

## 40 Rural dispossession and resistance in Asia and Africa

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The acknowledgement of interpolations and current continuities between colonialism and development in development studies has been tenuous at best, if not muted. This is predictable perhaps given that Western developmentalism variously assumes colonisation as, in terms of Schumpeter's euphemistic oxymoron, 'creative destruction'. The colonial advantage in Asia and Africa whereby Western colonialists, together occupying less than 2 per cent of the earth's surface, claimed possession (from the 19th century) to 50 per cent of Asia and 90 per cent of Africa, was secured in the post-independence era by the colonial powers via the neo/colonial development (or underdevelopment) project (Fanon, 1963; Rodney, 2018 [1972]). Developmentalism's post/colonial anti-rural imperatives (Davis, 2002; Patel, 2013) wherein development pathways out of rural poverty, a condition produced by capitalist development in the first instance, are envisaged either as wage labour or migration, glosses over histories of rural resistance(s) by presuming an apolitical compliance and foregone acquiescence to development by rural habitants. Developmentalism thus continues to underplay if not obfuscate around its colonial pre-suppositions and the structural persistence of pre-existing existential realities and non-capitalist collective-communal modes of peasant and indigenous production. There would also appear to be a presumption that anti-colonialism and resistance in the post-independence period have died along with the anti-colonial nationalisms for independence, the latter being equated with a final rupture with colonialism itself.

The relatively recent introduction of the concept of accumulation by dispossession (ABD) (Harvey, 2003), given its geographical preoccupation with land and space, un/wittingly resuscitated the academic and political question of neo/colonial structures of power and the anti/colonial dialectic. The food/financial crises of 2007–2008 propelled attention to dispossession and, in Marx's terms, land grabbing. First researched and politicised by GRAIN in its 2008 report, *Seized! The 2008 Land Grab for Food and Financial Security* and subsequently by other international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social action organisations, including Oxfam, Food First, and The Oakland Institute (see *Driving Dispossession*, Oakland Institute, 2018), these activist interventions have since spawned a burgeoning academic scholarship on the global land grab in critical agrarian and peasant studies pertaining to South/east Asia, Africa, and the Americas wherein Africa alone accounts for 70 per cent of grabs. On a relatively more subdued scale, with the exception of firsthand reporting from activist organisations (see [farmlandgrab.org](http://farmlandgrab.org); [miningwatch.org](http://miningwatch.org); [pambuzuka.org](http://pambuzuka.org); [panap.net](http://panap.net)), this has also stimulated regionally focused academic research pertaining to anti/dispossession struggles in Asia and Africa from about the early 2000s (Borras & Franco, 2013; Caouette & Turner, 2009; Hall et al., 2011; McMichael, 2010;

Moyo & Yeros, 2005; Oliver-Smith, 2010), a scholarship which continues to lag the ground realities of persistent and pervasive land conflicts (see [landconflictwatch.org](http://landconflictwatch.org) or [ejatlas.org](http://ejatlas.org)).

### **Dispossession**

David Harvey's conceptualisation of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003), while eschewed by some Marxists for misinterpreting Marx, resuscitates the relatively neglected question of land and land-based politics in critical development studies. His conceptual and political innovation inadvertently augments the labour/capital dialectic and the politics of class conflict with an anti/colonial dialectic pertaining to land/place and anti-dispossession struggles. Seeking to address the lacunae in Marx's account of primitive accumulation and his 'failure to see the creative potential that resides in what some regard dismissively as "traditional" and non-capitalistic social relations and systems of production' (including 'acknowledging the significance of multiple identifications based on class, gender, locality, culture etc.'). Harvey underscores the need to 'assiduously cultivate the connectivity between struggles within expanded reproduction and against ABD' (2003: 179).

