

Another Country:  
The Postcolonial State, Environmentality,  
and Landless People's Movements

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They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself.

-Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry.

-Eric Hobsbawm<sup>2</sup>

Despite being widespread, reports of the death of the peasantry are vastly premature. In one particular case, however, such reports could be said to be accurate. On September 10, 2003 a South Korean farmer and peasant organizer named Lee Kyung Hae climbed atop a truck near the barbed wire surrounding the World Trade Organization Ministerial Meeting in Cancún, Mexico, flipped open a small pocketknife, and stabbed himself in the heart. He died two days later. In a pamphlet published earlier that year, Hae had written:

My warning goes out to all citizens that human beings are in an endangered situation. That uncontrolled multinational corporations and a small number of big WTO Members are leading an undesirable globalization that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing, and undemocratic. It should be stopped immediately. Otherwise the false logic of neoliberalism will wipe out the diversity of global agriculture and be disastrous to all human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Tragic as Hae's death was, it nonetheless became a rallying call for Via Campesina, the transnational peasants' organization to which he belonged, and other rural social movements around the world. Within days of his death, the chant "We are Lee" had been translated into dozens of different languages, as tens of thousands of peasants marched in countries around the world in mourning and solidarity with Hae and to demand policies of national support for agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Hae's suicide thus became a sign of the crisis faced by peasants, indigenous peoples, and landless workers as well as of their radical challenge to the global status quo.

Rural people around the world, who constitute the bulk of most postcolonial nations, are facing increasingly dire conditions. Long-standing inequalities of access to land have been pushed to a critical point over the last quarter century as the postcolonial state has mutated from a developmental to a neo-liberal form. Newly independent nations, that is, initially viewed land reform as a crucial step in the creation of the large-scale domestic markets that would be crucial to state-led industrialization efforts.<sup>5</sup> Without a substantial, well-to-do peasantry, who would consume the products of new national industries and, just as importantly, guarantee the food sovereignty of the fledgling nation? The result was widespread state support for redistribution of land, whether as a result of revolutionary struggle as in China or through the kinds of market reforms carried out in nations such as South Korea. In addition, the relatively egalitarian growth of the United States – growth rooted, according to many posts-war commentators, in the country's fabled Jeffersonian yeomanry - offered a paradigm for development and democratization that the new superpower seemed anxious to export to nations such as Germany, Japan, and Taiwan after World War II. Indeed, land reform initially appeared

to be a central pillar of post-war reconstruction, at least in regions of strategic significance to Cold War antagonisms.

The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and after effectively dismantled these state policies of land redistribution and support for small rural farms. The new economic orthodoxy, implemented with ruthless rigidity around the globe, emphasized production (both industrial and agricultural) for export. In tandem with the protocols of industrialized, chemical- and capital-intensive agriculture that characterized the Green Revolution – so named because it was a conscious response to the threat of Red (i.e. socialist) upheaval in underdeveloped nations with large and militant peasantries – the new policies rolled back many of the gains made by rural peoples during the initial decades of national independence.

As the postcolonial state shifted from an agent responsible, in theory at least, for substantial agrarian reform to a proxy for the rollout of neo-liberal policies that dramatically escalated rural inequality, land reform also faded from view. Indeed, so sweeping was the Washington Consensus – not to mention concurrent academic theories of post-national cosmopolitanism - during the 1980s and 1990s that agrarian reform was simply not discussed.<sup>6</sup> Although there were of course significant exceptions to the voguish embrace of cosmopolitan hybridity in postcolonial studies, the agrarian question was nevertheless virtually totally overlooked by commentators, including those with a materialist outlook.<sup>7</sup> This situation is particularly stark when compared with the importance of the paired agrarian and national questions for forefathers of postcolonial theory such as Frantz Fanon. It seemed that as the tide of the peasant-led revolutionary movements in which Fanon and other activists such as Gandhi, Cabral, and Guevara had

placed so much hope receded, so did critical awareness of the inequalities that motivated such movements. Indeed, at the end of this period, the issue of whether the peasantry still existed actually became an important topic of debate in rural studies.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, if there was no longer a peasantry, land reform and the role of the state therein was a moot topic.<sup>9</sup>

This silence over rural injustice has, however, been decisively shattered over the last decade. Indeed, for some commentators, the core of contemporary anti-imperialist politics is to be found in the countryside of the global periphery.<sup>10</sup> There are a number of factors that explain the resurgence of the agrarian question today.<sup>11</sup> The metastasizing growth of mega-cities of the periphery such as Lagos, Cairo, and Mumbai, cities that lack significant industrial growth, has created crime-ridden slums that have helped generate support among social movements and some sectors of the peripheral middle classes and elite for land reform, a solution that is often cheaper than creating industrial jobs in mega-cities.<sup>12</sup> Another significant factor is the increasingly evident unsustainability of the Green Revolution model of industrial agriculture, with its dependence on historically unparalleled exploitation of natural resources such as water and hydrocarbons. Foremost in generating awareness of problems in the countryside, however, have been the militant campaigns waged by landless and poor rural workers such as Lee Kyung Hae. Over the last decade and a half, the struggle of these dispossessed people for access to land has placed them at the forefront of the global justice movement, as the role of the international coalition Via Campesina in the World Social Forum has made clear.

