

Sedentarized in Motion: Socio-political Consequences of Dispossession, Displacement, Deterritorialization, and Devalorization of Peasants and Poor People in Contemporary Myanmar

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Paper presented for Agrarian Studies Spring Colloquium, 5 May 2016

Abstract:

The enduring trope of the eternal Myanmar village is implicitly confirmed by the country's generally static urbanization rates. Yet changing uses and conceptions of land – including rapacious natural resource extraction, agribusiness expansion, SEZ development, speculative land grabs and enclosure of commons deriving from land's recent legal commodification, land investment as a drugs-money laundering tactic, and inadequate support for farmers (inputs, capital) resulting in indebtedness – are undermining agrarian viability and forcing members of rural households to search country and Asian region alike for labor opportunities. Concurrently, forced evictions of 'squatters' define the history and present of Myanmar's urban areas, and increasing living costs and rents there keep people moving. Recent research implies that movement has become necessary for survival in both cases. Combining fieldwork data from rural (Ayeyawaddy and Mandalay divisions) and peri-urban areas (North Okallapa, Yangon) with historiographical materials, I focus on movement and displacement as a perverse state 'development' strategy, in which individuals' bodies are deployed so as to transform environments (whether in turn-of-the-century Ayeyawaddy Delta land clearing or Yangon's 'new fields' industrial zones). I argue that structural changes to the economy wrought by this long-term pattern of 'development' and counter-insurgency (where populations are seen as threats) have produced a condition of de-valorized labor, and risk producing a lumpen proletariat 'sedentarized in motion', trapped in mobility. I inquire into the socio-political consequences: how can new democratic 'rights' compensate for this deterritorialization? What happens to patronage ties as oligarchic business-military elites ('cronies') increasingly amass wealth? I suggest an irony: the very political-economic conditions increasing the dependence of poor Burmese on the powerful have produced a state apparatus progressively disinterested in them and an elite consciousness gradually undermining a sense of responsibility for them.

1 Introduction: moving cheap life

Along what Han called 'the trash-rock quarries', hundreds of desperate people in Hpakant line the slopes of makeshift dump sites, waiting for trucks to disgorge themselves of tons of rock deemed useless by the mining companies. As the beds tip, foragers scramble about falling boulders, hoping to find an overlooked vein of jade hidden in a crevice. Landslides created by the falling rocks commonly periodically

envelop dozens at a time in mass graves. Han shook his head. “I can’t believe how cheap life is.”

Han is an ethnic Kokang Chinese who grew up attending international schools in Yangon and whom I met a decade earlier while playing sports at one of the local recreation clubs in the city. Han has an English name and a Burmese one as well, but thinks of himself as Chinese. His family’s jade mining operations, located in the dangerous reaches of Myanmar’s northern Kachin state (Han had himself had not been there since an uncle was kidnapped by insurgents the previous year), have blossomed by exploiting the cheap life at which he marveled. The family had become billionaires (in dollars) during China’s recent economic boom, as demand for Myanmar’s jade increased by a factor of one hundred, Han reported (generating an estimated 31b off-books annual revenue in Myanmar, according to Global Witness (2015)). Han had witnessed some of the human cost of the industry: not only the miners’ heroin abuse (which had recently been well-documented in international media – see Aye Win Myint 2015), but also the carnage of the quarry – the scenes of which I could barely imagine before a journalist expose materialized them a year later.



Figure 1: Desperation and promise at the ‘trash-rock quarry’ - Hpakant, 2015 (photo credit: Reuters)

Months following my conversation with Han, I was in Myanmar’s Delta region, nearly as far away from northern Kachin state as the country would allow. The

Irrawaddy river's alluvial basin, the Delta was uninhabited by people during Myanmar's dynastic era – only mosquitoes and crocodiles dwelled in its swamps and mangrove forests. But the British colonial administration, which controlled parts of what is now Myanmar with varying intensities from 1824 to 1947, recruited hundreds of thousands of people from "Upper Burma" (in the center of the country, south of northernmost Kachin state) to drain the swamps and clear the trees (Brown 2013:31), producing vast paddy lands that created for a time the world's most productive rice growing area. This productivity was also a curse for some of those who came to live there, as the post-colonial military-state that controlled Burma from 1962 to 2011 implemented forced procurement policies that resulted in significant dispossession of peasants who could not meet the quotas (Gret 2015); military units or well-connected businesses expropriated thousands more acres in extra-legal land grabs. According to a World Bank assessment, today the Delta has the highest rate of landlessness in the country (World Bank 2014); despite its natural bounty the Delta has some of the country's highest poverty rates (Myanmar Census 2014).

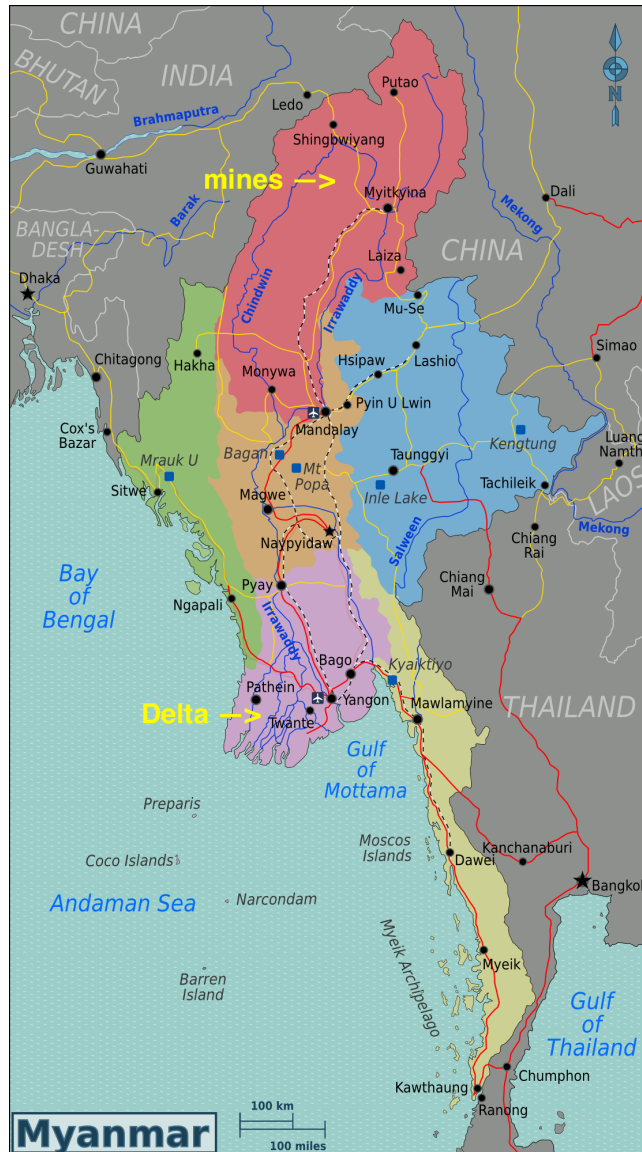


Figure 2: Local leader foregrounds water and land that had been grabbed (June 2015)

I was conducting fieldwork on these land grabs, looking particularly at local resistance and reclamation strategies deployed by grassroots social movements. While we walked through a village whose members who had lost their land two decades before, the community leader asked me to look around, and then said

All the houses have people gone now ... [After losing access to the lake] we could not even scoop water out of the lake. We could not even grope around for minnows. The poor people in the village could not live anymore. All of them went up to Yangon. Went to Myitkyina, went to mine there, [because] in this lake there is no work and there is no paddy land, the cronies of the lake grabbed it all. Food could not be found, there was no work anymore for these people... When that happened we are not able to bear it. The people arrived in quite a situation of suffering.ⁱ

Amidst these descriptions of hardship and struggle, I thought I had misheard or had missed a vernacular Burmese metaphor. I asked for clarification: these villagers, born here, had made their way all the way to Kachin state, and to work in those hellish conditions? As not much is known about the mines, given restrictions to access, I had simply assumed that those working there were young men of the Kachin ethnic group, displaced from their own farmlands either by land grabs or by the recurring civil war which had started again in earnest in 2011. And the Kachin certainly are there (Buchanan et al 2013); but rice farmers and fisher folk from thousands of miles away *also* found their way to this destination.



There was something compelling to the fact that a group of people whose kin had moved down to this area generations ago was being sent back up in the direction from which they had come. This is especially so because the popular trope of the essential Burmese village has long remained ingrained in the minds of Burmese and academics alike. This is partially because long-term anthropological studies of village life were impossible during the military's long reign (officially from 1962 to 2011), as researchers could not attain proper authorization; native anthropologist Ardeth Thawngmung's brilliant, and aptly named, *Behind the Teak Curtain* (2003), stands as

the lone sustained glimpse into Burma's villages since Manning Nash, Melvin Spiro, Lucien Pye, John Badgley, and others conducted studies in the 1950s. Moreover, Tania Li (2011) has argued that academics such as Clifford Geertz have produced narratives of Southeast Asian villages as timeless places of food security, a factor that could certainly have influenced the perception of Burma's rural spaces as eternal and unchanging.

