Dispossession, Displacement and Human Security

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ABSTRACT
Dispossession and displacement have made their imprint on the lives of uncounted millions, and continue to pose the gravest threat to security for many more. The ascent of neoliberalism to global hegemony in recent decades – in all its multifarious and contextually path-dependent varieties – has radically changed the landscape of human vulnerability and security. Its successes in massive global and national redistributions of income and wealth have enriched the few while leaving most of the population more vulnerable, less secure, and at greater risk of suffering. In this paper I argue that various forms of accumulation by dispossession and displacement, associated with policies of neoliberalization, exacerbate human vulnerabilities and increasingly constitute a major risk to security both directly and indirectly through contributing to growing inequalities. These are not peripheral processes taking place in the frontiers of modernization and the margins of urbanization: they prevail also in the central nodes of ‘advanced’ societies and affect broad swaths of global population. These are not natural processes, however much neoliberal discourse has succeeded in incorporating them into common sense. Programs aiming to effectively deal with human vulnerability, security and risk cannot afford to neglect some of the greatest risks and most powerful forces threatening human security. For security we need a right to stay put, a right to place.

Key words: accumulation by dispossession, displacement, neoliberalism, security, right to place

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Imagine this: You and your family are asleep in the safety of your home, when the door is smashed in without warning. Armed thugs hustle you from your house without allowing you to take any belongings. The streets are swarming with armed police, and you watch as your home is bulldozed to the ground. The same thing is happening to your neighbours, and within a short space of time, your community is a wasteland. You receive no compensation for your loss, nor any offer of relocation to another site, and you cannot take your case to court, as the entire exercise has been sanctioned by government.

Scenes like these occur every day somewhere in the world. This is the brutal reality of forced eviction – an act that destroys the hopes and homes of millions of people every year. (COHRE 2010)

Basic rights such as the freedom from … forced migration … are essential to every life. (Barnett, Matthew and O’Brien 2010, 19)

Dispossession and displacement have made their imprint on the lives of uncounted millions, and continue to pose the gravest threat to security for many more. Uncounted because they have been made invisible by not being counted: states calculate volumes of variables in national statistics, but are loath to tally displacement. This reluctance to register such painful processes is rooted in the condition that these acts of violence are commonly sanctioned by the state and inflicted upon undesired minorities and marginalized low-income communities.

Documenting and researching forced evictions and displacement is challenging (Atkinson 2000, Hartman and Robinson 2003, Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008), but given their devastating consequences for people (Fullilove 2001, 2004, Porter 2009) it is not surprising that the challenge is taken. As David Smith put it, “Losing one’s place can be much more traumatic than simply changing location.”
Finding cases is not difficult: “the tragedy is that there is so much from which to choose” (Smith 1994). Conservative estimates based on available reported cases of forced evictions suggest very large numbers globally, and these do not include other less flagrant forms of displacement and dispossession. Just the displacement associated with the Beijing Olympic Games reached over 1.5 million, not including approximately 400,000 migrants living ‘temporarily’ in 171 neighborhoods in situations of extreme insecurity, “whose homes were demolished to make way for massive transport infrastructure development.” COHRE also notes that Beijing authorities “used propaganda, harassment, repression, imprisonment and violence against those who questioned or protested against the involuntary displacement” (2009, 11). The “forceful expulsion of peasant populations from the land” is not a closed chapter in the early history of capitalism, but is rather intensifying in recent decades in, among other places, India and Mexico (Harvey 2009, 68, cf. Harvey 2003, 145).

Displacement cannot be adequately understood in terms of individual acts of aggression, however much this is part of the process. The history and scale of dispossession and displacement rather reflect *The Great Transformation* associated with the forced formation of markets for land and labor. Karl Polanyi analyzed key historical tensions in terms of “habitation versus improvement”, observing how “the juggernaut, improvement” is “accompanied by a catastrophic dislocation of the lives of common people”, and “a mystical readiness” on the part of liberal philosophy “to accept the social consequences of economic improvement, whatever they might be” (1944 [2001], 35 and 191). That the costs and benefits of ‘improvement’ are grossly skewed, and that the habitations of the wealthy and powerful are never at risk for ‘regeneration’, has not proven any great hinder for the reach of first liberal and now neoliberal ideology.

Uneven development is both driven by and a consequence of a process David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession. This process “takes a seemingly
infinite variety of forms in different places and times”:

The list of the deprived and dispossessed is as imposing as it is long. It includes all those peasant and indigenous populations expelled from the land, deprived of access to their natural resources and ways of life by illegal and legal (that is, state-sanctioned), colonial, neo-colonial and imperialist means, and forcibly integrated into market exchange … The conversion of common rights of usage into private property rights in land completes the process. Land itself becomes a commodity. These forms of dispossession, still extant but most strongly represented in the early stages of capitalist development, have many modern equivalents. Capitalists open up space for urban redevelopment, for example, by dispossessing low-income populations from high-value spaces at the lowest cost possible. In places without secure private property rights, such as China or the squatter settlements of Asia and Latin America, violent expulsions of low-income populations by state authorities often lead the way with or without modest compensation arrangements. In countries with firmly established private property rights, seizure by eminent domain can be orchestrated by the state on behalf of private capital. By legal and illegal means financial pressures (that is, rising property taxes and rents) are brought to bear on vulnerable populations. It seems sometimes as if there is a systematic plan to expel low-income and unwanted populations from the face of the earth. (Harvey 2010, 244-245)