The importance of groups such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico and Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra* or MST) lies not simply in the militancy of their

struggle, but in the novel strategies of protest they have pioneered. Previous models of rural insurgency such as the Latin American *foco* theory hinged on the use of the countryside as an organizing base by Leninist-style revolutionary cadres. Emerging from experiences of authoritarian rule and disillusionment with the claims of the postcolonial elite to represent national interests, contemporary rural insurgency tends, by contrast, to be characterized by anti-authoritarian methods of organizing and consciousness-raising, by non-violent forms of direct action, and by a refusal to create hierarchical structures of power. These strategies have had a strong impact, becoming modular elements used by the global justice movement around the world over the last decade and a half.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to dismantling the moral legitimacy of free market fundamentalism, radical rural movements such as the MST have advanced a struggle for the democratization of everyday life, offering an inherent challenge to the feeble forms of representative democracy held out by the Washington Consensus as the summit of political aspiration following the end of the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> While each movement draws on its own distinct local and national traditions, they share a commitment to what Hilary Wainwright has called the participatory Left's radical epistemology.<sup>15</sup> According to this orientation, which revives popular traditions of participatory politics from the past, knowledge and expertise are not the exclusive perquisites of a select party elite who steer the State for the good of the masses, but are rather the product of the kinds of social exchanges and practical experience generated by the horizontal, network structure embraced by groups such as the MST. Contemporary radical rural movements thus offer a stinging rebuttal to the chauvinism of Karl Marx and more recent commentators, who see peasants as embodying the most regressive forms of passivity.<sup>16</sup> The meekness of the

peasantry leads ineluctably for such analysts to a highly authoritarian politics of patronage. Such accounts cannot be sustained in the face of the militant rural movements of the last decade. Indeed, as movements that are both “in and against” the State, contemporary landless workers’ organizations are helping to articulate novel paradigms of both social being and State power.

There have been few attempts to represent these movements in literary terms, a fact that perhaps reflects the heritage of bourgeois individualism that characterizes the European novel just as much as it underlines the urban orientation of most postcolonial (including novel writing) elites. Perhaps, in addition, there is some trepidation among novelists concerning representation of the subaltern given the theoretical drubbing that such efforts have taken from postcolonial theorists.<sup>17</sup> Yet, if, as critics such as Foucault have shown us, power during the modern era takes on an overwhelmingly capillary character, the novel should be an ideal vehicle for exploring the politics of everyday life and their impact on the lineaments of the postcolonial state. In what follows, I discuss Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, a novel set in the labyrinth of islands known as the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal. Ghosh has long been interested in environmental issues, and his novel offers a very rich discussion of postcolonial modes of environmental governance and subject constitution. More specifically, *The Hungry Tide* unravels a dense knot of issues relating to the politics of wildlife conservation, urban-rural conflicts, and class and caste politics in postcolonial India against the backdrop of the policies adopted by the Communist-led Left Front government of West Bengal towards a community of refugees that occupied one of the islands in the Sundarbans during the late 1970s. Ghosh’s novel suggests that events such as the massacre of settlers on

Morichjhāpi Island cannot be separated from the broader power relations that characterize postcolonial Indian society. As a result, issues of representation – in both senses of the term – figure prominently in *The Hungry Tide*. Through its evocative exploration of the ambiguities and injustices of environmental governance, Ghosh’s work demonstrates the obstacles to a radical democratization of everyday life as well as the necessity of a solution to rural inequalities.

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Nearly fifty eight percent of the Indian populace is dependent on agriculture, yet more than fifty percent of this population owns smallholdings of less than one hectare.<sup>18</sup> Large plots of ten hectares or more belong to less than two percent of the population, while the absolute landless account for as much as forty three percent of peasant households.<sup>19</sup> Although they only begin to crack open the multiple divides that fissure postcolonial Indian society, such statistics put some perspective on the massacre that took place on Morichjhāpi Island in May of 1979. The squatters who settled on Morichjhāpi were Dalits (or “untouchables”), refugees who arrived in West Bengal from Bangladesh following the war of Independence in 1971-72. Lacking the social and material capital of earlier Bengali refugees, these migrants were used as political capital by opposition Leftist parties in West Bengal during this period.<sup>20</sup> After winning power in 1978, however, the Left Front government deserted the Morichjhāpi refugees, who they now claimed had illegally trespassed on a protected forest reserve slated for a World Wildlife Fund-sponsored tiger protection project. When the refugees refused to leave their settlement on Morichjhāpi and won a legal battle against the West Bengal government's economic blockade of the island, the government hired off-duty policemen and criminal

gangs to purge Morichjhāpi. In the course of three days in mid-May, 1979, the gangs engaged in an orgy of rape and killing that cleansed the island of human inhabitants.