But more important is the fact that Myanmar's urbanization rates had been generally static over the previous 50 years, and hence it could be assumed that people were staying put. Yet, the International Labor Organization recently released a report indicating a striking amount of migration today (estimates are between 14 and 19% of the workforce), adding that much of that is rural-to-rural (ILO 2015: 3). A different report, released by the World Bank, indicates that "earning differentials [between rural and urban areas] are not significant" (World Bank 2016:10), meaning that cities are not 'pulling' people in through the wage mechanism. Rather, rural folk seem to be leaving mostly because rural economies no longer provide work (ibid: 61). Further, organizations measuring out-migration to Thailand continue to report rapid increases (Khin Yupar & Watson 2016), despite precarious conditions there (Arnold & Pickles 2011). As the World Bank report declares in its report's title, these are "People on the Move." But is there anything at stake in these mobilities? Or is this simply a new empirical observation signifying nothing of sociological consequence?

Returning to the long-term historical perspective invoked by the delta dwellers now 'returning' north, I will argue that a focus on mobilities provides unique insights into Burmese political economy. Looking closely at Burmese mobility (how it has changed over time and with evolutions in modes of production) can even provide a materialist ground for Burmese political ontology – where ontology means a 'structure of feeling' towards governance, or a *habitus*: a patterned set of dispositions that constructs a political world view (Williams 1961; Bourdieu 1977). Against recent theories of mobility

which essentially suggest that ‘we are all migrants now’ (Nail 2015: 2-3), I draw distinctions between three modes of mobility: from one in which mobility was an opportunity for escape; to mobility as the means for organizing bodies for production; to mobility as an extrusion, or deterritorialization without a corresponding reterritorialization such that bodies move across the country (and the Asian region), searching for a place to re-embed. Hence, what follows is not an account specifically of the mines, nor the cities, nor the grabbed land, but the political, economic, and social forces that have begun to increasingly compel bodies to rotate through these spaces.

2 Theorizing Burmese mobility

Bodily mobility, I hypothesize, has taken on three distinct modes as it has operated across Burma’s history. Conceptually, these modes should be imagined as Foucault describes forms of power, not as “a series of successive elements, the appearance of the new causing the earlier ones to disappear” but rather as “a series of complex edifices... what above all changes is the dominant characteristic” (2007: 8). They are organizing principles for understanding broader patterns of social change: by looking at mobility, we may come to better perceive politics.

Specifically, under the first dominant mode of bodily mobility in Burma, movement acted as a protective technique through which peasants avoided dynastic state exploitation, by either maneuvering between patronage systems within the paddy state remit, or escaping its regulatory orbit entirely.

In the second era, movement was harnessed by a state-capitalist-militarist assemblage as the means through which to (re)deploy bodies to, or sedentarize them in, productive spaces. British colonial government induced massive population movement during the 1880s through the 1920s, and then enacted policies that re-displaced them from newly settled land, forcing them to extend the rice-paddy frontier.

Such inducements gave way to violent coercions under the post-colonial military regime, as the state (1962-2011) forcibly resettled ethnic minority villagers into the equivalent of strategic hamlets in the country's upland areas, moved hundreds of thousands of people in urban areas into manufacturing zones, and displaced farmers through forced land grabs and rice procurement policies. Despite the displacements, most bodies found work – especially given that the agrarian mode of production tied people to land, as over 70% of the population worked in rural areas. While the state also somewhat *restricted* movement by officially closing borders and policing intra-state travel and migration (such such household registration regulations), it welcomed outmigration for participation in international migrant-labor economies (which allowed the state to garner foreign exchange by intermediating remittance flows). During the era when this mode was ascendant, the state consolidated its control of its margins (at least in comparison with the dynastic era), so that bodies could not effectively flee capture and economic inscription. Critically, while the tactics differed across this modality (in that they involved different levels of explicit violence), bodies were still useful for participation in the political economy. But both their autonomy and their position of bargaining power eroded; hence these bodies could rarely consolidate their participation in production processes into stable lives or capture the value of what they produced; they ended up often creating the value in land that led to their own displacement.

Finally, the second mode has currently given way to a third, in which movement has become a technique through which bodies become deracinated from physical locations, put on the perpetual move. This is because land has become productive for purposes that do not involve bodies – sometimes not at all, often not in the same consistent labor-intensive manners (mechanized mineral extraction, mechanized farming, special economic zones, land speculation), and because land itself has become increasingly commoditized (hence putting demand pressure on holders of

land). As Michael Levien has put it in another context, “land for production” becomes “land for the market” (2013: 384). Hence this story of Burmese mobility cannot be told without also telling the story of changing conceptions of land ownership and value.

I ultimately want to make an argument, which is both with (2009) and parallel to (2011) James C. Scott, that while people have been “sedentarized” in one sense (in terms of life ways), this process actually occurs concurrent to the deployment of an imperative to always be on the move. So while people’s lives are canalized into certain roles (people are compelled, through deskilling and dispossession, to become lumpen proletarians), they are put into interminable motion (people are tasked to search out places where they can labor).

All of this encompasses a structural devalorization of Myanmar’s non-elites that has political repercussions: while those working the land were historically necessary to create the polity’s wealth (and were lauded in symbolic culture), the evolution of the global economy (which has substituted capital for labor in part as a by-product of technological advance), and the general transformation of land into a commodity (on which capital-intensive endeavors can be pursued), has meant that wealth is increasingly generated through means *not* involving laborers (workers or farmers). Bodies are excluded from the constellations of production inputs (land, capital, ‘total factor productivity’) in which wealth is generated.

This has, I suggest, consequences for political subjectivity. Theories expounded by political liberalism and even in Partha Chatterjee’s “political society” (2004, 2011) describe situations of *balance* between the governed and the institutions of power that do not inhere in Burma (in Chatterjee’s case, even slum dwellers in India are still appealed to as population blocks for votes; in Myanmar peasants and workers have not had a chance to be appealed for 60 years (until the recent 2015 election)). Following Achille Mbembe, who challenges the very premise of a balance when he asserts that, “The basic question, of the emergence of a subject with rights, remains unresolved”

(2001: 93), I suggest that without production in the economy in Burma one cannot perform citizenship that would earn 'rights' (or opportunities), and yet without (citizenship) opportunities, one cannot come to participate in production (Prasse-Freeman 2015).

3. Three Modes of Mobility

3.1 Mode 1 – Mobility as Line of Flight

According to James Scott's influential *Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), state societies in the area we now call Myanmar were generated when political entrepreneurs devised means (either through the promise of protection, the threat of coercion, or through direct enslavement) to concentrate people in low-land wet-rice producing ecologies and then utilize the surplus extracted from that mode of production to enact hierarchical political control over subjects and develop stable, self-glorifying, text-based cultures. These states were often predatory and expansionary, both extensively (in terms of new spaces consumed) and intensively (in terms of taxes and labor extracted from subjects), at least as perceived by significant numbers of their putative subjects, who often fled the impositions of this project. These fleeing groups took advantage of ecological features – such as hills and swamps – that were naturally difficult for those states to traverse, and once there the runaways re-established societies centered on agricultural patterns that evaded state control (swidden, rotational agriculture in the case of the hills), attenuated or non-existent political authority, and a plurality and flexibility of cultural forms.

Scott's conceptual intervention was to argue that the traits of these social groups who exist outside of the state, rather than marking their inferiority, must be seen as adapted strategies for evading state domination. Hence in addition to physical mobility, swidden agriculture, and flexible social structures mentioned above, religious

heterodoxy, egalitarianism, and even “post-literacy” are presented as specific *tactics* utilized for evasion. The point for political analysis is suggestive: people could run away. ‘Civilization ideology’ (which includes the normative standards communicated through self-aggrandizing historiography; doctrinal, text-based religion; a “cosmology and architecture of the Indic court center” for instance) can be seen as advertisements to get people to stay.

While the specifics of Scott’s model as describing actual flight *to the hills* as ethnogenetic have come under critique (Lieberman 2010), my objectives are humbler: an inquiry into whether mobility *in the lowlands* was a common strategy for evading elite control. There is some evidence for this. Historian Victor Lieberman describes in his *Burmese Administrative Cycles* (1984) the way peasants scattered both during the dynastic realms as well as in the interregna between them.

