Review

Marie Huchzermeyer (2011) *Cities with ‘Slums’: from informal settlement eradication to a right to the city in Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

Zachary Levenson
zachary.levenson@berkeley.edu

Marie Huchzermeyer’s new book *Cities with ‘Slums’* provides an overview of informal settlement eradication in African cities. As in her previous comparative work (Huchzermeyer 2004), South African cities assume center stage. After nearly two decades of silence on the subject, this text is at the forefront of an emerging consensus around the systematic nature of forced removals in the post-apartheid period. Whereas late apartheid studies assessed removals as central to a coherent accumulation strategy (eg Maré 1980, Platzky and Walker 1985, Savage 1986), it has only been in the last five years that post-apartheid analysts have begun to reach a comparable conclusion. After briefly considering a handful of key works from the 1970s and 1980s, this review situates Huchzermeyer’s new work, the first book-length treatment of post-apartheid evictions, in the context of the developing literature on the latest round of evictions and relocations.

The first comprehensive study of apartheid-era forced removals was published in 1971 by English-born Franciscan priest Cosmas Desmond. The result of six months worth of visits to threatened settlements across South Africa, *The Discarded People* drew national attention to systematic relocations for the first time, despite its nearly immediate banning inside the country. Desmond’s aim in writing the book was to ‘penetrate the cloak of secrecy’ surrounding removals (Desmond 1971:6), as he was convinced that South African whites would organise against apartheid urban policy if they knew what was occurring at the time. As he would contend over a decade
later, ‘The resettlement policy is the cornerstone of the whole edifice of apartheid’ (Desmond 1985:xviii). While early influx control was intended to achieve complete separation between whites and non-whites, a high modernist project of ‘tidy[ing] the map’ (Desmond 1971:13), by the 1950s the Nationalist Party shifted gears. This second phase was, according to Desmond, an attempt to reproduce cheap African labour reserves, in its initial phase paralleling what Marx called primitive accumulation: ‘The labour-tenant system is being abolished in one district after another, and the people are faced with the alternatives of working full-time for the White farmer (if he wants their labour) or being sent to resettlement camps without any land’ (1971:218). This process would later be described by two researchers from the Surplus People Project in strikingly similar terms, with relocations to bantustans serving as the central means through which ‘thousands of people have been locked into farm labour or contract work’ (Platzky and Walker 1985:33).

These rural evictions constitute the single largest category of forced removals under apartheid, and when combined with urban removals in accordance with the Group Areas Act, this was the fate of a fifth of the South African population by 1985 (1985:7). Like Desmond before them, the Surplus People Project would maintain that removals served to meet the labour needs of the white economy, emphasizing the mining, agricultural, and industrial sectors in particular (1985:16). While neither of these authors is reductively economistic, discussing both racialist and security rationales, the emphasis in both studies remains on the formation of an agrarian proletariat and the coerced peripheralisation of the absolute surplus population. Rural relocation sites were, in the words of Desmond, ‘simply dumping grounds for old people, women and children whose labour is not needed for the White economy’ (1971:27).

By the late 1980s, the apartheid government was no longer able to maintain control over urban influx control. Last ditch attempts to regulate the black urban population – most notoriously the destruction of Crossroads in 1986 – began to falter, and the 1990s were marked by the proliferation (and de nvo formation) of peri-urban shack settlements in every major metropolitan area. Thus Mandela’s 1994 promise of a million houses constituted a key component of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Low-cost subsidised structures are commonly called ‘RDP houses’ to this day, despite the abandonment of most tenets of the RDP itself.
These developmental efforts notwithstanding, the housing backlog has continued to skyrocket annually, and more than 15 years after the transition, nearly a quarter of the residents in South Africa’s nine largest cities remain without formalised shelter (Misselhorn 2009). Even while total government expenditure on housing delivery has more than doubled over the past half decade, the number of homes delivered remains roughly constant, oscillating between 220,000 and 270,000 annually (Tissington 2011:31-33). Despite the fact that more than 2.6 million subsidised units have been delivered since 1994, the number of informal settlements has increased from roughly 300 to more than 2,700 in the same period (2011: 32, 36).