Unlike Marx's prognosis of primitive accumulation as the prehistory of capital, Harvey suggests that ABD is a permanent characteristic of capitalism; a recurring process which purportedly has, under contemporary neoliberal and extractive capitalism, become 'the dominant form of accumulation relative to expanded reproduction' (Harvey, 2003: 153, 176). His definition of ABD is expansive in scope and includes, *inter alia*, land and labour power commodification, asset privatisation, suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of livelihood, and monetisation and exchange, including the use of the credit system (Harvey, 2003: 176). While some argue for more precision in definition, prompting Levien (2013) to define dispossession as the extra-economic coercive acquisition of land and other resources by the state, overlooking the difficulty of sustaining the dichotomy between extra-economic and economic coercive means of accumulation, Indigenous scholarship suggests that terms such as the 'new imperialism' or dispossession, development, globalisation, neoliberalism, displacement, land grabbing, foreignisation, or enclosures, without flattening distinctions between them, are indicative of a 'deepening, hastening and stretching of an already existing empire' (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005: 601). Indigenous scholars thereby underscore colonial continuities or what Massimo De Angelis would recognise as the common social character of what *prima facie* appears to be distinct socio-economic processes.

Similarly, compelling distinctions between the state-led 'developmentalist regime of dispossession' in the post-independence era in the South (postcolony) and the current 'neoliberal regime of dispossession' where the state is a more conspicuous 'land broker' for capital and expropriates land from small farmers for inter/national corporations (Levien, 2013: 361) negates neo/colonial continuities by seeking to place these 'regimes' outside colonial relations of power. These conceptions hastily assume that post/colonial epochs signify a decisive and uncontaminated rupture in social relations, including between colonial and capitalist structures of power and politics.

Under the regimes of dispossession (Levien, 2013) cartographies of power, capitalist (state) reproductions of social relations of production (wage-capital structuration) is construed as all encompassing (imperialism), while neo/colonial and internal colonial structures of power (race-gendered anti/dispossession structurations concerning land/place and deracination or removal/extinction) are eviscerated. The underlying logic

of Indigenous and anti/de-colonial territorial and land struggles is distorted when it is presumed that what is singularly objectionable about dispossession is that it enables their exploitation as labour. As Glen Coulthard (Dene) puts it, Indigenous resistance and anti-capitalism are 'less about our emergent status as rightless proletarians' as the 'history of dispossession, not proletarianization, has been the dominant background structure' (Coulthard, 2014: 12–13).

In addition to the Marxist conception of primitive accumulation and related elaborations of ABD, an intra-European account pertaining to the transition from feudalism to capitalism wherein for Marx, dispossession as primitive accumulation came to refer to the initial separation process that separated immediate producers from direct access to the means of production, thus forcing them into new labour conditions, now mediated by way of the wage, there are at least three other spatial-temporal political locations of note for mobilising the protean concept and politics of dispossession. All are driven by the historical and contemporary reproduction of colonialism and capitalism as dispossession and regressive reorganisation in material (production) and cultural (representational) social relations.

*First*, the settler-colonial logic of dispossession wherein Anglo-settlers engaged in one of the single largest land grabs in human history amounting to 6 per cent of the earth's surface (9.89 million square miles of land) over the course of the 19th century alone (Nichols, 2020: 51); a process which Indigenous scholars allude to as the experience of colonialism as an ongoing structure of dispossession which targets indigenous peoples for elimination since indigenous bodies don't relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it (Coulthard, 2014).

*Second*, the black radical tradition underscores the dispossession of slaves from Africa, including the commodification of slaves as speculative property; 'slavery as a critical foundation for capitalism' (Robinson, 2000: 163) as 19 million Africans perished in the Atlantic crossing during the mercantile period of capitalism. Anti-black racism and internal colonialism continue to define projects of deracination, while black feminists address bodily/reproductive dispossessions and dispossessed lives.

A related and *third* tradition of interpretation and politics is dispossession in relation to capital accumulation via a world system of colonial exploitation, including Asia and Africa, or what Lenin referred to as the highest stage of capitalism, namely, imperialism. Colonial capital realises surplus value through every means, taking advantage of uneven development globally, including, as per Rosa Luxemburg's observations, the exploitation of racialised labour in regions where the white race is not capable of working and where capital needs other races to exploit territories. Colonial capitalist dispossession of Africa and Asia prompted Fanon (1963: 76) to state that 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World ... an opulence that has been fuelled by the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races'. As formal and informal colonies gained independence and joined the march of civilisation and development, some of these countries became colonisers themselves and in the case of those that were unable to control and exploit new regions, as the economist Amit Bhaduri notes, imperialism turns inwards as wars are now waged on their own citizens in the name of development.