That people may flee and disperse during interim periods follows logically: as protection mechanisms break down, concentrated settlements provide tempting targets for raiders and political entrepreneurs. Beyond the evidence adduced by Lieberman for the occurrence of such phenomena during sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, historian Michael Aung-Thwin (1990: 34) finds similar evidence in the 14th. To end a cycle of anarchy a successful entrepreneur had to “pacify the frontiers, to reconcentrate the population, and to reorganize administration on terms favorable to central authority” (Lieberman 1994: 13). The phrase “to reconcentrate the population” means that it is not just the system that needs reconsolidation, but rulers had to actually re-accumulate and re-sedentarize the bodies.

Scattering *within* periods of order, however, is even more compelling, as the impulse to disperse appears immanent to the system itself:

Elite autonomy facilitated, and at the same time was strengthened by, the popular inclination to avoid assigned obligations to the throne in favor of less onerous work routines. The founders of each dynasty gathered around the capital a large body of

hereditary taxpayers and servicemen whom the crown attempted to control through an elaborate system of quotas and censuses. The Toungoo system of registration was subject to cumulative disorganization because of its very complexity. Even during the opening phase of the administrative cycle, commoners succeeded in minimizing their burdens by *moving illegally from one platoon to another*, or by becoming private retainers of powerful courtiers. But interelite competition accelerated the process. In their desire to amass resources that could buy political influence, capital and regional leaders exploited royal subjects beyond traditional norms, thus increasing the pressure to avoid royal service. By their willingness to convert royal servicemen into private followers, the same elites provided commoners with an avenue by which they could escape. (Lieberman 1994: 12, emphasis added)

Aung-Thwin (1984) provides further detail on the specific ways that subjects sought out bonded (vertical) relationships with patrons or institutions that secured their lives and livelihoods. If no maneuver was possible, then they retained the flight option.ⁱⁱ

In this era, under this mode of mobility, the political-ecological reality helped structure the relationship between ruler and ruled. On one hand the Burmese king remained tyrannical, unlimited by any force outside of himself. But on the other hand he became constrained by the possibility of flight. This was reflected in the two parallel 'legal systems' of the dynastic era that stood in tension: the first was called "သတ်ဦးဆံပိုင်ဘုရင်စနစ်" (literally: "the king system of owning [the subject's] life and the hair") which gave the king full ability to dispense with the life and body of the subject. As a Burmese historian put it, "the worst thing about it is any lady can be confiscated by the king and any man can be herded off to war."ⁱⁱⁱ But these ရာဇသတ် (*yazathat*: the king's rules for himself) were also arguably guided or influenced by the ဓမ္မသတ် (*dhammathat*), the law of truth. The practical efficacy of the *dhammathat* is ambiguous: they are sometimes presented as universal laws (the law of the *dhamma* which governs the universe, geography, seasons and weather that guards mountains, forests, rivers); other times as akin to case law (Huxley 1997), and others see them like *suggestions* to the king (for a discussion, see Prasse-Freeman 2015). But either way, they present a set of axioms about how to conduct rule that has ramifications for land governance:

when combined with the infinite prerogative of the *yazathat* create a situation in which the king *can* take a subject's life... but who would remain to work the land? Indeed, through the eyes of the King, value was created only when the land, labor, and royal-guaranteed security came together in a constellation. This perspective may have been shared by the cultivators as well, but when they felt it did not, they broke away in nomadic lines of flight (Deleuze & Guatarri 1987). Which is not to say they were nomads in the political-ecological sense, but rather in the sense described by Deleuze and Guatarri: their form of movement was unpredictable, uncontrollable, and uncontainable.

But, given this ability to flee, it is also possible that instead of a dialectic of balance (in which domination and flight, respectively, synthesized into mutually acceptable terms for both parties), there was one of recurring disjuncture: the King took what was his due, and the cultivators duly fled; then the King raised his armies and went to sack Siam, to bring back the suitable number of slaves. Thereby building a hydraulic machine of extrusion and induction.^{iv}

3.2 Mode 2 Deterritorialization with reterritorialization: Displacement for Use

3.2.1 British Colonial Period (1824-1947)

The British colonial project (1824-1947) introduced peasant subsumption to capitalist circuitry by enclosing common resources and inducting peasants into the perilous cash economy (Scott 1972: 25-26). As John Furnivall, himself a former colonial officer, put it “By the end of the [19th] century [Burmese] had less money to spend, but there were many things on which they had to spend money” (Furnivall 1956: 114-115).

Central to subsumption was the inscription of land into a private property regime. Furnivall, in earlier work, notes the significant efforts the British pursued to fix Burmese on land, beginning by observing that cultivators moved a great deal and in

frustrating ways: “One of the problems that seem greatly to have perplexed the first generation of [British] revenue officials was the frequent abandonment of land” (Furnivall 1909: 555); Furnivall goes on to quote a colonial officer, who writes, “the villagers regard land, especially paddy land, to be common land, which, if unoccupied, any villagers have a right to take up, and which when they have done with it they have an equal right to throw aside” (1909: 555-56). A different officer, quoted by Furnivall elsewhere, is so offended by the Burmese mode of land abandonment that he suggests that they “be looked on rather as speculators than as real agriculturists” (Furnivall 1939: 109). One can hear him tut-tut through the (p)ages.

To give a sense of what these peregrinations looked like, take Furnivall's description of a case of group flight in which “about fifteen families fled across the river at the time of the English occupation of Rangoon” (Furnivall 1909: 557-58). After the initial departure, the group soon split into groups of nine and six; the former founded their own village, while the latter merged with another, displacing some of the previous families in turn.

This cycle of churning movement reflects the availability of free land and the socio-political relationships forged by individuals to it. The organizing sociopolitical idea in play here is *damma-ucha* [ဓါးမ ဦးချ], the Burmese phrase which literally means “the first cut with the broad-bladed knife”, and which was (and still is, as we will see below) invoked by cultivators to emphasize that the *clearing* of the land is what confers ownership. Furnivall reports that the clearer has claims on the land for twelve years, after which another might use the land if abandoned; if a cultivator remains on the land it can become ancestral land. But “possession, however, was never absolute against the community; cultivated land could be taken up for house sites, and house sites for a monastery.” On the other hand, “In practice [ancestral] land could be alienated, but alienation was never final; any member of the family could at any time redeem it, but seven generations were usually regarded as the limit of kinship” (109-110). Furnivall

stresses that before the British “land was still for the most part unappropriated, a free gift of nature to the whole community” (1909: 555), but we also must attend to the transformative power of labor – land is a gift, but one that becomes a *valuable* one through the use of the cultivator’s knife. When land is scarce, such value increases; when it is plentiful, it often makes sense to move on.

In the eyes of the colonial administrator, such moving on was effective tax evasion, and Furnivall outlines

the methods by which [British] Government sought to establish a sense of property in land: (a) They introduced liberal fallow rates so as to encourage cultivators not to abandon land needing rest... (b) They took full revenue from all land abandoned unless the cultivator had specifically reported his intention of abandonment. (c) They encouraged cultivators to take leases of land for a period of years, the leases including unoccupied land which could be cultivated without the payment of extra rent. (d) They encouraged the granting of unoccupied land free of revenue for a period of years. (e) They also attempted to improve the cattle supply by giving veterinary instruction and holding agricultural shows. (Furnivall 1909: 555, fn 1)

Fixing property allowed the British to extract land rent (Furnivall 1939: 101-110), although given such significant mobility, and the corresponding recession of cultivated land into jungle, colonial administration land surveys were deemed more expensive than they were worth (ibid: 109). Such efforts did, however, facilitate the empire’s stunningly ambitious transformation of the Ayeyawaddy river delta areas into the world’s largest rice producer. In the half-century from 1855 to 1905 exported paddy went from 162,000 tons to 2,000,000 (Adas 2011: 58).

This endeavor was achieved by inducing peasants from upper Burma to leave their natal homes and social networks to come hundreds of miles south to clear land and fight malaria amidst never-ending swamps. What made such a miserable endeavor imaginable, let alone desirable? While historian Michael Adas (2011) focuses on the payoffs, which were vast and hence alluring, Ian Brown stresses the push factors (“drought, food shortage, and occasional famine”) that made the delta seem an

“escape” for “desperate cultivators” (36) from the north; indeed, “The number migrating into the delta at any particular point in these decades reflected the food position in the north” (ibid). Although he does not emphasize it, Brown does ultimately admit that “It is also possible that cultivators and their families were driven from the north by the social disorder” generated by colonial destruction of Burmese society.

