

Displacement: Neoliberal Land Warfare and Points of Intervention

Abstract

This paper draws upon existing literature to describe the dynamics of displacing peoples from their land and the intergenerational, sociological effects that follow. It presents cases from two regions of the world—the United States and India—where rural and tribal occupants have come into conflict within federal regimes in what many scholars are calling “land wars.” Both countries share a history of British colonial heritage which has provided a legal framework for land reallocation for national gain, and similarly both have since been heavily influenced by neoliberal economic values. The two examples serve to complement one another as tools for learning what interventions are possible for settling long-standing land disputes.

DISPLACEMENT: NEOLIBERAL LAND WARFARE AND POINTS OF INTERVENTION

The displacement of people for any reason is a phenomenon which has intergenerational implication. In the case of externally motivated land reallocation—such as the use of eminent domain laws to sanction land from one community to another in the name of development or business—measures should be implemented to protect the livelihoods of those displaced or in danger of being displaced.

This paper draws upon existing literature to describe the nature of displacement as it relates to intergroup politics and intergenerational biopsychosocial as well as spiritual effects. Examples are drawn from two regions of the world, the United States and India, where rural and tribal occupants have come into violent

conflict with federal regimes in what many scholars are calling “land wars.” While intergroup clashes over land are no new phenomena, there is some indication that their frequency is increasing with the rise of neoliberalism during the late twentieth century and now in the twenty-first.

Indeed, the young field of intergenerational research has brought to light the longstanding biopsychosocial effects of communally experienced historical traumas that span generations. This field provides the empirical evidence of harm caused by federal-level projects that those in power claim to be beneficial for the masses. The use of data from two different parts of the world seeks to demonstrate a pattern of oppressive displacement in postcolonial nations. It also seeks to have the examples complement one another as tools for learning what possibilities exist.

ACKNOWLEDGING DISPLACEMENT

This paper intentionally uses “displacement” rather than “dislocation” or “dispossession” or many of the other terminological options available in today’s academic world as an intentional choice to attempt to encompass the depth of meaning a place can hold for individuals. In many cases, land wars are not just a matter of opposing relocation of residence, nor can they be summarized as the result of dispossession without first submitting to the broken logic of commodification. Rather, the land in question is likely to hold cultural, familial, economic, or ideological significance for the people faced with leaving it.

For example, many indigenous populations have tied their very identities with the geology and/or ecology of the land (Jojo, 2017), like the Menominee tribe in the Wisconsin region—whose name literally translates as “wild rice people” in a neighboring tribe’s language (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d.). The Menominee have a legend that claims the day the rock known as Spirit Rock crumbles away is the day their culture and race will be considered likewise extinguished (Tourtillot and Peters, 2017). The dispossessed land

may be a holy place or perhaps an important resource for their existing economic structure. This is evident in India where the country's rigid caste system has brought many tribes to become defined by specific, environmentally dependent trades such as fishing or salt tilling (Parasuranam, 1995). Finally, land can also signify a place of refuge from opposing forces that threaten a community's livelihood and traditions. The acculturation that often occurs when a group is forced to disperse and assimilate to the culture of another region has harmful effects on individuals' mental health. Again, forced or coercive dispossession of land, therefore, can mean a loss of so much more than just the ground beneath one's feet and thus is better described by the term "displacement."

Today's call to action is thus multifold: to recognize the processes and consequences of displacement on populations displaced, to effectively respond to the consequences and expressed needs of these populations, and to improve prevention efforts to both avoid displacement altogether and to minimize harm. Indian and American examples will demonstrate common themes in neoliberal displacement, particularly in post-colonial nations. It should be clarified that the goal here is not to create an all-inclusive list of ways displacement affects societies and individuals, nor is it to paint a blanket generalization across two similar but still very different case settings. Instead, this paper seeks to answer previous scholars' call for more analysis of the generic features of anti-displacement politics (Levien, 2013a), and thus facilitate increased action from social workers and other stakeholders.

