TSpace

The University of Toronto’s research repository

Accepted Manuscript of Revisiting The Will to Improve

How to cite TSpace items

Always cite the published version, so the author(s) will receive recognition through services that track citation counts, e.g. Scopus. If you need to cite the page number of the TSpace version1 because you cannot access the published version2, then cite the Tspace version in addition to the published version.

Published version citation:

Li, Tania M.

TSpace version citation:

Li, Tania M.
2010 Revisiting The Will to Improve. TSpace. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/XXXX/XXXXXX. Replace the ‘XXXX/XXXXXX’ with the item handle from the URL, i.e. the last 9 digits.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Annals of the Association of American Geographers on 2010, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00045600903423790.

tspace.library.utoronto.ca

1 TSpace version: includes the pre-print/original manuscript (version before peer review) and post-print/accepted manuscript (version after peer-review and editing).

2 Published version: the publisher's final PDF.
Revisiting *The Will to Improve*

Tania M. Li


I extend warm thanks to Rachel Silvey and Gillian Hart for organizing this author-meets-critics panel at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, to Silvey for seeing the process through to this publication, and to the interlocutors who have enriched my thinking and pushed me to clarify and develop my arguments. I have arranged my response around the three themes that Silvey identified in her introduction to this Book Review Forum.

**Power and Political Economy**

One of my objectives in the book was to complicate a critical narrative that connects development interventions too quickly, and too directly, to capitalist accumulation. Katharine Rankin observes that a century of intervention in highland Sulawesi ended up servicing capitalism by producing free labor and dispossessing people of their land; Vicky Lawson asks how we might attribute responsibility for dispossession, and link it to accumulation at various sites and scales. I fully agree that in cases where national regimes, supported by transnational “development” banks, allocate land to mining or plantation corporations and dispossess traditional landowners, a practice rampant in Indonesia, it is crucial to trace chains of responsibility and hold the perpetrators to account. In the process of dispossession I traced in the Sulawesi highlands, however, attributing responsibility is not straightforward. Development interventions played a role in the process but mostly in ways that were unintended and indirect. Donor-sponsored conservation, for example, prevented villagers from expanding agriculture into the forest, closing off the escape route that has enabled generations of Southeast Asians, rendered landless in one place, to move to another. The effect was dispossession, but it was disconnected from accumulation, as conservation is seldom profitable. Further, although “free labor” was indeed generated, there are few corporations in Sulawesi looking for workers. There was some accumulation among the migrant smallholders who bought up the land of indigenous highlanders, but the process of dispossession was piecemeal, and its mechanisms complex. It worked through differences in knowledge and skill, the play of fears and desires, enterprise, toil, and contingency—strikingly, in this case, the
effects of the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998. In sum, there were victims in this story but no obvious villains.

Where does this leave us analytically? To me, it suggests the need to examine mechanisms of dispossession in all their particularity, avoiding the implicit functionalism of some linear accounts. Stressing contingency, Read (2002) reminds us that the movement to enclose agricultural land that began in England in the fifteenth century was driven by “improving” landlords, a social group quite distinct from the manufacturers who would later profit from the availability of landless people desperate for waged work. The class that required proletarians was different from the one that evicted peasants, and separated in time by several centuries. Also relevant here is Brenner’s (1985) analysis of the role of class struggle in shaping processes of dispossession, and Perelman’s (2) examination of the debates among scholars and officials of the eighteenth century about the economic costs, and the political risks, of dispossessing too many people too rapidly. Policies governing taxes, credit, rent, wages, and property regimes affect the rate of dispossession, although they do not determine it unilaterally. All over Southeast Asia, colonial officials, appalled at the rate at which smallholders fell into debt and mortgaged or sold their land, devised policies to forbid land sale and keep peasants in place—to little avail (Elson 1997). The conclusion I draw is that the “powerful actors” Lawson wants to hold to account are differently responsible, and some of them are less powerful than they seem.

If ruling regimes, with the power to establish laws and policies, struggle to manage social and economic processes according to plan, transnational development agencies have a still more difficult task. Even when project planners fully understand the forces producing dispossession—and I deliberately selected examples in which this was the case—they do not act on them. Is this a betrayal, as Lawson suggests? Or does it reflect, as I argue, the limits of the “development” mandate? Transnational agencies are not in a position to trigger revolutions or change regimes. If they tried to do these things, they would be expelled. They would also alienate the social movements and political parties who see such struggles as their affair. This is a crucial paradox: the goal of transnational development agencies is poverty reduction, yet major processes of poverty production escape their grasp. Professionalization, skepticism, and scorn for excess zeal fill the gap, attitudes strikingly revealed by Mosse (2008) in a recent extension of his ethnography of the inside world of development practitioners.

Neoliberalism and Modes of Government

The question of betrayal posed by Lawson is extended by Anthony Bebbington, who asks whether a non- or anti-neoliberal regime would govern differently. Bebbington has in mind the left-populist Latin American regimes in which the critics and activists of former years have
come to occupy the state apparatus. One possible outcome of their shift in position,
encountered by Schild (2) in Chile in the 1990s, is that activists assume the position of trustees
as they set out to improve the conduct of the poor. Alternatively, regimes strongly shaped by
social movements might attempt to counter the dominance of experts, bureaucracies, and
elected politicians by turning decision making over to assemblies characterized by broad
participation and wide-ranging debate ( Escobar 2008 ). These experiments are welcome,
although deliberative democracy is hard and slow work and thus far more effective at the
municipal than at the national scale, where the interests of different regions, classes, and
ethnic groups must be balanced, international relations managed, and development priorities
set. This is the terrain of “government” exposed by Foucault, in which optimizing the condition
of the population requires delicate calibrations. Government, in this sense, is inevitable. I
believe, however, that the hierarchy of trusteeship can and should be challenged. This is the
purpose of critique: not to replace government by something else, as yet undefined, but to
“enhance the contestability of regimes of authority that seek to govern us in the name of our
own good” ( Rose 1999 , 59), to question truths not in the name of greater or final truth but as a
matter of continuous vigilance.

