

AGAINST COLONIZATION AND RURAL DISPOSSESSION: LOCAL RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AND EAST ASIA, THE PACIFIC AND AFRICA

REVIEW BY TERRY DUNNE

Kapoor, D (2017) *Against Colonization and Rural Dispossession: Local Resistance in South and East Asia, the Pacific and Africa*, London: Zed Books.

This book is essentially a collection of case studies of rural social movement activity, or of more amorphous resistance, in opposition to dispossession. The editorial introduction strongly makes the case for ‘recognizing the primacy of the activism of those directly affected’ (6). That said, there is a recognition in some of the case studies that the role of inter/transnational actors, such as human rights activists, has been significant (9–10). Ibreck, in a chapter on agri-business projects in Sierra Leone and Ethiopia, makes the same point arguing that challenging land grabs ‘depends largely upon specific understandings and actual practices at the sites of investment’ (251). This appreciation is perhaps where the book is most useful to development education professionals, particularly in view of the fact that in some of the instances detailed, global solidarity is important. This was the case, for example, in Rodriguez’s chapter on Lumad opposition to mining in the Philippines (154–155; 158–161). On the other hand, it is similarly worth noting, too, the role of non-government organisation (NGO)-based humanitarian reconstruction assistance as an agency of dispossession, in helping to dispossess artisan fishing communities in Tamil Nadu, in the wake of the 2004 tsunami (Swamy & Revathi 122–144).

A number of the studies are exemplary in their understanding of social movement formation as a struggle for unity among heterogeneous social groups and in the empirical detail they proffer on this process. One of the strongest chapters is that by Naidoo, Klerck and Helliker on the farm workers’, farm dwellers’ and small farmers’ movement in Eastern Cape, South Africa. The pre-history of the social movement organisation they focus on, which is called *Phakamani Siyephambili* (rise up and move forward), begins with local farm committees, which, unlike conventional trade unions, brought together workers and dwellers (195–196). The latter are disproportionately female and are either

not employed on a standard contract (and likely under-employed, at least as regards formal employment), or not employed on the farm upon which they reside but possessing residential rights there. Similarly, the organisational structure was modified in particular areas to include seasonal migrant labourers (197). As well as this the organisation also includes some small farmers, most of whom are ex-workers who acquired land under recent land reform programmes (197). Brownhill, Kaara and Turner's study of local organic food production in Kenya likewise highlights its inter-generational and cross-gender basis (218-219).

The 'struggle to unify' (231) identified by Langdon and Larweh among the people of Ada, Ghana, is complicated by the fact that the local elite are involved in efforts to privatise local salt lagoons. Central there has been the creation of 'an open space of dialogue' (244), through various means from tapestries to community radio, in opposition to secretive plans for dispossession. Oriola's chapter turns a focus on the development of the Niger Delta's collective identity – a collective identity in a region with at least 40 different ethnic groups and 250 different languages and dialects (322). Oriola also touches on the need to address internal divisions within largely ethnically homogenous movements (327-328). Most starkly, Ibreck's chapter includes a case study in Sierra Leone, where opposition to a land grab includes people who took opposite sides in that country's civil war (257).

A strong asset of the book is the diversity of the forms of resistance it examines, including conventional social movement activity, as well as the so-called weapons of the weak, for instance, minor sabotage or continuing survival activity, such as small-scale mining, in defiance of apparent corporate property rights (Moloo, 305). However, efficiency of such actions, at least some of the time, suggests something is lost in the use of the term 'weak'. As Moreda's study of land grabs in Ethiopia finds: 'sporadic and anonymous actions by local people cannot be overlooked and could in fact have the potential to have a major impact on projects' (283). This diversity of forms of opposition reflects a diversity of political histories and contexts; some of the case studies are in places with histories of extreme repression. To Masalam opposition to agri-business coconut oil production in central Sulawesi, Indonesia, faces the social memory legacy of the massacres in that country in the mid-1960s (which in many instances were aimed at land-reform seeking peasants) (105; 107-108). Here there was a transformation

to 'overt modes of response and resistance' (113) in the more favourable context of the overthrow of the Suharto regime in the late 1990s.

Masalam's study is instructive in other ways. Notably in how there have been attempts to overcome 'a sense of hostility and suspicion among villagers' (105) by the adoption of a non-confrontational approach (110-111) to villagers who work for palm oil plantations or who have accepted compensation for the loss of land. Also, of note is the role of a legal aid organisation, *Bantaya*, which has focused on the provision of legal training to local activists, rather than a form of judicial activism which could pacify and demobilise (113-114). Such training, as well as other educational pursuits, and formal and informal meetings, take place in an important hub based on a camp on reclaimed land (109-110). Kapoor's chapter is equally attentive to the strategy and tactics of an anti-bauxite mining campaign among the inhabitants of the Niyamgiri Hills, Odisha, India. Particularly relevant is a 'conscious strategy to grow the movement', to 'widen the scope' of the constituency (82). This involved steps to appeal to various social groups who initially supported, or acquiesced in, the development project. For instance, many of the better educated youth were at first hopeful for employment or were won over by company sponsorship of sport and education (84-85). The opposition to the bauxite mine and associated refinery has been characterised by a diversity of tactics, including Supreme Court cases and mass mobilisations with a marked militant appearance (87).