Neo/colonial regimes of dispossession of marginal social groups and classes and non-capitalist modes of production persist through what are now referenced as 'regimes of development dispossession' and 'regimes of neoliberal dispossession' (Levien, 2013), including neo-colonial dispossession via structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed on rural populations in Asia and Africa in the 1980s–1990s as market disciplining

and withdrawal of social protections (Davis, 2006), Western development aid and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa (Langan, 2018) and a ‘new extractive capitalist scramble for African resources’ by an inter/national capitalist class (Wengraf, 2018). The 19th-century Euro-colonial plantations of Southeast Asia continue to carve the landscape into industrial agriculture and tree plantation development zones as mega projects wherein the region is currently the source of 76, 86, and 59 per cent of the world’s palm oil, rubber, and coconuts respectively and Malaysia and Indonesia alone account for 16 million hectares of palm oil cultivation, while 1 million hectare of non-traditional cash crops like rubber has been planted in China, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar (Lazar & Ishikawa, 2019).

The 2007–2008 financial and food crises, the latter sparked by a spike in commodity prices, triggered the agricultural land grab, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa and Central/Southeast Asia in terms of the Asian–African regions; a period evidenced by a ‘vast expansion of bourgeois rights ... a global land grab unprecedented since colonial times ... as speculative investors now regard “food as gold” and are acquitting millions of hectares in the global South’ (Araghi & Karides, cited in Kapoor, 2017: 5). Large-scale land ‘acquisitions’, in the vicinity of anywhere between 46 and 225 million hectares (the size of western Europe), have since taken place in relation to oil/mining, agribusiness (monoculture plantations), industry (e.g., special economic zones), conservation and biofuels, residential development (including remittance-based purchases), tourism, and speculation on land. According to the World Bank, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Mozambique account for 23 per cent of global demand for large-scale ‘acquisitions’, while sub-Saharan African governments (where states have formal ownership of land) have fully accepted arguments about the development benefits of foreign direct investment FDI promoted by the Bank/international financial institutions (IFIs) which in turn have diluted customary tenure regimes at village, tribal, or clan level (Hall, 2013). According to the Oakland Institute, the same interventions by these actors are being reproduced in Zambia, Papua New Guinea, and Sri Lanka (see report on *Driving Dispossession* (Mousseau et al., 2016) and the World Bank’s *Enabling the Business of Agriculture* report (Yacoub Hindiyeh, 2019)). Key actors involved in these deals include: (i) governments/states (e.g., China, US, UK, Gulf states) on the investment side and recipient states seeking to attract FDI (e.g., Cambodia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Philippines, Tanzania, Vietnam); (ii) transnational corporations and international and domestic capital; (iii) IFIs; and (iv) groups trying to regulate/resist the land grab (e.g., international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)/World Food Security, social movements).

*Recommended reading:* [www.farmlandgrab.org](http://www.farmlandgrab.org); [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org); [www.pambazuka.org](http://www.pambazuka.org); [www.panap.net](http://www.panap.net); <https://ejatlas.org>; [www.miningwatch.ca](http://www.miningwatch.ca); [tni.org](http://tni.org); [minesminerals&people](http://minesminerals&people).

