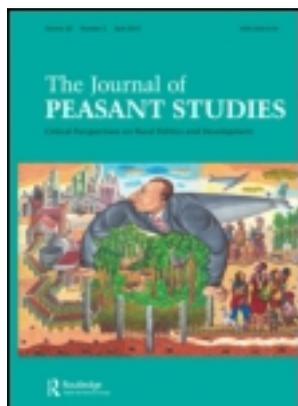


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The agrarian question in the neoliberal era: primitive accumulation and the peasantry

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The agrarian question in the neoliberal era: primitive accumulation and the peasantry, by Utsa Patnaik and Sam Moyo, Cape Town, Fahamu Books and Pambazuka Press, 2011, vi + 89 pp., £8.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-85749-038-4

The relationship between contemporary ‘land grabs’ and the classical agrarian question is now a subject of great scholarly interest, and burning political importance. Whether understood as accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), ongoing primitive accumulation (Perelman 2000, Hart 2002, De Angelis 2007), or accumulation through encroachment (Patnaik 2005) or displacement (Araghi 2009), many are trying to come to grips with forms of contemporary dispossession that, while sharing the ‘blood and fire’, do not exactly resemble the type of original transition to capitalist agriculture Marx first described. This short book represents a timely intervention into these debates by two reputed scholars of the agrarian question in India and Africa.

The book is structured as a series of short, solo-authored essays (some adapted from talks), written in a style that combines scholarly intervention into specialized debates, a relatively accessible overview of political economic trends, and a political call to arms. In Section 1, Patnaik covers terrain that may not be novel to those familiar with her decades of work on historical trends of agrarian change and contemporary restructurings of agriculture under neoliberalism. It begins by challenging Bernstein’s (1996) argument that in the age of globalization, transforming a stagnant peasant agriculture is no longer necessary to create the surpluses for capitalist industrialization in poor countries. Somewhat counter-intuitively, Patnaik proceeds to back up this point not by showing why such a transition *is* necessary in countries like India, but by arguing that it was in fact *never* necessary in countries like England.

Reanalyzing data on per-capita food production in the 18th and 19th centuries, Patnaik rejects the commonly held view that England underwent a domestic agrarian revolution that underpinned its subsequent industrial one. After 1750, England’s agricultural productivity mostly failed to keep pace with population growth and the country could only meet its food and raw material requirements through transfers from its agriculturally more abundant tropical colonies. It is not true, Patnaik argues, that agriculture in the north was more productive than in the south (such arguments are based on comparing single-crop yields, neglecting the multiple cropping seasons in tropical climates); then, as now, the real issue is an exploitative global political economy that enhances northern diets and profits, while undermining peasant agriculture and food security in the global south. After an excursus on the logical fallacies of Ricardo’s theory of comparative advantage,

Patnaik asserts that forced integration into export markets through free trade, the expenditure deflating policies of finance capital, and the concomitant failure to invest in agriculture have generated the present agrarian crisis in India and elsewhere. Contemporary land grabs represent the renewed attempts of an ascendant finance capital to control the land and natural resources of the global south. A joint peasant-worker struggle against imperialism is necessary to 'resist displacement from the land' and restore 'the viability of small-scale production' along cooperative lines (52).

Moyo's shorter Section 2 explains Africa's 'failed agrarian transition' in the light of colonial and neoliberal 'accumulation by dispossession' and 'super-exploitation of labor' (63). His brief sketch of the regional differences in the pattern of dispossession between settler and non-settler colonies provides a useful backdrop to today's 'land grabs', or 'transnational agricultural investments.' Moyo argues that after the brief interregnum in which post-colonial states slowed the pace of dispossession, neoliberal policies reaccelerated the process of undermining and dispossessing small peasants by disinvesting in agriculture, exposing farmers to international markets, and encouraging large-scale farming and ranching. Moreover, by reforming/privatizing land tenures, the first wave of neoliberalism created the basis for this new round of land grabs, which, Moyo observes, are mostly utilizing land that had already been alienated to large farmers or corporations. This 'new scramble over African lands for agriculture, mining and natural resource extraction' reflects 'the escalation of capital's speculative tendency to accumulate by dispossession, in the wake of the collapse of the housing, energy and secondary financial markets' (73, 78).

