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INTRODUCTION: PEASANTS, PASTORALISTS AND PROLETARIANS: JOINING THE DEBATES ON TRAJECTORIES OF AGRARIAN CHANGE, LIVELIHOODS AND LAND USE

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Abstract

Recent changes in the agrarian studies and geography literatures present differing views on the pace and trajectory of change in rural developing areas. In this special section of *Human Geography*, we contrast the theoretical and practice implications of these differing approaches, namely depeasantization, accumulation by dispossession and deproletarianization. Depeasantization refers to change in livelihood activities out of agriculture, long theorized as necessary for an area’s transition into capitalism. Accumulation by dispossession is a process of on-going capital accumulation where a give resource is privatized, seized, or in some other manner alienated from common ownership in order to provide a basis for continued capital accumulation. Deproletarianization occurs when workers are no longer able to freely commodify

and re-commodify their only commodity, their own labour. In this section, we explore these three theses with case studies that draw upon empirical data. The papers in this collection all speak to one aspect or another of these debates. We do not intend to try to determine a “best approach”, rather we explore strengths and weaknesses of each argument.

The production of nature, change in the mode of production and the political economy of nature are discussed in the first article by Brent McCusker. Phil O’Keefe and Geoff O’Brien examine the evolution of worked landscape under pre-capitalist modes of production in riverine ecologies. Through further case studies, Paul O’Keefe explores links between livelihoods and climate change in Mt. Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, while Franklin Graham explores the persistence of pastoralism in the Sahel. Finally, Naomi

Shanguhya and Brent McCusker examine the process of governance in dry land Kenya through the study of chronic food shortages.

Keywords: livelihoods, land use, depeasantization, pastoralists, Africa, deproletarianization

Sección Especial

Cambio Agrario, Subsistencia y Uso de la Tierra en el África Sub-Sahariana

Introducción: Campesinxs, sociedades pastorales y proletarixs: El Debate sobre las Trayectorias de Cambio Agrario, Subsistencia y Uso de la Tierra

Resumen

Cambios recientes en los estudios agrarios y en geografía presentan diversos puntos de vista acerca de la velocidad y naturaleza de las trayectorias de cambio en áreas rurales periféricas. En esta sección especial de *Human Geography* contrastamos las implicancias teóricas y prácticas de estas aproximaciones: descampesinización, acumulación por desposesión y desproletarización. La descampesinización se refiere a los cambios en las actividades de subsistencia más allá de la agricultura, y ha sido largamente teorizada como necesaria para la transición hacia el capitalismo en ciertos territorios. La acumulación por desposesión es un proceso de constante acumulación de capital en el que cierto recurso es privatizado, saqueado o alienado de su propiedad común con el objeto de proveer una base para la acumulación continua de capital. La desproletarización ocurre cuando lxs trabajadorxs ya no pueden commodificar y recommodificar su único commodity: su trabajo. En esta sección analizamos estas tres tesis mediante estudios de caso basados en información empírica. Todos los artículos en este número se refieren de alguna manera a un aspecto u otro de estos debates. No intentamos aquí presentar a “la mejor aproximación”, sino que más bien analizamos las fortalezas y debilidades de cada una.

En el primer artículo, Brent McCusker discute sobre producción de naturaleza, cambios en el modo

de producción y economía política de la naturaleza. Phil O’Keefe y Geoff O’Brien analizar la evolución del paisaje modificado bajo modos pre-capitalistas de producción en ecologías ribereñas. También mediante trabajo de campo, Paul O’Keefe estudia los vínculos entre la subsistencia y el cambio climático en el monte Kilimanjaro (Tanzania), mientras que Franklin Graham hace lo propio con la persistencia del pastoralismo en el Sahel. Finalmente, Naomi Shanguhya y Brent McCusker analizan el proceso de gobernanza en las tierras secas de Kenia a través del estudio de la escasez crónica de alimentos.

