

Injustice without recourse

Interview with Tania Li

Conducted by **Céline Allaverdian**

Tania Li is a professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. She is a renowned anthropologist whose research has focused on agrarian change in Indonesia. Her recent work examines the massive expansion of corporate oil palm concessions and their impact on rural communities. In the first part of this interview conducted on June 18, 2024, Tania Li discusses “injustice without recourse,” a phrase she uses to refer to situations in which people who suffer from injustice do not mobilize collectively to demand remedy. Although scholars and activists often highlight mobilization, non-mobilization is the norm. Hence it is important to understand the conditions that enable collective mobilization when it occurs, and equally important to understand non-mobilization. The latter is challenging methodologically, and Li suggests that ethnography can be a useful tool to explore how people express a sense of injustice in vernacular terms, and identify the conditions that enable or deter mobilization. In the second part, Tania Li exposes her opinion on the role of researchers in studying and communicating about justice struggles.

Celine Allaverdian is a PhD candidate at the department of geography of the University of Montreal and the department of comparative agriculture of AgroParis Tech–University of Paris-Saclay, on partnership with GRET.

The text below is a summarized version of the more detailed interview podcasts that you can listen to:

- [*Part 1: Injustice without recourse: Interview with Tania Li*](#)
- [*Part 2: The role of researchers in justice struggles: Interview with Tania Li*](#)

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Injustice without recourse

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Celine Allaverdian (CA): In this special issue called "Territories of Struggle and Spatial Justice", the JSSJ journal examines different forms of struggle and collective action and their territorial dimensions. The emphasis on struggle contrasts with your extensive and long-term research experience in Indonesian rural areas where you find that collective action is very rare and mostly ineffective. This has led you to write a forthcoming article about "injustice without recourse."

Could you explain what you mean by "injustice without recourse"? What literature and references have led you to develop this concept?

Tania Li (TL): The question of recourse is an empirical one. Faced by injustice, what do people do? What can they do? What modes of redress are available to them?

There are many possible courses of action—recourse to law, political lobbying etc.—but I'll focus here on the one you are highlighting in your special issue, collective action.

This could be collective action to demand redress from governing authorities, to reclaim space, to capture an institution or process, or to take over the state as a whole and remake it in a way that embodies, enacts or prefigures the kind of justice sought.

When we look across the globe, we find that collective action is exceptional. In most places, most of the time, people who suffer from injustice do not in fact mobilize collectively to contest it.

So we should be interested in collective action when it happens and equally or even more interested in the counterfactual—non-mobilization, unheroic decades—places and periods in which people suffer from injustice but do not organize and rise up.

Studying something that is not happening is, of course, more challenging than studying something that is happening. Researchers and readers love action, redemption and happy endings. So there is a bias in scholarship towards one pole—visible, collective action, especially action scholars think of as progressive—at the expense of the other. As scholars, we need to think about this.

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CA: That's a good point. It seems to be part of a broader bias that leads scholars to look for what's exceptional and ignore what is happening daily in "normal" life, which then becomes invisible.

In relation to JSSJ's core focus on spatial justice and this special issue about "Territories of struggle", could you give examples from your work about "injustice without recourse" and more specifically about its territorial and spatial dimensions?

TL: Your special issue highlights collective mobilization in defense of territories, and the role of territory and space in enabling and orienting collective struggle. I agree this is a crucial element in many struggles. Posed as a counterfactual, it helps to explain why, in the empirical case I'm examining, collective mobilization is rare or unsuccessful.

My research over the past few years, together with an Indonesian anthropologist Pujo Semedi, concerns the expansion of corporate presence in rural areas. The Indonesian government has granted corporations long term, renewable concessions covering a third of the nation's agricultural land for oil palm plantations, plus there are other concessions for timber plantations, logging, mining, etc.

These concessions overlap farm and forest land used by local communities, and the injustice they experience is extreme. Their lands, forests, rivers, livelihoods are living spaces taken from them, and in some cases they are squeezed into tiny hamlets wedged between multiple plantations. These hamlets do not offer possibilities for autonomous farming, they are much too small; and socially, culturally, and politically, they are not autonomous at all. Hamlet leaders are paid by the plantation corporations; hamlets are fractured into pro and contra groups; and survival needs push people to work for the plantation or seek other small avenues to extract value, such as theft.

So these spaces lack the configuration precisely you have identified as essential for collective action: autonomous spaces in which people can live, act, think, discuss, develop a critical vocabulary, and formulate strategies to change their situation. Even memories of place and belonging can be lost: the fruit trees, the graveyards, the trails and the stories embedded in them have been destroyed by corporate bulldozers and replaced by monotonous rows of palms.

