6 Social movements beyond incorporation

The case of the housing assembly in post-apartheid Cape Town

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In 2009, housing activists from across the Cape Flats began meeting at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Salt River called the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG). This was a direct outgrowth of an ILRIG-run community activist course, similar to those offered by various left NGOs in many South African cities, and soon began to operate under the moniker ‘Housing Assembly.’ Five years later, the Housing Assembly is a vibrant activist organisation, no longer simply a space for discussion, but an association that attempts to coordinate housing struggles across the City of Cape Town. After a number of its early recruits were involved in land occupations in Mitchell’s Plain in 2011 and 2012, the group assumed a very different identity from that with which it began. Whereas it began as a haphazard talk shop for existing activists, it quickly grew into an expansive (and expanding) organisation with local branches in neighborhoods across the Cape Flats.

While the number of service delivery–related protests has steadily increased over the past decade, the same period has witnessed the degeneration of existing social movement organisations. Cape Town’s Anti-Eviction Campaign fragmented into competing factions, each claiming to represent the core organisation. Another housing social movement, Durban’s Abahlali baseMjondolo, similarly experienced struggles between competing leaderships. Debates raged over the question of membership: Were formally affiliated residents actively involved or merely claimed on paper? The same dynamic was at work during the deterioration of the Anti-Privatization Forum: Political debates were limited to its leadership, whereas many affiliated community activists were unfamiliar with the organization’s politics.

Few local uprisings have coalesced into social movement organisations, making the Housing Assembly anomalous in its ability to overcome the localism characterising the current round of service delivery struggles. It formally launched in late March 2014, despite operating quite actively for three years prior. As I observed it over 15 months of participant observation fieldwork in Cape Town (spanning a period of 3 years), the Housing Assembly regularly facilitates critical discussions about the limits of existing social movement models and how to avoid their pitfalls. Rather than making direct demands on the local government, the organization pursued a strategy of decommodification, targeting the market rather
than the state. The full decommodification of housing would mean direct access to houses and land without the mediation of markets; housing would be distributed in accordance with need, and decommodification would be achieved through direct occupation of land rather than negotiation with local government officials. The alternative – pressuring the state – characterises the majority of recent housing and service delivery–oriented social movements and protests in South Africa.

By centering its strategy on a coordination and defense of land occupations, the Housing Assembly recognises the limits to acting as a pressure group on the local government. In this chapter, I argue that targeting the market is beneficial to the organisational dynamics of social movements. This strategy emphasises the generalised nature of the post-apartheid housing crisis, overcoming state-imposed divisions among residents. Preexisting movements tended to organise on a parochial basis around specific housing identities: the shack dweller, the backyarder, the number on a waiting list, the recipient of crumbling state-provisioned housing, or the subject of perpetually delayed in situ upgrading. These categories are “state-imposed” insofar as each residential group has historically negotiated with officials over specific housing policy issues relevant to their own respective situations. In other words, these divisions are a product of state mediation. Targeting the market rather than the state enables residents to organise collectively, overcoming these divisions.

**Social movements and the politics of incorporation**

A rich literature on post-apartheid social movements has considered the role of organised struggles in relation to privatisation, but less so relative to democratisation and the changing role of the state in relation to popular demands. Only a handful of authors attempt to think through the social role of movements both in the transition to democracy and afterward. Advocates of this latter approach characterise social movements as inherently orientated toward making demands on the state. In this telling, social movements are effective insofar as they render themselves legible to the state through formalisation. More generally, they are envisaged as voluntary associations incorporated into the local state through a process of devolution of decision-making.

As exemplified in recent books by Steven Robins and Elke Zuern, social movements can be understood as partners that bargain with the state to reach a consensus palatable to all stakeholders. For Robins, social movements that formally align with (or else become) NGOs are responsible forces of pressure from below on the state; all others are “ultra-left,” dismissed as an aberration in these processes, and therefore inexplicable other than as deviations. By deploying an entirely external metric – that of incorporation – to define success, Robins misidentifies these movements’ own criteria for being successful. In the terms of this chapter, he criticises decommodification movements for targeting the market rather than the state, even when this is precisely their aim.

