



JPS review symposium on Land's End

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REVIEW SYMPOSIUMS

JPS review symposium on *Land's End*

Land's End: capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier, by Tania Murray Li, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014, xi + 225 pp., US\$23.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5705-6

Land's End: Review by Henry Bernstein

Land's End is about the attempt made by indigenous highlanders to join the march of progress promised in modernization narratives, only to encounter the polarizing effects of the capitalist relations that soon emerged among them. Farmers able to accumulate land and capital prospered, and those who could not compete were squeezed out. My title plays on several meanings of land's end: the changed use of land, the end of a customary system of land sharing, and the end of the primary forest that had served as highlanders' land frontier, the place in which they could expand when need or opportunity presented. It also flags their sense of bewilderment – coming to a dead end, the end of a peninsula surrounded by sea, without raft or sense of direction. This was the predicament [of those] ... who could no longer sustain their families on the old terms, but had no viable alternative. (Li 2014, 2–3)

Tania Li made regular research visits to the Lauje highlands of Sulawesi over a period from 1990 to 2009, which enabled her to investigate processes of capitalist transition in 'laboratory'-like conditions – or as near as we get to them in the social sciences – which unfolded following the rapid spread of a new agricultural commodity, namely cacao. The disruptions generated by such rapid commodification took place on an 'indigenous frontier', not in the more familiar circumstances of a 'peasant'-type social formation densely settled by grain-producing households in social relations with other classes and subject to their appropriations, especially landed property (Li 2014, 14–15).

Prior to the introduction of cacao beginning in the 1980s, the Lauje highlands had long been marginal economically and mostly neglected politically, first by Dutch colonial administrators and then by their Indonesian successors following independence in 1945. Lauje people were familiar with markets, centered on the coastal plain and its settlements, and had long grown several commodity crops, notably tobacco which linked them through credit relations with merchants, as well as engaging in wage labour like portage. But this was mostly a kind of 'discretionary' participation in markets, in Li's view, given that subsistence was underwritten by shared access to common land and an open land frontier. These conditions were undermined in a remarkably short time by cacao tree planting on land to which individual title was then claimed, and accepted, representing a form of 'accumulation from below', and which generated social differentiation between those able to seize the new opportunities presented by cacao and those who subsequently lost out.

Reproduction crises are an important part of how Li (2014, 54) explains the pace of change among the Lauje, as 'roughly every five years highlanders experienced a catastrophic collapse in their food production'. She attributes these crises to cycles of drought, though one is also left to wonder about the pressure of a growing population on land availability (including from immigrants who first pioneered cacao planting in the highlands), a dynamic which is referred to only in passing (95). A second major element of Li's explanation of the pace of change relates to the consciousness of poverty, as 'highlanders

were not romantic about their autonomy or food self-sufficiency. They could grow their own food but they were still poor' (45, see also 179). Along with this knowledge, they aspired to the conveniences and benefits of modernity: better roads; decent housing; school education; health care; and the ability to buy goods, including better clothing *and* food – all of which became more available to those who prospered from cacao planting, such that most Lauje thought this was within their reach, if mistakenly so.

Two chapters set the scene for the advent of the cacao boom and its ramifications. Chapter 1 ('Positions') gives the historical context, and Chapter 2 ('Work and care') presents the social relations of production and reproduction in the highlands on the eve of the boom. This provides analysis of gender and generational relations in household formation and functioning, the practices of work parties in farming and of other food exchanges, and highlanders' aspirations to better lives. In short, Li makes it clear that the Lauje were very conscious of 'how centuries of work in the old manner – growing food, planting tobacco and shallots, working for wages – had enabled them to survive but not to achieve the improvements they desired' (82).

Chapter 2 also introduces the *dramatis personae* – the individuals who feature in the subsequent narratives detailing processes of commodification and differentiation (and who are listed in a useful appendix). A notable feature of Lauje society that Li emphasises is the individuation of rights to the fruits of one's work, which becomes important in the story of cacao. She also illustrates the strongly dyadic nature of that society which, together with scattered settlement and other social and cultural practices, presents strong barriers to effective collective action.

Chapter 3 begins by outlining land relations and different kinds of commons among the Lauje prior to the enclosure of land that came with cacao: 'By 1998 the word *lokasi*, an awkward import from English (location) via Indonesian, was in common use ... a by-product of highlanders' decision to plant tree crops, mainly cacao ... The effect was enclosure: the permanent withdrawal of plots of land' from the commons (84). This change introduced, for the first time, both the exclusion of kin from rights to land and sales of land. While the 'question of who exactly was entitled to plant trees where' (90) might be disputed according to local powers of knowledge and legitimacy, themselves unequally distributed, Li stresses that 'most acts of enclosure ... didn't become the subject of moral censure or debate' (97). Indeed, she emphasises here the very 'mundane' quality of most instances of enclosure for tree planting, centered on a common belief in the legitimate private ownership of trees among highlanders who were unaware of the revolution in property relations in land – and in their conditions of reproduction – that this entailed.

The relations introduced with commodified cacao production are set out more explicitly in Chapter 4 ('Capitalist relations'), both in analytical terms and as illustrated through Li's ethnography which shows growing inequality and its mechanisms. She unpacks the dynamics of increasing inequality by drawing upon data on sources of initial capital, farm sizes and prices, and the contingencies in the fortunes of different households and individuals that affected their emerging and growing differentiation, not least 'debt as a mechanism of land loss' (137–39, and *passim*). Some powerful passages convey the complexity of the emerging differentiation:

As highlanders separated into two groups – one group accumulating property, the other losing it – they did not simply co-exist side by side. They were linked through a class relation, since accumulation for some depended on the value they extracted from their neighbors ... in three ways: they bought their neighbors' land to expand their farming enterprises; they lent them money at interest; and they employed them as wage workers ... the compulsion to work daily for wages had become the *de facto* condition of many highlanders by 2006 ...

competition wasn't a matter of choice, it was progressively built into the relations through which highlanders accessed land, capital, and opportunities to work. Their previous market engagements – though centuries old – did not take this compulsory, competitive form. (Li 2014, 139, 145, 148)

'Politics' is 'revisited' in Chapter 5 within the conceptual framework constructed from the account to this point, illuminating how deep changes were layered onto certain dimension of the culture and came to be taken for granted quickly:

Highlanders didn't reject old ways of doing things; old ways were re-signified, or slipped quietly into disuse. Where I saw ruptures and turning points, highlanders emphasized the banal and commonsense adjustments they made without fanfare or debate ... their recognition that land really had come to an end was reluctant and partial ... practices, memories and ways of understanding changes in the highlands as a string of idiosyncratic, small events, were consequential. (Li 2014, 152–54)

This perspective is then explored in relation to elements of 'frontier thinking' and its optimism among many, if not all, Lauje highlanders (see 154), and to the influential notion of 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) which, Li (2014, 155–58) argues, has a limited purchase on understanding highlanders' beliefs and practices. One incident of collective protest is reported, when a new road that was promised failed to materialise, indicating perhaps 'the emergence of a new structure of feeling based in a sense of entitlement to fair treatment' (163), although it is worth noting that in this instance 'fair treatment' was about the local administration and its failures rather than growing class inequality among highlanders. The rest of this chapter reviews other aspects of politics that might affect the prospects of highlanders, especially those who lost out in the cacao boom – those 'with no land, no work, no welfare, and no allies' (177) – and now have little ground for hope of improvement in their conditions of existence.

The concluding chapter uses the case of the Lauje cacao 'boom' and its consequences to inform themes of the widest generality and importance which Li has written on in recent years, most fundamentally that 'a great many people have and will have no part to play in production organized on the basis of profit' (4) in the contemporary worlds of capitalism. That points to the urgency of a radical politics of redistribution to confront the consequences of 'jobless growth' – exclusion from any means of adequate reproduction, including through wage labour – and the massive challenges from entrenched class interests, and states, that any such politics faces (e.g. Li 2011).

So brief and selective a summary of the themes of *Land's end* is inadequate to convey its great achievement, an achievement which should not surprise those familiar with Li's work, including her deeply thoughtful and challenging *The will to improve*, which involved a novel synthesis of Marx and Foucault (Li 2007). To explain why this is such an important book requires unpacking a relatively short monograph that tells its story with almost deceptive simplicity, informed by a sophisticated grasp of theory and debate that is often arresting but never obtrusive, and in admirably direct and lucid prose as the extracts quoted illustrate.

One of the most powerful contributions of *Land's end* is its account of transformations wrought by commodification over a short time and in an apparently unlikely social and ecological setting. The analytic used to explore and explain commodification draws centrally on Marx, and indeed on specific mechanisms identified by Lenin (see 148). At the same time, classic materialist ideas about agrarian change, and the development of capitalism more generally, are used as tools of *investigation* rather than as means of disclosing

(‘predicting’) a single pattern, or narrowly limited patterns, of change. Historical conditions, including the diverse trajectories and effects of colonialism and capitalism, are central to Li’s account, reflected in her insistence on the importance of conjunctural analysis to ethnographic research: ‘a conjuncture is dynamic but ... not random’ (17, 16–20 and *passim*).

A second exceptional and related feature of the book is the integrity of Li’s work as an ethnographer, and not least her respect for the empirical material she explored – and generated. The Lauje do not represent simply another experience of rapid commodification that ‘verifies’ more general propositions or theoretical choices. Lauje society is posited in all its necessary specificity, from its ecological conditions to its cultural beliefs and practices, and Li traces the dynamics of commodification intimately through the fortunes and misfortunes of particular households and individuals and their perceptions of what was happening to them. In doing this, her purpose and method are impressively dialectical. On one hand, there are always contingent, and even chance, circumstances in how households and individuals initially position themselves, or find themselves positioned, in dramatic and disturbing processes of change which then have systematic (‘consequential’ in Li’s term) effects beyond their control or full comprehension, and which they might not be able, or wish, to articulate clearly (see, for example, 43–44). On the other hand, it is the responsibility of researchers to bring to bear their own resources for understanding the dynamics of change at work, not to ‘impose’ their understanding on that of their ‘subjects’ but rather to explore the limits and contradictions of subjects’ (‘actors’) perceptions and responses. Li does this with great illumination, which undoubtedly contributes to her ability to write about the *dramatis personae* of her narrative vividly and sympathetically but without sentimentality.

One way of handling the demands of this delicate dialectic is to place any given case within a wider comparative framework to explore the tension between specificity and generality, again demonstrated by Li’s light touch but always instructive citing of other relevant experiences which highlight particular similarities and differences (e.g. 134–35 on Dayak rubber smallholders). This is also exemplified more explicitly in her valuable survey, co-authored with Derek Hall and Philip Hirsch, of different patterns of change in the control and uses of land across Southeast Asia and the key dynamics that explain them (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011).

A third overarching feature of the book is its refreshing scepticism, that quality of scientific research so valued by Marx. Scepticism is not cynicism, nor is it best expressed in aggressively polemical fashion. In her work over the years, as in *The will to improve* and elsewhere, Li has developed a concurrent critique of both mainstream ‘development’ ideas and practices, not least as manifested in development projects, and of some of the ‘alternatives’ to them advocated by non-governmental organizations, ‘social movements’, and the like. *Land’s end* draws on and extends aspects of that strain of scepticism in Li’s approach. As she announces at the beginning:

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. (3)

Moreover, they did so in the absence of ‘external’ impositions by the usual suspects: corporate agribusiness, rural and urban merchants, state and donor-led development schemes, and so on. Instead, as Li puts in stark terms, the Lauje effectively ‘dismantled their own commons’ (165). In the course of developing this case, Li provides cool and carefully argued rebuttals of the kinds of claims made about (and ‘on behalf of’) ‘indigenous frontier’ social formations, including those of James Scott’s (2009) provocative recent work that

interprets their ‘art of not being governed’ through an anarchist lens, their supposed predilection and capacity for ‘food sovereignty’ (see also Li 2015 on the Lauje case), and other imaginings by many indigenous and peasant leaders, activists and sympathetic scholars.