In our co-authored *Plantation Life* (Li and Semedi 2021), we called this total reorganization of space "corporate occupation." Reading accounts of occupied Palestine we were struck by some recurring patterns: an occupying force fragments territory, restricts movement, relies on collaborators, creates rules, and divides the population into categories each with different sets of rights.

So that's the spatial element of the regime of power and control that's in place in the plantation zone, and it's lacking precisely, as I said, those autonomous spaces that are so crucial for collective action. It is hard to see where to start—imaginatively, affectively, practically, economically, politically—to reclaim such a terrain.

There are a few examples in Indonesia, much discussed by social movements, where people mobilized collectively to reclaim plantation land. What were the conditions of possibility? First, the plantations reclaimed were usually abandoned or in ruin, so the concession owners did not call in the army and police to try to defend them. Second, the mobilizations occurred in rare moments of political opening when politicians saw some advantage in supporting a popular struggle. In most of Indonesia, most of the time, these conditions do not exist.

So we need to study collective action when it occurs, and we need to study its absence; both sides help to clarify the conditions of the possibility for the other.

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CA: Your suggestion to study the absence of collective action is a powerful insight. It leads me to a question about a forthcoming issue you are preparing with other co-authors on demands for justice and responses to social, spatial, environmental injustice in the global South. In the introduction of that issue (Daré et al. 2024), you highlight the challenges posed for researchers studying communities where people do not or cannot openly express their feelings of injustice and do not make public claims for redress. What approach do you and your co-authors suggest?

TL: My answer to this question won't surprise you. I believe the only way to understand feelings of injustice in contexts where they cannot be expressed publicly is through ethnographic research that gets close to the everyday words and actions of the people concerned. Paying attention to language is a place to start. In our research on plantations, villagers whose land had been taken over by the plantation corporations told us they had "become the audience". What is an audience? An audience has no role in the drama, no one looks at them or even notices them. They watch what happens to others on stage. In this case, villagers watched plantation managers, well-paid workers, officials and politicians get rich from the plantation while they had nothing.

Becoming the audience is a vernacular expression of acute marginality—invisibility—or what Jacques Rancière (1999) calls "the part with no part". Their predicament also conforms to the position Giorgio Agamben (1998) called "homo sacer"—people who can be killed but not sacrificed, because a person whose sacrifice is recognized has a part in the drama—is actually central to it. Neither the corporations nor the government recognize that villagers whose land has been taken have made a sacrifice or been sacrificed. They treat them as if they simply are not there, or if they are there they have no value, hence they could not have suffered a loss.

How about actions? People engage in illicit activities on plantation land like gathering edible ferns, grazing cattle, and burning palms to hunt tree rats. These can be seen as guerrilla actions or simply as survival tactics and they often involve complicity e.g. paying off the plantation guards. The main action we encountered in our ethnographic research was theft. Villagers and workers steal from the plantation corporation; they also steal from each other. We had to be careful of jumping too fast into a theorization à la James Scott (1985) of theft as “weapons of the weak”. Theft can be predatory. So we tried to pay close attention to how people actually described and evaluated theft—as a weapon, as a sin, as sign of weakness or of strength, and so on.

You really can’t get at this without close attention to the details—words and actions as they unfold in the everyday.

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CA: How do you suggest we move beyond describing feelings of injustice or analyzing feelings of injustice? And what role can academics and researchers play in assessing what actually constitutes an injustice per se?

TL: Attention to the details is important here as well. There is a problem when outsiders—scholars, activists, human rights defenders—rush to identify injustice by their own standards, without paying attention to how injustice is felt on the ground. It is a tricky balance. When we heard people say “we have become the audience” it was their words, but our move to interpret those words as a vernacular expression of injustice. So you listen to what people say, and you try to contextualize it. In this case, it was not just one phrase—becoming the audience—we encountered many other ways in which people expressed their sense of being invisible, overlooked, discounted, not consulted—injustices of recognition and procedure—as well as not given a “rightful share” (Ferguson, 2015) of plantation wealth.

Villagers in the plantation zone did not make a claim for equality—inequality is something they are accustomed to and accept as normal. What they objected to was the fact that they were not recognized as rightful owners of any share at all. Their primary demand was for recognition and a dialogue in which they were treated, if not as equals, then at least as participants with the right to express aspirations and demands.

