
As an anthropologist working in postsocialist Romania, reading Max Spoor’s edited volume was of great personal interest. Focusing on land tenure reform, rural poverty, and rural land markets, the book surveys the world’s three main postsocialist areas: Central and Eastern European countries, the former Soviet Union (including the Caucasus and Central Asia), and postsocialist Asian countries like Vietnam and China. The volume’s twelve chapters explore the changes in land tenure throughout the postsocialist world, focusing on the development of private property rights, agricultural production, and land markets — processes that have contributed to the growing disparity between urban and rural incomes. As the various authors note, in many of the countries studied, formal property rights are incompletely allocated, land markets are highly dysfunctional, and agricultural infrastructure (e.g. irrigation system) is missing or critically damaged.

Following an opening chapter by Spoor that provides the thematic background for the various case studies presented in the book, Johan Swinnen, Karin Macours and Liesbet Vranken explore the way in which land reform and market developments have affected rural poverty. They identify four patterns. The first pattern refers to small-scale agriculture in countries such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, where a large share of the population is involved in agriculture. Here, improved access to land has helped to alleviate rural poverty and brought an increase in household incomes. A second pattern refers to large-scale privatised farms in the wealthier countries of Central Europe such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. In these countries the surplus workers were laid off and they found jobs in other sectors. The third pattern is to be found in countries like Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, and Lithuania, where restitution concentrated landownership among older households. While young, dynamic people left the countryside searching for better opportunities, older, low-skill, and less educated people remained to work the land. Finally, the fourth pattern regards the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Here, the large-scale farms continue to dominate the land market simply because the land privatisation process was very slow and has entailed little restructuring.

The third and fourth chapters of the book explore how recent agrarian transformations in the former Soviet Union have affected rural incomes and livelihoods in the region. In the first of his two single-authored empirical studies, Spoor focuses on rural poverty in the CIS. He investigates how differential access to land, the development of rural markets, and public and private investments in agriculture (all of which should stimulate economic growth on and off the farm) have impacted rural incomes, ultimately concluding that more consistent public policies are necessary to alleviate poverty. In the following chapter, Stephen K. Wegren analyses the rural responses to land reform in Russia. Drawing on Chayanov, he investigates the relationship between household labour and household income and identifies the two main problems faced by rural Russia: demographic decline and poverty. Wegren emphasises that land tenure, household income, and household labour are intertwined and cannot be addressed as separate issues.

Chapters five, six, and nine focus upon agrarian dualism in Eastern Europe. Oane Visser’s chapter attempts to clarify the debate on the symbiosis of household
plots and large farm enterprises (LFE) in Russia. The author shows that the declining profitability of the LFE in Russia led to an increase in the importance of household plots, which in turn became the main source of food production. However, support provided by LFEs is still extremely important for the development of the household plots. Whereas differential productivity contributes to agrarian dualism in Russia, Spoor and Felicia Izman maintain that in Moldova the phenomenon has been exacerbated by the privatisation of land. Both small-scale individual farms and large-scale corporate farms operating on leased land struggle with various bottlenecks, including a lack of infrastructure, fragmented agricultural markets, and outdated technology. In chapter nine, Aghassi Mkrtchyan, Gohar Minasyan, and Max Spoor explore the differential impacts of agricultural growth in Armenia since 2004. Although increased agricultural production has played a key role in improving incomes throughout the country, poverty is still prevalent in rural areas that are far from urban centres and have limited access to markets and irrigation.

Even though the rural areas of former socialist countries have undergone dramatic transformations since the fall of the iron curtain, chapters seven and eight demonstrate how the future of these areas is highly dependent upon agricultural processes unleashed during the Soviet era. Tommaso Trevisani’s chapter presents the dramatic case of Uzbekistan, where the state still retains a direct role in agricultural production. Analysing the state’s policy of re-regularisation of agriculture, questionably named the ‘transition to the market’, Trevisani shows that those who had a high status in the kolkhoz (or collective farms) maintained a high status after the re-regulation of production began. The state continues to control rural society and production. In his second single-authored chapter, Max Spoor explores the political economy of cotton in former Soviet Central Asia. After reviewing the long history of cotton production in this area, Spoor points out that cotton will remain a sustainable engine of the agro-industry sector, contributing to rural income and rural poverty reduction.

The final three chapters of the volume focus on Vietnam and China. Steffanie Scott investigates how agrarian transformations have shaped livelihood security in Vietnam. Exploring the history of land relations in this country, she points out that the process of social differentiation has increased opportunities and benefits for some groups while others are more exposed to livelihood insecurity. Peter Ho then analyses how the dismantling of agrarian collectives has contributed to growing landlessness in China. Although farmers played a key role in the creation of the ‘Household Contract Responsibility System’ under which they lease land from the state but are given greater control over their agricultural production, land rights are increasingly insecure and many farmers have had their land expropriated. The problem is particularly acute in peri-urban areas, where real estate developers and other powerful actors have been able to purchase the land while providing the farmers who traditionally worked it with minimal compensation. Despite the insecurity introduced by the reforms, Ho notes that rural producers still support the leasing system. Spoor and Xiaoping conclude the volume with an exploration of cotton production in the Xinjiang Uygar Autonomous Region in China, pointing out that the lack of infrastructure, outdated technology, and inefficient markets impede a rise in farmers’ income.

The various contributions in the book share a commitment to empirical studies based upon large surveys, an approach addressed to scholars and policy-makers
alike. The authors consistently move their analyses toward addressing specific issues to help improve rural policy in their respective regions. Foregrounding the link between land reform, land markets, and poverty, the book will be of particular interest to economists and other scholars interested in postsocialism.

Some critiques are to be made as well. The book focuses on agricultural land only, devoting minimal attention to the importance of forest resources to rural livelihoods. Many ethnographic accounts, in contrast, highlight the importance of forest products in the postsocialist context (e.g. To 2007, Wells and Williams 1998). Except for Spoor’s chapter on cotton and rural livelihoods in central Asia, the environmental dimensions of rural transformation are given little attention. Land degradation, soil erosion, deforestation, and polluted watersheds are problems that bring huge economic costs for all postsocialist countries (Carter and Turnock 2002). Another limitation of the book is its pervasive yet uncritical belief in the economic efficiency of private property. As anthropologists working in postsocialist settings have pointed out – see for instance Verdero (2003) or Hann (2007) – private property is not an automatic guarantor of economic efficiency. Economic outcomes are also shaped by access to markets, social networking, and the skills and political positions of economic actors.

The book would have benefited from closer attention to the relationship among the three postsocialist regions. Despite the historical, political, and cultural differences among countries, there are obvious common features, including the importance of privileged access to state and natural resources by the socialist elite; the transformations of the state through decentralisation; and social differentiation produced by varying access to markets and information. Simple cross-referencing by the contributors would have helped highlight these common features. On the whole, however, the book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on postsocialism. It will surely gain the unanimous appreciation of the international community of scholars and policy-makers interested in land reform and poverty in postsocialist countries.

References

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