This book is of great value to researchers, teachers and students of agrarian change in Southeast Asia and beyond. There is much to discover – matters for reflection about evidence, theory and politics – in its ethnographic craft and sociological wisdom.

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Land's End: Review by A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi

As a distinct field of investigation, ‘peasant studies’ emerged during the 1960s and early 1970s rooted in a triptych of complementary but distinct epistemological approaches: theories of agrarian change derived from the classical analysis of the so-called ‘agrarian question’ (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010); quantitative analysis of large farm-level agricultural data sets that featured in the analysis of the Organization and Production School (Chayanov 1986), the Agrarian Marxists (Cox and Littlejohn 2015) and the Indian ‘mode of production’ debate (Patnaik 1990); and the finely grained ethnographic analysis that featured in the intimately detailed work of a host of anthropologists who often took their initial impetus from the work of such luminaries as Eric Wolf, Maurice Godelier, Jack Goody and Sidney Mintz. To put it simply, but not simplistically: in peasant studies, agrarian political economy framed the central research questions, quantitative data provided the ‘what’, and ethnography provided the ‘why’. Cumulatively, powerful explanations of social change in rural societies around the world were established in the peasant studies literature.

In the past 40 years this triptych has, to a degree, unraveled. The following Google Ngram indicates the number of times the concept ‘agrarian question’ has been referenced in books by year between 1900 and 2000. The Ngram shows increasing interest in the agrarian question during the first 40 years of the twentieth century, resurgent interest in the years between 1955 and 1970, and a decline in interest over the last quarter of the twentieth century.



Source: <http://books.google.com/ngrams>

Moreover, the quantitative analysis of large data sets has now become the preserve of resolutely neo-classical economists, who have shaped statistical tools to reflect their concerns in ways that can seriously compromise the reliability of the data that is collected (Akram-Lodhi 2010, 570–71; Oya and Pontara 2015) and the policy recommendations that flow from the flawed evidentiary base. Finally, contemporary ethnographers have tended to be less interested in the rural, and those who are often face significant personal, professional and financial constraints if they want to engage in the serious long-term work of understanding the detailed nuances of a rural social formation and the processes of change within which it is enmeshed.

This scholarly context is part of what makes Tania Murray Li's *Land's end: capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier* such a compelling revelation, one that is hard to put down on a first reading. Drawing on nine visits over a 19-year period to the highlands surrounding the Gulf of Tomini in central Sulawesi, Indonesia, *Land's end* tells the story of the emergence of 'capitalist relations' (8) among indigenous Lauje highlanders over two decades, which Li frames within an 'analytic of conjuncture' that does not seek to provide 'a single cause' but rather gives a 'textured understanding' of diverse elements that cumulatively 'have formative effects' (179) in propelling the emergence of capitalist relations. This highly flexible, contingent but also rigorous understanding of agrarian political economy uses as its principal evidentiary base the kinds of ethnographic observation that only prolonged fieldwork can provide. All that is missing is the large-scale data that could have helped to situate the analysis of change, a product of the fact that the state had 'limited reach' (33) and no cadastral records (26) on this agrarian frontier, leaving her 'to track a set of processes as they took shape over time' without much of an empirical baseline (27).

Following the introduction, Chapter 1 explores the history of the region prior to the start of Li's research in 1990, unpacking the 'social relations of hierarchy, extraction and rule' that was 'forged between Lauje highlanders and coastal folk over more than a century' (56). Lauje highlander identity had, at its historic core, the lived experience of 'someone who sustains a family, builds relations of care, and works hard to secure improvements in their material conditions' (179). Li emphasises how 'the experience of social stigma, livelihood insecurity, and a desire for access to ... roads and schools' arose from this 'experienced set of relations, tensions and desires' that formed identities within the 'three distinct social groups' of the Lauje people (57). Chapter 2 examines relations of work and care among Lauje peoples in the early 1990s, stressing that with an abundance of land 'the right of an individual to the property that he or she created through work' lay in creative tension with relations of care 'that were sometimes reciprocal, and at other times one-sided' (81), both within and across households. Although 'their practices were formed through their long exposure to markets' (81) waged

labour was never historically treated as a commodity, in part because of the co-operative exchanges of labour required to underpin care and sustain food production. The net result is that highlanders survived by 'growing food, planting tobacco and shallots, earning wages' but 'only a few ... had been able to accumulate wealth', and even this limited wealth was rapidly depleted when shallot 'harvests failed repeatedly due to (the) fungal disease' (82) to which they were prone.

Chapter 3 shows how 'the erratic return from shallots' (82) contributed to changing conceptions of land, for which the Lauje previously did not have a word. During the 1990s, land increasingly began to be conceptualised as *lokasi*, 'a unit of space that was interchangeable with similar units, individually owned, and freely bought and sold' (84), driven further by the decision to plant cacao in order to improve 'incomes and ... social standing' (84). However, even though trees were seldom planted, the act of planting trees was nevertheless thought by some to have customarily conferred 'a permanent claim of individual ownership' (89). In a key passage, Li writes that 'through their words and deeds, they selectively revised the content of Lauje custom, the meaning of work, and their sense of what was reasonable and fair' as a 'desire to prosper' (114), which led people to concede 'to their exclusion from formerly common land' (113) as new property relations were established over *lokasi*. This leads to two of Li's key, interlocking analytical insights: that the institutional arrangements of highlander society were quite malleable in the face of conjunctural changes given their desire for 'a better life' (179); and that capitalist relations were not imposed upon the Lauje highlanders but rather emerged within the conjuncture as 'the new tree crops did the transformative work' (89).¹ Within this conjuncture, enclosure required: excluding kin; crossing social boundaries between the middle hill farmers and those who lived above them in order to enclose; and government projects that distributed free seedlings and compiled 'lists of de facto possession' which gave 'state validation' (109) to some highlanders' claims and facilitated the 'sense of land as *lokasi*' (110, emphasis added). Eventually, of course, the area that could be enclosed ran out: land's end.

With land's end, Chapter 4 unpacks the emergence of capitalist relations that were driven by 'the erosion of choice and the emergence of compulsion' (148) as 'land, labor, and capital started to move in circuits defined by competition and profit' (29), which served to reconfigure highlanders' 'relations with one another, insidiously, piecemeal, and unannounced' (148). Mechanisms driving such transformations included the quest for technical efficiencies and scale economies, access to credit, the use of debt 'as part of a deliberate strategy to acquire ... land' (137), and the exploitation of labour, although these processes were 'shaped by features of the landscape, drought and disease, prices, practices, and the character of crops' (148). Cumulatively, for many highlanders a 'simple reproduction squeeze' was created, with a result that would have been 'unthinkable' only 20 years before: that 'a few highlanders would control much of the land while neighbours would be compelled to depend on wages' (148). Capitalist relations had taken hold, but the agrarian transition witnessed among the highlanders was not 'an inevitable unfolding' (180); moreover, the poverty of the Lauje highlanders excluded from their land as a consequence of the agrarian transition was a product 'of the capitalist form taken by this "progress" that entrenches inequalities and fails to provide jobs' (180).

Chapter 5 turns to the response of the excluded, in which 'the increasingly acute crisis of social reproduction experienced by many highlanders' was not only a result of them having 'no

¹One cannot but help note the framing of this claim and the way in which it mirrors the analytical approach of Jason W. Moore (2015) in his magisterial new book, *Capitalism in the web of life*.

land, no work, no welfare' (177) but also, most especially, 'no allies. Government officials ignored them. There was no patron, political party or transnational humanitarian agency ready to help them. Nor was their plight of much interest to Indonesian or transnational social movements' (177). It is a bleak conclusion, but one that fits the tenor of our times. The majority of Lauje highlanders were left 'stranded by capitalist processes', requiring some form of 'protection' that 'they can seldom generate ... on their own' (181). Having been effectively transformed into a 'relative surplus population', in Marx's phrase, Li argues that such protection must be tied to a struggle for distribution. At the end of the book, she argues that 'progressive settlements aren't tied to growth, but to a commitment to distribution fought for on political terrain. This is what a *politics* of distribution entails' (185, emphasis in original), and it is only a politics of distribution that offers the possibility of a pathway out of poverty for the Lauje highlanders, as it does for the many, many others who are excluded in the contemporary age.

Land's end offers an outstanding and powerful depiction of rural social dynamics on an indigenous frontier, reinforcing Tania Murray Li's position as one of the most important scholars of rural social change working today. Elegantly and carefully written, it is a granular account of the maelstrom of social changes experienced by real people whose lives are changing before their very eyes, in ways and at a pace that they are not equipped to comprehend. It is an account that dispenses with easy answers, lazy theorisation, casual empiricism, and teleology. Combining solid ethnography, complex thinking and conjunctural nuance, Li instead provides an account of an agrarian question that focuses upon the substantive diversity that underpins the evident trajectories of variation in actual agrarian transitions.

Land's end will be required reading for many years, for all scholars working on the political economies of rural southeast Asia. It will also, no doubt, be widely used in upper-year undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, politics, development sociology and international development studies, and its utility as a teaching tool is buttressed by a companion website that offers video introductions to some of the material covered in the book. As a scholarly contribution, it vividly demonstrates the continuing vitality and relevance of peasant studies and an ethnographic understanding of the political economy of agrarian change rooted in the central concerns of the agrarian question.

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Land's End: Review by Wendy Wolford

The boiling frog is an anecdote describing a frog slowly being boiled alive. The premise is that if a frog is placed in boiling water, it will jump out, but if it is placed in cold water that is slowly heated, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. The story is often used as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness of people to react to or be aware of threats that occur gradually ...

... While some 19th-century experiments suggested that the underlying premise is true if the heating is sufficiently gradual, according to contemporary biologists the premise is false: a submerged frog gradually heated will jump out. (Wikipedia: The Boiling Frog)

At the heart of Tania Li's characteristically impressive book, *Land's end* is a debate over the nature of agrarian transformation and the entrenchment of market relations in previously non-capitalist social formations. Much has been written on this topic, of course; analyses of the social, economic and political aspects of capitalist transformation infused the formation of the social sciences and humanities in Europe and continue to consume much scholarship today, particularly in places where the transformation is argued to be incomplete or incorrect when measured against the presumptive ideals of modernity. Theories of change very often assume rather than ask the question, such that discrete and diverse transformations are read as part of The Transition, with an inherent teleology justified alternately by appeals to human nature, structural factors or power relations. The stories collected and told in Li's new book resist this euro-centric teleology. She argues that capitalist production and property relations were not inevitable in the communities she studied, nor did such relations develop in ways that either modernisation theorists or social movement activists would predict (or hope for, which often amounts to the same thing). Li argues instead that 'the non-commodified social relations through which they previously accessed land, labor, and food were not destroyed by "capitalism", envisaged as a force that arrives from the outside. They eroded piecemeal, in a manner that was unexpected and unplanned' (9). The gradual nature of this transformation is important for Li, who argues that the pace of change made it difficult for those who lost out – those who were arguably robbed of their land and labour – to organise effective or collective resistance.

