Comments on Hall, Hirsch and Li
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This is a fabulous book - I am excited to have the chance to pose questions and think out loud with the book. The argument the authors are making is very rich and useful to think with, and it is in that spirit that I offer my comments.

The book focuses on land – the title is land dilemmas but another title could be land transformations because they provide us with a way of thinking through the specific ways in which access to land is constantly changing as well as the way in which new modalities of access to land are shaping broader changes in regional and global economy.

This is an incredibly timely and urgent subject to be focusing on. I am biased but I think land has become central again in our everyday and global political economies in a way that warrants attention – land has always been more than just a factor of production but the particular dynamics of accumulation today have thrown the various meanings of land into dramatic tension – land as territory, livelihood, homeland, home, place, commodity, speculative asset, reservoir for future generations, political platform and the ground we walk on – all of this is being transformed by new political, social and economic imperatives and possibilities that are in turn being shaped by – and re-shaping – property relations, the forces of production and the modern subject. When I went into graduate school fifteen years ago, my undergraduate mentor was deeply skeptical of my decision to study land reform – land reform? She said, no one works on that anymore. I don’t think she would say that today. As the authors point out in their book the supposed death of the peasantry and the move to the industrial, modern city as part of the linear model of Development has been greatly complicated not only by failures of that vision itself but also by the momentous organizing of everyday acts of resistance and large-scale, sustained mobilizations.

So, the topic of the book is timely and important. And it is useful. The purpose, as I see it, is not to provide us with the grand theories of agrarian change but rather to provide readers with an analytical toolkit for understanding the micro-politics of struggles over access to land in different places around the world. The book is based in Southeast Asia, of course, but the key categories of analysis are applicable to the region with which I am most familiar, Latin America. The authors argue that in order to better understand contemporary land transformations, we need to better conceptualize the fundamental characteristic of land access – which they call exclusion. They argue that the ability to access land is the ability to make exclusionary claims. Exclusion is thus a structural relationship – it only takes on meaning in specific, grounded contexts where, the authors argue, it is shaped by four key powers: regulation, market, force and legitimation.

This analytical toolkit is a nice complement to broader theories of agrarian and social change. I think there are several frameworks commonly used in agrarian studies to evaluate some of the same relationships discussed in the book – these frameworks are valuable for providing a theory of change (or a discussion of what and who makes history and under what circumstances) and a guiding set of principles about the nature of social organization, the production of power and the circulation of possible ideas. But these frameworks don’t often provide the toolkit for actually
evaluating these relationships and principles on the ground. Anyone who has ever looked for class formations or fractions or hegemony or even the social forces of production and surplus extraction knows that these are difficult relationships to identify and follow. The toolkit provided in this book helps to extend the theoretical power of these frameworks with analytical tools. When I read the book, I was writing notes furiously in the margins – they mostly consisted of theoretical fragments, places where the powers listed by the authors connected to the frameworks I already use in evaluating agrarian relationships and change. I wrote down:

Different theories of property, property as theft, property as accumulated labor, property as a social relationship or a bundle of rights;
Theories of differentiation and struggle over surplus and the means of production, namely the land in this case;
Theories of the moral economy and the relationship between custom, transgression and law;
Theories of hegemony and the tensions between consent and coercion

The powers described in this book speak to all of these theories, but they do so in a clear and precise way that offers a lens for analyzing the specificities of each on the ground – and this is what makes this a very geographic book. None of these powers makes sense in the abstract; they require people, place and history.

So, in a sense, theories of property are pared down to a notion of exclusion; theories of differentiation are replaced by less linear and evolutionary concepts of constant change; theories of the moral economy are refined with the focus on legitimation and regulation; theories of hegemony are made more precise and easy to operationalize as force and legitimation rather than coercion and consent. Legitimation moves us beyond the perennial argument of consent versus autonomous spaces versus false consciousness – it moves us from an inner evaluation of intention to an evaluation of acts or actions around moral authority.

