

Forced evictions that did not end with apartheid

a necessary part of urban development projects

By Moira Levy

Moira Levy is the Production Editor of *New Agenda*, the flagship journal of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA).



Sara Dehkordi was only three months old when she had her first experience of political resistance. When the Ayatollah Khomeini became the first Supreme Leader of her country, Iran, her mother wrapped her up and took her off on a long journey into exile. After two months on the move, they arrived in Germany where they settled down to many years of exile. Her father, who was a guerrilla fighter at the time, eventually joined them there, but only much later. It was a fitting start to a lifetime of activism and exile.

The adult Sara now lectures at the Free University of Berlin on postcolonial and decolonial theory, colonial genocide, Negritude and the Black Consciousness Movement, the neoliberal impact on urbanisation and development and, broadly, peace and conflict studies. Her activism is now expressed at least in part through her writing, teaching and research.

It was therefore not unexpected that she would embrace the anti-apartheid struggle and the decolonisation project in Africa. Research for her master's thesis brought her to South Africa for the first time ten years after the democratic elections. She readily >>

SARA DEHKORDI, Iranian born and German educated, is a critic of the forced evictions of poor people in Cape Town, not under apartheid, but in the last 20 years. She addressed a recent IFAA Forum on “segregation, inequality and

urban development”, the title of her recent book, and pointed out how our municipalities and property developers have criminalised the urban poor. IFAA hosts regular public and online Forums at Surplus Radical Books in Woodstock.

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concedes that she enthusiastically and uncritically bought into South Africa's post-1994 Rainbow Nation discourse prevalent at the time.

She had romanticised the ANC, Nelson Mandela and the struggle for democracy, she said, but then she came to Stellenbosch on a student exchange.

“When I got here for the first time I was disillusioned, and also very disappointed with myself for so easily buying into the dominant Eurocentric discourses. When I got [to South Africa], I discovered my own ignorance and stupidity.”

What she soon observed was the persistence of racialised and segregated urban spaces, forced evictions that did not end with apartheid and the criminalisation of the urban poor who continue to be caught up in these ongoing struggles.

She has published a book, *Segregation, Inequality and Urban Development: Forced Evictions and Criminalisation Practices in Present-Day South Africa*. In it she describes what she saw in South Africa on that first trip,



and subsequent visits, as the “high concentration of class inequalities and divided urban and rural spaces still underpinned by race concepts”. Despite her deep engagement with communities and activists, she writes consciously as an outsider. Her keen internationalist perspective frames and tilts the mirror she holds up to free and democratic South Africa.

Dehkordi recently addressed one of IFAA's regular public Forums that are hosted jointly with Surplus Radical Books and its Reading Incubator Project. She argued that the persistence of such racialised practices are not only the result of our colonial and apartheid legacy, but also “a necessary part of the realisation and regulation of urban development projects that strive for a competitive, marketable, profitable and investor-attracting city”.

At the Forum she spoke out strongly against the neoliberal narrative directed at the urban poor and powerless and placed recent urban forced removals in Cape Town in the context of what she calls Urban Development Discourse. In her book she defines this term as “an umbrella term for government and business discourses on urban planning, on the role of the market and the city inhabitants' relationship with the

market, on housing, evictions and socio-economic exclusion and inclusion”.

She told the Forum: “The neoliberal agenda on development projects the capitalist imagination on landscape [as a] blank space. It says ‘No one lives there, or no one of any worth lives there ... people who have to be removed are being removed [and] are not worth listening to’.”

She had more to say about Urban Development Discourse, describing it as “the dominant discourse, [which is] informed by colonial discourse. It adopted a language from the colonial project, framing the colonial subject as lazy, not profitable, not creative, devoid of history, not clean, something inferior, childlike – as savage.

“This discourse today adopts the same language, the same rhetoric [as colonial discourse], only today maybe the label ‘savage’ has been replaced by ‘criminal’.”

