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Plantations are everywhere! between infrastructural violence and inclusive development

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Tania Murray Li's article *After the Land Grab: Infrastructural Violence and Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone*, placing it in the wider debates about global land grabbing and inclusive development.

1. Introduction

Murray Li's article, which focuses on the rapid expansion of oil palm in Kalimantan, demonstrates that oil palm plantations are violent in destroying existing livelihoods and local rules. Plantations are considered 'machines', bringing about the total material, social and political transformation of rural life. They are violent in the sense that 'as a system' they destroy other forms of life, and preclude other futures due to the set of material, social and political relations they fix in place. Plantations provide an involuntary grid for socioeconomic and political life. Underneath the 'orderly structure' (behind the linear grid of roads, palms, mills, etc.) there is 'predation', the violent underside of plantations, helping plantations to reinforce themselves and further expand. Plantations are, in other words, intended to do much more than generate profit. According to Murray Li, 'the plantation is everywhere' and mafia practices (shaped and enabled by the plantation's material infrastructure and official rules) help to enrich some people and leave others with small shares, or perhaps no share at all of plantation wealth. Plantation systems are predatory, and their victims are hierarchically arranged. 'There is no controlling family, and no boundary separating members from non-members.' Ultimately, it is the poor who lose the most, and gain the least, from the ways these systems work. According Murray Li, plantation systems affect not only the lives of the 'directly affected'; even bypassed people are affected by these systems (husbands must migrate out to find work in other districts). In other words, as soon as plantation systems enter in an area, it is 'the system' that takes over: everybody becomes part of the oil palm machine and there is no way to escape, unless moving to other, far-away areas.

2. Land grabbing?

The article provides a very interesting contribution to the land grab debate: rather than focusing on 'what has been lost and removed' (as many others do), Murray Li tries to fill the gap by focusing on 'what is coming in its place'. Focusing on what emerges after the land has been taken, Murray Li confirms the process that has often been described in the context of the land grab debate: 'empty or underutilized areas of frontier land' (i.e. low density area with dispersed groups) are being replaced by plantations. It is in fact the implantation of a new system in an area that used to be occupied by indigenous groups who used the land for slash and burn practices.

In describing the process, it is clear that during the establishment of a plantation, violent and irreversible processes of material destruction take place:

> On the material level, they begin with the production of a tabula rasa. Bulldozers remove all tree cover, carve terraces into hillsides, and obliterate signs of previous habitation. (…) The installed infrastructure is overwhelming linear: Roads are laid out in straight lines, carving plantations in regular blocks (…). Relations between workers are governed by the hierarchy of their job description; out growers are disciplined (have to harvest the same day etc.).

In describing the 'tyranny' of this infrastructure', Murray Li clearly focuses on path dependency and locked-in-ness ('the scale and density of landscape transformation makes it impossible to revert to the status quo ante'). It is clear that, once established, plantations are difficult to stop, forcing people into new grids, disciplining their lives and pushing them in a certain direction, or forcing them to move to other areas.

There are various reasons why the expansion of oil palm happens

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quickly and relatively easily. In the case of large-scale land investments, local groups and leaders play an active role in attracting investors, as the former often have high expectations about the potential benefits and hope to profit from the employment that will be generated (see also Kaag and Zoomers, 2014). This is in line with what Murray Li describes: large-scale investment often remains uncontested. An important reason why people do not engage in collective protest action is that as soon as a plantation is in place, 'everybody has become an insider in the sense that everybody seems to be driven to gain a share of plantation wealth'. People are caught between the loss of land and the desire for a share of the benefits (oil palm, access to electricity, etc.) that large-scale projects can deliver. Investment projects often come in by promising a better life (employment, services, electricity supply, etc.). According to Murray Li, 'local people are willing to give away their land voluntarily on the basis of the expected benefits: they value infrastructure so highly that they are willing to give away the major part of their land resources'. Plantations (or other investment projects) are not halted because nobody is willing to exclude themselves from the potential flow of wealth. Another reason why resistance is not mounted is that investors take 'local communities' by surprise: local people are often not informed in time, and given the range of interest within communities, there are always 'locals' or opportunity seekers (also from neighbouring places) who will help these investors to come in. In addition, various layers of 'mafia' help to produce eradation and 'lock in'. Large-scale investments in land create new opportunity structures 'fixing the situation of some'; these are the people who help investors to come in and 'fuel' the machine, which is difficult to stop. Because people were not forced from their land in Kalimantan, protests were relatively mild and those who became directly involved as day labourers often had high expectations.

