

María José Álvarez-Rivadulla, *Squatters and the Politics of Marginality in Uruguay*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Photographs, maps, illustrations, appendixes, figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index, 239 pp.; hardcover \$119, ebook \$89.

This excellent book addresses an interesting empirical puzzle: why did land invasions in Montevideo start rising in the 1970s and especially the 1980s, with spikes in particular years of the 1990s, and then decline and essentially disappear in the mid-2000s? The pattern is particularly striking, given that it does not correspond to Uruguay's early urbanization compared to other Latin American countries nor with the severe economic downturn the country experienced starting in 2002.

Drawing on theories of clientelism and social movements and displaying an exemplary use of mixed methods, María José Álvarez offers a compelling and nuanced answer that deepens our understanding of the politics of squatter settlements. Álvarez views land invasions as a specific form of collective action, one that is "elusive" or hidden but can be explained by a combination of dire economic circumstances and political opportunities and through the mechanism of brokerage, especially after a reframing of squatting as culturally acceptable to the working poor.

To develop this explanation, Álvarez begins by creating an original dataset of land invasions since the first one she could find. The resulting "yearly time series of squatting events" (3) from 1947 to 2006—which she constructed through archival research and dozens of interviews—allows her to demonstrate the great degree of variation in land invasions and squatter settlements, not only with regard to timing, but in location, type, and connection to political brokers. Of the 427 initial land invasions, Álvarez classifies 240 into 3 different types: more than half were by accretion (gradual), about a third planned, and about a tenth were by illegal subdivision.

Using color-coded maps and figures, Álvarez demonstrates patterns associating the timing, location, type of settlement, and brokerage. The accretion settlements formed a slow wave that began in the 1940s, spread throughout the city's periphery, and increased especially in the 1980s, with the help of the Catholic Church and church-related organizations. Planned settlements boomed in the 1990s, especially in the western working-class areas, and were linked to politicians in the leftist party, the Frente Amplio (FA, or Broad Front). Subdivision settlements, always less numerous, rose in the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly in the northeastern periphery, and typically were tied to a single, individual broker. Since 2004, however, new land invasions have almost uniformly ended in evictions rather than in ongoing settlements.

While Álvarez appropriately documents the heterogeneity of squatter settlements, she also provides a clear and convincing argument about why land invasions traced that arc over time. Her account has four main elements. First, Uruguay's economy declined in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality all rose while the state pursued a monetarist economic program and pulled back from housing and urban improvement policies. This development began in earnest during the military dictatorship (1973–84), when the government liberalized rent and began evicting those living in tenement houses.

Democratization generated squatting by creating political opportunities, initially through lessening of repression and later via “electoral competition for the votes of the urban poor, the leftist orientation of the city government [won by the FA], and the decentralization policy implemented by the leftist coalition after it assumed the municipal government in 1990” (109). Politicians seeking electoral support, or at least hoping not to be blamed for evictions, became key allies for squatters, promising and often giving them access to state resources. Only when dire economic conditions combined with political opportunities did squatting increase; Álvarez uses a series of regression analyses to demonstrate that when low real wages coincided with election or postelection years, land invasions spiked. Once the FA consolidated power at the city and national levels, after 2004, competition for poor voters declined, along with tolerance for new land invasions.

The third element is the important role of brokers, initially Catholic priests and activists and later politicians, particularly from the FA, some of whom encouraged land invasions. Álvarez argues that brokers “are vital as activating mechanisms for different types of contentious politics,” and her ethnographical work shows how, for squatting, brokers were “absolutely crucial for those with few resources to mobilize” (169). In addition, a less explored piece of her argument is that before land invasions could take off, squatting was culturally “resignified” at some point in the late 1980s: “It was not until squatting became a decent alternative for the structurally downwardly mobile Montevideans that planned land invasions entered their repertoire of collective action” (110).

Álvarez elaborates on the different aspects of her explanation throughout the book. The introduction sets up the book theoretically with a sophisticated discussion of social movement theory that emphasizes how she expands the contentious politics framework by extending it to squatting and by illustrating the importance of how grievances interact with political opportunities. Chapter 2 provides the background of Uruguay’s political and economic trajectory, along with a vivid sociological description of squatter settlements over time, while chapter 3 describes the different types of land squatting from the 1940s to 2011.

The following two chapters focus on accretion and planned invasions, analyzing the role of Catholic activists in the creation of a citywide anti-eviction squatters’ movement, and that of politicians in promoting invasions or—more frequently—helping squatters obtain material improvements and land titles, respectively. In chapter 6, Álvarez compares different kinds of political networks, which she characterizes as “market clientelism” (entailing competition between patrons and short-term exchanges) and “loyal clientelism,” and finds that squatter settlements with both types receive more state goods than those without such networks, but that market clientelism yields the most rewards. Following a brief conclusion, she adds two substantive and interesting appendixes, one describing the qualitative and quantitative methods used and how and why she combined them, and one presenting the event analyses using Poisson regression.

With its blend of history, ethnography, political economy, and quantitative analysis, Álvarez has written an exceptionally rich book. It offers not only deep

insight into the politics of squatter settlements but also lessons about Uruguayan and Latin American politics more broadly, including liberation theology, democratization, and social movements. The book's structure, with the methodological discussion and the quantitative analysis in appendixes, makes it a good fit for both undergraduate and graduate syllabi. The historical sweep and ethnographic approach make it a good read, with interesting details, such as the reason Uruguayans have a unique and sarcastic word for shantytowns: *cantegriles*. (The word dates to 1947, the year the Cantegril Country Club opened in the seaside resort town for the wealthy, Punta del Este, as well as the year of the first squatter settlement Álvarez could find in Montevideo.) And the expert combination of research tools provides a model of multimethod inquiry.

My one main critique concerns the conclusion, where Álvarez chooses to emphasize the negative side of the ledger when assessing the outcomes for squatters, and in so doing, perhaps fails to give the FA sufficient credit or readers sufficient hope. After all, as she recognizes, once the party took power nationally, it began a regularization policy that reversed the trend of increasing numbers of squatters and shantytowns, and FA governments at both the city and national levels improved living conditions. *Contra* Mike Davis's influential book, *Planet of Slums* (2006), which Álvarez criticizes as leaving us "paralyzed" (4) against social polarization and as missing the inequality-reducing potential of democracy, the FA's achievements show that slums are not necessarily the future if the state intervenes to relocate or regularize irregular settlements.

Instead of emphasizing the positive news that in general, Montevideo's squatters "have gained their right to the city, to land and urban services" (170), in the last pages Álvarez focuses on increasing violence and segregation in the remaining squatter settlements and ends up with the pessimistic conclusion that the "squatters' dream of belonging to the city seems as unattainable as ever" (171). Though Álvarez certainly has grounds for pessimism, a more optimistic close might have prevented reproducing a paralyzing interpretation.

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