After an initial dearth of analysis, the past few years have been marked by a resurgence of literature on South African shack settlements. Above all, it has been organised resistance to forced removals by those facing them that has been responsible for the new wave of studies. As its name suggests, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) has been at the forefront of organising against evictions in the Cape Flats, as well as militant protests against the privatisation of municipal services. In addition to winning a moratorium on evictions in its first year of existence, AEC helped organise a 21-month occupation against horrid conditions in the Blikkiesdorp transit camp (Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers 2011). Likewise, AEC led the campaign against the forced relocation of 20,000 Joe Slovo residents to Delft in order to make way for the N2 Gateway housing project. While the project initially promised to rehouse the evicted shack dwellers, less than a quarter of the promised homes were actually constructed, and most of these were out of evictees’ price range in any case (Tissington and Vartak 2009). Instead, former residents were removed to a transit camp 15 km further from the CBD.

Durban-based Abahlali baseMjondolo has done similar work, most notably winning a 2009 Constitutional Court-mandated revision of the KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Act of 2007, legislation which described informal settlements as a ‘hindrance to housing delivery’ and facilitated their eradication (Huchzermeyer 2011:203). Just two weeks prior to the court ruling however, armed attackers, suggested by some observers to be tied to a local ANC branch (Huchzermeyer 2011, Chance 2010, Neocosmos 2011), drove Abahlali from their headquarters in the Kennedy Road shack settlement, destroying their main office and even burning down the homes of some of their members. The debates surrounding the 2009 attack, as well as those related to a falling out among participants
in the 2006 Social Movements Indaba, have found their way into much scholarly work on informal settlements in South Africa. The result is that it has become practically *de rigeur* to reference Abahlali press statements in research on urban evictions, even when such work has little to do with the dynamics of these social movements.

A new consensus is beginning to form around the contention that state-ordered forced removals are back. While the political economy of housing was a key component of Patrick Bond’s work on the transition (2000a, 2000b), it was not until Marie Huchzermeyer released *Unlawful Occupation* (2004) that we were presented with a comprehensive account of the failure of informal settlement policy in the first decade of the post-apartheid period. After thoroughly reviewing both liberal and Marxist debates on informal housing, she engages in a rigorous comparative analysis of South African and Brazilian informal settlement policy, holding up the latter case as the ideal. Whereas the South African case is characterised by lack of consultation, eradication, and above all, a definition of informal housing as temporary, the Brazilian state recognizes *favelas* as here to stay, engaging residents and shaping policy accordingly. While Brazilian policy is certainly an improvement over South Africa’s consistent relocations, Huchzermeyer’s analysis emphasises rhetoric at the expense of policy as implemented. Multiple sections of Rio de Janeiro are already scheduled for eviction prior to the 2016 Olympics, and the Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) recently expressed concern about the likelihood of evictions in the run-up to the 2014 World Cup (COHRE 2010). Most recently, thousands of unlawful occupiers in the Pinheirinho settlement on the outskirts of São Paulo were evicted in accordance with an interdict granted by the state judiciary, despite having occupied this land for over eight years. As in South Africa, the legal enshrinement of progressive housing rights has meant little in the midst of a construction boom.

Perhaps the most remarkable fact about this emergent literature on informal settlement eradication is that excepting Huchzermeyer, virtually none of its contributors are trained as urbanists. Certainly there is a sizeable South African urban studies literature on both anti-eviction social movements and inner city evictions, but work on peri-urban removals is dominated by non-urbanists. At the forefront is political theorist and longtime Abahlali affiliate Richard Pithouse, whose 2008 report for COHRE stands as the only attempt to actually quantify the scale of removals, though he admits that a precise calculation is nearly impossible. He claims that ‘it can now be
confidently asserted that at least 10,000 people have been left homeless each year and that at least 5,000 people have been forcibly removed each year giving a total of 15,000 people subject to forced eviction each year’ (Pithouse 2008:135).

Relying entirely on a single article by Pithouse (2006), labour sociologist Ercüment Çelik argues that a new regime of forced removals was initiated in 2001 (Çelik 2010:168), the same year identified by Pithouse in the COHRE report (Pithouse 2008:108). While for Pithouse these removals were part of a ‘security driven eradication agenda’ (2008:145) tied to the UN Millennium Development Goals, Çelik attributes relocations to real estate interests (Çelik 2010:169). Similarly, political theorist Nigel Gibson likens evictions to a ‘gentrification scheme’, arguing that the ‘urban real-estate market has magnified the threat to shack dwellers’ (Gibson 2011:152, 188). Both of these analysts thus implicitly assimilate forced removals to a model derived from a ground rent-centred theory of gentrification.

