

Geography 516
Urban Geography: Dis/Possession



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Tuesdays 1:40-4:40, LCH-B120

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Course Introduction

Dispossession is perhaps the master concept in urban theory. For the early “fathers” of the Chicago School of urban sociology, migration and loss of place were at the core of the modern human experience. One of Robert E. Park’s foundational texts, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” published in 1928, for example, established marginality as a key concept of urban studies. Louis Wirth, himself an émigré from rural Germany to Chicago, formalized this position in calling urbanism a “way of life” defined by “the undermining of traditional basis of social solidarity.” Alongside this loss, or dispossession, of individual connection, though, came the collective social possession of new forms of command through such things as the scientific organization of the economy and rationalist urban planning. With loss comes something to be gained, for some at least.

The notion that a state of dispossession is the founding experience of the urban condition is also shared by one of the key thinkers of critical urban theory: Henri Lefebvre. For Lefebvre,

the “urban revolution” and the commodification of urban space that accompanied capitalist development unleashed immense powers of creative destruction, but also a condition of “extraordinary passivity of the people most directly involved” in the use of space. In this nod to Marx—who famously theorized the modern proletariat as passive appendages to the capitalist machine, not the other way around—Lefebvre locates material and psychic dispossession at the center of the urban problematic. Lefebvre follows Marx further in defining the material underpinnings and spatial conditions of urbanization through an original dispossession, what Marx called primitive accumulation. As Lefebvre put it: “The forces of history smashed naturalness forever, and upon its ruins established the space of accumulation” (1991, 49). Lefebvre’s innovation was to develop an urban analysis that mapped the flattening of the human condition, diagnosed by Marx, to the flattening of space.

This semester’s Urban Geography seminar is organized around these broad themes of dispossessed subjects and dispossessed cities. But, it does not aim to re-hash the canon of critical urban theory or provide a comprehensive survey of theories of dispossession. Instead, over the course of the semester we will follow key routes into the dialectics of possession and dispossession, considering in particular how models of collective urban life are premised on dispossession and how even emancipatory logics of urban change aimed at challenging exclusionary economic systems often exclude certain already dispossessed subjects. Following this line of thought means asking how common models of possession—such as home ownership, liberal citizenship, or “the integrated ideal” of complete infrastructure coverage, to take just a few examples—establish certain protected and universalized categories of personhood—property-owners, tax-paying citizen, the middle-class family—that are not equally accessible to all. We will also ask how canonical critiques of dispossession themselves rest on normative theories of possession. In the Chicago School, in Marxism, and in most urban geography, for example, the critique of dispossession signals if not a longing for the conditions lost (property, community, autonomy, self-realization), then at least an assertion of a particular model of the sovereign subject: the self-possessing individual, the industrial worker, the property-owning citizen, the unmarked flâneur, or the male breadwinner. To take this further, as Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2014, 13) suggest, our very notion of what a person is and can be is shaped by a notion of what property is and what is lost through dispossession: “property relations have come to structure and control our moral concepts of personhood, self-belonging, agency, and self-identity.” This is a claim that the logic of dispossession is mapped onto bodies, producing “dispossessed subjectivities, rendering them subhuman... and putting them in their proper place – the spatial condition of... non-being and non-having.” This is a provocative claim that the relationship between property and personhood, between material possession and self-possession, between citizenship recognition and performative expression, must be interrogated from different geographical and historical vantage points to understand how norms of property and propriety are established and concretized, but also challenged. The task of our seminar this semester is to begin such an interrogation.

The course will be divided in three parts. Part I is on Models and Genealogies of Dis/Possession. Here we will focus on certain clear historical patterns of dispossession and related critiques of them. Marx’s analysis of Primitive Accumulation and related Marxian accounts of imperialism provide a starting point, but historical analyses of racism, segregation, and anti-capitalist occupation provide alternative analytical lines, as does the Black Radical Tradition. Part II – Governing the Urban Body explores particular strategies of dis/possession and how communities in a range of ethnographic settings experience, uphold, and contest these

strategies. Specific strategies we'll consider here include security, injury, surveillance, civility, and collectivism. Part III – Dispossessive Infrastructures considers symbolic, material, and legal infrastructures that pattern possibilities for occupations and uses of space. This part of the course also examines how an infrastructurally attuned lens to studying urban geography opens up insights into creative practices and legacies of—as well as obstacles to—radical struggle.