The way in which Li details this slow transformation is beautifully done; her analysis is grounded in a set of personal stories that detail the multi-faceted relationships between individuals and groups, and between the land, labour and profit. The book is a testament to what can be done by an ethnographer with a keen eye, persistence, and a penchant for detail (and, presumably, good hiking boots). The book's richness comes from Li's ability to draw on multiple return visits to one region over multiple decades. What she describes as a conjunctural analysis, following Gramsci, I see as the articulation of a theory of history (or how things change over time) with a theory of place (or the importance of context). Others have balked at the repeated use of the term conjuncture (Gidwani 2015; White 2015), but I love it. The deployment of reflexive, repeated visits to a single community or what sociologist Michael Burawoy (2003) calls 'revisits' were once a staple of ethnographic fieldwork (Geertz 1995), particularly in agrarian studies, but they are increasingly the exception rather than the norm.¹ As a result of

¹See, for example, the magnificent study *Harvesting coffee, bargaining wages* by Sutti Ortiz (1999), the detailed analysis of property norms in Ghana by Sara Berry (1993), and the longue durée account

Li's commitment, this book is perhaps the finest elaboration of changing labour and property rights that I have read.

In *Land's end*, Li frames her discussion about the gradual rise of capitalist production relations as an argument: social movements and scholars of transformation such as Karl Polanyi (1944), she contends, wrongly assume that capitalism enters abruptly 'from the outside' and completely remakes existing social relations. This is an important argument, but it has certainly not been absent in the broader field of agrarian studies: from Karl Kautsky's ([1902] 1988) original treatise on the *Agrarian question* and persistence in the Prussian countryside to Michael Watts's ([1983] 2004) in-depth analysis of the erosion of peasant support and the localised moral economy in the Nigerian hinterlands, scholars have long recognised that capitalism often enters gradually and always remakes rather than obliterating and completely replacing the existing social formation. Indeed, this was one of the core observations for which Douglass C. North was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1993.²

What is at stake for Li in detailing this gradual transformation and framing it as an argument is politics. If capitalism takes hold slowly – and does so through a series of choices people make not just willingly but eagerly – then what sort of political subject is possible? Can people jump out of water that is boiled so slowly – especially if they themselves applied the heat? Li berates social movements for not understanding that transitions might be gradual and that people might actively desire the benefits afforded to them by increasing capitalist production and exchange: 'So long as social movements don't recognize the insidious ways in which capitalist relations take hold even in unlikely places, they can't be effective in promoting alternatives that will actually work' (4). She argues that social movements miss people like those in the highlands who are 'unrecognizable as "indigenous people" [because they embraced commodity markets] or even as "peasants" from the perspective of contemporary social movements' (9). This is an important argument – and it is one side of a conversation that scholars and activists in Latin America have been engaged in for at least two decades now.³ Clearly, the Indonesian context is quite different from that of Latin America, and it would have been helpful to have more detail on the social movements being invoked, as well as on the context in which social movements operate in Indonesia. Work by various scholars (e.g. Hart 2004; Peluso, Afiff, and Rachman 2008) suggests that there is great diversity among Indonesian social movements and that they all made significant compromises during President Suharto's authoritarian New Order, which indicates to me that a conjunctural lens might be usefully applied to social movements as well as to changing land-labour relations.

of changing plantation labour relations in *Coffee, workers and wives* by Verena Stolcke (1988). Gillian Hart's (2004) discussion of returning to her field sites in Indonesia along with Nancy Peluso after nearly 30 years of working elsewhere is another excellent discussion of the value – and challenges – of returning.

²Even Karl Polanyi (1944) cannot really be said to have argued that 'the great transformation' he chronicled (which took place over roughly 200 years, from around the implementation of the Poor Laws in 1601 to the dismantling of the Corn Laws in the early 1800s) happened abruptly or always engendered resistance.

³See especially Silvia Cusicanqui Rivera's (2012) discussion of *lo indio permitido* and the broader conversation around de-coloniality as necessary for re-imagining political subjects outside of European concepts such as indigeneity (Quijano 2000). There is a considerable literature on the multiple identities among indigenous peoples and rural workers more generally, some excellent examples of which are Bebbington (2004), De la Cadena (2010), Hale (1997), and Valdivia (2005).

In my own work (e.g. Wolford 2010), I came across similarly problematic conceptions of peasant life held by landless activists in Brazil, to those that Li critiques. But many movement leaders I spoke with suggested that they constructed these conceptions in part strategically as a way of building unity among a population they understood to be incredibly diverse. They believed that diversity would disappear over time – at least in terms of political subjectivities – because ‘the act of joining the movement and participating in movement activities [was] inherently transformative’ (Wolford 2010, 11). Returning to my field sites multiple times after finishing my dissertation work, it was clear that there were costs and benefits to such a strategy. On the one hand, unifying the peasantry at least strategically allowed the poorest of the rural poor – the landless – a voice in national politics for the first time in Brazilian history. On the other hand, in some places, such as the Northeast sugarcane region, the cost of such strategic essentialism was (and is) also clear: people who did not fit the image of a landless peasant (and who, contradictorily, embraced sugarcane production and planted it on the land they won in the struggle for agrarian reform, as well as working for wages on neighbouring plantations) left the movement or were expelled for lacking *cultura* (culture or proper upbringing). As Alcida Rita Ramos (2000) argued in a brilliant paper, throughout the late twentieth century concepts of the noble savage (self-sufficient and traditional) stalked the mainstream progressive agenda like ‘pulp fictions’, disguising the often othering effects of ostensibly supportive discourses surrounding indigeneity.

The crux of the issue is how to understand the relationship between choice and political subjectivity. Does the frog really choose the warming water, or is it lulled into a false sense of security, one that robs it of an ability to jump when necessary? Li answers this with a nuanced discussion of choice that should provoke good discussions among scholars and activists alike. On the one hand, she follows Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002) and defines capitalism as a system in which participants have no choice, driven by the dry whip of compulsion and forced to sell their labour or their goods in order to survive. On the other hand, she argues that the story she tells is one of many small choices – made freely – to enter into market relations, even when doing so required modifying or transgressing prior norms. The Lauje highlanders were familiar with markets and the desire for material improvement and they operated under a labour theory of property that accepted or encouraged hard work, individual progress and differentiation. Choosing to plant cacao trees was not compulsion, but common sense; once the trees were in the ground, however, and contracts were signed, then continuing down this path became compulsory. This is empirically satisfying but analytically problematic because of what feels like a tautology: capitalism is defined as compulsion and compulsion is defined as (and delimited by) capitalism. This begs the question of whether there was compulsion before capitalism or the possibility of making choices after. Who ceases to be able to choose under capitalism – just those who are exploited, or the successful property-owners as well? Can we read subject positions off of structure, particularly when the structure has been defined a priori by those subject positions? What might cause some people in some places – under similar conditions – to see the subjective conditions of their own exploitation, while others do not? Why do twentieth-century frogs jump when the water starts to heat up, while those from the nineteenth century boiled?

In Li’s study, the shift from common sense to compulsion was a surprise – a surprise driven by the materiality of cacao in this particular frontier setting. In a place where cultivation was mobile, shifting every three years or so, and where land was seemingly endless, perennials like cacao were unusual. But once embraced – because of high prices on a never-too-distant global market – they foster social and economic changes. Li’s discussion of the way cacao’s ‘deep roots’ came together with ‘frontier thinking’ in the highlands echoes work done on corn by Arturo Warman (2003), sugar by Sidney Mintz (1986),

and tubers, or ‘escape crops’, by James Scott (2009). *Land’s end* highlights the importance of frontiers for many agriculturalists, because of how integral the idea of open space *somewhere* so often is to the practices and dreams of farmers and farming. In the particular context of the Sulawesi highlands, the end of the frontier meant that choosing to plant cacao was effectively choosing to exclude others from the land and market; those who were able to command capital or authority were better positioned to seize the land upon which to plant cacao trees even as they framed their success as deriving directly from hard work.

But Li goes further than simply arguing that entering into market relations was common sense for the Lauje highlanders. She also argues that once engaged in commodity production, residents were forced to either continue it or suffer in isolation. Although there were clear signs of ‘weapons of the weak’ such as arson and theft, Li suggests that people did not organise collectively because they saw their situation as a product of bad choices and because, as a result of those choices, social movements were disinclined to take up their cause. Without more information on and from the social movements themselves, it is hard to evaluate that latter claim, but the rich ethnographic work in *Land’s end* does suggest other reasons for the lack of resistance to capitalist penetration and suffering. One is leadership, which social movement studies suggest is critical for mobilisation. Li describes leadership roles in the various communities as being dispersed and disputed (12), such that there were no obvious charismatic individuals who could have rallied those left out of the cacao boom. Second, there were no institutional hosts able to help mediate mobilisation – no organised churches, no trade unions, no pedagogical centres. The lack of supportive local institutions speaks to the isolation of the Sulawesi highlands as much as to the individualistic local moral economy. A third factor that may have prohibited mobilising was that people had few resources to draw on – from the lack of historical memories of mobilisation to meagre financial reserves – that might have made political protest both feasible and legitimate. A fourth factor is that social movements in Indonesia might still be finding their footing, boxed in by memories of the New Order on the one hand and by transnational visibility (given that they have hosted the Via Campesina secretariat for many years) on the other. Finally, there were significant religious, ethnic and class differences that complicated organising. Taken together, there are many reasons to temper Li’s suggestion that the highlanders of Sulawesi are not organised because they lack the will to protest or because they have been ignored by social movements.

In summary, there is much to like about *Land’s end*. The writing flows beautifully, the research is rich and the stories are interesting. Li does not weigh the narrative down with theoretical discussion, though for those who are interested in further theorisation it dovetails very nicely with an earlier co-authored book, *Powers of exclusion* (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). In that book, the authors outline a theory of property-making as exclusion linked to processes of force, consent and legitimation, and the empirical evidence in *Land’s end* puts flesh on the bones of all three, situating acts of exclusion in particular people, places and times.

Ultimately, what Li highlights so well is that whether the frog boils or bolts is a question that needs to be answered, not assumed.

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Land’s End: Response by Tania M. Li

Warm thanks to the reviewers for their participation in this symposium, and their thoughtful engagements with *Land’s end*. I was especially pleased that the reviewers saw the value in the style I adopted – one in which I let the ethnography do the theoretical work, and kept the

focus on people. I read Henry Bernstein's comment on the book's 'deceptive simplicity' as high praise. One of my colleagues in Toronto congratulated me on writing a 'fantastically unfashionable book', referring (I think) to the fact that the classic ethnographies on agrarian societies to which Wendy Wofford and Haroon Akram-Lodhi refer are seldom read or taught by anthropologists today. Writing a dense, place-based ethnography about the changing lives of people in a rather remote corner of rural Indonesia is unfashionable, yet the subject matter is extremely current. As the impressive readership numbers for *JPS* clearly show, agrarian change is back on the radar of scholars, activists and policy makers, and since around 2008 capitalism is again under discussion. Ethnography should be back on the radar too, for the unique insights it can offer on diverse and changing rural worlds.

In their reviews, Bernstein and Akram-Lodhi situate *Land's end* as a contribution to agrarian studies, and Wofford adds her expertise on social movements, especially in Latin America. Instead of taking up every point the reviewers raise, I have selected four themes around which to clarify and develop my arguments: explanation, frontiers, choice and movements.