As Pablo Mukherjee argues in his insightful discussion of *The Hungry Tide*, the novel hinges on Amitav Ghosh's perennial concern with unraveling the politics of boundaries and borders.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the novel's setting in the constantly shifting tidal mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans is itself a powerful metaphor for the evanescence of the boundaries established by human beings. In addition, Ghosh's redaction of the Morichjhāpi massacre reflects on the bloody outcome of the British colonial erection of borders on the subcontinent, a policy that led to the displacement of millions during the Partition and that continues to plague India in the form of highly combustible communal divisions. As Mukherjee notes, the politics of collective representation are particularly fraught given this history, for the Morichjhāpi massacres highlighted the spurious nature of claims on the part of West Bengal political elites to transparently understand and to adequately represent the interests of the refugees based on their linguistic kinship.<sup>22</sup> These purported affinities evaporated once the Left Front government was faced with the exigencies of what Arun Agrawal calls "environmentality:" the creation of technologies of environmental governance that are linked to the constitution of particular kinds of environmental subjects.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of Morichjhāpi, environmentality followed a script inherited directly from the British Raj. Colonial era state science was characterized by widespread and deep fears of what was termed dessication - what we would now call climate change - and other forms of natural degradation that resulted from intensive plantation cultivation in Britain's tropical colonies.<sup>24</sup> The result of these natural anxieties was the growth of

discourses of “conservation” that characterized the behavior of colonial subjects as a calamitous threat to the environment. In tandem with racialized discourses of sexual degeneration, the colonized were seen as responsible for the destruction of the natural world in a facile binary that isolated “natives” from “nature” just as surely as European settlements were to be physically and sexually segregated from indigenous habitations.<sup>25</sup> Colonial natural scientists and anthropologists became increasingly obsessed with tribal forest peoples, whose habits of shifting cultivation made them particularly difficult to control.<sup>26</sup> The answer to the alarmingly autonomous and supposedly deleterious practices of forest-dwelling peoples was the geographical demarcation of “reserves” that allowed the colonial state to exclude unwanted elements and practices, and to monitor and control “native” behavior tightly. As a result of these state policies, hundreds of thousands of imperial subjects were essentially criminalized and expelled from their homes as the government set aside forests and other lands as natural areas to be preserved from the destructive behavior of their indigenous inhabitants. By the 1890s in India, the colonial state’s investment in conservation reached an extraordinary degree of development, with up to thirty percent of some provinces coming under forest department control.<sup>27</sup>

The West Bengal government’s decision in the late 1970s to proceed with the WWF-sponsored tiger preserve in the Sundarbans is of a piece with the state science of the colonial era in as much as the Morichjhāpi settlers were represented by the government as a direct threat to conservation. Indeed, the fate of the settlers highlights the continuity between different historical moments of enclosure, from the creation of capitalist agriculture in late medieval Europe to the conquest of *terrius nullius* during the colonial era, from the forms of displacement occasioned by policies of national

“development” during the postcolonial period to contemporary processes of commodification and privatization associated with neoliberalism. While there clearly are important distinctions between the modes of environmentality deployed across these different periods, issues of local control over land and vital common property resources are common factors in resistance to both colonial and postcolonial “conservation” policies. For instance, Richard Grove argues that the Maoist guerrilla movement known as the Naxalites would not have managed to mobilize significant support among the peasantry of northern West Bengal during the late 1960s and 1970s were it not for deep animosities kindled by state agricultural and forest policy in the region, policies that had a colonial genealogy.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Grove links apparently disparate geographical sites by suggesting that similar issues were at play in Naxalism, in the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya during the 1950s, and in the insurgent nationalist movement of the 1970s in what was then known as Rhodesia. Rather than spelling the end of land alienation, in other words, the postcolonial period has seen a continuation and even escalation of the processes of expropriation initiated during the colonial era under the sign of conservation.

This intensification of accumulation by dispossession should not be so surprising given the metamorphosis of the state during the neoliberal era.<sup>29</sup> The common perception among both liberal and influential neo-Marxist analysts of globalization such as Hardt and Negri that the state has retreated, giving way to a borderless world of economic and cultural flows, has obscured the ways in which, to quote Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, “the state has been employed systematically to lift barriers, to deepen the commodification of social life, and to enforce the new order by coercive means.”<sup>30</sup> For Moyo and Yeros, modish discourses of globalization have submerged both the national *and* the agrarian

questions, conveniently obliterating awareness of the extent to which the peasantry has not “disappeared,” but has rather been compelled to absorb the costs of social reproduction as these have been systematically expelled to the global periphery by capital during the neoliberal era.<sup>31</sup> In tandem with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, postcolonial states have zealously pursued an avalanche of new forms of enclosure. Many of these policies have had a particularly destructive impact on rural peoples; some of the most important of these policies include: reneging on historical commitments to land reform; pursuing large infrastructural projects such as dams that have displaced hundreds of millions of people; standing by as land is increasingly commercialized, and as business interests – both agricultural (e.g. plantations) and non-agricultural (e.g. mining and petroleum) have infringed on public lands; refusing to combat the undercutting of peasant and other small farmers by policies such as trade liberalization, the flooding of local markets with cheap, dumped food imports, slashing of price supports, the privatization of credit, excessive export promotion, and the patenting of genetic crop resources; failing to challenge the monopolization of agricultural commodity chains – in both input (i.e. seeds) and output (i.e. grain trading) sides – by transnational corporations, a process that has put peasants in an unbearable cost-price squeeze.<sup>32</sup> In sum, while the neoliberal period may provide evidence of new modalities and intensities of environmentality, the underlying dynamic of accumulation by dispossession remains the same as that evident in other historical moments of enclosure.

