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On *Plantation Life: Corporate Occupation in Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone* by Tania Murray Li and Pujo Semedi. Duke University Press, 2021.

Review essays by Christian Lund and John McCarthy, with a reply from Tania Murray Li and Pujo Semedi.

Keywords: Oil Palm, Plantation Economy, Indonesia, Exploitation, Corporate Occupation.

Review Essay I: Christian Lund

A plantation is a giant—an inefficient and lazy giant—but still a giant. It takes up a huge amount of space. It is greedy and careless, destroying everything around it. It is alien, strange and unpredictable.

A plantation is a machine that assembles land, labour and capital in huge quantities to produce monocrops for the world market. It is intrinsically colonial, based on the assumption that the people on the spot are incapable of efficient production.

The two authors, Tania Li and Pujo Semedi, open their book with two complementary descriptions of the phenomenon of a plantation, letting us know that their work is a collective effort, and the result of years of dialogue. When the reader reaches the end of the book, he or she might want to add: A plantation is probably the worst possible pathway to a decent, just and productive rural livelihood. A plantation is a process of deception, plunder, violence, lawlessness and impunity.

Organized in five substantive chapters, *Plantation Life* analyses how plantations are established, how labour is recruited and managed,

how the plantations lock in labour in dependency despite its ostensible freedom to seek better deals elsewhere, how the plantation operation is embedded in hierarchies and logics of local politics, and finally how this organizational contraption keeps expanding, subsuming land and labour to produce palm oil.

In Indonesia, plantations fall under two basic categories. One is a centrally organized corporation where labour is hired to perform the work necessary. The other relies on a similar corporate form but with the addition of so-called out-growers, who in principle farm their own smaller plots but with a series of contractual connections to the plantation obliging them to follow the company's fertilizer and pesticide protocols and deliver the harvest to its mill. While the second format suggests some freedom for land-owning smallholders, the book shows how deceptive this is. The smallholders are completely dependent on the company for credit, for inputs and for selling the produce—there are no other viable alternatives for them. Many end up being indebted and losing their plots, and "become ghosts in their own land" (p. 36). The companies that own these plantations have tried to change the out-grower schemes to optimize their control over the entire operation. A so-called one-roof system was introduced whereby out-growers ceased to farm their own plots. Instead, they received nominal rights to a portion of the plantation land but no farm plot to visit and no tasks to perform. The farmers who signed up ceased to be farmers and became instead lumpen rentiers, with no control over their land.

Moreover, companies have no obligations towards the workers. Old workers are left with no pension, or other kind of security or social service, because they were always "free" peasants who entered a "fair contract" with the company. The book points to the difference between plantations and classical haciendas. In all their claustrophobic oppression, haciendas embodied a paternalistic idea of total society from cradle to grave. Contemporary plantations in Indonesia are similarly hierarchical worlds of labour exploitation, only without the sentimentality of the haciendas. When labour is spent in a plantation, it becomes irrelevant and is discarded.

Li and Semedi have conducted the research together over five years, and they have also opened their research to their students, who have had stays of varying length in the study area in West Kalimantan over the past years. Consequently, the authors have had access to a wealth of findings in the form of observations, interviews, surveys, reflections and other forms of data. Such access allows the authors to present much of the research through profiles of peasants, out-growers, *kulis*, workers, brokers, foremen, office personnel and so on. These profiles are presented with perfect pitch and credibility. In addition to breathing life into the multiple protagonists, the writers manage to illustrate the workings of the structure of a plantation.

