



Plantation life: corporate occupation in Indonesia's oil palm zone

by Tania Li and Pujo Semedi, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2021, 244 pp., \$25.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781478013990

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BOOK REVIEW

Plantation life: corporate occupation in Indonesia's oil palm zone, by Tania Li and Pujo Semedi, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2021, 244 pp., \$25.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781478013990

Recent transformations in corporate-driven agrarian capitalism are putting plantations at the center of scholarly debates once again. Over the last two decades, large-scale, export-oriented plantations have expanded massively across the global south, disseminating modern ideals regarding the development of economic growth and material prosperity. Indonesia has become one of the epicenters of this unprecedented expansive trend as the country has developed into the world's largest palm oil producer, contributing half of the global supply. Because palm oil is a key ingredient for a wide variety of mass-produced goods and precisely due to its multiple uses in the food and energy industries, palm oil has turned into Indonesia's most important export crop. Its production, mostly led by corporations, has exponentially increased in the form of neatly-aligned rows of monocrops which comprise around 40% of Indonesia's farmland. The spread of big corporate farms has entailed a complete reorganization of landscapes and rural livelihoods, as small producers, native dwellers, and their customary lands have become absorbed into ever-expanding plantation zones. What social and political relations does the all-encompassing presence of these plantations set in place? What new subjectivities, aspirations, and values do they instill in workers and local populations?

Anthropologists Tania Li, and Pujo Semedi attempt to answer these questions in *Plantation Life: Corporate Occupation in Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone* (2021). As revealed by the title, the book's central theme is the novel forms of life that the pervasive dominance of palm oil plantation corporations creates for the people living in rural Indonesia and how the plantation's social worlds enable corporate profits, despite the damage caused to people's livelihoods and ecosystems. Based on three years of ethnographic field work in West Kalimantan, the authors study the situated workings of two plantations: Natco, a state-owned corporation and Priva, owned by a private Indonesian company. While previous research about palm oil plantations explored the negative impact of plantations on the environment and local populations, the authors decided to pay attention instead to the 'contradictory spaces, practices, and affective states' (24) that plantations engender, focusing on how these corporate giants and their capitalist logics saturate landscapes, peoples' intimate sensitivities, and human relationships. In so doing, they delve into the specific forms in which corporate capital operates in rural Indonesia, disrupting subjectivities, creating new bodily dispositions, and restructuring social action conditions of possibility.

Prolific descriptions about everyday plantations life abound throughout the book, an ethnographic accomplishment achieved through intensive collaborative work and the assistance of roughly sixty undergraduate students, a research process the authors discuss in detail in an Appendix. Li and Semedi combine descriptions with a robust theoretical engagement with plantations, drawing both on classic and more contemporary works, which have highlighted the enmeshment of plantations with histories of colonialism, racial capitalism, and regimes of extraction. The authors take inspiration from a wide variety of plantation scholars ranging from George Beckford and Edgar Thompson to Anna Tsing and Katherine McKittrick, looking for differences and resemblances across space-temporal conjunctures. In this search, the manifold forms of violence, past and present, within the plantation become the cornerstone of the

ethnography's theoretical quest. By drawing comparisons between current operations of palm oil corporations and plantation economies of the colonial era, the authors delve into the power-laden landscapes of violence that arise in the plantation zone and their variegated world-making effects.

Crucially, the authors argue that the forms of violence that emerge today in Indonesian plantations starkly differ from their earlier formats in the undeclared nature of the contemporary political arrangements of the plantation (8). In contrast with former configurations, currently, palm oil corporations have no legal responsibility for the people living outside of the plantation borders, although the presence of the plantation drastically hampers villagers' access to land and water, destroys forests, and exploits casual workers, thus causing a form of 'licensed harm' in the Indonesian society (5). Inspired by Giorgio Agamben's figure of the *homo sacer*, a character living under a permanent state of exception that is paradoxically sanctioned by the law, the authors identify a parallel contradiction in the living conditions of the populations working in the plantation zone. They have been abandoned, but yet the neglect of their forms of life is justified for the economic benefit of the public.

Underpinning the book's most significant theoretical innovation is precisely that the corporations are exempt from any social liability despite their noxious disabling of ways of life in the name of economic prosperity. This deceitful form of governance leads the authors to approach the corporate presence of plantations as a political technology for capital accumulation that installs a war-like form of occupation. Based on an imperial mandate that regards customary landholders as racial inferiors, plantation corporations operate like an invading external power that forcefully seizes a territory to colonize it. Like other invading forces, plantations use the military powers of the state to secure corporate land grabbing and establish their presence for palm oil extraction. They do so, following a racialized and flawed assessment: 'corporations must make land productive because Indonesian farmers are not capable of doing this on their own' (10).

While the takeover of lands constitutes a central aspect of corporate occupation, this concept emerges throughout the ethnography as a polyvalent notion aimed at describing the variegated forms of material and discursive oppression experienced by enclaved villagers and workers. Local people see the plantation as an illegitimate and violent external force that not only invades their lands but also degrades their citizenship. Through corrupt extractive practices and multilevel alliances between state and business actors – 'the military crony corporate cabals' – corporations attain a totalizing dominance over plantation zones, a feature of plantations that Li theorized in a previous contribution (2018). The result is an inescapable mafia system which lies at the core of the plantation's inner workings and that engulfs workers and villagers into its obscure logics, without the possibility of appealing to the rule of law.

