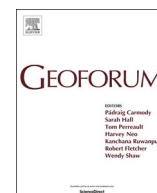




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The plantation and the mine: Comment on “After the land grab: Infrastructural violence and the ‘mafia system’ in Indonesia’s oil palm plantation zone” by Tania Li

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a commentary on Tania Li's paper, “After the land grab: Infrastructural violence and the ‘mafia system’ in Indonesia's oil palm plantation zone.” In her paper, Tania Li considers plantations as a spatial, politico-economic and socio-natural assemblage. Drawing on her recent work on African palm plantations in Indonesia, Li asks not only what is lost with the establishment of plantation, but also and perhaps more importantly, what is newly produced? The present paper notes the striking similarities between plantations and mines as territorialized sites of capital accumulation conditioned on radical ecological and social simplification.

1. The plantation

In her paper, Tania Li considers plantations as a spatial, politico-economic and socio-natural assemblage. Drawing on her recent work on African palm plantations in Indonesia, Li notes that in their political encompassment, their spatial expanse, and the social and ecological transformations they engender, plantations function as *total systems*; even more-than-total systems. Li asks not only what is *lost* with the establishment of a plantation, but also and perhaps more importantly, what is *newly produced*? It is, to a large extent, this bivalent character of subtraction/addition or absence/presence with which she is centrally concerned.

It is undeniable that African palm figures prominently in the contemporary pantheon of environmental villains, as they conjure the spectre of deforestation and biodiversity loss, with devastating and well-publicized effects for the populations of orangutans, amongst other tropical species (Gonchar, 2017). In Indonesia and elsewhere in South-East Asia, palm plantations are responsible for the clearance of massive swathes of rainforest, the burning of which creates air pollution emergencies on a regional scale. In Colombia, palm plantations have increased rapidly in recent years, as part of the ongoing enclosure and neoliberalization of the countryside. Not incidentally, palm plantations have been the focus of land grabs and the violent displacement of peasant farmers by armed groups with shadowy connections to putatively demobilized paramilitaries (Ballvé, 2012). It must be recognized, however, that if plantations are making a comeback, as Li avers, it is also the case that they never really went away. In Latin America,

banana, cacao, coffee, sugar and rubber plantations prevailed at various times and in various places from the 16th century onwards, and just as in the case of Indonesia, African palm is currently transforming landscapes and economies in Colombia, Ecuador and elsewhere. Along with the *hacienda*, plantations represent *latifundio* in the classic form: large capitalist landholdings dependent on servile labor and intimately connected to the global economy through the production of a single commercial crop. Indeed, Caribbean sugar plantations stood at the center of the triangular trade connecting Europe, Africa and the Americas, and demand for sugar, rum and other plantation products drove much of the slave trade and colonial conquest of what would become South and North America.

Throughout its long history, the plantation has been associated with multiple and overlapping forms of violence – most notoriously the institution of slavery throughout the Americas and elsewhere, but also other forms of exploitative labor relations, as well as physical violence perpetrated by armed gangs and hired thugs. These forms of brute violence continue on palm plantations in Indonesia and Colombia, as well as the vast and remote cattle ranches of Brazil and Paraguay (Correia, 2017). But, as Li details in her paper, plantations are also marked by forms of *infrastructural violence*: the disciplinary violence of roads, weigh stations, plantation facilities and housing compounds, which spatially and socially circumscribe lands and livelihoods, as well as the legal infrastructures of land rights rendered vulnerable by the imposition of investment capital. Surely, however, these forms of violence have a long association with the plantation form. While some of the contours of industrial infrastructural violence may be new, the

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phenomenon surely dates to the earliest days of mercantilist capitalism.

Another form of violence that Li examines is that commonly referred to as the ‘mafia system’: the manifold and often mundane forms of corruption associated with the plantation economy, which radiate outward and insinuate themselves into the myriad of social relations that extend well beyond the plantation itself. As Li makes clear in her paper, it is inaccurate to say that the plantation is beset with the problem of mafia, or that the mafia is an effect of the plantation system; rather, mafia is the system. The plantation is, in effect, the material manifestation of corruption so pervasive as to seem mundane. But again, the webs of corruption in which African palm plantations are enmeshed are not unique to plantations, and indeed are characteristic of many forms of capitalism, as evidenced by the long traditions of debt peonage, patronage and *caudillismo* that have long characterized plantation economies (Striffler, 2002).

Drawing Erving Goffman’s analysis of the hospital as a “total institution”, Li notes three important differences between Goffman’s case and her own: First, the plantation is a predatory and dispossessory institution that tends toward monopoly control of land and extreme concentration of wealth. Second, the plantation is characterized by “political encompassment.” In contrast to hospitals, plantations are spatially expansive and “loose on the edges,” with an indeterminate distinction between inside and outside. Spatially, economically and socially, it is unclear just where the plantation ends and something else begins. Plantations coopt and metabolize opposition, which contributes to the plantation’s indeterminate and expansionary qualities. Third, Li asserts that plantations are at once more *and less* totalizing than hospitals. On the one hand, plantations transform landscapes, rendering alternative livelihoods and ecologies all but impossible. On the other hand, their functioning rests on the existence and reproduction of part-time and casual labor, fostering a sense of precarity among workers and those who live adjacent to plantations.