Requirements

This course will be run as a reading-intensive seminar. Each week we will systematically discuss the argument, method, and presumptions of the key texts; present our ideas and questions to each other; and generally learn from the diverse backgrounds and perspectives we all bring. Accordingly, it is imperative that everyone comes fully prepared to participate.

Each student will be expected to undertake the following:

- (i) To prepare a short one-page **critical commentary** on each week's readings and to post this commentary on the week's forum on Sakai by the Monday evening (no later than 8 pm) prior to the Tuesday class.
- (ii) To **lead/chair two class discussions**, which involves a short (~10 minute) presentation of the key theoretical and conceptual issues in the readings pertaining to that week. This means laying out key empirical, theoretical, or methodological contributions of the week's readings (usually a single monograph), and posing a set of questions to open up and structure conversation. I will circulate a sign-up sheet during week 1 for you to choose the weeks you'd like to present. This will be done in groups of two or three.
- (iii) **To write a course paper** approximately 20 pages in length that deploys concepts from the course in the analysis of an issue, debate, theme, or phenomenon of your choosing. The purpose of the term essay is to demonstrate that you can leverage theoretical insights from the seminar to make an intellectually rigorous argument around an empirical or philosophical problem of your choosing. This paper can take the form of a research proposal, although it does not have to.

Assessment

Students will be assessed according to the following scheme:

Critical commentaries & presentations	35%
Classroom participation	20%
Course Paper	45%
Total	100%

Readings

Required course texts:

- Kristin Ross. 2015. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso.
- Matthew Desmond. 2015. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. Crown.
- Carl Nightingale. 2012. *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cedric Robinson. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Laurence Ralph. 2014. *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- Simone Brown. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.
- Ato Quayson. 2014. *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Antina Von Schnitzler. 2016. *Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics and Protest after Apartheid*. Princeton University Press.
- Austin Zeiderman. 2016. *Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogotá*. Duke University Press.
- Eyal Weizman. 2006. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. Verso.
- Erik Harms. 2016. *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon*. University of California Press. (NOTE: a free ebook version of this text is available from the University of California website)

Recommended texts:

- Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. 2013. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Polity.

These texts have been ordered through the Rutgers Bookstore (Barnes and Noble) in New Brunswick. Note that Barnes and Noble has a price guarantee, which means it will match the advertised price of any online merchant (Amazon) for new books. All additional readings will be posted on the course website on Sakai or placed on reserve in the Kilmer Library.

Seminar Outline

Week 1 (September 6th) – Introduction

In an organizational meeting to discuss the structure of the course, Butler and Athanasiou's dual formulation of dispossession introduces the linked problem of property and personhood we will engage in subsequent weeks. For Butler and Athanasiou, dispossession is both a condition of loss of land, citizenship or property, as well as a performative condition of being subjectively dispossessed of our normative selves. This provocative framing forces us to ask: Who is the subject of property? How is possessive individualism of the (neo)liberal variety challenged as other historically dispossessed subjects or collectives claim/enact property?

Background readings:

- Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. 2013. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Polity, Preface and Chapters 1, 2, 7–9

Part I – Models and Genealogies of Dis/Possession

Week 2 (September 13th) – Accumulation by Dispossession

Marx deployed the term “so-called primitive accumulation” at the end of Volume I of *Capital* as a critique, in part, of Adam Smith’s theorization of the origins of capital through what had been crudely called in political economy “original accumulation,” presumed to have been amassed through savings and thrift, not violence and pillage. He earlier laid out similar ideas in the *Grundrisse* to refer to the preconditions for capitalist accumulation. Marx explores this process through the violent history of the English enclosures, which was solidified subsequently among scholars into a form of structuralist historicism that treats enclosure as a one-off process of proletarianization and original accumulation necessary to set in place “normal” economic accumulation in a capitalist mode of production. An alternative and richer reading of Marx, however, one elaborated by Rosa Luxemburg and Hanna Arendt, sees “so-called primitive accumulation,” which Harvey rephrases as “accumulation by dispossession,” as an ongoing process central to capitalist accumulation. We selectively dip into this lineage of political economy this week to think about a formative model of dispossession and its relationship to a particular model of dispossessed personhood (the proletariat) that it sets in place within western social theory.