## **Rural dispossession and resistance in Asia and Africa**

*In colonial countries, only the peasantry is revolutionary ... all that the colonized has seen on his land is that he can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity. ... the land is the most meaningful ... and it is land which must provide bread and natural dignity (Fanon, 1963: 9).*

Indigenous people, small/landless peasants-sharecroppers and indentured labour/migrant workers, forest dwellers, pastoralists and nomads, fisherfolk and their extended social relations in the urban peripheries/slums are the canaries in the neo/colonial mine of

capitalist accumulation. Given Harvey's expansive definition of ABD, dispossession-related resistance is as varied as the multiple means of dispossession, i.e., these are dialectical or mutually constitutive processes. Whatever the forms of resistance to dispossession or the weakness of the weapons, for those occupying the lower rungs of multiple hierarchies of power, few would willingly give up (historical) claims of domicile or embrace socio-cultural and political-economic dispossession. Those that do engage the terrain of commodification, then presumed to be (willing?) self-interested rational instrumental actors in prevailing Northern agrarian accounts of rural social change, have typically been overtly coerced (extra-economic and impinging economic coercion/structures), bribed or deceived by state-corporate actors (e.g., corporate social responsibility palliatives) and/or by feudal/tribal elites and middle/big farmers at the interstices of feudal-capital social relations in contexts of dispossession.

Academic attention to resistance to dispossession in rural/development studies has been muted for several reasons (Borras & Franco, 2013), including prevailing disciplinary onto-epistemes which assume development neo/colonisation and subsequently evade the question of (anticolonial) resistance(s). Asian and African examples of dispossession-related resistance from a recent collection edited by the author, henceforth referenced as *ACRD* (Kapoor, 2017), are utilised below for purposes of illustration and brevity.

Resistance, to whatever degree or strength/weakness of the weapons and forms of expression, entails active opposition to existing colonial capitalist power relations driving dispossession in trenches encompassing fields, subterranean locations, water bodies, and forests. Resistance is mostly overt of necessity given the oft irreversible colonising implications of dispossession for ways of life/living. It is as conspicuous as acts of dispossession themselves (e.g., dams/flooding) and collective (dis/organised) given the numbers directly impacted at the point of enclosure (e.g., mine site) and beyond (ripple effects), if not simultaneously covert and quotidian, as in the case of workers employed by mines that they may be opposing. Resistance to dispossession can be sporadic or sustained over time in the case of organised collective action, which, when backed by dense social networks becomes a movement. It also encompasses various anticipatory, proactive, or ongoing (historical) parallel land-based projects including: food sovereignty, (re)commoning (public space assertions) or Indigenous sovereignty/territorial claims, as it does reactive activism produced at flash points of dispossession. In Kenya, rural (elderly) women farmers are drawing together several thousand (intergenerational) peasant farmers in food sovereignty activities (ancient seed saving), networks and campaigns, and relinking commoner value chains as opposed to corporate (Big Ag: Monsanto, Syngenta, IFIs, Gates Foundation, US Agency for International Development) value chains (Brownhill, Kaara & Turner, *ACRD*). In Samoa, where 80 per cent of customary land is being targeted as collateral for business loans encouraged by the Asian Development Bank, chiefs (*matai*) have taken up indigenisation via the *Fono* council to assert the Samoan way (*fa'aSamoa*) (Gordon, *ACRD*).

Keeping in mind the interests of dispossession struggles waged by those directly implicated at the point of enclosure, three key (imbricated) issues pertaining to dispossession-related resistance are considered here.

*First*, dispossession-related struggles and rural resistance usually involve multiple ontologies (valuations) of land and socio-cultural and political-economic interests across class, gender, ethnicities/tribal affiliations, race, caste, religion, and so forth, given that rural dispossession variously and differentially implicates multiple social groupings and subsequently, the social composition of related resistance. The continuous challenge for

social formations of resistance pertains to the construction and maintenance of cohesion, unified opposition, and organisation glued by/to an intelligible political teleology across interests and valuations of land.

As of January 2021, 200,000 mainly smallholders and farmers' (*kisan*) unions camped around New Delhi, India, for over a month have been protesting three 'anti-farmer' bills imposed by the neoliberal saffron (Hindu fundamentalist) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government. Protest against an unprecedented corporate (e.g., Ambani/Reliance petrol stations and cell phones are being boycotted by protestors) agricultural grab designed to replace the current state system of collective procurement (including price setting) and a public distribution system with private control and ownership has cohered across caste, religion, class, and gender (symbolised by women driving or learning to drive tractors to Delhi) given the broader political-economic interests at stake for farmers and peasants (including rural women and Dalits/outcastes) in/from the bread-basket Punjab region. Unlike migrant labour struggles, this is a rooted place-based mobilisation at the epicentre, fast taking on national proportions (e.g., an estimated 250 million participated in a nationwide general strike on 26 November 2020).

