

Book Review: Land's End

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Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier by Tania Murray Li.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 240 pp.

Tania Murray Li's recent book, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, represents a mature intervention into the fate of rural Indonesians in the wake of twenty-some years of relentless global integration. I have no specific axe to grind with the ontologists that have come to dominate discussions of indigenous difference in recent anthropology—other than voicing that I don't share their enthusiasm or like the philosophical impoverishment it usually implies. Li's book is refreshingly not part of the trend. In fact, it is proof of what deep ethnography has always offered the anthropological enterprise and evidence of how fundamental political economy is to understanding the predicament in which Sulawesi highlanders now find themselves. After decades of engagement with the state, agribusiness developers, and coastal merchants—in their own active pursuit of a forever-receding horizon of “modernity”—most of their lives are simply far worse than they used to be. As Li states in the Introduction,

The surprising finding of this book is that indigenous highlanders, people who are imagined by activists of the global indigenous and peasant movements to be securely attached to their land and communities, joined the ranks of people unable to sustain themselves . . . More surprisingly still, the process that dislodged them from their land wasn't initiated by land-grabbing corporations or state agencies. There was no “primitive accumulation” of the kind Marx described . . . The process through which they lost control over their collectively owned land was far less dramatic, even mundane. [p.3]

The book goes on to tell a literal and figurative tale of land loss over the last couple of decades—a slow but sure process of dispossession and the steady redefinition of these highlanders' lives in terms of private property, profit, and new paradigms of material inequality.

The fact that this was as much or more the product of the highlanders' own pursuits of the false promises of modernity as it was any explicit bullying by more powerful outside development actors, and that a few decades later they ended up lumped together with the rest of the world's landless and poor, isn't necessarily that surprising. I also think Li simplifies a bit by deciding to articulate the argument as contrary to the idealized imaginations of rural social movements and indigenous activists. Such actors do of course trade in strategic essentialisms and romantic resistance stories, all while the populations for which they speak get absorbed by global capital. However, judging from personal experience and from many scholarly treatments with a more nuanced view of social movements, many are also well versed in logics of self-criticism, critical reflection, and even outright cynicism at times. I'm not sure it really works to lump all activists together in the way that the book does at times. Contemporary activists can

also represent interlocutors equally self-conscious about how they too are wrapped up in the problem, even willing to concede they are part of it, rather than the only ones fighting for a “real” solution.

Despite this one disagreement, I find Li’s book a fascinating account and necessary analytical take on two major counts. The first is methodological. *Land’s End* is a wonderful lesson in the benefits of long-term engagement in a particular locale with the same collaborators; it could and should be read as a significant ethnographic statement in that respect. Her work with Sulawesi highlanders over a 20-year span creates the necessary space for serious reflection on long-term dynamics. The critique of ethnography as too place based (hence, the frequent compulsion among current graduate students in anthropology to claim everything they do is “multisited ethnography”) and anthropology as too human centered (hence, the drive toward Latourian frameworks and posthumanist meanderings) are both beginning to reveal their limitations and revel in certain analytical cliches. Li’s book reminds us that ethnography of the particularly committed sort is not so much “tradition” as it is necessary, particularly if one considers how little other disciplines (much less lawmakers or business executives) actually care about direct engagement with radically impoverished people or the marginal spaces they inhabit.

Finally, *Land’s End* operates at a compelling theoretical interspace very much needed in contemporary accounts of globalization. As interpretive ethnography, she looks for a master metaphor—“my study concerns land’s end as a dead end,” Li (p. 180) says in the conclusion—in order to express something about how the highlanders’ comprehend their contemporary reality. As analyst of a brutal material outcome, one still historically emergent but showing no signs of relief, she pieces together a nuanced political-economic argument. It refuses to champion the hopeful or utopian when there are simply no real signs for such. It is also moves past Polanyi-inspired expectations that rural peoples’ institutions might somehow sustain themselves in the face of capital’s expansion while simultaneously questioning traditional Marxist presumptions about the directionality and drivers of uneven development. In short, it’s really good anthropology.

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