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# Critical Agrarian Studies in Theory and Practice

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# **Symposium: Agrarianism in Theory and Practice**

**Organizers: Jennifer Baka, Aaron  
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Safransky**

## **Introduction: Critical Agrarian Studies in Theory and Practice**

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**Abstract:** In this introductory article we argue for renewed attention to life and labor on and of the land—or what we call the field of Critical Agrarian Studies. Empirically rich and theoretically rigorous studies of humanity’s relationship to “soil” remain essential not just for historical analysis but for understanding urgent contemporary crises, including widespread food insecurity, climate change, the proliferation of environmental refugees, growing corporate power and threats to biodiversity. The article introduces an innovative and varied collection of works in Critical Agrarian Studies and also examines the intellectual and political history of this broader field.

**Resumen:** En este artículo introductorio sobre Estudios Agrarios Críticos planteamos que la tierra y el suelo—y las relaciones sociales y de trabajo que se desenvuelven ahí—merecen una renovada atención de parte de los científicos sociales. Los estudios empíricos y teóricamente rigurosos sobre la relación tierra/suelo/humanidad son imprescindibles no sólo para el análisis histórico sino para comprender las crisis contemporáneas urgentes, tales como la inseguridad alimentaria, el cambio climático, la proliferación de refugiados que huyen de desastres ambientales, el creciente poder de las grandes corporaciones y las amenazas a la biodiversidad. El artículo presenta una colección innovadora y variada de trabajos en Estudios Agrarios Críticos y también reflexiona sobre la historia intelectual y política de este campo de estudio.

**Keywords:** agrarian studies, rural studies, peasant studies, development, modernization, spatiality

## Introduction

When scholars and pundits equate progress and the history of global capitalism with industry, manufacturing and urbanization, they forget that modern societies around the world arose from soil—the soil of peasant farms and big plantations, of distant frontiers, of hard-fought properties and commons, of new and old colonies, and of agricultural production bent to the service of towns, nations, empires and markets. Readers of this symposium will encounter the social life of this “soil” in many different forms: in the East German “Jane Goodall”, who sought to explain why wild boars were wreaking havoc in the famously orderly and repressive German Democratic Republic; in the teenage Egyptian boys who first experience sexual arousal watching “virginal girls” pick caterpillars off cotton plants under moonlit skies; in Indian government planners who in the 1970s engaged in massive propagation of a thorny invasive tree in order to head off an impending rural fuel-wood crisis only to recast the same areas as wastelands 30 years later, uprooting the trees to make way for biofuel production; in a deportable “migrant precariat” of diverse nationalities that labors in US agriculture but also increasingly in service and technology sectors; in the Mexican anthropologists and biologists who launched soil conservation campaigns in the 1930s through the government’s new Institute of Socialist Orientation; and in a “shrinking city”—Detroit—that was once an industrial powerhouse, where the new green urbanism is exacerbating historical racial antagonisms and generating combative agrarian struggles over “abandoned” lands.

As varied as these actors and the articles are, they share a concern with the ways in which agrarian life and livelihoods shape and are shaped by the politics, economics and social worlds of modernity. It is a defining feature of modernity that our intellectual frameworks are wrapped around dualisms of different kinds; the so-called transition sought from the enlightenment onward was a transition between opposites, from agriculture to industry, primitive to modern, rural to urban, feudal to market-oriented. Much has been written about and against this enlightenment epistemology but the oppositions are well internalized, manifesting in regular pronouncements of the “death” of the peasantry, in the necessary and acceptable equation of development with urbanization and industrialization and in the idea that tradition is necessarily primitive. The disciplines of the social sciences and humanities are all founded on these dualisms; the last 30 years of active critique has only made us more aware of the problems, not removed them. And so an unspoken prejudice against rural life, whether it takes the form of dismissal, ignorance or romanticism, continues.

The difficult relations—historically, theoretically and empirically—between the rural and “the rest” are present at the origin of agrarian studies, and we go into this in more detail later in this essay. But we cannot simply look to agrarian studies to better understand our past, or even just the present. The history of the contemporary world is important, but more now than ever, a rigorous understanding of the relationship between city and country (to quote Raymond Williams [1975]) is necessary to help us understand the makings of our future. It is not an exaggeration to say that the histories of the rapid transition from rural to urban have shaped a number of multi-dimensional crises. From the global food crises of 2007–2008 and ongoing concerns of widespread food insecurity to climate change, to the spread of

