

# THE POLITICS OF LAND

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RESEARCH IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY VOLUME 26

# THE POLITICS OF LAND

EDITED BY

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*Washington University in St Louis, USA*



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# INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF LAND

Tim Bartley

**Keywords:** Theory; power; commodification; state capacity; social movements; expulsions

The politics of land are vital. In North America, they stretch from fights over fracking, pipelines, public land, and indigenous rights to dynamics of residential segregation, gentrification, and neighborhood succession. In Europe, secessionist movements have gained new ground (in Catalonia and, perhaps, Scotland), while the constructed polity of the European Union faces a shrinking of its territory. In parts of Asia, Africa, and South America, “land grabs,” rural dispossession, and transformations of agriculture have put land at the center of contentious politics. And in the Middle East, land remains embroiled in conflicts involving Israel, Palestine, Turkey, and Syria.

Political sociologists, though, rarely analyze land explicitly. We are more likely to recognize a political sociology of the welfare state, of neoliberalism, and of the entrenching of categorical inequalities than a political sociology of land. Yet as we will see, the study of land necessarily leads to considerations of power, governance, mobilization, institutions, and the state – the central stuff of political sociology.

This volume of *Research in Political Sociology* seeks to carve out space for a political sociology of land. This introductory essay sketches some foundations and identifies features of land that are unique in comparison to other political objects. Then, nine chapters based on original empirical research shed light on numerous dimensions of land politics. They include analyses of anti-fracking campaigns, property tax caps, and “green gentrification” in the United States, soil protection regulation in Europe, squatter settlements in Peru, land grabs in

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The Politics of Land

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peri-urban China and rural Senegal, violent expulsions in Colombia, and property rights in Morocco. I hope that this diverse and exciting set of chapters opens up new points of comparison, theoretical insights, and empirical foundations for a political sociology of land. I have grouped them under four simple headings – capacities, coalitions, classification, and expulsions.

Beyond this volume, some seeds for a renewed political sociology of land have already been planted. Within political sociology, these include theories of state formation that emphasize shifting logics of territorial control (Ertman, 1997; Mann, 1986; Mukerji, 2010; Tilly, 1990), as well as relevant research on violent conflict (Hiers, Soehl, & Wimmer, 2017; Nyseth Brehm & Fox, 2017; Schoon, 2015) and older, land-centered classics (Moore, 1966; Paige, 1975).

In urban sociology, one finds important insights into research on real estate markets (Gotham, 2006; Guthrie & McQuarrie, 2005; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Robinson, 2017), eminent domain (Becher, 2014), and diverse strands of research on “place” (Brown-Saracino, 2015; Gieryn, 2018).

In and around environmental sociology, there are important building blocks in research on extractive industries (Downey, 2015; Kaup, 2008) and the burgeoning work on fracking in particular (Auyero, Hernandez, & Stitt, 2017; Boudet, Bugden, Zanicco, & Maibach, 2016; Vasi, Walker, Johnson, & Tan, 2015), as well as research on forests (Gunnoe & Gellert, 2011; Schwartzman, 2018), environmental justice and indigenous peoples’ rights (Akchurin, 2015), and the economic valuation of nature (Fourcade, 2011). In research on transnational governance, some work has pointed to shifting and contentious land use as a central factor in the success or failure of global sustainability standards (Bartley, 2018; Schleifer & Sun, 2018).

In the sociology of development, there is important recent work on agrarian reform (Bair & Hough, 2012) and gendered land rights (Burroway, 2015). In the literature on China, there is a growing body of sociological research on land control and conflict, in both rural and peri-urban areas (Chuang, 2014; Michelson, 2007). The burgeoning of research on the global “land rush,” land grabbing and resistance has happened largely outside sociology, but one also finds several important recent contributions by sociologists (Dargent, Feldmann, & Luna, 2017; Fairbairn, 2014; Levien, 2013; Ren, 2017). These are just a few of the strands that I believe can be weaved together to reinvigorate the political sociology of land.