As Karl Polanyi noted in his classic analysis of the rise of capitalism, a crucial question relating to such processes of commodification is how they are experienced;

what, in other words, does it feel like to live through such processes of enclosure?<sup>33</sup> Polanyi was interested in this aspect of the market society's growth, of course, because he sought to understand the contradictory forces for and against what he called "fictitious commodification." Other more recent analysts such as Arun Agrawal have also emphasized the need to grapple with the mutually constitutive processes of subject formation and governance in order to understand how land alienation is facilitated and resisted.<sup>34</sup> Representation plays a key role in this regard, for it is through a political economy of representation that institutions such as the state and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) make claims to deliver "the peasantry" in compliance with modes of environmental governance.<sup>35</sup> As Rajeev Patel puts it, in order to achieve this end, "a demobilized and depoliticized spectacle of the peasantry needs to be created and represented. This spectacle cannot coexist with genuine engagement by poor rural people in these development processes, as to accept this would be to accept the messy business of politics, power and democracy that development institutions are singularly designed to avoid."<sup>36</sup>

The extent to which the peasants tend to be rendered mute objects of government policies of accumulation by dispossession is mirrored in *The Hungry Tide's* highly mediated representation of the Morichjhāpi settlers' struggle. Rather than placing the account of the massacre in the mouth of a settler, Ghosh tells the settlers' story through Kanai Dutt, a resident of New Delhi who has returned to the Sundarbans after a mysterious manuscript written by his late uncle Nirmal Bose is found. Dutt is, importantly, a translator, although the love of literature that he cultivated in his student days has been drowned out by the workaday affairs of the extremely lucrative translation

agency he runs in the capital. Kanai could be said to represent the new Indian elite, enriched by the liberalization of the country's economy during the 1990s but totally out of touch with the nation's rural majority. The arrogance of this neoliberal elite is conveyed clearly through Kanai's imperious behavior towards those of lesser caste and class status, as well as by his predatory sexual overtures towards any attractive woman who crosses his path. Yet it is Kanai who is called on to bear witness to the subaltern world of the Morichjhāpi settlers, for he is the legatee of his uncle Nirmal's manuscript, the only written record of the government-perpetrated massacre on the island.

Even here, however, Ghosh adds another layer of mediation, for the manuscript Kanai reads is itself penned by an unreliable narrator. For instance, Nirmal, who during his youthful days had harbored quixotic revolutionary sentiments that quickly evaporated in the harsh light of government repression, initially expresses impatience with what he perceives as the superstitious local traditions associated with the tale of Bon Bibi.<sup>37</sup> As the reader comes to see in the course of Ghosh's novel, the myth of Bon Bibi is a popular belief system with hybrid Muslim and Hindu religious origins and a strong didactic edge concerning the need to respect the highly unstable and perennially menacing natural environment of the islands. Above all, the tale of Bon Bibi emphasizes the imperative to curb excessive avarice in one's dealings with other people and with the environment. Like many indigenous cosmogonies, in other words, the myth of Bon Bibi is a kind of regulatory social and ecological fiction for the residents of the Sundarban archipelago. Nirmal's initial disdain for this belief system and his dependence on the travel narrative of a European explorer of the delta region is symptomatic of his condescension towards the lower caste residents of the area. As Pablo Mukherjee argues, if Kanai may be taken

as a representative of the neoliberal generation of the Indian elite, Nirmal personifies an older cohort of first-generation postcolonial subjects, whose developmental policies in most cases disregarded the needs of the majority of the nation.<sup>38</sup>

As Kanai reads Nirmal's long-lost notebook, however, he observes the transformation that takes place in his uncle as he participates in the ill-fated occupation of Morichjhāpi. Nirmal's initial scorn for what he perceives as the superstition of the Bon Bibi myth is transformed into an appreciation for its hybrid origins, a sense that the tide country's faith, like its topography, is shaped by an incessant but beneficent flux and mixture (205). In addition, Nirmal's youthful revolutionary ideals are reanimated by the Morichjhāpi settlers' struggle for the right to land. For his wife Nilima, who misunderstands his passion, Nirmal's enthusiasm is a product of the settlers' simple willingness to pit themselves against the government (100). As Kanai learns as he reads his uncle's manuscript, however, the settlers' defiance of the Forestry Department does not simply serve as an example of abstract revolutionary behavior, but rather resonates on a highly personal level with Nirmal. The settlers' cries of "Amra kara? Bastuhara" [Who are we? We are the dispossessed] in the face of menacing policemen remind Nirmal of his own unhoused condition: "And as I listened to the sound of those syllables, it was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides. Who was I? Where did I belong? In Calcutta or in the tide-country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?" (211). Admittedly there is a strong element of humanist universalizing in Nirmal's reaction to the settlers' defiant cries, yet, to the extent that he stands in for a certain metropolitan subjectivity, this dawning self-questioning and sense of solidarity with the refugees constitutes an important epistemic

transformation. For if, as I have argued, the role of an elite political economy of representation is to interpolate peasant subjectivity in order to legitimate state policies of enclosure, then Nirmal's transformation suggests the potential for a decentering of the hierarchical epistemic relations on which such forms of representation are based.<sup>39</sup>

The rejection of hierarchical relations is a central component of the struggle of the landless rural semi-proletariat around the world today. From the umbrella group Via Campesina to national and local organizations such as Brazil's Landless Rural Worker's Movement (MST), Kenya's Greenbelt Movement, and India's Ekta Parishad (United Forum), key contemporary peasant, indigenous, and landless peoples' organizations are united not simply by their opposition to inequalities in the distribution of land and to the agricultural policies of organizations such as the World Trade Organization that intensify such inequalities, but by their rejection of the forms of paternalism that have traditionally been instrumental in keeping subaltern peoples in their subordinate place.<sup>40</sup> Once again, this is not simply a question of transforming institutional dispositions, but of undermining and transformation traditional epistemological structures that cement particular forms of subjectivity.