Readings:

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Part VIII, The So-Called Primitive Accumulation, Chapters XXVI-XXXIII, International Publishers, 1967.

Available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm>

De Angelis, Massimo. 2004. "Separating the Doing and the Deed: Capital and the Continuous Character of Enclosures." *Historical Materialism* 12 (2): 57-87.

Hanna Arendt. 1951. *Imperialism, Part II of Totalitarianism*, chapter 5: The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie.

David Harvey. 2003. “The New Imperialism.” *The Socialist Register*.

Additional Optional Readings:

Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, 1973, pp.459-516.

Available online:

https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Grundrisse.pdf

Rosa Luxemburg. 1913. *The Accumulation of Capital*, Section III, Routledge, see especially chapters 27, 28, 32.

Gillian Hart. 2006. “Denaturalizing Dispossession.” *Antipode* 38(5): 977–1004.

Michael Levien. 2013. “Regimes of Dispossession.” *Politics and Society* 41: 351-94.

Week 3 (September 20th) – Collectivism, Commons, Occupancy

How do experiments in collective living and collective occupation relate to broader claims to the city? This week, we examine that ur-moment of urban commoning that shaped Lefebvre’s and subsequent theorists’ notion of the right to the city: the Paris Commune. The Paris Commune was a laboratory of political invention, important simply and above all for, as Marx reminds us, its own “working existence.” This week, we explore the intellectual antecedents and political afterlives of the Commune as well as its contemporary impact on writing about and practices of the right to the city, from Occupy to anti-gentrification struggles.

Readings:

David Harvey. 2006. *The Right to the City*. *New Left Review*.

Kristin Ross. 2015. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso.

Additional Optional Readings:

Solomon Benjamin. 2008. "Occupancy urbanism: Radicalizing politics and economy beyond policy and programs," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32(3): 719-729.

David Harvey. 2003. *Paris: Capital of Modernity*. Routledge.

Hannah Appel. 2014. "Occupy Wall Street and the Economic Imagination." *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (4): 602-625.

Week 4 (September 27th) – Segregation

This week we read Carl Nightingale's global history of segregation, which places the racial organizations of urban space found in the US and South Africa in a colonial and imperialist frame, detailing how the idea of "race" arose through European colonialism, starting with British Rule in Madras and the East India Company's decision to split Calcutta into "White Town" and "Black Town." The word "segregation" itself, Nightingale shows, comes from techniques used in Hong Kong and Bombay in the 1890s that turned on the challenges of mass urbanization and sent the institution north, south, east, and west — even to Latin American cities where the distinction between "white" and "black" had been murky at best. In contrast with the new focus in urban geography on "comparative urbanism," which places distinct geographical particulars aside each other in a (mostly) positivist frame, Nightingale urges us to see the modern organization of urban space through the universal logic of racial capitalism.

Readings:

Carl Nightingale. 2012. *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities*. University of Chicago Press.

Additional optional readings:

Kevin Ward. 2010. "Towards a relational comparative approach to the study of cities." *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (4): 471-487.