One problem with the volume is that the voice of those people who were historically dispossessed as opposed to those being dispossessed today or in the recent past is largely missing. In other words, wage labour and the movements of wage labourers are absent (excepting the chapter on South African farm workers). This omission does not necessarily impact that much on the book's key aim, which is after all, to discuss resistance to on-going dispossession of rural populations by states and corporations. It does however potentially give a very distorted view to the unwary reader. After all, the majority of the population of rural India, for instance, are partially or wholly dependent on wage labour (Nilsen, 2018). In other respects, where relevant, it would have been useful to learn more about wage labourers in the particular study areas. For instance, Masalam's chapter on part of central Sulawesi concerns an area where 80 percent of the population (106-107) are wage labourers. Some want to farm on their own

account, others seemingly do not, some are plantation workers and seemingly less than enamoured of the effort to re-distribute the lands taken over by large plantations. More exploration of these issues would seem appropriate. It strikes the reviewer also that the nature of coconut oil production must be such as to allow small-scale production, which may not be viable in the case of other products.

The political-economic framing of the volume, in terms of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, seems to overlook other forms of dispossession, such as that brought about by rising input prices and falling output prices – something which is at the heart of India’s current agrarian crisis (Nilsen 2018). Processes of peasant differentiation and consequent dispossession are also absent. Tania Murray Li’s research on a highland community who adopted cash-crop cacao production, also in Sulawesi, Indonesia, explores a contrasting experience, where small-scale commodity production wrought winners and losers out of neighbours and kinsfolk (2014). This too is a form of capitalist dispossession.

The guiding thread which motivates these exclusions seems to be the idea that the various resistances and movements featured in the volume emanate from non-capitalist spaces. Namely from ‘communal modes of production’ (22) or ‘land-based communal economies’ (24). Unfortunately, there is only a short section of six pages in Kapoor’s introduction positing this framework, so the argument is undeveloped (20–25). Is it the case that these are resistances from, in some sense, outside of capitalism, or, at the least, with feet in two social worlds? This is not a question which animates the individual chapters making it hard to answer on the basis of this book. Capitalism is a protean web of social relations, there is nothing necessarily non-capitalist about small-scale market producers. Indeed, the editorial introduction (21) compares arguments for individual land titling to the colonial fiction of *terra nullius*, but farmer-owned private property is the rural reality in much of the global South.

There is a case for exploring the dynamics of resistances/social movements emanating from ‘land-based communal economies’ (24). Shanin (2018) covers some of the history of one approach that sees such lifeways as potentially contributing to a post-capitalist future, rather than being necessarily doomed archaic relics. The fact that there is actually only fleeting focus on

‘communal modes of production’ (22) in *Against Colonization and Rural Dispossession* means that it does not really address the specificity of resistances and movements arising from that context. Perhaps because in fact not all of the cases share this specific background? Meanwhile the premise that the agency of people subject to on-going processes of dispossession at the hands of large corporations is exclusively land-based and about reversing the process leaves us with a lacuna in understanding in some instances exactly what is going on. It is notable that in a number of the chapters the prospect of employment, or actuality of employment, in the incoming developments, are attractive to at least some local people.

Similarly, the introduction offers a very brief argument for the central contradiction within capitalism as being between ‘oppressor (imperialist) and oppressed nations’ (22). But the book carries histories of dispossession which continued under the sovereignty of national developmental states, such as post-independence India and Ethiopia under the Derg. Something which suggests that the internal differentiation of colonised (or formerly colonised) societies into different classes (and indeed into variously empowered or disempowered ethnic groups) is not an epiphenomenon of Western neo-colonialism.

The richly layered case studies in this volume make a useful contribution to teaching and learning about social movements at many levels within academe and outside it (many of the studies strike one as particularly useful as a contribution to social movement practice). For a focus on social movements in the global South in general it would of course have to be supplemented with other works (e.g. on movements of industrial workers such as Ness, 2016). The volume’s admirable emphasis on embedded local activism is a useful corrective to what is perhaps an over emphasis elsewhere on ‘global social movements’. The equally admirable emphasis on local agency is useful in development education, particularly as a corrective to the themes and tropes of the charity industry.

References

Ness, I (2016) ‘Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class’, London: Pluto Press.

Nilsen, A G (2018) 'How Can We Understand India's Agrarian Struggle Beyond "Modi Sarkar Murdabad?"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 53, Issue No. 50, 22 Dec.

Li, T M (2014) 'Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier', Duke University, North Carolina: Press Books.

Shanin, T (2018) 'Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism', London: Verso.

Terry Dunne researches agrarian social movements in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland, following a theoretical/comparative perspective which includes engagement with rural issues in the contemporary global South. He is a PhD graduate of the Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland - Maynooth.