In the case one of the most well known and influential of these organizations, Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST), for example, the fostering of autonomous subjectivity has been a central, indeed a constitutive, component of the struggle. The MST's struggle for land redistribution began during the days of the Brazilian military dictatorship, when the Catholic Church provided one of the sole venues for public discussion. Although the church's traditional support for the landed plutocracy in Brazil did much to ensure its immunity to the kind of repression meted out to other social

organizations, during the years of the dictatorship the church was transformed by the concept of a “social gospel” that emphasized messages of social justice in Jesus’ teaching, showing that a thirst for equality was not the sole perquisite of the Communist Party. Indeed, it was in the Christian Ecclesiastical Base Communities (CEBs) organized by priests influenced by what came to be known as liberation theology that the landless movement found its principal initial organizational and ideological base.<sup>41</sup> In CEB meetings, priests sat without vestments in circles among fellow believers and encouraged their parishioners to see themselves as a fellowship rather than a flock of sheep.<sup>42</sup> Thus, by modeling anti-hierarchical social relations, the CEBs challenged the church’s official position, which continued to emphasize individual salvation over the social gospel, obedience to secular authority, and the sanctity of private property.

Equally important in forming the MST’s anti-hierarchical stance was the influence of Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed. Working with the poor in rural Pernambuco before the military coup of 1964, Freire had observed that traditional pedagogical techniques that emphasized the power of the teacher over his or her students were one of the strongest obstacles to the success of adult literacy programs.<sup>43</sup> This hierarchical form of pedagogy encouraged students to adopt passive positions, which meant that even if they did succeed in absorbing a particular concept furnished by the teacher, they were unlikely to be able to apply that concept independently to new material and situations. The crux of Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed was to develop techniques that broke down the relation of dependence between student and teacher, thereby encouraging learners to move from passive to active modes of cognition and behavior.

When the MST began to organize land invasions in the early- to mid-1980s, the critique of hierarchical social relations that characterized liberation theology and Freirian pedagogy provided a crucial guide for the new organization's internal structure. Thus, not only were MST members able to see through the forms of paternalism and clientelism that traditionally constituted social relations between Brazil's wealthy ranchers and land owners and the impoverished workers who lived on or at the margins of their land. In addition, the MST refused to appoint individual leaders, who could easily be bought off or assassinated by the central government or local strongmen. Perhaps even more important in terms of radical politics, the MST embraced mass nonviolent direct action as its central strategy. The organization's land invasions thus typically involve entire communities, who take up residence on patches of land that the organization has identified as not in productive use (a concept whose inclusion in the Brazilian constitution allows for expropriation of unproductive *latifundia*). While the MST has had to battle both outright violence as well as the kinds of divide-and-conquer tactics that have traditionally been deployed against land occupations by the poor, their ideological sophistication and mass base have made them highly effective agents for change in Brazil. Over the course of several decades, the organization has carried out more than 230,000 occupations that have redistributed 20 million acres of agricultural land to over 350,000 families, have put the issue of agrarian reform high on the national political agenda, and have highlighted the need for sustainable, non-industrial, non-export-oriented forms of agriculture.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, the MST has also helped to transform Brazil's political landscape and has made a strong imprint on the global justice movement by refusing to allow itself to

become coopted by organizations that had traditionally claimed to represent the poor such as rural labor unions, which Brazil's military government did totally abolish but rather neutered through the creation of rigidly bureaucratic authority structures and a strong dependency on the organs of government. It is precisely such organizations that, along with newer forces such as international NGOs, have been at the core of creating what Rajeev Patel calls the "demobilized and depoliticized spectacle of the peasantry." Steering clear of the unions and insisting on its autonomy from political parties – even progressive ones such as the Workers' Party (PT) – the MST has come to constitute a powerful autonomous force in Brazilian political life, working "in and against" political parties and offering a critical component of new forms of radical democracy such as the participatory budgeting processes analyzed elsewhere in this volume.

Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement is not alone in its radical epistemological and institutional orientation. Groups such as India's Ekta Parishad draw on local Gandhian traditions to remarkably similar effect. A central component of Ekta Parishad's campaigns against the dispossession of the nation's *adivasis* or indigenous forest dwellers is the *yatra*, an extended march through the countryside that draws on the Hindu tradition of the spiritual pilgrimage.<sup>45</sup> Before the march begins, the organization typically publishes a "Declaration of *Satyagraha* [struggle for truth]," a move that highlights the group's Gandhian affiliations and that serves to decry the government's refusal to redress endemic inequalities linked to land dispossession and industrialized models of agriculture. The *yatra* then proceeds over the course of a month or so, during which hearings are held in individual villages around the issues addressed by the *satyagraha* declaration and local grievances are aired. The *yatra* concludes with

