

David E. Gilbert, *Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land: A Social Movement Ethnography*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780520397750 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520397767 (paper); ISBN: 9780520397774 (ebook)

Against all odds! Colonial and authoritarian post-colonial land control, propelled by the juggernauts of capitalism and modernity with the insistent discourses of extraction, commodification, and productivity, have locked in privilege and exclusion in rural Indonesia. Force, law, and political power have conspired to harden a *fait accompli* dimming alternatives to the faintest. Yet, in *Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land* David Gilbert offers an ethnography of how people in Casiavera in West Sumatra have thrown caution to the wind to reclaim land from which they had been evicted, to re-distribute land in ways that contradict current trends of concentration, and to farm it in ways the industry will not call productive. The odds have long been stacked against smallholder livelihoods based on democratic and egalitarian access to and control of land in Indonesia. 300 years of colonialism and some 50 years of post-colonial rule shifting between promise and brutal violence have consistently offered peasants the stump of the stick. Inequality and oppression have looked inevitable. Agrarian exploitation appeared as a millennial reign, until everything changed. Or, as Mike Tyson allegedly quipped, “everyone has a plan till they get punched in the mouth”. After prolonged crisis, the authoritarian New Order regime was indeed punched in the mouth in 1998, and a new unchartered time of *reformasi* emerged heralding the promise of democracy and justice. *Countering Dispossession* lays out two parts. First, Gilbert analyzes the colonial and post-colonial dispossession of the smallholders in Indonesia. Second, he records the experience of re-occupying the land by smallholders who cherish a dream of a just rural life.

Colonization of Indonesia was a spectacular operation of subjugation of labor and forced cultivation of crops desired in the Netherlands. Subsequently, it turned into theft of land at the grandest scale. The Dutch colonial administration declared the entire exotic archipelago for the *domain* of the state, thereby legalizing the land grab and dispossession. It meant that the state was not merely the territorial steward of the country’s space; it was also the proprietor of the land. The legal instrument of concessions furthermore shaped land tenure in the colony. Concessions not only establish the concessionaire—the company to which land is conceded for a period—but also, critically, confirm the government as the legal owner of the land. That is, the agency to whom

concessionaires—big companies and smallholders alike—are beholden for their land access. Hence, since 1865, the Indonesian government has simultaneously been an authorizing institution *and* a stakeholder with resource interests. Government institutions recognize property rights and enjoy them.

The second part of Gilbert's social movement ethnography puts the searchlight directly on the question: how can smallholders wrest property away from government while enjoying its recognition of their claims? This is no simple circle to square.

As the Suharto regime wilted in the late 1990s, land occupation by agrarian movements gained pace and different futures struggled for space in the political imagination in Indonesia. Some movements had a checkered history of occupations and evictions, while others assembled in this new era of emancipation and democratic promise, but land access was the common pivot.

The reclaimed land boasted an ambiguous status in many areas. On the one hand, land was legally government property, and different companies held legal leases (although many of them had been so confident of the endurance of the Suharto regime that they had not bothered to renew their leases and were operating on long expired rights). On the other hand, different agrarian movements had reclaimed many plantations, held the land in non-legal ways, and had to come up with workable governance systems. In some cases, individuals parceled out reclaimed land, and continued production of the plantation crops, like rubber. Within a few years, successful farmers had acquired much of the land of the less fortunate, and land distribution became very skewed. In other areas, successful peasant leaders moved into politics, sometimes joining the most authoritarian of the new Indonesian parties with a "pro-agribusiness and neo-fascist agenda" (p.96). In other areas still, reclaimers with radical visions refused to enter state processes of settlement legalization, and police, military, and gangs attacked and destroyed land reclaiming communities eclipsing countless agrarian utopias. The knife's edge between cooptation and violent destruction proved a very narrow space for developing a just, autonomous, agrarian future. Again, it was against the odds. It is therefore impressive that some reclaiming communities, like Casiavera, persisted in its efforts to break new ground.

Two organizational challenges faced the community: how to code rights and property on the "inside" among its members; and how to code their possessions to the "outside" world of Indonesian society to protect themselves from losing the land to the plantation company again. On the inside, internally, the community was careful to not only have individualized private plots, but

instead also have smaller pieces of land managed communally by a handful of land-using households; a Russian-doll system of face-to-face collectivities inside the larger collective, if you will. This way, land would not become a traded commodity among the community members and the property could remain a collective source of livelihood. As a reader, I would have enjoyed a few more individual voices from the field explaining how such a system works and what people think.

The community also had to secure their land from the outside world according to the community interests, i.e. legal recognition of community land control by the Indonesian state. This was no simpler task. The plantation company which had enjoyed a land lease had taken the community to court claiming their occupation to be illegal squatting and wanton destruction of property. There have been many cases like this in Indonesia over the past 25 years, and the question is whether the reclaiming is a violation of the company's business rights, or whether occupation is a reasonable step by workers to rectify the wrongs of a history of dispossession. This is a legal battle with uncertain outcomes. The law, the lawyers, the judges, the evidence, and the political context all matter in each case. Rulings are often ambiguous and inconclusive, though. In this particular case, the court found that the Cusiavera reclaimers were justified in taking the land back, but the ruling also found that the company lacked the standing required to bring the lawsuit against the named defendants. The result was a half-baked vindication of both parties, a continuation of a situation where the community tried to give their claim an air of legality though their governance of the area, and where the company reserved its right to re-state its claim for land or compensation for its loss at a later stage. The judiciary kicked the can down the road, the plantation company's claims continued to be potentially relevant, and the reclaimers remained in uncertainty. In Indonesia, that counts as a relative success for smallholders and rank-and-file citizens. This may be the crux: reality often falls short of clear, unadulterated, dreams of justice and wholesome livelihoods. But that is no reason to dismiss the accomplishments of the people who struggle. Nor is it a reason to dismiss their dream of a fair life.

Examples of agrarian movement success may be few, in fact they are the exception, but they can prove diagnostic of both current challenges and future possibilities. Dam-burst changes are as mesmerizing as they are radical, but as Gilbert demonstrates, their settlement, the institutionalization of the new situation, and the organization of a new field of politics are possibly even more fascinating. *Countering Dispossession* is domesticating a narrow terrain between gullible romanticism and lazy nihilism, carefully avoiding both. Gilbert shows that agrarian justice is

possible but only if you spin many plates at the same time. It requires enduring work to secure land control, a fair land distribution within the community, a cropping system and pattern that does not easily lend itself to land concentration and phagocytizing of your neighbor, government recognition of rights, and, on top of this, a constant political dialogue between stakeholders.

Countering Dispossession sets the bar high for academic text. The writing seems effortless. Yet anyone who has ever put pen to paper knows that analytical precision in lithe, flowing, prose is usually the result of countless iterations. Moreover, David Gilbert's contribution helps us to suspend the inevitable as an analytical path. The historical depth and the engagement with current rural livelihoods creates a vivid, trustworthy, and hopeful image of the human condition. Against the odds.

Christian Lund

Department of Food and Resource Economics

University of Copenhagen

clund@ifro.ku.dk

June 2024