Zuern provides a far more useful account. Rather than dismissing contentious political organisations as ‘ultra-left’ as does Robins, she ‘challenges the
assumption that rights will evolve without political conflict’. The material effect of struggle in this model is to diversify the base of political input into state administration, ‘open[ing] the door to the creation of a more substantive democratic system’. Thus her great merit is to shift from a purely procedural to a material conception of democracy, but even in this reformulation, the focus remains on socio-economic rights rather than their concrete realisation. Social movements understood in this framework, while making material demands or otherwise, remain political pressure groups. Any possibility of other modes of struggle – above all, struggles that target not the state but the market – are excluded.

In an Indian context, Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of social struggles resonates closely with Robins and Zuern. He develops the concept of ‘political society’ to distinguish those residents who lie outside of the purview of the formal state from effective members of civil society, or rights-bearing citizens. In this formulation, ‘it is resistance that tests rather than overtly violates the limits of conventional political practice. In so doing, it sometimes manages to induce responses from governmental agencies that change the familiar forms of the conventional’. Social struggles become part of a population’s representation of itself as an intelligible community, rendering it legible to the state as a worthy recipient of service delivery, settlement upgrading, and the like. But if members of civil society (‘citizens’) are guaranteed certain rights, then the assurances of the law do not extend these guarantees to members of political society (‘populations’). Rather, in comporting itself as an intelligible community, an informal settlement population competes with others over the limited resources of post-colonial delivery regimes. According to Chatterjee’s formulation then, political society is not only inherently competitive, but also orientated toward the local state, wittingly or otherwise. All social struggles are reduced to a population’s attempt to hail the delivery apparatus.

In this context, how should we understand the politics and potential trajectory of social movements such as the Housing Assembly? While the pressure group model is clearly one means of theorising the role of social movements in a transitional conjuncture, I argue that social movements do not exclusively target the state but may also target the market. Conceiving of social movements as political pressure groups cannot account for land occupations, illegal electricity reconnections, and other direct strategies of decommodification at the heart of the movements Robins dismisses as ‘ultra-left’. There is now an enormous literature on urban social movements that address the market rather than the state in a Northern context, but this framing is rarely applied in relation to struggles in Southern cities.

When constituted as organised social movements, anti-market struggles typically arise from cases in which the state is perceived to have failed to adequately ensure access to basic necessities. For example, Bond and McInnes describe the emergence of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) as a direct consequence of the failure of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) to provide electricity connections. The steady privatisation of electricity, and subsequently of water, catalysed frustration with the state as a target of demands. Instead,
residents took it upon themselves to illegally reestablish electricity connections. As Nilsen describes in the context of Indian social movements resisting the commodification of land, state power is conjunctural; only where negotiation with state actors “bears fruits” is it logical to make demands. The state may be engaged instrumentally by social movements, but this is only one of many possible strategies. Where such engagement fails, resisting commodification directly is a rational alternative.

Bond and McInnes conclude their account of the SECC with a turn toward Karl Polanyi’s “double movement”, the theorist most often cited to explain the emergence of anti-commodification movements. The “double movement” was Polanyi’s attempt to explain the emergence of decommodification movements. As excessive commodification of land, labor, and money begins to impede the very functioning of society, social actors increasingly struggle against the market. Michael Burawoy (Chapter 2) reworks this formulation to explain the emergence of a diversity of social movements. He argues that different forms of commodification generate different movement responses, and that in any given conjuncture, it is the “articulation of these different commodifications” that allows us to understand these reactions. The use of Polanyi to explain decommodification struggles reads the movement in double movement and the movement in social movement as one and the same. But in concrete applications, Polanyi is useful for illustrating that movements arise in response to commodification, but less so for explaining how social movements contest commodification in practice.