Despite the continuity between the periods during and after apartheid suggested in much of this literature on removals (Çelik 2010, Gibson 2011, Huchzermeyer 2011, Pithouse 2008), all accounts suggest that the rationale behind state-ordered removals has shifted from one centred on the reproduction of labour reserves to one focused on real estate profits and counter-insurgency. At the same time, despite recent generalisations about gentrification as a ‘global urban strategy’ (Smith 2002, Atkinson and Bridge 2005), there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the primary rationale behind post-apartheid peri-urban removals involves maximally extracting profit from ground rent, nor have service delivery protests proven more than a thorn in the government’s side. Certainly one could make the case where public-private partnerships or social housing institutions are involved, as in the case of N2 Gateway with Thubelisha Homes or more recently, the eviction of dozens of renters from a subsidised housing complex in Durban by Sohco. Still, maximising profits *strictu sensu* is too simple an explanation in this case, and it fails to explain widely publicised forced removals in less centrally located sites such as Ekurhuleni, the Cape Flats, and Cato Manor.

What interest then does the South African state have in forcibly removing shack dwellers? This is precisely where Huchzermeyer, convener of the Housing Programme at Wits, enters the fray with her new book *Cities with ‘Slums’*, the first monograph on informal settlement eradication in African cities since the 1980s. Her answer ties in with an emergent literature on the drive to render South African cities ‘world class’ (Gibson 2011, McDonald
2007, Samara 2011), focusing in particular on visibility as the key variable determining which informal settlements are targeted for eradication (cf Huchzermeyer 2006:45, Pithouse 2006). Underlying all of this is the phenomenon of ‘Dubaisation’, as Huchzermeyer calls it, the pressure on municipal governments to attract global investment and thereby maintain their city’s position in the hierarchy of interurban competition.

Urban competitiveness remains inextricably intertwined with what she terms the ‘target-setting approach,’ with both ‘focus[ing] the state squarely on symptoms rather than causes’ (2011:248). Rhetorical policy shifts notwithstanding, in every case she details, the state remains obsessed with an ordered city rendered legible to foreign investors through the concealment and peripheralisation of shack settlements. In practice this means riffing on Engels’ classic discussion of the bourgeois solution to the housing question:

Official urban planning in African cities deals with informal settlements either by stamping them out and replacing them, at best relocating their inhabitants to formally planned, regulated and taxed environments, or by applying the exception of in situ upgrading – the recognition and permanent incorporation of informally developed neighbourhoods into the city. Policies for urban competitiveness have shunned applying this exception. Instead they wish away any signs of informality ever having existed. (Huchzermeyer 2011:69)

This notion of in situ upgrading as exceptional forms a key part of Huchzermeyer’s larger critique of entrenched high modernism in African city planning. Of course we might expect aversion to upgrading in certain cases. For example, it comes as no surprise that roughly 20 per cent of all Zimbabweans were affected by Operation Murambatsvina (2011:102), or that forced peripheralisation accompanied the restoration of the Abuja master plan, itself reminiscent of Brasília and Naypyidaw. However, her examples from South Africa and Kenya demonstrate that a top-down approach to housing delivery is hegemonic even in purportedly ‘progressive’ cases. South Africa witnessed an explicit rhetorical shift toward in situ upgrading in both its new national housing programme Breaking New Ground (BNG) and in the introduction of a new National Housing Code in 2004, but in practice, the state pursued an informal settlement eradication drive. Even BNG’s flagship N2 Gateway Project fell into this trap, with Minister of Housing Lindiwe Sisulu providing at least seven reasons why in situ upgrading was not feasible after all (2011:151).
A similar sideling of upgrading solutions occurred in the implementation of KENSUP’s pilot project in Kibera. Despite UN-HABITAT involvement, the Kenyan Housing Ministry eschewed upgrading altogether, favoring eradication and forced relocation instead. Huchzermeyer provides additional examples from South Africa, detailing similar processes in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. In all of these cases, in situ upgrading remains perceived by the state as a threat to urban competitiveness. Making this point in a Lefebvorean idiom, Huchzermeyer argues for a ‘rights-based approach,’ calling for ‘firstly, the right to long-term habitation of the city and to spatial centrality; secondly, a right to voice or participation, through access to central decision-making; and thirdly, a right to [Lefebvre’s] oeuvre,’ a city made by those who use it (ibid:245).

While this call may seem relatively non-controversial, she points out that city officials view all three aspects of the right to the city as impediments to profit realisation. Her strongest use of this framework appears in the context of a long overdue critique of the NGO Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and its most prominent academic cheerleader Arjun Appadurai. As she demonstrates in case after South African case, from Victoria Mxenge to N2 Gateway to the KZN Slums Act, SDI’s authoritarian leadership tries to secure subsidies for its constituency and win over municipalities without any linkages whatsoever to actually existing social movements. The result is a well-funded NGO explicitly opposed to extra-parliamentary forms of opposition without any successful record of settlement upgrading.

