic zone’, a glittering commercial and residential enclave, and a key node in India’s emerging neoliberal ‘knowledge economy’. Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2011, he documents the diverse outcomes of this process, showing how it generated considerable discontent but little resistance.

Levien’s analysis rests on the concept of ‘regimes of dispossession’, which he elaborates to explore the forced transfer of rural land and the politics involved in this process. Multiple factors influence the form and logic of the regime, including ideology, but Levien places particular emphasis on economic processes, especially shifting patterns of capital accumulation. He argues that during the 1990s India transitioned to a neoliberal regime of dispossession, which involved the state becoming a ‘land broker’ and obtaining land for private firms to invest in commercial and residential real estate. State power was required to ensure the transfer of land to sectors of the economy that were ripe for capital accumulation in the context of economic liberalization and neoliberal globalization. This included the booming technology and service sectors, which expanded in the early 2000s as multinational corporations outsourced their back-

office operations to India, taking advantage of cheap labour and land and attractive tax incentives. The transfer of land to these sectors was facilitated by changes to national laws and policies but varied at the sub-national level as regional governments competed to attract capital.

Indian capitalists were one of the main beneficiaries of this process, and the emphasis Levien places on domestic capital is one factor that distinguishes his concept of regimes of dispossession from David Harvey's concept of 'accumulation by dispossession', which is situated within his theory of imperialism and neoliberalism (Harvey, 2003: 137-182). Levien also sees land dispossession as a general feature of post-independence capitalist development in India, which is another factor that distinguishes his concept from Harvey's. He does, however, argue that the neoliberal regime of dispossession was radically different to the regime that emerged in India in the decades after independence in 1947. During this period, dispossession primarily involved the state seizing rural land for public works and infrastructure projects rather than transferring land to capitalists for profit. However callous, dispossession in the post-independence decades was therefore linked to a collective sense of development and progress, which differed from the winner-takes-all individualism of the neoliberal phase.

One foundational feature of the regime of dispossession, whatever its historical form, is the notion of land dispossession as a 'social relation of coercive redistribution' (pp.4-8). Levien distinguishes this redistributive form of dispossession from dispossession through the market. Levien notes that states use various tactics to redistribute land from one group or class to another through dispossession. Their coercive capacity is key, but they fuse this with other tactics to force compliance, including attempting to legitimize dispossession by discursively appealing to public or national interests.

States also offer material compensation for dispossession, including services, infrastructure, and land. Levien notes, however, that material compensation is rarely sufficient to ensure compliance because of the multiple values land holds for farmers. Land is a source of habitat, security, identity, and community as well as a site for agricultural production and material gain. Since land's multiple values are incommensurable, material compensation is usually insufficient to secure compliance and farmers do not necessarily respond to changes in the market price for land as this price does not capture its true value. Hence, states have to intervene to unblock the supply side of the market and transfer land to buyers, who then resell the land or use it to construct commercial or residential properties, which are then leased or sold. Levien's concept of the 'rate of accumulation by dispossession' – capturing the difference between the compensation paid to farmers, the price at which the state resells the land, and the approximate market value of the land once it is acquired by a private firm - highlights the eye-watering profits this process generates for private firms. Levien stresses that this rate is fundamental to understanding the logic of dispossession, which is ultimately geared towards providing private firms with cheap land to maximise profits and accumulate capital. The various (extra) legal and bureaucratic steps involved in the coercive transfer of land provide ample

opportunity for politicians and bureaucrats to realize material gains, offering them sharp incentives to maintain the regime of dispossession.

In developing the concept of regime of dispossession, Levien draws on Karl Polanyi's notion of land as 'fictitious commodity' (Polanyi, 1944/2001). He uses this concept to show why material compensation for dispossession is insufficient to secure compliance and why farmers are reluctant to sell land on the market. Yet, the fictitious commodity concept is also useful for understanding the broader context within which dispossession takes place. Here, the historical construction of land markets and the relations, identities and subjectivities that emerge through land commodification are important (Goodwin, 2021). Levien's vivid description of the flurry of land market activity triggered by the arrival of the special economic zone in Rajpura – the fictional name he gives to the site of his study in Rajasthan – in the early 2000s hints at the importance of historical processes of land commodification. By this stage, the land market was well established, which greatly facilitated the incorporation of private land into the special economic zone, whether through voluntary sale or forced dispossession. The contested notion of 'market value', first introduced under British colonial rule, and the prior integration of land into the market supported the dispossession process. By offering dispossessed farmers small plots of private land adjacent to the special economic zone, the state individualised dispossession, reduced collective resistance, and provided farmers with the opportunity to remain integrated into the land market, however precariously. Opportunities for speculation increased and 'where one stood in relation to the real estate market became the chief determinant of one's socio-economic trajectory' (p.105). The land market therefore moved to centre stage during the neoliberal boom. However, its prior construction, which began during the colonial period, provided the foundations for this transformation. While Levien points towards this in his analysis, he focuses on commodification during the neoliberal phase and understates the importance of the historical evolution of the land market.

The links between commodification, redistribution and dispossession in Levien's analysis illustrate the relevance of another of Polanyi's core concepts - 'forms of integration' (Polanyi, 1957; Goodwin, 2017). The concept posits economic activity is organized around three broad principles – redistribution, reciprocity, market exchange - which are based on alternative social structures and relations. The market is the main organizing principle in capitalist societies. However, it is never totally dominant and redistribution and reciprocity also perform important and diverse roles. Polanyi's schema might help scholars of agrarian change to delve deeper into the shifting relationship between commodification, redistribution and dispossession, building on Levien's insightful analysis.

Dispossession without Development is a fantastic contribution to the agrarian change and political economy literature. In the conclusion of the book, Levien encourages comparative research on regimes of dispossession across the Global South, and Latin America provides interesting terrain to explore this complex issue. I hope that scholars of agrarian change in Latin

America will take up this task and provide new empirical and theoretical insights into the diverse histories and geographies of land dispossession, and how it has been resisted.

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