My account of the Housing Assembly’s emergence and genesis is a preliminary attempt to explain what it would look like in practice to target the market. The case of illegal electricity reconnections is instructive: Where the state proves to be an inefficient means for achieving decommodification, direct decommodification can be a viable alternative strategy. In this chapter, I argue that the Housing Assembly is charting a novel path for housing-oriented social movements in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead of limiting its repertoire to resisting evictions and demanding housing, the organisation frequently bypasses the state altogether by encouraging land occupations on private property as well as municipally owned land. Where the state proves to be an instrument incapable of actually delivering land or housing, direct seizure may be a viable option.

**Housing crisis, organisation, and the politics of representation**

After the slow dissipation of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, Cape Town’s most militant and successful citywide housing rights organisation, demand began to arise for an organ capable of transcending localised dissent and spontaneous service delivery protests. The earliest attendees of Housing Assembly meetings were largely seasoned activists from housing-orientated groups of various sizes. As the character of the organisation changed during the period 2011–13, new members were increasingly unaffiliated with any existing group. Many had been active in their local civic associations or the United Democratic Front in the
1980s, but few of the members drawn in after these initial meetings were themselves formally affiliated to post-apartheid social movements.

At its inception, the group was largely a talk shop, a space in which residents of disparate settlements would come together to tell one another about various problems, both of material deprivation and of political organisation. However, at this point the Housing Assembly did not function as a coordinating body for actually existing housing struggles. In tracing the origins and genesis of the Housing Assembly’s politics, I want to demonstrate how its politics exceed the externally imposed limits of the pressure group model. The Housing Assembly’s target, I argue, is not the state, but the market. The pressure group model is not capable of taking decommodification struggles seriously, as by its imposed criteria, these groups fail where they do not act as pressure groups or embed themselves as policy-making entities. When Housing Assembly members participate in land occupations, for example, they do not do so in order to pressure the state or attempt to dictate land policy; they do so in order to gain direct access to land.

The Housing Assembly was largely the creation of two employees of a Cape Town NGO that emerged from COSATU struggles in the late 1980s, the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG). As well intentioned as they were, these NGO workers reproduced a dynamic all too common in NGO–social movement interactions. Often those who would come to Housing Assembly meetings were self-identified activists, who would use their involvement in ILRIG-sanctioned activities to legitimise their own leadership roles in their respective neighborhoods and settlements. After it later became an active group of housing activists, relatively autonomous from its unofficial institutional affiliation, its earlier reputation remained.

Even after gaining nominal independence from ILRIG, the Housing Assembly continued to hold coordinating and steering committee meetings at the NGO’s offices. Largely this was a function of not having a large enough alternative space available for multi-hour meetings of this size. By the same token, one ILRIG employee was involved from the beginning, consistently giving presentations on the South African housing crisis, social policy, and the history of social movements in the 1980s and after apartheid. He was exceptional in two ways. First and foremost, he was himself a housing activist, both in his own township – Mitchell’s Plain – and more generally. He was an active member of the Anti-Eviction Campaign from its inception, and before that, he was a founding member of the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC), a body that organised the first successful generalised rent strike in the Cape Flats and was a predecessor of the civics movement. CAHAC was always the implicit model he had in mind as he attempted to develop the Housing Assembly’s organisational form.

Second, his method was intentionally one of facilitating autonomy and self-organisation. For example, he organised a six-part training session he called ‘train the trainer’ in which Housing Assembly members were taught how to give a presentation on the failure of post-apartheid housing delivery and the persistence of substandard housing. They would subsequently revise this presentation, and organise workshops around the housing crisis themselves. The first of these that
I witnessed was organised for about 70 attendees from across the Cape Flats in mid-August 2013. Rather than lecturing attendees or other potential members, the goal was to begin by soliciting testimony from the crowd. One man from Khayelitsha described the parastatal electricity company’s refusal to deliver electricity to his settlement, even though electricity lines ran directly above his shack. He continued, telling everyone that the municipal government refuses to extend plumbing to the neighborhood, citing an adjacent dam as the reason. There is also quite a bit of disease, most notably tuberculosis, he continued, and there has been no progress for decades.