Indeed, the book's most notable strength is precisely the detailed ethnographic depiction of the multifaceted and institutionalized 'order of impunity' of the plantation enabled by a state-licensed politics of mafia, which endorses the corporations' corrupted forms of domination and occupation of customary lands. Throughout five chapters, Li and Semdi show different instances in which this rule of impunity emerges in Indonesia. Chapter 1 tackles the origins of corporate occupation, digging deep into the predatory tactics a corporation employs for land acquisition, with Natco's unilateral land-grab backed by state military powers and Priva's quest for achieving a 'purchased and coerced compliance' of the local population (42). Dodging transparent negotiations, corporations pushed customary landholders onto smaller plots and enclaves. Companies never met any of their promises: neither compensation nor decent jobs for native villagers.

Chapter 2 explores how corporations hired and expelled workers, creating an abundant work force through the recruitment of Javanese migrants and the establishment of flexible labor arrangements. The authors show how the mafia system (euphemistically dubbed by workers as 'the network system') tinges the labor conditions within the plantations, enabling both superiors and subordinates to prey on each other through routine theft (66). Because the work force is not unionized but fragmented along ethnic and gender differences that are instrumentalized by managers, transmigrant workers have no other option but to engage in micro practices of corruption to survive. Practices such as the doubling of official and private roles or the imposition by managers of a callous rate of extraction upon harvesters are widely accepted ways of taking advantage of the existing opportunities.

Chapter 3 deals with the ambiguous position of out-growers, the original Malay and Dayak farmers that were subject to the occupation of their landholdings for palm oil production. While the companies provided them with two-hectare plots of palm oil as part of an out-grower scheme, this size did not allow them to eke out a living. Moreover, corporations encouraged them to incur in debt for the preparation of their out-grower plots, but yet they had no control over the loan conditions. Most importantly, although out-grower production of palm oil is essential for the functioning of the core plantations, they were formally classified as ordinary villagers and not as company workers, which enabled corporations to avoid any kind of responsibility for them. This paradoxical positionality rendered the livelihoods of farmers vulnerable to the endemic predation of corporations, which without any contract specifying corporate obligations, led to the undermining of the farmers' rights as citizens.

Chapter 4 grapples with the everyday operation of the law as well as the hierarchies and daily tensions at play in the plantation zone. Li and Semedi detail how the existing institutional arrangements drastically impede former landholders to appeal to local authorities to enact their rights as citizens. Because local officials like village and district heads receive regular payments from the corporations to facilitate their extractive operations, law enforcement hardly ever interferes with corporate interests. In the case of any potential opposition from local authorities, workers or villagers, corporations are used to responding with additional payments (in the form of money envelopes) to gain political leverage and continue with their normal extractive operations. These twisted strategies for mitigating resistance, expose even earnest authorities to suspicion while subverting villagers' demands, who feel both 'occupied and abandoned' (143).

Finally, Chapter 5 explores the unabated expansion of plantations in Indonesia despite their negative environmental and social effects. The authors discuss compelling evidence that shows that plantations are no more efficient than small farmers; neither do they bring development to rural areas. Why then do corporations continue receiving more permissions and land concessions? For Li and Semedi, at the center of this dilemma lies the complex nexus of powers that sides with the corporate mandate and reigns since 1966 when General Suharto's New Order began. This nexus consists of multiple complicities: favorable laws, corporate bailouts, the support of government officials through legal mechanisms, the normalized use of bribes, the protection of the army and police, and a cheap and fragile labor force, among others.

But the total dominance of these plantations corporations begs the question of whether there is room for farmers to resist or for any local agency at all. For the Li and Semedi, the possibility of building alternative livelihoods seems to be foreclosed. The emergence of transformative dissident acts is highly unlikely because the work force is utterly fragmented, with migrant workers and native villagers constantly preying on each other. Yet, what is even more problematic is that the mafia system within each plantation establishes an illegitimate way of doing politics that creeps into the workers' most intimate spheres, as they too end up taking what

they can to survive. In this context, workers' resistance becomes reduced to individual self-protection and to the fight for a minimum of economic security, which prevents the articulation of collective demands. In Li and Semedi words: 'Stealing ... was a mode of self-protection that supplied extra income and pushed back against extraction, but workers had no mechanism to launch a coordinated struggle' (70). Workers' acts of resistance are hence neither heroic nor transformative.

Because plantations pervert the ethical foundations of life, alternative livelihoods appear to be all but unattainable. Nevertheless, future research might consider looking for underground sites of nonconformist livability, an unexplored terrain in this ethnography. Indeed, readers are left dreaming about workers' hidden modes of resistance or forms of existence, which – while being linked to plantation extractive logics – attempts to move outside of them. Is it possible to resist when the moral crisis is so entrenched that the boundaries between the licit and the illicit are blurred? An exploration of the dynamics of peasant resistance in illicit contexts might help imagine alternative forms of legitimacy and thus avoid the imprisonment of a totalizing and pessimistic view. For instance, other works have analyzed how criminalized peasant farmers that produce illicit coca crops in Colombia have managed to reclaim their citizen rights and identities as peasants while building micro-spaces of refusal of the illicit drug business (Ciro 2019; Lyons 2020; Ramirez 2001). Future studies about plantations could search for similar terrains of dissent and refusal, or for spaces not fully inserted into plantations capitalist logics.



Overall, *Plantation Life* is a pathbreaking book. Its approach to corporate presence as a state-licensed form of occupation represents an advance in the understanding of the forms of violence that emerge in plantation zones. The book opens a novel line of inquiry for plantation scholarship, one that will allow future researchers to continue theorizing the multiple modes of corporate occupation and exploring potential spaces for workers to develop life affirming projects and alternative forms of building legitimacy. Finally, since the authors critically engaged in joint research and writing, the book also sets the parameters for future developments in the practice of scholarly collaboration.

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