Palabras clave: subsistencia, uso de la tierra, descampesinización, sociedades pastoralistas, África, desproletarización

Introduction

As the neo-liberal global order has matured, an increasing number of authors writing on agrarian change and livelihoods studies in the developing world have commented on the decreasing importance of agriculture as both an income and subsistence activity (Reardon, Delgado and Matlon 1992; Ellis 2000; Bryceson, et.al. 2000; Rigg 2006; Bernstein 2010; Brass 2011a). This trend has been variously termed livelihood diversification (Ells 1998; Scoones 1998), depeasantization (Bryceson, et.al. 2000) or deproletarianization (Brass 2011a), with some authors going so far as to dismiss class analyses of the peasantry due the complexity of determining its social relation to capital (Bernstein 2010: 112). Adding a geographical perspective, David Harvey has termed the alienation of access to communal resources through privatisation or commodification “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003). While his argument was not set specifically in the context of agrarian change, we find it useful for our discussion due the prevalence of such activity in rural areas of the developing world (e.g. “land grabbing”).

We suggest that geographers, having previously contributed to debates around articulation of the modes of production, can enrich the discussion given their attention to political economy and political

ecology. As the trends listed above, save accumulation by dispossession, tend to be a-spatial, we intend to provide both a spatial perspective and empirical evidence in this collection. Recently, geography as a discipline has tended to sidestep issues of class in development and agrarian studies in favor of cultural and identity politics. Whilst the latter is important, we argue that without a salient analysis of class, the cultural turn in agrarian studies can lead to a regressive rather than progressive politics (c.f. Brass 2000). In addition to our spatial and empirical evidence, we pay close attention to rural class formation in this special edition. We seek to address a simple question - "how can our knowledge about the peasant/pastoralist in our study areas be enriched with such theories/debates?"

Depeasantization, Deproletarianization and Accumulation by Dispossession

Within social science, three complementary, yet contradictory narratives offer a framework for understanding processes of agrarian change, especially as they relate to land use and livelihood changes. These are depeasantization, deproletarianization and accumulation by dispossession. Each narrative emphasizes certain forces that shape the contemporary agrarian question (Akram-Lodi and Kay 2010; Brass 1997, 2000, 2007, 2013; McMichael 2009), therefore each leads to different interpretations of societal development.

Depeasantization. The implications of processes of depeasantization often frame the context in which development interventions are planned and implemented. This thesis was advocated by Bryceson et al. (2000) and is fundamentally important - the idea that there is an inevitable process towards dissolution of peasantries as classically understood. This is a recurring argument that uses material evidence of processes such as livelihood diversification and urbanization to claim that globally the peasantry is in inexorable decline. These assumptions were mainstreamed into livelihoods research in the 1990s and 2000s (Bryceson 2002; Ellis 1998; Ellis and Mdoe 2004; Rigg 2006) when it was assumed that the only way for peasants

to survive was to make small-scale non-agricultural production profitable. In this context both the celebrants of peasant identity (Desmarais 2007) and proponents of capitalist growth in rural areas (World Bank 2008) shared similar, but highly contested assumptions about the desired, practical and realizable opportunities for real change to register. In Tanzania, for instance, and echoing shifts in the policy direction of international institutions, there has been a renewed drive to intensify agriculture and make it more profitable through the Kilimo Kwanza (Agriculture First) Initiative (Tanzania, U.R. 2010). Societal trajectories are certain to affect on the ability of households to adjust, adapt and identify opportunities caused by, for example, changes in climate and the economy. A rural laborer will experience an increasingly variable climate in different ways from a profitable small-scale farmer, someone employed on salary in a rural area, someone who has migrated in order to seek work elsewhere or someone who commands the labor of others in a productive enterprise. Their vulnerability is necessarily differentiated. Increased livelihood diversification, loss of communal access to resources, informal support networks and loss of support provided by the state have driven major changes in rural economies. What is fundamentally important is how the rate and direction of these processes has occurred and varied. Bryceson et al. (2000) provide evidence that livelihood diversification, an indicator of dissolving peasant modes of production, and hence depeasantization, has been widespread.