## LAND IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Land was once at the center of political sociology. Or, perhaps more accurately, several prominent theories put land at the center of their explanations. Let me highlight three.

The first is Barrington Moore’s (1966) classic of comparative-historical research, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. For Moore, the relationship between landed elites, peasant populations, and the commercialization of agriculture explained a great deal about trajectories of political change from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. In England and France, Moore

argued, the rise of commercial agriculture had helped to liberalize the aristocracy, allowing capitalist democracies to take hold; in the United States, democracy developed without the shadow of a landed aristocracy. In Japan and Germany, where there were strong landed ruling elites, “revolution from above” institutionalized capitalism but with unstable democracies that later succumbed to fascism. In Russia and China, extensive agrarian bureaucracies created the conditions for revolutionary peasant rebellions. Though far from a deterministic theory, Moore’s account showed how varied forms of land control shaped class formation and political development.

Jeffrey Paige’s (1975) *Agrarian Revolution* went further in making land the central determinant of political outcomes. Paige argued that one can explain the outcome of agrarian social movements – reform, revolt, or revolution – based on the sources of income for cultivators and elites. Landed elites tend to be less accommodating than commercial elites to challenges from below, he argued, since the former tend to be economically weaker, less capable of expanding production, and more accustomed to servile labor. For their part, cultivators tend to be more risk-averse, socially isolated, and apolitical when they rely on land for their livelihoods than when they earn wages. Thus, when landed elites are confronted by land-dependent cultivators, the result tends to be agrarian revolt, with a focus on land redistribution but few larger political demands. When landed elites are confronted by income-earning cultivators, revolution is more likely. When agrarian elites earn commercial incomes, one finds more reformist commodity movements or labor movements. Paige applied this theory to agrarian movements in Peru, Angola, Vietnam, and through a quantitative analysis, to a larger sample of countries and industries.

This land-centered analysis was soon challenged, though, by Skocpol’s (1979) state-centered account of revolution, which made state breakdown the central variable, and later by Goldstone’s (1991) supplement, which highlighted demographic factors promoting state breakdown. Land can be found in the margins of these accounts, but not at the core.

In a different vein, John Logan and Harvey Molotch’s (1987) book, *Urban Fortunes*, developed the theory of “growth machines” by unpacking “the social nature of markets in land and buildings” in urban settings in the United States (p. 3). Their attention was fixed primarily on the commodification of land and the inherent conflicts between its exchange value and use values. The use values of urban neighborhoods, they argued, are grounded in social support networks; a sense of predictability, security, and identity; practical benefits of agglomeration; and what they called the “daily round.” But these are threatened by the exchange values of land and buildings, as aggressively promoted and pursued by coalitions of developers and local government officials. Growth machine theory paints cities as “enterprises devoted to the increase of aggregate rent levels through the intensification of land uses” (p. 13), and it describes the character of pro-growth coalitions and their strategies for overcoming opposition.

In the political sociology of the past two decades, one finds far less attention to land. Perhaps by “bringing the state back in,” taking the cultural turn, and intersecting with social movement and organizational theory, political sociology

got pulled away from land. In addition, an urban bias in mainstream sociology seems to have grown more severe over time, leaving many questions about land to separate departments of rural sociology. The agrarian questions that animated Moore and Paige still animate some comparative-historical. “Growth machine” research lives on, it is more linked to urban sociology than to political sociology.

## ACCUMULATION AND DISPOSSESSION

Meanwhile, land has been at the center of vibrant literatures in anthropology and geography, particularly as scholars have grappled with the global “land rush” and commodity boom of 2008 – and related forms of “land grabbing.” As institutional investors looked for safe havens in the wake of the global financial crisis, land investment and food prices boomed, generating huge profits for some and great precarity for many others. (See [Wolford, Borras, Hall, Scoones, and White \(2013\)](#) and [Hall et al. \(2015\)](#) for two of the handful of special issues on the topic and [McMichael \(2005\)](#) for parallel work in sociology.)