The social hierarchy in a plantation is a millefeuille with endless categories of superiors and subordinates. While virtually all people are subjected to someone in a superior position, most also control conditions of someone else in an inferior position to themselves. Hence, at every level there is an opportunity for the superior to misappropriate rent, siphon off salaries and other payments, and cheat workers of their dues because he (mostly "he") holds the power to exclude his subordinates from work and income. This also means that at every level there is an equivalent incentive for the subordinates to defraud the plantation and their superiors by stealing palm fruit to sell it twice to the plantation, leaving the fruit to rot, engaging in go-slows and so on. Everybody in the plantation operation seems to be shortchanged in some manner, or harassed or even intimidated into leaving some of their land, valuables, labour or earnings at the doorstep of a superior. And, equally, everybody seems to pilfer from the plantation and extort from their own underlings if possible. Added to this is the complex ethnic composition of the plantation populations: Dayak, Malay, Javanese, Batak and Chinese. Any form of effective social organization against corporate injustice is made difficult by this structure, and by the haunting memories of the massacres of 1965, when the military and their henchmen killed communists and their sympathizers.

The continuation of a colonial-style agricultural operation like the plantation seems counterintuitive from an economic point of view.

The waste in the operation is considerable, and numerous studies document its economic incoherence. However, when Li and Semedi contextualize the plantation in the local politics of contemporary Indonesia in chapters 4 and 5, the absurdity makes sense. A constant flow of envelopes lined with cash from plantation companies to local politicians and civil servants ensures that land is acquired cheaply without the cumbersome strictures stipulated by law; the process secures relative impunity for violent evictions and control of any labour unrest and provides the tranquillity for companies to falsify maps, lists and the books accounting for land acquired and people compensated. The destructive wastefulness of plantations is more than made up for by the concentration of immense profits in the hands of the powerful and the externalization of the cost. People at the bottom rungs of the plantation economy, on the other hand, try to eke out a living by all sorts of petty occupations, seizing hardscrabble opportunities whenever they arise.

"Plantation life is", Li and Semedi argue, "life under corporate occupation." And the occupation is enabled by politics that renders all problems associated with plantations discrete, technical and subject to fixes. The broad range of protests from Indonesian and international NGOs against the plantation industry's destruction of the environment; its horrendous treatment of its labour; and its systematically unfair, fraudulent and sometimes outright criminal land acquisition seem to never amount to an indictment of plantation agriculture as such. They are deflected as teething problems in need of minor correction.

Plantation Life dissects a complex issue and is exemplary in its clarity. It demonstrates structural dynamics and injustice through micro-stories of loss and exclusion, and while we are never in doubt about the authors' sympathies, no individual is excessively vilified. The problems analysed are not about individual behaviour as much as they are about the callous nature of unbridled capitalism on political life support.

Review Essay II: John McCarthy

The expansion of oil palm plantations in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, continues to provoke discord among civil society actors, policymakers and scholars. Economists brandish data on incomes, economic growth and poverty reduction, pointing to the developmental benefits of oil palm (Edwards 2019; Qaim et al. 2020; Euler et al. 2017). Yet, critics argue that it is responsible for deforestation, impoverishment, expunging customary rights of indigenous people, increasing landlessness, adverse impacts on women, and growing inequality in Indonesia and elsewhere (Pye et al. 2012; Julia and White 2012; Elmhirst et al. 2017). Tania Li and Pujo Semedi jump into the fray with this volume presenting an ethnographic study of two plantations in Sanggau, West Kalimantan.

The study focuses on Natco and Priva, plantations established in the New Order period (in the 1980s), a dark time for the hapless subjects of plantation and forestry development in remote corners of Indonesia. Here the authors catalogue the excesses of the plantation system, documenting a cheerless story of suffering. It builds on a rich tradition of plantation critique that focused initially on the colonial period (Stoler 1995; Breman 1989). The authors note that many studies have made similar findings (p. 58). What sets their study apart is the vehemence of the approach and the unrelenting and sometimes provocative nature of the narrative.

