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Review Essay

Household Production and Capitalist Development in Contemporary Russia

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Agriculture in Transition: Land Policies and Evolving Farm Structures in Post-Soviet Countries, by Zvi Lerman, Csaba Csaki and Gershon Feder. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. Pp. vii + 254. \$85 (pb). ISBN 0-7391-0807-7.

The End of the Peasantry? The Disintegration of Rural Russia, by Grigory Ioffe, Tat'yana Nefedova and Ilya Zaslavsky. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 258. \$27.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8229-5941-0.

Measuring Social and Economic Change in Rural Russia, by David J. O'Brien and Valery V. Patsiorkovsky. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006. Pp. xxxiii + 240. \$99 (hb). ISBN 13: 978-0-7391-1420-9.

Russia's Unknown Agriculture, by Judith Pallot and Tat'yana Nefedova. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xv + 218. £66 (hb). ISBN

This essay reviews four recent books based on research on the development of capitalism and the position of household-based farming in post-Soviet Russia. Each of the books represents a different set of conceptual assumptions and is based on different methods of enquiry. It is argued that a problematic feature of much of the literature on this topic is that it begins from the assumption that successful capitalist development in Russian agriculture should be based on the development of small-scale family farming. This tends to obscure the variety of forms of production

that have emerged so far and the range of different relationships between them.

Keywords: Russia, peasants, capitalist agriculture, family farming, postcommunist transition

In some ways the situation of Russian agriculture in the years since the end of communist rule seems to resemble that of the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution. Now, as then, a prominent theme in the debate on the character and trajectory of Russian agriculture is concerned with the questions of whether and to what extent there are trends towards capitalist development, and what are the main factors encouraging or impeding such a development. Further, then as now, many authors are concerned with a broad category of farming people who may, by various definitions, be described as peasants. More generally, then as now, there is some confusion about terminology and the categories that are used to classify those involved in farming and food production and to organize the data that is collected on them. In both periods, those attempting to research into Russian agrarian development have to work with official classifications that tend to obscure many of the main characteristics of the organization of agriculture and the relations between agricultural producers.

Of course, the comparisons can only be taken so far. In the 1920s the development of capitalism was seen by policy makers as the main danger to be avoided, whereas since 1991 capitalist development has been presented as the goal of government policy; in the 1920s those that could be categorized as peasants formed a larger proportion of the population and generally had more land at their disposal than those now described as household producers; and whereas researchers in Russia in the 1920s had to work within politically and ideologically defined categories such as ‘kulak’, and small, medium and rich peasants, modern researchers are constrained more by the legal categories that determine how different kinds of farming organization are officially perceived. Moreover, perhaps the biggest difference between the two periods stems from the very different characters of the two transitional periods, towards and away from communist rule. Whilst the revolutionary events of 1917 and 1918 brought about a radical reallocation of land as peasants seized the property of the former landowners and

redistributed the land among themselves, the reforms of post-Soviet governments have been top-down initiatives designed to the break-up of the collective and state farms of the communist period and to promote the development of private commercial farming.

OUTCOMES OF THE POST-SOVIET REFORMS

Beginning at the end of 1991 the new post-Soviet Russian state introduced a series of decrees calling for the large collective farms (kolkhoz) and state farms (sovkhoz) to undergo reorganization and for the transfer of their land to the private ownership of the rural population. In the years from the early to the mid-1990s 63 per cent of the large farms changed their legal status to a variety of new forms, while the remaining 37 per cent resisted change. The most common of the new corporate forms was the 'joint stock company of a closed type' (TOO) in which only the former members of the collective farm were able to own shares. However, in practice the organizational structure of the TOO and other new corporate entities did not really produce very significant changes in the authority structure of most large farms. Often the chairperson or director of the new company or cooperative maintained an authoritarian and highly centralized control over the organization, and ordinary workers did not win significant new rights or powers. Alongside the changes in legal-organizational status, perhaps a more significant change was brought about by the liberalization of prices and the drastic reduction of subsidies to the large farms from the central state. As a result, by the late 1990s the vast majority of these enterprises were formally bankrupt, although many continued to operate despite their debts. In some areas they were subsidized by regional governments. In other cases changes were made that enabled them to generate new income. In general they were able to reduce expenditure by the transfer to local governments of the responsibilities they had in the Soviet system for providing and funding social services and infrastructural support.