Explanation

In the agrarian studies division of labour Akram-Lodhi sets out, it falls to ethnographers to explain why people do what they do, or fail to act in ways theory might have predicted. Not all ethnographers see their work in this light. For some, the most important task is to discover the 'native's point of view', or understand their subjective experience. Yet the difference is not absolute. Any discovery requires contextualisation; hence, it is already halfway to explanation. It also requires the selection of relevant frames of reference: not every detail and nuance can carry equal weight, or else the ethnographer becomes merely a recording device. The essential challenge in writing ethnography is to find a balance in which the multiple threads that comprise a person's desires and decisions, or the sets of practices that enable a group of people to live together, are exposed for reflection without all of the complexity becoming overwhelming. It also helps to identify a puzzle – a sense of what needs to be explained, a quest governed by the ethnographer's purpose.¹ As Wofford observes in her astute reading of my ethnographic practice, the underlying puzzle for me is usually politics, which she frames so eloquently through the analogy of the frogs: When do people come to recognise inequality or injustice and act to change it, or let boiling water destroy them? As Bernstein notes, I treat this as an empirical question. One can find critical thought and action in diverse forms, in likely or unlikely places, and fail to find it where it might be expected: an ethnographic approach to politics demands both focus and an open mind.

Thinking through Henry Bernstein's comment that *Land's end* explores capitalist transition in 'laboratory-like conditions', I would isolate a few elements that make the study more 'lab-like' than most. First, the particular transition I explored, though far from straightforward, involved a relatively restricted set of elements. It did not involve land acquisitions by external actors like national elites or transnational corporations. Nor did it involve the state transfers, subsidies or remittances which help sustain marginal rural

¹Burawoy (1991) provides an illuminating account of the role of puzzles in framing ethnographic analysis, and Smith (2014) provides a valuable discussion of the role of politics – or its absence – in the framing of ethnographic projects.

livelihoods in much of the world. Both before and after the transition, Lauje highlanders had to survive mainly on the product of their own farms. The absence of what economists might call ‘distortions’ made this case not just lab-like, but close to a textbook example of small-scale agrarian capitalism: efficient producers who invested wisely prospered, while inefficient ones lost their land. Second, the 20-year research period enabled me to situate the dreams, desires and discourses that come to the fore when ethnography focuses on ‘the native’s point of view’ in relation to the practices that emerged over time, and the uneven outcomes that ensued. Most importantly, it gave me insight into ‘how’ questions (e.g. how did accumulation actually unfold?) that are difficult to retrieve through other methods (White 1989). Third, repeat visits enabled me to pose specific, concrete questions to my highland interlocutors, based on shared prior knowledge. To give one quite crucial example, highlanders told me in 1996 that they planned to maintain food crop production alongside cacao, but by 2006 they had stopped growing food. The disjuncture between plans and outcomes gave us a topic of conversation we could not otherwise have entered. Similarly, I was able to follow up on the outcome of particular tensions and struggles, to see which ones were resolved, and which continued to simmer. Short-term fieldwork is always vulnerable to being subsumed by the drama at hand.

Having spent 20 years watching frogs heat up slowly, a different risk presented itself: becoming absorbed into highlanders’ view that the transformation they had brought about was not dramatic at all, but merely common sense. In their account, the system of land sharing and food sharing I had observed fully functioning in the 1990s had simply slipped into disuse: ‘Of course land can’t circulate any more – how could it when it has cocoa trees on it?’ ‘You are right we no long give bundles of corn to our neighbours, that is because no one grows any more corn’. Theoretical readings led me down the same path: clearly there was a process of class differentiation unfolding among highlanders, exactly as Marx and Lenin would have predicted – no surprises there either. Maybe it was all so obvious that I had no story to tell? It took some iterative work between theory and data to recognise, first, that I had witnessed a major transformation, namely the emergence of capitalist relations among highlanders, not simply the arrival of a new crop; second, that the apparent banality of this transformation to my highland interlocutors was a central part of the puzzle I had to explain. What causal pathways, and subtle shifts in meaning and practice, had ruptured old relations and set new relations in place with so little drama or debate? Highlanders who ended up landless were in an especially precarious position. A key question that Wolford poses is why they did not see this coming, and act collectively to prevent it – which leads us towards frontiers.

Frontiers

Although some readers have been surprised at the depth and rapidity of change on such a remote forest frontier, Wolford notes that there are many examples. In my comparative essay ‘Involution’s dynamic others’ (Li 2013), I described the coffee boom in Sumatra in the 1920s, and the rapid uptake of rubber by smallholders in Sumatra and Borneo in the 1920s and 1930s. As Clifford Geertz (1963) recognised, agricultural heartlands tend to involute because rich soils enable intensification, and land is so scarce and valuable no one gambles with it. On land frontiers, in contrast, farmers tend to take risks and dive enthusiastically into the latest boom crop, knowing that should they lose their land they can move and clear more. Colonial officials were horrified to observe that indigenous farmers faced with a squeeze on land or labour were willing to give up producing food

in favour of higher value crops, and the pattern continues (Levang 1997). At present, indigenous farmers in Sumatra and Kalimantan are in the process of converting their swidden rice and low-intensity ‘forest’ rubber gardens to the region’s current boom crop, oil palm (Feintrenie, Chong, and Levang 2010). Only if they have abundant land do they maintain the old crops alongside the new one, maintaining the kind of balance commonly associated with ‘middle peasants’ (Li 2015b).

Migrants are often part of frontier processes, but as I demonstrate in *Land’s end*, indigenous people *in situ* can be equally dynamic. They too want to try their luck when a new boom crop presents itself. Lauje highlanders who travelled for wage work saw that other farmers in the region were planting cacao, and started to purchase seedlings to experiment. Here, Bernstein makes a small misreading, as migrants did not introduce the crop. In most highland neighbourhoods there were no outsiders at all, and the enclosure of land and subsequent processes of accumulation I describe took place entirely among kin. In about 20 percent of highland neighbourhoods, outsiders did play a role: these ‘migrants’ were Lauje from the coast – people of the same ethnic group and from within the same *desa* (the smallest administrative unit) – who bought land from highlanders in order to plant cacao. They did not live in the highlands, but trekked up periodically to check on their holdings of cacao and clove. The processes that emerged in these two types of neighbourhood were quite different, as I showed with my selected examples: in Sibogo and Sipil, there were no outsiders (everyone farming there in 1990 and 2009 was kin); and in Pelalang, coastal folk bought land. I also explored a third process in which highlanders seeking more land for cacao pushed into the territory of the clusters of unrelated Lauje who were living above them, domino style.

Returning now to the slow-boiling frogs, why did highlanders not see that ‘land’s end’ was coming, and organise to prevent it? To do so they would need not only foresight, as the reviewers note, but also a new system to allocate and ration land. Their old system was based on land abundance, and had no procedures to guarantee land access for all. There are threads in the highlanders’ repertoire of meanings and practices that could justify moves to distribute land in the context of scarcity, but other threads license individual land ownership and accumulation as the legitimate reward for effort. Leadership is diffuse in the highlands, as Wolford notes, and the previous commons system was lightly institutionalised: there were no committees of elders with jurisdiction over land matters, ready to either defend the old system or devise a new one capable of addressing new concerns. This situation is not unusual. As I argued in another comparative essay, many of the more institutionalised forms of ‘indigenous’ commons found in Asia and Africa are the product of colonial interventions designed to place a check on emergent land markets so that feckless natives would not dispossess themselves through land sales provoked by debt (Li 2010). Places like the Lauje highlands which were barely touched by colonial rule did not go through a process in which a customary, collective land regime was inscribed and consolidated. The highlanders’ customary tenure system functioned very well for their purposes: it enabled them to define who could do what and where while land was still abundant, and it enabled them to privatise land when the time came, with remarkably little conflict. As Indonesia’s indigenous land rights activists stress, custom is dynamic, and customary tenure systems that morph also deserve legal recognition and respect.²

²I develop this argument more fully in Henley et al. (2016).

Choice

Wolford correctly notes a tension in my treatment of choice. Individuals seem to have choice on many things, such as whether or not to press a particular land claim that might damage relations with kin, or spend money on a big wedding, or sell corn instead of giving it away for free. Yet I argue, following Robert Brenner (1985) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002), that the emergence of capitalist relations erodes (and disciplines) the array of choices, subjecting all parties – workers, farmers and owners of capital – to the imperative of market-based competition. Wolford is concerned that the definition is circular: capitalist relations = eroded choice, and eroded choice = capitalist relations. I found the concept of a switch point where market opportunity shifts to compulsion very useful, however, in my attempt to understand why planting cacao brought about fundamental shifts in highlanders' relationships to land, labour and capital – and to each other – while previous cash crops had not. These highlanders were not baffled by money and markets, as they had grown tobacco for sale for a hundred years. So what really changed? As usual, the clearest way to explain is with concrete examples.

The starkest example of what it means to switch from market as opportunity to market as compulsion is in the sphere of labour. Before the arrival of cacao, when all highlanders had access to land, they sometimes did wage work for each other, as opportunity presented, but they were not compelled to do so. Later, landless highlanders had no choice but to work for wages in order to survive, and the wage they could expect reflected the competitive pressure of their similarly needy neighbours as well as a plentiful supply of potential workers from the coast.

The kind of compulsion experienced by farmers who still had control over some land is especially crucial for my argument, and it is more difficult to grasp. They chose to plant cacao initially, so why couldn't they choose to switch back to growing food, or at least maintain a balance? It was not a problem of contracts, as Wolford suggests – there were none. For highlanders, the tipping point where choice became compulsion was a matter of scale. After land was enclosed, if they ended up with a plot too small to support food production in the old, extensive style, they were compelled to use their land efficiently for the highest value crop, namely cacao. I watched as those who made inefficient choices (such as attempting to sustain food production on weed-covered, exhausted soil) at first borrow money to buy rice and, eventually, sell their land to pay off unmanageable debt. In theory, it might have been possible to intensify food production by adopting new technologies such as terracing, ploughing and using green manure, but to my knowledge there are no examples of successful adoption of these practices anywhere in the province. Efforts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to introduce these techniques in the Lore Lindu area around 2000 failed completely, as farmers found they took up too much land and labour for low returns, in a context where the competing crop was cacao (CARE 2002; Li 2007). The ecological collapse of cacao due to disease is making farmers in the Lauje highlands and throughout the province search desperately for alternative crops, but the poorest among them have the least choice: only very high-yielding, quick-growing crops will enable them to hold on to their tiny plots of worked-out land, unless they are able to find good sources of non-farm income to help them make ends meet – still very unlikely in this region.

