

FORUM

**Accumulation by dispossession  
and Asia's "modernizing" Left**

*Edited by*

**Luisa Steur**

# What's left? Land expropriation, socialist “modernizers,” and peasant resistance in Asia

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With the victory of capitalism and the end of the Cold War, almost all countries in the global south, including those still calling themselves “communist,” have become “transition” countries, competing to attract foreign direct investment and reform according to the strictures of global capitalism. Particularly interesting cases of “transition” are those states that explicitly legitimize their rule in terms of communist ideals, the general alliance of peasants and workers toward an egalitarian society, and whose ideological pillars historically include a pro-poor redistributive land reform. This forum debate focuses on three such states in Asia: the world's longest-running democratically elected communist state of West Bengal (part of the Indian federation), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China. It focuses, more precisely, on the land struggles taking place in these states that have not embraced neo-liberalism ideologically but all see rural unrest increasing as peasant land is cleared for Special Economic Zones and other capitalist investment—usually purportedly aimed at “industrialization” and consequent employment creation but often driven by real estate speculation and elite consumption, accompanied by the creation of a huge reserve army of labor (Banerjee-Guha 2008). Even modernizing “communist” countries, where land expropriation is the order of the day, thus seem to be following the trend in contemporary capitalism that David Harvey

(2005) conceptualizes as the shift in emphasis from expanded reproduction to accumulation by dispossession.

A comparative perspective on these cases raises several questions. To begin with, is communism in these states simply the window-dressing of a capitalist accumulation drive? On the one hand, there are strong indications to answering this question in the affirmative. Projit Mukharji shows how in subtle ways the Communist Party rhetoric that used to incite class struggle in West Bengal has transformed into a discourse legitimizing ruthless capitalist expansion. He also argues that communist ideology and politics do not play a part in the day-to-day operations of the party any longer. Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury state that the international Left need not look at the Communist Party of West Bengal for inspiration as it has totally deviated from socialism—it is instead the peasant and people's movements that the party violently suppresses that embody the true legacy of the Left. Moreover, we know from Naomi Klein (2007) and can see in Bo Zhao's contribution to this forum, that communism in China nowadays serves primarily as the mechanism through which political dissent against a dramatic shift toward free market policies is being suppressed. What is usually interpreted in the West—and is represented to it as such by many Chinese dissidents—as resistance against communism, may more likely be seen as resistance against neo-liberalism cyn-

ically dressed up as communism. Zhao does not go so far as to claim this but does argue that since “the terminal crisis of international communism in late 1980s, what glues party members together is no longer so much communist ideology as mere pursuit of individual interest.” What we see from Vietnam, meanwhile, is that though the official figures of land expropriated for special economic zones—and golf courses!—are tremendous, the communist state discourse that labels such processes the “transfer of land use rights” functions mainly to euphemize a process that the opposition in liberal-capitalist property regimes would simply have called dispossession.

Still, there seem to be certain distinctions between land expropriation struggles in communist China, Vietnam, and West Bengal and the larger phenomenon of economic adjustment across the developing world. The stories told here would find parallels in the tenacious struggles raging both inside governments and between governments and various interest groups in “transition” countries over issues such as “trade liberalization, reallocation of government expenditures, reduction in government regulation and subsidization of private economy” (Nelson 1989: xi). But there also seems to be a difference in that more so than in states committed to a purely free market ideal, there is a recognition of the developmental role of the state in assuming the responsibility to “discriminate between progressive and regressive aspects of capital accumulation ... and ... guide the former towards a more generalized political goal that has more universal valency” (Harvey 2005: 179). Rejecting any such efforts as simply capitalist, without paying attention to details on the ground, or a priori dismissing the institutional legitimacy of such efforts holds the danger of degenerating into an anti-development “politics of nostalgia for that which has been lost,” superseding the search for better ways to meet the material needs of the population (ibid.: 177). All three countries discussed in this forum pay a lot of lip-service to this search, not only because of the unrest that reform provokes but also because the legitimacy of the state is so closely connected to its success in promoting general welfare rather

than, in the case of for example the United States, primarily serving to promote “freedom and democracy.” The official communist rhetoric employed in these three states allows citizens to stake their claims to economic rights, and particularly land, in accordance with the dominant discourse, potentially increasing the legitimacy and power of such claims. But the opposite is also imaginable. Though Sarkar and Chowdhury as well as Mukherji criticize the communist “class” discourse of the government of West Bengal for not being genuinely communist, a different reaction—seen more in Zhao’s article—is to instead find inspiration in the dominant ideals of global civil society and criticize government policy in a totally different register—that of liberal democracy. An important question this forum raises—though does not conclusively answer—is to what extent a fundamental understanding and critique of capitalist accumulation processes is either helped or hindered by the historical presence of a strong local Marxist tradition, now appropriated by the ruling class.

