

Guest Editorial

Gaining ground: Emerging agrarian political geographies

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The impact of political ecology testifies that agrarian-related issues, such as the political economy of food production, are by no means alien to political geography. But agrarian issues do not occupy a prominent place in the sub-discipline; nor do studies of agrarian geographies rank high amongst contributions to *Political Geography*. There are some serious indications, not least in 2008, that all of this might have to change. I use three cases in what follows to suggest that emerging ‘agrarian political geographies’ alert us to the value of expanding political geographers’ field of vision into the countryside and onto the (broadly construed) political dimensions, dynamics, and impacts of contemporary agrarian struggle and change.

The first of these is the Maoist revolution in Nepal, which “against all received wisdom” (Vanaik, 2008: 47) bucked the trend in the last decade by launching an underground armed struggle. It has moved to a new phase with the election of a Constituent Assembly in which the CPN-M (Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)), although without a majority, will govern. Its key tasks, Vanaik (2008: 65) notes, will be to restructure the state and eliminate caste and gender oppression. But the CPN-M also will have to tackle “class oppression” and poverty, which in Nepal and so many other places is closely intertwined with inequality in land ownership.¹ The CPN-M’s agitation and struggle has, therefore, thrust land and agrarian reform back onto the political agenda.

Zimbabwe, secondly, is another place where land and agrarian reform has mattered; the crisis there is closely tied up with the Zanu-PF government’s fast-track approach to pursuing it. As Moyo and Yeros (2007) note, sanctions imposed upon Zimbabwe after its government began

¹ Vanaik (2008, 53–54) notes that, “the richest 5 per cent of households own nearly 37 per cent of land, while some 47 per cent of landowning households own around 15 per cent, with an average size of 0.5 hectares [...] In the countryside 16 per cent are totally landless while 63 per cent of the agricultural workforce are self-employed on the little land they have, or else engaged in rural work for others. These are the rural poor.”

the fast-track land reform programme demand regime change and restoration of neoliberal orthodoxy in regards to national policies, not the least of which is land reform. In other places, such as Brazil and South Africa, such orthodoxy seeks ‘market-led’ or ‘negotiated’ land reform measures (Wolford, 2007), rather than their antithesis, that is, the Zimbabwean approach.

A third situation unfolding in 2008 is the emerging ‘global food crisis’. Prices of many commodities are currently rising, particularly as a consequence of growing demand from India and China. But *food* prices in particular are increasing due to the same sources of demand as well as shifts to biofuel production, which encourages farmers to grow grain for fuel rather than for food. Some governments are pushing for export restrictions in response to price increases and protests, which have occurred, especially in those places where the market overrides the right to eat. Of course, poor occupants of our “planet of slums” (Davis, 2006) are among the most vulnerable to food price inflation; but then there are many others outside of the city, including landless, land hungry, and indeed landed groups such as peasants, sharecroppers, small-scale farmers, and farm workers – individuals and groups with exposed and highly differentiated positions relative to the ‘global’ turbulence of the commodities markets and more ‘local’ geo-histories of land dispossession and land reforms (however stunted or far-reaching). This highly uneven level of vulnerability to food price inflation among the world’s population reminds us of the full extent to which three decades of wealth redistribution to the rich has deepened material inequality in almost all societies globally; and prompts questions about the political geographies at work in the production of hunger and need.

There are numerous ways to see the wider significance of these and other agrarian political geographies to the world that political geographers seek to understand and explain. Nepal, for example, highlights the persistent capacity for a politics that is so closely bound up with land inequality to reach into the city, find support among the urban poor, and result in a new example of bottom-up revolutionary activity; action to which many oppressed people in other places might look for inspiration. Removing Kings or Princes is achievable; we can only ponder the ‘what ifs’ of Nepal-style action developing in the Arabian Peninsula. Meanwhile, the Zimbabwean case demonstrates how attempts to deal with (or, arguably, exploit) agrarian questions, and the response of the ‘international community’, can have far-reaching consequences for the political geography of neighbouring states, especially South Africa, which has had to negotiate much of the human fallout from Zimbabwe’s ‘meltdown’. But so, too, is it helpful to recognize how Zimbabwe impacts upon far-off places, such as London, from which some Zimbabweans now face deportation, the sad irony of which helps sharpen debates about immigration into Britain. Beyond South Africa and London, Zimbabwe is significant right now in the context of attempts by critics of neoliberalization, including many geographers, to question the just place of private property rights amidst material inequality and especially in post-colonial contexts (Harvey, 2005; Moyo & Yeros, 2005). What Zimbabwe crystallizes so clearly is the uneasy relationship between private property rights and justice, equality, and democracy – that is, issues at the heart of political geography’s ‘third tradition’ (Herb, 2008).