Competition among smallholders is built into these compulsory market relations: it is a structural condition, not a character trait. It manifests most obviously in the price of land, which is established by the price that richer farmers, bent on accumulation, are able to pay. It is also manifest in the price of credit: merchants had no need to extend credit to struggling highlanders when they could lend to their more successful neighbours whose scale and

efficiency guaranteed a good return. If poorer highlanders could borrow at all, it was at crippling rates of interest that drove them quickly towards land loss. Wolford asks whether compulsion applies also to owners of capital. It does apply, although owners have a bit more room for manoeuvre. I gave the example of a merchant who had borrowed his capital from a bank and paid market rates of interest, and hence could not afford to make loans to losing ventures. Some highlanders who had accumulated capital chose to make gifts and loans to struggling kin, but if they took this too far they depleted the funds they needed to invest to keep their cacao productive, and they too entered a downward spiral. Did this kind of compulsion exist before cacao? My answer is no: highlanders who produced tobacco for a hundred years before they launched into cacao retained the option to withdraw into food production on their collectively held land, and no amount of debt could dispossess them because land was not an asset that could be mortgaged or sold. The difference is crucial to my argument. Cacao had the incidental effect of transforming land into private property, and the ensuing scramble for land on which to grow cacao quickly closed down the land frontier. These two features together – private property in land, and a closed frontier – created the conditions under which competitive, capitalist relations could emerge and become compulsory.³

Movements

It can be quite challenging for any of us to get our heads around agrarian environments where farming systems and ways of life differ from those with which we are familiar.⁴ It is even more difficult, I now realise, to portray very different political environments. The contexts in which the reviewers have conducted their primary research (Bernstein in southern Africa, Akram-Lodhi in Pakistan and other parts of Asia, and Wolford in Brazil) offer deeply divergent possibilities for small-scale farmers to connect up with social movements, political parties, and religious or philanthropic organisations that might take up ‘the part of the peasant’ and offer support (Bernstein 1990; Akram-Lodhi 2010; Wolford 2010). Wolford is quite right to point out that the failure to connect is deeper and wider than the lack of fit with movement platforms, or the absence of an event to attract their attention. Here I will amplify some of the contextual elements *Land’s end* passed over too fast.⁵

The big picture is that the reform period since the end of Suharto’s authoritarian New Order in 1998 has not resulted in a renewal of political mobilisation among the rural or urban poor, despite apparent opportunity. Laws passed since 2000 on labour, investment, plantations and mining strongly favour capital. The material outcome of the current balance of class forces is starkly conveyed in the numbers. In the period 1990–2011, Indonesia had the second biggest increase in the Gini coefficient for inequality of any Asian country, with steeper growth *after* 1998; it has the second lowest spending on health as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), and its social protection expenditure is also very low, far behind India and China (ADB 2012). Although Indonesia is now classified as ‘middle income’, its rate of childhood malnutrition is comparable to that of low-

³There were other elements as well, which I summarized in my answer to the question of why a stable, middle-peasantry did not emerge (Li 2014).

⁴I hope readers will make use of the visual tour I prepared for the website noted by Akram-Lodhi, which introduces the people and landscapes featured in the book.

⁵I do not take up Wolford’s insights on strategic essentialism but I have discussed this topic in several previous publications, most recently in Henley et al. (2016) and Li (2015a).

income countries.⁶ These sad facts should be the subject of serious critique and popular mobilisation, but they mostly pass unremarked. None of the plethora of new political parties addresses the problems of poverty or inequality in more than superficial terms. Indeed, the parties cannot be distinguished on the basis of their political platforms or class constituency; they are simply variations of the same oligarchy, in slightly different colours (Aspinall 2013).

NGOs such as the environmental consortium Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia that helped bring down Suharto have stalled in their attempts to develop into mass social movements. The farmers' unions that played an important role in agitating for agrarian reform around 2000 have lost momentum, and remain localised in particular regions, mainly parts of Java and north Sumatra (Warren 2005; Peluso, Afiff, and Rachman 2008). Although Indonesia hosted the secretariat of the transnational alliance La Via Campesina for many years (2005–2013), as Wolford notes, no mass peasant movement emerged in Indonesia during that time. Organisations that claim to represent particular constituencies, such as the Alliance for Indigenous People of the Archipelago (AMAN), also struggle to develop a mass base. For the moment, AMAN and affiliated organisations focus mainly on lobbying for greater legal recognition for indigenous people, conducting mapping projects to document land claims, and facilitating consultations for donors and development banks that are required to take indigenous peoples' issues into account.

The point of my summary is not to criticise these organisations, but to note that their resources are very limited, and in huge parts of rural Indonesia farmers and workers have simply not heard of them. Nor are there alternative forms of popular education and critique – nothing like the base communities of liberation theology that have played such an important role in Latin America, or even village school teachers who might promote adult education and help to articulate popular concerns. School teachers were heavily targeted in the 1965 massacres in Indonesia and, since then, like all civil servants, they have been selected for regime loyalty and conformity to the status quo. Some are dedicated to the welfare of their students, but they do not dabble in 'politics', which is something most Indonesians continue to treat with deep suspicion (Li 2007). Farmer groups and cooperatives arise and disappear with project funds, and do not develop into member-driven, self-sustaining units (Henley 2012; Li 2016). Elections from the village level upwards are governed by 'money politics' in all but exceptional cases (Aspinall and van Klinken 2011; Aspinall 2013). Hence, tens of millions of rural Indonesians are still without access to the intellectual and organisational resources that provide crucial frameworks for the development of leadership skills, and could help foster political mobilisation and debate. The contrast with the individual and collective transformation experienced by rural Brazilians who join the Landless Peoples' Movement (MST) described by Wolford is stark indeed.

For highland Lauje, even the act of approaching a government official or politician is a huge challenge, because their lack of access to primary schools leaves them unable to speak the national language, Indonesian. They are easily intimidated and fear losing face. Add to this an indigenous social structure that favours neither strong leadership nor collective action at the neighbourhood level, and kin loyalties that cross-cut emergent class divides. Taken together, it becomes easy to see why highlanders suffer their fate in isolation. Their isolation is multi-scalar and conjunctural, as Wolford points out: it is embedded in

⁶Moderate to severe stunting among children under 5 is 36.4% (UNDP 2015). Rigg (2015) provides a useful analysis of contemporary patterns of poverty and inequality in Southeast Asia, and the underside of the region's apparent success.

local, regional and national configurations that have developed historically, and will not be easy to change. As Bernstein notes, I am a sceptic, but not a cynic. I am sceptical of narratives that end with what I call a ‘redemptive twist’ – a beacon of hope that writers offer to readers in the closing pages of a book, because hope is so deeply desired. *Land’s end* does not offer redemption. But an ethnographer does not have the last word: I don’t know what will happen next in the Lauje highlands or in other parts of rural Indonesia where life is becoming more precarious. The land is still there, the people are still there, and something new will surely emerge.

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Land's End: Review by A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi

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predilection and capacity for ‘food sovereignty’ (see also Li 2015 on the Lauje case), and other imaginings by many indigenous and peasant leaders, activists and sympathetic scholars.

This book is of great value to researchers, teachers and students of agrarian change in Southeast Asia and beyond. There is much to discover – matters for reflection about evidence, theory and politics – in its ethnographic craft and sociological wisdom.

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Land's End: Review by A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi

As a distinct field of investigation, ‘peasant studies’ emerged during the 1960s and early 1970s rooted in a triptych of complementary but distinct epistemological approaches: theories of agrarian change derived from the classical analysis of the so-called ‘agrarian question’ (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010); quantitative analysis of large farm-level agricultural data sets that featured in the analysis of the Organization and Production School (Chayanov 1986), the Agrarian Marxists (Cox and Littlejohn 2015) and the Indian ‘mode of production’ debate (Patnaik 1990); and the finely grained ethnographic analysis that featured in the intimately detailed work of a host of anthropologists who often took their initial impetus from the work of such luminaries as Eric Wolf, Maurice Godelier, Jack Goody and Sidney Mintz. To put it simply, but not simplistically: in peasant studies, agrarian political economy framed the central research questions, quantitative data provided the ‘what’, and ethnography provided the ‘why’. Cumulatively, powerful explanations of social change in rural societies around the world were established in the peasant studies literature.

In the past 40 years this triptych has, to a degree, unraveled. The following Google Ngram indicates the number of times the concept ‘agrarian question’ has been referenced in books by year between 1900 and 2000. The Ngram shows increasing interest in the agrarian question during the first 40 years of the twentieth century, resurgent interest in the years between 1955 and 1970, and a decline in interest over the last quarter of the twentieth century.



Source: <http://books.google.com/ngrams>

Moreover, the quantitative analysis of large data sets has now become the preserve of resolutely neo-classical economists, who have shaped statistical tools to reflect their concerns in ways that can seriously compromise the reliability of the data that is collected (Akram-Lodhi 2010, 570–71; Oya and Pontara 2015) and the policy recommendations that flow from the flawed evidentiary base. Finally, contemporary ethnographers have tended to be less interested in the rural, and those who are often face significant personal, professional and financial constraints if they want to engage in the serious long-term work of understanding the detailed nuances of a rural social formation and the processes of change within which it is enmeshed.

This scholarly context is part of what makes Tania Murray Li's *Land's end: capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier* such a compelling revelation, one that is hard to put down on a first reading. Drawing on nine visits over a 19-year period to the highlands surrounding the Gulf of Tomini in central Sulawesi, Indonesia, *Land's end* tells the story of the emergence of 'capitalist relations' (8) among indigenous Lauje highlanders over two decades, which Li frames within an 'analytic of conjuncture' that does not seek to provide 'a single cause' but rather gives a 'textured understanding' of diverse elements that cumulatively 'have formative effects' (179) in propelling the emergence of capitalist relations. This highly flexible, contingent but also rigorous understanding of agrarian political economy uses as its principal evidentiary base the kinds of ethnographic observation that only prolonged fieldwork can provide. All that is missing is the large-scale data that could have helped to situate the analysis of change, a product of the fact that the state had 'limited reach' (33) and no cadastral records (26) on this agrarian frontier, leaving her 'to track a set of processes as they took shape over time' without much of an empirical baseline (27).

Following the introduction, Chapter 1 explores the history of the region prior to the start of Li's research in 1990, unpacking the 'social relations of hierarchy, extraction and rule' that was 'forged between Lauje highlanders and coastal folk over more than a century' (56). Lauje highlander identity had, at its historic core, the lived experience of 'someone who sustains a family, builds relations of care, and works hard to secure improvements in their material conditions' (179). Li emphasises how 'the experience of social stigma, livelihood insecurity, and a desire for access to ... roads and schools' arose from this 'experienced set of relations, tensions and desires' that formed identities within the 'three distinct social groups' of the Lauje people (57). Chapter 2 examines relations of work and care among Lauje peoples in the early 1990s, stressing that with an abundance of land 'the right of an individual to the property that he or she created through work' lay in creative tension with relations of care 'that were sometimes reciprocal, and at other times one-sided' (81), both within and across households. Although 'their practices were formed through their long exposure to markets' (81) waged

labour was never historically treated as a commodity, in part because of the co-operative exchanges of labour required to underpin care and sustain food production. The net result is that highlanders survived by 'growing food, planting tobacco and shallots, earning wages' but 'only a few ... had been able to accumulate wealth', and even this limited wealth was rapidly depleted when shallot 'harvests failed repeatedly due to (the) fungal disease' (82) to which they were prone.

Chapter 3 shows how 'the erratic return from shallots' (82) contributed to changing conceptions of land, for which the Lauje previously did not have a word. During the 1990s, land increasingly began to be conceptualised as *lokasi*, 'a unit of space that was interchangeable with similar units, individually owned, and freely bought and sold' (84), driven further by the decision to plant cacao in order to improve 'incomes and ... social standing' (84). However, even though trees were seldom planted, the act of planting trees was nevertheless thought by some to have customarily conferred 'a permanent claim of individual ownership' (89). In a key passage, Li writes that 'through their words and deeds, they selectively revised the content of Lauje custom, the meaning of work, and their sense of what was reasonable and fair' as a 'desire to prosper' (114), which led people to concede 'to their exclusion from formerly common land' (113) as new property relations were established over *lokasi*. This leads to two of Li's key, interlocking analytical insights: that the institutional arrangements of highlander society were quite malleable in the face of conjunctural changes given their desire for 'a better life' (179); and that capitalist relations were not imposed upon the Lauje highlanders but rather emerged within the conjuncture as 'the new tree crops did the transformative work' (89).¹ Within this conjuncture, enclosure required: excluding kin; crossing social boundaries between the middle hill farmers and those who lived above them in order to enclose; and government projects that distributed free seedlings and compiled 'lists of de facto possession' which gave 'state validation' (109) to some highlanders' claims and facilitated the 'sense of land as *lokasi*' (110, emphasis added). Eventually, of course, the area that could be enclosed ran out: land's end.