demonstrations before legislative bodies that often include Gandhian forms of nonviolent direct action such as sit-ins and fasts.<sup>46</sup> Like the MST's campaigns, those of Ekta Parishad and other similar groups challenge the forms of hierarchy and paternalism that have traditionally constituted rural social relations, including, crucially, the patriarchal gender relations that keep women the world over, who are responsible for the bulk of agricultural production while owning less than 1% of the globe's land, in subordinate positions. In addition, as we have seen, they react to the cooptation of movements for national liberation during the postcolonial and neoliberal periods by eschewing the predilection for violence and authoritarianism that characterizes both hegemonic forces and traditional anti-imperialist movements. In seeking to transcend institutionalized political channels by reviving and developing forms of participatory democracy, decentralization, and organizational autonomy from political parties and the state, such movements may be seen as movements whose impact is likely to be limited to lobbying efforts towards a state increasingly in hock to powerful global financial institutions and interests. Yet such organizations are not simply working to organize subaltern groups in order to help them increase their power to influence the state. By stressing the collective capacity of some of the world's most marginalized people to transform their conditions, such movements are articulating radical new forms of grassroots democracy that in turn may serve to transform the institutional apparatus of the state. Rather than being romantic antiquarians of bygone worlds or doomed opponents of implacable policies of development, in other words, these movements are forging a radical democratic imaginary constituted by alternative forms of development and social relations that are more sustainable, nonviolent, and democratic.

Amitav Ghosh wrestles with this question of what we might call the modernity of the subaltern through the figure of Fokir, the son of a Morichjhāpi settler named Kusum, with whom both Kanai and Nirmal have been enamored in the past. After being spirited off the island before the massacre during which Kusum and the other settlers were killed, Fokir grows up in the Sundarbans to be a fisherman. Unlike his ambitious wife Moyna, Fokir is illiterate, but possesses an immense knowledge of the tidal country's waters and their inhabitants. Given the precipitous decline of the area's aquatic life as a result of overfishing, however, Fokir's vocation appears doomed. Indeed, for Kanai, "Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was [the island of] Lusibari" (183). Yet if Fokir appears to Kanai as a symbol of the rural poverty and ignorance that India is fast leaving behind, he is, as the young Asian-American cetologist Piya Roy comments, a ghost who haunts the metropolitan modernity of the neoliberal Indian elite: "she guessed also that despite its newness and energy, the country Kanai inhabited was full of these ghosts, these unseen presences whose murmurings could never quite be silenced no matter how loudly you spoke" (183).

After he saves her from drowning following an incident in which her forestry department escort extorts money from Fokir for alleged poaching, Piya develops a strong attraction for this man whom Ghosh paints as emblematic of India's cast-aside rural masses. Like the relation between the Dalit Velutha and the upper class Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, this slowly blossoming attraction crosses proscribed boundaries of caste. Regardless of violating this taboo and despite the fact that they do not speak the same language, Piya and Fokir's relationship develops based

on their shared intense affinity for the natural life of the Sundarbans. Fokir's deep knowledge of the Sundarbans' flora and fauna allows him to lead Piya to secluded habitat of the Irawaddy dolphins that she has come to the area to study. The narrative of Piya and Fokir's exploits on the water unfolds in a braided counterpoint to Nirmal's diary, seeming to offer a redemptive narrative to the violent betrayal of the Morichjhāpi peasants by the elite West Bengal government. Indeed, as the two weave their way across a lagoon, the one fishing and the other inputting information into a Global Position System, Ghosh's narrator comments that the two are amazed by "the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and their purposes" (118).

Just as he does in terms of the struggle on Morichjhāpi, however, Ghosh troubles facile notions of a coincidence of elite and subaltern interests. During a trip that follows this idyllic first encounter on the water, for instance, Piya is horrified when she witnesses Fokir helping a group of fishermen kill a tiger that has wandered into their village. For Piya, the killing of the tiger reflects the sweeping subordination of the natural world to the whims of human beings. This anthropocentric perspective finds one of its most horrendous contemporary embodiments in the commodification of tropical animals on the international black market, a trade that is described in the story of the dolphin nicknamed Mr. Sloane that immediately follows the killing of the tiger in Ghosh's narrative. Yet, as Kanai points out to Piya, her sensitivity to the suffering of animals, like that of many good-hearted, Animal Planet-watching people in the global North, comes at the expense of the poor on whom such animals often prey. Picking up on the events on Morichjhāpi about which he's been reading, Kanai comments acidly on the devastating impact of "conservation" on the people who inhabit game reserves: "It was people like you who

made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my own class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're dying – after all, they are the poorest of the poor" (248-49). Kanai, who has been deeply affected by Nirmal's account of the Morichjhāpi refugees' obliteration for a WWF-sponsored tiger refuge, forces Piya to reevaluate the power relations in conservation policies that have remained hidden to her as an elite metropolitan subject. Central to his challenge, however, is the self-examination he is clearly engaged in as he reckons with the complicit role of postcolonial elites in global conservation policies that silence and sacrifice subaltern peoples.

This traumatic moment, which is followed shortly afterwards by Kanai's own brutal outburst of pent-up metropolitan caste rage against Fokir when they confront a tiger on one of the archipelago's islands (269), nevertheless contains the seeds of an auto-critique of elite forms of representation. Indeed, it is in the midst of this explosion of bile that Kanai manages to look through Fokir's eyes, to translate himself into the position of the Other, and thereby to see himself and, by extension, his class as the immense threat they typically are to people such as Fokir:

It was as though his own vision was being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes and he was seeing not himself, Kanai Dutt, but a great host of people – a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal (270).