Her book explores how in present-day South Africa, urban development agendas have inscribed doctrines of desirable and undesirable life in city spaces. She shows that these doctrines are being legitimised and legalised as part of a discursive practice and that the criminalisation of lower-class members of society are part of that practice.

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... the dominant post-apartheid discourse that targets lower-income groups, marginalising them for illegal occupation, effectively criminalises them and then rationalises and justifies forced evictions.

The book incorporates incisive reactions to the views of explorers, historians, artists and commentators on South Africa and the Western Cape in particular. She documents how segregated city spaces, the displacement of people from their homes, and criminalisation practices are structured and executed.

The question she posed at the Forum is: “How is neo-liberalism able to do that, how is it able to take all these different, powerful narratives and turn them against the subject it wants to marginalise and use only as a cheap workforce?”

Dehkordi said she has come to the conclusion that neoliberalism is able to “continuously, perpetually find solutions to its own contradictions. There is never a final stage of neoliberalism; it actually exists because it can reinvent itself over and over again.”

Embedded in almost all the different forced removals across the African continent and beyond that to the Global South – “look at what has happened in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya, Sierra Leone” – are the Bretton Woods institutions, such as the World Bank and

the International Monetary Fund, who are “financing development projects that lead to forced removals”.

She paid tribute to those who have long fought against forced evictions in South Africa; “This work evolved out of the struggle memory of so many people involved.”

At the IFAA Forum, Dehkordi asked how “silences in politico-economic discourses are produced and what can be learned from the people who shared their testimonies, and more generally from the South African political experience of the past 25 or 30 years.”

The majority of people who are forcibly evicted are being marginalised and criminalised in the process. In her book Dehkordi refers to “the dominant post-apartheid discourses that target lower-income groups, marginalising them for illegal occupation, which effectively criminalises them and then rationalises and justifies forced evictions, making the normalisation of forced evictions possible. This then becomes the discursive discourses of government, developers, investors and the media.”

The persistence of racialised and segregated urban spaces places the forced evictions and the criminalisation of the urban poor in the context of our colonial and apartheid legacy.

At the Forum, she cited various recent forced removals in the Cape Town metro – for example, the 2012 eviction of poor families from District Six who had been living for many years in a block of houses that had escaped the 1960s Group Areas Act demolitions. They were told they had to leave to make way for the development of the area. The city offered to move them, but they determinedly refused, resulting in an impasse that continued for five years.

In 2009, 20,000 from the Joe Slovo section in Langa township were evicted to make way for the city’s N2 Gateway Project. This was a high-profile project to provide homes for the homeless – but it excluded most of those who had been

evicted and made homeless to make way for the development.

There was also the 2009 evictions of pavement-dwellers from Symphony Way in Delft. The city council offered only one alternative – to be moved to the appropriately named Blikkiesdorp or “Tin Can Town”, one of the government Temporary Transit Camps on the Cape Flats. In the 2011 evictions from Tafelsig in Mitchells Plain homeless people, fed up with their decades-long wait on the waiting list for housing, occupied open land. They found themselves in protracted legal battles and violent protests that went on for years.

There are many such examples of post-apartheid evictions of the thousands of people who have set up shacks or tents on sports field, pavements and other unoccupied spaces, many owned by the city council, to create homes for their families.

Dehkordi pointed out how middle class areas are enclosed and separated from the city at large. This reinforces the discourse of racialised and segregated urban spaces by excluding and barring entry to parts of the city by those defined as “other”. The irony of this is that the very people required to enforce this separation are usually security guards, who themselves are largely excluded and marginalised.

She believes most of them “are not happy with what they are doing. The moment they take off their uniforms they will be the same subjects that are being targeted [by forced removals] because the majority of security guards also live in informal settlements and townships.”

Dehkordi asks, “How is neoliberal urbanism able to incorporate that workforce and turn it against its own guards in that way?”

REFERENCE

Dehkordi, S. 2020. *Segregation, Inequality, and Urban Development: Forced Evictions and Criminalisation Practices in Present-Day South Africa*. transcript Verlag, Bielefeld. Available for free download. [NA](#)