We might do well to separate the authors' arguments about past and present agrarian transitions on the one hand, and contemporary land grabs on the other. To begin with the first, Patnaik's argument about the absence of an agrarian revolution in England, while provocative, will leave some unconvinced. The question is which form of primitive accumulation analyzed by Marx, the enclosures and creation of agricultural capitalism in England, or colonial plunder abroad, was more consequential for industrial capitalism. This long debate has become quite polarized, and Patnaik's argument reflects the tendency to take an either/or position on the issue. But it is possible to argue that colonial plunder made a large contribution to the development of capitalism in England without arguing that its domestic enclosures and the development of agrarian capitalism were of no consequence. By arguing the latter, Patnaik leaves herself open to several criticisms.

First, some might question Patnaik's use of per capita grain production in the 18th century (and emphasis on the poor quality of the native English diet) as the sole indicator of whether England's domestic agriculture contributed to capitalist industrialization. As many have argued since Marx, the development of capitalist agriculture contributes to industrial capitalism in multiple ways – by increasing and concentrating profits and rents (which, as Patnaik notes, *did* rise), 'freeing' people from agriculture, and by creating a home market. All of these can – and usually do – happen without the resulting propertyless laborers being particularly well fed. They just must be fed enough to show up for work, which Brenner argues they were in England during the more decisive 16th and 17th centuries, in which increased agricultural productivity allowed England to support a rapidly growing population that could move away from agriculture without the subsistence crises and price

fluctuations experienced previously in England and concurrently in Europe (Brenner 1985, 51–54). By starting her analysis in the 18th century, it is not clear how Patnaik can counter this argument.

Second, Patnaik's emphasis on grain availability sits uneasily with her own acknowledgement that most of England's coerced trade with its overseas colonies involved non-basic food stuffs, which is not to say that these were insignificant for capitalism (e.g. Mintz 1986). But the more limited and convincing argument one might draw from Patnaik's data is that while primitive accumulation at home was vitally for the development of industrial capitalism in England, primitive accumulation abroad subsequently provided many of the necessary raw materials and made the English working class less hungry (and more stimulated) under an already developed capitalism than they otherwise would have been. It must be said, however, that it is unclear exactly what implications we should draw from this for agrarian transitions in other countries today, and how this would refute Bernstein's thesis.

The authors' arguments about the generally destructive effects of neoliberalism on peasant agriculture in India and Africa will be objectionable mostly to the World Bank and present Indian and African governments. The high-altitude overview they provide will serve as a useful primer to non-specialists. Their proposed solution of restoring small-scale peasant agriculture, or 'accumulation from below', will smell of Chayanovian neo-populism to some, but even those not predisposed to being critical might have appreciated a more detailed roadmap of how that might possibly be accomplished.

When it comes to theorizing contemporary land grabs, however, the authors' contributions raise more questions than they answer. To begin with, there is a proliferation of terms – primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation through encroachment, and accumulation through displacement – that are neither defined nor differentiated from each other. Is the primitive accumulation of the title defined functionally as that which creates the pre-conditions for capitalist development, or by the extra-economic means specific to it? If primitive accumulation is ongoing, why is it ongoing, how does it vary across time and place? What do contemporary land grabs – like those today in India over SEZs, housing colonies, factories, and mines – have to do with primitive accumulation as classically understood in the transition to capitalist agriculture? Can we call land dispossessed or grabbed if it is bought on the market – as Moyo says is true of many of today's large land deals in Africa?