In the article, the core idea is that infrastructural systems are self-enforcing, destructive and difficult to change. There are indeed reasons why infrastructural systems are often inert: sunk investments in the plantation and technology (palms, roads, mills, etc.). However, skills, social networks and belief systems will increasingly complicate a swift shift to new systems (Verbong and Geels, 2010). By focusing so much on path dependency and locked-in-ness, however, the article does not provide space for the possibility that plantation systems move away from violence and destruction, which in practice might be the case: in the article, little or no attention is paid to the adaptive capacity of plantation systems that might help plantations to diversify – showing different levels of innovations and/or types of transition pathways. Looking at the type of changes taking place, Geels and Schot (2007) make a distinction between transformation (achieved by external pressure by outsider groups, such as NGOs); reconfiguration (when regime actors adopts certain niche-innovations in response to problems that they encounter); technological substitution (innovations slowly replacing existing regimes); and de-alignment or re-alignment, when regime actors lose faith in the normal solutions (and the system collapses). In the article, however, no attention is paid to such transition processes, and no mention is made of the fact that industrial crops often undergo cycles of boom and bust, which are often due to market forces. In the article, much attention is devoted to the persistence and resilience of oil palm plantations, showing their capacity to expand and persist. This will, however, very much depend on technological development and innovation, as well as the state of affairs in the world economy (even though Tania Li argues that even price decline led to enhanced land grabbing in expectation of future gain).

In the article stakeholders are presented as two opposite categories: plantations versus smallholders. According to Murray Li, it is 'the plantation' that is violent (and not the crop), while suggesting that smallholders would 'do better' without the plantation system. The reality, however, is much more dynamic and diverse, and 'plantations' and 'smallholders' cannot be seen as independent or opposite categories. Focusing on areas with oil palm plantations (such as Riau), there are indeed traditional oil palm plantations (as described in the article), but there is a huge variety of business models, ranging from independent smallholders with tiny plots to large-scale plantations with different types of out-grower systems and/or operating under different rules and regulations (Susanti, 2016; Jelsma and Schoneveld, 2017). The outcomes of plantation systems are difficult to generalize, as much depends on the business model and the origin of the investor (and the capital), as well as on stakeholder involvement and the local environmental conditions. What is presented in the article as the 'machine' of oil palm cultivation and its inevitable outcomes, is in reality 'multiple machines' and multiple outcomes.

According to Murray Li, it is clear that it is the plantation system that is responsible for the infrastructural violence that occurs, and not (!) the oil palm or smallholders:

> If farmers were left in control of their land, and could adapt the oil palm to their flexible landscapes and ways of living, there would still be challenges, but they would be far less intractable than the insidious violence that is built into Indonesia's plantation zones alongside the neat rows of palms.

A comparison between Kalimantan (the new frontier area for oil palm, with many large-scale plantations) and Riau (the old frontier with a large proportion of smallholders) shows that smallholder farming should not be romanticized: the negative consequences of smallholders taking over land from vulnerable neighbours (e.g., indigenous groups) and their contribution to environmental problems (e.g. invasion of peatlands) should not be underestimated.

According to Tania Murray Li. 'the plantation is everywhere', but looking at the reality on the ground diversity is greater than suggested. Although at first sight one only sees oil palm plantations, livelihood portfolios are often more diverse than expected: 'the plantation is everywhere' but people are also involved in other activities, varying from slash and burn agriculture, to gold mining and urban jobs or migration. According to Pandu Permana (2012), who analysed the situation in Berau (East Kalimantan), there are considerable differences between the different types of communities there, namely the tribal, peasant, and pioneer farming and fisheries communities. Daily life in Kalimantan is less 'plantation based' than suggested, and urbanization will probably bring with it new opportunities for economic diversification. Reality is, of course, more dynamic and diverse than suggested in the article. Tania Murray Li will probably agree.

