

On the Land-Crisis Nexus: Reterritorialization of Landed Relations in the Late Tsarist and Post-Soviet Moscow

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In this paper I explore the role of land and territory in the formation, management, and resolution of socioeconomic crises. I provide a historical account of various practices of dismantling of prevalent communal order, which were triggered by the crises of the late Tsarist and post-Soviet development in Russia on the verge of transitioning towards capitalism during both periods. Elimination of the commune under these political regimes furthered growing agrarian and economic crises and impoverishment of the dispossessed populations via intensified struggle over land and rights to territory. Through these transformations, the former commune became simultaneously a space for accumulation of old landed wealth and exploitation of landless populations suddenly found in need of waged employment. The rural periphery turned into a contested territory, a place of struggle, where the coexistence of poverty and wealth was crucial for the reproduction of capitalist relations. The events of the late nineteenth century contributed to the rise of landed oligarchy and unique features of corporate capitalism in the modern Russia.

Using rare archival materials to illuminate the genealogy of this land-crisis nexus in a case of Moscow—during two opposing political regimes of Russian Imperialism and the ‘actually existing Socialism’—this paper argues that capitalist enclosure of land is an illusory solution to the deepening contradictions related to the persistent state of crisis under a modern mode of economic governance. Hence the idea of crisis of crisis management is in the core of this work.

Traditionally, land enclosure practices inherited objectives related to advancement of economic productivity via consolidation of land holdings to enable farming innovations and the elimination of common right to land, to encourage individual projects for agricultural

improvement. Yet, not all objectives were related to enhancing productivity, as enclosure of land was a key strategy for penetrating territories whose institutional structure made it difficult to access land ownership through markets (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015). Also, as in the pre-capitalist West, the old landed gentry often desired to improve its political reputation and power by acquiring landed property. Hence, this paper views land enclosure as a political strategy of reterritorializing prevalent territorial order to achieve certain operational outcomes particularly during a time of economic crises.

The term ‘capitalist land enclosure’ goes back, evidently, to the formation of capitalism, or the 16th century England – as claimed by Karl Marx to be the classical example of ‘primitive’ or ‘original accumulation’ of capital through land. Nevertheless, the first practices of land appropriation with a goal of changing the conditions of social production can be found in many early settled societies and communities from the Greek city-state ‘*polis*’ to the Russian fifteenth century community ‘*mir*’. German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt famously argued that every settled society was born in, through, and from the land (Schmitt, 2003). Land appropriation, redistribution, and production, for Schmitt, are three main pillars that predetermine the order of the Earth, thus, they are primary for the formation of civil society. Or as Rousseau critically argued in *Discourses of Inequality*:

The first man who, having fenced off a plot of land, thought of saying, 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him was the real founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors might the human race have been spared by the one who, upon pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had shouted to his fellow men: 'Beware of listening to this imposter; you are lost if you forget the fruits of the earth belong to all and that the earth belongs to no one.' (1751)

As long as these propositions are criticized and debated over in the modern political theory (Agamben; Elden; Legg; among others), enclosure of land still plays a key role in the processes of land appropriation.

These issues, while still persistent in the twenty-first century, emphasize the importance of two neglected categories of analysis in the fields of urban and political geography – categories of land and territory. Land is foremost a political category, it is a finite resource that can be allocated and owned. As Karl Polanyi deftly argued, land is also a fictitious commodity – its actual economic, social, and cultural values far exceed the exchange value imposed by the

markets (Polanyi, 1957). Understanding land as a scarce resource, however, is not sufficient for understanding the struggles over land ownership, use, or control. Here, the concept of territory becomes critical. In the *Birth of Territory* Elden examines territory as a combination of political-economic and political-strategic aspects related simultaneously to land, as a base for landed property, and terrain, a base for security, management, and administration of land (Elden, 2010). For Elden, territory is more than merely land and terrain but is a “rendering of the concept of ‘space’ as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered and controlled” (ibid, p.810). Thus, territory inevitably constructs the basis for changing the conditions of social reproduction through inclosure, commodification, and dispossession of land. Hereby, land scarcity, land unaffordability, or land concentration in the hands of the powerful are among the major causes of global conflicts. Thus, enclosure plays a role of a political strategy of redrawing boundaries, reterritorializing, or in some cases deterritorializing traditional landed relations to achieve certain operational outcomes. Borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, processes of ‘territorialization’, ‘reterritorialization’, and ‘deterritorialization’ are the cornerstone of this work, with the use of territory as a means for changing the socio-economic conditions through enclosure, commodification, and dispossession of land (1988).

The land-crisis nexus

In particular, land enclosure is most acute in the times of economic crisis or instabilities, when land and landed resources lose their market value. During moments of crisis, capitalism attempts to overcome barriers to its accumulation by gaining control of, commodifying, and capitalizing upon not-yet-commodified resources. Thus, recently intensified economic instabilities and uncertainty paired up with the increasingly limited availability of ‘cheap nature’, have generated renewed interest in land as a potentially liquid asset. In the recent decade these interests were matched by a rising inflow of local and international speculative capital directed towards urban and agricultural land and associated with it resources, including water, forests, energy, waste, food, and housing that, in particular, lost a share of their market value during the recent economic recession.