Theorists of the global land rush and land grabbing have most often drawn on David [Harvey’s \(2003\)](#) Marxist account of “accumulation by dispossession” and the “spatial fix” to inherent crises of capitalism. [Marx \(1990 \[1887\]\)](#) highlighted a “primitive accumulation” process – or “the expropriation of [...] the peasant from the soil” (p. 622) – that begets the dynamics of capitalism. In essence, Harvey argues that this kind of dispossession continues with the global expansion of capitalism and its crises of falling profit rates. This language and theory has inspired a huge swath of research on land grabbing. But at least four important caveats should be noted as political sociologists draw on and extend this work.

For one, Miles [Kenney-Lazar \(2018\)](#) has questioned the Marxist functionalism of much work on accumulation by dispossession. In essence, scholars have argued that dispossession must happen in order for capitalism to expand – and so it happens. Kenney’s “relational” alternative retains a critical account of capitalism but acknowledges that expelling people from land takes on-the-ground work that may sometimes fail.

Tania Murray [Li’s \(2014a\)](#) critique highlights what I would call “dispossession without accumulation.” Studying the rise of private property in upland villages of Sulawesi, Indonesia, Li shows how collective land turned into private property gradually and without external intervention. As villagers planted trees or other permanent crops, rather than planting and replanting repeatedly, they tended to protect their land as private property, and villagers gradually came to accept their exclusion from some areas. In this telling, enclosure, integration into capitalist markets, and declining access to land for subsistence farming can emerge without corporate-state land-grabbing or state reform of property rights. Put differently, land-governing institutions may emerge from within rather than just through top-down imposition.

Work by [Levien \(2013\)](#), [Kaup \(2015\)](#), and others has brought a comparative Polanyian frame to debates about dispossession. [Polanyi \(1944\)](#) argued that

land, labor, and money are all “fictitious commodities,” which unleash backlashes when treated merely as commodities to be bought and sold. While the commodification of labor is ongoing and often breeds covert resistance, Levien argues, coercive commodification of land “poses a sudden, exogenous and irreversible threat to people’s livelihoods, homes, and ways of life” (p. 362), breeding overt though not necessarily organized resistance. Kaup notes that sociologists have paid far more attention to the labor as a fictitious commodity and seeks to “unearth nature” in Polanyian theory. My own work (Bartley, 2018) has explicitly compared land and labor as objects of transnational private regulation, arguing that their baseline similarities are blurred by differences in structures of production, advocacy networks, and framings of the “common good.” A political sociology of land should neither see land as *sui generis* nor treat it as a generic commodity, but rather probe further into the parallels and differences with other objects of commodification and contestation.

Finally, as the chapters in this volume will illustrate, the politics of land are not limited to rural and agrarian spaces. These have received the most attention from anthropologists, geographers, and rural sociologists, but their insights must be combined with research on urban and suburban locations to build a new political sociology of land. In the chapters that follow, we will see some authors returning to growth machine theory, others building on the new “fiscal sociology,” and others extending research on urban governance in Asia and South America.

## WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT LAND? BASELINE ANSWERS

To be sure, the politics of land are similar in many respects to the politics of labor, gender, race, ethnicity, migration, class, sexuality, religion, indigeneity, and other central loci of struggle. But by considering some ways in which land is distinctive, we can hopefully develop more defensible modes of lumping and splitting in the study of political phenomena.

Scholars have provided several baseline answers to the question of how land is unique. First, land is fixed in place. As Derek Hall (2013) puts it, “if you want to use land, it will not come to you—you have to go to it, or convince other people to go to it for you” (p. 8). Combining land’s fixity and commodification, Li (2014b) explains that land can be treated as a “a thing-like unit of space apparently detached from the history of the landscape,” but this is always only partial, “because of the particular materiality of land. Unlike a mat, you can’t roll it up and take it away” (p. 113).<sup>1</sup>

Second, cultural and emotional attachments to land are both varied and strong. “What land is for a farmer is not the same thing as for a tax collector [...] Its uses and meanings are not stable and can be disputed,” says Li (2014b). The emotional attachments of individuals, families, and groups make it especially susceptible to conflict. Particularly since the decline of colonialism, the symbolic association between nation and territory has been strong (Hall, 2013).