The interdisciplinary nature of harm caused by displacement positions social workers as potentially effective agents of change—functioning in the mesosphere between individuals, communities, and larger federal governments so as to advocate for policies which honor the dignity and worth of not just the dominant, governing class of citizens, but of all individuals who fall within a nation's boundaries. Furthermore, social workers are trained to recognize abuses of power and are bound by their code of ethics to pursue social justice. Thus,

while the problems associated with displacement call to action lawyers, policymakers, journalists, and historians, this paper will devote its final section to actions which fall specifically within the field of social work.

OLD PATTERN, GROWING SOCIETAL CONCERN

According to Levien's research, an estimated 60 million Indians were displaced from their land for development projects between the years 1947 and 2013, with the rate of dispossession increasing significantly after economic liberalization of the early 1990s (Levien, 2013a; Levien, 2013b). Levien's (2011) work highlights how governments have increasingly moved away from a true developmental state which reallocated land for mines, dams, and other government-run estates toward a land-brokering state that hands land from one class (rural dwellers) to another (corporations) for private, commercial purposes (Levien, 2011; Levien, 2013b). In India, these acts are complicated with the deeply embedded tradition of the caste system and the liberalization of the 1990s which brought the designation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), yet their increased frequency and changing nature require social intervention now.

Similarly, Native American tribes throughout the United States have faced displacements over the past 200 years and inherited physical and mental health disparities, poverty, and discrimination. Rather than newly created SEZs, antiquated legislation justifies new violations of Native sovereignty (Volcovici, 2018), as with the development of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Standing Rock Lakota sacred lands. The deployment of private security officers equipped with military-grade gear and trained attack dogs against Standing Rock tribe members and allies who protested the quasi-legal project (Erdich, 2016) drew a nationwide discussion of the problematic practices regarding land use and dispossession that abounded in the country's history of interacting with Native groups.

Unfortunately, despite growing public interest and grassroots efforts, the current federal administration has only driven the sword of neoliberal displacement deeper. On February 2, 2018, the U.S. government opened up previously protected land at Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments for mining (Volcovici, 2018). While the land's previously protected status has meant that no one has been formally living on this land for quite some time, it is home to thousands of sacred sites central to Native culture. Destruction and private ownership of the land would mean something of a spiritual displacement for tribes which have visited Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, called the decision a "serious attack on indigenous peoples' rights in the United States" (Corbett, 2018).

As the two cases show, the conflicts between the rural minority and the state has been changing not just the frequency but in character (Levien, 2013). Across the globe, both sides of these conflicts have been growing increasingly more aggressive, earning them the proper title of "land wars." Just as at Standing Rock, the Indian context shows the police and employed goondas responsible for 14 people killed and more raped and beaten at Nandigram; an additional 14 killed and more wounded by 27 platoons of security forces and supporters of the project at Kalinga Nagar (Levien, 2013a). Left unattended, these conflicts around development projects and displacement are likely to continue to escalate.

SOCIOECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

While direct combat is certainly an element of what makes "land wars" dangerous, it is not the only way. All too often "development" projects are initiated by governments which previously demonstrated little interest in the current inhabitants of the land where the project is to be implemented. For example, in the case of New Bombay and the Jawaharlal Nehru Port (JNP), the state acquired land from 95 villages (33 of which were completely displaced) in the 1970s and 1980s for

the development of a twin city to modern day Mumbai (Parasuraman, 1995). While groups like the Jamin Bachao Samiti (“Save the Land Committee”) fought for—and gained—some compensation (Parasuraman and Sengupta, 1992), JNP developers offered rehabilitation through jobs. The JNP case thus initially seems like a moderate victory made possible through community organizing. But the sociological evidence from the years that followed reveal the degree of damage endured by the displaced villagers.