Others gave briefer accounts. One woman told us she had five kids but only one large room separated by thin partitions. This lack of privacy and her perpetually leaking roof rendered her home miserable. Another woman described having to stay at others’ houses, having to bring them gifts in order to stay in their good graces, but she complained that she did not have any disposable income to do so. A third woman living in Lost City talked about her rent increasing every month even though her landlord refused to pay the water bill. As a result, her water was regularly cut off; sometimes she was not even able to flush the toilet, she insisted. That and overcrowding make the place nearly unlivable even though it is technically a formal flat. Other participants described leaking, overcrowding, crime, and gangsterism in their living situations.

After this initial exercise, they moved on to describe the impact of these conditions on their family life. These included poor public health, no place for children to do homework, domestic violence, mental health issues, crime (resulting from lack of electricity and therefore darkness), washing with cold water, smelling like fire all the time, and having limited access to water. Women and children were scared to go outside, and people described a general loss of confidence. Of course, there were also endemic substance abuse problems, as well as high HIV/AIDS rates in their areas. One woman concluded, “We’re just waiting to die. We’ve given up hope. We’re dead here [pointing to her head].”

I noted how residents in quite disparate forms of housing – rented flats, backyard shacks, informal settlements, temporary relocation areas (TRAs), crumbling RDP houses – were able to articulate problems that affected people in all of these substandard forms of housing. Residents were surprised to encounter others with similar problems in forms of housing that they otherwise viewed as viable alternatives. When shack and TRA residents were able to discuss their housing dilemmas with recipients of state-provisioned formal housing, they increasingly came to the realisation that the problem was not insufficient will or even capacity on the part of the state’s delivery apparatus. Even those who had received housing were facing substantial problems, whether of the quality of structures or of being required to move to unsustainable locations far from affordable transportation or viable employment.

This is not to suggest that the shift from state to market as the target of social movement activity easily or even necessarily follows from these discussions among residents occupying various rungs in the ladder of housing distribution. There is an observable reluctance on the part of precarious residents to enter into
any kind of alliance with others in a similar situation. At the ILRIG-sponsored Globalization School in September 2013, for example, housing activists from around the country gathered for a strategic dialogue about potentially building a larger organisation, though ultimately to no avail. A Housing Assembly member from an informal settlement in Athlone insisted that everyone in the room’s living situations were connected, related to the same crisis of housing and service delivery, and through analysis the housing activists could begin to think about strategy. His interventions were immediately resisted. Some of this was a sense of proprietorship over one’s own experience; for many participants, equation amounted to reduction. As soon as multiple experiences were rendered comparable, the thinking went, variation was erased altogether. Thus one participant from the Eastern Cape decried the Housing Assembly chairperson’s invocation of ‘the working class’, a concept, he argued, that negated his own experiences as a Xhosa man, as perpetually unemployed, and as a shack resident.

In one representative ‘train the trainer’ workshop, the difficulty of reaching a common perspective was abundantly apparent. Attendees insisted upon detailing their own living conditions. When pushed to connect their own situation to that of others in the room, they refused, often with a flourish of mild annoyance. Each attempted to outdo the next, presenting her own poverty as a novelty, despite the countless narratives that were already described. Much of this emphasis on the particularities of each housing situation seems to be related to a desire for adequate representation in a context of perceived political abandonment, a stubborn refusal to fully dispense with the notion that a faulty system of housing delivery was to blame for their respective predicaments. Indeed, there appears to be a commonplace understanding in many settlements that through forcefully narrating their respective plights, they might attract the attention of the municipal state.

