

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Tania Murray Li**, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5694-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-5705-6 (paper)<sup>1</sup>

*Land's End* is book of delicate power, almost a laboratory account of how capital seizes hold and transforms the latticework of social relations through an almost banal process of “erosion”, where the bearers of capital, unrecognized, participate in the re-invention of their own “subject” position.<sup>2</sup>

There are many good things to say about this book. For one, few write as purposefully as Li, with an understated lyricism. I'll give you an example: on page 16 she writes: “Together, the elements I have listed form the terrain, the circuits, understandings, and practices within which capitalist relations emerged and left Kasar [the desperately poor highlander who inaugurates her book] stranded on a tiny, barren plot of land.” Boom! A swirl of forces, leaving a bewildered Kasar and his son, aged 12, to ponder their archipelagic existence in a remote speck on the world's largest archipelago.

While some deploy theory with all the subtlety of a hammer, determined to shatter, Li takes on big questions of theory with understated poise, her deft strokes transforming a dull palette of preconceptions into a living landscape teeming with

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier, chattier version of this review was aired at an author-meets-critic session on 20 April 2015 at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> I employ “subject” in the double sense of Louis Althusser—“subject to”, or in thrall to, a power (the Lacanian Other) that holds them captive, as well as “subject of”, that is to say author of, their own initiatives, who make certain choices and conduct themselves in particular ways. Althusser (2014: 185) puts it thus: “The individual...behaves in such-and-such a way, adopts such-and-such a practical line of conduct and, what is more, participates in certain regulated practices, those of the ideological apparatus on which the ideas she has as subject, depend freely and in all ‘good’ conscience chosen.”

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

surprise. Aided by artful ethnography, *Land's End* crafts a strange yet deeply familiar world. Many sedimentary views are felled along the way, gently but firmly. Notions of indigeneity, frontier, custom, moral economy, primitive accumulation, transition, development, and citizenship, all come in for scrutiny and are left rattled.

The comforting dualisms that have long organized versions of modernization theory are dismissed. *Land's End* refuses any easy answers. In the Sulawesi highlands Li visited nine times between 1992 and 2009, capitalism is not a “big, bad force” that descends from the outside to wreak havoc on the ecologically attuned lives of the native Lauje. There was an ecological attunement of sorts before the humble cacao tree arrived in 1991—thanks to emissaries from Li’s home country, Canada—to play devil. Who would have expected cacao to be the Mephistopheles that snares the souls of *dramatis personae* such as Idin, Hamdan, Amin, Hilo, Emsalin, and the villainous Linajan, transforming them from middling middle highlanders into full-blown capitalists? Well, I exaggerate (Amin remains a nice guy in Li’s narrative, but some of the others are not so nice). As if that’s not all—specters of Bruno Latour and Tim Mitchell here—those well-intentioned Canadians also sponsor the preparation of “a map showing land parcels, each with a number that corresponded to a name on a list”, which “lent itself to a sense of land as *lokasi*, a thing-like, interchangeable unit of space, readily detached from the people whose work had produced it” (p.110). Land can now be fitfully dragged into the world of commodities.

*Land's End's* big pitch is that “capitalist relations emerged by stealth” (p.9); no spectacular acts of dispossession here, just the banal but unceasing drip, drip, drip of the “coercive laws of competition”, lubricated by the desire to get ahead in life. “The Will to Improve”, to recall the title of Li’s (2007) earlier and equally gripping book, operates here not so much from above (the half-hearted attempts of Canadian do-gooders and

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Indonesian government “crocodiles” notwithstanding) but at ground level, functioning as solvent, melting “all that is solid”.

If ethnography serves as the preferred mode of research that makes the familiar sentinels—categories and concepts—of theory stretch and groan, obliging “the ethnographer to confront the gap between the chaotic ‘common sense’ of lived realities and the schemes he or she must apply to make sense of them” (p.5), then conjuncture is the analytic that does most service for Li’s argument. A conjunctural approach, she tells us, “attends to ‘history at one point in time’ and space”, it is “dynamic but not random”, it produces “path dependence”, “while at every conjuncture a new history is produced, sometimes deliberately, more often as an unintended consequence of how various elements combine” (p.16-17).

*Land’s End* is full of conjunctures when a swirl of elements and forces are set into motion: the arrival of Islam via seafaring merchant-raiders between 1750 and 1850 and their defeat by Dutch military might in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (p.34); tobacco cultivation and flirtations with the market between 1820 and 1970 (p.52); Suharto’s New Order from 1965 to 1998 (the Japanese Occupation 1942-45 appears to barely register); the almost casual entry of Canadian cacao in 1991 (p.107); and, after 2006, the imminent disappearance of the cacao economy thanks to “vascular streak dieback” (p.173).