Hence the British, whether intentionally or simply by benefitting from one of the unintended felicities of imperialism, deterritorialized bodies to affix the engine, in the form of the cultivator, that generated a vast transformation of ecology and economy. But while Burma became “the rice bowl of Asia”, the clearer and worker of the land was often victimized. First, “All too often the pioneer agriculturalist, having spent years bringing some frontier tract into production, found himself dispossessed by a land speculator who, much earlier and in certain anticipation that at some point the area would be settled, had filed with the local administration a provisional claim for possession. Or the pioneer was simply driven from his land by intimidation and thuggery” (Brown: 33). Further still, the British passed the 1894 Land Acquisition Act (still operative today), meaning that land was not only increasingly turned into a commodity, but was turned into one appropriable by state whim.

Then there were the less explicitly violent means of dispossession, in which cultivators were permitted to take loans out against their new land titles, a process which resulted in significant debt dispossession. As Furnivall notes, “The revenue records for the thirteen chief rice districts of Lower Burma showed that half the land was held by non-agriculturists, and that the chief moneylending caste, the Indian *chettyars*, alone held a quarter of it” (1956: 111).

British officials themselves recognized this problematic nature of this phenomenon and repeatedly advocated to their superiors for farmer protection policies: land sales should only to be permitted to other agriculturalists; the law would accept “only usufruct mortgages, that is loan agreements which allowed the cultivator-borrower

who defaulted to remain on the land as a tenant of the lender, in this case up to fifteen years” (38); law could written to revive “the traditional Burmese practice that gave those who sold a piece of land the right to repurchase it after a number of years” (Brown: 38). The British noted the way they were undermining the long-term health of Burmese society, and yet chose to keep expanding the extraction machine (Brown 2015: 37-44).

While many settled into new locales, many did not. As Furnivall put it, “Debt was heaviest in the districts with a migratory population, where transitory occupants, living in small scattered hamlets” lived “with no social cohesion” (Furnivall 1956: 113).

3.2.2 Colonial and Military Continuity in Mobility: Urban, Agrarian, ‘upland’

While the British and military-socialist eras appear quite different, when viewed through the lens of mobility, continuity emerges.

World War II precipitated a rapid end to British rule and a transition to a constitutional state that, while it lasted a decade, struggled throughout to quell numerous insurgencies mobilized along ideological and ethnic lines. Burma’s military emerged as an ambitious and capable actor (Callahan 2003), ultimately able to build a hybrid rentier state (Prasse-Freeman 2012): while fighting off those many insurgencies, the military-state apparatus extracted the country’s natural resources and cut a set of ‘bargains’ with the populace. Rural dwellers got land, but were compelled to give up much of their rice yield to the state; urbanites got cheap rice, but there was no competent industrialization and no growth. Both groups were denied political freedoms. The military was also able to violate those bargains at will – as in the Delta area where thousands of farmers were dispossessed of their land after not delivering their rice yield quotas (GRET 2015) resulting in “nearly ten million people largely dependent on laboring wages alone” by 2000 (Brown 2013:185), landless yet still linked to land and agrarian political-economic relationships.

3.2.2.1 Urban

The same phenomenon of sedentarization without security emerges in urban areas as well.

While there is significant historiographical data on Yangon's colonial and post-independence periods (see Bayly 2003; Lewis 2011), there are few accounts of city life since 1958 when the military started to involve itself directly in state affairs^v (for ethnographies see Fink 2001; Skidmore 2004; Leehey 2010; MacLachlan 2011). A popular elite refrain in the mid-2000s when I first lived in Yangon was that the city had not changed at all in the proceeding half-century: the colonial-era buildings merely degraded a bit further. But that story only encompasses *downtown* Yangon, in which the built environment did not change in drastic ways. Yangon's contours have changed radically, as the city added in two succeeding phases a dozen new townships around its peripheries through a novel form of construction: physically displacing hundreds of thousands of poor people from its central areas to build up its outskirts.

The massive displacement and dispossession of more than a half-million people of in 1989-1990 is iconic of this change. It was part of a national eviction campaign in which 1.5 million people across the country were relocated (constituting 16% of the urban population of Burma; Standley & Etherton 1991: 11). In Yangon this meant urbanites were transferred to paddy field land that itself was confiscated from farmers (Bosson 2007: 42). But if we look past this iconic event, it becomes clear that Yangon's entire history is defined by eviction. Elizabeth Rhoads, in a study cataloguing Yangon's long history of evictions, points out that the city itself (meaning the built environment as it is known today) was founded on the eviction of its entire population, as the British razed the pre-existing town in 1853 and rebuilt upon it from scratch. Rhoads then reports that in 1911 the government evicted poor residents from downtown blocks to Alone and Theinbyu townships (and because these evictees were poor, the government made it policy that there would be neither sewage nor water in homes, and

that roads would be of low quality). The constitutional government (1947-1958) for its part attempted to move squatters who had sought refuge from the post-independence war, but managed to evict only 3,000 households to the outskirts. Under the military ‘caretaker’ government (1958-1960), 150,000 people were evicted in 1960 to new townships with no infrastructure, and then in the mid-1980s (after the military was officially in power) policies were enacted that prevented fire victims from rebuilding their homes, meaning that those unlucky to have their homes burned were instead moved to outlying areas, resulting in at least 13,900 families displaced. Finally, even before the massive evictions of 1989-1990, Rhoads notes that the government had already begun to send people out in smaller numbers in the years prior to the nearly 600,000 people who were evicted in 1989-1990.

Noteworthy about these evictions is that they are deterritorializations with corresponding reterritorializations. *In every case the state provided a place for people to go.* In the original displacement, the British allowed people to squat downtown; these same people were displaced again, but provided new quarters in Alone and Theinpyu townships. In the Burmese government’s case (whether constitutional, military caretaker, or military from 1960s to 1990s, at least), they provided new places for bodies to go: the “new towns” and then the “new fields”.

This is important to keep in mind when considering the military government’s actions, as they have mostly been interpreted for their reflection of punitive intentions and their atomizing social effects. Indeed, after the 1988 popular uprising against the quasi-socialist military regime led not to a democratic revolution but to the military’s entrenchment in the state, a number of scholars – including Skidmore (2004), Guy Lubeigt (2007), and Donald Seekins (2005) – have argued that relocation reflected the desire to remove from the heart of the city those opposed to the regime.^{vi} Jennifer Leehey elaborates:

Although in most cases the evicted residents were renters or legal property owners, their communities were referred to in the press as 'squatters quarters' (*kyu-kyaw-ya'-kwe*). The Burmese word that means to squat or trespass (*kyu kyaw*) can also mean 'to make an incursion' and carries connotations of insurgency. Urban planning was thus presented as ridding the city of criminal, insurgent elements, in accord with the SLORC vision of 'Myanmar' as a modern, disciplined, uncontaminated domain... called the 'huts to highrises' scheme (*teh-paw-hma tai'-paw*), literally: 'from straw hut to brick edifice' - the language vaguely suggestive of magical, alchemical transformation. (Leehey 2010: 68-9)

While the transformation evoked by 'huts to highrises' did not materialize in downtown Yangon, the new fields did experience radical change. Monique Skidmore devotes a chapter of *Karaoke Fascism*, her 2004 ethnography of Yangon, to these sites in peri-urban Yangon (Dagon MyoThit, Hlaingthaya, Shwepyitha, Shewpaukan, Warbargyi, Thunandar) where former paddy land became new squatter slums. Skidmore describes these as bleak and bereft spaces, no longer at the margin of the city, but completely cut off from it. Skidmore argued that the different spatial realities there – such as single-dweller homes – made extended family co-habitation more difficult, and hence children represented a childcare problem that could not be surmounted by former wage workers: 'Why don't you catch the train into the city and continue to work there?' Skidmore asks an informant. 'Who will look after the children?' comes the response. Hence traversing the distance from New Fields to downtown Yangon became impossible: "the Circle Line train does not represent transportation to [these] residents" (Skidmore 2004: 151).

But, cut off from the city, these masses of bodies found reterritorialization as laborers in industrial zones that were concurrently being developed. While at least one observer (Lubeigt 2007) suggests that these bodies were *intentionally* moved by the military-state for such a purpose, no evidence of that motive has emerged.^{vii} I think it mistaken to ascribe such strategic thought to the regime. Their treatment reflects

instead the normal conduct of a state dealing with excess bodies or a normal counter-insurgency campaign against threatening subjects: put these insurgents to work by growing the city. This was not a high-modernist Scott-ian (1998) state which sought to know and regulate these bodies (as Seekins 2011: 165 notes, many evictees were explicitly *denied* identification cards so they could not return downtown), but rather used them by putting them down on land. While collaborators with the regime suggested this would assist with revenue collection by enlarging the tax base (Standley & Etherton 1991: 71), destitute evictees forced to spend their life savings to buy the houses on the plots to which they were evicted seem poor targets for taxation (especially given Myanmar's complete disinterest in taxing). But the evictees built houses, roads, wells, waste management systems, even as they survived without, initially, electricity, schools, and health centers [confirm details on how these services followed formalization with YCDC]. Ultimately, the body stood as a critical node in the construction and production of the political economy.

