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Anne Haila, *Urban Land Rent. Singapore as a Property State*

Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 291 pp. – 2016

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*Anne Haila, Urban Land Rent.
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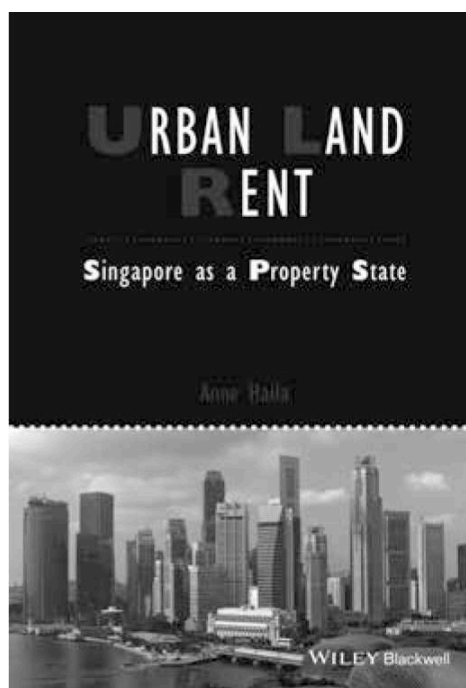
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- 1 “This is a book about land” Anne Haila clarifies in the first line of her volume. Yet it is much more than that: the volume is a call for a comprehensive rethinking of rent theory and mechanisms to capture future rent in our cities. To this end, the author argues that David Ricardo’s study of ‘land’ in association with rent – for agricultural taxation – should be critically updated to an urban world in which factors of production have changed to such an extent that ‘land’ in the city “was reified into the monetary value of real estate thus blurring the boundary between physical and financial assets” (p. 210). Such condition was made evident in recent financial crises, in which “derivative rents draw land and real estate into a financial game” (p. 213), although ‘money’ is used more frequently as an easy explanation for crises. Despite these ambitious propositions, this is also a case study-based book about land, rent, property and state in the very peculiar Singapore city-state. As in other works by Anne Haila, the detailed accounts of local specificities are instrumental to explore critically conventional assumptions about general issues such as the interaction between state and private property and land use right.
- 2 ‘Land’ accounts for the social relations affected by laws and customs in which land is embedded. Hence, land matters when occupied by people that are often emotionally attached to it. The book, after a brief introduction to Singapore and a methodological statement that introduces the unconventional way in which ‘the case’ is utilised, presents a detailed summary of land ideologies as retrospectively regarded from Singapore privileged observation point, multiplying the diverse possible definition of land and focusing on the more transformative ones. Anne Haila keeps Singapore in the background of the second chapter, as a test to her critiques to settled ideologies. Singapore, where state and market are blended and the 90% of land is owned by the state, is not presented as an ideal practice, but rather as the extreme condition in which conventional issues should be redefined.
- 3 Anne Haila then presents a broad review of Rent Theory, or the relationship between owners and users of lands with the ‘naturalisation’ of claims over future revenues, and of Property Rights Theory, declaring at the very beginning her interest in forms of land tenure to explain urban development processes. The argument is recapped in the ‘Conclusion’, thanks to an epistemological assessment of the land question, the urban question and the rent question, that ends with a pledge for an explicit policy choice on land speculation.
- 4 Here comes the value of Singapore as a case study. Anne Haila guides the reader into the blend of state and market of the city-state making use of comparisons to other regions of the world to clarify her points and engage into challenging analytical angles



without describing too many technical details. Land and real estate stand in a prominent, yet often neglected, position in Singapore's economic success. Indeed, the state has used its land resources monopoly to provide public housing for the majority of the population, and public industrial space for the economy to prosper, also benefiting a successful private development. With the structure of the book in mind, three further considerations should be added.

- 5 First, the author proposed, in many cases, ground-breaking classifications. Since landownership has become a social issue, for example, a proper classification of land regimes may include not only forms of propriety (shared, leased, private) but also clarifications about the involved relationships, justifications and development modes. Moreover, this operation provides a new dimension for comparisons, the comparison of causal factors, as the author did in this book, as opposed to macro-level comparisons and micro-ethnographies.
- 6 Second, the author critically selects Singapore as a case study. Differently from other scholars, Singapore is never meant to be the 'best practice' and it is not only regarded as a single city. It is used to compare land as one causal factor of specific urban development also in Hong Kong, in other Asian cities and European and US cities, proposing interesting insights, remarking obvious and less expected differences and potential parallelisms. Again, in a time in which urban scholars pay more attention to non-Western cities this is a suggestive move.
- 7 Third, readers may find in some points that the author considers some pre-knowledge as taken for granted, in particular her well-defined position about property rights theory. To have the whole picture, further readings of her previous works are recommended, as well as a parallel reading of this work together with recent production on the nexus and tensions between neoliberalism, governmentality and the production of space.

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