The irony is that the refusal to be represented at the level of the neighborhood occurs at the same time as residents state that they want representation at the level of the municipality. The bulk of skepticism remains directed at local representatives – in most cases, people’s neighbors – rather than the city or the province. It is to the Housing Assembly’s great merit that it has been able to begin to transcend some of the barriers of localism, shifting focus from competition over limited state resources to a critique of capitalist housing markets and their inhibiting effects on distribution itself. In the following section, I provide an account of the Housing Assembly’s organisational model, focusing in particular on how multiple organisational scales are articulated into a coherent strategy that both incorporates localised discontent and posits a generalised theory of the post-apartheid housing crisis. But this organisational model alone is insufficient to unite various housing identities under the rubric of a unitary social movement. It was only through a process of actual, material struggle – through participating in and defending land occupations – that the Housing Assembly was able to form a coherent bloc. The penultimate section details this process of struggle, taking the Housing Assembly’s involvement in three land occupations in Mitchell’s Plain as the crucial moment in uniting its disparate membership into a fighting body.
Devolution to the districts

Cape Town–based housing struggles have a long history of federated structures rooted in neighborhood-level branches, from the United Democratic Front of the 1980s\(^{21}\) to the Anti-Eviction Campaign of the early 2000s\(^{22}\) – both of which, incidentally, were launched in Mitchell’s Plain. The Housing Assembly is no different. However, as discussed extensively at Coordinating Committee meetings, previous Cape Town–based post-apartheid social movements faced two major barriers to effectively utilising their federated structures. First and foremost, branches became mired in a parochial localism, unable to transcend neighborhood-level concerns and make use of the organisation as a whole. The Housing Assembly consciously attempted to overcome this limit by holding regular (ranging from weekly to monthly) report-backs to a central Coordinating Committee that included both district-level conveners and organisation-wide elected officials. The sole purpose of these meetings was to ensure that local strategies accorded with the Housing Assembly’s overarching strategy as determined by its membership. This makes the Housing Assembly unique in a period characterised by two notable features: nearly all of the post-2000 urban social movements in South African cities have collapsed, and those militant struggles that have emerged more recently (around service delivery, housing, jobs, and education) have rarely been connected to a coordinating movement organisation.

A second major limit to previous iterations of district-level organising is that despite maintaining the organisational form of a federated structure, previous organisations were frequently dominated by a handful of charismatic personalities. In such cases, directives typically ran from these individuals to local branches instead of vice versa. In some instances, these individuals were able to stand in for branches themselves, creating the appearance of district-level power, but in practice resulting in one or two figures substituting their individual wills for those of the local committee. This critique was the one most frequently voiced in the Housing Assembly’s discussions of previous social movements.

To reinforce branch autonomy, the Housing Assembly divided the Cape Flats into five districts (see Figure 6.1), and each of these into a number of neighborhood committees. The Mitchell’s Plain district, for example, convened meetings in Tafelsig and Beacon Valley, two large, well-established neighborhoods; and in Siqalo, an informal settlement with an estimated 30,000 residents. At the neighborhood committee level, organisers would decide upon the frequency of meetings. I attended a handful of such meetings in four of the five districts, and I attended every district meeting in Mitchell’s Plain’s Beacon Valley and Tafelsig neighborhoods over a four-month period. At their peak, these occurred weekly. This was the strongest district at the time, and so it would be inaccurate to extrapolate from this experience, but by the time I left, Athlone and Khayelitsha were reportedly holding meetings of comparable strength.

A major function of these meetings was to coordinate *huisbesoek*, Afrikaans for door-to-door campaigning. Every Sunday at 2 pm, Beacon Valley residents would meet at the convener’s front gate, and for two hours they would systematically work through the neighborhood. They would bring petitions with them, which were
actually less petitions and more condensed versions of the Housing Assembly’s draft program, describing the organisation’s politics in some detail. Signing the document was a means of expressing interest in the organisation, and every week huisbesoek would draw in one or two additional members. Given the centrality of this collective activity to the Housing Assembly’s local strategy, there were very few opportunities for opportunistic activists to act on behalf of the group. In the rare instances where this occurred, the offending activists were formally rebuked by the Steering Committee, to whom they would have to report back periodically in order to monitor their progress. In the case of one particularly intransigent

*Figure 6.1* Housing assembly districts in relation to the Cape Town city centre
district convener who continued to speak on behalf of her neighborhood without substantial outreach work, the Committee relieved her of her duty. She was replaced by a district convener who reinitiated *huisbesoek* in his informal settlement and surrounding neighborhoods.