First, the compensation agreed upon was not available to the total population of those affected. For the limited jobs they could offer, the JNP instituted a priority system where jobs were offered to the households who had lost the most land. Due to sociocultural associations between India’s lower backward castes with jobs reliant on public rather than private land (Parasuraman, 1995), the vast majority of project-affected villagers were ineligible for jobs or compensation. In fact, as compensation was paid out on a per-acre agreement, it can be presumed that the population who benefited most from the JNP acquisition was the villages’ top two percent, who belonged to land-associated middle caste. Ultimately, 91% of those who lost land lost all they had but less than 33% of those received employment (Parasuraman, 1995).

A follow-up study on JNP-affected households post-displacement showed that the project decimated the villages’ middle-income class. Whereas in 1983-1984, 8.6% of the 1,753 affected households surveyed earned less than 80 rupees per month per capita, 29.2% of the same 1,753 households fell into this condition by 1991-92. Similarly, 2.0% of households in 1983-84 earned over 371 rupees per month per capita, yet by 1991-92, this elite income sector increased to 17.0% of the total surveyed households (Parasuraman and Sengupta, 1992).

Furthermore, certain caste groups faced additional problems when it came to integrating into the new economy created by the port. Women were especially negatively impacted as they had previously

held retail positions, which all but disappeared when the port cut off access to the sea. Children of certain lower caste groups had traditionally entered the workforce at younger ages and, therefore, lacked the formal education necessary for securing employment in the villages' new industries (Parasuranam, 1995).

None of these patterns are exclusive to the JNP scenario.

Several other researchers have noted similar effects among displaced populations. Even before displacement in India and the U.S. commonly had private incentives, public development projects in these countries have disproportionately displaced the marginalized groups (Fernandes, 2008; Levien, 2015), failed to provide adequate compensation or rehabilitation (Fernandes and Thukral, 1989; Fernandes and Paranjpye, 1997; Cernea, 1999; Fernandes, 2004; Singh, 2008; Levien, 2015), and did not appropriately take into consideration common areas such as forests, sea access, or grazing lands (Banerji et al, 2000; Tsosie, 2001; Fernandes, 2009; Stromberg, 2013; Levien, 2015). Finally, as seen in the case study above as well as numerous other studies (Mehta, 2009; Dewan, 2008; Levien, 2015), displacement has the worst impact on those already experiencing low socioeconomic status (e.g., women, children).

DEEPENING OPPRESSION

In Jaipur and surrounding villages, a new class of village land brokers—referred to as *dalals*—were neither elected nor educated on the social implications of land selling, yet they served as a commercially motivated intermediary between villages and corporations. Prior to the area's designation as an SEZ, land was not frequently sold, and if it was, the act tended to coincide with a loss of one's honor within the community. After the SEZ designation, land values shot up and opened the opportunity for a select number of individuals to profit. It could be argued that the dramatic land value increase following the SEZ designation was a coercive factor that pushed rural community members into a modality of commodification. But the mobility of these few should not be mistaken for an economic achievement of

the community. Haila (1991) points out that in cases where the land is first acquired by fellow community members for the sake of the government—ultimately to be passed on to private developers—the bulk of the profiting will inevitably go to the private developers, not the community.

A 2009 ethnographic study on the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Oglala Lakota in South Dakota reported many participants felt the interaction between federal and tribal politics “severely limits” tribal members from actually using the land as they wish (Stromberg, 2013). Instead of sovereign authority over the land, land plots are leased and divided intergenerationally until the pieces of land are either too small or require too many signatures in consensus to use. One survey respondent explained:

We weren't the ones to negotiate it [the lease]. It's historic, it's almost like it clicks in to place automatically and we don't have a say on our land...the lease is a generational lease. So the grandma that leased this land from my grandparents. When they died, my dad and his sisters inherited it, that lease followed them. And then when he passed away, that lease followed that land, and it was for 25 years. (Stromberg, 2013)

At the time of the interview, this woman shared her lease on a few acres with several hundred of her relatives. She is one of many participants who voiced concern over the fairness and effectiveness of the tribal government's management of land within the reservation which had been set-up by the U.S. government.