3.2.2.2 Upland Counterinsurgency

Concurrent to this sedentarization, the government was also prosecuting a brutal war and counterinsurgency campaign against communist and ethnic armed groups – and, critically, their populations.

Displacements of local people (Woods 2012; KHRG 1992, 1997, 2003, 2009, 2015) were not simply *tactics* (reactive instruments emerging as secondary to a larger objective, such as winning a war) but a central *strategy* (an asserted “calculus of force-relationships”, nearly an end in itself – see de Certeau 1984: xix-xx, 94-96). Indeed, Ferguson (2015: 303) draws a distinction between classic COIN, which attempts to ‘win hearts and minds’ for instrumental pacification and the Burmese military’s version: “rather than being turned into ideological support systems for the government, the state, etc., the strategic villages are turned into a direct material support system for the army

in Burma.” Ferguson describes this impetus as deriving at least in part from state desire to get land under cultivation for the ultimate purpose of extraction through taxation.

3.2.2.3 Agrarian Dispossession with reterritorialization

Finally, this era also saw massive dispossession of lowland Burman (non-ethnic) farmers: various state agencies were encouraged to embrace the market economy by setting up their own ‘development’ projects, meaning that ill-equipped ministries grabbed land from farmers and invited them to work as tenants (on their own land!), or ministries attempted to establish industrial projects (sugar production, etc) with predictably disastrous results (Woods 2014). Much of my fieldwork was spent looking at the documents of these cultivators: of land taxes paid, of agricultural loans taken, of the contents of complain letters sent but to which no replies were ever received.

A perverse corollary within this mode emerged that might be named ‘self-displacement’. Anthropologist Maxime Boutry (forthcoming) has catalogued how laborers ‘squatted’ on unclaimed or unused land near factories in ex-urban Yangon (in land at the margins of the New Fields which was still farmland), built infrastructure such as roads and sewage solutions (rudimentary as they were), and hence demonstrated to authorities that the land was habitable and should and could be classified as urban housing rather than as ‘waste land’ (and receive appropriate services). In generating the value that led to the land’s formalization, the squatters inadvertently led to a rise in their own rents or spurred a reassertion of ownership by absentees: in the end, they ended up displacing themselves. Whereas in other ‘auto-construction’ situations (Holston 2008), the squatters can capture value (and often end up exploiting those with less opportunity than themselves – becoming slum landlords, as Mike Davis (2007: 80-81) points out), here they do not.

In a rural area of Kyautsay township in Mandalay division I encountered another iteration of this unfortunate phenomenon: a farmer had cleared land in the 1970s, becoming its owner by custom, only to have a military unit displace him. They offered

him a position as a sharecropper on his former land – he refused, choosing instead to clear land further afield. Eight years later [confirm years from fieldnotes] he was displaced again, under much the same circumstances.^{viii} While all the hundreds of farmers I talked to were displaced, the few who are doubly-displaced compel a re-interpretation of the singularly displaced: not as those who have been reterritorialized, but merely those who have *yet* to be re-deterritorialized.

3.3 Mode 3 Deterritorialization without Reterritorialization: Enclosure and mechanization without proletarianization and welfarism

Indeed, those doubly-displaced subjects anticipate the third mode of mobility: of deterritorialization without reterritorialization, made possible by the interaction of three macro political-economic challenges – agrarian displacement (often to make way for natural resource extraction); few good jobs to reabsorb displaced laborers; and inadequate social provisions through which they could acquire human capital. These factors create political economic outcomes that breed another relevant socio-political phenomenon: the erosion of patronage bonds of care. For Deleuze and Guatarri, this move turns the *nomad* (unbounded, and moving at different speeds and with different trajectories than the dominant mode of social organization) into the *migrant*: the body immured in movement and canalized in space.

The shift between the dominance of mode two to mode three came about as the military consolidated its control of the state, relinquishing some direct control of the economy so as to pivot toward controlled market experimentation. It did this by encouraging an improvisational quasi-entrepreneurial form of wealth extraction. For instance, as it defeated non-state armed group leaders, it joined forces with former enemies to engage in shared resource exploitation (Woods 2012), resulting in impoverishment of ethnic masses (Brenner 2015). Much of this involved transfers of

population to clear them off land that contained treasure beneath or within: jade, minerals, hardwoods, etc. Human disaster attended such movements; for instance:

From 1999, between 50,000 to 126,000 Wa hill farmers from north-eastern Shan State were forcibly moved 400km south, close to the Thai border. The removals were carried out by the United Wa State Army (USWA), in collaboration with the SPDC. The aim was ostensibly to provide more fertile land so that the farmers would not have to cultivate opium poppies, and was thus presented as an opium-eradication operation. From 4000 to 10,000 of the relocates are said to have died in 2000 alone, in the warmer climate, of malaria and other diseases. The displaced Wa in turn displaced approximately 48,000 local Shan, Lahu and Akha. (Bosson 47)

This transition – from austere faux-socialism (punctuated by looting and rent extraction) to authoritarian capitalism – created and reflected new conceptions of opportunity and value.

3.3.1 Dispossession within and outside of the law

Economic liberalization also precipitated legal ‘reforms’ that have made land an officially alienable asset, providing an alluring investment opportunity for agribusinesses, industrial zone conglomerates, narcotics money launderers, and land speculators. These reforms together with the aforementioned land-intensive resource extraction are putting immense pressure on the livelihood base of Myanmar’s poor: land is being stripped from both peasants and urbanites through means both ‘legal’ (evictions and debt dispossession) and extra-legal (violent land grabs).

3.3.1.2 Extra-Legal Land Grabs

Even though the issue is squarely in the public eye, as literally hundreds of grassroots collective actions for land redress have disrupted the military’s disciplined transition to democracy (Prasse-Freeman 2016), land grabs continue apace (BNI 2015; Khin Su Wai 2015; KHRG 2015).^x Rural grabs have been supplemented in urban areas by increasing displacement of ‘squatters’ (ILO 2015:48).

Relevant here is that the displaced people are not easily reabsorbed or reterritorialized. Take an eviction from just a number of years ago:

City Development Committee staff and policemen carried out a nighttime city-sweep to remove homeless families. The authorities used a public rubbish truck to forcibly detain the families and then to transport them to Okshittpin Forest, which is halfway between Pyay City and the border with Rakhine State. The families were abandoned in the forest during a monsoon rain, and were threatened not to return to Pyay. Both children and adults were threatened with prison if they returned. (KHRG 2013)

Being dumped in a forest is different than being given a house to purchase. All of this has emerged as a function of the broader political-economic context: the normalization of external diplomatic relations has made agribusiness development possible (Scurrah et al 2015), allowed industrial zones (including SEZs) to proliferate (see Nishimura forthcoming), and massive resource extraction projects to ramp up. Millions of acres of land have been transferred to companies to carry out these land-intensive endeavors, and the government promises to convert 10 million by 2030 (Andersen 2016:11) – a phenomenon described elsewhere as “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2007). Bodies drop out of the equation, and hence they are dropped into the forests.

3.3.1.3 “Natural” Land Grabs

Eclipsed by the eventual nature of the land grab, more quotidian forms of dispossession generate fewer headlines (see Li 2014 for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in Indonesian highlands). These are the more insidious, “natural” forms of dispossession – in which people are removed from land to which they lack, or have forfeited, legal ‘rights’.

As rural sociologist Henry Bernstein (1981) pointed out long ago, under normal conditions peasants face significant challenges to make ends meet year-to-year – a phenomenon he calls the “simple reproduction squeeze” (for observations in the Myanmar context, see LCG 2012). This intrinsic vulnerability becomes potentially

disastrous when vested and powerful actors desire the same land, and when legal reforms (in this case Myanmar's 2012 Farmland Law and 2012 Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Law) make land suddenly officially alienable and transferable. The insertion of land into markets creates what can be called the quotidian land grab, in which commons “are being fenced off by some local authorities to generate revenue for themselves and the common rights are no longer available to the village folk” as government economist U Myint (2011) describes it. Without the commons, farmers often cannot reproduce themselves as debt that was once rolled over or extended suddenly becomes grounds for land forfeiture (Woods 2015a; Salaing Thant Sin 2014).

