The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology

ISSN: 1444-2213 (Print) 1740-9314 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtap20

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To cite this article: Patrick Guinness (2015) The Development Squeeze: Cash Crops, Land's End and Alternate Pathways, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 16:4, 424-429, DOI: 10.1080/14442213.2015.1051172

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1051172

Published online: 21 Sep 2015.

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The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 2015
Vol. 16, No. 4, 424–429, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1051172

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REVIEW ESSAY
The Development Squeeze: Cash Crops, Land's End and Alternate Pathways

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Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier
Tania Murray Li
Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014

'I argue that a great many people have and will have no part to play in production organized on the basis of profit' (4). So Tania Li introduces the significance of her study of the commercialisation of agriculture among the Lauje of Central Sulawesi, the indigenous frontier of her title. It is reminiscent of David Mosse (2010), Maia Green (2006) and others who write about the chronic poverty that is created through the power relations of state and capitalist expansion. The enclosure of common land, Li argues, 'undermined their [Lauje] capacity to make their own fortunes through their own efforts' (148) and left them without viable alternatives.

Tania Li's intention is to challenge both the capitalist development proponents who assert that agrarian capitalist transition will incorporate all farmers positively in the global economy and the alternative development proponents who oppose the incorporation of small farmers in that capitalist development and suggest they would be better left alone. She points out that many of these farmers flourish as they become integrated into the global cacao and clove markets, yet others are rendered landless and have no future in a region where both land and wage labour opportunities are scarce. But the farmers mentioned do not reject the hope that development offers. Li emphasises that these farmers have chosen to convert their land to cacao and cloves and dream of the prosperity these crops will bring. They do not seek to opt out of development but rather crave the roads, schools, health clinics and cash income promised by mainstream development.

Li takes what she terms a conjunctural approach to the themes explored in the book. It is an approach that focuses on the specific local circumstances of change and

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examines social relations from the point of view of 'multiple forces that come together in practice to produce particular dynamics' (18, quoting Gillian Hart). She thus distances herself from grand theory or teleological analysis, recognising the range of circumstances that leads to the dynamic emergence of capitalist relations in this remote area of Indonesia.

Her key interest is the enclosure of 'commons' land and how Lauje are responding to the growing shortage of land. As land is almost the only path to prosperity in this remote location, its commoditisation under Indonesian state imperatives has consolidated a division of village society into three strata: landed classes who employ labourers to farm their extensive cacao holdings; those who have enough land to subsist through food gardens and cash crops; and those who have no land or are critically short of land. Any previous tendencies to socio-economic differentiation have been exacerbated under economic development. Cash crops have locked up land that in previous times would have been distributed among heirs of the pioneer farmer, and the stands of forest that pioneers accessed have been cleared and planted in cacao. So there is seemingly no way out of the impasse for these landless people on the indigenous frontier. Li documents disputes between neighbours and kin over access to land that are invariably resolved in favour of the powerful. Her interest is in how such polarisation of wealth grows and how it is accepted as the only way forward for this society.

Li notes the specific political dynamics created by peculiar administrative arrangements. The Lauje are administratively divided into *desa* 'villages' extending from the narrow coastal plain into the inner hills with each *desa* population split between: its coastal elite and traders; a middle hill population farming poor rainfall land; and the inner hill folk (*bela*) who retain access to virgin forest in better rainfall areas. These three disparate and scattered populations are administered by village headmen located on the coast. Economic and political development has greatly favoured the coastal population, and polarised *desa* populations between: the 'sophisticates' of the coast and the 'primitives' of the inner hills; the Muslims of the coast and middle hills and the animists and Christians of the inner hills; and the traders and moneylenders of the coast and the food and cacao producers of the interior. Most village headmen have not even ventured to the inner highland regions of their village, yet it is they who decide on land disputes—generally in favour of the powerful who are known to them. Several of these powerful highlanders have built brick houses for themselves on the coast where they stay when they visit the markets and deliberate with the village leaders. The powerful highlanders accuse the kin they leave behind of bad gambling habits or lack of initiative as causes of their impoverishment. So when these poorer farmers visit the coast to attend market, trader or village offices they are rarely welcomed by their wealthier kin.

Kinship ties are not sufficiently robust to protect the disadvantaged nor are there strong or cohesive village populations in which generalised sharing among neighbours might soften the blow of polarisation. The Lauje trace kinship bilaterally with lineage groups limited to extended families with short genealogical memories.