In attempting to address similar tensions around organising and on a smaller scale, the Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti successfully organised the core constituency of Dongria, Jharnia, and Kutia Adivasi and Dalits in 112 villages in eastern India to protect Niyamgiri mountain over two decades from the Vedanta/Sterlite (UK) bid to mine bauxite, by claiming it as a sacred site and as a source of livelihood. They also organised around an economic and physical geography of mountains, rivers, and streams with corresponding socioecological implications of hill-top mining for these groups located at various points on this terrain (Kapoor, *ACRD*).

Small/landless peasant organising along with plantation labour and Saluan ethnic groups against coconut plantations in Bohotakong village in Sulawesi, Indonesia, on the other hand, has persisted but fluctuated over three decades due to competing claims and class-ethnic interests and valuations of land/labour (Masalam, *ACRD*). The common experience with apartheid in South Africa (which restricted 80 per cent of the black population to 13 per cent of the land), however, helped mobilise mainly black citrus and vegetable farm workers and small/landless peasants against white farming capital in the Eastern Cape under *Phakamani Siyephambili* (Naidoo, Klerck, & Helliker, *ACRD*). Similarly, in Uganda, the stalling of Madhavani Group's Amuru Sugar Works sugarcane cultivation seeking 40,000 hectares by all family farmers around the village of Lakang was possible because the overwhelming majority of small producers unequivocally rejected enclosure and refused incorporation as outgrower farmers or labourers; a lucid claim of land sovereignty and autonomy vis-à-vis capitalist markets and state (Martiniello, 2015).

A *second* set of issues confronting dispossession-related resistance at the point of enclosure concerns cross-scalar vertical alliances and assemblages of activism with national advocacy networks (NANs) and transnational advocacy networks (TANs) potentially involving: related movements (e.g., human rights, environmental, Indigenous, labour); I/NGOs; activist/research organisations; media; religious organisations; and increasingly, political parties and guerrilla movements (e.g., Maoists/India and the New People's Army/Philippines). Horizontal alliances with different anti-dispossession movements in the region also present opportunities and specific issues for what is essentially a coalitional politics of resistance to dispossession.

Local movements at the point of enclosure, while locking on state-corporate agents of dispossession, also contend with the politics of boundary spanning and its contradictory

implications and prospects. In the African context, TANs have succeeded in affecting several cancellations, failures, stoppages, and suspensions on conversions from farmland, grazing, forests, mangroves, pastureland, wildlife corridors etc. to flex-crop (sugar, ethanol, and palm oil), biofuel (oilseeds, jatropha), and tree plantations (eucalyptus, pine) involving anywhere from 15,000 to 1.3 million hectare foreign concessions in Kenya (Tana River Delta), Tanzania, Uganda, Niger, Ghana, Senegal, South Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique (Limpopo), and South-West Cameroon (see farm-landgrab.org and EJAtlas). Similarly, in the Southern Philippines, Lumad indigenous resistance in the mining zone in Mindanao has converged with left formations and the New People's Army to address ongoing state-corporate incursions (Rodriguez, *ACRD*). In Bangladesh, however, the Rampal coal power plant land grab (with ecological implications for mangroves in the Sundarbans) and related small farmer and landless labour resistance have been hijacked by international green capitalist environmentalist non-governmental organisations, shrimp farming capital, and feudal-capitalist classes and steered towards commodification (Mookerjea & Misra, *ACRD*). NGO-isation or professionalisation and de-politicisation of anti-mining and other anti-dispossession movements can also prove problematic for the struggle at the point of enclosure in these assemblages, as some NGOs steer movement constituents towards the terrain of commodification or potentially derail movement objectives (Kapoor, *ACRD*), while others can help consolidate claims, as in the case of the Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA), a social action NGO which magnified coastal fisher resistance to tsunami-related disaster relief-related dispossession and shrimp farming interests in Tamil Nadu, India (Swamy & Revathi, *ACRD*).

