

Hall, Derek, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li. *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*. Singapore, NUS Press, 2011. 266 pp. ISBN: 978-9971-69-541-5.

Reviewed by

Erik Harms (Department of Anthropology, Yale University)

In this insightful, wide-ranging, and empirically detailed book, Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li show that all land dilemmas are, at root, defined by the basic fact of exclusion. Studiously avoiding moralizing arguments about what position readers should take about the various land dilemmas animating contemporary Southeast Asia, the authors focus instead on developing analytic tools. The tools they develop are elegant, ready for application in a wide range of situations, and will surely inform the next generation of writing about land in Southeast Asia. The authors begin by offering a clear, unambiguous argument that guides the book and informs the title: “all land use and access requires exclusion of some kind. Even the poorest people, farming collectively and sustainably, cannot make use of land without some assurance that other people will not seize their farms or steal their crops” (4). In other words, land is an increasingly scarce resource. If one person has it, another person does not. Inclusion implies exclusion, which is always a “double edge.” Granting access for some typically implies limiting access for others (8). This approach is purposefully apolitical: “Nowhere in this book do we reduce the problem of access to a dichotomy in which exclusion (bad) can be counterposed to inclusion (good)—indeed, the very terms of such a dichotomy are incoherent, since the inclusion of some land uses, and some land users, necessarily means the exclusion of others” (13). Rather than forcing readers to take sides, this book demands that readers take all sides into account, a position that will appeal to many readers and also frustrate others. Regardless of one’s position, however, this calm analytic detachment is no small accomplishment in the politically fraught world of Southeast Asian “land dilemmas,” where fortunes rise and fall, accumulation and dispossession run wild, and people from Sulawesi to Vietnam’s Central Highlands seem increasingly able to cite the current market value of their land off the top of their head.

If all land use is, for better or for worse, exclusive, the real challenge lies in understanding how exclusions play out in different contexts. In response to this challenge, the book develops a robust analytic framework which focuses on how exclusion operates through various “powers,” which include, but are not limited to, powers of *regulation*, *force*, *the market* and *legitimization* (4). The *power of regulation* can be summed up by the simple phrase: “It’s not allowed” (15). Regulation excludes by setting up rules and delineating land use, and by demarcating and limiting boundaries, ownership, and use-rights under the rubric of zoning. Regulation can be carried out by states, customary groups, and even transnational groups (16). The *power of the market* excludes by telling some people that they simply “can’t afford” land. Focusing on the market indicates how important land prices, speculation, and real estate are to understanding dynamics of exclusion. And prices, of course, are tied in with other factors, especially, but not only, regulation (18). The *power of force* excludes by asserting that harm will come to those who attempt to gain access to certain kinds of land.

Force, of course, can work in tandem with powers of regulation, but it also extends beyond them. Force can work top-down, but it also operates in other directions. Force also can work through implicit rather than explicit means (17). The *power of legitimation* appeals to morals and ideas of what “should be.” It tells people whether it is “right or wrong” to use certain kinds of land in certain ways (18). Because of their directness and explanatory force, the four powers described in the book recall the elegance and analytic clarity of Weberian ideal types. If Max Weber had spent his career researching land in Southeast Asia, he may well have written a book like this.

But Weber didn’t know much about Southeast Asia. These authors do. Like Clifford Geertz or Charles Keyes before them, Hall, Hirsch, and Li combine Weberian precision and theoretical clarity with the kinds of on-the-ground examples needed for an adequate explanation of the complexity of the Southeast Asian context. Specifically, they bring their combined expertise into comparative relief by carefully analyzing how the four different powers of exclusion map onto six different kinds (or “processes”) of exclusion that they describe as particularly important in contemporary Southeast Asia. The six processes, each the focus of a separate chapter, are: the rise of licensing regimes; the permeation of discourses of environmentalism; the expansion of boom crops; the rise of post-agrarian land-uses requiring land conversion; the fracturing and realignment of intimate relations among villagers; and the mobilization of groups agitating against exclusion. Each of these processes is discussed in terms of the ways the four different powers—of regulation, the market, force, and legitimation—combine and recombine in different ways depending on the context.

The breadth and range of examples used to illustrate these processes is impressive. The chapter on exclusion through licensing regimes, which they also call land formalization and allocation, is illustrated through land titling in Thailand and Laos, as well as the campaign for land redistribution in the Philippines. The chapter on exclusion through conservation and environmentalism is explored through the study of a protected area in Sulawesi, a community-based natural resource management in Cambodia, and a mitigation project associated with a dam in Laos. Exclusion through the rise of boom crops is illustrated through the study of oil palm production in Sarawak, shrimp farming in Thailand, and coffee crops in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Exclusion through “land conversion,” where formerly agricultural land is converted to other uses, is analyzed through the example of urbanization in Cavite in the Philippines, tourism in Bali and Angkor, as well as displacements associated with the Hoa Binh dam in Vietnam. The chapter on exclusion via kin and neighbors is illustrated with examples from village Java, highland Sulawesi, and upland Vietnam, where unequal land access is reemerging in villages. Finally, the last body chapter describes what the authors call “counter exclusions” or movements of people trying to reclaim land in Indonesia and Vietnam, and mobilizations against evictions like those seen in Thailand.

All of these case studies are clearly described and offer compelling examples of how the four powers of exclusion combine and recombine in complex yet eminently observable ways. When the authors describe how different powers overlap with different processes, they offer a logical framework that is rigid enough to enable clear comparison while retaining the flexibility to account for the complexities of different social, political, and cultural contexts. The book may overwhelm some readers with its scope, but it is especially illuminating for the way it combines empirical attention to detail with a clear comparative framework that self-consciously recombines and pushes the limits of ideal types in order to show how they blur into, and overlap with, each other. As the authors note, the four powers they identify are

not meant to be understood as the only powers at play, and the powers are rarely independent. They often operate together or are sometimes even “inextricably fused.” The delineation of four powers is meant as “an analytical and heuristic move” (197). It is a very good move indeed, for this is one of those rare collaborative volumes in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts. Much credit, it seems, is due to the methodology they have developed.