Accumulation by dispossession. David Harvey's political economy attempts to explain how processes of capitalist expansion are inextricably entwined with the commodification and re-commodification of resources and services that were previously accessed on a communal, cooperative or socialized basis (Harvey 2003; Glassman 2006; Brass 2011b). In rural areas of the developing world this is primarily experienced and understood through questions of access to, and control over natural resources. The recent growth in both the practice of 'land grabbing', and the literature surrounding it, is testament to its contemporary relevance (Hall 2011; Fairhead et al. 2012). In the context of this special edition, the notion of accumula-

tion by dispossession potentially provides a framework for understanding the relationship between a rural area of a developing country and the broader global capitalist economy. Key sectoral specific processes highlight the usefulness of the concept as an explanatory variable. Access to water and land are perhaps the most pertinent. Once water ceases to be treated as a universal right, freely available to all, then a process of allocation based on some criteria must take place. In the developing world, this has usually taken the form of first commoditizing, then creating a market and consumers for water. The history of water rights across Africa demonstrate this (Grove 1993; Bender 2008). The rise of 'land grabbing' as a theoretical context hides some very important processes under its slightly pejorative title. Essentially, a process of land commodification is occurring, which is often complex and mediated by customary rights (Manji 2003; Shivji 2009). It becomes an issue when people who derive their livelihoods primarily from agricultural activity lose access to the land in various forms. Associated with this are processes of consolidation, a rise in landless workers and movements to urban areas. A further issue is that the globalization of land transactions mean that the increased agricultural productivity brings little benefit to those where the land is located (Fairhead et al. 2012). The rate of these processes will partially determine both individual and societal responses to environmental change. Household vulnerability changes on the basis of the resources they can access and command, formal and informal support networks and institutions, and level of exposure. This material evidence of processes of accumulation by dispossession provides a partial context for rural political economies.

Deproletarianization. This concept is less represented in the current literature on agrarian change than depeasantization or accumulation by dispossession, especially with regard to rural societies in the developing world, however, we are keenly interested in its explanatory power. Tom Brass (1984, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) is the leading proponent of this approach. He argues that capitalism does not, *prima facie*, require free labor - an assumption in almost all economic thought. The agrarian change literature, and indeed

much of the classical and neo-classical economics literature, assumes that capitalism functions, or is said to be present as the mode of production of any given area, only when laborers are "free" to exchange their labor (or labor-power in Marxist theory) for wages. The bulk of the literature suggests that unfree labor is anathema to the development of capitalism and where it is present or partially present, the economy is deemed to be "semi-feudal". Following this, change in the mode of production must be from a feudal or semi-feudal state into a capitalist one. The political and development implications for this assumption, then, concentrate on moving a place/economy from feudalism into capitalism, rather than from capitalism into socialism. Many Marxists also share these views (Brass 1995, 2003, 2008, 2011a).

Unfree labor is not equivalent to slavery, however. There is a qualitative and quantitative difference between the two. Slavery is the absolute removal of freedom of the laborer to collect wages for his or her work and where the owner must provide for the slave's subsistence and reproduction. Unfree labor results from the laborer being deproletarianized - a process where the laborer still possesses freedoms of movement, etc. however, he or she is unable to negotiate his or her wage. Brass summarizes this point with great clarity:

labour-power is free by virtue of its owner being able to commodify and recommodify it unconditionally: that is, to be free in the sense understood by Marx and Marxism. A worker must be able to sell his/her own labour-power on a continuous basis... [unfree workers] are still landless; they still work for someone else on a permanent, seasonal or casual basis; they can still be employed in conjunction with advanced productive forces they still receive cash wages; they may be migrants of work locally, and (under the control of a contractor or in the form of changing masters) their labour-power can still circulate in the labour market. But - and this is the crux of the issue - they are no longer personally able to sell their own labour-power. (Brass 2011a: 5-6).