Part of the reason for this lack of conceptual clarity is the absence of any fine-grained empirical analysis of contemporary forms of land dispossession. The high-altitude view leads to not very illuminating generalizations, such as that contemporary land grabs arise from finance capital, and vague political wishes – that they must be resisted as part of the worker-peasant alliance against imperialism. To begin with, why does 'global capital' now look to dispossess and own land rather than simply control its use or appropriate its surpluses? Which fractions of capital are driving the expropriation of different kinds of assets in different places? Why is land dispossession largely for non-agricultural purposes in India and agricultural ones in Africa? Do these processes have anything in common? Why are states willing to dispossess land for capital, and what kind of state restructuring does this involve? What kinds of political struggles are these

contemporary dispossessions generating and how are their dynamics similar to or different from working class and other forms of peasant politics? On what basis could struggles over 'accumulation by dispossession' unite with those over 'expanded reproduction', and what are the possible contradictions between them? These are questions that need to be asked of the moment, but they cannot be answered at such a high level of abstraction.

What does seem clear is that contemporary forms of land dispossession are very difficult to understand as 'more of the same' primitive accumulation. In India, they are almost entirely for non-agricultural purposes (though Indian companies are acquiring agricultural land in Africa), and the neoliberal era has seen a transition from a development model that dispossesses peasants for dams and steel mills, to one that dispossess them for SEZs, IT parks, and upscale housing colonies. These large expropriations of land are entirely oblique to India's stalled agrarian transition, and represent a very different kind of dispossession (and politics) than that arising from the diffuse and grinding pressure on indebted farmers. While Patnaik seems to use 'the land question' and 'agrarian question' synonymously, the land question today is quite distinct from the old agrarian question: it is not about extracting the surpluses from agriculturalists for industrialization, but rather expropriating land from agriculturalists for industrial development and real estate speculation. Meanwhile, we need to know much more empirically about what today's agricultural land grabs in Africa and elsewhere look like on the ground (and in the boardroom), so we can begin to theorize what in fact is new about them, who they are dispossessing, and with what consequences for various agrarian classes. Chalking both up to finance capitalism and imperialism does not begin to answer these questions.

One should not place the demands of a monograph on a short collection of essays that, moreover, is written for a broad audience with a political purpose in mind. However, what this short book most clearly illustrates is the difficult fit between old frameworks of agrarian change and the new realities of contemporary land dispossession, which calls for theoretical reconstruction based on comparative empirical research.

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Land tenure, gender and globalization: research and analysis from Africa, Asia and Latin America, edited by Dzodzi Tsikata and Pamela Golah, 2010, New Delhi, Zubaan and Ottawa, International Development Research Centre, xii + 299 pp., INR 395 (paperback), ISBN 1098654321. Free download available at <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/43683/1/130252.pdf>

This publication brings together reflections about cutting edge research findings on complex interactions of gender, globalization and land tenure. The book comes at a time when, once again, these issues have become topical as a result of increasing concerns around climate change and the on-going controversial large-scale transactions in land in the developing world. The publication brings together illustrious scholars to extend the boundaries of feminist knowledge about globalization, land and gender and also illustrate similarities and differences that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The book is unique in that it uses local realities to illustrate how gender relations in land tenure are as much a product of global processes as they are of local ones, and that land relations and gender identities are constantly evolving in response to local and external pressures.

The book extends the debate on globalization to embrace the policy dimensions, social processes, cultural implications and historical issues that have been largely marginalised (Jaggar 2001). The authors use a gendered lens to develop a unique framework for exploring the synergies between gender, land tenure and globalization. The authors suggest that the meanings of land, gender and globalization are negotiated in diverse contexts by various actors at specific points in time. Their case studies show how women are marginalised on various levels as outsiders who negotiate with governments, local lineage chiefs and through the market. The findings reveal the governance gap between the actors and the institutions that shape the global arena to highlight the often understated gendered costs of globalization. The publication focuses on the local level to highlight the impact of globalization on women in marginalised communities whose experiences and vulnerabilities would have been glossed over by research focused on activities at the national and/or macro level.

The authors provide practical examples of how current research methodologies can be adapted to interrogate the interconnectedness between land, gender and globalization. The publication relies on case studies in diverse study sites to illustrate the impact of global processes on local dynamics and livelihoods, which enables them to consider the mediating effects of local and cultural settings on globalization. It also has the added benefit of illustrating how similar processes can impact different communities in distinct ways. In her foreword, Ann Whitehead aptly describes the collection as a 'stimulating heir to some central themes in contemporary feminist