At the same time, Huchzermeyer’s deployment of the rhetoric of rights against the target-setting agenda remains insufficient. As she demonstrates in much of her text, the South African state has been perfectly adept at pursuing its eradication agenda despite a legal framework that is comparatively friendly to squatters’ rights. The right to housing enshrined in the 1996 Constitution has done little to safeguard against removals since the demise of apartheid. In practice then, the language of rights is inadequate for advocating the decommodification of land, especially when many of the gains Huchzermeyer does cite have been won through circumvention of legal frameworks, not through them, most notably in the case of land invasions. If the South African state has continually remade the urban world in the image of competitiveness, and if the rights she envisions explicitly contradict this goal, a clear disjuncture exists between Constitutional rights and the right to the city. Without clearly distinguishing juridical from ethical conceptions of rights, she appears to assume a direct path from the one to
the other, even if this is not her intention. The connection between strategies of litigation (2011:ch 8) and direct action (2011:250) thus remains unspecified, rendering the relationship between rights talk and decommodification unclear.

Returning to target-setting, Huchzermeyer argues that the multilateral organisation Cities Alliance, which includes both UN-HABITAT and the World Bank, has been the most effective promulgator of this gospel. In 1999, the group launched ‘Cities without Slums,’ a slogan adopted less than a year later by the UN in its Millenium Development Goals. The policy consequences have been disastrous, with informal settlements defined by most African states as inherently temporary dwellings to be eradicated, rather than as admittedly insufficient improvisations in the face of an unresolved housing question. Hence the normative thrust of the book’s title: *Cities with ‘Slums’*.

In the South African case, the target-setting approach is most clearly observable in statements by former Housing Minister Lindiwe Sisulu: ‘Thus, in line with our commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals we join the rest of the developing world and reiterate our commitment to progressively eradicate slums in the ten year period ending in 2014’ (quoted in Huchzermeyer 2011:118). In her ‘war against shacks,’ Sisulu presided over the passage of the Slums Act of 2007 in KZN, a bill reminiscent of the 1951 Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act which criminalised land invasion. As Huchzermeyer points out, ‘the penalty for unlawful occupation in the KZN Slums Act by far exceeds that of the notorious 1951 PISA’ (2011:119). Far from exceptional, she argues, similar language has found its way into proposed legislation across the country. Despite a Constitutional Court ruling striking down a key section of the KZN Slums Act in 2009, Limpopo’s legislature is now set to ratify a nearly identical bill with the blessing of Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, the former MEC for Housing in that province. More prominently, Jacob Zuma used this language at Polokwane, which was immediately picked up by Gauteng housing officials, who subsequently referred to the eradication of informal settlements as the ‘Polokwane mandate.’

This emergent policy objective then indicates the onset of a new wave of forced removals. If we recall Pithouse and Çelik’s periodisations as discussed above, we can observe that the timing of evictions and relocations since 2001 corresponds with the rise of the importation of the target-setting approach to South Africa. With success defined entirely in terms of the release of standardised capital subsidies and RDP housing delivery – what Huchzermeyer calls ‘rigid, reductionist focus on delivery targets’ (2011:136)
– shacks are rendered inherently undesirable, as representing the failure, or at least incompleteness, of the state’s modernist housing project. Formalisation then does not imply the in situ upgrading of not-yet-formal shacks, but rather a step toward the demolition of these structures. This is the logic whereby existing communities are destroyed in the name of relocating them to dispersed ‘formal’ structures – usually prefabricated tin rooms – in peripherally located transit camps. Hardly a solution, we know quite well where this leads: ‘they are merely shifted elsewhere! The same economic necessity which produced them in the first place, produces them in the next place also’ (Engels 1935 [1872]:77).

The book’s limits are most evident in its lack of any concrete data on the scope and scale of removals, though this is admittedly difficult to obtain. Still, some of Huchzermeyer’s claims might be more adequately substantiated by statistics, including her assertion ‘that most informal settlements are categorised as being unsuitable for in situ upgrading’ (2011:191). Without such national level data, it remains nearly impossible to assess how representative flagship projects are of less publicised eradications. At the same time, the framework provided in Cities with ‘Slums’ is extremely generative for tying relatively remote removals to similar drives in major metropolitan areas, and subsequent empirical work will benefit immensely from her analysis.

References