Peter Marcuse (1985) estimated that between 1.5 and 3.5 per cent of the population of New York City were displaced annually. This is between 100,000 and 250,000 people, in one city alone, every year. This resonates with Newman and Wyly’s (2006) estimates for the 1990’s. Other cities with other social, political, legal and institutional histories experience more or less displacement, making space for urban redevelopment in the form of gentrification (cleansed and
legitimized as ‘revitalization’, ‘regeneration’, ‘beautification’ or the like), infrastructural mega-projects, mega-events, or other juggernaut ‘improvements’. It is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that displacement “ranks amongst the most widespread human rights violations in the world” (COHRE 2009, 7).

These are dispossessions through displacement. But dispossession takes many other forms as well. The ascent of neoliberalism to global hegemony in recent decades – in all its multifarious and contextually path-dependent varieties – has radically changed the landscape of human vulnerability and security. Its successes in massive global and national redistributions of income and wealth have enriched the few while leaving most of the population more vulnerable, less secure, and at greater risk of suffering. The main means of redistribution have been privatization, financialisation, management and manipulation of crises, and state redistributions (Harvey 2007).

Public assets and institutions for provision of healthcare, education, housing, transportation, water, and other public services, are privatized, becoming sources for accumulation of profit, much of which disappears from local economies through offshore finance paradises. These services become increasingly difficult for low-income populations to afford, especially when their real incomes steadily decline, which they do under neoliberal reform. New markets are created where they did not exist, allowing capital to penetrate and profit from all spheres of life: the financialisation of just about anything and everything. Deregulation of finance allows “the financial system to become one of the main centers of redistributive activity through speculation, predation, fraud, and thievery” (Harvey 2007, 36). The creation, management and manipulation of crises – “what the U.S. Treasury/Wall Street/IMF complex became expert at doing everywhere” (Harvey 2007, 37) – has evolved into a fine art of redistributing wealth from the poor regions to global corporate capital. Regarding for instance the Asian crisis of 1997-98, “there is no doubt that Western and Japanese corporations are the big
The combination of massive devaluations, IMF-pushed financial liberalization, and IMF facilitated recovery may even precipitate the biggest peacetime transfer of assets from domestic to foreign owners in the past fifty years anywhere in the world, dwarfing the transfers from domestic to US owners in Latin America in the 1980s or in Mexico after 1994” (Wade and Veneroso 1998, 20-21). Neoliberal politics have reformed laws and institutions, transforming the state into a leading agent of regressive redistributions, largely through privatization schemes, but also through regressive taxation.

These various forms of accumulation by dispossession and displacement, associated with policies of neoliberalization, exacerbate human vulnerabilities and increasingly constitute a major risk to security both directly and indirectly through contributing to growing inequalities. The indirect consequences may indeed be as significant as the more obvious direct consequences. The ways in which inequalities impact negatively on societies – in terms of health, trust, security, education, crime and incarceration, stress and anxieties, freedom and social mobility, wellbeing and sustainability – are well known and documented (e.g. Rothstein and Uslander 2005, Wilkinson 2005, Bowles et al. 2006, Gilbert 2007, Bartels 2008, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). The spread of neoliberal politics across the globe is followed by increasing inequalities, evident in increasing gini-coefficients. The human costs of these growing gaps are immense – “by far the greatest source of human misery today” (Pogge 2001, 8) – and impact not only the weakest households, but also the broad middle class, and in many variables such as health, trust, crime, security and sustainability, also upper class households. The evidence is overwhelming that “rising inequality has created enormous losses and few gains, even for its ostensible beneficiaries” (Frank 2010).

These are not peripheral processes taking place in the frontiers of modernization and the margins of urbanization: they prevail also in the central
nodes of ‘advanced’ societies and affect broad swaths of global population. Let us
take a brief look at Sweden, described by Harvey as an example of
“circumscribed neoliberalization” (Harvey 2005, 115). Certainly, the above
concerns must come across as alarmist in an exemplar of the European welfare
state. Or do they? Sweden has experienced a marked transformation during the
last thirty years (Boréus 1997, Ryner 1999, Blyth 2001, 2002). Especially in the
field of housing, neoliberalization in Sweden succeeded in circumventing the
protections of habitation established during the middle decades of the twentieth
century. Political reforms have radically changed the political economic
landscape of housing for both households and agents in structures of housing
provision (Lindbom 2001, Clark and Johnson 2009). Sweden’s leading real estate
economists observe that Sweden has “gradually become one of the most liberal
market-governed housing markets in the Western world” and conclude that “state
engagement is substantially less in Sweden than in the homelands of market
liberalism, Great Britain and the United States” (Lind and Lundström 2007, 129,
my translation). Real rents increased 73 per cent during the 1990s, while real
costs for owner occupation dropped by 8 per cent. Neoliberal politicians said this
is simply market forces. But Uppsala economist Bengt Turner (2001) calculated
that 90 per cent of the increase in rents was due directly to political decisions,
including regressive taxation policies burdening rent while benefitting owner
occupiers. A governmental whitepaper concluded that housing policies were “in
practice subsidizing economically strong households” (SOU 1996). Housing
construction fell to the lowest level since World War Two. Vacancies increased
along with the population, a growing segment of which had increasing difficulties
affording adequate housing. Crowded housing conditions increased for the first
time since the 1930s. Homelessness has multiplied.