Third, the monetary value of land is highly variable across space and time — similar to the price of labor but unlike most other commodities (Hall, 2013).

This points not only to booms and busts in the price of land, but also to tremendous differences in the price of land parcels that are only a few miles apart. Land markets are highly stratified and subject to major price swings.

Fourth, Hall argues that land is unique in often being rented, leased, or conceded rather than purchased outright. “It is difficult to think of circumstances (other than the staging of an avant-garde play) under which someone might want to borrow 12 tons of iron ore or 500 kilograms of fish,” he notes (p. 9). In part, this is because the use of the land does not normally exhaust its value, although there are of course important exceptions wherein land use degrades its future capacity.

Finally, Li notes that land is subject to – and in some ways constituted by – various “inscription devices” that make it manipulable and legible. “The axe, the spade, the plough, the title deed, the tax register, maps, graphs, satellite images, ancestral graves, mango trees – do more than simply record the presence of land as a resource: they are integral to assembling it as a resource for different actors” (Li, 2014b, p. 589).

This list is surely not exhaustive, and it likely elides similarities to other domains that will occur to readers. For instance, race and ethnicity are also subject to powerful “inscription devices,” and labor is, in a sense, rented rather than purchased outright. Nevertheless, this list provides a useful baseline that the chapters in this volume build upon.

## **WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT LAND? ANSWERS FROM THIS VOLUME**

Although none of the chapters in this volume set out to determine what is unique about land, they have ended up suggesting a number of compelling answers, which both deepen and question the baseline mentioned earlier. These answers revolve around land’s fixity, social movement characteristics, territorial control, and price swings.

### *Fixity*

We get a fuller sense of the consequences of land being fixed in place through Isaac Martin’s chapter on property tax policy. For Martin, land and buildings are a major source of tax revenue and different from most other taxable items because they cannot easily be moved. “Producers can flee across the frontier to escape the tax collector, but they cannot carry their land with them,” he notes (p. 39). As a result, local governments can seemingly rely on property taxes for revenue, except that the character of land also facilitates the mobilization of residents to contest property valuations and taxes. Because residents are physically proximate, they are easier to mobilize than many other sorts of collectivities. As Martin shows, spikes in taxable property values have often been accompanied by popular mobilization against land taxation and rising housing costs. The tax and expenditure limits that have been set in response have, indeed, squeezed government revenues, Martin finds. But this is just one of several takeaways from this chapter.

Martin's argument implies that there is generally a positive relationship between the openness of jurisdictional borders and a government's relative reliance on land taxation. Where it is relatively easy for business and residents to move their mobile assets to another jurisdiction, governments must tax immobile landed resources to a greater extent. In addition, taxing land, as Martin notes, can be a strategy for authorities to build and expand markets, especially in times and places in which market participation is otherwise sparse. Simply put, when there are tax bills to pay, residents and farmers must generate revenues to pay them, so they increasingly seek to sell their labor or their crops. Finally, like the growth machine literature, Martin emphasizes conflicts between use value and exchange value — a theme that is also prominent in Amanda Buday's chapter on fracking and Josh Sbicca's chapter on "green gentrification."

But is land truly fixed in place? Henning Deters's chapter on soil protection policy in the European Union suggests that the answer should be "not entirely." Through erosion, land literally moves, and this can change waterways far downstream, potentially across national borders. Moreover, runoff of fertilizers, pesticides, and manure can contaminate rivers and lakes — as can be seen in the toxic algae that plagues Lake Erie and other parts of the Great Lakes in North America. Contaminated soils may also travel to some degree with plants and animals as they are incorporated into food supplies. Even when land does not literally "move," land degradation in one place can spill over to others through declining biodiversity, impaired carbon sequestration, or air pollution from desertification or fire. In Southeast Asia, the burning of forest land in Indonesia — mainly to clear it for oil palm plantations or other agricultural development — has repeatedly spread a dangerous haze around the region.