The deproletarianization thesis does not refute depeasantization. Brass' view is that it probably is still happening, but that the bulk of rural workers have already or long been depeasantized - a view that comports with our data. In short, it is interesting, but not particularly relevant. Deproletarianization, on the other hand, has the potential to explain a great deal about rural livelihoods and land use. It could point us to the reasons for on-going and persistent poverty - poverty that seems to defy any and all development policies. In our case studies, it helps explain the widespread occurrence of "piece work" or "informal labor". The deproletarianization thesis allow us to question the place of any given economy-society in its relations to labor relations and mode of production. We maintain that conceptual confusion between depeasantization, accumulation by dispossession and deproletarianization can lead to policies that exacerbate unevenness and exploitation. For instance, misreading a process of deproletarianization for depeasantization might lead to development policies that encourage the movement out of "semi-feudal relations" (getting markets right = more capitalism is needed) and lead to policies that encourage "livelihoods diversification" when the real problem is that capitalism already exists in an advanced enough state to have accumulated the necessary power and hegemony in the local economy to deproletarianize workers. Development outcomes that advocate more capitalism, thus doubly jeopardize rural workers - they are not only exposed to policies that exacerbate the problems they face with capitalists already, but policies put in place to adjust micro-and macro economies cut off any chance they may have to re-proletarianize themselves through struggle for labor-friendlier relations of production (minimum wage laws, collective bargaining, mobility of workers).

Deproletarianization also enables a critique of the idea of accumulation by dispossession and the associated resurgence in interest around primitive accumulation (Perelman 2000; de Angelis 2001; Glassman 2006; Roberts 2008; Webber 2008; Fairhead et al. 2012; Hall 2011, 2012). Brass's principle argument, which he derives both from his reading of Marx and his idea of deproletarianization, is that primitive accumulation is a process that only occurs at the 'dawn of

capitalism'. As by his account capitalist relations have established themselves globally, and consequently that most rural livelihoods are structured to a significant degree by consequential class formation, differentiation and conflict, then primitive accumulation does not provide an accurate framework by which to explore contemporary attempts to find profitable outlets for surplus capital (cf. Brass 2011a, 2011b). Brass challenges Harvey's notion that unfree labor relations in the current phase of capitalism are "a trace of pre-capitalist social relations in working class formation" (Harvey 2003 cited in Brass 2011a: 9). Accumulation by dispossession, Brass argues, can also apply to the laborer:

why should unfree relations of production not be seen also as a case of accumulation by dispossession...where owners of labour-power are concerned? That is, literally "dispossessing" workers ultimately of a capacity to personally commodify or recommodify their only commodity. This, surely, is a logical final step the class struggle waged by capital, one that would ensure that workers are deprived of the sole remaining weapon in their conflict with owners of the means of production: making or not making available their labour-power, according to the conditions stipulated by the market (2011a: 10).

This, indeed, is an intriguing retort to popular explanations of continuing accumulation. What is being accumulated, such an argument would hold, is the labor-power of workers rather than/in addition to some scarce natural resource. In fact, arguments for both primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession, so popular in geography right now, displace the nexus of class struggle from labor-capital relations onto accumulation of capital derived from some other (often natural) resource. In this counter-argument, capital has forced workers into "freely" selling their labor. By controlling either the market for labor or the conditions for social reproduction, they create a de facto monopsony and create a powerful illusion of "free labor" conditions all in the name of further accumulation.

In the context of social transformation in Africa the concept has been applied sparsely. Perhaps understandably much work that has been done in places where active efforts to create a proletariat occurred. In South Africa the apartheid era represented a profoundly geographical effort to produce separate spaces for different groups of people. The principle contribution of deproletarianization in these debates has been to show that the incompatibility of capitalist relations with unfree workers is evidently untrue. The creation of labor reserves was a principle means by which those producing surplus value for the owning class were not 'doubly free' in the Marxian sense (Grossman 1997; Brass 1999). The idea of the labor aristocracy also engaged briefly with the idea of deproletarianization. An argument framed within dependency theory, this idea presumed that as capital flowed primarily from peripheral to core areas, the workers producing for these capitalist enterprises necessarily had stronger class linkages with other 'compradors', as opposed to still non-capitalist peasants (Shivji 1975). The difficulties of sustaining a framework rooted in a dualistic model of modes of production, however articulated, and the limitations in seeing relations of circulation determine capitalism in the last instance meant that a continued focus on, "the way in which labour has been constituted/reconstituted as relationally unfree" (Brass 1997: 37) is lacking from most discussions of sub-Saharan Africa in the past few decades.