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Each neighbourhood population lives in scattered hamlets composed of several nuclear households linked as close kin. Parents instil in their children responsibility for their own survival and often divide cleared land into plots for each child whose task it is to farm and manage the produce from their individual plot. On special occasions, such as when guests are present, each child may choose to contribute their own food towards the meal, and each can market their own produce. Spouses may also plant and market their own cacao. From this perspective it is a society that privileges individual achievement rather than generalised reciprocity.

Although Li makes clear that villagers exercise choice in growing cash crops, it is also clear from her account that those choices may be seriously limited by the powerful claims of the better connected who can resort to spiritual forces or to government authorities to get their way. Less well connected farmers have little information on global markets and capitalist relations to inform their decision-making. There is in Li's analysis an inevitability about this progression to extreme polarisation of land holdings and the curtailment of development options. 'Rural areas have become slum lands', she writes. Poverty 'is expanding and intensifying, exacerbated by development policies that place their faith in markets to generate economic growth from which all are expected to benefit' (180). Li's story is rich in these conjunctural histories of how polarisation of cash crop holdings has emerged in the last twenty years. In the Lauje case it is a combination of village politics, kinship and individual choices, not just the inevitable advance of capitalist relations that has produced the outcome she describes.

But could there be countervailing alternate development pathways which villagers might follow to negate the impoverishment of highland families? Li's account is limited to four adjacent neighbourhoods in the middle hills on the social boundary between Muslim middle range cacao farmers and the inner areas occupied by Christian and animist *bela*. In order to study relations between middle hills and inner hills peoples, she includes one inner hill neighbourhood among the four. However, little attention is given to the different options which Christian and animist people may have chosen in the inner hills where they continue to fell forest for food gardens and may be able to reach a different balance between capitalist relations and alternate relations of reciprocity that Li largely dismisses as destroyed by capitalism. They have forest to spare, and have not invested all their land or their energies in cash crop production. The trends that Li describes may well come to dominate all parts of the village but her conclusion is, for the moment, limited to the infertile and low rainfall middle hills where first tobacco and then cacao cultivation has ensured little or no forest cover for generations of farmers.

The establishment of capitalist relations in these populations, as Li explores in Chapter Four, requires the tricky negotiation of changing relations between neighbours and kin. She makes the important point that under capitalist relations:

> only when a person is obliged to sell crops as a condition of survival is he or she obliged to sell them at a competitive price…. Only when people are compelled to sell their labour is the price they can obtain for it governed by competition with

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> other workers who are equally desperate. Only when land cannot be accessed except through rent or purchase is its price fixed by the sum the most competitive farmers can afford to pay. (115–116)

Li explores the friction that arises as social relations defined by kinship or neighbourly history are painfully transformed by such 'unfreedoms' (Sen 1999) into capitalist relations. Li does not appear at this point to countenance alternate development scenarios where people may have the freedom to sell labour, land or crops onto the wider market while continuing to balance these with social relations of a non-competitive nature. Yet her data provide examples of just such an outcome. Hamdan, for example, 'often felt himself under pressure to lend money to kin and neighbours whose requests were not backed by a reasonable prospect of repayment' (141). Tamang allowed a wide range of people and not just kin or near neighbours to harvest yams from his extensive gardens. And in the expansion of oil palm plantation in the province, Lauje men—although marginalised from their land—could not compete with the migrant workers from Java because Lauje were seen as too independent, unlike the migrants who were perceived by managers as totally dependent on the plantation and hence more easily disciplined (170). Despite their impoverishment Lauje were not desperate enough to sell all their crops or their labour in the manner Li depicts of capitalist relations. In her analysis, 'competition was not a matter of choice, it was progressively built into the relations through which highlanders accessed land, capital and opportunities to work' (148). Her account however indicates that this effect is not inevitable and it is therefore important to determine under what circumstances such compulsion developed. It is due to a conjuncture of: the rapacious demand of agribusiness to expand its plantation crops; the power relations in *desa* that favour the rich; the infertility of the middle hills where her village subjects live; and their social relations within family and settlement.

Thus for most Lauje, 'land's end' had become a dead end, not compelling them to seek sources of employment elsewhere but imprisoning them in poverty and immobility. The story Li tells is one of despair rather than hope, a despair deepened by the ecological disaster that struck in 2009 when most of the provincial cacao plantings became decimated by disease. Wealthier traders, money lenders and landholders were able to shift whatever liquid capital they held to other markets and indeed to accumulate more land from the poor which they planted in the main alternate crop of cloves. But the cacao disease rendered many poorer Lauje farmers utterly destitute.

