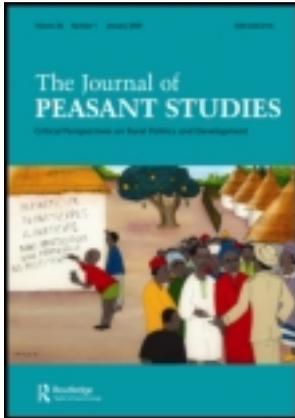


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## Journal of Peasant Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjps20>

### Powers of exclusion. Land dilemmas in Southeast Asia

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Available online: 01 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Esteve Corbera (2012): Powers of exclusion. Land dilemmas in Southeast Asia, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39:1, 221-225

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.656241>

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**Powers of exclusion. Land dilemmas in Southeast Asia**, by Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch and Tania Murray Li, Singapore, NUS Press, 2011, vii + 257 pp., US\$32 (paperback), ISBN 978-9971-69-541-5

In a recent landmark conference on land grabbing (Borras et al. 2011), Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Li Murray presented their new book: *Powers of Exclusion. Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*, a well-structured effort to analyse processes of land-use and land-use change in this region since the 1990s through the lens of 'exclusion'. The authors emphasise that they understand this concept as an inevitable consequence of the fact that 'all land use and access requires exclusion of some kind' (pp. 4). In doing so, the authors detach themselves from other scholars who have focused on 'high-profile' cases driven by conservation, forestry or tourism development policy approaches where exclusion has very negative connotations (Adams and Hutton 2007, Dowie 2009). Thus they highlight that exclusion is an inherent characteristic of land relations and recognise that much too often it results in inequality and dispossession. Informed by Polanyi, they also convene that exclusion results in social 'countermovements' through which actors reject the implications of particular 'exclusionary outcomes' and propose alternatives for re-defining access and property relations (p. 9).

Drawing on their experience in rural political economy, Hall and his colleagues construct their analytical framework around four powers that help to understand how exclusion occurs and who wins or loses (p. 13). The first of these is 'regulation' that contributes to draw property boundaries; to establish eligible and non-eligible land-uses; and to define the degree of legitimacy of social actors' claims. The authors show throughout the book that regulation is often carried out by the state, but can also be enacted by customary groups and even by national or transnational organisations, thus translating into 'fuzzy' regulatory regimes and conflicting situations. The second power concerns 'force' and its use by the state to secure legitimate and sometimes illegitimate claims, as well as the use of armed or other kind of violence by other social groups to guarantee access to land. The third power is 'the market' that shapes the dynamics of land access and exclusion in Southeast Asia and across the world. Markets do not evolve spontaneously and they are often a consequence of combined regulatory, force and 'legitimation' processes, the latter involving 'justifications of what is or what should be', therefore appealing to 'moral values' (p. 18). In other words, legitimation refers to actors' discourses around land and their embedded values and framings, including ethnic or ancestral rights to land, the need for economic development, or appeals to the global common good. Hall et al. also emphasise that these four powers may act synergistically but they are distinctively

effective across scales. They argue, for example, that force ‘operates most effectively when it is employed at a proximate scale’ (p. 19) while legitimation depends clearly on the type of actor involved, its audience, and its discursive frame of reference.

The book’s central part is organised around six chapters that dispel the characteristics of different types of exclusion associated with land titling and formalisation programs driven by state regulations (chapter two); the development of protected and community-based conservation areas (chapter three); oil palm, farmed shrimp and coffee cultivation booms (chapter four); land conversion for housing, industrial and tourism developments (chapter five); enclosures from below based on kinship and ethnicity (chapter six); and counter-exclusions where social groups mobilize to reclaim land through a variety of arguments (chapter seven). Each chapter includes an introduction to the issue in question, a discussion of how the four powers play out through case studies in Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam, and a concluding summary. Chapter eight summarises the book’s approach and its findings while a very useful Appendix compiles key events in the history of the studied countries.

The book’s empirical richness makes it impossible to review here each of the many processes of exclusion described. Instead, I would like to highlight three key messages I have taken away to reflect further upon. The first is that land-use transformations are messy processes that translate into distinct exclusionary processes and that can also help to invigorate social tactics aimed at securing property rights and livelihoods. In other words, exclusion can stimulate some actors to engage in actions for further social and political recognition. For example, the discussion on the expansion of oil palm expansion in Malaysia concludes that ‘State actors and private companies have worked together to seize enormous amounts of contested land for oil palm plantations worked largely by Indonesian migrants. Natives have found themselves dispossessed from land they claimed as their own and have resisted this dispossession . . . . Even in this case, however, the straightforward “land grab” narrative needs to be complicated. Natives are not necessarily “against oil palm” . . . Engagement with oil palm also offers benefits beyond those immediately associated with growing the crop: it facilitates the exclusion of other potential users (state agencies, corporations, neighbours) and can give access to infrastructure’ (p. 98).

