Upland Geopolitics

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FOREWORD

This historically grounded examination is situated in northwestern Laos, a region given recently to rubber plantations. Michael Dwyer argues that socialist and other successor states in postcolonial Southeast Asia played an active role in state consolidation of power over land. These activities across the latter part of the twentieth century have at times been discussed as “land grabs.” Such land deals, and the consequent repurposing or sequestration of land, are better understood as a land rush that may or may not result in the kind of predictable outcomes that is indicated by the language of land grabs. This rush goes on, however, to generate wealth for national and regional political elites, influence over land-based economic activity for foreign powers and capital, and acute forms of dispossession for the rural poor. Thus, Dwyer offers a welcome focus on historical processes and regional particularity to shed light on these land-control projects, which are sometimes uniformly characterized around the world in the dramatic accents of land-grab analysis.

The politics of land control has long been a favored topic of study in environmental anthropology. Earlier work often examined the emergence of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century colonial forms of exclusionary and monopolistic land zoning and use in parts of Asia, Africa, and South America, in the cases of forests, pastures, commercial agriculture, and floodplain development. Protected areas, biosphere reserves, and public-land designation became principal methods for nation-states to control vast stretches of land in the name of species conservation, natural heritage preservation, and promoting sustainable development in the later part of the twentieth century. However, the new land grabs of the twenty-first century, as they are referred to, seem to present a new configuration of both national and transnational forces, driven by land markets and food security scares,
and they seem to have unleashed an intense wave of land dispossession for the rural poor and other marginalized communities in many parts of the world.

The initial spate of research on the global land rush, reported often in the pages of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, focused most on the seizure of vast tracts of land and other natural resources by large corporations or sovereign wealth funds to provision a growing global extractive economy for minerals, metals, grain and fodder cultivation, and offshore industry.¹ Some more ethnographic work has led to finely observed accounts of the uncertain, often fitful, and locally variegated forms, cultural and economic, that emerge in struggles over land in the shadow of more global land commercialization.² Yet other studies have broadened the discussion to include land-control ventures responding to current environmental concerns, notably climate change.³ In that sense, the politics of land control remains entangled in projects of environmental governance.

Through his study in Laos, Dwyer elucidates what he calls the social and spatial unevenness of dispossession from contemporary land deals. He finds that processes of enclosure operate on multiple time scales, perpetuating different waves of land alienation toward locally unsuitable and disadvantageous purposes—an approach well used also by Liza Grandia in her research on Guatemala.⁴ Dwyer, in this context, situates the outcomes in Laos in legacies of the Cold War and in the tense relations between the United States and China as actors in Laos’s economic development. Dwyer also pays attention to the role played by local government agents, illuminating the processes of population management and property formalization that variously facilitate or impede the realization of grand schemes that are posited on large-scale land control and conversion.

In addition to imperial and Cold War legacies and the role of different levels of government action, Dwyer also considers the variable ways Laotians are included as citizens, and the tenuous ways in which uplanders lay claim to social recognition and legal protection. Thus, the study distinguishes different layers of socio-spatial unevenness while revealing how the layers work across and through each other to produce multi-scalar processes and understandings of land struggles and modes of expropriation. One of the signal achievements of the book, then, is to show how different levels of government work with and against each other to control the allocation of land to commercial and social development projects in service of different interpretations of the public good and local authority.
The Chinese-funded rubber boom in northwestern Laos is the initial field of inquiry for this study, which was conducted over a decade of place-based and broader research. Dwyer shows how the legacies of wartime resettlement, earlier forest management programs, and more recent state efforts to control local authorities shape current land policies in and around rubber cultivation. This work emerges then as a study in state formation, shifting strategies of land control by foreign and domestic actors, and the facilitation and obscuring of land transfers often too simply characterized as land grabs. As Dwyer observes, the apparent messy and arbitrary nature of the land deals is not a sign of chaos or anarchy, but part of the very process by which different agencies struggle to retain influence on outcomes that seem overdetermined by global capital or national governments. His approach is timely because this way of connecting land policy to state formation has emerged as a topic of renewed interest.

Dwyer contributes an original, well-researched, clearly written case study of land politics, and thereby offers portable analytical frameworks for the study of land grabs—a growth industry, I might add—that include historical shifts in the constellation of geopolitical forces at work in any location and the imprint of these histories on contemporary land struggles. Along the way he offers some new conceptual tools, such as the calibration of enclosure to citizenship, the role of land deals in upland population management work, and the way that formal geography helps manage the legal optics of land control. In combining these, Dwyer stresses the importance of not simply discerning a process of enclosure getting underway but of studying how that process is legalized, managed, and presented as ostensibly imbued with some social purpose.

Tensions have often surrounded special economic zones where, too, large swaths of land are earmarked for foreign investment unencumbered by tariffs or social protections for local communities. Identifying similar frictions in Laos’s upland hinterland, Dwyer reveals the fraught politics of shifting land out of local control and use without stoking widespread resentment and a legitimacy crisis in the government. In these parts of Asia, proximate to China, agribusiness—built around rubber plantations in this case—converges on mega-infrastructure projects. This amounts to the global integration of land and its productive potential as it combines with the influx of foreign capital and expertise. Ultimately new relations of dependence are forged in nations only recently released from the grip of European colonial domination and American imperial influence. Studies in the style Dwyer has devised will likely uncover such convergence and external
influence on other continents. A similar pattern might unite these phenomena into what may be a global problem, but each case will require discovering the specific historical development of conditions that fomented and furthered a twenty-first-century land rush.

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