environmental refugees, we are reaping what we sowed in our relationship to soil. For centuries, developing societies have viewed natural resources such as soil, minerals, forests, and water, and rural peoples as well, as fodder for the rapid transition to urban industrial market economies. The transformation of such resources and people was, in some cases, deliberate and in other cases an unintended consequence, collateral damage in the race to modernize. Market society—the subsumption of everything to the market—was such a break with the past that everything needed to be re-crafted, from bodies (Bourdieu 2004; Federici 2014) to the structure of the family (Lovett 2007; Wolf 1994), from soil structure to plant genetics (Kloppenborg 2005) and labor practices, to common sense understandings of value, rights and wrong (Thompson 1971), to national sovereignty and to the coursing of water around the world (Carse 2014; Pritchard 2011). Much of this re-crafting rested on a singular vision of these resources as factors of production that could be given a price, exchanged and used indefinitely (Polanyi 2001). In this way, historians have argued that the history of the modern world can be written through the history of several key commodities whether sugar (Mintz 1986), rice (Carney 2001), cotton (Beckert 2015) or corn (Warman 2003). Geographer Jason Moore (2011) argues that the rise of capitalism depended and depends on the discovery and exploitation of new commodity frontiers. This expansion into and exploitation of agrarian life, then, gives rise to conquest and colonization, vesting modernity with violence, dispossession and racial prejudice (Escobar 2007; Mignolo 2011). No one can read the reports of European colonial officers and scientists and not see the violent treatment of natives—rendered gifts of civilization by the colonizers—as intimately woven into future post-colonial nations, peoples and land (Isaacman 1996; Mosca 1999).

The revival of agrarian studies in the 1970s, as we discuss in more detail below, was closely connected to the rising tide of revolution in colonies and underdeveloped countries (Paige 1975; Wolf 1969). Also significant was a growing awareness of humans' impact on a range of worsening, interrelated environmental crises (Watts 2013). The extent to which we succeed in feeding a growing global population while conserving resources and maintaining climate change within tolerable bounds depends greatly on how different peoples, societies, leaders and interests look to harness the energies of the land and its people. It also involves the outcomes of struggles over resources and the wealth they generate, whether between social classes, economic sectors, nation-states or regions and ethnic groups. Will global elites continue to view increasing growth, accumulation and productivity as the answer to everything? The rise of the global rush to acquire land suggests that many will (Borras and Franco 2012; McMichael 2012). But communities across the planet have also worked to create alternatives in multiple ways, some through global networks and others through social movement communities deeply rooted in place. From community kitchens and farmers' markets to land redistribution and new forms of agriculture, many of the most visible alternatives stem from the land. This is unsurprising if one remembers that the commodification of land, labor and money propelled early capitalism (Perelman 2000; Polanyi 2001) and that in more recent years the incomplete capitalist penetration of some rural zones turned them into founts of resistance to full-blown commodification (Edelman and Borras 2016).

This set of papers is as much about possible futures as it is about the past or present. Its proximate origins are in two 2009 workshops on “Critical Agrarian Studies” that the authors of this Introduction coordinated for the Social Science Research Council’s Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship Program (SSRC-DPDF). Meeting first in New Orleans and then in Philadelphia, with a summer of intensive fieldwork in between, the then-student authors manifested a delightful esprit de corps, forged close intellectual and personal bonds, and later embarked on long-term research projects marked by impressive empirical and theoretical depth, highly diverse disciplinary, topical and geographical foci and—nonetheless—thought-provoking synergies and unifying threads. One goal of the SSRC-DPDF Program was to encourage the construction of new fields of knowledge. The contributors to this collection have accomplished this to a degree that surpasses the already high hopes we had in 2009 and—now all PhDs on university faculties—they have also formed a durable and dynamic “invisible college” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:64). It is worth, then, considering how these contributions relate to the broader field of Critical Agrarian Studies.

## **Critical Agrarian Studies**

The rise of Critical Agrarian Studies in recent years has been closely linked to the rise of related critical frameworks that call into question dominant paradigms. Critical Legal Studies (Boyle 1994), Critical Development Studies (Edelman and Haugerud 2005; McMichael 2010; Veltmeyer 2011), Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2012), Social Movement Theories (Wolford 2010) and Science and Technology Studies (Hackett et al. 2008), among others, have sought to identify, analyze and combat the biases and values and forms of representing and legitimizing knowledge that characterize conventional wisdom. Equally important, scholars and activists working in these traditions have dedicated themselves to constructing alternative forms of knowing and of acting in the world. This battle between mainstream and critical paradigms has always been highly unequal, both a consequence and a reflection of lopsided structures of political and economic power and media influence. Nevertheless, these critical frameworks have succeeded in opening up important intellectual debates and affecting discussions of public policy. The dominant ideas no longer seem unquestionable and inevitable, nor do they enjoy the same degree of hegemony and legitimacy that they once had.

The rural world—and the world of the specialists who study it—has also received critical scrutiny. Critical Agrarian Studies are simultaneously a tradition of research, thought and political action, an institutionalized academic field, and an informal network (or various networks) that links professional intellectuals, agriculturalists, scientific journals and alternative media, and non-governmental development organizations, as well as activists in agrarian, environmentalist, agroecology, food, feminist, indigenous and human rights movements. These linkages are not easily mapped or bounded, in part because of their complexity and in part because their contours shift over time.