Neoliberalism, viewed as a particular ethos of government, emphasizes competition, choice,
incentives, performance, accountability, efficiency, audit, and the responsibility and autonomy
of individuals and communities. These elements comprise the commonsense repertory of our
neoliberal times. No doubt they are present in the contemporary Latin American regimes
Bebbington describes, although differently inflected. In the United Kingdom, they traveled
from Thatcher’s regime to New Labour, not seamlessly but substantially intact ( Clarke et al.
2007 ). They were strikingly present in the KDP program designed by the social development
team of the World Bank in Jakarta, which I describe as “neoliberal through and through.”
Rejecting the Suharto-era approach of spreading resources relatively evenly across the country,
the Bank program required villagers to compete for funds under strict conditions. This is what
I meant by “structural adjustment” down to the village level—replacing entitlements by
incentives and rewards. If I was rewriting the passage now, I would say “conditionality” all the
way down, because this was the key relation: Villagers could access resources only if they
followed the rules set by Bank officials.

Ethics and Positionality

As Silvey points out, all my interlocutors raise questions about the ethics of my position as a
critic, outside the development apparatus. I think the question arises acutely (1) because the
designers of the schemes I examine might read what I write (not the case with the colonial-era
missionaries, scholars, and administrators I also discuss); (2) because I recognize that they are
intelligent and dedicated people, who are attempting to improve the world despite the odds;
and (3) because I deliberately selected projects that cannot be dismissed as mere covers for the promotion of corporate profits, taking me closer to the heart of the will to improve, with all its contradictions.

Bebbington asks whether I have unfairly read the intentions of Bank staff from their project documents: What if their intention was to foster greater village influence over the spending of government resources and create a more meaningful engagement with the state? As I stated in the book, I agree that this was indeed their intention. In a short follow-up ethnography in Sulawesi villages where the Bank program was operating, I found they had some success (Li 2008). If I spent more time talking to Bank staff, or collaborating with them, or tracing their alliances and factions, would I have understood them better? On some levels, yes—there is huge value in ethnographic work inside institutions and in tracking actor networks as Bebbington suggests. Mosse’s book (2005) is a superb example. Note, however, that Mosse also recounts the dismay of development officials when he switched position from insider participant to outside observer, to describe the various practices he and his colleagues engaged in to sustain a coherent policy narrative in the face of contradictory events (Mosse 2006). Precisely because he was close to them, and had been one of them, and despite their prior, informed consent, his colleagues felt seriously betrayed when he started to write about their shared world.

Lawson asks how I negotiated my relation with development practitioners. By confining my analysis of the World Bank, Nature Conservancy, and other agencies to their published documents, I avoided the risk of betraying home truths, the predicament faced by Mosse. In the case of the social development program at the World Bank in Jakarta, where I had engaged in an extensive dialogue by e-mail and in person over several years, I sent drafts of my chapter to Scott Guggenheim, the principal architect of KDP and incorporated his reactions into in my revisions. I shifted my ground on some points but not on others. Despite his suggestion that I was setting too much store by the documents, which in his view—and in keeping with Mosse—were poor representations of program realities, I persisted for two reasons. First, documents have effects: In the case of the Bank program, the Indonesian nation took on $1 billion of debt on the basis of the documents’ narrative connecting problems to solutions. Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians participated in new ways of doing things prescribed by the Bank. Second, a close reading of documents can reveal an ethos, a way of defining problems and connecting them to solutions, that takes even the authors by surprise. In this case, Bank staff members were surprised, and possibly dismayed, that I discerned a neoliberal ethos in their program, because some of them consciously oppose important elements of neoliberal agendas.
Bebbington is correct to point out that my description of the emergence of KDP is too linear: The planners did indeed make use of concepts and opportunities as they came to hand. In subsequent work (Li 2007), I have attempted to address this problem through a more robust concept of assemblage that highlights the practices through which elements of a program of intervention (problematizations, techniques, etc.) are pulled together from diverse sources and recognizes the role of agents who do this assembly work, without either making the intentions of self-sovereign actors the master term or overstating contingency, because it is not the case that anything goes.

As Lucy Jarosz notes, I explore the gendered modes of power operating within the farmers group that mobilized to occupy the park and among the activists that mobilized to guide and support them. The book is still in translation, so I have yet to find out whether these people feel betrayed by what I have written about them. Discussions on the book in Indonesia in May 2008 with activists, scholars, and practitioners, including some who were protagonists in these events, were reassuring. They were provoked, but not paralyzed, and we were able to engage in a productive debate.

The positioning of critical scholarship in relation to programming, social movements, and other initiatives to bring about change is a question too big for me to tackle in the space provided here, although I have explored it (in Li 2008) under the rubric of “situated politics.” In my view, more significant than the positions that any of us hold as individuals, or the ideas we might have about how to produce a better world, are the social forces that produce shifts in power relations and to which our work might—or might not—connect.

References:

3. The end of the peasantry in Southeast Asia: A social and economic history of peasant livelihood, 1997, Macmillan, Elson R. E.
Find Full-Text @ My Library
Find Full-Text @ My Library
10. The invention of capitalism: Classical political economy and the secret history of primitive accumulation, 2, Duke University Press, Perelman M.