Significantly, in her Conclusion Li warns that with the expansion of capital world-wide 'land's end demands new knowledge, and a new politics' (179). She does then embark on a more global teleology. As swidden farmers around the world are integrated into the expansion of agribusiness they too will face land's end, and as land becomes short they too will succumb to planting their entire landholdings in the preferred cash crop because they no longer have enough residual land to cycle through food production. They thus become even more vulnerable to losing what little land they possess when they run out of cash to purchase the fertiliser and

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pesticides to keep their crop productive, or when ecological disaster strikes. The story Li tells is a warning to all swidden farmers whose extensive style of farming is threatened by the intensification of land use under capital intensive agriculture. There was what she terms an 'erosion of choice' for the Lauje and no class war or political movement sprang from these circumstances; rather, farmers developed a dull acceptance of circumstances as the 'natural result of unequal luck, effort, and skill' (181).

In her judgement, farmers do not have the capacity to escape this trap and outside assistance is needed. But she points out that much of the assistance offered by the state is subject to the corrupt devices of the elite that milk such programs for their own advancement. Her call rather is for a 'politics of distribution' along the lines being realised in Thailand, China, Brazil or India where peasants have found their voice on the national stage. She suggests that in Indonesia where rural resistance collapsed in 1965 with the destruction of the Communist party and where elite politics continues to undermine the capacity of the rural poor to be heard or represented, the solution must emerge at a national level, and for that to happen farmers in this remote frontier need representation at the centre. She cites Walker's (2012) account of Thailand's 'political peasants', where, through economic and agricultural development, middle-income peasants have come to dominate the villages of the north and to press their claims for state protection and largesse even to the streets of Bangkok. Could there be hope for the powerless through a greater engagement in capital development?

One such development Li mentions in passing is the preference of agrarian companies in Central Sulawesi to switch to the highly capital-intensive oil palm industry. McCarthy's (2010) account of oil palm expansion in Sumatra demonstrates that it is a rich man's crop, further supporting Li's argument. McCarthy however provides an example of farmers who more successfully incorporated oil palm into their 'wider portfolio of livelihood strategies' (832). Here, the key impediment seemed to lie not in the nature of capitalist production but in the rapacious greed of local officials and leaders who sought to accumulate land for their own oil palm expansion. By contrast, in one village of study, a resident government official was able to protect the claims of the majority of farmers to commons land until they had learnt the value of the oil palm crop: 'this village emerged as the most prosperous Melayu village, with most indigenous farmers falling into the category of "progressive farmers"' (836). As Tania Li would no doubt point out, the conjunctures here are different, yet impoverishment is not inevitable.

My own work has focused on the expansion of oil palm among the Maututu of West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. 'Land's end' among the Maututu could refer to the impending shortage of garden land as oil palm spreads throughout village domains. When cacao was first planted in the 1960s and then oil palm in the 1980s individual farmers simply converted their gardens into cash crops. Several villages have reached the point where the conversion of additional land into oil palm will result in insufficient land for food production. Land shortage is being felt but the

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immediate effect is not commoditisation and polarisation of landholdings but the consolidation of the kin group—sharpening its membership to ensure that access is retained by lineage members only. For the moment, at least, there is an alternative development path being chosen by Matututu to enable production of food and cash crops to all within the kin group. And it is not inevitable that oil palm expansion will lead to the enclosure of land by individuals and to its open trade on the capitalist market.

What then of the politics of distribution analysed by Tania Li in which she despairs of the capacity of rural peasants to mount a strong resistance to the pressures of agribusiness? Papua New Guinea has even fewer of the nationwide social movements observed in Thailand, India or even Indonesia. Its educated urban middle class is small and highly localised, limited by strong perceptions of ethnic difference. It is rare to trust someone who is not a *wantok* or one who has demonstrated the claim to be one on the basis of marriage or long friendship. Nor are state institutions likely to provide the support for rural movements, as the state is similarly fragmented into multiple provincial and local level government loyalties and commitments. However a nascent rural movement is being fuelled by local frustrations and anxieties and led by local leaders and graduates of local schools who have gone on to become lawyers and civil servants in the wider PNG society while retaining their links to village kin. These groups have instituted court proceedings to protect and win back their land. In this case the conjunctures of history and kinship suggest a different pathway for capitalist expansion, marked not by impoverishment of the landless but the consolidation of kin groups around land resources. The conjunctures of this place pose a challenge to any suggestion that 'land's end' is the inevitable outcome of capitalist expansion.

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