

BOOK REVIEW

Jo Guldi, *The Long Land War: The Global Struggle for Occupancy Rights*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. Appendix. Timeline. xxii + 577pp. £30.00 hbk. \$40.00 hbk.

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In light of our existential environmental crisis, Jo Guldi in *The Long Land War* evokes a precedent for global action – ‘a global government of land’ that prevailed during the middle of the twentieth century. Guldi rebuts scepticism about the metropole’s interventions in rural economies and argues that the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) offered a third way through the Cold War, promoting land redistribution to overturn the legacies of colonialism and foster stable democracies. Underlying these policies was a ‘parade for empire’s end’ – a global movement for occupancy rights that united urbanites in the United States and England with farmers in India and Peru. Guldi concludes that the FAO failed to make the world ‘legible’ but that we can learn from its mistakes.

Guldi’s story begins with the Irish Land War, which prompted reforms that successfully established tenant rights. The conflict was seen as a model for how a colonized nation could amend the imbalances of wealth and power that imperialist land grabs had created. When the FAO was formed in 1943, most social scientists looked to New Deal land reforms or rent strikes in Ireland and India as evidence of a universal movement that would inevitably guarantee access to land. Guldi devotes the first part of the book to showing that, while Westerners had their own histories that fed into this perceived connection between small proprietorship and democracy, intellectuals throughout the world contributed to it. She highlights, for example, the impact of Samar Ranjan Sen, who demonstrated that expensive infrastructure projects and industrial farming were not necessarily as efficient as small farms when supported by education and affordable, small-scale technological improvements.

The second part of the book focuses on the FAO’s often misplaced faith in technocracy. Inspired by Indian economists, director general of the FAO Norris Dodd imagined that small farmers could thrive if they were provided with hoes, seed catalogues, agricultural statistics, prices, lists of agricultural experts, maps and bibliographies. But the FAO, even though it was initially the largest UN programme, lacked the infrastructure to connect its work to the farmers who needed it. The FAO’s largest project, the *Soil Map of the World*, took decades to complete, and even then lacked the granular detail about soil quality that national governments needed to equitably redistribute land. By the time the map was completed in 1978, interest in land reform had waned and the map was only useful in aiding planning for transportation and dams. FAO’s investments in bibliographies came progressively to focus on newer and more pragmatic material, and therefore to be dominated by the

flood of research produced by the United States Department of Agriculture's Pesticides Documentation Bulletin.

The third part of the book covers the diverse roots of the backlash to agrarian reform. Concerned with calls for land redistribution from indigenous and Black activists within its own borders, the United States turned against land reform. Guldi tells the story of the Curta, a simple calculator that was distributed by organizations like the World Bank to encourage small farmers to transition to debt-financed production for markets. Horrified by stories of violent land redistribution in China, Karl Wittfogel argued that land redistribution was a type of psychological war that could draw on the jealousies of the rural poor to undermine rather than reinforce democracy. American agricultural experts William and Elizabeth Paddock argued that international assistance to small farmers in the developing world failed to produce the gains in productivity imagined, but instead produced a bumper crop of brown children who threatened to further immiserate the world. Milton Friedman popularized the belief that the sort of rent controls first established in the Irish Land War reduced the supply of urban housing and forced families to cohabitate.

In light of this backlash, land reformers increasingly turned away from the state, often further undermining the institutions necessary for change. Vinoba Bhave, a Gandhi acolyte, electrified the world with marches that pressed landowners to donate their land to the poor, but because of an absence of formal government action, much of the 2.5 million acres of land that was gifted was subsequently retaken by landowners when its value grew. In England, an urban squatting movement often tied to anarchism secured housing for people in need but also fed into narratives about the inefficiency of public housing that were ultimately co-opted by the World Bank, which marketed 'land titling' schemes as a panacea to turn squatters into independent owners. The most promising trend, according to Guldi, is a movement toward embedded scholarship, including participatory mapping, in which the geographer Hugh Brody worked with indigenous communities to map traditional land claims that would be recognized by courts. Such strategies, Guldi believes, might have made the *Soil Map of the World* practical and are a model of co-operation between experts and dispossessed communities that should point the way forward for future social movements.

Guldi is aware that even with its vast scope and focus on what had been the British empire, this book could only ever scratch the surface of such a large topic. She also acknowledges that methods of securing occupancy vary widely from broadcast ownership, land value taxation and collectivization – policies that were often mutually exclusive and violently contested. Nevertheless, she has provided an indispensable framework for connecting international land reform movements. Without this global focus, the interdependency of metropole and countryside would have been difficult to capture. We see that even rural land reformers like Hugo Blanco looked to the communal spaces of the city to build movements. Land reform relied upon the FAO in Rome for data and fell into decline when the power of urban squatters and public housing activists in places like England and the United States were eclipsed by the ideas of Milton Friedman. This story recasts the myriad land reforms of the period as part of a coherent global movement that connected urbanites in need of housing with farmers demanding rights to their land.

Christopher England 

Towson University

chris.england456@gmail.com