

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Oil Palm Complex: Smallholders, Agribusiness and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia*, edited by Rob Cramb and John F. McCarthy. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016, 512 pp.

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Rob Cramb and John F. McCarthy, both leading scholars of the social-political impacts of the oil palm industry in Southeast Asia, have edited an impressive volume on the topic. The diverse contributors to the volume, ranging from scholars to government officials to activists, is testament to the complexities and widespread implications of this ever growing agricultural sector. Indeed, the growth of the oil palm industry has been nothing short of astounding. In 1974, global production of oil palm stood at 14 million tonnes with the top two producers (Nigeria and Malaysia) producing 5 million tonnes each, followed by Indonesia (1.3 million tonnes), Congo (1 million ton) and Ghana (0.1 million ton). In 2014, global output jumped to 249 million tonnes with the top producer country, Indonesia, producing 127 million tonnes. Malaysia was the second biggest producer of oil palm in 2014 with 96 million tonnes.

It is thus especially useful that the empirical focus of the volume is on Indonesia and Malaysia. While the volume covers a range of issues associated with the development of the oil palm industry, the editors have sought to coalesce these diverse issues around the concept of a "complex". They argue that,

The oil palm industry in Indonesia and Malaysia needs to be understood as a complex whole in which land, labour, and capital, the various modes of production in which they are combined, and the value chains into which they are inserted are closely interconnected across the region, giving rise to a discernible pattern of economic, social and environmental outcomes over time (p. 1).

This complex, along with its attendant components, is very eloquently explicated in the introductory and second chapters. Pages 38–62 succinctly show how land, labour and capital are drawn into particular modes of production in both Malaysia and Indonesia. Beyond laying out a framework to understand the complexities of the oil palm industry, the volume has an equally important

objective of assessing the future of small holding oil palm producers in the face of large agribusiness expansion. Indeed, a few of the chapters (Chapters 3 to 5 and Chapter 7) concern themselves explicitly with the fate of small holders and how their livelihoods can be made more resilient.

The oil palm complex is a highly political one. Conflicts can arise from multiple sources with the tension between plantation agriculture and small holders given prominence in the volume. For example, Levang, Riva and Orth (Chapter 8) details the different sources of grievances that might arise from the encroachment of oil palm plantation in West Kalimantan. These ranged from well-known ones such as land grabbing and environmental degradation to less obvious ones such as theft of indigenous crops and sense of unfair treatment by the agribusinesses towards different groups of locals. In Chapter 10, Acciaioli and Dewi take the argument further to explore how activist groups and villagers contest oil palm plantations. Their strategies are pivoted upon valorising the ethnic identities of the peoples not so much to reject the presence of the plantations but to open up spaces of opportunities such that they can benefit from the former's presence. This is a nuanced and interesting conclusion that circumvents the stereotypical view of "us against them" in the context of oil palm plantation development in Kalimantan.

As one of the key components of the oil palm complex, labour was also discussed in detail in Chapters 11 and 12. Tania Li provides an illuminating chapter that questions the extent to which oil palm plantation can ameliorate under-employment in rural areas. Sanderson (Chapter 12) describes the plight of Indonesian migrant workers drawn to work in the plantations in Sarawak, Malaysia. Where it lacks in explicit conceptual underpinning, Sanderson does well in making the reader invested in the dire straits of migrant workers who are exploited in multiple ways by various actors.

Overall, the volume does very well in narrating the social-economic reality of the oil palm sector in both Malaysia and Indonesia. It is also heartening, for this reviewer, that the arguments presented are for the most part, non-polemic. Rather, they are intent on finding a clearer path of livelihood improvements among the most marginalised in the oil palm complex. These include smallholding oil palm farmers, local and migrant workers in plantations as well as indigenous people whose land might be taken over by oil palm plantations. The solutions suggested are pragmatic and situated in clear cognisance of the political realities of Malaysia and Indonesia.

The chapters in the volume are also clearly written even as one might wish for a more consistent engagement with the concept of the complex. In addition, apart from Chapter 13, where Pye explores the politics of environmental governance of sustainable palm oil, the volume does not include notions of nature and environment in any substantive manner. To be sure, the editors did admit to this neglect and in some sense it is understandable. Yet, one cannot help but feel

a lost opportunity given that "environmental outcome" was specifically included as one of the components of the oil palm complex.

These are, however, relatively minor complaints. Given the pre-eminence of oil palm as an essential ingredient for countless types of consumer products, this volume is requisite reading for all those who are interested in the under-belly of plantation agriculture. It is also useful for those who are interested in the political economy of Malaysia and Indonesia, given that many of the chapters, in their discussion of oil palm, shed light on the politics of governance and economic development in these countries. In short, this is a timely and highly readable volume.

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