



Tania Murray Li and Pujo Semedi, *Plantation Life: Corporate Occupation in Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1495-9 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1399-0 (cloth)

Large-scale plantations have long constituted contested landscapes; indeed, plantation development was one of the critical tools used to establish sovereignty by European colonial powers. However, since the late 2000s, large-scale land concessions for plantation development have emerged as especially important sites for empirical research associated with what has become known as the global land grab or global land rush. This book contributes to this literature, and represents a deep-dive into the intricacies that produce large-scale oil palm plantations in Saunggau Regency, in West Kalimantan Province, Indonesia, an area described as a “plantation zone”. The book’s focus is on two particular oil palm land concessions, one operated by Natco, an Indonesian state-owned company, and the other controlled by Priva, a private company owned by a wealthy Indonesian who cooperated with the Indonesian government’s transmigration programme to relocate people from densely populated parts of the country, particularly Java, to less population areas such as Kalimantan. The World Bank supported the Transmigration Project when this particular plantation was first being established. Based on many years of detailed research, the authors argue not that agronomy or productive efficiency are key for plantation dominance, but that particularly politics is critical, including political economy, and what the authors call “political technology”, meaning “corporate occupation”. An emphasis is also put on what they refer to as “the order of impunity that characterizes Indonesia’s political milieu” (p.2). Many readers of *Antipode* will appreciate the approach that the authors take to this study.

Plantation Life is organised as a series of chapters linked to specific and intriguing questions—ones critical for understanding the ways that these plantations have come to be. For Chapter 1, the question is: “How did Natco and Priva become established in Tanjung, and what novel sets of relations did their presence generate?” (p.27). Here, the authors provide a useful review of the origins of these two plantations, taking an ethnographic approach and partially relying on the voices of local people who experienced the changes that occurred, including the injustices brought on by the companies’ grabbing of local peoples’ lands, which sustained their previous livelihoods. The authors are interested in the bureaucratic schemes and political conditions that lead to massive oil palm plantations to be established in particular places. They appropriately emphasise that these areas each have their own histories, geographies, and population dynamics, which require careful attention.

For Chapter 2, the question asked is: “Who worked in these two plantations and why?” (p.27). In this chapter, the authors do an excellent job laying out the positions of the different groups of actors associated with the plantations, considering both ethnicity and especially class relations. There are Dayak locals, Java transmigrants, and different variations of these groups. Through the approach they adopt, the power relations and associated tensions emerge, and the inequalities and injustices become increasingly evident.

In Chapter 3, the authors ask: “What did it mean for farmers to be bound to a corporation?” (p.27). While forced or “coolie” labour no longer exists in the oil palm plantations of Indonesia, the authors demonstrate how labour remains entangled and bound to the corporations that control the plantations, for better or worse, but particularly for the benefit of capital accumulation.

Then in Chapter 4, they ask: “What were the forms of life that emerged in the plantation zone?” (p.28). In this chapter, the authors dive still deeper into the lives of the various groups of people who work in various capacities on the plantations, demonstrating how difficult and

precarious many people's lives are. This includes the lives of oil palm out-growers, who have their own small plantations, but remain intricately connected with the large companies that purchase and mill their oil palm, and often retain the crucial role in maintaining necessary infrastructure. Many locals are both resentful for having lost their land and forests to these oil palm giants, while also depending on the same companies and plantations for other reasons, thus creating a complex set of positionalities.

In Chapter 5, the question asked is: "Why are corporate oil palm plantations still expanding across Indonesia?" (p.28). Titled "Corporate Presence", this is my favourite chapter, as it takes a broader and more analytical approach to looking at oil palm plantations, including usefully reviewing important debates. The authors are clearly disappointed that large oil palm plantation concessions continue to be given out in Indonesia, but the information they present is dealt with in an even-handed way. The authors convincingly criticise the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, arguing that it has done very little to substantially address the core social and environmental problems associated with large oil palm plantations in Indonesia. They seem to be sympathetic to calls by activists to stop issuing new oil palm plantation concessions, although they ultimately fall short of calling for doing this, as they believe that such efforts are futile considering the tremendous counterforces supportive of concession plantations (p.182). Still, their position was somewhat surprising to me considering the overall tone of the chapter.

The concluding chapter of *Plantation Life* presents the book's main findings, that plantation life is life under corporate occupation, which cripples or limits so many rural Indonesians. This includes capitalists using people as low paid labour when they are strong, and later throwing them away when they are sick, weak, or old. The authors essentially follow a political economy approach and lens, considering how land, labour, and capital are assembled in these particular circumstances to produce profit.

Plantation Life is an interesting project because, rather than the typical colonial pattern of the local Indonesian collecting the data but having little involvement in the analysis or writing, it involved the constitution of a real partnership in *all* aspects of the work. An explanation of this process is included in an appendix at the end of the book, titled “Collaborative Practices”. This section is useful, but I would have liked to have read this important background information before getting into the main book, so it might have been better situated as part of a longer preface. I think this methodology section is crucial for understanding how the book developed, and why it feels like such a great source for understanding the intricacies of oil palm plantation life on Kalimantan, Indonesia.

Plantation Life represents an important contribution to the literature on large-scale concession-based plantations in the tropics, particularly in insular Southeast Asia, and has a lot of potential for class adoption, and as a teaching tool more broadly. It combines detailed empirics and ethnography with strong theory, something that has also been evident for other books that Tania Murray Li has written, including *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (2007) and *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (2014). In fact, I plan to adopt *Plantation Life* for an upper level undergraduate/graduate course that I teach about development studies and political ecology in Southeast Asia.

Ian G. Baird

Department of Geography

University of Wisconsin-Madison

ibaird@wisc.edu

September 2022