The roots of today’s Critical Agrarian Studies lie in the peasant studies of the 1960s and 1970s, a period when scholars and policymakers of both the political left and the right viewed the peasantries of Asia, Africa and Latin America as important historical agents. With the war in Vietnam, the cultural revolution in China, the

anticolonial wars in Africa and the guerrillas in various countries of Latin America, as Mexican anthropologist Arturo Warman (1988:655) remarked, “in a thousand ways and under quite varied circumstances, the peasants have emerged as social protagonists and have dragged peasant studies along with them”.

This “dragging along” had a powerful impact in academia in Europe, North America, Latin America and South Asia, among other places. Peasant studies drew eclectically and sometimes in contradictory ways on several earlier and some contemporary intellectual and political traditions. These included: (1) classical Marxist analyses of “the agrarian question”, particularly those by Karl Kautsky (1974) and V.I. Lenin (1964a), but also those by key figures on the losing sides of history, such as N.I. Bukharin (Cohen 1975) and L.N. Kritsman (Cox 1984), both of whom perished in Stalin’s purges; (2) the more recent peasant-centered Marxism of Mao Tse-tung and his followers (Huang 1975); (3) the Russian agrarian economists of the 1890s to 1920s, notably A.V. Chayanov, also a victim of Stalin (Bernstein 2009; Chayanov et al. 1966; Shanin 2009); (4) debates in agrarian history, particularly over modes of production and the transition from “feudalism” to capitalism in Europe (Aston and Philpin 1995), South Asia (Patnaik 1990) and Latin America (Stern 1988); (5) the heterodox comparative research of a small coterie of innovative social scientists, such as Eric Wolf (1969), Sidney Mintz (1973), Barrington Moore (1966) and James Scott (1976); and (6) a small number of works from mainstream rural sociology (Goldschmidt 1978), demography (Boserup 1965), anthropology (Fallers 1961; Geertz 1961) and the emerging fields of political ecology and agroecology (Berry 1972; Bunch 1982; Netting 1993).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze these distinct currents in detail, a task which, in any case, others have attempted with notable success (Akram-Lodhi 2007; Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010; Bernstein and Byres 2001; Borrás 2009, 2016; Hussain and Tribe 1981). Instead, we will attempt to outline in broad strokes key aspects of the sometimes uneasy relation of Critical Agrarian Studies and Marxism. Rather than trace the complicated lineages of the political-intellectual traditions mentioned above, we would suggest that a broadly Marxist inheritance shared by all (or almost all) tendencies within Critical Agrarian Studies is a recognition of the importance of analyzing agrarian social classes and the political-economic forces that call them into existence or make them disappear, and that facilitate or impede their reproduction. The central issues that animated debates about “the agrarian question” more than 100 years ago—the differentiation of the rural population or the emergence of rich and poor classes among the peasantry and the extent to which preexisting agrarian structures limit the advance of capitalism in agriculture—remain very much on the agenda, though they are generally discussed in more complex terms. Critical Agrarian Studies, like the Marxism on which it draws, is not a consensus field. Just as Bolsheviks and proponents of the Organization and Production School, such as Chayanov, tangled over the motors of the differentiation process in early 20th-century Russia, echoes of these discussions resounded in Mexico in the 1970s, as orthodox Marxist “descampesinistas” and agrarian Marxist “campesinistas” clashed (Edelman and Borrás 2016:38), and—more recently—in polemics over the viability and desirability of small-scale versus industrial agriculture, such as those between Bernstein (2014) and McMichael (2015).

Peasant studies' "broadly Marxist inheritance" was fractured in its origins. Lenin, for example, went from hailing the publication of Kautsky's (1974) *Agrarian Question* as "the most important event in present-day economic literature since the third volume of [Marx's] *Capital*" to denouncing its author as a "renegade" for his insistence that socialism must be democratic and not rely on a dictatorship of the proletariat (Lenin 1964b, 1974). Kritsman and the agrarian Marxists, like the non-Marxist Chayanov, insisted that one of the best indicators of peasant wealth was not land but draft animals, since these guaranteed that small producers could plough their own fields and maintain autonomy vis-à-vis the large landowners who rented yokes of oxen. But Kritsman, like Lenin, saw the emergence of permanent social classes in the countryside, while Chayanov viewed rural differentiation as a cyclical or generational phenomenon linked to accumulation by older households that had fewer young dependents to feed and more adult laborers to generate wealth. Bukharin spearheaded a brief, pro-peasant, market-oriented New Economic Policy in the 1920s USSR, but Stalin cut it short in the lead-up to the complete collectivization of agriculture.

