

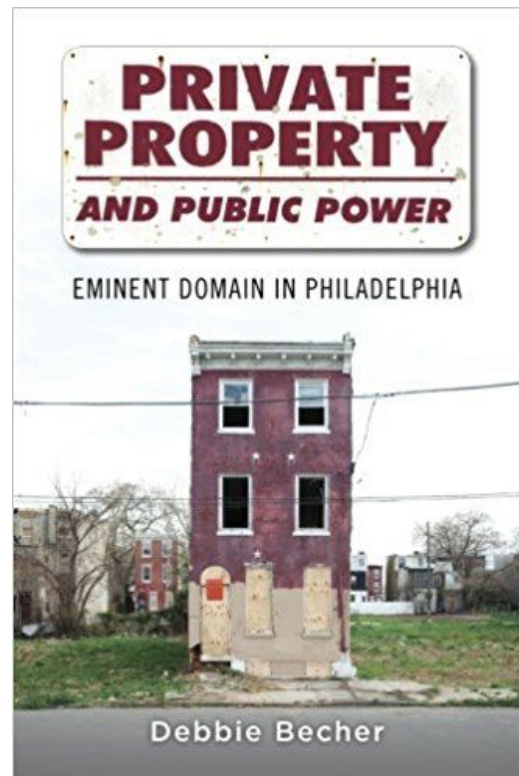
Accounts Dialogue: Interview with Debbie Becher

Ferhunde Dilara Demir, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Department of Sociology. Interview with Debbie Becher, Barnard College / Columbia University, Department of Sociology, author of *Private property and public power: eminent domain in Philadelphia*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Debbie Becher is an Assistant Professor at Barnard College. She is the co-Winner of the Zelizer Award for Best Book in Economic Sociology from the American Sociological Association in 2016 and the winner of the Hart Socio-Legal Prize for Early Career Academics from the Socio-Legal Studies Association in 2015, both for Private Property.

FDD: You look into private property as a socio-legal phenomenon that economic sociologists need to investigate. From a study of government takings of private property for private redevelopment in Philadelphia, you argue that officials and citizens perceive property as investments of value that government is responsible for securing. Can you talk about your choice as an economic sociologist to make private property a subject of research?

DB: For too long, economic sociologists have treated markets as advanced capitalism's dominant institution and ignored institutions of property. Although property in land was a central concern of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, when we study land as property now, we mostly examine moments of massive post-colonial, post-socialist, or post-conflict transformations. And when we study property outside of those tumultuous times, we typically focus on how property comes to govern new objects, for instance, through financialization



and intellectual property. If we don't study private property more carefully, we are likely to rely on classical theories and assume that private property simply serves market transactions.

New understandings of property are needed for today's so-called neoliberal era of privatization, especially in places where private property in land has been a stable institution for generations. In today's neoliberal (and perhaps post-neoliberal) era of privatization, private property and private contracting are touted as solutions to any number of social issues. But we don't know what private property means in everyday life unless we investigate it. We do know that understandings of property are always a product of politics at a

certain time and place, and advanced capitalist countries are peculiar in important ways. Here, private-property is the normative experience and is rooted in a long history of private ownership. In addition, governments are larger and more intricately involved in activities that affect property's values than ever before. And given histories of regional growth and decline as well as understandings of globalization, economic uncertainty is a prescient and familiar concern. I hope that we will deepen our understanding of private property in places where it has a long history, where there is a widespread experience of ownership, and where there is a deep concern with economic and geographic uncertainty.

I see my book as part of a growing movement by sociologists to study private property in land as a central institution, especially in advanced capitalist countries. There is a burgeoning interest in the property rules undergirding housing, as it relates to financing, evictions, and home as commodification. We have some significant books on other topics related to land as private property by Wendy Espeland, Isaac Martin, and Jens Beckert. In addition, Fred Block's and Margaret Somers' recent resurrection of Polanyi's work emphasizes his more complex view of private property than is typically recognized. I hope that many more economic sociologists will add to this emerging discussion.

FDD: It seems you work through intersections of economic sociology, sociology of law, as well as urban sociology and cultural political economy. How do you think your particular argument about property as investment contributes to existing discussions in economic sociology specifically?