These examples show how federal governments' decisions on land use, ownership, and dispossession can impact the sociopolitical structure of a community and ultimately the set stage for conflict both immediately after policies are implemented and years down the line.

LAND WARFARE AND THE INDIVIDUAL

One need not wait years to witness the effects of displacement on individuals. Psychiatrist Mindy Thompson Fullilove (1996) explains that an individual's "sense of place" is developed out of that person's past as well as by their attitudes, beliefs, and actions in the present: "Place sets the conditions for human consciousness," (Fullilove, 1996). Drawing then on the work of John Bowlby, Fullilove goes on to propose that, since concepts such as personal safety and security are developed in the context of one's larger personal environment, "a threat to that environment is best understood as a threat to the self," (Bowlby, 1973; Fullilove, 1996). The experience that follows displacement also carries a high potential for distress. If the place called home is tied up with one's identity (Dominy, 1993, 1995; Fullilove, 1996), then the loss of said place can thrust an individual into a state of internal fragmentation as well as alienation within the new environment (Fullilove, 1996). Therefore, the disruptive experience of being displaced—even if that displacement occurs without physical violence—can be psychologically traumatic.

An "extraordinarily consistent relationship" between factors of chronic stress (e.g., low socioeconomic status, minority status, acculturation) and specific negative health outcomes has been demonstrated (Furomoto-Dawson, n.d.; Warneck et al., 2008; Bahls, 2011). Studies have shown individuals experiencing chronic stress to be at a higher risk for hypertension, hyperglycemia, glucose intolerance with hyperinsulinemia, hyperlipidemia, central obesity, Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease, and early mortality (Sobal and Stunkard, 1989; Furomoto-Dawson et al., 2007; Furumoto-Dawson, n.d.). Moreover, there are alarming mental health disparities among displaced populations. Suicides, alcoholism, and domestic abuse are all commonly found in post-displacement populations both in the years immediately following the displacement and in generations to come (Thukral, 1996, 2009; Dewan, 2008; Ehlers et al., Thukral, 2009; Fernandes, 2009; CNAY, 2013; SPRC, 2013; Horwitz, 2014; Levien, 2015).

In the case of North America, Native youth—a demographic which experienced tremendous periods of upheaval and displacement for centuries—are significantly more likely than the U.S. average to consider suicide and nearly twice as likely to attempt it (Dobrowski, 2014; SPRC, 2013). The disparity is so alarming that the U.S. national Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) published an additional five risk factors to their standard four specific to Native American population. They include alcohol and drug use (not necessarily abuse), historical trauma, alienation, acculturation, and discrimination (2013). This information suggests that mental health is under-documented for effect of land wars and a critical point for intervention as will soon be discussed in Part III.

POINTS OF INTERVENTION

Prevention and Policy Development Activism

Whenever possible, social workers should advocate that governments avoid a displacement model of infrastructure development and instead use a model which fulfills their duty to provide public services and utilities to existing populations. Social workers should be wary when governments respond that required development (e.g. paved roads, potable water) are impossible due to environmental conditions (Mammen, 2017)—for years, the Indian government has successfully expanded television and phone access across the nation to the point where half of its citizens have phones, but not toilets in their homes (“Indian Census...”, 2012; Mammen, 2017). Social workers can help communities apply pressure on the government to reassess their priorities through community organizing and other mobilization techniques.

When commodification and land use restructuring is inevitable, trained social workers should advocate alongside community members to settle with the federal government on a plan for compensation and protection which best fits the needs of that community. Emphasis should be given to democratic process and the burden of information dissemination regarding the proposed

displacement policy and methods of dispute should be placed on the social workers to ensure maximum participation by all socioeconomic classes within the community.

