

Review of: "Theorizing the Normalization of Plantation Agriculture in Colombia"

Stephen Acabado¹

¹ University of California, Los Angeles

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Review of Andres Suarez's "Theorizing the Normalization of Plantation Agriculture in Colombia"

Stephen B. Acabado, Department of Anthropology, UCLA

The MS "Theorizing the Normalization of Plantation Agriculture in Colombia," Andres Suarez provides a theoretical framework to understand the normalization of plantation agriculture, focusing on Hass avocado plantations in Colombia. This study provides a framework for understanding the broader implications of plantation agriculture in the Global South. However, a comprehensive understanding of such agricultural practices' complexities and varied impacts necessitates a comparative analysis with similar scenarios in different geographical contexts, such as the Dole plantations in Mindanao, Philippines.

Suarez defines normalization as the process through which certain practices, behaviors, or conditions become accepted and regarded as standard within a specific society or context. It involves integrating new practices or ideas into established routines and structures, making them commonplace and expected. Normalization encompasses both descriptive considerations, such as what is typical or average, and prescriptive considerations, which involve judgments about the situations' desirability. It is a complex social process entailing the interplay between social-ecological-agrarian structures and human agency, where individuals actively shape and respond to the normalization process.

The manuscript underscores the importance of normalization as an analytical tool, aiding our understanding and explanation of how certain phenomena or practices become accepted and routine within a particular context. By delving into the normalization process, the manuscript reveals insights into the social, economic, and ecological structures that contribute to the establishment and persistence of these phenomena.

Furthermore, theories of normalization, such as the Normalization Process Theory (NPT), elucidate the social processes involved in implementing and sustaining new practices or phenomena. By examining their implementation, embedding, and integration, the manuscript highlights the role of human agency and the interaction between structures and individuals in the normalization process.

The manuscript also sheds light on power dynamics, contestation, and social change. It recognizes the agency of individuals and communities in either accepting or resisting the normalization of certain practices. Additionally, by examining the normalization of phenomena, the manuscript identifies potential opportunities for structural elaboration and

instigating change in existing social, economic, and ecological systems.

Suarez adopts a multidisciplinary approach, integrating critical realism, agrarian studies, and cognitive and implementation sciences. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the social-ecological-agrarian structures and human agency in the normalization of plantation agriculture. Such an interdisciplinary perspective is essential for a subject that spans various socio-ecological dimensions, offering insights into the complex interplay between ecological systems, agricultural practices, and socio-economic structures.

A key strength of the manuscript is its focus on human agency. It explores how individual and collective actions influence, and at times, resist, the normalization process. This attention not only acknowledges the role of human actors in shaping agrarian landscapes but also opens possibilities for exploring strategies of resistance and counter-normalization. Additionally, the manuscript's emphasis on the incremental and cumulative nature of changes in agrarian practices and landscapes highlights the subtle yet significant shifts in agricultural systems, challenging more dramatic and visible narratives of change.

The manuscript also presents structural conditions as critical in shaping the normalization process. These conditions influence the success and persistence of plantation agriculture. They define the "ideal" conditions necessary for the normalization process to occur. By understanding and analyzing these conditions, researchers and policymakers can identify factors contributing to the normalization of plantation agriculture and its effects on traditional agricultural landscapes.

Although the manuscript references other comparable examples exploring plantation agriculture and agrarian struggles in different regions, a more profound comparative analysis would strengthen the discussion. Particularly, its focus on the Global South necessitates a discussion on the transformation towards sustainability and addressing the trajectories of change in regions with established plantation economies.

As a case study, extending the discussion to the Dole plantations in Mindanao, Philippines, provides a contrasting comparison. The impact of plantation agriculture on indigenous communities in Mindanao, shaped by the Philippines' unique socio-political environment, offers a broader perspective on the normalization process. Economic opportunities, infrastructure development, cultural impact, land rights, and capacity building emerge as key areas where the normalization of plantation agriculture has significant implications for indigenous communities. However, these benefits must be critically assessed against the backdrop of cultural erosion, environmental degradation, and loss of traditional knowledge.

Understanding the underlying mechanisms of plantation agriculture's normalization in both Colombia and the Philippines has significant implications for the global plantation economy and cultural practices. The concept of the Plantationocene, introduced in the Colombian context, is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Colombian case study, coupled with the comparative analysis of the Philippine context, can significantly strengthen the manuscript. This approach can model future research in similar domains, facilitating collaborative research and knowledge exchange.

Another avenue to explore is the relationship between normalization and resistance. While normalization typically implies adapting and integrating new practices or situations into everyday life, it does not mean passive acceptance or complete acquiescence to the status quo. I understand that this is not the topic of the manuscript, but an exploration of James Scott's concept of everyday resistance could significantly expand the understanding of the normalization process in plantation agriculture contexts.

Scott's work on everyday forms of resistance offers a lens through which to view the subtle, often overlooked acts of defiance by those subjugated within the plantation system. His insights, particularly from "Weapons of the Weak," highlight that resistance to oppressive structures often manifests in discreet, non-confrontational ways. This perspective is crucial in understanding the dynamics at play in plantation agriculture, where power imbalances are stark, and the voices of workers and indigenous populations are frequently marginalized.

Integrating Scott's concept into the discussion in the manuscript reveals the nuanced ways individuals and communities involved in plantation agriculture resist the process of normalization. This resistance is not always manifest in overt protests or organized movements but can be seen in the daily, inconspicuous acts that challenge or subtly undermine the established order.

One form of such resistance is the non-compliance with labor norms in plantation agriculture. Workers may engage in work slowdowns, intentionally misunderstanding instructions, or selectively adhering to certain practices, particularly when they find them exploitative or unfair. These acts, while seemingly minor, represent a form of passive resistance against the dominant power structures within the plantation system.

Another significant form of everyday resistance is the preservation of traditional agricultural practices and cultural expressions by indigenous communities. Despite the pressure to conform to the norms of plantation agriculture, these communities often maintain their traditional ways of farming, their rituals, and their cultural narratives. This persistence serves as a resistance to the homogenizing influence of large-scale plantation agriculture and a testament to the resilience of indigenous cultures.

Moreover, Scott's concept illustrates the role of oral traditions and storytelling in resistance. Songs, folklore, and stories become mediums through which communities can sustain a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse propagated by plantation economies. These cultural forms serve as a repository of community memory and identity, offering a form of resistance that is both subtle and profound.

Informal markets and networks also play a role in everyday resistance. By creating and sustaining economies that operate outside the purview of the plantation system, individuals resist economic dependence on plantation agriculture. These informal networks can provide not just economic but also social support, acting as a bulwark against the incursions of plantation norms into every aspect of life.

Lastly, quiet acts of sabotage, such as misplacing tools or subtly affecting the quality of the produce, represent another dimension of everyday resistance. These acts, while small in scale, disrupt the normal operations of plantations and

signify a form of protest against the prevailing system.