

EXCLUSIONARY DISCOURSE IN NEW YORK CITY AND CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the discursive practices employed by residents and property owners to justify the exclusion of squatters from the Lower East Side in New York City and from three suburbs in Cape Town, South Africa. In these cases the residents and property owners voiced nearly identical objections to justify the exclusion of the "other" from "their" neighborhoods. The main justifications, couched in race neutral terms, were that the squatters would increase crime, decrease property values, spread disease and despoil the natural environment. It is argued that while these discursive practices often camouflage racial prejudice, this does not explain the occurrence of similar discursive patterns in areas where race was not a major factor. I argue that a satisfactory explanation for these discursive commonalities should embrace both class and racial dynamics and must be situated within the context of capitalist property relations.*

INTRODUCTION

Within society there is constant conflict over access to space and territory. In this context, control over space is a very clear signifier of power (and hence, often racial) relations in society. In this equation everyone is seemingly meant to know their place, both in society and within the spatial landscape. As a white youth in Carroll Gardens commented to justify the racially motivated assault on a black teenager who had emerged from a subway station in this predominantly white part of Brooklyn, "It's boundaries. You pass the line, you get chased out." (Martin, 1997, L35). The idea of socially (and often racially) defined space is the underlying theme of this paper which examines the language and strategies that three affluent communities in Cape Town (Hout Bay, Noordhoek, and Milnerton) and one gentrifying neighborhood in New York City (the Lower East Side) used to justify the exclusion of the "other," in these cases urban squatters, from "their" space. As Sibley (1992, 113) points out, "space represents power in that control of space confers the power to exclude" and thus discourse analysis shows how particular constructions of place help sustain or legitimate residential exclusion (see Dixon et al.,

1997, 318). The reason for choosing the three Cape Town cases is that all three areas have undergone fairly similar experiences and they have all generated a substantial volume of media coverage. Likewise, the squatters on the Lower East Side received a great deal of media attention during the late 1980s and into the early 1990s.

The aim of providing a comparative context is to show that very similar exclusionary discursive patterns can be found within seemingly very different social contexts. In both countries the response of residents and property owners raises the broader question of how discourse can be used to legitimate exclusionary geographies. This in turn gets to the heart of debates over the nature of property relations within capitalism and raises especially troubling concerns for those, such as progressive urban planners and policymakers, concerned with producing a more equitable division of urban space.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

According to Wetherall and Potter (1992:2-3) discourse analysis focuses on activities of "justification, rationalization, categorization,

attribution, making sense, naming, blaming and identifying.” Discourse analysis thus highlights how forms of discourse “institute, solidify, change, create and reproduce social formations” Wetherall and Potter (1992). As social formations have a spatial dimension, discourse analysis is particularly suited to an analysis of debates and conflict over the ordering of space. Exclusionary discourse therefore plays an important role in legitimating spatial exclusivity. To achieve this spatial exclusivity there first has to be a form of identity ascription that confers a positive group identity to the culturally and/or economically dominant members of society, while simultaneously labeling another group as “different” and usually, by implication, inferior. Language becomes an important signifier in this process, allowing the dominant group to ascribe various social pathologies, such as propensity towards criminality, to the “other” and in so doing legitimate their exclusion from particular spaces and places in society. Simultaneously, the ascription of these pathologies to the “other” allows the dominant group to set itself up with an opposed set of positive values. In these cases, groups construct a version of reality that takes on the status of objective truth in their own minds. In spatial terms this can take the form of the dominant group reifying the virtues of their own space while denigrating the space of the “other” and simultaneously preventing them from accessing their own space.

In its most overt and crude form the discourse of exclusion is avowedly racist. In most contemporary societies it is, however, no longer acceptable to base residential exclusion on an openly racist discourse. This means that the language of exclusion has to be more subtle. These more subtle mechanisms of exclusion can take many forms. With regard to urban squatters, the most common assertions from existing residents is that they will cause an increase in crime, diminish the neighborhood’s property values, destroy the “character” of the neighborhood and despoil the natural environment.

While it is tempting to see the motivations behind most exclusionary discourse in racial terms, this becomes more difficult in situations where exclusionary suburbs are racially mixed or

exclusion is towards people of the same race. It is therefore important that we acknowledge, when considering neighborhood opposition to issues such as squatting, that this opposition and its discursive manifestations must always be situated within the relevant economic context. Thus, when attempting to analyze the codified discourse of residential exclusion one should remain aware that while at any given time the relative weight of class and race are contingent on the specificity of a particular place and the socially constructed norms and values of those living in that locality, the context of these struggles is always mediated through the self-interest that is engendered by the unequal division of space (and hence of resources) inherent within the capitalist land market. This unequal division of space perpetuates continual spatial conflict, with each neighborhood desperately trying to protect and maintain its position from those above (such as financial speculators) and below (such as squatters) the urban hierarchy. As the following cases will show, this can be illustrated by looking at the reactions of residents to squatters moving into “their” areas.