The organisational model adopted by the Housing Assembly then safeguarded against both excessive localism and the threat of demagoguery. However, organisational form alone does not sufficiently account for the Housing Assembly’s politics, directed not toward the state but the market. As Andrew Walder recently observed, ‘we no longer have explanations to offer about variation in the substantive content of a movement – the type of politics that it represents’. Instead, prominence is accorded to organisational form and effective mobilisation; the means are emphasised at the expense of the ends. Moving beyond the formal means, it is to the Housing Assembly’s development of a politics beyond incorporation that I now turn.

**The ends of politics**

As described to me by an early Housing Assembly member from Mitchell’s Plain, it was the group’s engagement with a concrete series of struggles over access to land and housing that solidified the organisation’s political identity, elevating it from an occasional meeting space to a citywide coordinating committee for housing struggles. He told me how backyarders led two occupations in 2011 in Tafelsig, the poorest neighborhood in Mitchell’s Plain, just before the 2011 municipal elections: one at the field across from the Kapteinsklip Metrorail station, and the other at the field adjacent to the Swartklip sports complex. The Kapteinsklip occupation initially had 5,000 people, he recalled. On the first Sunday of the occupation, the police showed up and cleared the field, but the following day a number of shacks would go back up. Small groups retained hold of each field for nearly 18 months until most occupants were successfully evicted. A small encampment of a few dozen people remains on the field at Kapteinsklip.

Despite the ultimate clearance of the land occupation, activists’ sustained experience of frontal conflicts with police and representatives of the municipal Department of Human Settlements transformed their politics. These conflicts, in combination with the necessity of constantly reconfiguring strategy simply to retain access to the land, increasingly led Housing Assembly–affiliated participants to view the local state as an adversary. Whereas many housing-related social movements make demands on the state’s delivery apparatus, participants in and supporters of the Tafelsig occupations were largely backyarders who had slipped through the cracks of the post-apartheid housing delivery scheme. Their perception of the local state was not as a potential source of housing and services, but as a coercive entity that sought to evict them. The fact that this squatted land was municipally owned – not even private property – was doubly alarming to these activists, not least because the City of Cape Town had no immediate plans to develop the land adjacent to the Kapteinsklip station. Thus clashes with the City – its Anti-Land Invasion Unit and the Department of Human Settlements – and the
South African Police Service remained participants’ primary interaction with the state.

Often, however, conflicts between residents and the state took a more subtle form. In drawing out the implications of occupation-level factionalism for thinking about the role of the municipal state, Housing Assembly affiliates made sense of otherwise quite complicated dynamics. In the Kapteinslip occupation, a sizable faction aligned itself with opportunists, forming blocs aligned with various outside entities. Its members were interested in dialoguing with philanthropists or small political parties that would appear at the land occupation in search of a constituency. One Housing Assembly member described the scene to me in impassioned detail, clearly growing agitated as she explained the source of conflict. She recounted battle lines quite literally drawn, with one opposing faction proposing to work with the police. The idea was that if they could eject immigrants from the land occupation, perhaps they could legitimate their own position and gain at least a temporary reprieve from the City. The Housing Assembly member was not having this. She told me that just a few days before this squabble, she met the man from ILRIG and through him, she built a relationship with a number of Housing Assembly affiliates. She was immediately drawn to the group’s politics and began attending their occasional meetings and workshops closer to the city centre when she could; he would reimburse her taxi fare. Through these encounters, she told me, she gained a sense of programmatic politics for the first time. From this day forth, she laughed, she could only think of politics—it was all she would discuss with her husband. Housing Assembly members who would visit the occupation stood in solidarity with her, and a number of other occupiers were drawn into the organisation.