The picture they paint in the opening chapter is of a totalizing plantation system—where market relations, palm oil as a commodity under the plantation mode, class relations and the corporate form of organization lead to disempowerment and impoverishment on a wide scale. The indigenous Dayak and migrants from other areas of Indonesia are caught in the cogs of a giant machine that assembles capital, land and labour to produce profit for some while impoverishing and dispossessing others (p. 4). Indigenous populations living in the "oil palm zone" are subject to an occupation that the authors compare to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This extractive regime is built on the debris of the colonial system, forming a kind

of monolith whose reach Dayak, labourers and smallholders are unable to escape. While purposed to bring about rural development and other policy ends, the corporate machine relentlessly produces subject territories and populations alongside corporate profit. The authors document how "corporate occupations" impair, among other things, diverse ecologies, customary rights, worker rights and smallholder well-being and standard forms of citizenship (p. 21). As well as seizing land without due compensation, the corporate model involves bringing in labour to produce a "saturated" local labour force that is un-unionized and hence cheap and disposable. In this account, the Company is always looking for more ways to extract profit; for instance, by reducing job security and preventing the children of loyal workers from taking over jobs when their parents retire. Out-growers (plasma farmers) are also stuck in monopsony arrangements that allow only a few to prosper. The book catalogues the depredations exposed by earlier research in multicoloured detail.

At the same time, like an underground theme in a Mahler symphony that occasionally bursts to the surface, moments in the text point to the reality of localized agency and adaption, everyday practices where local people exploit, adapt and adjust the plantation system for their ends. Here the plantation is not a totalizing monster but a stumbling hulk with an exposed underbelly that people exploit for their own ends, including those recruited into the "plantation mafia". Like the law, the system is "deeply ambiguous" (p. 19), with contractors finding spaces for extraction, and smallholders and workers exhibiting a highly differentiated sense of belonging and developing ways of exerting agency. Dayaks sometimes succeeded in rolling back transmigration schemes; villagers followed differentiated strategies, even in a few cases holding onto their land; and permanent plantation workers found better livelihoods than deeper deprivations. For some labourers and successful cultivators, the plantation is also better than other choices (p. 88). The volume offers an equivocal vision of the phenomena: a clumsy beast and a crushing leviathan.

In the final pages, the authors ask what can be gained from studying "two unusually troubled, inefficient and corrupt

plantations". As a long-term observer, one cannot help wondering whether the authors might have done more to establish the paradigmatic status of this study by exploring how these cases fit into the now prolific literature on oil palm. To what degree are these what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls "paradigmatic cases"—exemplifying the general tendencies of the oil palm phenomena? Or are they extreme cases where circumstances are unusually grave? Oil palm in Indonesia is not one phenomenon. Strategies and policies matter and vary over time and space, with experiences depending upon the terms under which local populations engage with the oil palm economy (McCarthy 2010; Rowland et al. 2020). We must remember that a large cohort of smallholders and "middle farmers" control an estimated forty-two per cent of the sixteen million hectares under oil palm cultivation (Bissonnette and De Koninck 2017). A considerable body of historical research on smallholders and oil palms in Sanggau (e.g., Potter 2015) and Kalimantan (e.g., Peluso 2017) also points to variation in smallholder and plantation experience

These quibbles aside, this is a well-written, well-researched study undertaken amid challenging circumstances: the authors have documented and presented before the reader the disorders of "plantation life". In a compelling chapter towards the end of the volume, the authors ask why the plantation system persists despite the controversies, conflicts and critiques it continues to provoke. They argue that the "corporate presence" reaps too many benefits for too many actors in too many places. They are critical of reformist approaches and wonder whether, in the *longue durée*, the plantation system will fold like the rubber boom before it. This, like many other observations in this book, should inspire further debate. For instance, one wonders what the alternative to reform is. Yet, perhaps the book's value is its faithfulness to Jean-Paul Sartre's adage, "If something is not true in the eyes of the least favoured, then it is not true." In the end, this book will be of far more consequence than another anodyne statistical study of the oil palm phenomena.