John Eligon and Robert Gebeloff. 2016. "Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation," *New York Times*, August 20, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/us/milwaukee-segregation-wealthy-black-families.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=photo-spot-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0

Week 5 (October 4th) – Racial Capitalism

Cedric Robinson takes up and challenges dominant 20th century interpretations of historical materialism that too easily absorb race into the analytics of class. Noting the methodological extension within Marxism of Marx's treatment of the figure of the slave as an "embarrassing residue" of a feudal, pre-capitalist mode of production, "which disqualified them from historical agency . . . in the modern world," Robinson offers the beginnings of a theorization of racial capitalism, arguing that emancipatory Marxism can only be one routed through various legacies of black radical thought and praxis. For our purposes, the question becomes what sort

of self one can possess in “white” Marxism, and what sort of selves are denied or dispossessed of historical footing through it. What possibilities for re-possession exist with a theory of race (inspired by W.E.B Du Bois, Franz Fanon, and Richard Wright) as integral to modern capitalist formations and associated organizations of space? We supplement selections of Robinson’s masterful *Black Marxism* with Pulidos’ critique of the water crisis in Flint and other recent geographical analyses of racial capitalism.

Readings:

Cedric Robinson. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of North Carolina Press.

Laura Pulido. 2016. “Geographies of race and ethnicity II: Environmental racism, racial capitalism and state-sanctioned violence,” *Progress in Human Geography*

Laura Pulido. 2016. “Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27(3): 1-16.

Additional Optional Readings:

Jodi Melamed. 2015. “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 1(1), 76-85.

Part II – Governing the Urban Body

Week 6 (October 11th) – Injury

This week we examine the link between physical and emotional injury and what Laurence Ralph calls the renegade dreams that arise in injury’s aftermath. How does one reorganize life and aspiration in the wake of disability and neighborhood decline? How does a gang member come to possess renewed sense of life and community after being expunged from the masculine ideal of neighborhood command? How do we theorize the ghetto, and the urban condition more broadly, from an injurious state? Ralph’s careful ethnography of gangland Chicago and the competing uses of nostalgia in the face of gentrification pressures and racial banishment addresses these questions, showing how youth cultural practices create opportunity where many would see only despair.

Readings:

Laurence Ralph. 2014. *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

Loic Wacquant. 1993. “Urban outcasts: stigma and division in the black American ghetto and the French urban periphery,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 17(3), 366-383.

Week 7 (October 18th) – Surveillance

As cities become increasingly subjected to new forms of securitizing power that seek to order bodies in space, we this week examine what Simone Brown calls “racializing surveillance.” Brown’s concept of “dark matters” refers to the ways racism structures surveillance logics and practices, revealing the ways in which race becomes deeply entangled with visions of secure urban and national space. Turning back in time from technologies such as drones and biometric scans that dominate the news today, Brown provides a deep genealogy of these and other technologies’ rooting in racial systems of policing.

Readings:

Simone Brown. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.

Katherine McKittrick. 2011. "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place." *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12:8: 947-963.

Additional Optional Readings:

John Fiske. 1998. "Surveilling the City: Whiteness, the Black Man, and Democratic Totalitarianism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 15 (2).

Allan Sekula. 1986. "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39, 3-64.

Week 8 (October 25th) – Collectivism

We this week consider forms of collectivism that emerge in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring with a specific focus on the structurally adjusted city of Accra. Postcolonial theorist Quayson provides our point of departure, taking Accra's main commercial street "as the *expressive spatial analogue* of the discourse of enchantment that has swept Ghana since the IMF-inspired neo-liberal reforms of the late 1980s." Quayson urges a consideration of how image, pop cultural forms, and street style combine to create possibilities for collective life that stretch beyond narrower imaginaries of economic decline in Sub-Saharan Africa. This week's meeting coincides with a campus visit by Professor Quayson on October 26th, featuring both an invitation-only lunch workshop (open to Geography and English students) and an evening public lecture.

Readings:

Ato Quayson. 2014. *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*. Duke University Press.

Rosalind Fredericks. 2015. "Vital Infrastructures of Trash in Dakar," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, African and the Middle East* 34(3): 532-548.

Week 9 (November 1st) – Security

Security and risk have become central to how cities are planned, built, and inhabited in the twenty-first century. Reading Zeiderman's *Endangered City* this week we consider the effects of this new political imperative on how the present is governed in anticipation of future harm. What happens when logics of endangerment shape the terrain of political engagement between citizens and the state? This text, focused on Bogotá, Colombia, also provides an occasion to consider how self-built settlements subject to a variety of environmental and political threats provide useful sites for theorizing the contemporary city.