DB: The idea of investment offers a new way of

understanding how social private property really is. A conception of property as investment calls attention to how connected people's futures are. Homeowners who care for their properties by applying new paint, planting in a front yard, sweeping a sidewalk, and maintaining a generally social and lively space benefit their neighbors financially and enhance their sense of comfort and security. Collective actions matter too. Investments in property motivate informal community organizing involving groups of neighbors, networks of sports teams or businesses, and church and school groups. Citizens invested in property expect a voice in local government decisions about nearby land uses and spending on services and infrastructure in national government's credit and tax policies. Thus, the conception of property as investment focuses attention on hopes about a collective future, encouraging political agreements and battles about how to control that future. When property is treated as an investment to be protected, citizens want and expect government to provide insurance against the risks and uncertainties associated with the neighborhood's, the city's, or the larger community's future. Yet my conception of property as investment does not redirect all attention from individual to collective responsibility for property's value. Citizens using investment protection as a standard for government action know that, while an owner's own sacrifices make a property valuable, collectivities also have significant control.

The notion of investment also draws attention to the importance of time to economic institutions. My definition of investment involves acts in the present or past made with expectations about the future. An investment requires that a person hold value in an object for a period of time. This

long-term sense of a history of the economic act differs from economists' ideal of a market exchange, which is practically instantaneous, beginning and ending when money is traded for an object. But it is similar to the longer-term sense of time inherent in the relational work that economic sociologists have shown are so involved in market exchanges. I emphasize that the institution of private property, like the relational work in market exchanges, focuses attention on the future. I think that this is also what Jens Beckert is getting at in his argument about how "imagined futures" are fundamental to capitalism. One of the things I liked about the idea of investment is that it calls attention to how when people are thinking about property, they are thinking about value over time.

FDD: Can you say more about the question of value? And can you say more about how it relates to the part of your work about compensating people who lost their properties to eminent domain?

DB: I'm really glad that you brought that up. It's important to realize that value is essential to my discoveries about property. People seem to expect very different kinds of protection for property depending on whether it has any value. Property might mean one thing when the land is very valuable to its owners, but something else entirely when it feels like more of a burden (as vacant property in devastated real-estate markets can be). And like other sociologists, I have a pluralist notion of value. The value of an investment can be made or returned in money or labor, but also in time, emotion, friendship, social networks, local schools and parks, or any other currency. Any of these may bring future income but also benefits such as wisdom, creativity, status, and self-

assurance. This value pluralism differs starkly from the clean exchange value/use value distinction that is central to most theories of property in political economy. My pluralist notion of value builds on the work of cultural economic sociologists like Boltanski and Thevenot, who discuss multiple orders of worth, and Viviana Zelizer, who exposes the connectedness of representations of sentimental and monetary worth. I add to this literature by showing how objects of property are often understood as personal containers for many kinds of value simultaneously. I also show how even if someone holds on to the same property title over time, its significance as value will almost definitely change with the neighborhood, the local economy, and the life course.

I showed how officials sometimes managed to consider all of these kinds of value when they compensated people for property lost to eminent domain. "Full market value" is the primary standard for "just compensation" in legal doctrine. Legal scholars and economists who have written about compensation commonly argue that being forced to use this market standard explains why some compensation arrangements become contested, usually because the market standard prohibits officials from accounting for a variety of idiosyncratic or subjective forms of value. I show, to the contrary, how officials consider market value, but deploy categories that bend market value to provide compensation that more directly reflects concern for people's investments. At one end of the spectrum, they try to give the least to slumlords and speculators. At the other end, they try to secure the most compensation for long-time homeowners who are committed to their neighborhoods. And there are many categories distinguishing levels and kinds of investment in

between. By attending to how categories and labels justify compensation, I build on Viviana Zelizer's work about marking transactions and on Wendy Espeland's work on commensuration and on ranking. I show how government's success or failure in earning approval for its actions depended on how well officials fit individual situations into the right categories for compensation, and thus for market valuation.

FDD: Part of what you say motivated you to study eminent domain when you did was your curiosity about and discomfort with political positions taken on the issue. Can you discuss a little bit about your argument that libertarian and left positions create a strange alliance?

DB: When I started my research in 2006, an overwhelming majority of Americans sympathized with a libertarian movement to curtail local governments' eminent domain powers. The libertarians had created strategic alliances with left-leaning organizations around the issue. Those on the left were concerned about how takings for urban redevelopment benefit the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor, the elderly, and people of color. But whereas libertarians generally want limited government and strong private rights, the left generally seeks government support and strong public power. This alliance made me suspicious and motivated my research into everyday experiences with eminent domain. I found out that this political campaign about eminent domain was seriously mischaracterizing the concerns of poor people, not just with respect to eminent domain but with respect to their property more generally. And sociologists weren't doing much better.

FDD: So what did you conclude about how the eminent-domain debate obscured people's understandings of property?