3. The plantation is everywhere?

Tania Murray Li's article shows that the consequences of the expansion of the plantation, or more specifically the global land grab, cannot be reduced to a narrow discussion about such issues as land loss or enclosure. By presenting the expansion of the plantation as 'infrastructural violence', it is clear that the plantation will contribute to large-scale transformations, resulting not only in the mono-cultivation of the land, but also in deforestation and the creation of no-go areas. Despite the negative social and environmental implications, the plantation system is a wolf in sheep's clothing, in the sense of being welcomed by local groups that expect to benefit from the employment opportunities, which in practice will materialize only for the happy few. After arrival, plantations often develop their own dynamics, putting existing livelihood systems at risk, or obliterating them.

Looking at current trends, it is interesting that in Indonesia, landscapes are undergoing huge transformations. In addition to large-scale investments in oil palm plantations (and other crops),[1] it is clear that large-scale land investments also involve claims for nature conservation ('green grab', including **R**educe **E**missions from **D**eforestation and forest Degradation (REDD + programmes), urbanization and infrastructure (including dam construction), and tourism. This is happening not only

[1] To provide a reliable estimate of the volume of the global land rush, the International Land Coalition (ILC) took the initiative to create a 'land matrix' (http://landmatrix.org) – a database containing information about land investments of more than 200 ha each.

in Indonesia, but throughout the world. Estimates mentioned in literature usually range from 20 to 60 million hectares (IFPRI, 2009; Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; Friis and Reenberg, 2010), but including investments in the urban sphere and infrastructure it is clear that millions of hectares are involved.

Although Tania Murray's article focuses on the expansion of oil palm plantations, it is interesting to widen the debate, showing that infrastructural violence happens not only in the rural sphere as a consequence of oil palm plantations: similar processes are taking place as the result of large-scale investments in roads and high-speed rail connections, dams and bridges, energy grids and real estate. Looking at the broader picture, we see rapidly expanding grids of urban infrastructure bringing about material, social and political transformations that go much further than the consequences of plantations on 'empty' land. Looking at processes of rural–urban land conversion, it is clear that the 'machine of urbanization' is producing an involuntary grid for social and political life. Just like the plantation, it is violent in the sense that as a system, it destroys other forms of life and precludes other futures (even that of the plantation). In the article, little attention is paid to the fact that plantations are embedded in dynamic contexts of rapid urbanization, or to the similarities between the plantation and the urban grid: also in the urban sphere 'underneath the orderly structure of roads and electricity grids, there is predation' – mafias helping urban infrastructures to reinforce and further expand. Large-scale investments in land for food and biofuels, as well as in tourism, mining, hydro dams, real estate and urban infrastructure, are contributing to new types of linear development and enclaves. The process often goes hand in hand with processes of formalization, and leads to the displacement or resettlement of vulnerable groups. Rather than focusing on oil palm plantations, one should broaden the scope: although plantations are considered 'violent machines', in the longer run rapidly expanding urban grids might be more destructive and violent than rows of oil palm trees. Infrastructural violence is an enormous problem – investments in inclusive business and inclusive city development are a necessary requirement for meeting the sustainable development goals ('leaving no one behind').

According to Tania Murray Lee, 'the plantation is everywhere'. What I argue is that infrastructural violence is not limited to the rapidly expanding oil palm plantations – it goes much beyond: Given the boom in different types of large-scale investments, landscapes undergo rapid processes of change with negative implications for vulnerable groups: the mono-cultivation of land (e.g. oil palm, as well as other industrial monocrops such as sugar, rubber and soya), deforestation and loss of biodiversity, destruction of landscapes by mining, dam construction and infrastructures, and the appearance of new 'no-go areas' due to investments in nature conservation etc. Land is very much under external pressure, which is also reflected in rapidly rising land prices (especially in peri-urban areas).

