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Michael Goldman, Nancy Lee Peluso, and Wendy Wolford, eds. *The Social Lives of Land*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 14, No. 3, December 2025, pp. 609-611.

How to Cite: Hirsch, Philip. Review of *The Social Lives of Land* edited by Michael Goldman, Nancy Lee Peluso, and Wendy Wolford. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, December 2025, pp. 609-611. DOI: 10.20495/seas.br25018.

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Michael Goldman, Nancy Lee Peluso, and Wendy Wolford, eds. *The Social Lives of Land*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Philip Hirsch*

We often think of land as timeless, inanimate and immovable. This collection of mainly case study-based essays seeks to reconsider the ontology of land. Land has a history. It has agency. In some cases, it is literally mobile, in other cases metaphorically so. In other words, land has lives of its own. These lives are not lived out in isolation, however. On the contrary, the lives of land are relational, contextual, and time bound. Hence the social dimension of land as a living entity: land is living in relation to histories of settlement and encounters between indigenous people and newcomers, in relation to assemblages that determine its control and mobility, and in relation to the myriad ways in which people seek to identify with it, live off it, profit from it, care for it, use it and abuse it.

The case studies in *Social Lives of Land* are organized around three main themes. The temporal emphasis of the first section reveals how, as newcomers settle territory, land is at the same time “unsettled” in the long sweep of history—through colonization, associated encounters between settlers and indigenous peoples, and through the reorganization of land along socialist and post-socialist lines. The geographical sweep of this and subsequent sections is similarly extensive, ranging from Clint Carroll’s study of the contested Cherokee homelands of Oklahoma to Kati Álvarez, Ciara Wirth, Gabriela Valdivia, and Flora Lu’s discussion of the very different meanings ascribed to land by settlers and indigenous people in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

The story is not one of a simple linear occupation of native lands by encroaching newcomers, however. Commodification of land and its products creates fundamental divisions within indigenous societies, such that land itself has agency. No chapter brings this agency out more emphatically than Katherine Verdery’s “autobiography” of a Transylvanian block of land. Here, the voice resides in the land as it tells of the ways it has shaped people’s lives under different political regimes in central Romania.

The second section of the book turns to the materiality and mobility of land. The case

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studies are drawn from a wide range of contexts. Laura Schoenberger recounts how land in the form of sand has physically been exported from Cambodia to Singapore; Andrew Ofstehage tells the story of American farmers seeking to make the Brazilian Cerrado more “productive” for soya; and Nancy Peluso turns to a different sort of mobility in her account of labor migration and its implications for land relations in East Java. Gregg Mitman and Emmanuel King Urey Yarkpawolo show how gendered land relations shape, but are also shaped by, land struggles in Liberia. Through the materiality of a particular crop, namely manioc, Wendy Wolford provides a lens through which visions for agricultural progress have been manifested in colonial and post-colonial Mozambique. This and several other chapters reveal some of the circularities and resonances of recent large scale land acquisitions with earlier colonial visions, uncovering the fissures in linear narratives of progressive commodification of land.

The third and final section of the book explores land as a speculative asset that shapes ongoing tensions between collective and individual social organization and between socially distributive and privately marketized values. In its place at the core of social debates and struggles, land is an instrument, rather than a mere recipient, in the organization of societies, whether that organization is more communitarian or neoliberal. Michael Goldman draws on the important theme of financialization to show how meanings of land change, as do the lives of those intimately bound up with their inherited fields, in the context of the urban expansion of one of India’s most dynamic cities—Bengaluru. It is thus not only the cutting-edge IT sector that upends rural and peri-urban lives, but also the ontological shift of land as a source of identity and livelihood to its meaning as a speculative asset distanced from those who now control and profit from it.

Despite their utterly different geographical and historical frames of reference, two other chapters in this section provide—intentionally or otherwise—interesting parallels to the swings between collective and private control over land. Emmanuel Sulle and Richard Mbunda’s account of the changing meanings of land in Tanzania draws from one of the early and most significant experiments in home-grown socialism, notably Julius Nyerere’s program of *Ujamaa* villages and its ideals of an egalitarian post-colonial order, to illustrate the ongoing tensions involved in dealing with this legacy in a neo-liberalized order. Meanwhile, Kirsteen Shields gives an account of the significance of historical memory of displacement, notably the Scottish highland clearances, in providing the political impetus for land reform that grantscrofting communities rights of communal purchase of land from large estates. One of the complicating aspects of this account is that many of the communities engaged in both voluntary and involuntary arrangements with neighboring estates are not solely or even mainly populated by “indigenous” locals.

Other than the book’s introduction, only two chapters are not based on case studies. Robert Nichols introduces the first section by demonstrating how fundamental the making and remaking of land was to the project of colonialism, not only as an outcome of the colonial order,

but also in its very rationale. In the third section, Erik Swyngedouw and Callum Ward provide a highly readable political economic analysis of land as the center of accumulation, dispossession, and social conflict, again showing how land is constitutive rather than simply reflective of social relations.

While only two chapters in the collection draw specifically on Southeast Asia for case study material, namely those by Laura Schoenberger and Nancy Peluso, each chapter fundamentally resonates with the changing significance of land in this region. As a region with histories of marketization, individualized land titling, revolutionary socialism and post-socialist reform, and tensions between states and upland ethnic minorities, Southeast Asia has been shaped by most of the processes discussed throughout the book. Land has been central to the social, economic, political, and environmental histories of tension in the region. That said, this does not mean that the case material from other parts of the world is simply illustrative of universal themes and processes. Context matters. Each of the case studies had this reviewer thinking across context—that is, drawing comparative reference between examples from Africa, South America, India, North America, and even Scotland, on the one hand, and the voluminous study of land and agrarian transformations in Southeast Asia (e.g., Hart *et al.* 1989; Hall *et al.* 2011; Li and Semedi 2021; Hirsch *et al.* 2022).

If this volume is to be used as a teaching resource, it is likely to be at the post-graduate level. The level of detail in each of the case studies, the assumed theoretical knowledge required to grasp the main argument of each chapter, and perhaps most importantly, the ways in which each chapter contributes to the notion of land having a social life of its own, all mitigate against insertion of this volume into lists of required reading for undergraduate students of development and social change. This is by no means a critique of the volume, which would make for a highly valuable resource at the core of a semester-length postgraduate seminar series. For serious researchers on land, particularly for those who tend to treat land as a less than complicated object, the volume provides a great deal of food for thought on some of land's unchallenged or assumed meanings.

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