The implications of these paradigms for the study of livelihoods and changing land use practices are significant. The position taken on the question of whether it is the peasantry or the proletariat that disappearing is highly likely to contribute to the position taken on which actors should be supported in the development process (Brass 2000). In this special section, we explore these questions and test/apply Brass' insight on deproletarianization to sort out: a) if the question of change in the mode of production in rural developing areas is even relevant; and b) to explore the implications of shifting our views between depeasantization, accumulation by dispossession and deproletarianization.

This Section

We have collected papers that speak to one or another aspect of depeasantization, accumulation by dispossession or deproletarianization. These papers examine a variety of social formations across sub-Saharan Africa and attempt to determine the relevance (or irrelevance) of the debates above.

Brent McCusker provides a theoretical overview and clarification on the production of nature and advances a "political economy of nature", defined as "the combination of the relations and decisions that are made to overcome contradictions in the process of producing nature". Using an open dialectical approach to the study of change, land use and livelihoods are reconsidered as more than outcomes from a process stimulated by an outside "force". In this paper, he attempts to demonstrate the continuing usefulness of both materialism and class analysis for geographic studies of development.

Phil O'Keefe and Geoff O'Brien provide an argument first outlined by Phil O'Keefe some 35 years ago on why fields are square. After a brief critique of the assumptions of isomorphism in geographic models, they lay out an argument about why fields are rectangular, tracing the evolution of worked landscape under pre-capitalist modes of production in riverine ecologies of high potential; they note that these landscapes are built under conditions of customary law and communal ownership. They posit that model against land-use that emerges under capitalism where access to land under statutory law and defining individual ownership sees the wealthiest accumulate high quality land while the poor only obtain land of low potential.

Paul O'Keefe writes an illustrative narrative on changes, or lack thereof, in the mode of production taking as his case the production of climate change and livelihood vulnerability at the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Livelihoods approaches are drawn upon but are placed explicitly in relation to broader socioeconomic processes that partially structure and determine household vulnerability. He uses detailed case study

data to draw conclusions about the relevance of depeasantization and deproletarianization in the context of contemporary rural livelihoods and the projected impacts of climate change.

Franklin Graham explores changes in pastoralism in a case study set in the Sahel. He argues that pastoralism as a social formation waxes and wanes resulting in both a proletarianization of pastoralists, but after Brass (2011) that such changes are not uni-linear. Population growth, global climate change and urban social problems will push many ex-pastoralists back into nomadic herding.

Naomi Shanguhya and Brent McCusker examine governance in dryland Kenya as it relates to the continued production of uneven development manifest as chronic food shortages. They demonstrate how policy has affected unevenness and consider how the formation of policy has changed little since the colonial period. "Food security" for them is as much about capital accumulation as it is weather.

Conclusion

This special section contributes to debates on agrarian change from a geographical perspective. It attempts to provide evidence for these debates while not implying that such theoretical issues actually drive or structure change. The authors here do, however, maintain that these debates can and do influence policy decisions that result in real material consequences for the people being "developed".

We acknowledge that some of ideas about deproletarianization may be controversial; more evidence will certainly be needed. Brass has provided very detailed responses to almost all authors who have critically engaged with his work and we argue that his ideas, along with his willingness to critique and counter-critique a whole range of theories surrounding rural transformation deserves closer examination from a geographic perspective. We are also aware that a criticism of the deproletarianization thesis is that it is stronger in the abstract realm of theory than as a generalizable construct to analyse the concrete (Lerche

2007). We attempt here to begin to fill in some of these empirical gaps. We believe that highlighting this issue also provides an alternative framework for understanding attempts to create and sustain global 'Left' movements. Rather than describing the effects of capitalism and suggesting a retreat into isolated communities, we maintain that struggle against capitalism starts with clarity about classes and social formations, both within and outside of capitalism. Retreat from theories of social change and celebration of difference helps us identify anti-capitalist struggles that may have been subsumed by the monolith of class in the past, but we are unconvinced that the identification of difference and the development of "many capitalisms" will get us very far. In this special edition, we seek to examine material practices through geographic study of difference without reintroducing the old "-isms": essentialism, economism and determinism.

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