Enclosure of land is instrumental to crisis management at least in three ways: 1. it releases un-commodified and under-commodified land that is difficult to obtain through the market, but not through the state thus creating new outlets for investments, 2. it secures higher profit returns upon land and land-based resources by releasing them more cheaply, and 3. it

creates conditions for proletarianization by making landless communities rely on wage labor. This process underscores the use of and the reliance upon land or territory (in particular under the common or state rule) for delivering strategic economic change and reproduction of capitalist social relations. The consequences of this process for seemingly crisis-free accumulation of capital can be highly destructive in the long run:

- It inaugurates the local/regional periphery or global/national frontier to deliver strategic territorial change shifting economic risks and uncertainties onto the most vulnerable. Hereby turning peripheral land into a contested territory.
- It encounters contradictions when all land and land-based resources are possessed, thus, opening up new horizons for repossession of already commodified land.
- It contributes to intensified socioeconomic inequality due to parallel processes of land concentration and dispossession - privileging certain areas as motors for economic development while holding other underinvested for the new cycles of commodification.

Enclosure by the Acts of Parliament and the formation of capitalism

This favourite example of Marxist historiography - the waves of land enclosure conducted by the Acts of Parliament in pre-industrial England - illustrates the land-crisis nexus well. Enclosure of the 'commons' along with colonial expansion and appropriation of distant lands represented an essential fix to the crisis of feudalism. In the 15th century through the dawn of the 19th century, the English gentry slowly started to incorporate vast and free landed resources for improving its power and economic conditions in the wake of the self-destructive crisis of feudalism. In this context, land was not simply a limited resource upon which feudal rent could be imposed, but also the means by which a large scale reorganization of the feudal territorial order via changes in the forms of land ownership occurred to accommodate economic instabilities. It is also important to note that the origins of the feudal crisis were partially shaped by the "relation of the feudal system of social production to land" - reinvestments in land for improving agricultural productivity were undermined by persistency of feudal rent, thus, generating conditions for severe agrarian crisis.

Thus, the frontier of feudalism became at once the space for accumulation "of new merchant capital for old rentier landowners and also a space of exploitation in which emerged a new army of dispossessed populations, totally dependent on the sale of their labor power" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015). Institutionalized privatization of common land that served as the outlets

for allocation of surplus profits allowed feudal proprietors to overcome economic stagnation and agrarian crisis in the 16th century (Moore, 2004). This historical moment can be seen as a primary model for examining proto-capitalist formation of territory and contextualizing crisis management through land, since land is considered to have served as a primary cause and a solution to the crisis of feudalism.

Dismantling of the Russian commune

Historical evolution of capitalism in the late Tsarist and post-Soviet Russia via land enclosure has been largely overshadowed by the Marxist analysis of the English case. However, development of Russian capitalism during both periods of the late Tsarist and post-Soviet political regimes deserves a special attention since it achieved unexpected outcomes that differs this case from the Western and colonial settings. It has also affected a wide array of countries in eastern Europe and Asia, through Russia's influence on satellite nations after the World War II. Waves of resource dispossession and social displacement in Russia were not simply the consequences of enclosure, they were 'its very essence': they operationalized communal and state-owned periphery - Tsarist commune or Soviet collective farm enterprises, and a national frontier - underdeveloped land in Siberia, as a new and profitable source for speculative investments after 1905 and 1992 land reforms to accommodate crisis and to further capitalist development.

Russian feudalism, to start, was carried out with characteristics different from the 'classical' Western case. In as early as the 15th century, large parcels of land had been 'donated' to the Russian aristocracy and merchant capitalists in exchange for their military services. The rest of the populous enjoyed working in a 'commune'—or mir – meaning the 'world', which was later termed as obshina – meaning the 'society'—a form of settlement unique to Russian institutional structure under the Tsarist rule (Pallot, 1999). For the majority of 19th century, the open-field system of agriculture was a common practice of land management in the pre-emancipatory Russia where agriculture accounted for almost 90% of the land use. Prior to 1861 serf communities were assigned to use land, owned by their seigneurs in return for their rent (obrok) or various labor services (barshchina) - land, however, was still allocated and cultivated by their village community unlike in Western Europe and England in particular, where peasant households held rights to one or several scattered strips of land. These practices of communal

land management under serfdom gave rise to the ‘commune’ - “the central element of the institutional structure of rural Russia” (Nafziger, 2013).

Collective land redistributed under serfdom was formalized after the emancipation and redemption statutes of the 1860s that ended serfdom and began the process of transferring property from the state, the court, the church or the landed nobility to village communities. After 1861 a newly emerging class structure was superimposed onto the prevalent territorial order - the old communal land regime under the open-field system of agriculture that, in analogy to the Western Europe in the 17th century consisted of arable fields divided into narrow strips of land and meadows or waste land being held under the ‘common’ rule.