So, land is not entirely immobile and localized. On the other hand, as Deters shows in his account of the failed EU Soil Framework Directive, the deep association of soil with fixity and national sovereignty makes it quite difficult to frame in terms of cross-border externalities. One can symbolically reinforce sovereignty by referring to "French soil" more powerfully than, say, "French air," "French companies," or "French workers." This helps to explain why support for EU soil protection dwindled (unlike other EU environmental protections), and it holds some promise for explaining other policy outcomes as well. For instance, "our common good" frames have been applied fairly successfully to sustainability and environmental protection projects — more than global labor and human rights (see Bartley, 2018). But Deters's analysis might lead us to expect "common good" frames to be an easier fit for air, water, and climate than for land.

### *Social Movements — Coalitions and Consequences*

The character of social movement coalitions may also be distinctive when land is at the center of campaigns. Spatially proximate residents may be easier to mobilize — as Martin argues — but coalitions may be more likely to fracture. Here, we can see parallels between Deters's account of the EU and Amanda Buday's chapter on anti-fracking campaigns in Illinois. In Deters's case, the coalition for European soil protection fell apart as opponents emphasized the

localized character of soil and effectively shifted the forum from international (European) to subnational and national arenas. In Buday's case, forum-shifting went the other direction but with a similar effect. The coalition between local and national environmental organizations fractured as the forum shifted from the local to the national level.

Buday's chapter covers a sort of coalition that is often fraught – between issue-specific local groups and professionalized national (or international) advocacy organizations. But perhaps the tensions are especially severe when land use is involved. Local activists are more rooted in the land in question, while at the same time, the consequences of the land use (fracking, in this case) are locally uneven – generating both local winners and losers in economic terms. Thus, coalition tensions are exacerbated as local activists find themselves embroiled in bitter disputes with their neighbors – and emergent counter-movements – but pushed to the margins of decision-making in the larger social movement coalition. Such dynamics may occur in movements unrelated to land – for GLBTQ rights, gender equity, labor rights, or racial justice, for instance – but the spatially concentrated but unevenly distributed costs and benefits of a controversial land use would seem to make them especially severe here.

We also see some potentially unique dimensions of coalitions in Marie Gagné's analysis of resistance to large-scale land acquisitions in Senegal. Gagné's account is to some degree one of bottom-up resistance to intrusions from public, private, and international elites. But Gagné also finds that efforts to halt or reverse large-scale land acquisitions can produce strange bedfellows. Local elites are not uniformly allied with land-grabbers, and in some cases, they may ally with popular resistance campaigns. This increases the campaigns' chances of success, but it also intertwines seemingly popular uprisings with landed elites' defense of their power. As Gagné shows, this is analytically important if one wants to explain the success and failure of campaigns against land grabs; it is normatively important to remain attentive to the unequal distribution of rights and resources without romanticizing community resistance.

Examining land expropriation in urbanizing areas of China, In Hye Hwang's chapter challenges the common assumption about protest and state response in China – namely, “big disturbance, big resolution; small disturbance, small resolution; no disturbance, no resolution” (Lee & Zhang, 2013, p. 1486). She finds no discernible link between the occurrence of collective action in a village and welfare compensation for expropriated land. Instead, villagers seem more likely to get welfare compensation when they petition to higher levels of government rather than county and city government officials. The reason, Hwang argues, is that local officials tend to be more responsive when their career prospects are threatened but social stability is not.

Beyond its analysis of welfare compensation, Hwang's chapter illustrates how property development in urban peripheries requires acquiring land from a number of households, such that a few holdouts can jeopardize a project – as seen in the “nail house” phenomenon in China. Governments and private developers often work together to acquire land use rights, but their powers are especially strong in authoritarian contexts. Here, resistance will often be repressed,