

**Tania Li**, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2014. 240 pp., including references and index. ISBN 978-0-8223-5694-3.

'Land's end' indicates the end of land as a common resource for the Luaje highlanders in Sulawesi (Indonesia) amongst whom Tania Li analyses the insidious emergence of capitalist relations between 1990-2009. The book is likely to have a wide impact for the compelling interventions it makes: a methodological intervention that introduces an 'analytic of conjuncture'; a theoretical intervention that offers a realist understanding of the emergence of capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier; and finally a political intervention that urges us to address land's end as a *real* dead end of capitalist competition, across the global South.

Tania Li makes her first, methodological intervention by discussing how an 'analytic of conjuncture' helped her capture the dynamic elements that aligned and collided to shape Lauje highlanders' lives in the period under study. History is central to the analysis 'because every element in a conjuncture has a history that actively shapes the present, while at every conjuncture a new history is produced, sometimes deliberately, more often as an unintended consequences of how various elements combine' (p.16). Analysing a conjuncture thus requires 'peeling back layers of meaning and practice, and tracking relations across different spans of space and time' (p.16f). Key is then a *relational* rather than binary conception of history and power. In accordance with Marxian anthropology, and in particular the work of Eric Wolf, this entails rejecting 'the search for whether change is generated from the inside, or by the impact of processes arriving from the "outside", because it doesn't assume there is an "inside" or prior condition of fixity before change started to occur' (ibid.). This is combined with Michel Foucault's rejection of the binary of power versus resistance in favour of studying how power works prior to that, forming desires and practices. The subjects in *Land's End* are agents 'whose desires don't stand outside a conjuncture but are formed within it, and are formative in turn' (p.19).

The conjunctural approach thus comes close to Don Kalb and Herman Tak's 'critical junctions' to capture the 'relations through time, relations in space, relations of power and dependency (internal as well as external), and the interstitial relations between nominally distinct domains such as economic, politics, law, the family, ... that shape the place-making projects, capacities, aspirations and frustrations of modern subjects' (2005: 2f). Tania Li, however, pays less attention to (institutionalized)

politics. She consistently talks of *capitalist relations* rather than *capitalism*. Capitalist relations she defines as relations governed by *the compulsion of competition and profit*, which emerges where the commodification of land and labour has progressed to such an extent that non-commoditized relations through which people may previously have weathered crises have eroded: for 'only when people are compelled to sell their labor is the price they can obtain for a day of work governed by competition with other workers, who are equally desperate' (pp. 16). Useful as this definition is, it ignores the state as a key actor managing the process of commodification and privatizing the surplus produced through this compulsive competition. Tania Li also defines materiality considerably more narrowly than those within a historical materialist tradition, for example when she attributes the emergence of capitalist relations in large part to highlanders' decision to plant cacao and the consequent effects of the characteristics of cacao in shaping future trajectories. Here Tania Li almost seems to lean in the direction of Anna Tsing's 'ethnography of global connection' (which likewise emerged from fieldwork on an indigenous frontier in Indonesia). *Land's End's* methodological intervention does not, however, avoid cumulative theorizing and does deliver a coherent argument about capitalist change, indigeneity and the present global juncture.

Indeed, the second intervention *Land's End* makes is providing a definitive theoretical critique of a political-intellectual position that considers capitalist accumulation and class antagonism as alien dynamics that encroach upon an indigenous people as a spectacular shock from the 'outside'. *Land's End* presents a culmination of relational historical-realist thinking about how capitalist change involves indigenous people, emerging in the wake of the late twenty-first century global rise of indigenist activism. Such thinking is already seen in Tania Li's earlier work (Li 2000, 2010), and also in that of anthropologists working in similar places where capitalist changes in the relational context that indigenous people live in did not come in the form of dispossession through large-scale, internationally financed development projects or multi-national companies, but in more subtle and insidious forms (see, for example, Dombrowski 2002, Steur 2014, Sylvain 2002). The point of such work has not just been to deconstruct colonial or essentialist notions of indigeneity as capitalist modernity's Other but to understand the tremendous role that class processes and a capitalist relational context have in directing and limiting change in indigenous livelihoods and politics.