Readings:

Michel Foucault. 2007. Lecture 1 from *Security, Territory, Population*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Austin Zeiderman. 2016. *Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogota*. Duke University Press.

Additional Optional Readings:

Ieva Jusionyte and Daniel Goldstein. 2016. "In/Visible-In/Secure: Optics of Regulation and Control," *Focaal-Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 75:3-13.

Week 10 (November 8th) – Civility

In cities of the new “Asian century,” luxury shopping complexes, gated communities, and world-class infrastructure operate as key signs of post-socialist and post-colonial cities’ entrance into global modernity, but they also put into play powerful visual and civic markers of belonging and unbelonging. Focusing on Ho Chi Minh City, we use Harms’s *Luxury and Rubble* this week to consider how civility becomes a powerful governmental technology, but also a contested terrain of struggle and opposition. How do norms of appearance, comportment, and disposition structure forms of action and protest, but also hint at the possibility for the reemergence of old, or the restructuring of new, styles and practices of public engagement and debate?

Readings:

Erik Harms. 2016. *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon*. University of California Press.

D. Asher Ghertner. 2012. “Nuisance talk and the propriety of property: Middle class discourses of a slum-free Delhi.” *Antipode* 44 (4):1161-1187.

Part III – Dis/Possessive Infrastructures

Week 11 (November 15th) – Architecture as exclusion

This week we consider the political uses of architecture, or how design, engineer, and planning work in the service of state projects of exclusions and segregation. How do matters as seemingly mundane as the thickness of a line on the map shape freedom of movement? How is archaeology used in the service of the state? How does disciplinary power become embedded in material infrastructures, and how do objects as rigid as a wall and systems as fixed as a political occupation become plastic enough to allow colonial projects to appear flexible and correctable? Weizman raises these and a variety of other questions about architectures of state power through his study of the Israeli occupation of Palestine in *Hollow Land*, a book that pushes us to consider the full consequences of understanding space in three-dimensions.

Readings:

Eyal Weizman. 2006. *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*. Verso.

Week 12 (November 22nd) – No Class

Week 13 (November 29th) – Infrastructures of protest

If for Manuel Castells urban politics historically centered on struggles over collective commodities, or the conditions of collective consumption (housing, transportation, education, water and sanitation, etc.), then questions of collective possession have always been infrastructural questions. This week queries the power of infrastructure as a conduit of collective claims to the city, considering how infrastructure functions as a material technology of dis/possessive collectivism, promising particular forms of collective ownership of the materials of community life while also imprinting dispossessive logics into the social fabric of cities. As we shall see through the case of South Africa, struggles over infrastructure also provide a different historical lens for understanding the right to the city, as well as a way to make visible longer lineages of struggle over the means and meaning of collective life.

Readings:

Antina Von Schnitzler. 2016. *Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics and Protest after Apartheid*. Princeton University Press.

Additional Optional Readings:

Nikhil Anand. 2013. Municipal Disconnect: On Abject Water and its Urban Infrastructures. *Ethnography* 13(4): 487–509.

Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin. 2001. “The Collapse of the Integrated Ideal,” In *Splintering Urbanism*. Routledge.

Week 14 (December 6th) – Eviction

This week we shift focus from physical infrastructures to legal and financial ones, exploring how property, rent, and tenancy laws, combined with idealizations of homeownership, perpetuate cycles of eviction in contemporary US cities. Crisis proves to be a far more mundane experience than macro-structural writing on financialization suggests when it is witnessed through the everyday circuits of eviction notices and tenancy court visits so many low-income renters confront. What does an eviction feel like? How has eviction become a cause, not just a condition, of poverty? How does the precarity of not knowing where to call home generate new crisis management strategies, and what does the urban signify when it is lived as a perpetual state of dispossession and forced exit?

Readings:

Matthew Desmond. 2015. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown.

Raquel Rolnik. 2013. “Late Neoliberalism: The Financialization of Homeownership and Housing Rights.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37(3): 1058-1066.

Week 15 (December 13th) - Wrap-up session

----- Paper due December 16th -----