Authors' Response: Tania Murray Li and Pujo Semedi

Oil palm corporations currently hold concessions to around twenty-two million hectares—one-third of Indonesia's total farmland (Chain Action Research 2019). Their presence brings massive permanent changes to the Indonesian landscape and the livelihoods of millions of Indonesians, transforming political, economic and social relations in profound ways. *Plantation Life* explores the human dimensions of these changes, and we make no apologies for the vehemence of our writing, for the reasons Christian Lund summarizes very well: "A plantation is probably the worst possible pathway to a decent, just and productive rural livelihood. A plantation is a process of deception, plunder, violence, lawlessness and impunity." We did not anticipate these findings when we began our research in 2010, but the darkness of the plantation world we discovered provoked us to conduct a comprehensive study of the set of economic, political and economic relations that plantation corporations install. The "unrelenting and sometimes provocative nature of the narrative", John McCarthy notes, is the result of our attempt to make sense of what we found, and to theorize about the conditions and practices that produce these outcomes, not idiosyncratically (as extreme cases or the work of bad actors) but systematically across Indonesia's plantation zone.

Our theorizations highlight four common features of Indonesia's corporate oil palm plantations: (1) they draw upon and sustain the colonial "myth of the lazy native" (Alatas 1977), according to which Indonesia's farmers are incapable of producing global market crops, hence the government is justified in granting subsidies and privileges to corporations so they can get the job done; (2) corporations obtain their land concessions under the 1960 Land Law, which (like its 1870 colonial predecessor) empowers the government to grant massive corporate land concessions that overlap land claimed by villagers and customary landholders; (3) Indonesia's Plantation Law makes corporations responsible for bringing their concessions into production but does not hold them responsible for the losses

experienced by the former landholders; and (4) all government officials in plantation zones, from the most senior to the lowest-level hamlet head, are formally required to facilitate corporate operations, such that their position as corporate collaborators compromises their capacity to defend the interests of villagers and workers who suffer injury and loss.

Taken together, these four elements provide the ideological and legal underpinnings of Indonesia's plantation sector, and we theorize they have effects consistent with our concept of "corporate occupation" or, more graphically, "living with giants". We examine the histories and processes that enable "giants" to take control over massive swathes of the Indonesian countryside, and we explore "plantation life" ethnographically through a grounded, human-centred account.

As Lund notes, our ethnography is full of people. We introduce readers to workers and managers, villagers and officials, local and transmigrant women and men, plantation defenders and plantation critics. Their diverse practices and dilemmas animate our account. From the opening metaphor of plantation-as-giant, we note that the giant is lazy and a bit stupid, so people who have to live with the giant have some room to manoeuvre. We describe a plantation as a machine, but we note that it is a leaky machine full of "toll booths" where people who occupy particular positions are able to extract an illicit share of plantation wealth. By calling it a machine, we stress that it is not anarchic: there is a system, but it is not a system governed by laws or bureaucratic rules. Some villagers describe the plantation zone as a "mafia system", by which they mean a predatory system in which people in positions of power (however petty) find ways to line their own pockets at someone else's expense.

Recognizing that theft can be predatory pushes against the temptation to classify theft as a "weapon of the weak" deployed to fight back against a corporation (Scott 1985). We give several examples of workers who steal to defend themselves by, for example, working slowly because they experience the demands placed on them as unreasonable. We also describe foremen who routinely steal ten

per cent of the workers' pay, or falsify the weight of a harvester's daily quota, predatory moves that workers must accept if they want to continue working. We show that excessive levels of theft can weaken the plantation corporations—the two we studied were close to bankruptcy at the time of our study despite peak palm oil prices. At the same time, theft helps plantation corporations survive: many people come to depend on the geese that lay golden eggs. Theft, however, leaves a bad feeling. Some managers were appalled at the sorry state of the palms on their plantations that had never received the correct amount of fertilizer; workers and villagers described their horror at having to live among thieves or become thieves in order to survive or prosper in the plantation milieu. Agency is everywhere in our account, but it is not a story of heroes and villains.

To figure out whether the forms of life we identified are common across plantation zones, more comparative research would be needed. But we believe falsification is a good starting point. We read every study we could find about Indonesia's oil palm plantations, looking for contrasting cases, but we found none. Problems with land acquisition, unfair smallholder schemes and a lack of good jobs for the local population are ubiquitous. No doubt some corporations are more benevolent and law abiding than others, and theft and corruption may be more or less prevalent, but we believe the structural causes we identified are generic. Corporate plantations are run by managers who often see themselves as underpaid, hence they are tempted to steal some of the wealth the plantation generates before it flows away to corporate headquarters; workers do the same. The tight link between corporations, bureaucrats and politicians makes licit and illicit payments for services routine. Attempting to extract more labour from workers and reduce the cost of wages and benefits is endemic in the corporate sector, where it is called "increasing efficiency and productivity". Nothing we found, in short, is exceptional.