In this moment of role reversal, Kanai, who had once consigned Fokir and all those like him to the dustbin of history, develops a profound sense of empathy with his rival for Piya's affection. In seeing the normally hidden forms of naked class assertion that buoy his erstwhile imperious sense of self, Kanai, like Piya following the tiger killing, develops the intellectual and emotional resources for acts of affiliation with the dispossessed grounded not in paternalism but in mutual recognition. Thus, if contemporary landless people's movements are advancing radical democratic strategies that hinge on the rejection of authoritarian social relations, *The Hungry Tide* deploys narrative to involve its readers in a complementary process of empathy and affiliation with the marginalized.

### Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh refuses, however, to provide saccharine solutions to the intractable problems of inequality that beset the world today. *The Hungry Tide* thus concludes with one of the most tragic love scenes ever put to pen. Fokir saves Piya from the typhoon that sweeps across the archipelago by lashing her to a tree and by protecting her from the gale and the lethal objects it carries with his own body. It is ironically in this moment of natural violence that the two achieve a union that their life circumstances have made impossible: "Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him... it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one" (321). A powerful moment, but one that does not bode particularly well if read from an allegorical angle for the kinds of empathetic affiliation and political solidarity that I have just described. Yet, crucially,

Ghosh does not end his story here. Piya survives and remains in the Sundarbans to run a conservation group that will be administered through the Badabon Trust, the organization founded by Nirmal's wife Nilima. By involving Nilima and Fokir's wife Moyna, Piya's plan suggests the potential for the kinds of transnational linkages between women that have proven to be one of the most vibrant faces of the global justice movement over the last few decades.<sup>47</sup> In addition, this institutional structure will, according to Piya, insure the involvement of local fishermen, who will thereby be provided with a livelihood as well as with the intellectual arsenal and international networks to counter the depredations of the Indian Forest Department and future inimical government schemes against the residents of the archipelago. It seems, then, that the anti-hierarchical forms of empathy that gestate earlier in the novel do result in practical forms of decentralized institution building.

Piya and Kanai are not the only ones, however, to embrace radical democratic projects. Even the World Bank and other international financial institutions have shown signs of converting in recent years to the gospel of anti-authoritarianism. Pushed by the protests of landless peoples' movements as well as the analyses of its own development economists, the World Bank, for example, has recently recognized the relative efficiency of small farmers and has, in theory, embraced land reform. Yet the programs proposed by the Bank are, not surprisingly, grounded in market-led land titling programs, and consequently constitute a threadbare bandage over the suppurating wound of inequality, unsustainability industrial agriculture, and massive rural-urban migration that characterizes the crisis of today. According to Peter Rosset and his colleagues at Food First, far from empowering peasants and landless workers and thereby contributing to a

thoroughgoing decentralization of political power, the Bank's land titling programs are contributing to a new round of land loss and conflict since their costs make them wholly inadequate compared to the scope of landlessness and their beneficiaries tend to be burdened with heavy debts for expensive land of poor quality.<sup>48</sup> Working among impoverished Adivasi communities in rural Madhya Pradesh, Amita Baviskar comes to similar conclusions. The doxa of decentralization, she argues, has helped constitute a new form of environmentality that "fails to address the political predicament of the vast majority of *adivasis* who are not land-owning peasant cultivators but increasingly participate as members of an industrial proletariat."<sup>49</sup> Like Patel, Baviskar concludes that the result of such centrally administered policies of decentralization is to create a simulacrum of peasant participation, one that empowers a select, narrow stratum of small landholders to exclusion of the bulk of those working the land. The danger, in other words, is that global institutions such as the World Bank as well as national and regional governments will respond to the radical democratic demands being advanced by groups such as Ekta Parishad and the MST with the adoption of policies that create a thin veneer of decentralization while continuing to pursue business as usual.

These largely rhetorical concessions to radical democracy clearly constitute a significant challenge to landless workers groups, particularly since they tend to depoliticize questions of land reform and equality, making them seem nothing more than technical exercises to be dealt with using the most efficient mechanism – which almost invariably is held to be the free market. In the face of such maneuvers, organizations like Via Campesina have reemphasized the link between the agrarian question and the national question through advancing an alternative model of *food sovereignty*.<sup>50</sup> Today's

dominant global model is one of food security, in which nations such as the United States argue that the best way to ensure an adequate food supply is to import cheap, subsidized food produced in overdeveloped countries such as the US and the nations of the European Union. By contrast, Via Campesina's alternative model begins by embracing the human right to food, but goes on to underline the right to land and the right to produce for rural peoples. Food sovereignty, in other words, offers a critique of the doctrine of food security, which legitimates massive imports of industrially produced food that help drive farmers off their land and swell the ranks of the hungry who live at the mercy of the cash economy in mega-cities. Putatively decentralizing programs of land reform such as that advocated by the World Bank hasten precisely such policies of alienation, and in the process further the penetration of the postcolonial state by international financial institutions. Any successful democracy of course requires an active, informed citizenry. The ersatz policies of reform and decentralization adopted by bodies such as the World Bank in response to the crisis of the Washington Consensus are merely exacerbating tendencies inimical to the creation of precisely such an engaged and politically empowered population. It is, instead, in alternative models such as Via Campesina's, which emerge from experiences of grassroots organizing as well as an awareness of the linked agrarian and national questions, that a radical democratic imaginary is being cultivated.



Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 124.
- <sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the Twentieth Century 1914–1991*. (New York: Vintage, 1996), 289.
- <sup>3</sup> See Lee Kyung Hae, Pamphlet (2003). Accessed November 8, 2007.  
<<http://www.countercurrents.org/glocarlsen160903.htm>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Rajeev Patel, “International Agrarian Restructuring and the Practical Ethics of Peasant Movement Solidarity,” *Journal of African and Asian Studies* 41.1/2 (2006): 71-93.
- <sup>5</sup> Carmen Diane Deer, “Foreword,” in Peter Rosset, Raj Patel, and Michael Courville, Eds., *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* (Oakland, CA: Food First, 2006): ix-xii.
- <sup>6</sup> Although there were of course significant exceptions to the voguish embrace of cosmopolitan hybridity in postcolonial studies, the agrarian question was nevertheless virtually totally overlooked by all commentators, including those with a materialist outlook. This situation is particularly stark when compared with the importance of the agrarian and national question in forefathers of postcolonial theory of such as Frantz Fanon.
- <sup>7</sup> Although many critics emphasized the national question, most – including important figures such as Aijaz Ahmad, Tim Brennan, Benita Parry, E. San Juan Jr., Arif Dirlik, Laura Chrisman, and Neil Lazarus – largely ignored cognate agrarian issues.
- <sup>8</sup> For an overview and stinging critique of the “death of the peasantry” discourse, see Rajeev Patel, “International Agrarian Restructuring and the Practical Ethics of

Peasant Movement Solidarity,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 41.1/2 (2006): 71-93.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Bryceson, Cristo’bal Kay, and Jos Mooji, Eds., *Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (New York: Zed, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Deer, x.

<sup>12</sup> For a sweeping discussion of peripheral mega-cities, see Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> For analysis of the central strategies of the Global Justice Movement, see Notes from Nowhere, Eds., *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (New York: Verso, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the institution of weak democracy during the Cold War, see Hilary Wainwright, *Reclaim the State: Experiments in Popular Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Wainwright, 23.

<sup>16</sup> As Guha notes, even critics intent on challenging dominant notions of peasant false consciousness tend to associate the peasantry as a class with mollifying passivity. See Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> I’m thinking here, of course, of Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay “The Subaltern Cannot Speak,” etc etc.

- <sup>18</sup> Manpreet Sethi, "Land Reform in India: Issues and Challenges," in Rosset, 75.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ross Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58.1 (1999): 104-25.
- <sup>21</sup> Pablo Mukherjee, "Surfing the Second Waves: Amitav Ghosh's Tide Country," *New Formations* 59 (Autumn 2006): 144-158, Article accessed through Literature Resource Center, November 12, 2007, <[www.galenet.galegroup.com](http://www.galenet.galegroup.com)>.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.
- <sup>24</sup> For a discussion of state science and the environment during the colonial era, see Richard Grove, "Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony, and Popular Resistance: Towards a Global Synthesis," in John MacKenzie, Ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 15-50.
- <sup>25</sup> On European colonial sexual discourses, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*.
- <sup>26</sup> Grove, 23.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Grove, 34.
- <sup>29</sup> For an extensive discussion of "accumulation by dispossession," see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

- <sup>30</sup> Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, “The Resurgence of Rural Movements Under Neoliberalism,” in Moyo and Yeros, Eds., *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (New York: Zed, 2005), 10.
- <sup>31</sup> Moyo and Yeros, 9.
- <sup>32</sup> This list is adapted from Peter Rosset, “Moving Forward: Agrarian Reform as a Part of Food Sovereignty,” in Peter Rosset, Raj Patel, and Michael Courville, eds., *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* (Oakland, CA: Food First, 2006), 302.
- <sup>33</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 2001).
- <sup>34</sup> See, for example, Agrawal, 3.
- <sup>35</sup> Patel, 79.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 123. Future references to specific portions of Ghosh’s text will be included in the article itself.
- <sup>38</sup> Mukherjee.
- <sup>39</sup> Pablo Mukherjee makes a similar point when he argues that Ghosh’s novel is centrally concerned with displacing metropolitan/cosmopolitan figure with refugee as paradigm of postcolonialism, with centralizing subaltern voices, and with critiquing instrumentalist “environmentalism.”
- <sup>40</sup> For a useful synthetic overview of such organizations, see Kurt Schock, “Nonviolent Struggles to Defend and Reclaim the Land,” Paper delivered at *International Studies*

*Association* (Chicago, 2007), Accessed November 12, 2007, Available at  
<[www.isanet.org](http://www.isanet.org)>.

<sup>41</sup> Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (Oakland, CA: Food First, 2003), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Wright and Wolford, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Wright and Wolford, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Schock.

<sup>45</sup> Schock.

<sup>46</sup> For a profile of a typical campaign conducted by Ekta Parishad in October 2007, see  
<<http://english.janadesh.net>>. Site accessed November 12, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> For a strong discussion of such transnational feminist movements, see Chandra Talpade  
Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*  
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Rosset, 309.

<sup>49</sup> Amita Baviskar, "Between Micro-Politics and Administrative Imperatives:  
Decentralization and the Watershed Mission in Madhya Pradesh, India," *The  
European Journal of Development Research* 16.1 (March 2004): 26-40.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of food sovereignty, see Rosset, 305.