The "feudalism" and mode-of-production debates in the late 1960s and after were similarly contentious and, like the earlier Marxist polemics, had real-world consequences. In Latin America, for instance, the question of whether "feudal" structures persisted in the countryside or whether the region had been "capitalist" since the conquest fueled bitter arguments between orthodox Marxists and new left dependency theorists. The former, often close to the region's Communist Parties, argued that the persistence of latifundios (large underutilized landholdings) and servile labor forms indicated that Latin American societies still had to move from "feudalism" to capitalism before they would have significant proletariats or possibilities of transitioning to socialism. This analysis led the Communists to seek alliances with "progressive" sectors of the bourgeoisie. Dependency theorists, on the other hand, maintained that Latin America had long been thoroughly capitalist because of its integration into international markets and that it lacked a "progressive" fraction of the bourgeoisie. An imminent transition to socialism was therefore possible, a prospect that encouraged young intellectuals throughout the continent to enlist in (mostly) ill-fated guerrilla movements.

The Chinese revolution was the first revolution led by Marxists that unambiguously relied on mass peasant support. (Wolf [1969] had included Russia in his *Peasant Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, but the 1917 revolution was significantly urban.) Maoism affected peasant studies not only as one of several inspirational (for some) movements, but also by offering a clear, if overly schematic, categorization of rural social classes that some agrarian scholars, including non-Sinophiles and non-Maoists, adopted as a convenient, shorthand frame of analysis. Mao's (1971) poor peasant-middle peasant-rich peasant typology had reverberations in subsequent agrarian studies debates over which sectors of the peasantry were most likely to become revolutionary, notably in the contrasting theses of Wolf (1969), who pointed to middle peasants, and Jeffery Paige (1975), who emphasized the role of rural proletarians. Again, it is important to underscore that these polemics were far from "academic", in the narrow sense of the word. The partisans of these discussions frequently worked closely with rural grassroots organizations and had

deep and longstanding commitments to effecting radical change (Cabarrús 1983; Feder 1971; Huizer 1972).

Some of the most important critiques of the basic premises of peasant studies came from scholars who focused on the frequently overlooked roles of rural women. Ester Boserup, for example, called into question anthropologist Margaret Mead's (1949) "dubious generalization" about universal patterns in the gender division of agricultural labor and demonstrated that "Africa is the region of female farming *par excellence*" (Boserup 1970:16). Carmen Diana Deere (1995:55) built on Boserup's findings to demonstrate that peasant farming in Latin America was highly heterogeneous in gender terms and that it varied:

not only cross-culturally and regionally in accordance with cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity ... but also, within given regions in accordance with the prevailing social relations of production and income-generating opportunities, as well as with peasant social differentiation, suggesting the importance of material conditions in changing social constructs.

Deere further distinguished patriarchal from egalitarian farming systems and called into question the "undifferentiated return to family labor" or pooling of resources that was central to Chayanov's theory of peasant economy, noting that not all income was necessarily pooled and that pooling does not always result in shared consumption. Furthermore, the conflation of households and individual, usually male, household members as economic strategists obscured intra-household relations and struggles. The incorporation of gender analysis into peasant studies was intrinsically significant, but it also opened the way for what many scholars and activists would subsequently term "intersectional" analyses of oppression and exploitation (Edelman and Borrás 2016:49–53).

If in the early 20th century Marxists were prone to reducing complex issues to a single "question" (as in "the agrarian question" [Kautsky 1974], "the woman question" [Marx et al. 1951] or "the Negro question" [Berland 2000]), by the end of the century scholars of Marxian and other stripes refused to see these "questions" in the singular and increasingly acknowledged their interrelations and complexity. The move from "peasant studies" to "agrarian studies", signaled by Bernstein and Byres' (2001) lengthy introduction to the newly founded *Journal of Agrarian Change* (*JoAC*, an excision from the much older *Journal of Peasant Studies* [*JPS*]) resulted in part from an explicit recognition of something that scholars had always known, namely that the rural world did not consist only of peasants, but also of many other sectors, including large landowners, plantation workers, fisherfolk, nomadic pastoralists, ethnic groups, service providers, professionals, merchants and intermediaries, among many others. Eight years later, in 2009, the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, founded in the early 1970s during the peasant studies boom, changed direction and, while it maintained its historic title, it added a subtitle, "critical perspectives on rural politics and development", thus embracing not only the agenda of a broader agrarian studies, but of a critical one as well.