A case of a dispossessed widow in Kyaungkaung illustrates the dissonance in conceptions of land value that perhaps only become perceivable in conflict over that land itself. Maxime Boutry and Celline Avardarian of GRET have explored the history of debt much of Myanmar's rice-growing areas as evolving out of the military-state's dual failures: 1) its inability to deliver sufficient inputs and 2) the inability of those small loans to be delivered at the appropriate times in the cultivation cycle (Gret 2015; see also Salaing Thant Sin 2014). But for much of this era (mode 2 in this paper's parlance), and except for in some parts of the Delta, not repaying one's loans was not a fundamental problem – late payment resulted in fines, not repaying resulted in a temporary ban from additional credit [source]. This possibly reflects the systemic necessity of laboring bodies for the production of appropriable surplus. *Irrawaddy* investigative journalist Salaing Thant Sin finds that today, however, that system has ceased to function:

Currently, by the relevant directive of the Ayerawaddy Division Agricultural Development Bank, township Farm Development Bank managers are to take out warrants for those farmers who are not able to pay back the loan on their fields and their homes, suing those who have cheated on their loan with Chapter 420 [the cheating law], say the local farmers.^x

Salaing Thant Sin then quotes a Manager of the regional branch of the Agriculture Bank, an U Kin Maung Lwin, who is worth quoting at length:

Ours is a friendly department that is giving help to the farmers. We are not a department that is an enemy. The action that is being taken at times like this is unavoidable. This route, in which debts like these that are not being paid back are coming up more and more, should be blocked.”^{xi}

The article does not explain why there is such a drastic alternation of the status quo now. There is the simple political-economic reality that land is becoming more valuable, which is creating pressure to complete its commodification. The task is to attend to how people perceive this economic imperative. When the manger says, “this is unavoidable” one wonders what are the conditions of possibility that allow him to say that, with such assurance? And will farmers believe that it is indeed unavoidable?^{xii}

When I spoke to the widow, Daw Thandar, in July 2015 she had recently lost her land to debt. She described how every year taking loans from the farmers’ bank was necessary. Only when the crops yields are good are farmers able to survive; if they are not – because of bad weather, for instance – the debt spiral begins. As she put it, “But after cultivating, the water comes and sinks me again. After the flood comes and sinks me, the paddy is destroyed. After it is destroyed in here, it is necessary for us to pay back the bank the money. But at that time I have no money. It is very difficult.”

To pay back the bank, farmers like Thandar take loans from local creditors. Some farmers use these loans to try to boost yields. A staff member of a local NGO who was accompanying me added his interpretation: “They will have to use chemical fertilizer. And so they have to take the debt. And also because they take that debt, in regards to using the chemical fertilizer, it is not up to the standard. Because it is not up to the standard, in the area where they will use one bag for an acre, they have to use three bags. Because they have to use three bags, they lose more. For that, more debt is taken.”

If farmers are lucky such interventions – getting loans from local financiers or adding chemical fertilizer – can get them out of their debt hole, but often it merely exacerbates their debt problem. But when the latter outcome materialized for Thandar, she described her land as being “taken by force” rather than her land being taken as the result of her failure to fulfill her end of a contract.

Moreover, Thandar has been working to amass money (from her migrant son working in Malaysia [confirm country from fieldnotes]) and wants to pay off the loan, even though the land ownership has transferred to another party. “They do not take the money... Because they want the land. Now if I want to pay back, I can’t. I am wanting, but can’t give. Without my being able to work it, they rent it out to others,” she says. Thandar feels she *still* has a claim on the land, even after - to the new logics of land commodification anyway - it has clearly gone.

Thandar’s logic rests on *dhamma-ucha* (the law of the clearer) mentioned above in which land takes value and ownership based on how human labor power has transformed it from its original state of nature. This logic cuts across class divides: Win Maung, a senior Burmese member of an NGO recently wrote (in English) a public note to the collective members of the Land Core Group (a consortium of CSOs), after posting the treatise to his *LinkedIn* page. It began with the following:

Planting a tree whatever it is can make our land valuable. A land which has never been used is not valuable. Planting a tree can save our planet, can feed our people, can develop our people’s living standard, and can change our people mindset. Only hand which is growing trees or any kind of plant is potentially not grabbing other people’s farmland because he/ she knows very well how much the effort invested to grow a plant.^{xiii}

According to Win Maung, labor transforms plain land to make it both environmentally and socially useful, hence giving it value.

This ideology of clearing is often placed by international NGO staff (who have worked in other contexts) under the rubric of a “land to the tiller” logic. And while the

two are certainly related (in the sense that they both are opposed to a “sovereign owns everything” approach), in Burma they often mark a sharp contrast.

This is not simply because *damma-ucha* privileges the *original* transformation of ‘nature’ into land whereas “land to the tiller” focuses on who is doing the laboring *now*, but because in the context of the policies mentioned above – in which cultivators are dispossessed, often violently, and land is circulated to other poor tenant farmers – those who cleared the land are actually often in direct conflict with those who are currently working it.

Indeed, in another village where I conducted fieldwork, the farmers described the aporia created by the conditions on the ground in which they cleared land but others had been working it for a long time: “They [who are on the land now] are correct; we farmers are correct,” said Kyaw, the liaison for the aggrieved farmers. “And so it is a challenge, and we discuss. Two people, two sides - it is challenging and so we are discussing.” Kyaw pointed out that even as his ancestors were the first to work the land, those who are on the land now have evidence indicating ownership as well: “We said that these lands are lands that we cut first. When we said this, they said that they have the evidence of ownership. I do not have evidence. My ancestors started to reign over this land, and the trees that they cultivated in the land are owned by me, there are witnesses to that.” Kyaw seems to believe that even though his kin were displaced unjustly, those who occupy the land now have a certain perspective that deserves recognition, one which creates the basis for a discussion. The critical point is that while these farmers are closer enough in class and cultural terms that it seems (or Kyaw believes) that some common ground can be found, the same cannot be said for Thandar and her fight with the moneylender; in an era of commodification, the clearer is becoming irrelevant.

Land’s commodification is generating a secondary and compounding pressure: investment in land. Patrick Meehan (2011) perceives land purchases as a way of

laundering drug cash, arguing that “for an inflated price drug lords have been able to purchase property, allowing the state to exact a fee (the inflated cost paid over the actual value of the asset) in return for which drug revenue is converted into legitimate real estate” (391). Rhoads (2016) has explored a transfer of land resources in early 2010 so vast that it is colloquially referred to as ‘the fire sale’ (see New York Times 2010). As vast swathes of public land have been effectively given away to well-connected individuals, Rhoads has marked a concomitant transformation in the way land is valued: whereas in the previous era urban land owners rented out land to tenants to generate a small but stable income stream, now land is meant to provide real and fairly immediate returns. Investment in land has hence gone from a risk management (see MDRI/Mastercard 2014: 59, 68, 73) to a capital accumulation strategy. Maxime Boutry (forthcoming: 14) finds that on Yangon’s physical margins “Speculators anticipate that what at first is created as an informal settlement will eventually become legalized as housing land, especially if they invest in drainage and flood management infrastructure. Even within the first year of sale, land prices grew to five times their initial value.” Speculators literally follow planning announcements, buying up land surrounding new project sites the day they are made public (Ye Mon and Myat Nyein Aye 2015), a phenomenon of fictive wealth creation well-documented in cases beyond Myanmar (Tsing 2000).

Urban poor are directly affected by this land investment (Myat Nyein Aye 2016) as affordable housing proves elusive (AFP 2013); the World Bank notes that urban poverty in Yangon is “surprisingly high” (2014:23) while Boutry (nd; forthcoming) outlines the vulnerability created in part by the housing crisis.

3.3.2 MyoTha Industrial Zone: Land Grab Under New Regime of Land Regulation
MyoTha Industrial zone and the thousands of farmers dispossessed from its lands, brings together issues of land commodification, speculation, and

dispossession into an ugly mix. The area, on the outskirts of Mandalay (see fig 3), was chosen by its parent company because there were few farmers and it was mostly scrubland anyway (indexing that there would be no impact on national food security). We learn this from the company's publicly filed prospectus (MMID 2011), which also declares that all the farmers displaced were given adequate compensation and were happy to have the project. There are photos testifying to this fact.