Together with neoliberal policies in other spheres, not least taxation and
privatization, this period is characterized by marked social polarization, with clear
geographic manifestations. During the early 1990s, the Swedish economy experienced negative growth and an economic climate worse than during the depression of the 1930’s (Swedish Government 1996). Polarization escalated, as both super-gentrification (rich areas getting markedly richer) and low-income filtering (low income areas getting markedly poorer) doubled in Sweden’s three largest cities (Hedin et al. 2011). The geographic concentrations of these polarized places correspond to the geographies of devaluation (generating future opportunities for capital reinvestment and associated displacement) and soaring property values. For some, the crisis proved to be very lucrative.

During the 1990s, real incomes of the richest 10 per cent in Sweden increased by 47 per cent. The richest 5 per cent enjoyed increased real incomes of 66 per cent. The 10 per cent at the bottom of Swedish society experienced a 5 per cent decline in real income. Sweden’s gini-coefficient was 2.1 in 1989. In 2007 it had grown to 3.3. (By comparison, the USA has 4.1, Brazil 5.7 and South Africa 5.8.) The only reason Sweden remains a relatively equal society in global perspective is because of the global reach of neoliberal ideology and politics, favoring corporate capital over people: gini-coefficients have with few exceptions increased everywhere.

Schools, hospitals, and primary healthcare and elderly care institutions are being privatized. The six largest companies in the care sector, together with the four largest school companies, registered profits in 2008 of 1.5 billion SEK. In order to avoid taxation, most of this profit flows to the two offshore tax havens Jersey and Guernsey. Meanwhile, the government favors incentives for profit-driven firms with the motivation that it “leads to long-term sustainability”. In Stockholm, over half of all primary care units and high schools are already private profit-driven firms. Lobbyists for privatization estimate that this will be true for the whole country within four years. We are not talking about small entrepreneurs, but large financial investment corporations (Werne 2010).
This is the redistributional face of the neoliberal city in Sweden today. Tamer perhaps than many other places, but with great human costs nonetheless.

These are not natural processes, however much neoliberal discourse has succeeded in incorporating them into common sense. They are “the result of increasingly sophisticated, well-financed and well-organized efforts by the corporate and financial sectors to tilt government policies in their favor, and thus in favor of the very wealthy.” Herbert (2010) refers here to the United States, where “the incomes of the very highest earners … a small group of individuals hauling in more than $50 million annually (sometimes much more), increased fivefold from 2008 to 2009, even as the nation was being rocked by the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression” (compare Sweden in early 1990s). But this orchestration has global reach and national counterparts (regarding Sweden, see Ryner 1999, Blythe 2001, 2002).

The neoliberal revolution is, in spite of the rhetoric, not a tide that lifts all boats: “a person earning an income of $2 per day is in the top half of the world income distribution today” (Bowles et al. 2006, 1). Taking human security seriously today means seeing the impacts of neoliberalism on societies in terms of dispossessions and displacements, and establishing a politics that effectively counters these processes. The under-fulfillment of human security in both developing countries and in the back yards of rich countries “is not a homegrown problem, but one we greatly contribute to through the policies we pursue and the international order we impose” (Pogge 2001, 22). This under-fulfillment of human security is exacerbated by the aggressive commodification of space, which facilitates the flow of capital seeking opportunities for accumulation, while threatening the places of millions upon millions of everyday lives and livelihoods. As Stiglitz (2001) reminds us, “The freedom to move capital in and out of a country at will is a freedom that some exercise, at an enormous cost to others.”

International programs aiming to effectively deal with human vulnerability,
security and risk cannot afford to neglect the most powerful forces threatening human security. Countering these threats will require legal, policy and institutional innovations curbing the commodification of housing and land (Smith 1994, Slater 2009) while establishing and safeguarding the right to the city (Mitchell 2003, Harvey 2008), the right to place (Imbroscio 2004) and the right to stay put (Hartman et al. 1982, Hartman 2002, Newman and Wyly 2006, Slater 2011).

Freedom to move is important for human development (UNDP 2009). Freedom from dispossession, displacement and forced mobility is at least as important. For security we need a right to stay put, a right to place.

REFERENCES


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