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Polecon 101 Extra Credit Assignment – seminar by Jo Guldi

**Summary**

During the talk, Prof. Guldi discussed her newly published book, *The Long Land War,* where she focuses on the evolution of land rights throughout history. In her introduction, she also briefly mentions a new perspective of looking at economic growth for nations that primarily rely on peasants and farmers: the idea that farm density is a determining factor in allowing for more growth. Firstly, she discussed the United Nations and the founding of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and how it is one of the first internationally recognized organizations that actively advocated for redistributing land back to farmers. Following this theme, she also discussed a common trend she saw: land reforms were almost always motivated by social means (e.g. public demonstrations), and backed by intellectuals. To support her hypothesis of farm density as an indicator for economic growth, land reforms endorsed the rights of working-class citizens, putting them out of risk of displacement, thereby disrupting housing crises. In addition, land reforms were also very closely related to the government. However, she also admits that not *every* land reform shared these common themes. In India for instance, land reform policies were introduced voluntarily and peacefully, without the need of a large social movement. This is contrasted with similar campaigns in the US around this time, where land redistribution was often enforced through the use of barbed wire fences and the deliberate invasion of occupied territory.

**Connection between talk and themes discussed in class**

As discussed in the summary, one of the main themes that Prof. Guldi talked about during her talk was the idea of land reform and the presence of the government in facilitating such a movement. Personally, these ideas remind me most of the evidence Polanyi gave for his thesis that the government is required to control the economy, where he referenced the British land reforms how those were facilitated by the government. In fact, this connection can also be made more general – Prof. Guldi’s argument that the government is almost always involved in some way in the redistribution of land also reinforces the overall discussion we’ve been having about the role of the government in economic affairs. Moreover, her discussion of the FAO can also tie well into our discussion of globalization and the establishment of international organizations such as the IMF, the WTO, and the United Nations. Perhaps more importantly however, Prof. Guldi discussed how land reforms disrupted housing crises by diminishing the risk of displacement faced by working-class citizens due to lack of workers’ rights. This relates well to our discussion a couple weeks ago about Friedman’s “shock doctrine,” where he argues that major changes can only be made when a large crisis, whether supernatural or sociopolitical, is present. In this case, the issue in question is the housing crisis, and radical land reforms are the government’s attempt to resolve it. Furthermore, this theme is even present when the government is largely not involved: in her example of the Indian land reforms, radical land reforms were enacted in order to lift citizens out of poverty, the most prevalent crisis at the time. However, unlike previous cases, these land reforms were carried out primarily by spontaneous communities rather than organized government institutions.

**Reflection**

Personally, the biggest takeaway I had from the talk was the idea that land should be treated as a commodity just like anything else. While I had heard about the idea that we should treat land as an economic commodity before, I’ve only heard it as a concept that dominated European thinking during the colonial period, and I did not expect these themes to be so relevant in the 20th century. In addition to this, the almost necessary involvement of the state in facilitating land reforms was also interesting to learn about, since this is an example of the government altering the market indirectly (as opposed to altering the market directly, as seen with the examples in class and in the readings), by protecting workers’ rights and allowing them to accrue capital. That said, I do wonder, what factors allowed the land reform in India to be so successful despite the lack of any government figure facilitating the process? Why can this approach not be replicated with other land redistribution efforts that we’ve seen around the world? Is it the differences in culture and the context, or it is something else entirely?