From *Land's End* we learn that indigenous people living on land frontiers can actually be particularly ill-equipped to resist the emergence of capitalist relations through enclosure, because their attitudes towards land have been shaped in a context where land is abundant and where people are used to interpreting control over land as resulting from personal chance, effort and skill. *Land's End* shows that when capitalist differentiation does emerge, the past does not provide a fixed point of equality and virtue against which to judge the present. In fact, the newly landless were still likely to hold on to the 'real, embodied, mainly implicit structures of feeling' that enabled them to 'maintain the view that any individual with determination and hard work could succeed' (p.154). People become entangled in capitalist relations through the often mundane, unmarked, and initially contingent decisions that they make as part of their struggle for a better life. Few indigenous people would actually want the life of their grandparents back: in highland Sulawesi, this life was marked by periodic hunger when droughts struck and all were left struggling to survive. It is precisely this that made it appealing for people to switch to cacao production, for it allowed them to borrow money from cacao merchants during droughts, their debts secured with land that, by planting cacao trees on it, had become individual property. But while planting cacao increased the security of some, it undermined the security of those who got caught in a capitalist cycle of debt and declining soil fertility that eventually led to landlessness, thus endangering their survival not just in drought years but even in normal years.

It is precisely by analysing the practices of Sulawesi's indigenous cultivators as flexible and contextual—rather than reified as Indigenous—that *Land's End* makes its most directly politically relevant intervention. It connects the analysis of the problems produced by emergent capitalist relations amongst highlanders in Sulawesi to the dire plight of small-scale farmers locked out of the land frontier across the global South. The reader is compelled to confront land's end as a real dead end of capitalist competition: as radically insufficient and insecure livelihoods *without* the relations of care and the protective institutions that Karl Polanyi would have liked to see emerge as a counter movement. These dead ends are not a residual problem to be solved by the march of progress but 'the *product* of the capitalist form taken by this 'progress' that entrenches inequalities and fails to provide jobs' (p.180). Out of sight for the planning official Li meets on her journeys—for whom the people living in tiny huts on squatted land on the coast are 'quite poor enough

for our project' (p.38)—the image of Kasar, the highland farmer we meet at the start of the book on his tiny, barren plot of land together with his 'terribly thin and visibly exhausted' son and 'no way out, no way back, and no future for his children' (p.1), continues to haunt the reader. By the end of the book, there is no hope that complacency, letting 'growth' do its supposed job, will turn the tide for Kasar. *Land's End* argues that for the millions of people worldwide who struggle to survive as their livelihoods become ever more precarious, the only hope is an urgent commitment to large-scale redistribution fought for on political terrain. It is a strong indictment against a reigning transition narrative that ignores 'the hard realities of jobless growth, and the uneven distribution of the costs and rewards of growth' (p.185).

The focus of Li's argument on redistribution is perhaps all too closely tied, however, to her ethnographic case and the conjunctural approach used to interpret it, which provide a remarkably mundane, un-politicized picture of capitalist change. Political institutions had little to do with the making of surplus populations, and Luaje highlanders—like most of us perhaps—became caught in capitalist polarization mainly due to a passive acceptance of gradual changes and of the individualist gamble that they personally might be the lucky winners in a process where many would lose. Tania Li rightly points out that the lack of will to organize collectively, politically, is all the more understandable in the Indonesian context where the anti-Communist purge of 1965-66, murdering over half a million people, continues to cast its shadow over the present. But all this need not compel us to merely confirm the only solution that Luaje highlanders themselves proposed near the end of Li's fieldwork: of using political institutions to properly channel development money their way (getting rid of the 'crocodiles on the path', as they called corrupt officials). Surely there is a more convincing answer to the highlanders' global predicament than this call for efficient redistribution. As Li convincingly showed, 'indigenous custom' was never a stable reference point that could function as an external counter to capitalist differentiation. It need not be a stable companion of a capitalist status quo either: it is not unimaginable that indigenous or any collective 'custom-in-formation' is turned into a tool for struggle. It is then surely important that this struggle helps to make redistribution a global policy priority again; in the short-term that may keep someone like Kasar afloat. But to envision a future out of poverty for his son would require the struggle to aim for more than merely channelling resources to those that are systematically turned into a surplus popula-

tion: it would require politics to intervene in the capitalist production of surplus populations.

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