THE CONTEXT

Cape Town

The unequal racial partitioning of Cape Town, together with a lack of affordable housing for “non-whites”, has meant that the city has a very long history of black squatting (see Western, 1981). With the erosion of enforcement of apartheid influx controls and later, the repeal of the *Pass Laws* (1986), there was a rapid growth of black urbanization during the 1980s, with a concomitant growth in squatting (see Cook, 1991; 1992). During this period the black urban poor’s search for available land on occasion led to the appearance of ‘squatter’ camps within the boundaries of more affluent areas. Within the Cape Town Metropolitan area the three most noted examples occurred within the affluent ‘white’ suburbs of Noordhoek (see Sowman 1990), Hout Bay (see Dixon et al., 1994; Dixon,

et al., 1996; Oelofse, 1994) and Milnerton (see Saff, 1996; 1998a). While the events in each of these areas have their own historic specificities, they all nevertheless display the events in each of broadly similar characteristics. First, all are upper-middle class areas characterized by expensive low-density owner-occupied homes. Second, by 1991 all three areas had fairly substantial squatter communities and, given the political realities of the transition period, the local authorities were forced to enter into negotiations with these squatter communities. Third, ignoring the vociferous objections of homeowners, the local authorities set aside a piece of land within the boundaries of each of these suburbs to house the hitherto scattered squatters on one permanent, consolidated site. In providing these sites, the authorities acknowledged the right of the squatters to remain in these areas.¹ Finally, since granting the squatters permanent residence, the majority of residents in these areas have attempted to have as little contact with the ex-squatters as possible while simultaneously blaming them for what they see as the decline in their quality of life (see Oelofse, 1994).

New York City

New York City, like Cape Town, has a long history of homelessness and squatting (see Ludington, 1995). Over time, New York City's homeless population waxed and waned with changing economic conditions and city housing policies. Nevertheless, the city has always had groups of homeless people who sought shelter in makeshift dwellings and shantytowns, often under bridges, in subways, in parks and on unused piers along the banks of the Hudson and East Rivers. New York's declining economic fortunes during the 1970s, the slashing of social programs, and expanding gentrification during the 1980s, caused the city's homeless population to expand rapidly. By 1989 it was estimated that New York's homeless population was between 60,000 and 70,000 persons, with the City only having shelter space for fewer than 20,000 (Harloe et al., 1992, 189). Increasingly from the late 1980s, the City has torn down shantytowns

and removed the homeless from their traditional shelters in subways and under bridges.

From the late 1970s the ethnically diverse and predominantly working-class Lower East Side has been a particular flashpoint for clashes between squatters, activists, property speculators, gentrifiers, local residents and the City.² In the early 1980s, the homeless began sleeping in Tompkins Square Park, a ten and a half acre park within the heart of the area. By the late 1980s over 200 homeless people were living in the park, and after August 1988 some of them began erecting shelters on its southern portion (see Greshof and Dale, 1994, 270). After a number of previous clashes, in December 1989 police in riot gear moved into the park, tore down existing structures and evicted between 150 and 300 persons (Harloe et al., 1992, 197).³ This was followed by evictions during 1991 after which the park was closed for renovations.⁴

During the same period, groups of predominantly white squatters occupied vacant city-owned buildings in the area. By May 1989 it was estimated that there were at least sixteen squatters' buildings between Houston and 14th Streets on the Lower East Side, containing as many as 800 squatters (Powell, 1989, 8).⁵ Since that time, under pressure from speculators, gentrifiers and residents, the City has attempted to clear these squatters from buildings in the area.

DISCURSIVE SIMILARITIES

Despite obvious locational and political differences the events on the Lower East Side share important commonalities with the three cases in Cape Town. All these cases are about the right of squatters to live in a mostly hostile environment and in the process subvert existing capitalist property relations. Further, there are similar patterns in the discourse used to justify the exclusion of the squatters from these areas. This discursive pattern consisted of the use of key terms to stigmatize the squatters' behavior and norms as not in keeping with the neighborhood, and at the same time legitimized

the capitalist land market. These arguments normally combined one or all of the following elements: the property owners described their neighborhoods in reified (and homogenous) terms, with squatters being defined as outsiders who did not belong in the area; second, it was argued that the squatters would destroy the natural beauty of the existing environment and/or spread disease; and third, it was argued that the squatters would increase crime in the area and spread other social pathologies (such as drug dealing), and thus lower existing property values (or prevent the appreciation of current values, a key to continued gentrification), a process seen as inimical to the meritocratic nature of capitalism and the rationality of the property market.