Researchers need to be attentive to these dynamics and not impose judgments. We need to understand what people are thinking, saying, and claiming without putting words into their mouths. For example, some activists in Indonesia are disappointed that people whose land has been taken by corporations do not demand the eviction of the corporations. In the case we studied, we found that people sought to transform

the occupier into a partner who would engage respectfully in a set of reciprocal exchanges, a position which aligned with their sense of justice. If researchers and other outsiders fail to understand villagers' perspectives, they could find their conduct surprising or disappointing. Achieving a position as partners in an exchange may not be revolution, but in this context, it would be a huge transformation in the existing set of relations and thus far villagers have found no means to bring this transformation about.

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CA: Now I'm going to change scale a bit. I've had the opportunity to read your forthcoming article about injustice without recourse which concerns communities affected by the expansion of corporate oil palm plantations. The international dimension of struggles and their relays seem quite absent in your account, despite the highly global feature of the palm oil value chain and a certain level of international media attention on palm oil. What would you have to say about the multiple scales for struggle and recourse?

TL: Indonesians have been producing commodities for global markets for centuries—think about the spice trade, the collection of resins, smallholder crop booms for coffee, cloves, rubber, cacao. The global element is not new. For the producers, justice is a matter of how the profits are distributed along the value chain. Local enthusiasm for producing global commodities puts an interesting twist on Gibson-Graham's notion of "autonomous zones of counter-power." In Indonesia, small-scale producers do not generally seek autonomy from markets, which they regard as essential for improving their economic security and well-being. Rather, they seek to hold on to more of the value created.

Global campaigns against oil palm miss this dimension. The problem is not with oil palm as a crop, or palm oil as a commodity, but with the highly extractive conditions imposed by plantation corporations. When smallholders grow oil palm, they capture more of the value for themselves and pay their workers well to secure their loyalty. They generate lively rural economies in which money circulates as prosperous farmers fix up their houses, start small businesses, etc. When plantation corporations grow oil palms they employ casual workers for very low pay and they rob smallholders of access to farmland. Hence they create dead zones of impoverishment and despair. Same global crop, vastly different outcomes (Li, 2023a).

Most of Indonesia's palm oil—currently around 85%—is exported to India where it is used as an affordable cooking oil. This is not a market in which global activism against palm oil or for sustainable palm oil has much traction (Li, 2024).

In my view, the crucial scale of justice for oil palm is national: the problem is not with the crop or its export markets. It is with a development policy that has given a third of Indonesia's farmland to plantation corporations and squeezes smallholders out.

The relevance of the national scale becomes especially clear through comparison: in Thailand, the world's third-largest palm oil producer, 80% of the crop is grown by smallholders with an average plot size of 4 hectares. Different nation, different history, different land law, different policies concerning rural development—and vastly different outcomes.

The role of researchers in justice struggles

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CA: While socio-economic gaps are widening in most parts of the world and new injustices are being fabricated, how do you see the role of researchers in crafting resources for struggles against injustice in both the Global North and the Global South?

TL: First, I would step back from general, sometimes apocalyptic statements about the way the world is headed. In a paper I co-wrote with James Ferguson (2018), we argued that inequality and injustice are increasing in some places but not everywhere, and not for all sectors or social groups. Researchers need to be attentive to these varied histories and experiences, considering how different places are impacted. For instance, a prosperous smallholder in Indonesia growing oil palm might feel their life is improving. Recognizing this diversity is crucial, rather than assuming a uniform experience of decline.

Second, I am inclined to be modest about the role of researchers in crafting resources. What I have tried to do in my research is to pay attention to the kinds of resources that people are already crafting and putting to use—including the non-heroic kinds of resources I described earlier. If researchers are only looking for collective mobilizations and claims for justice, they will miss most of what most people do, most of the time—i.e., try to survive—but they will also miss the spark of action that is present in critique.

When someone says “we have become the audience” they are speaking critically. They are stating that they do not accept the situation as just. The next question for a researcher is: what are the formats in which a critical insight is shared, and what are the barriers that prevent it from being amplified and acted on? I wrote an article about this which I called “Politics, Interrupted” (Li, 2019) in which I tried to identify the blockage points that immobilize people or limit their thoughts, expressions and

actions. Why is a thought not expressed, or expressed but not shared, or shared but not acted on?

Even when we do not know how to remove the blockages, recognizing the sparks of critical thought and the potential for critical actions has value: it guards against despair, and it means there is work to be done. My working assumption is that everyone has the capacity for critical thought and action hence I'm always interested in what happens to that capacity, how it is channeled, mobilized, blocked, reoriented. There is so much we need to understand. The encouraging part is that it is never over: the spark of critique is always present. That is what keeps me going. If people accepted the world as it is—as the best of all possible—then we would really be in trouble.