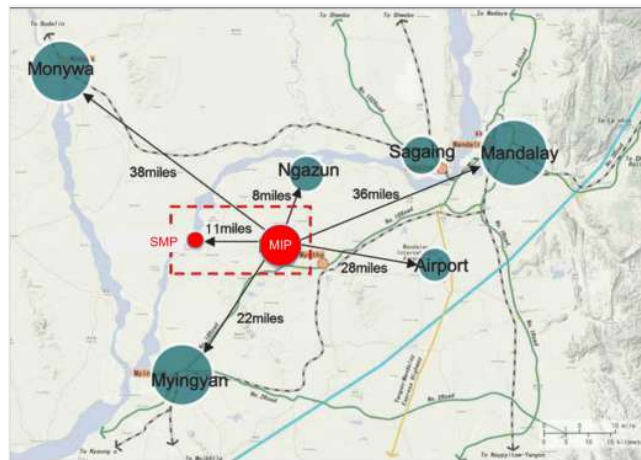


Figure 3 Map of Myotha Industrial Zone (MIP) in proximity to other landmarks [source: Myanmar Myotha Industrial Zone LLC (MMID) Prospectus]

However, activists with whom I did my participant observation went to the zone to help farmers who told a different story: hundreds of farmers living in their villages in the middle of the gated off zone, refusing to leave. They were sleeping in shifts in tents outside their fields to guard against bulldozing. If the bulldozer engine fired up in the middle of the night to plough their fields under, they called the other villagers out to stand in front of the bulldozers (which they have done on numerous occasions; the leaders have been jailed for the actions, charged under the Emergency Powers Act for defaming the state).

The MyoTha case is quite complex and all of its details cannot be described here, but a distilled version of the terms of the conflict is that the farmers are rejecting compensation offered by the company for their lands because it is inadequate for the farmers to buy replacement land. Partially this is because the act of creating the industrial zone has led to speculation, in addition to the general upwards pressure on land prices from a huge purchase, that together have made land become exorbitantly expensive: it has gone from 2,500,000 to 8,000,000 or even 10,000,000 kyat/acre [2,000 USD – 6,400 - 8,000 USD].

Critically, when the activists interviewed the company manager, he justified the unilateral dispossession and the inability to buy more land because the farmers had also been given a 'stake' in the project - in the form of a plot of land inside the industrial park – which, of course, the farmers were not allowed to use for crops. Instead, the farmers were meant to hold the parcel as a speculative investment, waiting for the demand for spots in the zone by interested companies to emerge and drive the price up before selling.

The farmers, however, not having the flexibility in incomes to be able to invest in this investment, and not having the wherewithal to imagine this plot of land in such ways (many told me, "we already have houses, why did they give us this plot?"), sold them off immediately. At least two farmers cursed their windfall payouts and immediately gave them to the local monastery.

3.3.3 Structural Transformation?

What happens to these people? Infrastructure and logistics deficits – not to mention a global political-economic structure that provide barriers to economic 'structural transformation' for such a late 'late developer' (Waldner 1999) – mean that displaced masses are not reabsorbed into any burgeoning high-productivity economic sector such as manufacturing.

The processes described above seem at first glance homologous to historical enclosure movements – for instance, the privatization of the English commons described by Karl Polanyi (2001). But in that era there were jobs in factories and mines (as miserable as they were) awaiting the people recently made ‘free’ of their land and security (Marx 1994). While the World Bank today uses language (if not connotation) similar to Marx when describing the liberated poor (“The prospects for poverty reduction are greater when *newly released farm labor* can find its way to good, formal sector jobs” (World Bank 2014:28, emphasis added)), there are marked differences in the *opportunities* for those laborers to find good work. As the World Bank itself notes, “there is likely to be some substitution of capital for labor [in the agricultural sector]” (ibid:45) but “the pace of structural transformation has been limited... the reallocation of labor appears to have stalled” (ibid:13). In other words, as bodies are made superfluous (by technology or land grabs alike) they are not reabsorbed in other production processes elsewhere.

Comparing similar displacements elsewhere, in Indonesia anthropologist Tania Li has found that agribusinesses do not provide stable and beneficial employment. “In Southeast Asia, plantations have routinely been bad news for the ‘locals’: their land is needed, but their labor is not” (Li 2011:286), and elsewhere she challenges the entire structural transformation model, questioning whether in a globalized market it is reasonable to assume that laborers can be absorbed by *domestic* economies (Li 2009). Where employment opportunities emerge as a result of industrialization, these benefits have been mitigated by rampant labor abuses and a suppression of wages (Labor Rights Clinic et al 2013).

3.3.4 Few Avenues of Social Mobility

Finally, meager public services do not provide the marginalized with opportunities to break the cycle of underemployment: education and health in particular are sectors in which the wealthy consume high-quality private services (often outside Myanmar), while

the poor survive on underfunded and under-qualified public options. Further, resource rent management processes remain inscrutable (World Bank 2014:42) and hence revenues may be siphoned off rather than being allocated to those starved public good sectors.

Indeed, not only does the allocative mechanism of economic growth not accrue to the poorest, it also does not appear that *distributive* interventions will be implemented to serve the poor's needs. Even if, as David Dapice et al show (2011), increased investment in the agrarian sector could assist the rural poor, several factors prevent delivery of those benefits. Adequate sectoral support to farmers – in the form of sufficient provision of credit and inputs, or debt relief – have never been delivered, even during this era of putative reform. Non-delivery derives from the state's inability to effectively tax its citizens (Wood 2014), especially the wealthy (Lawi Weng & Thet Swe Aye 2013); hence there is little revenue for supporting the agrarian sector, let alone to assist those made vulnerable by dislocations wrought by economic changes. Indeed, the state's social protection program, which aspires to a universal pension, remains unfunded (Htoo Thant 2015); the state devotes a stunningly meager 0.01 percent of GDP to social safety net programs, far below other poor countries (World Bank 2014:44). Moreover, investment in education and public health remains below international standards, and what health investments there have been are sub-optimal (ibid:38). Finally, even if equity-directed policies were designed and funded, there is a question of state capacity and will to deliver them. People are left to fend for themselves.

[Note to readers: I have a conclusion below of 3,000 more words on patronage bonds breaking down, but the paper is sufficiently long already, at it makes sense to end here, I think. But for those gluttons, there are some cool cartoons below 😊]

4 Class Consolidation Excluding Former Clients

Two centuries of implicit social compact linking patrons and clients is ending in Burma under the guise of rights and democracy. Indeed, traditional networks of care and support may be eroding as increasingly necessary migration (ILO 2016) disrupts village life and *horizontal* community ties therein (Boutry 2013), while an ascendant bourgeois ethos celebrating individual accomplishment combined with elite reorientation to a now-accessible global consumptive marketplace degrade *vertical* patronage bonds.

Looking first to the horizontal axis, while village-based insurance mechanisms still do function, they are strained, and the fact that villages are expelling underemployed young people, whose proceeding employment and then remittances the villages are dependent on, means that villages can only reconstitute themselves around more diffuse networks that include nodes outside the village. Put differently, in order for the village to function it needs a migrant worker on the border in a Thai garment factory remitting one hundred dollars per month, or when crises arise. As for the urban areas, as they remain in hyper-flux according to Slingsby (forthcoming) and Boutry (forthcoming), the latter of whom describes the consequences for horizontal bonds of support:

the high mobility of many inhabitants of peri-urban marginal settlements... leads to the dismantlement of any village-based migrants' communities that had once existed (If their migration have been mediated by social networks originating in their home village). (Boutry forthcoming: 14)

In regards to vertical ties, we can return to Scott, who insists that patron-client ties are not atavistic vestiges of 'pre-modern' political economies but "serve as a formula for bringing together individuals who are not kinsmen and as building-blocks for elaborate chains of vertical integration" (1972:8). Yet currently there are fewer reasons to create and maintain these integrative chains. And while performing wealth and power - especially through public donations to religious associations and especially during natural disasters - retains its social importance, such demonstrations are sporadic and

arbitrary: the social function of responsibility for the less well-off runs the risk of inexorably eroding.

This is because the transition is facilitating the consolidation of a new authoritarian-capitalist oligarch-military class, complete with a new consciousness circulating amongst its members. Tycoons ('cronies') who once kept low profiles now audaciously assert their centrality to the economy; while this centrality may be true (Ford et al 2016), the blatant proclamation of it, often combined with a rejection of the term 'crony' and an explicit assertion of the tycoons' principled entrepreneurialism (Ye Naing Oo 2016), suggests a robust ideological project.



Figure 4 Cut-out poster of motivational speaker Linn Thaiq Nyunt [Taw Win Center, downtown Yangon, January 2016 (photo: Phyo Win Latt)]

This consciousness is developed through self-help memes circulated on social media which focus on hard work and 'smart' investment,^{xiv} and through the alarming rise of self-help figures such as Lin Thaiq Nyunt, a business achievement guru peddling easy answers about the efficacy of positive thinking and the non-existence of any structural barriers to success. "In the world we cannot talk about separation between classes. There is only a difference in effort and striving," is his tagline and his slogan is "See you at the top" (in English).

Lin Thaiq Nyunt is not so much causative of this consciousness, but an index of it, and provides another site (in addition to yacht clubs, night clubs, shopping malls) that beckon others to participate in the 'principled entrepreneurial' mission.