Importantly, the existing residents and the authorities were very concerned that their objections be seen as being for the rational good of society, rather than being based on either narrow self-interest or on racial or ethnic prejudice. This was particularly the case in Cape Town, where the local residents' associations were particularly keen to be seen as non-racist while simultaneously appealing to the rationality of market forces that would allow a very small number of blacks to buy entry into "their" neighborhoods (see for example, Milnerton Ratepayers Association, 1991).

The three main discursive categories that were identified above (the reification of space, environment and disease, and crime, property prices and the maintenance of the capitalist land market), are more fully illustrated by looking at the stated objections to squatters in the three suburbs in Cape Town and in the Lower East Side in New York.

Reification of Ones "Own" Space

To justify the exclusion of the "other" from "their" space, residents often reify and idealize the natural beauty, or other positive attributes of their own space while simultaneously vilifying the location of the "other." See for example the following account of Noordhoek (*Argus*, 28 May 1988):

Residents of Noordhoek could be excused for thinking of their beautiful valley as "God's little Acre." Flanked by majestic Cape mountains on one side and the crystal blue Atlantic on the other, the area has an aura of exclusivity which the residents strive to maintain.

The residents of these areas therefore described these places as areas that are abundant in natural beauty. In contrast to this positive discourse, newspaper accounts and letters to the editor in all of the Cape Town cases continually described the space of the squatters in negative tones. In the case of Hout Bay, Dixon et al. (1997, 329) note that most accounts of the squatter camp saw it as a form of visual pollution that should be eradicated or at least screened from view. Hout Bay residents letters to the local newspapers, describe amongst other things, the squatter camp as a "total eyesore", "a scar on the landscape", "a sprawling blot on the landscape", and "a festering sore" (from letters cited in Dixon et al., 1997).

Even in the less visually attractive Lower East Side of New York the eviction of squatters from the area, particularly in the case of Tompkins Square Park, was often justified on the grounds that the squatters were destroying the natural beauty of the park. Some residents also argued that the squatters were a menacing presence in the neighborhood and the park and that the people living in the park prevented them from using that park for its intended purpose. As one resident commented, "It's really like a form of terrorism...they're [the homeless] like little ayatollahs. They're holding the park hostage.". While another resident argued "We're taxpayers...we want a place to walk our dogs." (*Newsday*, 15 December 1989, 3)⁶. Once the squatters were evicted, the City announced a \$2 million renovation plan that included reviving "its original Parisian park layout." (Moreno, 1992, 7). In addition, when the newly renovated park reopened in August 1992 it was surrounded by an eight foot chain-link fence with only two main access gates, and had a 9 P.M. curfew (Kifner, 1991, A1). According to the *New York Times* (Levy, 1992, B3) while some residents expressed disapproval at the curfew, most welcomed the changes and were especially "relieved that the Lower East Side once again had a patch of greenery."

Environment and Disease

One of the recurring themes to justify the exclusion of squatters has been to highlight their lack of concern for the natural environment and for personal hygiene. In the Cape Town examples, much of the white residents' opposition to the settlements was couched in terms of an ecological discourse, with fears expressed about the harm that the squatters were doing to the pristine natural environment of the various areas (see for example, Dixon et al., 1994). In the Milnerton case, attempts to relocate the squatters to another part of the suburb were resisted by those closest to the proposed settlement on the ground that it would destroy the ecosystem of the nearby wetlands (see *Weekend Argus*, 17/18 April 1993).

The debates about squatting in both Noordhoek and Hout Bay took a very similar turn. Dixon et al. (1994) who analyzed the contents of the 53 letters to the editor of Cape Town's two major daily newspapers published between 1991 and 1993 to protest a plan to extend the squatter settlement in Hout Bay, note the persistent use of ecological arguments to declare the squatter camp's location as inappropriate. Typical of the residents' sentiments towards the squatter settlement in Hout Bay, is the following 1992 letter to the *Cape Times* (25 September 1992, 6):

When will the ongoing destruction of the environment stop? The Hout Bay valley was so named due to the forests that used to exist here and now the Cape Provincial Administration wish to take yet more trees away to make room for services to an enlarged squatter community... Now we understand that the squatter camp is to be enlarged and that thousands of trees are to be uprooted... Our family, like many Hout Bay residents, would like to register total unacceptance of this plan of destruction and rape of our environment. (cited by Dixon et al. 1994, 283-284)