These two journals, probably more than any other fora, exemplify one of the institutional forms that Critical Agrarian Studies have taken. Both publications have audiences and contributors that span the globe and in some cases include

non-academic authors and “grassroots voices”, such as agrarian movement leaders and human rights and environmental activists. *JPS*, in particular, has sponsored several major international conferences on issues of pressing contemporary significance, such as land grabbing and food sovereignty. By 2011, the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, despite its quaint name, had the highest impact factor of any English-language social science journal, a reflection no doubt of its determinedly interdisciplinary character and the relevance of its analyses to a broad range of scholarly, policy and practitioner publics (Edelman 2014). Many *JPS* authors have longstanding, deep ties to agrarian, environmental and human rights movements or participate in international social justice organizations. This identity of scholarship with political action—frequently close, but critical at the same time—has fueled the dynamism and contributed to the relevance of contemporary agrarian studies.

Even though Critical Agrarian Studies have been and remain internally heterogeneous, across different historical periods, world regions and disciplines, scholars working within it are broadly united by three primary analytical assumptions. First, lived experiences, structural configurations and representations of agrarian societies influence contention over and processes of modernization, development policy, democratization, globalization, and urbanization. Agrarian societies are not primitive, backward, or “other” to modern, urban societies; rather, they mutually constitute each other in manifold ways. As we indicated earlier in this essay, ignoring rural life because it appears to be marginal means not only ignoring the production of past and present but also the construction of possible futures. Second, work on agrarian societies and themes highlights the importance of the political and cultural economy of production, consumption, accumulation, distribution and governance and requires in-depth understandings of diverse kinds of relations and tensions between countryside and city, social classes, regions, communities, economic sectors, and often ethnic and religious groups. Third, understanding the particular dynamics of rural society in any given place and time requires analysis of the experiences and political culture of agrarian classes and communities, of generations of women and men, and of the urban groups and institutions—nearby and distant—that interact with and affect the countryside. The papers in this collection show how the field of Critical Agrarian Studies provides a lens for understanding everything from state formation to modern subjectivities; shifting politics, policies and practices; the production of forms of knowledge and ignorance, as well as popular beliefs, rituals, and norms; informal and formal practices of collective action, within and across borders; and the ways in which the past can foreclose certain taken-for-granted futures.

The articles in this symposium build on these topics and incorporate new themes that emerge from theory building across multiple disciplines. Four themes in particular animate this symposium. The first is spatiality, both in the sense of grounding analysis in an understanding of particular places and contexts, and also in the sense of focusing on a particular kind of space, marginal spaces, such as wastelands, foreclosed properties, or wild game habitats. The second key theme centers on the privileging of economic valuations of agriculture and agrarian production under colonialism, capitalism and socialism. The third is the importance of rethinking human–nature relations through new hybrid concepts such as social ecologies,

ecologies of interest, visions of greening, and land epistemologies. Finally, the fourth is history, understood not only as the rootedness of social analysis in a temporal frame, but also the view that any given conjuncture—past or present—is an epiphenomenal result of earlier processes and struggles between contending social classes or groups, or between these and states, each with their longstanding repertoires of contention. Historical contingencies or choices made during critical conjunctures of diverse kinds—that path-dependent foreclosing of taken-for-granted futures which we mentioned earlier—frequently play a role in political outcomes and in solidifying what eventually appear to be “social structures”.

In what follows, we briefly flesh out each of these themes, highlighting the ways in which the articles engage with the theme as well as with each other. It is our contention that the articles can be read individually but that there is something to be gained by reading them all together.

## **Spatiality: Reading from the Margins and Marginal Spaces**

One striking thread that unites the papers in this collection is what we might call the centrality of the marginal (and not just under capitalism, but also under what used to be called “actually existing socialism”). The margins are not always marginal, of course; they often define the center or the production of what is considered “normal”. Agrarian studies over the decades have been particularly adept at working from and for the margins, given the theoretical and historical exclusion of its subjects from the “making of their own history”. Margins are edges, and as such they mark borders and define what is inside and what is out. Like hedgerows or barbed wire fences, they not only demarcate the center or inside but also define its economic and cultural value vis-à-vis the “outside”. In this way, space and place are intimately connected to the disciplining of rural societies—from homelands, native reserves and colonial or post-colonial settlements to nature parks and slums, agrarian peoples and resources have been circumscribed in ways intended to channel their productivity (and the productivity of their natural resources), to appropriate the wealth that they produce and to reduce their political autonomy and agency.

In his analysis of the ordering of farmland in Eastern Germany, Fleischmann highlights the importance of forested land, that which lay outside the urban order of Berlin and the managed spaces of collective and state farms). Forests were virtually ungoverned spaces until the government instituted a conservation ideal known as *Landeskultur*, which aimed at “the ‘improvement’ of wild game habitats across a network of hunting and forest reserves”. This conservation program was situated in a landscape with “larger fields than ever before, bordered by expanded archipelagoes of reforested land”. These were the areas that would be plagued by the actors at the heart of Fleischman’s paper, the wild boars.