Such beckoning constructs its own spaces, and a noteworthy phenomenon is the differentiation between the crony elite and the rest of the people, something reflected in Yangon's cityscape in how the separation is deeply inflected upon space. New malls, nightclubs, and restaurants are gleaming, air-conditioned spaces of conspicuous consumption and desire creation where more conservative modes of dispositional decorum and sartorial propriety do not apply. And because these spaces are accessed by private car, the home to the car to the mall to one of the gastro pubs or nightclubs on the northeast side of Inya Lake encompass an insulated pathway within (and yet also outside of) the city. The Finnish anthropologist Lauri Nio has done long-term participant observation with the sons and daughters of notorious tycoons, and observes that these youth will not even take taxis – a mode of transportation generally out of reach for the majority of average Yangon residents – and insist upon their own private cars. The taxis, the "crony-kids" (as they are called) felt, were too common and hence laced with fear – although fear of what was never articulated. Such separation is featured by anthropologist Jacqueline Menager in her own research on cronies:

The question is: how do these people fit into Myanmar? They may not. While they remain tied to Myanmar through citizenship and business, when in Myanmar they are chauffeured from their compounds to havens of elitism: their offices or restaurants and bars. Their world is distinguished from the Myanmar of the masses in many respects. (Menager 2014: 204)

Cronies then seem to have seceded from the polity in meaningful material and affective ways; and yet many normal people argue that the system they have helped built has devoured the economy and indeed society itself. One informant told me that there is no such thing as a 'normal' businessperson and that the entire economy is a crony economy. As such, analyst Stuart Larkin insists that the country is stuck with the

tycoons, any alternative being far worse: “their absence can reduce results in essential areas like Infrastructure... [and] in their place, shadowy players, often backed by big black money from Yunnan and beyond, could step into the void and further undermine standards of governance” (Larkin 2015). This sentiment is endorsed by Htay Oo, currently joint-secretary of the military party USDP:

Some who are cronies, their names are broken and about them [people] are not saying good [things]. But truly, the things that are called crony, they must exist. Their not existing is not ok. There will be rich people. Their businesses will have to be done. The government only doing it is not ok. They work and with the issue of getting the jobs becoming wide will get carried out. (7 Daily 2015)

In all of these statements we hear an identification of a double-bind sorts in which average people are kept *separated* from the cronies even while they are *enveloped* by their system, forced to maneuver within a system that excludes them. As a local commentator put it: “Will cronies become monopoly capitalists (or) will they become those who businessmen who will make the country developed? Only with time will we be able to know” (Aung Khin & Kyaw Kyaw Thein 2015).

It is noteworthy also that during this era there have been dozens of cartoons featuring peasants in, or associated with, prisons (see figs 5 and 6).

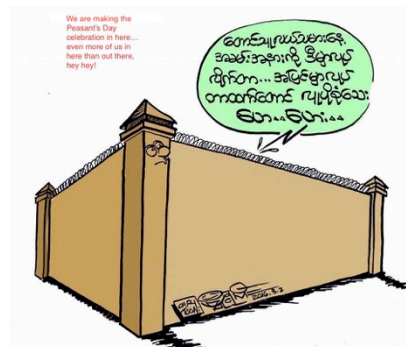


Figure 5 “We are making the Peasant's Day celebration in here... Even more of us in here than out there, hey hey!”

In many of the obvious ones (as in fig 5), readers are presented with the brutal fact that farmers protesting against land grabs are actually ending up in prison – as the activists with whom I conducted fieldwork for a year know too well.

But some more complex ones (fig 6) suggest a more structural critique: that in the midst of the country's era of enclosures, peasants themselves are an endangered species: extruded from the socio-political order, the prison is the one of the only spaces in which they can be reinscribed. This evokes Hannah Arendt's famous insights about the stateless person who can only be recognized by the political order by breaking the law, because at least the criminal is a legible figure (Arendt x).



Figure 6 There is always room in prison!

Not able to go home again those stuck in motion continue on. As Boutry puts it:

As a last resort, families from rural areas may go back to their village, if they didn't sell all of their belongings in their place of origin. Yet, according to our interviews this rarely happens as most families, if they are willing to go back to their village, want to be in a "successful" position when doing so. In other words, no family is willing to go back to their village if they have failed to improve their situation; they would rather go to another new settlement. Meanwhile, households who have moved from other urban areas generally have nowhere else to go. They cope, as best they can, potentially even turning to harmful coping strategies, including dropping children out in order to work, including begging activities in markets, but also commercial sex for young girls. (Boutry forthcoming)

[Essay on the Hoffman book made a similar argument?]

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ⁱ Fieldnotes, “Non-Ethnic” village, 24 June 2015.

ⁱⁱ (Here, however, a mild tension emerges between Scott’s flight hypothesis and his own earlier work that describes the importance “of alternative social mechanisms such as the kindred and village” (Scott 1972: 7). The two only mesh seamlessly if communities were able to maneuver (find other patrons) and, especially, flee *all together*, as fleeing to the hills alone drastically increases vulnerability and risk. This is all complicated and perhaps undermined by spatial relations, as it seems implausible for people to uproot their village unit and plop it down somewhere else within the paddy state territory. If infra-state movement was impossible as a unit, then subjects would have to weigh tradeoffs between horizontal support under abusive patrons, versus exiting horizontal bonds while hoping to find a new patron.)

ⁱⁱⁱ 4 February 2016, FB conversation.

^{iv} Lieberman’s work (1984) shows, *pace* Aung-Thwin (1991), a progressive consolidation of state administrative infrastructure, which would imply a corresponding sedentarization. However, the issue of localized mobility to escape regulatory capture is a different issue, and warrants its own specific exploration.

^v Although the military officially seized state power only in 1962, it had been becoming increasingly imbricated in state affairs long before. In 1958 the elected Prime Minister Nu abdicated the government to a military “caretaker regime” with the understanding that the military, after reforming the civilian administration, would hand power back in 1960. It did so. But after two more years of what it perceived as chaos, the military finished the job in 1962, ushering in the BSPP period.

^{vi} The regime deployed a similar strategy of spatial de-concentration after 1996 and 1998 university protests: it closed campuses, making all education of the long-distance correspondence variety.

^{vii} Lubeigt suggests that industrial zones were designed near army barracks because children of military men would make disciplined members of the labor force. I have seen no evidence that children of army members had aspired to factory work.

^{viii} After Zimbabwean farmers were displaced by a national ethanol company, they were given compensation plots, “end[ing] up with nonirrigated land several hours’ walk from their homes. They spent weeks clearing brush and cutting down trees to get their new plots ready for planting, only to be told by the chief that the land had been re-allocated to the company. They would have to start over on a new plot. ‘They were just using us to clear their land,’ one farmer [said]” [Hobbes 2016].

^{ix} Land grabbers may continue to act with impunity because courts tend to favor those who can maneuver the law (a discourse of expertise and coercion at the same time).

^x “လက်ရှိတွင် ဧရာဝတီတိုင်း လယ်ယာဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးဘဏ်၏ ညွှန်ကြားချက်ဖြင့် သက်ဆိုင်ရာ မြို့နယ်လယ်ယာဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးဘဏ် မန်နေဂျာများက ချေးငွေ မဆပ်နိုင်သည့် လယ်သမားများ စိုက်ပျိုးထားသော စပါးများနှင့် နေအိမ်တို့အား ဝရမ်းကပ်ခြင်း၊ ချေးငွေလိမ်လယ် ထုတ်ယူသူများအား ပုဒ်မ ၄၂၀ (လိမ်လည်မှု) ဖြင့် တရားစွဲဆိုခြင်းများ ပြုလုပ်နေသည်ဟု ဒေသခံ လယ်သမားများက ပြောသည်။”

^{xi} “ကျနော်တို့ ဌာနမှာ လယ်သမားတွေကိုကူညီပေးနေတဲ့ မိတ်ဆွေဌာနပါ။ ရန်သူဌာန မဟုတ်ဘူး။ အခုလို အရေးယူမှုတွေ လုပ်ရတာကလည်း မလွဲမရှောင်သာဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ ဒီလို ချေးငွေ မကျေတာတွေ များသထက်များလာရင် ချေးငွေလမ်းကြောင်းကြီး ပိတ်ဆို့သွားနိုင်ပါတယ်။”

^{xii} for a comparison of conceptions of debt as bondage/linkage versus debt as vulnerability, see the review article by Peebles (2010).

^{xiii} Email circulated to LCG, 13 jan 2015. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/make-our-land-treasure-win-maung?published=t>

^{xiv} [<https://www.facebook.com/myanmaronlinebookshelf/posts/742799069189250>]