Related to the ecological discourse are arguments that if environmental degradation is allowed to occur (or continue), it will pose serious health risks to both to the squatters themselves and to the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. A typical example of this type of discourse is provided in the comments of a self-styled "worried resident" of Milnerton in a letter to the editor of the local

Newspaper (*Table Talk and Mail*, 8 October 1992):

1) I am concerned to note that an area near to the stables in Milnerton, popular for walking dogs, is increasingly being littered by human excrement. Not only is this disgusting, but with the fly problem experienced in Milnerton in the summer, this is a potential health hazard to all residents. 2) I can only presume that the culprits are squatters as this is a new problem...I had envisaged the "New South Africa" would mean members of other races, employed with health and hygiene standards similar to mine, becoming legally and financially able to purchase houses in the neighborhood. Instead we have been inundated with vast numbers of unemployed and largely unemployable peoples whose presence poses safety and health risks to themselves as well as to the established community.

Concerns about health were also present in the discourse around squatters in Tompkins Square Park, where police officers filed a health related lawsuit in state Supreme Court in Manhattan in an attempt to close the park. The suit charged that "burning garbage and the stench from animals and approximately 100 squatters who live in the park endanger the health of the officers assigned to work there." (*Newsday*, 3 June 1991, 8). Subsequently, the Park's deteriorating environmental conditions was one of the main reasons given for the eviction of the squatters in 1991. In October 1991, after the eviction of an estimated 200 people from shantytowns constructed on three city-owned lots in the East Village, the director of the Mayor's Community Assistance Unit, justified the evictions:

We've gotten complaints almost daily from residents about these lots...There were fights, loud music, unsanitary conditions. People urinated and defecated on the streets. The situation had just gotten out of control. (Morgan, 1991, A1)

The discourses with regard to "unsanitary conditions" and fear of disease must be considered in the same way as those of the broader ecological discourse (of which they are clearly a part). There were undoubtedly genuine concerns over health conditions within squatter communities and the effects that this could have on the surrounding areas; instead of trying to provide washing facilities or promoting more equal access to resources and/or health care, however, this discourse was used in an attempt

to protect and entrench the existing partitioning of space.

Crime, Property Values and the Sanctity of the Property Market

The fear that the introduction of the "other" into a previously homogenous community would cause an increase in crime and subvert capitalist property relations (by decreasing property values) has been one of the recurring themes of most exclusionary discourse. In the Cape Town cases, letters from residents to the editors of the various newspapers in the region clearly reflect this preoccupation with identifying the squatters as the source of crime in these suburbs. As a letter by "Another Squatter Victim" to the local newspaper states:

I have had two break-ins in my house since the squatters came to Milnerton and twice I have had my insurance premiums increased. I am not looking forward to the next increase when the squatters arrive. Also why should we be paying for housing for them? In the first place, they are going to decrease the value of our property and secondly we don't want them there. (*Argus*, 18 February 1992)

Similar sentiments and vocal objections about the effects that the squatters were having on property values can be found in both Hout Bay and Noordhoek, (see Oelofse, 1996; Dixon et al., 1994).

Like the situation with crime, from the mid-1980s South African newspapers constantly, uncritically (and often erroneously) reported massive housing price declines in suburban areas that were located near either expanding black townships or new informal settlements (see Saff, 1998b). It is thus not surprising that suburbanites would make the mental connection between informal settlement and decreasing prices. Linked to these sentiments is the idea that squatters were violating the sanctity of the private property relations which underpin the capitalist land market. This view was reinforced by the courts in Cape Town which not only upheld the right of private landowners to evict squatters, but also saw their very presence in an area as damaging to the property market in that area.⁷

Very similar sentiments with regard to both crime and property relations can be found on the Lower East Side. Justifying the 1991 evictions, Mayor Dinkins, commented to the *New York Times* (Kifner, 1991, A1) that the atmosphere in Tompkins Square Park was "disturbing, disruptive and dangerous." The eviction of squatters from buildings in the Lower East Side was brought about by gentrification in the city that placed a premium on the buildings that the squatters occupied. Justifying his role in this process, the developer of an Art Deco condominium complex (named Christodora House or "gift of Christ") on the corner of Avenue B and 9th Street commented:

It's a loaded word, gentrification... People think of it as a bad word, but it's a very complicated process. There are goods to it and there are bads to it. And I tell you, in 1980, the East Village had nowhere to go but up. It couldn't have been worse. I really do believe that an all-poor neighborhood is a bore. (*Newsday*, 3 March 1988, 8)