DB: The libertarians, who incidentally share with classical sociologists an understanding of property as private control, were asking for governments to leave poor neighborhoods alone. The left, who share with political economists an expectation that the poor treat property as use value, were joining a campaign to limit eminent domain. I found out, however, that although poor people might decry particular uses of eminent domain, they actually applauded the very common condemnations of vacant and abandoned properties. In addition, I saw that poor people demanded generally that government get involved with more than just tangible goods and services, and sentimentality. They insist that, as much as any other Americans, they should be able to recoup the labor, time, effort, and money they have put into their properties by receiving money and/or the opportunity to move into new communities of their choosing.

Importantly, the conception of property as investment leads to a damning critique of many more urban policies than eminent domain, and in a way that departs from libertarian views of property asserting a limited role for government (as well as from left views of poor people's property as use value.) To the extent that Americans expect governments to protect property as an investment, they declare the general oversight of poor neighborhoods—not only the use of eminent domain—to be abhorrent. This expectation holds government responsible for protecting citizens against the pervasive harms of neighborhood decline. By bringing government back into

providing value security for all urban neighborhoods, a conception of property as investment allows the poor to demand the same kind of government respect and protection for property that wealthy and middle-class Americans have come to enjoy.

Exposing everyday meanings of property is important work for us to be doing. We can help provide language that allows people to better express their interests when they engage in debate. Intellectuals have developed and reified other meanings of property. Liberal political theory has cemented the ideas of property as individual control or as an object of utility maximization through exchange. Critical theorists have developed a notion of property as the basis of commodification, and sometimes as claims against commodification. As a result, when people face political dilemmas, they have these labels, or easy rhetoric to defend their positions. But this rhetoric might do more harm than good when it suggests that government should go away or it pits use against exchange values, if this is not really what citizens want. So perhaps with a different label – like investment – in mind, when conflicts arise, and groups are mobilized, these ideas can be more easily leveraged to mobilize support, and perhaps lead to collective decision-making that better reflects citizen experience. Perhaps citizens can carry this label of investment to many urban policy arenas – from development projects not using eminent domain, to zoning, to foreclosures, anti-gentrification measures, and property taxes. And if economic sociologists start looking, I am sure they will expose and clarify additional meanings of property already in use.

FDD: As you mention in your book, one of the most glaring reasons for popular resistance to urban redevelopment policies generally and eminent domain in particular is how often they victimize blacks and other people of color. In different parts of your book, you discuss race and housing. And you wrote an article on race as a set of symbolic resources to mobilize people, depending on your research in Jefferson Square. You go beyond discussing race as an analytic category; and emphasize the potential role of blackness in public fights of property. What do you think of potential intersections of economic sociology and critical race studies?

DB: I believe that economic sociologists can and should expose how race and class inequalities overlap in ways that reproduce or challenge patterns of wealth. We know, for instance, that housing is the single biggest contributor to American families' wealth. Economic sociologists can investigate how and why African Americans typically have so much more trouble than other Americans accumulating wealth through housing. My arguments in the book on eminent domain showed how governments have victimized poor and racial minorities with many policies that contribute to neighborhood decline – well after overt racial discrimination was outlawed and in a city with many African-American political leaders. We can continue to expose how color-blind rules lead to deeply unequal results because of the intersection of economic inequalities and racial identity, and because of the unyielding significance of race in social life.

Economic sociologists with an eye for culture can explain the significance of various meanings

attached to race and to inequalities. In other words, we can gain insight into the power of race by treating race as a malleable symbol, instead of as a variable. That is what I found necessary to explain the importance of race in one of the projects I was studying, as I explained in the chapter you referred to. I witnessed how knowledge of past racial discrimination in housing and neighborhoods motivated residents to resist government action. I also noticed how African-American identity allowed potential leaders to claim authentic representation of others, and how dramatically such a claim could backfire when their own economic interests seem to conflict with their racial solidarity. Economic sociologists can continue to learn how actors represent race strategically or unconsciously to lay claim to material resources and to political leadership affecting material resources.

FDD: In your book, you tell the stories of real people and development projects, using their real names. You discuss citizens, officials, and advocates. Have you received any feedback from your research subjects and from others familiar with local policymaking? If yes, what are the reactions?

DB: I've been thrilled with the reactions from government officials who have worked on urban redevelopment. By and large, they seem to feel that the book originally and accurately reflects dilemmas that they face, and what they do in response. In one session, I was qualifying how my findings are potentially peculiar to Philadelphia, and former government officials piped up to argue to the contrary: that they knew of the same dynamics faced by officials in countless cities.

