

## Book Reviews

### Activist Scholarship and Urban Land Invasions

by  
Marc Becker

**Paul Dosh** *Demanding the Land: Urban Popular Movements in Peru and Ecuador, 1990–2005*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

Neoliberal economic policies that privatized government services and diminished social safety nets in the 1980s and 1990s placed impoverished people in Latin America in an economically vulnerable position. In response, illegal land seizures led to squatter settlements in many Latin American cities. Often these urban social movements focused on very tangible goals: acquisition of water, electricity, sewers, and title to the land that they had occupied. How to realize these often elusive goals, however, remained an open question in a changing economic and political environment. Labor unions and leftist political parties had lost the power that they previously had held to influence government policy. A question that emerged was what new types of strategies grassroots activists could effectively implement to realize the social, political, and economic changes that they envisioned.

Paul Dosh's compelling study of 10 land invasions that resulted in squatter settlements in Lima, Peru, and Quito, Ecuador, between 1990 and 2005 examines competing strategies to understand why some neighborhood groups flourished while others did not. Dosh effectively incorporates multiple causal factors into his study to analyze organizational strategies, successes, and survival. He constructs what he terms a strategy life cycle to conceptualize external and internal factors that explain the success or failure of different land invasion movements.

Dosh categorizes land invasions as following three different strategies. The first was a veteran "Old Guard," whose members insisted on following radical and extralegal strategies that had previously worked but were not well suited to the current neoliberal situation. Their lack of innovation weakened and divided neighborhood leadership structures. A younger "Next Generation" combined disruptive and militant extralegal strategies with clientelistic partnerships that focused on material goals rather than ideological objectives. Dosh is critical of its clientelistic strategies, which traded access to services for electoral support for politicians. This approach led to a decline in neighborhood participation and often failed to meet crucial needs. A final group of "Innovators" had a stronger sense of mission and organizational activism. Members employed a mix of novel tactics that included a flexible combination of legal and extralegal strategies that acquired new services for its members. Dosh finds the most promise in this strategy and in particular champions the success of La Encantada, a descendent of the famed Villa El Salvador in Lima, and Itchimbia in Quito.

Itchimbia in particular is a very impressive success story of an effective land invasion that ultimately realized many of its most important goals, even as Dosh recognizes its

Marc Becker is a professor of Latin American history at Truman State University and the author of *Indigenous Movements and Electoral Politics in Ecuador* (revised paperback edition, 2012).

failures. Families from the crowded La Tola neighborhood occupied a hill in the downtown area known as Itchimbía that had become a garbage dump. Municipal plans to develop the land into a park had stalled, and the government threatened to rezone the area for commercial development. On the September 1995 equinox, a well-trained and organized community began to clean the site. Its organized nonviolent strategy made it difficult for the police to evict the settlers. The participants built housing from recycled materials, organized block councils, and engineered innovative utility systems. A militant use of nonviolent strategies to press for formal recognition eventually led the municipal government to construct an apartment complex for the settlers in an area away from the original occupation. The former settlement was turned into a park and cultural center that has become a focus of activities in Quito.

The photographer James Lerager has illustrated Dosh's book with images that add a compelling visual dimension to the study. The photographs are also part of Dosh's dedication as a scholar-activist. Lerager and Dosh used the images to share their research with both academic audiences and activists and as a reciprocal gift to the squatter settlements. The photographs are now part of a permanent exhibit in a community center in La Encantada. Dosh continues to collaborate with this community. In a moving epilogue, "From Scholarship to Activism," he reflects on returning to La Encantada after the conclusion of his study to engage in social justice and development work with his nonprofit organization Building Dignity.

*Demanding the Land* is an important study that will be of much interest to readers of *Latin American Perspectives*. Dosh effectively combines theoretical insights from social movement theories with rich ethnographic data to present a complex of factors for understanding why strategies for social change result in success or failure. His work's political dedication and commitment, intellectual and theoretical rigor, moving narratives, and compelling visual images are a model for the type of activist scholarship for which *Latin American Perspectives* is so well known.