With land's end, Chapter 4 unpacks the emergence of capitalist relations that were driven by 'the erosion of choice and the emergence of compulsion' (148) as 'land, labor, and capital started to move in circuits defined by competition and profit' (29), which served to reconfigure highlanders' 'relations with one another, insidiously, piecemeal, and unannounced' (148). Mechanisms driving such transformations included the quest for technical efficiencies and scale economies, access to credit, the use of debt 'as part of a deliberate strategy to acquire ... land' (137), and the exploitation of labour, although these processes were 'shaped by features of the landscape, drought and disease, prices, practices, and the character of crops' (148). Cumulatively, for many highlanders a 'simple reproduction squeeze' was created, with a result that would have been 'unthinkable' only 20 years before: that 'a few highlanders would control much of the land while neighbours would be compelled to depend on wages' (148). Capitalist relations had taken hold, but the agrarian transition witnessed among the highlanders was not 'an inevitable unfolding' (180); moreover, the poverty of the Lauje highlanders excluded from their land as a consequence of the agrarian transition was a product 'of the capitalist form taken by this "progress" that entrenches inequalities and fails to provide jobs' (180).

Chapter 5 turns to the response of the excluded, in which 'the increasingly acute crisis of social reproduction experienced by many highlanders' was not only a result of them having 'no

¹One cannot but help note the framing of this claim and the way in which it mirrors the analytical approach of Jason W. Moore (2015) in his magisterial new book, *Capitalism in the web of life*.

land, no work, no welfare' (177) but also, most especially, 'no allies. Government officials ignored them. There was no patron, political party or transnational humanitarian agency ready to help them. Nor was their plight of much interest to Indonesian or transnational social movements' (177). It is a bleak conclusion, but one that fits the tenor of our times. The majority of Lauje highlanders were left 'stranded by capitalist processes', requiring some form of 'protection' that 'they can seldom generate ... on their own' (181). Having been effectively transformed into a 'relative surplus population', in Marx's phrase, Li argues that such protection must be tied to a struggle for distribution. At the end of the book, she argues that 'progressive settlements aren't tied to growth, but to a commitment to distribution fought for on political terrain. This is what a *politics* of distribution entails' (185, emphasis in original), and it is only a politics of distribution that offers the possibility of a pathway out of poverty for the Lauje highlanders, as it does for the many, many others who are excluded in the contemporary age.

Land's end offers an outstanding and powerful depiction of rural social dynamics on an indigenous frontier, reinforcing Tania Murray Li's position as one of the most important scholars of rural social change working today. Elegantly and carefully written, it is a granular account of the maelstrom of social changes experienced by real people whose lives are changing before their very eyes, in ways and at a pace that they are not equipped to comprehend. It is an account that dispenses with easy answers, lazy theorisation, casual empiricism, and teleology. Combining solid ethnography, complex thinking and conjunctural nuance, Li instead provides an account of an agrarian question that focuses upon the substantive diversity that underpins the evident trajectories of variation in actual agrarian transitions.

Land's end will be required reading for many years, for all scholars working on the political economies of rural southeast Asia. It will also, no doubt, be widely used in upper-year undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, politics, development sociology and international development studies, and its utility as a teaching tool is buttressed by a companion website that offers video introductions to some of the material covered in the book. As a scholarly contribution, it vividly demonstrates the continuing vitality and relevance of peasant studies and an ethnographic understanding of the political economy of agrarian change rooted in the central concerns of the agrarian question.

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Land's End: Review by Wendy Wolford

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Land's End: Review by Wendy Wolford

The boiling frog is an anecdote describing a frog slowly being boiled alive. The premise is that if a frog is placed in boiling water, it will jump out, but if it is placed in cold water that is slowly heated, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. The story is often used as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness of people to react to or be aware of threats that occur gradually ...

... While some 19th-century experiments suggested that the underlying premise is true if the heating is sufficiently gradual, according to contemporary biologists the premise is false: a submerged frog gradually heated will jump out. (Wikipedia: The Boiling Frog)

At the heart of Tania Li's characteristically impressive book, *Land's end* is a debate over the nature of agrarian transformation and the entrenchment of market relations in previously non-capitalist social formations. Much has been written on this topic, of course; analyses of the social, economic and political aspects of capitalist transformation infused the formation of the social sciences and humanities in Europe and continue to consume much scholarship today, particularly in places where the transformation is argued to be incomplete or incorrect when measured against the presumptive ideals of modernity. Theories of change very often assume rather than ask the question, such that discrete and diverse transformations are read as part of The Transition, with an inherent teleology justified alternately by appeals to human nature, structural factors or power relations. The stories collected and told in Li's new book resist this euro-centric teleology. She argues that capitalist production and property relations were not inevitable in the communities she studied, nor did such relations develop in ways that either modernisation theorists or social movement activists would predict (or hope for, which often amounts to the same thing). Li argues instead that 'the non-commodified social relations through which they previously accessed land, labor, and food were not destroyed by "capitalism", envisaged as a force that arrives from the outside. They eroded piecemeal, in a manner that was unexpected and unplanned' (9). The gradual nature of this transformation is important for Li, who argues that the pace of change made it difficult for those who lost out – those who were arguably robbed of their land and labour – to organise effective or collective resistance.

The way in which Li details this slow transformation is beautifully done; her analysis is grounded in a set of personal stories that detail the multi-faceted relationships between individuals and groups, and between the land, labour and profit. The book is a testament to what can be done by an ethnographer with a keen eye, persistence, and a penchant for detail (and, presumably, good hiking boots). The book's richness comes from Li's ability to draw on multiple return visits to one region over multiple decades. What she describes as a conjunctural analysis, following Gramsci, I see as the articulation of a theory of history (or how things change over time) with a theory of place (or the importance of context). Others have balked at the repeated use of the term conjuncture (Gidwani 2015; White 2015), but I love it. The deployment of reflexive, repeated visits to a single community or what sociologist Michael Burawoy (2003) calls 'revisits' were once a staple of ethnographic fieldwork (Geertz 1995), particularly in agrarian studies, but they are increasingly the exception rather than the norm.¹ As a result of

¹See, for example, the magnificent study *Harvesting coffee, bargaining wages* by Sutti Ortiz (1999), the detailed analysis of property norms in Ghana by Sara Berry (1993), and the longue durée account

Li's commitment, this book is perhaps the finest elaboration of changing labour and property rights that I have read.

In *Land's end*, Li frames her discussion about the gradual rise of capitalist production relations as an argument: social movements and scholars of transformation such as Karl Polanyi (1944), she contends, wrongly assume that capitalism enters abruptly 'from the outside' and completely remakes existing social relations. This is an important argument, but it has certainly not been absent in the broader field of agrarian studies: from Karl Kautsky's ([1902] 1988) original treatise on the *Agrarian question* and persistence in the Prussian countryside to Michael Watts's ([1983] 2004) in-depth analysis of the erosion of peasant support and the localised moral economy in the Nigerian hinterlands, scholars have long recognised that capitalism often enters gradually and always remakes rather than obliterating and completely replacing the existing social formation. Indeed, this was one of the core observations for which Douglass C. North was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1993.²

What is at stake for Li in detailing this gradual transformation and framing it as an argument is politics. If capitalism takes hold slowly – and does so through a series of choices people make not just willingly but eagerly – then what sort of political subject is possible? Can people jump out of water that is boiled so slowly – especially if they themselves applied the heat? Li berates social movements for not understanding that transitions might be gradual and that people might actively desire the benefits afforded to them by increasing capitalist production and exchange: 'So long as social movements don't recognize the insidious ways in which capitalist relations take hold even in unlikely places, they can't be effective in promoting alternatives that will actually work' (4). She argues that social movements miss people like those in the highlands who are 'unrecognizable as "indigenous people" [because they embraced commodity markets] or even as "peasants" from the perspective of contemporary social movements' (9). This is an important argument – and it is one side of a conversation that scholars and activists in Latin America have been engaged in for at least two decades now.³ Clearly, the Indonesian context is quite different from that of Latin America, and it would have been helpful to have more detail on the social movements being invoked, as well as on the context in which social movements operate in Indonesia. Work by various scholars (e.g. Hart 2004; Peluso, Afiff, and Rachman 2008) suggests that there is great diversity among Indonesian social movements and that they all made significant compromises during President Suharto's authoritarian New Order, which indicates to me that a conjunctural lens might be usefully applied to social movements as well as to changing land-labour relations.

of changing plantation labour relations in *Coffee, workers and wives* by Verena Stolcke (1988). Gillian Hart's (2004) discussion of returning to her field sites in Indonesia along with Nancy Peluso after nearly 30 years of working elsewhere is another excellent discussion of the value – and challenges – of returning.

²Even Karl Polanyi (1944) cannot really be said to have argued that 'the great transformation' he chronicled (which took place over roughly 200 years, from around the implementation of the Poor Laws in 1601 to the dismantling of the Corn Laws in the early 1800s) happened abruptly or always engendered resistance.

³See especially Silvia Cusicanqui Rivera's (2012) discussion of *lo indio permitido* and the broader conversation around de-coloniality as necessary for re-imagining political subjects outside of European concepts such as indigeneity (Quijano 2000). There is a considerable literature on the multiple identities among indigenous peoples and rural workers more generally, some excellent examples of which are Bebbington (2004), De la Cadena (2010), Hale (1997), and Valdivia (2005).

In my own work (e.g. Wolford 2010), I came across similarly problematic conceptions of peasant life held by landless activists in Brazil, to those that Li critiques. But many movement leaders I spoke with suggested that they constructed these conceptions in part strategically as a way of building unity among a population they understood to be incredibly diverse. They believed that diversity would disappear over time – at least in terms of political subjectivities – because ‘the act of joining the movement and participating in movement activities [was] inherently transformative’ (Wolford 2010, 11). Returning to my field sites multiple times after finishing my dissertation work, it was clear that there were costs and benefits to such a strategy. On the one hand, unifying the peasantry at least strategically allowed the poorest of the rural poor – the landless – a voice in national politics for the first time in Brazilian history. On the other hand, in some places, such as the Northeast sugarcane region, the cost of such strategic essentialism was (and is) also clear: people who did not fit the image of a landless peasant (and who, contradictorily, embraced sugarcane production and planted it on the land they won in the struggle for agrarian reform, as well as working for wages on neighbouring plantations) left the movement or were expelled for lacking *cultura* (culture or proper upbringing). As Alcida Rita Ramos (2000) argued in a brilliant paper, throughout the late twentieth century concepts of the noble savage (self-sufficient and traditional) stalked the mainstream progressive agenda like ‘pulp fictions’, disguising the often othering effects of ostensibly supportive discourses surrounding indigeneity.