Through discussions of their experiences at the two Tafelsig occupations (as well as a third Mitchell’s Plain–based land occupation a few months later), Housing Assembly members began to rethink their relationship to the City. Rather than a benevolent delivery state, residents encountered municipal agencies that either criminalised them, or else attempted to relocate them to semi-permanent encampments on the far periphery of the municipality. This was not only a conflict with the City, but also a campaign against the commodification of land. Of course, this was not their language, but the concept remains the same: The Housing Assembly’s politics emerged from its experience of reappropriating land that the City deemed too valuable, or else unfit for use.

At the centre of the organisation’s Draft Statement – its most important document and essentially its founding program – is an explicit defense of land occupation as a legitimate tactic:

We believe that occupations are a legitimate means for both people fleeing poverty and unemployment elsewhere in the country, as well as for evicted people, backyarders and those in overcrowded housing, to take their struggle for decent housing forward.24

This set of politics is reiterated in the group’s central document adopted at the formal launch of the organisation in March 2014, coupled with a cautionary note.
on engaging the state: Their aim is ‘to promote an understanding among affected communities that the cheap policies such as site-and-services, the upgrading of informal settlements and backyard dwellings, “re-blocking” initiatives, self-help schemes, among others, are hopelessly inadequate changes and unacceptable as alternatives to decent housing for all.’ Their argument then is that revising existing policy is not only too little too late, but not even particularly effective. If the new national housing policy Breaking New Ground was supposed to spur a shift from relocations to peripheral greenfields to in situ upgrading, it did nothing of the sort. Above all, according to these two Housing Assembly documents, this failure of housing policy is attributable to the dominance of private interests in its implementation, from the nepotistic contracts granted to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) companies to the use of for-profit subcontracting more generally. The primacy placed on the value of real estate over the right of residents to live in decent housing is at the centre of the Housing Assembly’s critique, and above all, acting as a pressure group on policymakers will do little to reverse this tendency in their estimation.

The few cases in which Housing Assembly members did see squatters gain access to more durable forms of housing were invariably disappointing. In one case, a half dozen participants in the Swartklip occupation accepted state-provisioned alternative accommodation. These turned out to be peripherally located corrugated zinc shacks in a temporary relocation area (TRA). This TRA was notorious among residents for its high concentration of gang violence and petty robberies, and these relocated residents were extremely dissatisfied. Within a couple of months, they had returned to the Housing Assembly. In another case, squatters from an occupation in another township (Grassy Park) received formal housing in a nearby development. The walls and floors of these structures were crumbling before they even moved in. Despite being home recipients, they too remained active in the Housing Assembly. From these experiences, the Housing Assembly drew two major lessons. First, state-provisioned housing is nearly always distributed on an individualised basis, forcing households to compete with one another over a limited supply of housing stock. Second, even in cases where formal housing is distributed, it is rarely what recipients envisioned it to be beforehand. In both cases, the municipal state is encountered as an adversary rather than a potential partner. Instead of engaging this state then, Housing Assembly members were skeptical of the strategic efficacy of doing so. They certainly kept an eye on housing policy, convening study groups on Breaking New Ground and Connie September’s housing Green Paper, to name but a couple, and organising workshops on the history of housing interventions since the demise of apartheid. But the Housing Assembly’s social movement strategy was aimed not toward the state, but the market, rejecting the mediation of the Department of Human Settlements in favor of advocating direct land seizure.

**Beyond incorporation**

Rather than an abstentionist critique of engagement, the Housing Assembly has developed a programmatic alternative to what it views as the futile efforts of the
pressure group model in a period marked by the failure of housing and service delivery. Its direct participation in and defense of land occupations as a viable strategy for gaining access to housing is at the root of its ability to bypass the morass of localism. In a period dominated by scattered service delivery protests, however increasingly frequent, and following the demise of most post-2000 social movements, the recent emergence of a citywide housing organisation would appear anomalous. As I argue in this chapter, this ability to transcend localism is grounded in two major strategic developments that distinguish it from many previous housing-oriented organisations: the active construction of a novel agent of struggle – the subject of a generalised housing crisis, as opposed to distinct and fragmented housing identities; and involvement in decommodification struggles instead of acting as a pressure group on the municipal state.