Information dissemination. Historically, when information dissemination has been left as a responsibility of the government or development agent, the chosen method of communication has been biased by oppressive neglect of the to-be-displaced community and/or motivation to avoid a reaction from the to-be-displaced community that could slow project progress. Such questionably ethical and undoubtedly ineffective methods of dissemination have included: placing materials where only a certain class of the to-be-displaced community could see them, not investing in a sufficient quantity or frequency of materials, not providing information in a medium accessible to the population which is supposed to receive it (e.g. wrong language, wrong reading level, small font), and otherwise failing to provide accessible mediums for response (e.g. town hall meetings at odd hours, phone lines which are insufficiently operated, government offices unofficially or officially requiring a certain socioeconomic, gender, and/or educational status to enter) (Ramkuwar, 2009; Levien, 2015; Jojo, 2017).

Developing a plan. Social workers can work with to-be-displaced communities in advocating for a compensation and rehabilitation plan that fits the community's needs. Based on the examples provided in Part II, the plan should include methods for holding the implementing agency accountable, it should address unique economic concerns, it should prepare for intergenerational biopsychosocial effects, and it should secure the right for community members to reevaluate and communicate concerns about it later.

Post-Policy Legal Action

India's identification and legislated protection of three classes of human rights (i.e. Fundamental, Economic, and Collective) provide a unique opportunity for legal advocacy which is not as readily seen in the U.S., where the government and general society have stigmatized

and obstructed human rights with loaded words such as “entitlements” as well as the deeply embedded cultural ideologies such as the Protestant Work Ethic.

Farmers who have opposed state efforts to acquire lands from rural communities have increasingly begun winning in Indian courts (Levien, 2013a). This is good news in that, although India’s government has in many cases failed to protect its Scheduled Castes and Tribes from displacement, its legal system is set up as a promising method for post-policy development intervention. Of course, legal battles require a certain level of privilege—access to lawyers, time, transportation, etc.—so social workers in India should work alongside lawyers to increase communities’ awareness of and access to legal options.

Given the increase in violent aggression that has emerged out of India’s neoliberal growth model (Levien, 2013a; Levien, 2013b; Jojo, 2017), measures to increase community members’ sense of self-efficacy should be implemented immediately. Presenting legal interventions as a physically nonviolent method of resisting displacement policies may help to reduce the frequency of physically lethal conflicts (Bruell, 2013; Levien, 2013a).

On the other hand, recent events in the U.S. suggest that legal interventions may require a broader approach. The political turbulence in the country’s federal government that has occurred nearly concurrently with the Standing Rock-DAPL conflict in the North Dakota area has exacerbated the lack of a clear path to resistance. In fact, in the latter half of 2016, the Standing Rock community went over the U.S.’s head and took their case to the United Nations, stating that the U.S. had violated the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (endorsed by the U.S. in 2010) (Indian Law Resource Center, 2016; Medina, 2016).

This action represented the growing strength of a multilevel legal intervention and awareness campaign to oppose DAPL’s destruction of land considered sacred by the Standing Rock

community. The movement drew connections between the fight for genuine sovereignty among Native peoples, the concern for environmental conservation among scientists and the general public, and the desire among many other movements for the constitutional protection of the right to protest to be upheld. In his testimony before the U.N., Standing Rock Chairman Dave Archambault II explained: “There was solidarity... To see tribes here from all over the world who are having the same experiences where large corporations are infringing on their land, on their rights—it was powerful to see that we aren't alone in our struggle” (Medina, 2016).

The #NoDAPL movement is both a learning opportunity for the strength of intergroup collaboration and an example of some of the legal challenges communities and associated advocates have yet to face. Increasingly, government bodies have sided with private corporate interests to make the path to policy dispute by community members not only difficult but dangerous. This includes gender discrimination and exclusion in political activities, penalties for protest participation, and encouragement of civilian violence against resisting groups (Ramkuwar, 2009; Levien, 2015; Ranade, 2017; Jackman, 2017; Jojo, 2017; Andone, 2017).

Reparative Action

As many cases of displacement have already occurred and are likely to continue in the coming years, social workers should be prepared to handle the variety of common consequences of displacement.