There are some studies that describe the benefits that villagers may gain from their engagements with oil palm—a possible falsification of our generally bleak account—but on close inspection these studies are not about corporate plantations; they are about oil palm smallholders,

whose experience is variable, as McCarthy notes. With two ambiguous exceptions (Edwards 2019; Santika et al. 2019), we found no studies that examine, still less quantify, the benefits that local populations gain from the presence of plantation corporations occupying village land. Village officials who collaborate with the plantation corporations reap some benefits, but for everyone else the losses are severe. The claim that plantations bring jobs and prosperity to the local population is repeated endlessly by the oil palm corporation association GAPKI and by government officials, but neither corporations nor their supporters have found it necessary to support their claims with hard data—a finding that is remarkable in itself.

There is no doubt that smallholders who have farms of a viable size, access to good quality seedlings and a nearby mill can prosper from oil palm. Smallholders in our study who had six hectares or more prospered, and they generated a lively and diverse local economy. They paid good wages to neighbours who worked for them and they spent money on goods and services such as improving their houses, installing generators and so on. If support was in place, more farmers could benefit from adding oil palm to their farm repertoire, but the farmers in our study insisted that they wanted to farm their own land on their own terms, maintaining autonomy, flexibility and a diversity of livelihood sources. They had bitter experiences with a corporate-run out-grower scheme of the Soeharto era that took control of their land, burdened them with debt and left them with incomes far below the poverty line. A study by the Gecko Project (2017) confirms that the terms of more recent corporate out-grower schemes are significantly worse. We fully agree with McCarthy that the terms on which different groups of actors are incorporated into the oil palm economy are crucial, and our book contributes to this line of inquiry by identifying the mechanisms through which some people gain while others lose out.

McCarthy asks about an alternative to reform. We argue that efforts to reform oil palm plantations by making them more "sustainable" end up consolidating the dominance of plantation corporations. Piecemeal critiques of specific problems (e.g., deforestation, forced

labour) lead to piecemeal technical fixes but do not challenge the plantation format as such. We argue that a virtuous corporation that obeys every law and adopts good land, labour and environmental practices is still a giant. It monopolizes space, homogenizes landscapes, locks vast swathes of rural Indonesia into an inflexible development path, and subjects millions of Indonesians to life under corporate occupation. We support the call of Indonesia's land reform NGOs for a complete and permanent end to the issue of plantation licences. Land that corporations are holding in their so-called land banks or that they have occupied illegally should be returned to the customary landholders to use according to their own judgement. Plantations that are legally installed should be obliged to secure and sustain a social licence: if villagers in the surrounding areas agree that the plantation has brought them benefits, let it continue; if not, a fair and democratic process should be used to forge new arrangements.

At the same time as these steps unfold, the government should offer serious robust support to independent smallholders who want to grow oil palm or other crops on their lands, with a focus on farmers holding six hectares or less. In Thailand, eighty per cent of the oil palm is grown by farmers with holdings of less than four hectares (Byerlee 2014). If Thailand can adopt a pro-poor, small farmer–based model for growing oil palm, Indonesia can too. The reason plantation corporations dominate in growing oil palm is not technical: smallholders can produce as much oil palm fruit per hectare as plantations can, and they do so at a lower cost since they do not need to pay for managers, accountants or guards.

As McCarthy suggests, it is indeed a total "revaluation of the plantation model" that our study provides. The alternative is not reformed plantations but no more plantations, and much more support for Indonesia's dynamic and capable farmers. We invite readers to look to the future. Will Indonesia become a land dominated by giants that promise to bring benefits but cause deep and enduring destruction? Or will it be a nation that is socially just and civilized, as outlined by the constitution?

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