
*Powers of Exclusion* combines the insights of scholars from three different fields: Derek Hall (political economy), Philip Hirsch (human geography) and Tania Murray Li (anthropology). Each of the authors brought extensive experience in Southeast Asia to the project. Their collaboration has produced an excellent book that serves as an enquiry into current land issues in the region. Through detailed examples and illustrations, they examine the poignant and timely issues of access to and exclusion from land.

A focus upon the concept of exclusion in relation to access helps make the book more radical and intellectually stimulating than much of the literature on land access. The authors define exclusion as the “ways in which people are prevented from benefiting from things” (p. 7). This is an inversion of the definition of access as “the ability to benefit from things” (p. 153) in Ribot and Peluso’s influential article from 2003, ‘A Theory of Access’, on which the authors build.

By framing exclusion in terms of access, Hall, Hirsch and Li’s analysis reaches beyond normative rights-based approaches that would otherwise constrain them to the inclusion-exclusion nexus. This shift in emphasis makes the concept of exclusion more political—and in many ways more operational—and is a distinguishing aspect of the book. By focusing on the prevention of the ability to benefit, exclusion is elevated from an issue of rights alone, as is the case in much of the land grab literature in which the antidote to exclusion is inclusion through land titling and therefore issuing the legal right to access land. Hall *et al.* point out several shortcomings of this perspective. One is that land titling itself is an act of both exclusion and inclusion, security and insecurity. While the title-holder is included, others are excluded. In this way, the authors strive to de-stigmatize exclusion as a negative concept that might otherwise be equated with land grabbing. At the same time, they recognize that the costs and benefits of inclusion and exclusion are far from distributed equally. The authors also note that land titling legitimizes the issuing authority as one that has the right to issue land. Hall *et al.* also make clear that exclusion is not simply the opposite of access, but that it also highlights issues of contention, conflict, and power relations among actors. The authors are careful not to step into debates on the meaning of “power” in social theory. They instead posit four “powers” which, in their reckoning, “provide a particularly fruitful heuristic basis for the study of land access and exclusion” (p. 15).
These four powers are regulation, market, force and legitimation. Each shapes how different actors are prevented from accessing land. Regulation involves setting the terms of use within specified boundaries for specified purposes by specified users. The authors focus on conservation and corporate and state land grabbing as the main land dilemmas under this power. The second power, markets, is detailed via its influence over the price of land: the demand to utilize land to participate in certain markets, especially of boom crops, drives up its price, thereby excluding some from its benefits. The third power discussed is force. The authors discuss force in terms of state actors expelling villagers from land, mostly for conservation, as well as large scale and corporate boom crop production. Lastly, Hall et al. discuss legitimation as the rationale used by state actors to exclude other actors. They highlight territoriality, as “the association between land and belonging” (p. 196). The four powers interweave and rely on one other to take effect. They are offered as heuristic devices rather than mutually exclusive forms.

The authors not only spotlight exclusion of smallholders by state and large landholders, but also dedicate a chapter to intimate exclusions, which they define as “‘everyday’ processes” (p. 145) and “processes of accumulation and dispossession among villagers in the context of agrarian capitalism” (p. 146). These processes are dissected using the powers of exclusion analytic to great effect, showing that the same powers of exclusion operate at several scales within society, something that might otherwise be lost when looking at issues of land grabbing and displacement. Such analysis roots their work firmly in Marxist approaches to capital accumulation. The powers of market and legitimation are demonstrated to be particularly relevant to everyday processes. They argue that “in intimate settings, market powers always need to be hedged around by attempts at legitimation, because social proximity freights exclusion with moral weight and has consequences for personal standing” (p. 146).

Further work on the connection between the ‘powers of exclusion’ posited by Hall et al. and the notion of ‘access control’ in Ribot and Peluso’s work would be interesting. Sara Berry, one of the foundational scholars in conceptualizing ‘access’, emphasized the importance of access control by stating that the ability to generate a livelihood is dependent on the “ability to control and use resources effectively” (1989: 41). Ribot and Peluso built on this notion and theorized the ways in which access is not only gained, but also controlled and maintained. More recently, issues of access and exclusion have veered toward issues of possession, which are closely related to control and seem applicable directly to the powers of exclusion. Thus, Sikor uses the phrase “politics of possession” to diagnose how land is acquired, maintained and controlled in Vietnam. He emphasizes that access and exclusion are not only about how actors gain control of land (and by extension resources), but also how they control it. “Possession…always involves an element of control, as rights and entitlements situate a social actor in relation to the authorizing powers of politico-legal institutions” (2012: 1089). Applying concepts of
possession and access control to the four powers analytic would enrich the ‘powers of exclusion’ framework by explicitly showing how different types of power relations affect, or are affected by, the four powers.

*Powers of Exclusion* is an outstanding read with keen insights on processes of exclusion in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, many of which can be generalized to other areas of the world. Hall *et al.* are to be commended for writing an accessible, empirically rich and conceptually instructive book that will be of tremendous use to those interested in researching and teaching issues of land, access, exclusion, social relations and social differentiation.

**References**


Rodd Myers  
School of International Development  
University of East Anglia  
rodd.myers@uea.ac.uk

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