In response to these types of sentiments a local priest who supported the squatters commented, "...this is all about naked greed...that and politics and greedy landlords." (*Newsday*, 16 December 1989, 19). In this situation the presence of the squatters was clearly seen as an impediment to the gentrification process. Further, the pressures of gentrification and the resulting shortage of low-cost accommodations within the area, fueled resentment within local neighborhood groups who saw the squatters as "jumping the line" for low-cost housing (see Powell, 1989, 8).⁸ Building on this resentment, the City increasingly attacked the squatters as free loaders and anarchists who had no concern for the working poor and were simply intent on subverting capitalist property relations. Justifying the eviction of squatters from a Lower East Side building, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) commissioner commented to *Newsday* that squatters, "are simply engaged in grand larceny. The building belongs to all the people who pay taxes...How can someone just walk in and say, 'It's mine,' especially on the Lower East Side." (Powell, 1989, 8).

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to show that different case studies reveal very similar exclusionary discursive practices, including a common trend in associating pathologies of some sort (crime, disease, dirt) to outsiders in order to justify their exclusion from neighborhoods. Resorting to these discursive practices allows the relatively privileged to show that these excluded groups would not fit into "their" neighborhoods, because of the pathologies which they themselves have ascribed to the excluded. Discourse analysis is thus a useful method for showing how discourse helps to legitimate and maintain exclusionary geographies. The more complex question, which discourse analysis is less able to answer, is how these exclusionary geographies are arrived at.

Within the context of this paper there are two, not necessarily competing, explanations for the discursive convergence that has been noted. First, it can be argued that these discourses reveal an attempt to maintain homogenous space primarily along racial or ethnic lines. Thus, the discursive practices adopted are simply attempts to conceal the residents true racial agenda, which is to maintain racialized space. This argument is not easy to dismiss, primarily because it is difficult to prove that people are not racists, and further because it is clear that powerful racial and ethnic groups have historically mobilized to manipulate space to their advantage. In itself, however, this is insufficient to explain the outcomes and intent behind exclusionary discourse in cases where race or ethnicity is not seemingly a significant factor in the attempts at spatial exclusion (such as the Lower Side) or where the opposition comes from the same race.

A second possible explanation for the convergence of exclusionary discourse must be sought in the production of space under capitalism, which creates a system where the competition for access and control over desirable space (and its resources) inevitably fuels societal conflict. This competition for space creates a system which in a sense separates insiders (those

with access to desirable space) from outsiders (those on the margins, looking in). Within this dynamic process of competition, insiders resort to any methods possible to protect their relative privilege, including the desire to protect space in racial or ethnic terms. It is thus important to heed Harvey's (1996, 80) warning that "to privilege discourse above other moments [within the social process] is insufficient, misleading and even dangerous." While this position does not deny the existence of genuine racial prejudice, it posits it within the bounds of space production under capitalism. Placing exclusionary discourse within this context explains both why it is so similar in different parts of the world and recognizes the underlying "rationality" (if not morality) of these discursive practices (see Lake, 1993). Acknowledging this "rationality" while focusing on addressing the conditions that generate exclusionary discourse could play a useful role in guiding the strategies that urban policymakers and planners adopt to simultaneously address legitimate neighborhood concerns, while pushing for a more equitable division of space. In other words, recognizing and confronting the fears of residents may serve the purposes of equity better than simply dismissing them as the products of racism, NIMBYism or other forms of selfishness and/or bigotry (which they may be). A focus on exclusionary discourse could therefore be a fruitful way to help address neighborhood concerns while simultaneously promoting spatial and social equity.

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NOTES

1. These settlements became known as Marconi Beam in the case of Milnerton, Site Five in Noordhoek, and Imuzamo Yethu in Hout Bay.
2. In 1990 the population of the Lower East Side was 161,617 (Abu-Lughod, 1994, 30).
3. This included a notoriously bloody clash in August 1988, during which more than 50 police and protesters ended up in hospitals, scores of people were arrested and 121 complaints of police brutality (*Newsday*, 5 June 1991, 4; see also Smith 1992, 1996).
4. For a more detailed analysis of these events see Abu-Lughod (1994) and Smith (1996).
5. In October 1991, the City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development estimated that there were about 500 squatters living in 32 buildings on the Lower East Side (*New York Times*, 13 October 1991, A40).
6. For a detailed review of the different positions taken by residents on the eviction of the homeless from Tompkins Square Park see Abu-Lughod (1994, 234-266) and Gordon (1994).
7. See *Cape Times*, 21 August 1994.
8. See Van Kleunen (1994), for a more detailed analysis of the squatters and their relationship with the surrounding community.