Beyond Nepal and Zimbabwe, the effects of food price inflation rippling across or ripping into ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ countries, and looming inflationary pressures, which raise concerns about the onset of a new accumulation crisis and associated social disruption as the ‘NICE’ decade (non-inflationary, consistently expansionary) comes to an end, demonstrate other ways that agrarian political geographies are significant in the contemporary period. Rising inflationary pressures as regards food and associated ‘food riots’ highlight the close but yet highly unequal relations between peasant producers, consumers, and the capitalist

intermediaries linking them together.² Organizations such as Vía Campesina, which call for peasants to renew their control over agriculture and for alternatives to market-led land reform efforts, are particularly skilled practitioners at highlighting these connections. That they should do so at a time when neoliberal extremists demand that food is exported to meet trade agreements rather than local demand is a welcome challenge to dominant discourses and practices of development; as such, Vía Campesina is one of today's most prominent 'post-development' (see Sharp & Briggs, 2006) – if not necessarily post-colonial – movements.³ If Vía Campesina's member associations can connect with (resurgent?) labour movements or other allies, they have the potential to craft new geographies of development that go far beyond "small agricultural co-operatives, local seed banks, and fair-trading ventures" (Desmarais, 2007: 200). Political geographers can look to the BRIC states (Brazil, Russian, India and China) for 'new political geographies of development'; but there are other potential geographies to which we must remain alert.

As Vía Campesina and other land reform programmes around the world demonstrate, then, efforts to 'gain some ground' – that is, crafting new political geographies – for land, food (and food sovereignty; see Borrás, 2008) and shelter are moving higher up the political agenda in a wide range of places. Perhaps counter-intuitively given recent rapid urbanization, agrarian questions, land reforms, and peasants – that is, ostensibly 'rural' issues – are increasingly demanding attention in the 21st century. Some scholars have taken note. For example, in addition to the influential edited collection, *Reclaiming the land* (Moyo & Yeros, 2005), recent themed editions have appeared on topics such as Transnational Agrarian Movements, including the dynamics of large coalitions of peasants such as Vía Campesina, advocates and implementers of 'bottom-up' land reform in Brazil, and small farmers' resistance against large multinational agri-businesses, as well as other rural social movements (*Journal of Agrarian Change* Issue 2/3, 2008; *Journal of Rural Studies*, Issue 2, 2008).

Although *Political Geography* has published articles that deal with some of the issues I have flagged – such as a themed issue on climate change, which included research on how it impacts on conflict over resources, migration, and agrarian change in East Africa (Issue 6, 2007) – more such work is needed. If issues of agrarian change are indeed making a comeback, it is important for *Political Geography's* visibility and reputation that the journal sees outcomes of research on the agrarian. As laid out in a recent editorial (O'Loughlin, Raento, & Sidaway, 2008) *Political Geography's* policy welcomes all contributions that engage with the spatial dimensions of political questions, including studies of conflict, states and territoriality, identities, political economy, or the politics of the environment. And so work on agrarian political geographies can be aired here.

But this having been said, research on agrarian political geographies will have to take seriously political geographers' insights and contributions; at issue is more than just theorizing emerging local, national, international, and indeed transnational agrarian geographies as

² Meanwhile, 'fuel protests' call attention to the commodity chains and their underlying logics that deny most Nigerians or Iraqis affordable fuel, despite their proximity to and rights to claim ownership of massive petroleum or natural gas deposits.

³ Notably, states such as Venezuela and Bolivia are taking steps in the direction called for by Vía Campesina by indicating their intent to increase efforts to address inequality in land ownership. Whether they will be 'successful' – and how any such success will be measured – remains to be seen, but the push for land reform and for addressing underlying causes of inequality is another welcome counter to the dominance of market extremism regarding 'development'.

agrarian *political* geographies. Contributions on the agrarian must endeavour to make an impact in the discipline. In this regard, it is worth reiterating that the sorts of issues I have highlighted demonstrate how the agrarian can stretch beyond the countryside *and* the nearby cities to which they are tied. And we can immediately start to imagine and conceptualize how the various processes affecting agrarian relations connect with and contribute to capitalism's contemporary spatiality. But political geographers will want to understand more fully *why* they should incorporate agrarian political geographies in their understanding of the world and *how*, precisely, those geographies improve explanation. As I have suggested, issues such as the struggle for land in Nepal and Zimbabwe and ongoing debates over the causes of hunger and food insecurity globally suggest there is scope to bring the politics and geography of agrarian change more centrally into *Political Geography*. There are numerous empirical entry points and a wide range of conceptual questions require attention. *Political Geography*, the sub-discipline's "meeting place" (Taylor, 1992: 6), is an excellent place to start seeing some answers.

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