This market-orientated approach stands in stark contrast to strategies easily explained by the various proponents of the pressure group model, as discussed previously. Above all, this approach signals a break with Chatterjee’s valorisation of political society, which he notoriously describes as ‘popular politics in most of the world’. If for Chatterjee, politics in informal settlements concerns the formation of settlement-level organisations competing with one another for recognition from a delivery state, the case of the Housing Assembly demonstrates quite clearly that poor people’s politics need not be inherently competitive. Indeed, it is precisely the limits of this competitive mode of politics that drove the organisation to develop its citywide approach in the first place. Rejecting the prevailing social movement approach of identifying in terms of one’s immediate conditions – as shack residents, as backyarders, as RDP house recipients, and so on – the Housing Assembly seeks to unite all of these residents as subjects of a capitalist housing crisis under the political identity of being ‘working class’. It is division into these sectional interests that reduces the effectiveness of housing-related mobilisation in the first place, they argue, and so Chatterjee’s reinscription of neoliberal governmentality as a form of popular politics from below misses the mark. Rather than a potentially effective challenge to a municipal state that continues to exacerbate the housing crisis, the political society approach to social movement politics simply engages the state on its own terrain.

Given the vast literature on social movement organisations involved in land occupations, electricity reconnections, and other active forms of decommodification, it is the task of social movement theorists to think these movements beyond direct engagement with the state. A growing literature on Northern social movements that target the market rather than the state indicates a shift in the way we talk about contemporary social movements more broadly. Yet this tendency remains to be fully considered by social movement theorists in general and, as I hope I have demonstrated in this chapter, analysts of South African social movements in particular. Certainly the post-Marikana strike wave in the platinum belt and the Western Cape wildcats of 2012–13 were described in such terms, but when it comes to social movements struggling not at the point of production but at the point of reproduction, no such allowance is made.

The case of the Housing Assembly clearly demonstrates the need to situate organised struggles for decommodification within a more wide-reaching
theoretical scaffolding that takes movements’ own goals seriously. The challenge will be to consider both market- and state-orientated struggles, developing specific accounts of each without abandoning the concept of ‘social movement’ altogether. Political variation should not pose a problem to theorists of these movements, but instead serve as their point of departure. The Housing Assembly and other decommmodification movements should not be represented as deviations from a set of goals presumed in advance to accurately represent social movement strategy. Certainly the majority of social struggles and movements in contemporary South Africa do target the state, and the Housing Assembly is atypical in this regard. But its attempt to veer from a course that has yet to yield substantial gains does not render it misguided or aberrant. Social movement theorists must reject teleological approaches rooted in organizational theory and begin to take movements’ own politics seriously.

Notes

1 This chapter benefitted greatly from critical feedback from Marcel Paret, Trevor Ngwane, Noor Nieftegodien, and Carin Runciman, as well as from the participants in a one-day conference on Contentious Politics, Capitalism, and Social Movement Theory organised by the Social Change Research Unit at the University of Johannesburg.


4 During the lead-up to the formal launch, I attended every citywide Housing Assembly meeting, ranging in frequency from monthly to three times per week. I also sat in on every Mitchell’s Plain district meeting, and I lived with the Mitchell’s Plain district convener during this entire period, regularly interacting with new recruits in the area. I occasionally attended meetings in other districts (described in subsequent notes), as well as recruitment meetings and workshops in areas beyond the five core districts.


7 Robins, From Revolution to Rights in South Africa.

8 Zuern, Politics of Necessity.
Social movements beyond incorporation

10 Ibid., 18.
11 Ibid., 184.
12 Ibid., 42–3, 50, 67.
15 Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, 150.
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29 Chatterjee, Politics of the Governed.
31 Harvey, Rebel Cities; Brenner et al., Cities for People, Not for Profit; Leitner et al., Contesting Neoliberalism; Mitchell, Right to the City.