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CA: I'm reflecting back again on your Indonesian case of injustice without recourse. Beyond the Global South and authoritarian contexts, I observe similar expressions of "helplessness" among youth of the global North when confronting injustice. In her book *"In the ruins of neoliberalism: The rise of antidemocratic politics in the West"* (2019), Wendy Brown explains how the erosion of the nation-state in the face of neoliberal globalization and the rise of finance capital worldwide has occurred hand in hand with the disappearance of spaces of political and civic equality and concern for public goods, and the emergence of a "deterritorialized and de-democratized sociality". What are your thoughts on this?

TL: In Indonesia, the liberal democratic period seen in Euro-American history did not occur, and Indonesians have never known a state dedicated to ensuring people's welfare. Despite this, we're arriving at the same point. Both Indonesians and Europeans today feel like no one's really looking out for them. When I read Wendy Brown's characterization of this period in American history, I find myself wanting more ethnography—a better understanding of the experience of people who have come to distrust government or science.

What terms do young people use to express their sense of critique, their alienation, their frustration with the status quo? What do they do with those insights and feelings? If they are attracted to right wing projects—as is often the case—what are the elements of those projects that resonate with their own understandings and experiences? It is not just progressive mobilizations that should concern us but all kinds of mobilizations (and non-mobilizations too!). My inspiration for this kind of research is the British-Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall, a founding figure in cultural studies, who spent a decade in the 1980s trying to account for the massive popularity of Margaret Thatcher in Britain (Hall et al., 2017). What was it that she was saying and doing that resonated with such

a large part of the population, including people who had always voted for the Labour Party in the past? He felt that it was important to try to understand that historical moment. If we really want to understand this moment, we have to do the fieldwork. Our role should be to understand the complexities of the current historical moment without rushing to judgment.

I think we fail as scholars if we only study what we want to see, or what we want to find—then when it disappoints us we're lost. Being puzzled, or even disappointed, should be the starting point for research.

In agrarian studies, my main field of research, many scholars overlook small-scale farmers who enthusiastically plant global market crops. These farmers are also dismissed by social movements seeking examples of non-capitalist alternatives. Some readers were horrified by the findings of my book *Land's End* (Li, 2014) which explores why indigenous farmers on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi abandoned food production in favour of growing cacao. Activists suggested to me that the farmers had made a big mistake, but I assumed that they had their reasons and it was my job to try to make sense of them. Going with Jacques Rancière's foundational ideas (1999), let's assume equality of intelligence.

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CA: I really appreciate this comment on the equality of intelligence. It reminds me of my educational background in comparative agriculture and its core assumption that farmers have good reasons to do what they do. But I'd like to pursue the question of failures of research, especially in relation to communication. What should we be doing to share insights and connect with different channels of dissemination to generate debate about justice?

TL: The research we undertook for *Plantation Life* convinced Pujo and me that a catastrophe was unfolding in the Indonesian countryside, where a third of the nation's farmland had been placed in corporate hands through renewable concessions, robbing millions of families of access to farmland now and in generations to come. We felt a strong need to intervene but quickly realized our limitations and lack of skills. We tried writing for popular Indonesian newspapers and news magazines and gave talks. During one talk in Jakarta, a woman from the National Science Council expressed her gratitude: "thanks for bringing this to my attention", she said, "I had no idea." Urban people are often completely unaware of what is happening in rural areas of their own country, and know still less what is happening in other parts of the world. The communication gap exists at every level—from urban to rural, North to South, and academic to popular audiences.

We faced numerous communication failures despite our efforts to circulate provocative pieces publicly. For example, one news article I wrote on corporate impunity (Li, 2023b) questioning why Indonesian oil palm corporations treat the law as optional, immediately resonated with 75,000 views in its Indonesian version. The theme of corporate impunity struck a chord with an Indonesian public, while other articles we wrote about plantations as an occupying force failed to gain traction. This inconsistency suggests that effective communication might hinge on catching the right thread, vocabulary, or moment.

A skilled journalist helped me with impunity piece. He coached me on simplifying the content, prioritizing key points, and avoiding excessive detail to maintain reader engagement. This collaboration resulted in a much wider readership than I could have achieved alone. I learned a lot from the journalist, but my skills are still limited. I don't feel compelled to do everything myself. Some excel in research, while others are better at popular writing—and collaboration could be the key.

Despite living in a media-saturated environment, we often fail to communicate outside our circles. In anthropology, many writers are deeply invested in theoretical debates. I am invested too, but I try not to let theoretical discussion dominate to the extent that it alienates non-specialist readers. In the introduction to your special issue, I noticed that the writing is heavily citational and more accessible to scholars than to popular readers. While scholarly spaces are necessary, perhaps we also need other forms of writing and formats to reach a broader audience. A balance between scholarly and popular communication is something we all need to work on in different ways.

To quote this article

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