Emancipation reform institutionalized village commune (*obshchina*) and allotted land endowments to the newly freed peasants. The amount of allotted land was largely dictated by the amount of “eaters” or by the amount of “male souls” in each household. Ownership/purchase of received land shares by the peasants could be constituted through mortgage payments to the government that had to be paid off in their entirety. The resulting economic burden imposed onto the peasants was a collective liability of each commune. Moreover, the government imposed restrictions on selling or renting land allotments before redemption loans were paid off. These restrictions limited peasant’s mobility and well being since the debt value exceeded the actual productive value of land strips. This economic drag forced the former serfs to engage in exploitative labor in the village or land rental relations.

Moreover, the government exercised the right to redraw boundaries between land strips on the yearly basis (repartitioning) due to the demographic change and redistribution of tax burdens, which lead to a frequent reterritorialization in areas engaged in open field system of agriculture. This practice contributed to peasant disinvestment in land in the long term and the loss of agricultural productivity. These restrictions almost immediately furthered the growing economic crisis in the countryside. Hereby, new territorial restructuring was needed as the agricultural crisis and a severe famine hit Russia in 1891. As Rosa Luxemburg states in her seminal work on *The Accumulation of Capital*, reflecting upon Marx’s rich encounter with the primary accumulation and the history of capitalism - “the Russian rural communal ownership of land, the famous obshina, seemed to offer a shortcut to the blessed land of socialism, and lead directly to a higher social development of Russia, without the capitalist phase and its attendant misery as experienced in Western Europe”. Nevertheless, appropriation of land and the first

wave of capitalist land enclosure were introduced through Stolypin's reforms to eliminate communal territorial order resistant to agricultural development and economic growth.

Primitive accumulation of capital flourished splendidly in Russia, encouraged by all kinds of state subsidies, guarantees, premiums and governmental orders. It earned profits that would already seem legendary for the West. Yet the picture of internal conditions in contemporary Russia was anything but attractive [...]. On the plains, the decline and disintegration of rural economy under the pressure of exploitation [...] caused terrible conditions, periodical famines and peasant risings (Luxemburg, 1951 p.272)

New legislation was introduced in response to the growing crisis of the late Tsarist countryside. The purpose of land reforms was to impose private rights onto the communal land holdings and thus encourage individual projects for improvement. Under the reform peasants were given a right to privatize their strips of land and an opportunity to reduce or cancel the redemption debt imposed by the state. Most significantly, the results of the reform didn't follow the popular example in the West: - *the land reform administration found itself having to deal with communes which voted to form unitary farms without any apparent need for more progressive individual ownership (Pallo, 1999).*

For this reason, the state underwent an institutional restructuring and rescaling of its control over the process. For instance, various local land settlement commissions and the Committee for Land Settlement Affairs within the Chief Administration for Land Settlement and Agriculture were created and reformed to manage the process of enclosure. In short, the attempt to impose a new order in such a direct way—by territorial reorganization of the countryside, exercising the disciplinary authority of the state and its techniques of subjectification of the commune to the market rule—encountered a strong resistance from the communities and culminated in the 1917 revolution followed by the forced collectivization and deterritorialization of the late Tsarist regime.

After complete deterritorialization of an early Soviet mode of land ownership in the late 1920's, the system of communal land right encountered a severe agrarian crisis and was yet again in need of transformation, which were undertaken through the three subsequent land reforms in the early 1990's. However, instead of appropriating land by individual farmers, land reforms of the 90's in fact contributed to the emergence of the large-scale land agrohholdings or mega farms, which carried out economic recovery. Former collective (kolkhozy) and state farms

(sovkhozy) attracted a vast amount of foreign capital and were consolidated into even bigger companies (agroholdings). The financial crisis of 1998 caused the flight of capital from the city centers where it enjoyed subsequent rounds of gentrification into the countryside where land of the former collective farms lost its quality and value, allowing foreign and domestic capital to buy off weak enterprises and to reallocate investments.

Prior to this massive assault upon Russian land wealth there was actually an attempt of classical land privatization, where members of collective and state farms were assigned a plot of land available to them through the issuance of land share type of property right. This new type of post Soviet ownership had its own nuances. Land ownership via land share didn't actually mean land usage, such that from an estimated 93% of privately owned land only 13% was actually in private use, the rest was assigned in the form of abstract land shares during the 1992-1994 land reforms (Wegren, 2009). These same insecure land shares were bought in bulk by wealthy investors that enjoyed large tax breaks and other subsidies from the state. This resulted in the massive waves of land dispossession and forced displacement of local communities from the periphery, which thus became a strategic space for managing economic crisis.

Conclusion

Russian case of land enclosure, in particular its unfolding in the city of Moscow that is so attractive for investments of local and international capital, differs critically from its Western analogy. Russian commune, the late-Tsarist 'obshina'—proved incredible resistance to enclosure. Here, Rosa Luxemburg was right by noting that the 'famous Russian obshina could offer a prospect to the blessed land of socialism' (2003). Nevertheless, Soviet land enclosure erased the communal territorial order, thus preparing a reterritorialized space for the expansion of corporate capitalism that only furthered crumbling of Russian economy and its dependence on the outside capital. Hence, this strand of research has a potential to reverse the disciplinary objective of political geography as seeing land and territory as a subject and result of change, to treating them as a strategy for change.