The paper that most directly invokes the language of marginal lands is Jennifer Baka’s piece on the multiple waves of investment into what the Indian government has categorized as wastelands. Baka shows how the same wastelands serve repeatedly as areas for capital to “fix” itself again, temporarily solving crises by finding new ways to extract surplus from land whose productive value derives in part from

its marginality. This “fix” is also a “fix” in another sense. The enthusiasm for the “miracle crop” *jatropha*, a biodiesel feed stock, recalls the hoopla around earlier “technofixes”, such as the “green revolution” (discussed by Marchesi in this symposium), the now-forgotten “perennial maize” of the 1970s, or the “golden rice” of the early 2000s.

This political invocation of marginal land as productive for the resolution of crises resonates with the paper by Sara Safransky, who shows how the Detroit city government valued properties through the tax revenue they generated and came to see wide areas as vacant even though they were populated and claimed as commons that were only visible through different forms of value. Detroit residents stake out claims to the land that echo those made in other times and places in the context of rural land recuperations. As Safransky explains, they do this in three ways: “First, they emphasize the land’s use-value rather than exchange-value. The second way residents claimed the commons was *vis-à-vis* collective labor. The third major way residents claimed the commons was by appealing to land as a site of historical memory”.

Spatiality is not just about marginality, however. As Gabrielle Clark’s paper indicates, it may also involve the extension of systems of control—of immigrant labor, for example—from one economic sector (agriculture) to another (healthcare or the post-Fordist knowledge economy). While the legalization of some immigrants in the United States may be cause for celebration, the broadening of rights is accompanied in many instances by new forms of coercion, monitoring and social control.

## Circuits of Labor and Capital

Not all of the papers in this symposium issue are about capitalism, but they do all pay attention to the way in which agrarian landscapes produce economic value. Whether the social formation under consideration is capitalist, socialist or colonial, all of the papers are populated with actors who benefit from, and actors who labor on the land. In Baka’s story of wasteland recovery, it is the possibility for accumulation that generates waves of investment in wastelands, though the jobs that are promised in exchange for land do not seem to materialize. This is a case of accumulation by dispossession at times, particularly when the “miracle” crop—*jatropha*—does not have the magical productive effect predicted. But it is also a case of the unintended consequences that result from attempting to discipline the environment; Fleischman vividly describes wild pig “irruptions” in East Germany, an unforeseen consequence of the government’s “unyielding faith in industrial agriculture” and of conservation policies that reflected a rigid and impoverished view of the nature–culture distinction. His account has implications for understanding state-centered accumulation, socialist recreation traditions and the construction of so-called wild animals. Jakes tells a somewhat similar story of industrial agriculture, though his case is cotton production in Egypt. There the post-colonial government exalted peasant smallholders as “the repository of nationalism’s normative claims” even as state leaders attributed ecological crises to smallholder practices and resorted to forms of tribute child labor, which nationalists had decried under colonial rule.

Marchesi's story is very different—in her article about conservation in the wake of the Mexican Revolution it is peasants who will be the solution to soil erosion and forest degradation. The national commitment to peasants in the revolutionary era helped to build a progressive approach to conservation and forest administration. It was only in the late 1940s and 1950s that Mexico pioneered the Green Revolution in agriculture that later spread to India, the Philippines and elsewhere. With its emphasis on industrial inputs, new irrigation zones and high-yielding varieties of commercially viable crops, notably wheat, the “Revolution” largely bypassed Mexico's peasants who practiced rain-fed maize cultivation on small hillside plots. As Marchesi indicates, “rather than rehabilitate existing agricultural soils, emphasis was placed on bringing new soils into large-scale production”.

Both Jakes and Clark analyze the way in which discourses of “exception” and “exceptionalism” help to mobilize agricultural labor. For Jakes, Egyptian leaders justified their use of child labor for de-worming cotton crops because peasants had not done so themselves, and so “unnatural” labor relations—that is, an absence of children in the fields—threatened the natural conditions under which cotton could thrive. Even though the British colonial government had abolished *corvée* labor more than a decade earlier, Consul General Lord Cromer justified the need for forcing children into the cotton fields by arguing “that ‘European and wealthier proprietors’ had been cleaning their crops of caterpillar eggs for years”. As Jakes evocatively points out:

The Egyptian state organized children picking caterpillars off of cotton plants. Amidst a double crisis of agro-ecological degradation and financial collapse, the nationalist movement simultaneously critiqued the exploitation of peasant labor by unproductive foreign finance and endorsed these cotton-worm campaigns as a national obligation. Egypt's crises provided fodder for anti-colonial mobilizations. But they also inaugurated a new predicament of developing national capital in a landscape already pillaged as a commodity frontier for empire.