This reflection takes me to the second message: scale and location matter. Drawing on the previous example, this is to acknowledge that land grabbing for oil palm may have resulted in large amounts of dispossessed peasants across Malaysia but, at the same time and if one looks closely, it is possible to find poor peasants who have benefited from crop expansion and the subsequent messy regulatory and property frameworks. The question of scale can also be simply thought in terms of geographical significance. For example, the ‘exclusionary’ effects of Thailand’s land titling program of the 1990s (pp. 37–43) are not the same than those of development-offset projects (i.e. environmental interventions designed to compensate for the negative impacts of a development project), simply because the number of potentially empowered or dispossessed communities may be very different. Land titling programs result in a greater number of social conflicts because the delimitation of individual and social property often colludes with customary property relations or with the interests of powerful actors across an entire region or country. The effects of development-offset projects on tenure relations are more localised, albeit not necessarily less ridden with conflict. Furthermore, in contrast

with development-offset projects, titling programs can be perverted to benefit actors who have not previously been there and who want to grab land for economic, political or speculative reasons, and new property regimes can be imposed through military force, for example. Furthermore, titling has strong repercussions on land markets and, as a result, can induce processes of accumulation and dispossession, as soon as land becomes a collateral to be sold and mortgaged, an aspect discussed in many of the book's passages (e.g. p. 40 and p. 158).

Finally, the third take-away message is that exclusion from below is more common than often thought. Exclusion is as much about poor peasants being dispossessed by corrupt states and economic voracious companies as it is about poor people excluding other poor people. In this regard, the authors' discussions of Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) and intra-community exclusions are enlightening. Hall et al. demonstrate that CBNRM can result in exclusionary processes from below if it is driven by communities who fight encroachment or by conservation organisations. CBNRM initiatives are often promoted by regulatory frameworks that promote demarcating boundaries and re-defining who should or should not access land resources, subsequently marginalising some poor social groups based on gender, ethnicity or property rights criteria. Some CBNRM can thus be reconceptualised as a self-imposition of natural resource management restrictions, influenced by the underlying conservation-oriented objectives of governments and NGOs (pp. 71–78). Additionally, the authors also show that cacao expansion in upland Sulawesi has been built upon a process of enclosure of collective swidden land and forests, with some families planting cacao trees and claiming ownership at the expense of other members of the kin or the collective as a whole. Increases in land enclosure and cacao cultivation has led to increasing inequalities in land access and to the establishment of a money lending system between the 'enclosing households' and the increasingly dispossessed, who have increasingly become landless wage labourers. This process has contributed to a process of extreme class differentiation within the village in a short period of twenty years (pp. 154–160).

In many instances of the book, there is a clear relationship between the authors' exclusionary powers framework and other analytical approaches. For example, the analysis of Vietnam's central highlands coffee boom (pp. 105–111) shows how ethnicity played a critical role in understanding who accessed property and loans for coffee production. One dominant ethnic group could claim or buy more land, and exclude others from it, due to a favourable regulatory framework (i.e. legitimisation) and their better access to capitalized family networks extending away from the highlands. The latter, which does not fall into any of the four powers identified by Hall et al., suggests that the book's framework is somewhat incomplete, as it necessitates from other concepts in property and access theory to generate the whole picture of 'exclusion'. Of course, this is not a major shortcoming and, in fact, the authors acknowledge the existence of 'other powers in operation' that complement their approach (p. 197).

In this regard, I think that the first chapter should have included a longer discussion of how the four powers relate to Ribot and Peluso's Theory of Access (2003), which is briefly sketched in the introductory chapter (p. 8). Access (i.e. how and why people benefit from things) holds a dialectical position with exclusion (i.e. how and why people cannot benefit from things): they speak to each other and therefore the latter cannot be understood without the former. Ribot and Peluso's