Physical and mental health services. The factors of chronic stress mentioned in Part II directly relate to the status of many displaced populations (Baum et al, 1985; Furomoto-Dawson, n.d.). Therefore, social workers should be aware and available to connect displaced individuals with health education and resources. Special attention should be given to individuals who have, or are experiencing, displacement during their childhood and adolescent years as research has shown the harmful health effects of chronic stress to be

particularly impactful during these stages (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2003; Furomoto-Dawson et al, 2007).

Interestingly, research has shown that there is a correlation between people's perceived self-efficacy and their biopsychological resiliency to chronic stress (Baum et al, 1985; Kessler et al, 1985; Furomoto-Dawson, n.d.). This suggests that interventions by social workers during the Preventative and Post-Policy stages may reduce health disparities among the displaced community members down the line. It may also be beneficial for health services to be included in displacement compensation packages (Furomoto-Dawson et al., 2007).

Community (re)development. Community development efforts have been shown to positively impact the mental and physical health of displaced individuals. Just as forced acculturation and assimilation have been shown to contribute to increased rates of suicide among Native American youth, connectedness to peers, family, community, and appropriate social institutions have been shown to safeguard this population's risk of suicide (Dobrowski, 2014; Borowsky et al, 1999; Mackin et al, 2012; SPRC, 2013). Effective methods for facilitating connectedness—and ultimately reducing mental health disparity in individuals who have experienced chronic stress at a young age—include recreational programming (Furomoto-Dawson et al., 2007) and spiritual involvement (Garrouette et al., 2003; SPRC, 2013), among others. Social workers should encourage policymakers to allocate funding for these activities and also encourage displaced individuals to think about where these activities might be most easily accessed when relocating. Importantly, it has been shown that many of these interventions are most effective when ultimately carried out by members within the community (Kral et al., 2009; SPRC, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The history of federal governments' interactions with indigenous and rural communities in many parts of the world can easily be

summarized as examples of coercive exploitation (Levien, 2013b; La Duke, 2015; Jojo, 2017) facilitated by neoliberal commodification. In Karl Polanyi's (1944/2001) widely cited *The Great Transformation*, he offers a fatalistic warning to any economic theory which proposes a self-regulating market disembedded from human society and the natural environment. He writes: "Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human a natural substance of society" (p. 3). In other words, left unattended, market liberalism can cause great detriment to people and their environment—which is exactly what happens when populations are uprooted by populist machines for the sake of "development."

When multidimensional ideas such as land, labor, and money are made into what Polanyi (2001) calls "fictitious commodities," those participating in their trade begin to treat them as simple "real commodities," risk flattening their context, and ultimately subject them to the fluctuating values of the market. Suddenly, a person becomes a voucher holder; a place becomes square meters of land. Polanyi argues, as does this paper, that the state must intervene through market regulation and relief efforts to avoid the disembedded dystopia which market liberalism can lead to.

Thus it stands that current policies and practices that lead to displacement not only fail to protect those who are ultimately displaced, they promote the commodification of people and natural resources. They disproportionately target marginalized populations and increasingly draw national resources away from the national public in favor of the elite. They fail to account for intergenerational socioeconomic, cultural, and health consequences of displacement. What should be a last resort, eminent domain or accumulation through dispassion, have become common methods of promoting liberalization and capitalist agendas through land policy.

While existing literature supports the position that the costs of displacement are not sufficiently addressed in contemporary policymaking, additional research could more accurately ascertain

which methods of intervention would be most effective and appropriate in individualized circumstances. The United States and India are each large countries with numerous independent tribal societies functioning within their boundaries; no two circumstances are alike. Nevertheless, social workers must not delay in mobilizing around the under-supported rural and tribal populations who have been displaced by public-private endeavors. This paper has highlighted a few key points of intervention but should not be seen as an exclusive list. It is my hope that as land wars increasingly arise, so too may we social workers stand up to fight.

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