In this context, the Russian agricultural workforce had to adapt in order to continue to make a living. They did this within a new legal framework involving two different changes in their status. First, workers and pensioners were granted a share of the land of the former state and collective farms that they had worked on. However, taking up ownership of an actual share of the land of the collective or state farm was problematic for many people and was implemented relatively rarely. The usual pattern

was for people to take their share as a certificate of the general holding of the large farm rather than as a plot of land and to allow the large farm to rent the land from them and therefore to continue to farm it as before. Secondly, land within the boundaries of rural settlements was transferred to the local government administration. This included the household plots on which rural dwellers in the Soviet period had carried out their 'personal subsidiary farming', growing fruit and vegetables and keeping chickens and sometimes goats and other animals. Following the transfer of this land to the local authorities, people were able to apply for their plots to become their private property. Further legislation was then introduced in an attempt to facilitate the development of a market in land and to create a more favourable legal climate for people to claim their share of the large farm in the form of land. However, a large majority of rural dwellers have resisted the temptation of becoming private farmers and receiving their share as land. Most rural people who have wanted to expand their household production have preferred instead to rent land from local authorities and expand their farming activities that way.

These changes all took place in the broader context of an overall decline in the volume of production in the large farm sector of 60 per cent in the first post-Soviet decade. The share of household production of total agricultural output rose to just over 50 per cent by the early 2000s, on the basis of farms whose average landholding was less than one hectare. Behind these figures lay a trend towards an increasingly distinctive division of labour between the different kinds of farming in their main products. While the large farms specialized in the cultivation of cereals, sugar beet and sunflowers, the focus of household farming was increasingly on growing potatoes and other vegetables, and also as the main producer, with just over half of all production, in meat and poultry and milk. The focus of the private farms' production was in the exact same crops as the large farms, but with a minor share of the total.

However, although the larger farms declined in terms of their share of total output, it should be noted that they retained a clear superiority in the proportion of their patterns of land use. As Wegren has noted, by the end of the Yel'tsin period the large farms continued to use 86 per cent of all agricultural land 'although formally much of this

land had been “privatized”, in that the land was ‘owned’ by shareholders who were the former workers on the large farms (2008, 123).

Thus the post-communist period in Russia has witnessed the emergence of a distinctive pattern of Russian agriculture built on a division of labour that had already emerged in more muted form in the Soviet Union. Although it had been envisaged originally that as the collective and state farms matured the household plots would be phased out, in practice this proved impossible to achieve. After a renewed move towards restriction of the plots under Khrushchev they became a more or less accepted feature of rural life in the 1970s and 1980s and indeed, under Gorbachev, they were even seen as a basis on which a decentralization of the state and collective sector might be achieved and small private farming encouraged. However, more than coexisting, the socialized sector and the households developed what has often been described as a ‘symbiotic’ relationship. This is summarized by the authors of one of the books reviewed here, Pallot and Nefedova, as follows:

The relationship consisted of a type of social contract between farm managements and their workers’ in which the farm management would provide inputs into household production in exchange for a commitment to work on the large farms. The inputs from the large farms ranged from formally agreed support to turning a ‘blind eye to the illicit use and theft of collective property’ (p. 23).

In the post-Soviet period household production has become more autonomous from the large corporate farms but there is usually still a high degree of interdependence.

RESEARCH ON RUSSIAN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Post-Soviet Russian agriculture has attracted a wide range of research from different academic disciplines, including economics, geography and sociology, using a variety of different research methods and approaches, ranging from the analysis of official statistics through the use of questionnaires and structured interviews, to ethnographic observation and unstructured interviews; much of this variety is reflected in the studies reviewed here. These studies also reflect a range of different viewpoints on the character of Russian agriculture and its future prospects. However, a central issue around which much of the

debate between them revolves concerns the idea that a successful strategy for the development of commercial agriculture should be based on the development of household and small scale private farming.

Agriculture in Transition is the culmination of the work of a team of economists who have worked on World Bank projects researching agricultural transition in Eastern Europe since 1991. The authors – Zvi Lerman, Csaba Csaki and Gershon Feder – draw on a combination of national official statistics, the World Bank’s comparative database of World Development Indicators and a wide range of farming surveys carried out in each of the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Although the book is the independent work of the authors, its conceptual framework and general approach reflect the assumptions and policy outlooks that have also framed the World Bank approach to transition from communist rule to the market economy in general. From this perspective the aim of the agricultural transition was ‘to improve the efficiency and productivity of agriculture’ and this ‘required the replacement of institutional and organizational features of the former command economy with attributes borrowed from the practice of market economies’ (p. 50). Approaching the problem in this way led the authors to the formulation of a series of ‘ideal transition desiderata’ reflecting the goals of the neoliberal economic approach that informed policy makers in Russia in the early 1990s. Thus centrally prescribed production targets were to be removed; prices were to be liberalized; state subsidies were to be eliminated and hard budget constraints adopted; state and collective ownership was to be replaced by private ownership; and the large state and collective farming units were to be broken up into smaller businesses (p. 51). With such desiderata in mind, the actual transition performance in agriculture of each country could then be assessed.

