

BOOK REVIEW

TANYA MURRAY LI

Land's End

Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 248 pp.

Tanya Li's *Land's End* describes the formation of capitalist relations among the Lauje highlanders of central Sulawesi in Indonesia. Based on almost twenty years of field research (1990–2009) in ten hillside neighborhoods in the middle and inner hills, the author traces elusive social and economic transitions in the context of closing frontiers, land loss, and increased reliance on tree crops such as clove and cacao (24). Central to her analysis is an “analytic of conjuncture,” that considers economic elements, material qualities of crops, social boundaries and values, institutional elements, meanings and desires, and unseen spirits as part of a dynamic constellation of forces. By analyzing how these elements collide and intersect, Li traces the histories that shape “structures of feeling” among the Lauje, compelling them to desire the very changes that rob them of their own sustainability (16–18).

Land's End makes critical contributions to theory on the development of capitalism, modernization, and agrarian transition. She uses the case of the Lauje highlanders as a corrective to current scholarship on agrarian transition, which relies on a Marxian notion of “primitive accumulation” as its main explanatory fulcrum. Contra Marxian theory, the end of the land frontier and the customary system of land sharing among the Lauje was not dramatic, but mundane; not brought about by land grabbing industrial agribusinesses, but by farmers' own desires for modern progress and their initiative to plant tree crops like cacao and clove.

There is an elegant and logical organization to the book. Chapter 1, “Positions,” details the histories of encounter and division that framed the Lauje area as a “minus region” largely opaque to central and colonial administration (37, 39). Li describes the formation of three distinct social groups (inner hill, middle hill, and coastal) as a result not only of social exchange, but also of a conjuncture of material, spatial, and topographical forces that intertwined Lauje destinies with the development of cash crops like tobacco and shallots. She emphasizes the importance of looking beyond relations of coercion, and focuses instead on “histories of desire,” or “how power works to produce subjects who desire particular ways of living” (33).

Chapter 2, “Work and Care,” introduces readers to the practices that produced Lauje highlanders as economically autonomous individuals, and linked them in relations of kinship, at a time when land for subsistence production abounded (59). The chapter sets up later discussions in the book by describing how a conjunction of factors—including long exposures to the market, an abundance of land, and the material quality of crops and technical requirements of the harvest—would shape the trajectories that emerge with cacao (58, 81).

Chapter 3 on “Enclosures” is the central pivoting point of the book. It traces the gradual shift in Lauje understandings of land as commons to land as “*lokasi*,” a “unit of space interchangeable with other units, individually owned, and freely bought and sold” (84). The author looks to cacao planting as an unexpected, seemingly benign cause for changes in social organization, and the corrosion of previous informal systems of law governing the ownership of forests, fallowed gardens, and farm plots. Importantly, the chapter describes enclosures shaped by a Canadian development project. While seeking to use cacao planting as a way to prevent forest destruction and create new sources of income, the project had effectively heightened unequal distribution and consolidation of holds on secondary forests.

Chapter 4 expands on the idea of “Capitalist Relations,” portraying the double movement between the commoditization of land and labor, and the erosion of non-commoditized social dynamics that once governed access to land and food (115–16). It portrays how Lauje highlanders became entangled in systems structured around private ownership, sale of labor, and competitive use of capital, in such a way that eroded choice, and constrained the simple reproduction of “stable middle peasant” livelihoods.

Much in the spirit of previous work on critical agrarian studies, the final chapter, “Politics Revisited,” returns to the persistent question: How do we explain non-revolt? Where impoverished communities are unlikely to mobilize towards collective action in the name of class interests, what options are available to them? And what implications does this new understanding of the Lauje’s predicament have for politics?

More forcefully than in previous chapters, this section introduces readers to Li’s political vision for “renewed ethnographic engagement with rural places” (xiv). She demonstrates poignantly how the Lauje’s self-inflicted destruction of the commons had effectively rendered their predicament unrecognizable to contemporary social movements (9). Without an emergency to draw official lines of humanitarian accountability, and without industrial agribusiness to make the focus for mobilization, Lauje suffering remained “out of sight, out of mind” (164–65). Moreover, developmental plans optimistically assume an “exit path” for landless farmers to sell their labor when the uncompetitive are squeezed out by technological innovation. However, jobless economic growth in a “labor surplus nation” such as Indonesia demands a different political response built on different frameworks of understanding (179–80). Li proposes a “politics of distribution” that draws renewed attention to blocked paths and dead ends, mundane practices like planting cacao, and the failures of entrusting wealth distribution to market logic (181–85).

Li’s elegant and authoritative prose, strong theoretical interventions, and clear political vision will surely make this work a contemporary classic. The themes will be of broad interest not only to scholars of Southeast Asia or of the Global South, but also to all invested in capitalist development and agrarian change. The book delivers a powerful critique of both scholarship’s and development work’s tendency to fetishize the spectacle of rural poverty, calling critical attention to the myopia by which policymakers, development workers, activists, and scholars have imagined their response. Over all, *Land’s End* provokes its readers to ask what other forms of rural suffering in the Global South have gone unnoticed for their mundaneness?

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