mechanisms of access (i.e. legality/illegality, technology, capital, markets, labour, knowledge, authority, social identity, and social relations) explain many of the social processes that define exclusion in the book's case studies. As highlighted above, ethnicity (i.e. social identity in Ribot and Peluso's terminology) has shaped access to coffee markets in Vietnam and has subsequently influenced who has been excluded from these markets. Access and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, when Hall et al. emphasise that their framework pays more attention to contention and conflict and to those who cannot access land than Ribot and Peluso's (p. 8), they fall short in identifying the actual inter-linkages between these two very rich approaches. For example, Ribot and Peluso's (2003, 162–64) discussion of legal and illegal access, defined by law, custom, convention and the use of force, coercion and corruption, resonates with Hall et al.'s first, second and fourth powers. Seemingly, their recognition that capital and wealth play a key role in securing other forms of access, such as knowledge or authority (p. 166), also implies asserting that mechanisms of access often operate together and are thus separated only for analytical purposes, as it is the case of the book's exclusionary powers (p. 197). Finally, I would have liked to see a longer discussion of development-offset initiatives, expanding their analysis of a World Bank's funded dam (pp. 79–82) to emerging markets in carbon and biodiversity offsets, which are increasingly popular in some Asian countries and that may have already re-invigorated traditional exclusionary conservation in some cases or exclusion from below in others.

Overall, the book is a 'must read' for doctoral candidates and senior scholars concerned with the processes that continuously re-configure land relations and re-define ecological, economic and socio-political conditions. For 'land grab' researchers in particular, the book challenges somewhat naïve characterisations of these phenomena. It shows that rural transformations unfold heterogeneously across countries and landscapes, translating into very diverse outcomes. Rigorous empirical studies are required to draw commonalities and differences in processes of access, exclusion, accumulation and dispossession across different types of 'land grabs'. Hall and colleagues have convinced me that their four exclusionary powers constitute great lenses through which to look at agrarian change, even if I would suggest newcomers in the field to complement this book with other important readings. Now it is our responsibility to take these Powers of Exclusion forward and test them thoroughly in other regions and cases from around the world.

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**Disturbing History: Resistance in Early Colonial Fiji, 1874–1914**, by Robert Nicole, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2011, ix +300 pp., US\$52 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8248-3291-9

Fiji history has always been highly politicised and segmented. Ethnic Fijians have their own history, centred on the maintenance of nineteenth century coastal and island empires. Contradictory stories have been largely excised from their official record. Alongside that history, however, occupying a different universe according to some writers, has resided a semi official history of IndoFijians, descendents of the indentured labourers that Britain imported to sustain its colonial sugar economy. Together these colonially derived and postcolonially maintained histories tell a story of colonial disorder generated by Indian greed and disloyalty contrasting sharply with the stability that Fijian loyalty produced.

Postcolonialism transformed this official view of the past, with many Fijians believing their loyalty had denied them space in the colonial economy and marginalised them. Instead the former 'guest-workers' who consequently prospered captured that space. These myths have helped shape Fiji's politics in the past 40 years but they were never absolute. Some forms of resistance among Fijians were recognised, but dismissed as products of less sophisticated hill people or of opportunists who cavalierly rejected the wisdom of Fiji's chiefs. That these forms of resistance might have been more widespread or that they bore strong similarities with the actions of heathen Indians lay beyond the pale.

Robert Nicole sets out to disturb the conventions of Fiji's past. It is rare to come across a book as direct in its thesis and as comprehensive in its coverage as *Disturbing History*. 'I want to explore how subordinate groups consciously or unconsciously, selectively or haphazardly, critically or uncritically', he writes in his Introduction, 'variously avoided or rejected . . . invasions and refused to function as passive receptacles for the effects of power' (10). His subaltern analysis does not imply a 'singular unitary monolithic anti colonial resistance', as Marxists might have painted their postcolonial version of history, but rather a resistance that 'untidily' coincides with 'collaboration, consent, appropriations and opportunism' (214). If power is variable and fragmented, Nicole quotes Foucault, so too will be resistance (9). Indeed when the few large-scale oppositional wars and movements in Fiji such as the Colo War or Apolosi Nawai's Viti Kabani movement are placed alongside forms of everyday resistance, a very different picture emerges and 'resistance is shown to run almost uninterrupted for the first 40 years of colonial rule' (214). Furthermore, this continuity is not broken by the country's ethnic divide; what is most surprising is how –albeit separately– similar forms of resistance embraced all communities. This is Robert Nicole's triumph.

Local circumstances rather than imperial action determined the forms resistance assumed. Places that were historically independent of or opposed to Bauan, eastern and other coastal chiefdoms, were among the first sites of resistance. Deep in the interior of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, the fiercely independent Kai Colo also regarded Christianity as synonymous with conquest, enslavement, and the alienation