Discourses of development/resistance too, are influenced by trans/national actors (e.g., human rights and environmental framing), amplifying or contradicting articulations of activism at the point of enclosure. Radio Ada has played an instrumental role in ensuring that the perspective and interests of local clans and artisanal salt mining cooperatives around the Ada salt lagoon front the resistance to Vacuum Salt Ltd. in Ghana (Langdon & Larweh, *ACRD*) at the national level, while, in the case of early germination of organised resistance by artisanal miners to Acacia Mining's North Mara Gold Mine in Tanzania, transnational media/investigative journalism (with allied campaigns like Protest Barrick) has publicised these remote struggles (Moloo, *ACRD*). All cross-scalar dis/connections require movement vigilance and political boundary maintenance wherein local struggles selectively de/legitimate these relations.

*Thirdly*, anti-dispossession resistance perennially contends with strategic and tactical issues, including consideration of the aforementioned assemblages and the in/efficacy of an un/necessary politics of scale/networking. Strategic and tactical concerns are compelled by changes in the tactics of dispossession by state-corporate agents which demand contingent responses, including when/not to resort to: legal activism (e.g., to buy time); direct action (e.g., barricades, sabotage, blocking survey teams—raising the risk rating of investments); open/hidden resistance (e.g., storm refinery gates while symbolically wielding traditional weapons); and non/violent action (as triggered by development violence); public/popular mobilisation/education (media expositions) (*ACRD*, 2017). State-facilitated large-scale land grabs in the Benishangul-Gumuz region in Ethiopia for commercial crops and biofuels have been enabled by the Derg regime's forced re-settlement programme, thereby prompting Gumuz to engage a range of tactics, including arson; re-occupations ('illegal' cultivation); flight; and violence against migrant agricultural labour imported by the regime (Moreda, *ACRD*). Reliable and timely information is also indispensable for tactical purposes and trans/national alliances can facilitate this, as

in the case of Mukaya Payam (South Sudan) opposition to a Texas-based company's 49-year (extendable to 100) lease of 600,000 hectares for US\$25,000 with the Mukaya Payam Cooperative (a fictitious entity) for the right to exploit timber without limit, to plant palm oil and jatropha, and to develop wood-based industry. The oustees were not even aware of the deal until the Oakland Institute's research and advocacy alerted them to this state-corporate-rural elite grab. Similarly, NANs and TANs can also augment local/indigenous knowledge with scientific knowledge capacity where needed (e.g., for challenges concerning environmental clearance for mining projects).

Strategic directions typically converge around: (i) bargaining (for prices, jobs, and wages) within the terrain of commodification and expanded reproduction wherein associated tactics are more in keeping with forms of compliant defiance (e.g., legal tactics within the terms/institutions of the architects of dispossession or colonial justice and capitalist incorporation); (ii) an anti-colonial politics unequivocally against ABD utilising relatively more disruptive radical democratic tactics (e.g., anti-colonial threat/use of counter-violence); and (iii) multiple positions given varied constituents in coalitions and networks, wherein tactics are multi-pronged or even politically counter-productive.

To the extent that these forms of dispossession-related rural struggles in the Asian and African contexts are sources of resistance to colonial capital (Anderson, 2010; Kohn & McBride, 2011), they would strive to adhere to the socio-political interests of territorial and customary claims of the Indigenous/tribal ethnicities, smallholders/landless peasants, pastoralists, fishers, un/waged rural plantation/farm labour and paupers vis-à-vis the architects of dispossession, i.e., capitalist and consumer classes, feudal/landed elites, and the neoliberal capitalist state. Alliances across modes of production and subaltern classes coalescing around anti/colonial land-based resistance and un/waged rural labour, along with the struggles of the industrial working class, will continue to be the backbone of a postcapitalist revolutionary prospect.

*Recommended reading:* Edelman et al. (2018); Kapoor (2017); Temper et al. (2020); Wengraf (2018).

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