2. The mine

In all these senses, plantations are not unlike mine sites, particularly in areas of the world where large-scale mining exists side-by-side and in symbiosis with small-scale agriculture or artisanal forms of extraction. Indeed, forms of industrial agriculture such as African palm, banana or sugar plantations, the monoculture production of soy or maize, or the industrial-scale farming of fish such as salmon (to name a few prominent examples) hold many features in common with mining and hydrocarbons production. As with palm plantations, large-scale extractive activities come to dominate local economies. It is not the case that mining, oil and natural gas automatically or inevitably supplant local livelihoods so much as subsume them, redirecting and circumscribing them according to extractivist logics and practices. As with African palm plantations, extractive activities routinely entail the dispossession of lands and the upending of livelihoods, at times through legal means (via market exchange or voluntary out-migration) or else through eminent domain, coercion, violence or trickery. Very often the legal and the criminal exist side-by-side and, as with the plantation’s indeterminate territoriality, money laundering, extortion and other activities make it difficult to determine exactly at what point one shades into the other (McSweeney and Pearson, 2013).

Economically, both plantations and extractive industries tend to exist as economic enclaves, isolated to greater or lesser extents from the surrounding economy. The plantation and the mine may each employ local residents as unskilled, temporary and precarious labor, but the relatively few skilled, technical positions they produce tend to be filled by outsiders, foreigners or nationals from the capital city (or other major urban area). The enclaves in this case work in two ways: the plantation is an economic enclave that in turn contains within it remnant and relatively isolated resident populations. By orienting toward the production of basic commodities for export, with minimal processing, extractive industries and plantations are both mono-economic –

single industries dominated by a single large capitalist firm – discouraging innovation and the formation of ancillary economic activity (what economists refer to as forward and backward linkages).

Environmentally, plantations and resource extraction both entail radical ecological transformation, often on a massive scale and sometimes in irreversible ways – as with mountaintop removal coal mining, open pit mining, and the extraction of bitumen from tar sands. One obvious difference between resource extraction and palm plantations is that the former are oriented toward the extraction of inorganic and therefore non-renewable materials such as minerals, oil and natural gas. They are, by definition, unsustainable. By contrast, as Li points out, with the use of chemical inputs, palm plantations can be replanted such that they can produce indefinitely. It bears remembering, however, that some mining regions and particular mine sites remain productive for generations. There are mines on the Bolivian Altiplano, for instance, that have been in production to one degree or another since the early days of the Spanish invasion. While not “sustainable” in any conventional sense, such mines are trans-generational (and are understood as such by those who work in and live near them). In a fundamental sense, both the plantation and the mine remind us that capitalism is, unavoidably, an environmental project (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Both represent the direct and industrial-scale appropriation of natural resources in the service of accumulation and in so doing reconfigure social relations and local ecologies.

Li refers to plantation-based oil palm production as a form extractive activity. She mentions this almost in passing, but I think there is analytical value in viewing industrial agriculture through an extractivist lens. The literature on resource extraction emphasizes environmental and social impact, social movement protests, and trans-local networks of investment and materials flows (e.g. Bridge and Bradshaw, 2017; Bebbington and Bury, 2013). By contrast, the literature on plantations emphasizes agrarian political economy, land grabbing, land rents and labor relations (Wolford et al., 2013). These processes are less distinct in practice than they might appear in theory. Extractive industries are implicated in vast land and water grabs, often in agricultural regions dependent on both land and water to sustain livelihoods (Stoltenberg and Boelens, 2016). Like mines, plantations are implicated in trans-local flows of resources, investment capital and commodities, and serve as the points of contact between national economies and international markets.

Moreover, many forms of industrial-scale agriculture and aquaculture share fundamental characteristics with extractive activities. As with Indonesian palm plantations, the production of soy in Brazil and Argentina, for instance, or the farming of salmon in Chile or British Columbia, represents the production of a single, standardized, mass-produced commodity for sale on world markets. This entails a radical ecological simplification of existing biodiversity, nutrient cycling and hydrology, necessitating massive chemical inputs. In some instances, intensive production leads to widespread ecological degradation, the erosion of topsoil or the introduction of parasites and other pests harmful to local environments. Additionally, palm, salmon and soy represent important sites of accumulation in the flows of transnational capital, and their production is in many ways more responsive to international financial markets and distant economies than they are to the political, economic or cultural aspirations of local residents.

One useful way to compare the plantation and the mine is through the lens of the resource regime (Marston and Perreault, 2017): territorialized complexes of capital flows, social relations, and sociocultures. Both the plantation and the mine are ‘total social facts’ given spatial and material form. Mines and plantations both represent the toxic entanglements between state and capital, which conjure their own peculiar forms of power, authority, patronage and accountability that transcend the bounds of local ecologies and communities. As with the production of Nigeria’s “oil complex” (Watts, 2004), we must also consider what the plantation and the mine represent to the states that promote them: forms of development, modernity, technical mastery

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