The crux of the issue is how to understand the relationship between choice and political subjectivity. Does the frog really choose the warming water, or is it lulled into a false sense of security, one that robs it of an ability to jump when necessary? Li answers this with a nuanced discussion of choice that should provoke good discussions among scholars and activists alike. On the one hand, she follows Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002) and defines capitalism as a system in which participants have no choice, driven by the dry whip of compulsion and forced to sell their labour or their goods in order to survive. On the other hand, she argues that the story she tells is one of many small choices – made freely – to enter into market relations, even when doing so required modifying or transgressing prior norms. The Lauje highlanders were familiar with markets and the desire for material improvement and they operated under a labour theory of property that accepted or encouraged hard work, individual progress and differentiation. Choosing to plant cacao trees was not compulsion, but common sense; once the trees were in the ground, however, and contracts were signed, then continuing down this path became compulsory. This is empirically satisfying but analytically problematic because of what feels like a tautology: capitalism is defined as compulsion and compulsion is defined as (and delimited by) capitalism. This begs the question of whether there was compulsion before capitalism or the possibility of making choices after. Who ceases to be able to choose under capitalism – just those who are exploited, or the successful property-owners as well? Can we read subject positions off of structure, particularly when the structure has been defined a priori by those subject positions? What might cause some people in some places – under similar conditions – to see the subjective conditions of their own exploitation, while others do not? Why do twentieth-century frogs jump when the water starts to heat up, while those from the nineteenth century boiled?

In Li’s study, the shift from common sense to compulsion was a surprise – a surprise driven by the materiality of cacao in this particular frontier setting. In a place where cultivation was mobile, shifting every three years or so, and where land was seemingly endless, perennials like cacao were unusual. But once embraced – because of high prices on a never-too-distant global market – they foster social and economic changes. Li’s discussion of the way cacao’s ‘deep roots’ came together with ‘frontier thinking’ in the highlands echoes work done on corn by Arturo Warman (2003), sugar by Sidney Mintz (1986),

and tubers, or ‘escape crops’, by James Scott (2009). *Land’s end* highlights the importance of frontiers for many agriculturalists, because of how integral the idea of open space *somewhere* so often is to the practices and dreams of farmers and farming. In the particular context of the Sulawesi highlands, the end of the frontier meant that choosing to plant cacao was effectively choosing to exclude others from the land and market; those who were able to command capital or authority were better positioned to seize the land upon which to plant cacao trees even as they framed their success as deriving directly from hard work.

But Li goes further than simply arguing that entering into market relations was common sense for the Lauje highlanders. She also argues that once engaged in commodity production, residents were forced to either continue it or suffer in isolation. Although there were clear signs of ‘weapons of the weak’ such as arson and theft, Li suggests that people did not organise collectively because they saw their situation as a product of bad choices and because, as a result of those choices, social movements were disinclined to take up their cause. Without more information on and from the social movements themselves, it is hard to evaluate that latter claim, but the rich ethnographic work in *Land’s end* does suggest other reasons for the lack of resistance to capitalist penetration and suffering. One is leadership, which social movement studies suggest is critical for mobilisation. Li describes leadership roles in the various communities as being dispersed and disputed (12), such that there were no obvious charismatic individuals who could have rallied those left out of the cacao boom. Second, there were no institutional hosts able to help mediate mobilisation – no organised churches, no trade unions, no pedagogical centres. The lack of supportive local institutions speaks to the isolation of the Sulawesi highlands as much as to the individualistic local moral economy. A third factor that may have prohibited mobilising was that people had few resources to draw on – from the lack of historical memories of mobilisation to meagre financial reserves – that might have made political protest both feasible and legitimate. A fourth factor is that social movements in Indonesia might still be finding their footing, boxed in by memories of the New Order on the one hand and by transnational visibility (given that they have hosted the Via Campesina secretariat for many years) on the other. Finally, there were significant religious, ethnic and class differences that complicated organising. Taken together, there are many reasons to temper Li’s suggestion that the highlanders of Sulawesi are not organised because they lack the will to protest or because they have been ignored by social movements.

In summary, there is much to like about *Land’s end*. The writing flows beautifully, the research is rich and the stories are interesting. Li does not weigh the narrative down with theoretical discussion, though for those who are interested in further theorisation it dovetails very nicely with an earlier co-authored book, *Powers of exclusion* (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). In that book, the authors outline a theory of property-making as exclusion linked to processes of force, consent and legitimation, and the empirical evidence in *Land’s end* puts flesh on the bones of all three, situating acts of exclusion in particular people, places and times.

Ultimately, what Li highlights so well is that whether the frog boils or bolts is a question that needs to be answered, not assumed.

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Warm thanks to the reviewers for their participation in this symposium, and their thoughtful engagements with *Land’s end*. I was especially pleased that the reviewers saw the value in the style I adopted – one in which I let the ethnography do the theoretical work, and kept the

focus on people. I read Henry Bernstein's comment on the book's 'deceptive simplicity' as high praise. One of my colleagues in Toronto congratulated me on writing a 'fantastically unfashionable book', referring (I think) to the fact that the classic ethnographies on agrarian societies to which Wendy WOLFORD and Haroon Akram-Lodhi refer are seldom read or taught by anthropologists today. Writing a dense, place-based ethnography about the changing lives of people in a rather remote corner of rural Indonesia is unfashionable, yet the subject matter is extremely current. As the impressive readership numbers for *JPS* clearly show, agrarian change is back on the radar of scholars, activists and policy makers, and since around 2008 capitalism is again under discussion. Ethnography should be back on the radar too, for the unique insights it can offer on diverse and changing rural worlds.

In their reviews, Bernstein and Akram-Lodhi situate *Land's end* as a contribution to agrarian studies, and WOLFORD adds her expertise on social movements, especially in Latin America. Instead of taking up every point the reviewers raise, I have selected four themes around which to clarify and develop my arguments: explanation, frontiers, choice and movements.

Explanation

In the agrarian studies division of labour Akram-Lodhi sets out, it falls to ethnographers to explain why people do what they do, or fail to act in ways theory might have predicted. Not all ethnographers see their work in this light. For some, the most important task is to discover the 'native's point of view', or understand their subjective experience. Yet the difference is not absolute. Any discovery requires contextualisation; hence, it is already halfway to explanation. It also requires the selection of relevant frames of reference: not every detail and nuance can carry equal weight, or else the ethnographer becomes merely a recording device. The essential challenge in writing ethnography is to find a balance in which the multiple threads that comprise a person's desires and decisions, or the sets of practices that enable a group of people to live together, are exposed for reflection without all of the complexity becoming overwhelming. It also helps to identify a puzzle – a sense of what needs to be explained, a quest governed by the ethnographer's purpose.¹ As WOLFORD observes in her astute reading of my ethnographic practice, the underlying puzzle for me is usually politics, which she frames so eloquently through the analogy of the frogs: When do people come to recognise inequality or injustice and act to change it, or let boiling water destroy them? As Bernstein notes, I treat this as an empirical question. One can find critical thought and action in diverse forms, in likely or unlikely places, and fail to find it where it might be expected: an ethnographic approach to politics demands both focus and an open mind.

Thinking through Henry Bernstein's comment that *Land's end* explores capitalist transition in 'laboratory-like conditions', I would isolate a few elements that make the study more 'lab-like' than most. First, the particular transition I explored, though far from straightforward, involved a relatively restricted set of elements. It did not involve land acquisitions by external actors like national elites or transnational corporations. Nor did it involve the state transfers, subsidies or remittances which help sustain marginal rural

¹Burawoy (1991) provides an illuminating account of the role of puzzles in framing ethnographic analysis, and Smith (2014) provides a valuable discussion of the role of politics – or its absence – in the framing of ethnographic projects.

livelihoods in much of the world. Both before and after the transition, Lauje highlanders had to survive mainly on the product of their own farms. The absence of what economists might call ‘distortions’ made this case not just lab-like, but close to a textbook example of small-scale agrarian capitalism: efficient producers who invested wisely prospered, while inefficient ones lost their land. Second, the 20-year research period enabled me to situate the dreams, desires and discourses that come to the fore when ethnography focuses on ‘the native’s point of view’ in relation to the practices that emerged over time, and the uneven outcomes that ensued. Most importantly, it gave me insight into ‘how’ questions (e.g. how did accumulation actually unfold?) that are difficult to retrieve through other methods (White 1989). Third, repeat visits enabled me to pose specific, concrete questions to my highland interlocutors, based on shared prior knowledge. To give one quite crucial example, highlanders told me in 1996 that they planned to maintain food crop production alongside cacao, but by 2006 they had stopped growing food. The disjuncture between plans and outcomes gave us a topic of conversation we could not otherwise have entered. Similarly, I was able to follow up on the outcome of particular tensions and struggles, to see which ones were resolved, and which continued to simmer. Short-term fieldwork is always vulnerable to being subsumed by the drama at hand.

Having spent 20 years watching frogs heat up slowly, a different risk presented itself: becoming absorbed into highlanders’ view that the transformation they had brought about was not dramatic at all, but merely common sense. In their account, the system of land sharing and food sharing I had observed fully functioning in the 1990s had simply slipped into disuse: ‘Of course land can’t circulate any more – how could it when it has cocoa trees on it?’ ‘You are right we no long give bundles of corn to our neighbours, that is because no one grows any more corn’. Theoretical readings led me down the same path: clearly there was a process of class differentiation unfolding among highlanders, exactly as Marx and Lenin would have predicted – no surprises there either. Maybe it was all so obvious that I had no story to tell? It took some iterative work between theory and data to recognise, first, that I had witnessed a major transformation, namely the emergence of capitalist relations among highlanders, not simply the arrival of a new crop; second, that the apparent banality of this transformation to my highland interlocutors was a central part of the puzzle I had to explain. What causal pathways, and subtle shifts in meaning and practice, had ruptured old relations and set new relations in place with so little drama or debate? Highlanders who ended up landless were in an especially precarious position. A key question that Wolford poses is why they did not see this coming, and act collectively to prevent it – which leads us towards frontiers.

Frontiers

Although some readers have been surprised at the depth and rapidity of change on such a remote forest frontier, Wolford notes that there are many examples. In my comparative essay ‘Involution’s dynamic others’ (Li 2013), I described the coffee boom in Sumatra in the 1920s, and the rapid uptake of rubber by smallholders in Sumatra and Borneo in the 1920s and 1930s. As Clifford Geertz (1963) recognised, agricultural heartlands tend to involute because rich soils enable intensification, and land is so scarce and valuable no one gambles with it. On land frontiers, in contrast, farmers tend to take risks and dive enthusiastically into the latest boom crop, knowing that should they lose their land they can move and clear more. Colonial officials were horrified to observe that indigenous farmers faced with a squeeze on land or labour were willing to give up producing food

in favour of higher value crops, and the pattern continues (Levang 1997). At present, indigenous farmers in Sumatra and Kalimantan are in the process of converting their swidden rice and low-intensity ‘forest’ rubber gardens to the region’s current boom crop, oil palm (Feintrenie, Chong, and Levang 2010). Only if they have abundant land do they maintain the old crops alongside the new one, maintaining the kind of balance commonly associated with ‘middle peasants’ (Li 2015b).

Migrants are often part of frontier processes, but as I demonstrate in *Land’s end*, indigenous people *in situ* can be equally dynamic. They too want to try their luck when a new boom crop presents itself. Lauje highlanders who travelled for wage work saw that other farmers in the region were planting cacao, and started to purchase seedlings to experiment. Here, Bernstein makes a small misreading, as migrants did not introduce the crop. In most highland neighbourhoods there were no outsiders at all, and the enclosure of land and subsequent processes of accumulation I describe took place entirely among kin. In about 20 percent of highland neighbourhoods, outsiders did play a role: these ‘migrants’ were Lauje from the coast – people of the same ethnic group and from within the same *desa* (the smallest administrative unit) – who bought land from highlanders in order to plant cacao. They did not live in the highlands, but trekked up periodically to check on their holdings of cacao and clove. The processes that emerged in these two types of neighbourhood were quite different, as I showed with my selected examples: in Sibogo and Sipil, there were no outsiders (everyone farming there in 1990 and 2009 was kin); and in Pelalang, coastal folk bought land. I also explored a third process in which highlanders seeking more land for cacao pushed into the territory of the clusters of unrelated Lauje who were living above them, domino style.