Before I published the book, I reviewed a final draft

with many of the residents whose stories were covered, and they attested to the truth of what I had written. Those who could boast of victory over government were actually quite proud to have their stories recorded and publicized in the book. Those who had only bitter and sad recollections seemed to get some comfort and solace, but also experienced some pain from seeing my writing.

FDD: You use mixed qualitative and quantitative methodologies in your book that enrich your insight about the eminent domain. Your appendix on research methods is clear, precise and exemplary for any graduate students on their research design. It shows how delicately and diligently you weave the story. Would you like to say a few words about advantages and/or difficulties of mixed methodologies for your research, if any? Also would you like to give any suggestions for graduate students about weaving their own scholarly stories?

DB: Mixed methods were best for answering my research questions about the character of takings and the likelihood and reasons for citizen approval or resistance. I needed to overcome a problem: research on urban redevelopment and eminent domain had focused so exclusively on cases that erupted in large-scale, public conflict that we did not know whether such conflict and the practices that create conflict were typical or not. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed me to characterize the full variety of redevelopment projects using eminent domain. I created a database of takings and compared it with government data on all of the city's properties. I analyzed this quantitative data along with archival, interview, and observation data to get an overview of eminent-domain practice. These data were

necessary to teach me that most uses of eminent domain for private redevelopment were practically routine, that they earned widespread approval, and that the property conditions explained why. To learn about why some cases evoked significant anger and dismay, I needed more in depth qualitative data about particular cases, so I used archives and interviews to understand two controversial projects that taught me what caused resistance.

Although particular research designs will vary according to one's questions, I recommend that all students consider analyzing multiple forms of data. Our findings can only be more reliable if we triangulate observations, interviews, archives, and quantitative data. We can further verify our findings in many research projects by including multiple perspectives. I planned my qualitative data to expose the behaviors and sentiments of officials, residents, business-owners, organizers, and lawyers. I encourage others to identify and investigate the experiences of the primary parties involved.

FDD: One last question. I had the opportunity of listening to your paper presentation on transfers of property rights necessary for the extraction of oil and natural gas at ASA, Seattle. How does your new research on oil in the northern Plains follow up on the interests of the book you've discussed here?

DB: Just as the US Supreme Court case *Kelo v. New London* brought a lot of attention to eminent domain in 2005, the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines and proposed statewide fracking bans have recently focused a national spotlight on oil and gas development. Just as in my eminent-domain project, I wanted to look beyond

sensational controversies to everyday engagements with private property, here I'm studying the incidents around which conflicts erupt but also the more common, quotidian, pervasive experiences with property. As was true in Philadelphia, I'm looking now at a place where outsiders are using property to drastically transform that land's use for economic development, but for a different kind of real estate development: they are newly extracting oil. Here, large private oil companies, rather than government, are the direct instigators of the change. You might say I'm moving even more into the essence of the neoliberal era's ideological core, because I'm investigating how people use private deals with private corporations to accomplish what some might have expected of government prior to this neoliberal period. The resource being commodified – oil that is underground – is arguably treated much more like a commodity, an item for market exchange, than the urban homes or abandoned lots at risk of condemnation by the city of Philadelphia.

Because one of the things I emphasize about property is that it changes with context, even within advanced capitalist countries, I'm looking at very different places and peoples. My eminent-domain study was mostly about how poor, African-American and Puerto Rican residents of the urban Northeast faced proposals for dramatic neighborhood redevelopment. I'm now studying the interior West and the mostly white and American-Indian ranchers and farmers and oil-industry workers there.

This research has some important early lessons for how we think about the way white, rural residents react to economic developments. Rural America

and fracking in particular were in the news before and after the Trump election - when rural interests in government regulation allied with those of urban, environmental activists. But these protestors' demands for government regulation are unlikely to reflect the sentiments of most of the white ranchers and farmers living in the northern Plains, where between ten and fifteen percent of America's oil is now being produced. Among rural whites, there is a great deal of skepticism about state regulation. Recent studies of rural conservatism like Arlie Hochschild's, *Strangers in their Own land*, or Katherine Cramer's *Politics of*

Resentment, are asking how these rural populations can be so enraged by government regulation and so willing to allow huge corporations to have such power. I'm seeing how rural citizens do want some government regulation, but they also use private property in land to assert limited control over some of the most powerful private players in the world. This private action is much more localized, responsive and widespread than government regulation.

FDD: Thank you so much for your time and intellectually stimulating answers.