What I think is most valuable about the framework is the way that it highlights the contradiction of access – the notion that access for one is always in some way an act of exclusion, whether the exclusion is of competing activities or users. This gives rise to what the authors call the double-edged nature of exclusion and it allows them to sharpen their political analysis at the same time as they diminish the normative analysis. By that I mean that many rural activists decry large-scale land appropriations by the state and by business as exclusions but they counter this with a competing demand for exclusive rights to the land. This is one of those contradictions inherent in property but it is only contradictory if not properly situated in particular places. What I mean is that pointing out the contradictory nature of property is not simply to descend into relativity and argue that there is an equivalency in these different demands for exclusion. It is to say that claims to property must always be situated in particular places; they are not a priori different.

This double-edged aspect of exclusion speaks to me as someone who works in Latin America where you have the rise of left-leaning or populist governments voted in by large-scale popular mobilizations with strong anti-neo liberal sentiment. These governments – from Venezuela to Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Brazil – are having to perform a very complicated dance between the popularization of resources and appeal to the public and the necessary exclusions made in the name of progress, development and social well-being.
The double-edged aspect also speaks to me as someone who has worked with a landless movement for many years – a movement that argues against the exclusionary nature of property and promotes its own vision of exclusion instead. This is a contradiction that is not contradictory – it is inherent in the nature of property, but there are real political and analytical dangers if we do not recognize it as such. The movement has been accused by a prominent rural sociologist in Brazil of being a “modern” movement because it is fundamentally about acquiring property. This was taken as a critique but it shouldn’t be – we should be able to recognize exclusion not of

I want to illustrate this very briefly with an example from my work with the Rural Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil. As I said before, I went to Brazil to study land reform – a political demand that resurfaced in the country with the transition from military dictatorship to democracy. The interesting thing to me was that land reform was advocated by people on opposite sides of the political spectrum – by neoliberal policy makers and by Marxist activists.

In an article I wrote for Antipode in 2005, I argue that land reform re-emerged as a relevant policy for both of these actors in large part because underlying the claims of both was the same theory of property - a labor theory of property that attributes the fruits of one’s labor to the laborer: the notion of land to those who work it could be appropriated by people on radically opposed sides of the ideological spectrum. The theoretical justification for a labor theory of property can be found in the writings of John Locke - although Locke is most commonly associated with neoliberal governance and institutions that privilege the rational, self-maximizing individual with rights to accumulate private property in a variety of arenas (McCarthy and Prudham 2004), his work contains nuances that enable different political actors to find support for their platforms within. John Locke’s theory of property includes both the right to property produced by labor (where property is understood in the narrow sense of land and house and in the broader sense of physical goods) and property rights.

As simple as the labor theory of property seems to be – and as widely as it is held – it lends itself to the ambiguity and contradictions described in this book. The two aspects of property (labor and ownership) were not contradictory for Locke because he assumed a natural state in which abundant land existed and all persons were equal. In this natural state, a person had an uncontested right to both the means and the product of his labor. The complexities within a Lockian labor theory of property become politically explosive, however, and contradictory with the development of a market - or heritable ownership rights - in situations characterized by either extreme inequality or resource scarcity (the two may be mutually reinforcing). As Richard Pipes (2000) writes: “As attractive and self-evident as it may appear, the labor theory of property is a two-edged sword, for it can also be used to assail property. How is one to justify inherited wealth which requires no personal effort, or the fact that farm laborers and factory workers do not own what they produce?” (p. 36). It was the market, or exchanges mediated by money, that Locke argued enabled some men to accumulate more than they could use.

The different perspectives on property in neoliberal and populist perspectives originate in the context and evaluation of the so-called “original sin” (Marx 1977: 873) of commodification: the initial transformation of labor, land and money into commodities for sale on the market (Polanyi 1980). Whereas liberal and neoliberal political economists see this as a natural and necessary
evolution of man’s desire to truck, barter and trade (Smith 1997: 507-520), critical political economists (including Marx and the contemporary agrarian populists) have argued that rather than exposing the true nature of production and exchange, the development of the capitalist market mystified both: far from allowing for the just distribution of rent, profit and wages, the market unfairly extracted surplus from the only commodities that themselves produced value: labor and land (Marx 1972, 1977: 873-908; Perelman 2001; Polanyi 1980).7 This was the history of primitive accumulation that Marx argued was “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (1977: 875).

In this way, although liberal/neoliberal and Marxist/populist philosophers share a focus on labor as the source of value, their different interpretations of commodification (both the “original sin” and ongoing primitive accumulation) lead them to very different policy and political positions.