The exceptionalism noted in Clark's article is different. She analyzes the well-known arguments that in the United States agriculture is an exceptional sector and that wartime conditions presented exceptional circumstances. These assured that “1917 provided the conditions under which the temporary labor migrant was juridically produced for the first time inside the boundaries of the nation”. Importantly, her article also calls into question conventional historiography that implicitly views the abolition of slavery as ushering in a new era in which labor was mobilized only through market mechanisms. Indeed, as others (e.g. Blackmon 2009) have shown in more detail, coerced “unfree” labor was (and remains) a central feature of US agriculture and is present in other sectors as well.

Also in the United States but in an urban context, Safransky examines racialized structures of capital accumulation and property in urban Detroit. She points to two kinds of “greening” familiar in Critical Agrarian Studies literature from other contexts: (1) repeasantization (Van der Ploeg 2008), in this case of urban residents, many only a few generations removed from the rural South, who engage in urban agriculture as a survival strategy; and (2) urban “green grabbing” (Fairhead et al.

2012) that acts to exclude low-income citizens from the land. In Detroit, she points out, “the planting of thousands of trees in a Black city draws powerfully on the cultural value of wilderness in U.S. history as a spatial trope that has been integral to the territorialization of whiteness”.

## Rethinking Nature and Culture

Social scientific understandings of “nature” and “culture” have come a long way since Marx (1964) and later Levi-Strauss (1973) posited these as self-evident oppositional categories, whether in the material or ideational realm. Later researchers problematized this binary by showing that even the most apparently pristine environments actually reflected extensive human impacts (e.g. Balée 2010; Denevan 1992; Dove 1992). The authors of the papers in this symposium advance the nature–culture discussion several steps further, recognizing—among other things—the agency of non-human species (see also Raffles 2010). Re-examining social natures allows them to re-define agency in a way that, as Jakes says in his paper, is an “emergent and relational quality—not a zero-sum resource—produced and observed amongst a given set of actors be they human, animal, or insect”. Jakes tells us not to ask whether non-humans have agency but instead to ask: “what the agency of an animal reveals about its relationship to other organisms and the environment”. Marchesi echoes this argument, drawing upon an analysis of conservation in a very different period, post-revolutionary Mexico, in which progressive bureaucrats and intellectuals built upon a theory of “ecological dialectics” that emphasized connection and a “generative relationality between all living organisms, including humans”. These new social and political ecologies strengthened the state, building “a new conception of national subjects as ecological subjects”. This deft treatment of co-produced human and non-human actors and environment provides insights into the way in which particular landscapes are produced and how those landscapes simultaneously shape the very actors who design them. Such co-production has long figured importantly in political ecology and agrarian studies, where the study of wilderness, invasion, pest and landscape imaginaries helps to underwrite the kind of political power and technopower documented in Jakes’ paper.

In Baka’s paper, human–nature relations provide a new perspective on forestry in India in the 1970s. Once India had achieved food self-sufficiency (through the Green Revolution technologies discussed also in Marchesi’s and Fleischman’s papers), it turned to the production of social forests (fuelwood and fodder plantations) on “‘lands not put to any productive use’ outside of forest bounds. This included village wastelands, lands alongside roads, canals, and railways and the perimeters of farms”. Fleischman situates new claims about wildness, invasive species and domestication in the anthropocene within what he calls the *longue durée* of human–pig relationships, in which wild boars’ remarkable capacity for adaptation makes it surprisingly difficult to establish a clear line between wild, feral and domestic animals. He notes the particular nature of the pig, living in proximity to its wild relative, and argues that state-led conservation and development programs produce the very wildness they are sometimes designed to eradicate.

In Safransky's paper, there are multiple contesting visions of the relationship between humans and their environment. On the one hand, media coverage of Detroit disseminates images of wildness overtaking the city, with foreclosed supposedly empty houses falling back into "nature", and simultaneously creates utopian porn that idealizes the rise of new urban gardens as "the city's rebirth". At the same time, investors such as Hantz Woodlands see commodity potential in this "nature" and look to invest in land for the production of woodlands. A third vision of nature in the city, however, grows out of local experiences with persistent and racialized inequality in a space many look to as home. Safransky quotes one Black radical farmer as saying: "What's happening is deeper than saying no to a land grab ... It's about having an ability to develop our own plan".

Jakes develops an argument about the importance of nature to development and nationalism in Egypt, which he calls an "ecology of interest". This argument indexes three key ideas:

First, the multiple, overlapping circuits of finance capital moving around and through the agrarian landscape were not only a mechanism for extracting value but also a "way of organizing nature" ... Second, and perhaps most crucially, interest rates on loans both great and small conditioned both metabolic relations between farmers and the soil and socio-political relations between distinct classes of landowners. Finally, the "interests of capital" were not singular but plural and contradictory.