In addition to the question of whether or not there are significant differences that make the (so-called?) communist countries of Asia stand out in practice from countries that have embraced neo-liberal capitalism more wholeheartedly, another important question arises—that of the substantial differences among these three states. The most obvious source of divergence, besides size and geo-political position, is the fact that Vietnam and China are one-party authoritarian states whereas West Bengal is a democratic state, whose commitment to democracy is backed-up by a formally democratic Indian union government. It seems that one consequent difference is that in China and Vietnam, more so than in West Bengal, the state can often get away with a high-handed solution to what is referred to as the “distributive conflict problem”—the problem that the costs of efforts to increase the aggregate social wealth in a society for the general benefit of all have to be shouldered quite concretely by certain opposing groups. This difference is reflected in an overall slower pace of industrialization in India and a greater “check” on governments’ actions, prohibiting it in prin-

ciple from taking any drastic steps, such as forceful acquisition of land, and allowing owners (though not necessarily all inhabitants or workers) of land targeted for industrial development more means of resisting expropriation or pressurizing the government to ensure proper rehabilitation for them. In this forum we do not hear of Chinese or Vietnamese cases where the drive toward land expropriation has actually been halted as it was in Nandigram. In a democratic set-up, it seems, ruling parties need to take more heed of the principle formulated by Haggard and Kauffman, that "a reform that generates a net social gain should be politically viable [only] if a portion of the gains are used to compensate the groups experiencing losses" (1995: 157). For West Bengal's ruling party, there is a more acutely politically consequential "policy-change dilemma" of "how to modify the core commitment of its partisan and ideological agenda toward public sector-led industrialization and redistributive economic policy strategies without losing its core support base—the public sector workers and agrarian peasants" (Sinha Forthcoming: 18). A related crucial distinction in Indian versus Chinese and Vietnamese cases is that while Sarkar and Chowdhury and Mukherji question the moral authority of West Bengal's communist government to dispose farmers of their land/traditional livelihood, this ideological dilemma is less pronounced in China and Vietnam, where private ownership of land is prohibited. As discussed by Suu and Zhao, land is largely state or collectively owned both in Vietnam and China, allowing the state to allocate or withdraw land use rights to/from individuals in the name of public interest. The debate in Vietnam and China therefore seems to revolve primarily around policy formulation (land pricing, compensation) and implementation (through adequate institutions). Though such questions are equally important for economic development of West Bengal, moral/ideological debates usually dominate there.

The determined resistance of the peasants of Nandigram, as narrated by Sarkar and Chowdhury, may also, however, point to some of the weaknesses of West-Bengal's democracy. De-

spite—or perhaps due to—being more authoritarian, the state in Vietnam and in China seems in some aspects more in control of the "distributive conflict problem." One of the blunders of the West Bengal Left Front government in its dealings with the Salim corporation was for instance to offer the extremely fertile land in Nandigram rather than less productive "wasteland," which it did primarily to be able to use the existing infrastructure in the area rather than develop a new one. Special Economic Zones seem more strategically located in China than in India, where such planning is influenced by a myriad of interest groups. The democratic process in India makes policy-making proceed at a slower pace, not just in terms of dispossession but also in terms of proper rehabilitation legislation. The forum articles focusing on Vietnam and China, though paying less attention to the question of the legitimacy of capitalist land transfers, do pay considerable attention to three main problems that inevitably arise during land transfers: the correct pricing of land, adequate and encompassing compensation schemes, and an effective resettlement and rehabilitation policy. Zhao shows that there are detailed legal mechanisms in place in China to deal with all three issues (though he criticizes the faulty implementation of these laws and in particular the impunity with which laws are broken). Because the Communist Party is directly identified with the state in China and Vietnam and because the one-party set-up discourages fundamental political turmoil (unlike in India, where some political parties in fact thrive on such), it is perhaps all the more fundamental for the party not to allow dispossession to go too far. Note Giovanni Arrighi's (2007) conviction that the Chinese state is well aware of the instability that radical expropriation of peasant land and total proletarianization of workers would cause and therefore will not easily be seen privatizing land and taking it away from peasants beyond a certain point. Whether this degree of "self-restraint" by the Chinese state is a legacy of its socialist history or of a longer Confucian imperial strategy of benevolent paternalism is an open question; it would be interesting to see to what extent this self-restraint will last.

