
The Tenant Class by Ricardo Tranjan. Between the Lines, 2023. 148pp. ISBN-10-1771136227

As a legal academic who collaborates with housing rights and tenants' rights organizations, I am always looking for new books that address housing systems and the struggles that tenants face in securing places to call home. This is why I was very happy to pick up a copy of *The Tenant Class* (Between the Lines Press, 2023) by Ricardo Tranjan. This book is a short yet powerful contribution to the literature on housing in Canada. It will be of great interest to anyone seeking a highly readable and forceful critique of Canada's inequitable housing markets as well as a prescription for an alternate approach. Tranjan is an analyst for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, an organization that seeks to bring progressive research and analysis into Canadian policy debates. He brings his own positionality and experiences into his book. As a child growing up in the context of the tumultuous political struggles of 1980s Brazil, he observed first-hand the ways that those with power work to construct narratives that naturalize the status quo. He also witnessed how social movements and organizing are fundamental prerequisites for real changes to inequitable conditions.

Tranjan argues that the ubiquitous language of "crisis" deployed in debates about housing obscures the real problems and power relations within Canada's housing markets. This is because the language of "crisis" suggests a state of temporary emergency that could be fixed by technical solutions. This distracts people from paying attention to the ways the system itself is designed to entrench fundamental inequality between landlords and tenants. Tranjan points out that for most landlords, real estate investment firms, and property developers, there is, in fact, no crisis. Rather, these landlords operate within a "stable and lucrative business environment" that is designed as a "permanent state of affairs". This market actively tolerates and even encourages exploitative practices and allows many landlords to amass wealth while creating ongoing precarity for tenants. Thus, while dominant discourses frame high rents and housing insecurity as the result of a glitch in the system that could be fixed with the right technical solutions, Tranjan disagrees. Instead, he argues, it will take organizing and "political power to move the needle."

The book is divided into six short chapters. Following an introductory chapter that outlines the core arguments of the book, chapters one and two advance the argument that tenants comprise a social class that is subject to economic exploitation by landlords. Tranjan points out that tenants, as a group, earn less income and are more likely to work in precarious and low-paying jobs than homeowners. He also points out that for increasing numbers of tenants, and historically for many groups, being a tenant is not simply a "phase" on the road to becoming a homeowner. Meanwhile, landlords extract ever greater shares of tenant income, and rent increases have far outpaced increases in tenant wages and income over time. This part of the book opens some key insights, including a critique of the ways that "affordability" discourses are consistently framed in mainstream media as a problem of tenants not having enough money to pay rent. Rather, Tranjan argues, the questions should be (1) Why are landlords charging such high rents, and (2) Why do governments allow this to continue?

Chapter three is entitled "But what about the landlords?" This chapter directly confronts and deconstructs common arguments about landlords. Tranjan notes that media and policy

makers often portray landlords as a sympathetic group, commonly deploying the trope of the “mom and pop” operation who are themselves struggling to get by. This narrative cultivates sympathy and suggests that landlords and tenants have commensurate interests to balance out. While Tranjan is clear that some landlords in Canada certainly fit the struggling “mom and pop” image, most landlords do not in any way fit this description. Rather, most private landlords are wealthy families, businesses, large corporations, and financial investors. They are in the business of building equity, making profits, and, in many cases, “squeezing” as much money as they can from their properties. Tranjan forcefully makes the case in this chapter that large corporate landlords benefit substantially from mainstream depictions of landlords as sympathetic “mom and pop” operations. This narrative conceals the massive power disparities that exist in most landlord-tenant relationships in Canada, depoliticizes discussions about landlords and tenants, and thereby helps sustain the status quo.

In chapters four and five, Tranjan turns to historical and contemporary stories of tenant organizing in Canada. He concisely summarizes some key examples of tenant organizing, noting that knowledge about the history of tenant struggles helps us understand the dynamics of the longstanding inequities in our housing markets and adds new insights into current policy discussions. These chapters constitute a valuable compendium of examples of tenant organizing in Canada.

Finally, chapter 6 returns to the book’s central arguments and sets out some prescriptions for change. According to Tranjan, the solutions to the current problems with housing are not technical, but political, and require challenging the entrenched interests of those who benefit from the current system. We must, Tranjan writes, work to move as much housing as possible out of private markets; tightly regulate market provision of rental housing, and “organize tenants to ensure quality and access.” These solutions require the building of political power, the rejection of status quo narratives, and the commitment to focussing on “stretching the realm of the possible”.

Tranjan’s focus on the power dynamics and political underpinnings of the current system and the ways that it benefits landlords is a valuable insight for tenant advocates, as is his clear demonstration of how the way we frame issues dictates the types of solutions we generate. Despite its short length, the book is filled with helpful statistics and information about landlords, tenants, and housing, and, as mentioned above, compiles important and often-neglected histories of tenant organizing in Canada. The book is clear, passionate, and constructively polemical.

However, perhaps because of its pocket-sized length and practical focus, there are some gaps in the book. Notably, the book does not really situate itself in conversation with the relevant literature. Absent, for example, is reference to David Madden and Peter Marcuse’s 2016 book, *In Defence of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, which makes some very similar arguments. For example, Madden and Marcuse write in their book: the “housing crisis is not a result of the system breaking down but of the system working as it is intended.” (p.10). Likewise, Tranjan does not mention the work of scholars like Matthew Desmond who have written extensively about exploitation in landlord-tenant relationships. The book also says very little about international examples of jurisdictions that have adopted some of the types of

proposals and approaches it argues for. I also wondered why there was not more emphasis on the role that co-operative housing might play in building housing security. Finally, the book also says very little about the human right to housing. This is a notable omission given that Canada recognized housing as a human right in its *National Housing Strategy Act* because of grassroots pressure and organizing, and there is significant ongoing energy and organizing in Canada and internationally centred on the human right to housing. However, these omissions do not significantly detract from the value of the book. Indeed, the book's brevity and clarity mean that it will be more accessible and useful busy advocates and organizers in their work to create equitable and just housing for all.

Reviewed by

Sarah Buhler
University of Saskatchewan
Email: sarah.buhler@usask.ca