This ecology of interest builds on insights from Moore's (2011) world ecology in which the economy is analyzed as working through the internalization or capture of human nature (labor power) and the externalization of nature's "gifts", which are given "for free". Jakes' study of cotton as a vector for appropriating labor, energy, land and finance, makes clear, however, that these "gifts" are never truly free.

## **The Special Light of History**

Finally, this brief introduction to the papers and their contributions is appropriately bookended by space and time. All of the papers illustrate the importance of a historical sensibility as both methodology and epistemology. In terms of method, it matters when the story starts. In terms of epistemology, it matters how history is treated—if it is treated as a canvas on which things necessarily unfold or as a product of social struggles across time and sometimes contingent outcomes. As Fleischman says, even hybridity must be historicized such that human–nature relations are seen in "the special light of their temporal context". In his case, this historical perspective is necessary for seeing how "forests and farmland developed together, making new boar habitat in the process"—habitats that were neither fully wild nor managed. Jakes invokes Fernando Coronil (1996) in his incisive critique of Timothy Mitchell's (1991) study of technopolitics and mute mosquitos: "Coronil identified a similar tangle of problems when he observed that 'for Mitchell, power seems to be epochal rather than historical; it is the expression of an age, not of a particular society'".

Marchesi's article re-historicizes the usual story of the Green Revolution in Mexico by going back to an earlier period, after the post-revolutionary land reforms implemented by Lázaro Cárdenas. Marchesi argues that this period focused more on soil conservation and socially conscious governance, in part because "soil conservation as a governance strategy gained international traction following the globally spectacular U.S. Dust Bowl and ensuing Soil Conservation Service", but also because the land reform created new subjects who expressed their affinity for peasants in a variety of ways that materialized in the countryside as collective farms, participatory land management and social forestry. If we are not attentive to the particularity of historical conjuncture, we miss this progressive opening in Mexican agriculture and state policy, and see only the over-determined apparent inevitability of the Green Revolution.

Safransky also takes us back in time through successive periods of growth, conflict and racial tension in Detroit. She argues that an analysis of attempts to "right size" Detroit without attention to earlier periods of white flight perversely places the blame for "blight" on the very residents who fight poverty in their everyday practices. In addition, she argues that media fascination with new urban gardens and "rebirth" robs residents of their much-longer tradition of planting and searching for a land where one can be free. Clark makes a similar argument about the importance of seeing unfree labor and its juridical forms or defense in a longer context rather than simply focusing on the bracero period, as is typical in much of the migration literature. She starts with imperial control in Panama, which she argues is the first time in post-Civil War US history that unfree labor is legally accepted and employers protected. In her sweeping study of the way such acceptances and protections change over time, Clark shows how agricultural labor is at first an exceptional category of work but that then the definition of temporary employees extends to include high-waged professional and managerial sectors. As Clark points out, echoing positions that other scholars (Hart and Sitas 2004) articulated earlier, the changing juridical frames that control migrant labor call into question the historic separation between rural and urban studies:

Ultimately, the case of temporary labor migration suggests that what we are calling in this volume the "new agrarian studies" investigate the extent to which and how modern agricultural labor exceptions relate to a wider liberal state regulatory project to "securitize" manpower across labor processes, questioning the exceptionalism embedded in the field itself.

For Baka, history is not simply a matter of periodization or defining a suitable starting point for analysis, but rather an approach to understanding how "shifting definitions over time make wastelands mobile". In her case, it is government defining the meaning—and therefore value—of wasteland "in concert with changing notions of 'improvement' and development". Thus, in one period the thorny Proposis bush is imagined as the "cure" for wastelands; 30 years later, Proposis itself is diagnostic of wasteland and a new cure—jatropa—emerged to remove wastelands intentionally created in a previous cycle of development. This is what Baka refers to as an in situ spatial fix, one whose location does not shift, just the meaning and the capital applied to remedy the deficiencies of the last cycle.

## Conclusion

These articles are not only rich and theoretically grounded on their own, they also provide a glimpse into new directions for Critical Agrarian Studies and for exploring the “life of the soil” with increasing nuance, an issue particularly relevant in the age of what has been called the Anthropocene where changes are taking place, whether because of exogenous climatic conditions or because of more terrestrial designs for development. The material effect of such changes is important as peasants and farmers around the world notice a difference in the rains. These papers also speak to the need to bring urban and rural optics together, going beyond rural–urban linkages to see “nature in the city” and urbanized planning logics in the countryside—and to see how both are constitutive of the other. There are also new directions here in terms of finance, speculation, and investment, not the least of which is represented in the recent wave of global land grabs in which lands are acquired for securing access to food and biofuel stocks (Edelman et al. 2013; Hall et al. 2015; Wolford et al. 2013). Finally, the papers are rooted in a variety of disciplines, but linked by a shared Critical Agrarian Studies perspective that demands the incorporation of space, temporality and contention into our analyses of agrarian relations, processes and actors.

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