Another point on which to compare the three cases in this forum is their institutional set-up. A lack of effective institutions at the local level to manage the issue of land transfer is emphasized mostly in the article on China—including a critique of the corrupt and inefficient bureaucratic channels, the poor law enforcement, and the party-controlled judicial systems. Lest we focus too much on the idea of local institutional inadequacy, it must be noted that in China, the imperial tradition of peasants petitioning the emperor, or later the Communist Party leadership, to find redress for abuses by local authorities (both systematically encouraged toward such abuses but also publicly condemned for them by the center) seems alive as ever in the “rightful resistance” taking place in the countryside (see O’Brien and Li 2006), but with a growing number of these petitioners finding themselves persecuted by the state. What looks like local institutional failure thereby might well be a systematic way by which the Chinese central state tries to deal politically with the contradictions of the path of capitalist development it has embarked on. Institutional inadequacy is probably as acute in West Bengal. One example is Singhur, where after expropriating land from peasants, building a half-baked car production plant, and receiving huge subsidies from the West Bengal state, the Tata company decided at the last moment to give in to peasant protest and move instead to notoriously neo-liberal Gujarat. What made the mediocre policies of land expropriation in West-Bengal eventually lead to outcomes that were disadvantageous to all local players involved is perhaps the fact that the state had little control over the various institutions needed to implement its policy precisely because in a democracy, adequate institutional functioning entails “an independent regulatory commission with judicial powers to oversee the whole process ... operat[ing] at arm’s-length from the government, with independently appointed officials ... and with the judicial authority to request information from the government ... with the media acting as a watchdog” (Banerjee et al. 2007: 1489). This democratic institutional commitment in West Bengal combines with an intensely com-

petitive environment confronting all state government in India to attract private investments since in 1991 the federal Congress government embraced an era of concerted economic reforms (Jenkins, 1999; Sáez, 2002). Unlike in China, the central government in India to some extent actively promotes the drive for greater financial regional independence in the transition from a *dirigiste* mode of planning to a liberalized economic environment. The compulsions this has placed on the Left Front government in West Bengal is reflected in Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya’s perhaps genuine words: “I cannot build socialism in this part of the country ... What we are looking at is the Left alternative and the compulsions of the objective situation” (*The Hindu*, 27 February 2007).

Despite these “compulsions of the objective situation,” some (Sarkar and Chowdhury) would argue the cases discussed in this forum are not so much examples of land expropriation under Asia’s modernizing Left but under Stalinist versions of Asian capitalism. The three cases considered in this forum do not, however, exhaust the possible alternatives to neo-liberalism in Asia or elsewhere. For many (e.g., Sandbrook et al. 2007), Kerala would be a more logical place in Asia to look for inspiration for a leftist alternative to neo-liberalism, even though—or probably precisely because—it is a state where communists manage to stay in power only for one election term at a time. But critical Kerala scholars will also point out that Kerala’s communist party has not only recently become heavily implicated in corporate corruption scandals but has also, despite rhetoric to the contrary, started to implement economic policies that embrace neo-liberalism (see, e.g., Devika 2007). Also in Kerala, the Communist Party’s Marxist discourse is being experienced as a mechanism to silence or co-opt, rather than empower, the political aspirations of subaltern groups (e.g., Steur 2009). At Chengara, in Kerala, thousands of *dalit*, *adivasi*, and other landless people who revived the specter of pro-poor land reform by occupying land on a formerly corporately owned plantation, have found themselves pitted against the present communist-led government trying to

undermine their movement. Tension at Chen-gara between land reform activists and communist cadres has frequently become so intense that fears of another "Nandigram" have arisen (see Rammohan 2008).

Kerala's example, therefore, does not allow us to think that there are regions where the established Left has not been implicated in the processes of accumulation by dispossession that have been intensifying since the global advent of neo-liberalism. But it does confirm that local socialist histories can still contribute to the present-day political struggles for a more just redistribution of wealth. In West Bengal the socialist legacy of peasants organizing for their right to land against capitalist predators is invoked against the ruling Left Front government's turn toward neo-liberalism. In Kerala, still more democratic than West Bengal in that no single party has a de facto monopoly on political power, an increasing number of people that have been dispossessed of their land because of economic liberalization (Banarjee-Guha 2008: 57) are now pro-actively claiming land as a people's right and a historical promise of Keralese democratic socialism, betrayed by politicians hypocritically posing as communists. Whereas in Vietnam and China, oppositional movements seem to find little genuine inspiration in socialist legacies and instead frame their dissent against authoritarian socialist predators in terms of claims to property, civil society, and democracy, resistance against more democratic socialist predators in West Bengal and Kerala is often articulated in a more socialist register, with reference to alter-globalist, anti-capitalist ideals and redistributive claims to land (see Omvedt 1993). Taken together, we may conclude that in democratic socialist states—unlike in authoritarian socialist states—the legacy of socialism, even if articulated in a more contemporary terminology and by political actors other than the official Left, continues to inspire more egalitarian alternatives to the overall drive toward accumulation by dispossession.

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