Returning now to the slow-boiling frogs, why did highlanders not see that ‘land’s end’ was coming, and organise to prevent it? To do so they would need not only foresight, as the reviewers note, but also a new system to allocate and ration land. Their old system was based on land abundance, and had no procedures to guarantee land access for all. There are threads in the highlanders’ repertoire of meanings and practices that could justify moves to distribute land in the context of scarcity, but other threads license individual land ownership and accumulation as the legitimate reward for effort. Leadership is diffuse in the highlands, as Wolford notes, and the previous commons system was lightly institutionalised: there were no committees of elders with jurisdiction over land matters, ready to either defend the old system or devise a new one capable of addressing new concerns. This situation is not unusual. As I argued in another comparative essay, many of the more institutionalised forms of ‘indigenous’ commons found in Asia and Africa are the product of colonial interventions designed to place a check on emergent land markets so that feckless natives would not dispossess themselves through land sales provoked by debt (Li 2010). Places like the Lauje highlands which were barely touched by colonial rule did not go through a process in which a customary, collective land regime was inscribed and consolidated. The highlanders’ customary tenure system functioned very well for their purposes: it enabled them to define who could do what and where while land was still abundant, and it enabled them to privatise land when the time came, with remarkably little conflict. As Indonesia’s indigenous land rights activists stress, custom is dynamic, and customary tenure systems that morph also deserve legal recognition and respect.²

²I develop this argument more fully in Henley et al. (2016).

Choice

Wolford correctly notes a tension in my treatment of choice. Individuals seem to have choice on many things, such as whether or not to press a particular land claim that might damage relations with kin, or spend money on a big wedding, or sell corn instead of giving it away for free. Yet I argue, following Robert Brenner (1985) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002), that the emergence of capitalist relations erodes (and disciplines) the array of choices, subjecting all parties – workers, farmers and owners of capital – to the imperative of market-based competition. Wolford is concerned that the definition is circular: capitalist relations = eroded choice, and eroded choice = capitalist relations. I found the concept of a switch point where market opportunity shifts to compulsion very useful, however, in my attempt to understand why planting cacao brought about fundamental shifts in highlanders' relationships to land, labour and capital – and to each other – while previous cash crops had not. These highlanders were not baffled by money and markets, as they had grown tobacco for sale for a hundred years. So what really changed? As usual, the clearest way to explain is with concrete examples.

The starkest example of what it means to switch from market as opportunity to market as compulsion is in the sphere of labour. Before the arrival of cacao, when all highlanders had access to land, they sometimes did wage work for each other, as opportunity presented, but they were not compelled to do so. Later, landless highlanders had no choice but to work for wages in order to survive, and the wage they could expect reflected the competitive pressure of their similarly needy neighbours as well as a plentiful supply of potential workers from the coast.

The kind of compulsion experienced by farmers who still had control over some land is especially crucial for my argument, and it is more difficult to grasp. They chose to plant cacao initially, so why couldn't they choose to switch back to growing food, or at least maintain a balance? It was not a problem of contracts, as Wolford suggests – there were none. For highlanders, the tipping point where choice became compulsion was a matter of scale. After land was enclosed, if they ended up with a plot too small to support food production in the old, extensive style, they were compelled to use their land efficiently for the highest value crop, namely cacao. I watched as those who made inefficient choices (such as attempting to sustain food production on weed-covered, exhausted soil) at first borrow money to buy rice and, eventually, sell their land to pay off unmanageable debt. In theory, it might have been possible to intensify food production by adopting new technologies such as terracing, ploughing and using green manure, but to my knowledge there are no examples of successful adoption of these practices anywhere in the province. Efforts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to introduce these techniques in the Lore Lindu area around 2000 failed completely, as farmers found they took up too much land and labour for low returns, in a context where the competing crop was cacao (CARE 2002; Li 2007). The ecological collapse of cacao due to disease is making farmers in the Lauje highlands and throughout the province search desperately for alternative crops, but the poorest among them have the least choice: only very high-yielding, quick-growing crops will enable them to hold on to their tiny plots of worked-out land, unless they are able to find good sources of non-farm income to help them make ends meet – still very unlikely in this region.

Competition among smallholders is built into these compulsory market relations: it is a structural condition, not a character trait. It manifests most obviously in the price of land, which is established by the price that richer farmers, bent on accumulation, are able to pay. It is also manifest in the price of credit: merchants had no need to extend credit to struggling highlanders when they could lend to their more successful neighbours whose scale and

efficiency guaranteed a good return. If poorer highlanders could borrow at all, it was at crippling rates of interest that drove them quickly towards land loss. Wolford asks whether compulsion applies also to owners of capital. It does apply, although owners have a bit more room for manoeuvre. I gave the example of a merchant who had borrowed his capital from a bank and paid market rates of interest, and hence could not afford to make loans to losing ventures. Some highlanders who had accumulated capital chose to make gifts and loans to struggling kin, but if they took this too far they depleted the funds they needed to invest to keep their cacao productive, and they too entered a downward spiral. Did this kind of compulsion exist before cacao? My answer is no: highlanders who produced tobacco for a hundred years before they launched into cacao retained the option to withdraw into food production on their collectively held land, and no amount of debt could dispossess them because land was not an asset that could be mortgaged or sold. The difference is crucial to my argument. Cacao had the incidental effect of transforming land into private property, and the ensuing scramble for land on which to grow cacao quickly closed down the land frontier. These two features together – private property in land, and a closed frontier – created the conditions under which competitive, capitalist relations could emerge and become compulsory.³

Movements

It can be quite challenging for any of us to get our heads around agrarian environments where farming systems and ways of life differ from those with which we are familiar.⁴ It is even more difficult, I now realise, to portray very different political environments. The contexts in which the reviewers have conducted their primary research (Bernstein in southern Africa, Akram-Lodhi in Pakistan and other parts of Asia, and Wolford in Brazil) offer deeply divergent possibilities for small-scale farmers to connect up with social movements, political parties, and religious or philanthropic organisations that might take up ‘the part of the peasant’ and offer support (Bernstein 1990; Akram-Lodhi 2010; Wolford 2010). Wolford is quite right to point out that the failure to connect is deeper and wider than the lack of fit with movement platforms, or the absence of an event to attract their attention. Here I will amplify some of the contextual elements *Land’s end* passed over too fast.⁵

The big picture is that the reform period since the end of Suharto’s authoritarian New Order in 1998 has not resulted in a renewal of political mobilisation among the rural or urban poor, despite apparent opportunity. Laws passed since 2000 on labour, investment, plantations and mining strongly favour capital. The material outcome of the current balance of class forces is starkly conveyed in the numbers. In the period 1990–2011, Indonesia had the second biggest increase in the Gini coefficient for inequality of any Asian country, with steeper growth *after* 1998; it has the second lowest spending on health as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), and its social protection expenditure is also very low, far behind India and China (ADB 2012). Although Indonesia is now classified as ‘middle income’, its rate of childhood malnutrition is comparable to that of low-

³There were other elements as well, which I summarized in my answer to the question of why a stable, middle-peasantry did not emerge (Li 2014).

⁴I hope readers will make use of the visual tour I prepared for the website noted by Akram-Lodhi, which introduces the people and landscapes featured in the book.

⁵I do not take up Wolford’s insights on strategic essentialism but I have discussed this topic in several previous publications, most recently in Henley et al. (2016) and Li (2015a).

income countries.⁶ These sad facts should be the subject of serious critique and popular mobilisation, but they mostly pass unremarked. None of the plethora of new political parties addresses the problems of poverty or inequality in more than superficial terms. Indeed, the parties cannot be distinguished on the basis of their political platforms or class constituency; they are simply variations of the same oligarchy, in slightly different colours (Aspinall 2013).

NGOs such as the environmental consortium Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia that helped bring down Suharto have stalled in their attempts to develop into mass social movements. The farmers' unions that played an important role in agitating for agrarian reform around 2000 have lost momentum, and remain localised in particular regions, mainly parts of Java and north Sumatra (Warren 2005; Peluso, Afiff, and Rachman 2008). Although Indonesia hosted the secretariat of the transnational alliance La Via Campesina for many years (2005–2013), as Wolford notes, no mass peasant movement emerged in Indonesia during that time. Organisations that claim to represent particular constituencies, such as the Alliance for Indigenous People of the Archipelago (AMAN), also struggle to develop a mass base. For the moment, AMAN and affiliated organisations focus mainly on lobbying for greater legal recognition for indigenous people, conducting mapping projects to document land claims, and facilitating consultations for donors and development banks that are required to take indigenous peoples' issues into account.

The point of my summary is not to criticise these organisations, but to note that their resources are very limited, and in huge parts of rural Indonesia farmers and workers have simply not heard of them. Nor are there alternative forms of popular education and critique – nothing like the base communities of liberation theology that have played such an important role in Latin America, or even village school teachers who might promote adult education and help to articulate popular concerns. School teachers were heavily targeted in the 1965 massacres in Indonesia and, since then, like all civil servants, they have been selected for regime loyalty and conformity to the status quo. Some are dedicated to the welfare of their students, but they do not dabble in 'politics', which is something most Indonesians continue to treat with deep suspicion (Li 2007). Farmer groups and cooperatives arise and disappear with project funds, and do not develop into member-driven, self-sustaining units (Henley 2012; Li 2016). Elections from the village level upwards are governed by 'money politics' in all but exceptional cases (Aspinall and van Klinken 2011; Aspinall 2013). Hence, tens of millions of rural Indonesians are still without access to the intellectual and organisational resources that provide crucial frameworks for the development of leadership skills, and could help foster political mobilisation and debate. The contrast with the individual and collective transformation experienced by rural Brazilians who join the Landless Peoples' Movement (MST) described by Wolford is stark indeed.

For highland Lauje, even the act of approaching a government official or politician is a huge challenge, because their lack of access to primary schools leaves them unable to speak the national language, Indonesian. They are easily intimidated and fear losing face. Add to this an indigenous social structure that favours neither strong leadership nor collective action at the neighbourhood level, and kin loyalties that cross-cut emergent class divides. Taken together, it becomes easy to see why highlanders suffer their fate in isolation. Their isolation is multi-scalar and conjunctural, as Wolford points out: it is embedded in

⁶Moderate to severe stunting among children under 5 is 36.4% (UNDP 2015). Rigg (2015) provides a useful analysis of contemporary patterns of poverty and inequality in Southeast Asia, and the underside of the region's apparent success.

local, regional and national configurations that have developed historically, and will not be easy to change. As Bernstein notes, I am a sceptic, but not a cynic. I am sceptical of narratives that end with what I call a ‘redemptive twist’ – a beacon of hope that writers offer to readers in the closing pages of a book, because hope is so deeply desired. *Land’s end* does not offer redemption. But an ethnographer does not have the last word: I don’t know what will happen next in the Lauje highlands or in other parts of rural Indonesia where life is becoming more precarious. The land is still there, the people are still there, and something new will surely emerge.

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