Just like in the case of the oil palm plantation, the rapidly expanding grids of urban infrastructure discipline the lives of both those who are directly affected and those who are unaffected (or bypassed) in surrounding villages. In the case of oil palm plantations, 'If there are old settlements in the area, plantation roads typically by-pass them, leaving then orphaned on the plantation periphery'. In the context of urban areas, slums and informal settlements are not taken into account in master plans and people are displaced. Indeed, as is highlighted by the article, it is often investors/governments/donors who take the lead in making investment plans to be rolled out in faraway areas, without making an effort to bring investments in line with local needs and aspirations. 'Ruling regimes of investors and technicians regard 'local groups' (under customary forms of ownership) and their existing land uses (subsistence farming, low density rubber, etc.) as hopelessly backward. 'They tend to regard the people, their villages and their fluid, adaptive ways of living as backward too (…)'. The same applies to the urban context, with negative views on informality etc. 'Straight lines and designed grids of triangles and squares are considered aesthetically pleasing: they index technical mastery, a civilizing mission effectively imposed on people and space'. 'They are declarations of a kind of modernity governed by order, productivity and profit, sometimes tinged with ideas of nation building and patriotic pride' (even though the order will in practice be quite different from the one the planner imagined). Development is, in other words, increasingly coming from distant places, and the space for local people to have a say about the type of development they prefer or desire is limited. Development as 'freedom' is increasingly being replaced by implanted development 'from the outside'.

4. Conclusion: from violent infrastructures to inclusive development?

Inclusive development has become the latest buzzword in international development studies and practice (Otsuki et al., 2017).

> We have learned over the last decade that large-scale investment flows caused social and environmental conflicts, and unequal distributions of the promised benefits such as employment, knowledge spill-over and improved services, even when investments were legitimized for serving sustainability and public good objectives. Also in the case of oil palm plantations, there are many adverse effects, not serving inclusive and equitable growth objectives.

In an endeavour to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016) and 'leaving no one behind', efforts are made to make investments and development projects more participatory and inclusive (e.g. inclusive business models and inclusive cities), driving more participatory land and environmental governance processes, often based on multi-actor platforms consisting of civil society, donors, investors, practitioners and researchers. Core questions are how to incorporate smallholders in the value chain and make business models more inclusive; in the urban context, attempts are made to make cities more inclusive by linking people to the urban grid (e.g. connecting them to formal water and/or electricity systems). Attempts to make development more inclusive are mainly focused on helping people to 'come on board': local populations are excluded from the first decisions about whether and where certain investments will be made. From the perspective of local people, investments come from outside. They might be invited to participate in multi-stakeholder or Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) meetings, or have the right to withdraw their consent when they are consulted about the project, but in many cases, even when the local community at large welcomes the investment, it has little control over the core elements of the investment, such as types of crops, infrastructures or exact locations of the projects, which are thereby likely to cause grievances as time progresses (Otsuki et al., 2017). Moreover, due to a lack of attention to the diversity that actually exists within a community, the inclusion of one group often leads to the exclusion of another group in the same community, as observed in the gendered space configurations.

In conclusion, coming back to oil palm, the problem is not the plantations but the fact that they are parachuted in from the outside (plans are made in other places). Along with the rolling out of the investment plans, local groups are forced to make room for violent grids of roads, palms, mills, housing blocks, etc. They are hardly informed and have limited opportunities to participate in decision making. Big investment projects remove land from local control and exclude native people from future use. Rather than allowing people to have the lives they value and aspire to (development as freedom), people are forced into centralized grids, become enclosed or pushed aside, without having a stake in their own future. One of the core reasons for infrastructural violence is that plantations (and other large-scale land investments) come from the outside. Development processes that follow are driven by investment and investor, depending on global market opportunities in combination with the positionality of the place (road access, distance to port, etc.). New investments often create frictions between those who

will benefit directly from the investment projects and those who will be excluded. In the context of discussions about inclusive development, it is not enough to make business models more inclusive. After all, development is not a matter of vulnerable groups being incorporated or becoming owners of projects brought in from the outside: people should become the designers of their own plans. Development is not about incorporating people into expanding grids; it is about expanding freedoms.

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