Add to this the materiality of crops (as a keen student of all things agrarian “nature” is never far away from Li’s gaze): it is almost futile to grow rice alone; corn starts rotting if stored more than six months; hill soils are flimsy and quickly lose productivity; cacao’s spread owes, among other unanticipated attributes, to its capacity to shade out weeds, stabilize slopes, and be unloved by the birds, monkeys, and pigs who wreak havoc on other crops. You get the picture. One of the upsides of the “conjuncture” is that the congealing of elements that creates a “structure of necessity” (and thus, path

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

dependence) is contingent, and overdetermined. Not at all boring, straight-line A leads to B brand of causality. Indeed, one might say that capital as self-animating value—“a process of money perpetually chasing after more money”, as David Harvey (2011) puts it—has the force of “retrospective causality” in Sulawesi: “Once formed, these relations really were compulsory. They eroded choice” (p.181).

It does beg the question, though: *What is a conjuncture and what is not?* Since the conjunctural approach does not privilege any particular scale of analysis, in principle any cut into history at one moment in time could be a conjuncture. And if that’s the case what is not conjunctural? I don’t think I ever found a clear answer to that question; and I am not sure it matters. But since as social scientists we are taught that analytics must parse what they include and what they don’t, I thought I’d ask if only to be nitpicky.

The discussions of Lauje cosmology in *Land’s End* are fascinating. The coastal elite inhabit the top rung, they describe the middle hills and beyond as “minus region” (*daerah minus*), and characterize its people as “lazy, uneducated, and lacking in enterprise” (p.39). The middle highlanders in Sulawesi accept this uncharitable characterization of them and, in turn, transpose it upon the “bela”, who inhabit the uplands. I am sorry to report that Louis Dumont’s (1980) *Homo hierarchicus* is alive and well (p.39).<sup>3</sup>

But between the peregrinations of evolutionary ideology and the generous references to Marx, Gramsci, Polanyi, Foucault, and Williams I was led to wonder: *which European theory travels and why?* For example, Deleuze, Derrida, and Negri seem

---

<sup>3</sup> If Li had replaced Sulawesi with, say, central Gujarat in India (a region I am intimately familiar with), she might just as well have been describing the attitude of central Gujarat’s Lewa Patels toward their inland Baraiya and (and even further east) Adivasi tribal neighbors. While multi-sited ethnographic work is increasingly popular, *Land’s End* demonstrates that general resonances can arise from methodical, place-specific research.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

remote to the happenings in central Sulawesi, but the aforementioned theorists don't. Oh, and I will say this, of the two Karls who feature in *Land's End*, the elder one (Marx) fares relatively better than the other (Polanyi); and of the two Jameses who also appear, the elder one (Scott) fares relatively worse than the other (Ferguson). No *zomia* for these Lauje highlanders: they want the state's gift of development!

Look, I could go on about *Land's End*. How parents regard children, for example. The title itself is fecund: a place at the far reaches of the world, the exhaustion of the land frontier, the severing from a vital means of production that compels a person to sell themselves as a pseudo-commodity, and the indignity of an existence where one must beg to be exploited. It's a ripping tale but one that left me forlorn, pondering our world's bleak future, thinking about displacement, jobless growth, surplus populations, and precisely what collective imaginaries the Left can muster for vast numbers who inhabit the thin zone between destitution and despair.

I say this because there is one promise that the book doesn't quite fulfill. "My goal in writing this book," Li says, "is to examine closely just what happened in these highlands and draw out the implications for politics" (p.4). On the very next page, there is another reference to politics: "This kind of intellectual work is intrinsically political in the definition proposed by the Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci" (p.5). I wanted more from Li on these two sites of "politics". But merely because Li refuses to offer the sort of redemption or resolution my "progressive" desire demands (perhaps the unsettling of such desire *is* the politics on offer) cannot distract from the book's many noteworthy achievements. *Land's End* is a pugnacious and thought-provoking read.

## References

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Althusser L (2014) *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (trans G M Goshgarian). London: Verso

Dumont L (1980) *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (trans G Weidenfeld). Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Harvey D (2011) *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. London: Profile

Li T M (2007) *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press

*Vinay Gidwani*

*Department of Geography, Environment and Society*

*University of Minnesota*

*gidwa002@umn.edu*

*July 2015*