As is clear from the desiderata, transition is seen as a multifaceted process but, the authors argue, the key focus of the transition in agricultural production itself must be on the twin processes of land reform and the restructuring of farm enterprises. As far as land reform is concerned, a central problem is the creation of a market for land. Given the starting point of an agricultural sector where all land is either collectively or state owned, ‘privatization is the natural starting point for land reform’ (p.6) but it is not necessarily sufficient for the creation of an efficient market-based agriculture. Since farmers in

established market economies do not always own the land they cultivate, but enter instead into rental and lease agreements, the key issue is rather the transferability of land through market mechanisms: 'It is through land markets that land resources can flow from less efficient to more efficient users, allowing farmers to adjust their holdings to optimum size subject to their managerial capabilities' (p. 6). Closely connected with enabling a free flow of land resources between farmers is the question of farm restructuring. Two basic approaches to restructuring are possible: one involving the break-up of the large state and collective farms into smaller units that can be managed by small private and family farms, and the other geared to a 'corporatization' of the old large farms so that they are maintained as large units but jointly owned by multiple shareholders (p. 7).

In the detailed analysis developed through *Agriculture in Transition* the particular pattern of land reform and farm restructuring forms the central focus with the experience of each country compared. The book offers a very impressive comparative survey of the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, presenting and analyzing a great deal of detailed information in a very accessible and clearly argued way. The conclusion reached by the authors is that although all the countries discussed in the book began from a very similar starting point in terms of the institutional and ownership characteristics of their agricultural sectors, and all went through an initial decline in agricultural production, thereafter the paths of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) on the one hand, and of the former Soviet Union (except for the Baltic countries) began to diverge. This divergence, the authors argue, 'appears to be associated with differences in the actual policies and the specifics of implementation, which in all likelihood stem from inherent cultural, social and political differences that persisted throughout the Soviet era' (p. 216). The main differences concerning policy and implementation concerned 'recognition of private ownership of land, transferability of property and land use rights, allocation of land in physical plots or paper shares, privatization by restitution or distribution'. Of these, private ownership, full transferability and allocation in the form of plots of land rather than paper shares were most closely associated with improved agricultural performance (p. 221). The differences were quantified and ranked by the authors on a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 signified the

ideal conditions for successful commercial agriculture and it was found that whilst the CEE countries had an average score of 9, the former Soviet countries had a score of 6.

For Lerman and his colleagues their analysis leads to the conclusion that successful agricultural reform in a transition to the market is associated with the 'individuation' of landholdings and the creation of small private farms, as tend to be found in CEE more than in the former Soviet Union. A key factor in the explanation of divergence between the two regions therefore is the policy decision to 'privatize' the state and collective sector by the allocation of plots of land in the former and paper shares in the latter. Policy makers in Russia and other former Soviet countries 'essentially perceive market agriculture as based on successors of former collective and state farms, which are to be subjected to a "horizontal" transformation toward improved productivity but otherwise remain largely unchanged in scale and scope'. In contrast, CEE policy makers 'recognized the need for radical changes in the farm-enterprise sector, including introduction of hard budget constraints ... [which] favor individual farms and show a negative bias toward large corporate farms' (pp. 224-25).

Although the whole approach of *Agriculture in Transition* is consistently comparative, the conclusions concerning Russia are clear: that Russia has one of the poorest performing agricultural sectors, that this is related to the survival of large corporate farming as the predominant form of agriculture, and that this in turn is related to the policy choice of privatization by paper shares rather than in the form of separate plots of land. For the most part the authors choose not to go beyond the question of policy choice in identifying causes; the nearest they approach to discussing the roots of the different policy choices between countries is in their allusion to unspecified 'inherent cultural, social and political differences' mentioned above. Indeed, they clearly state that their focus is on economic aspects and that 'treatment of political factors is left to authors who are more qualified to discuss them' (p. 3). In this respect their book stands in contrast with some of those discussed below that attempt to locate economic aspects in a wider social or political or spatial context.

It is specifically the spatial aspect that provided the central focus of *The End of the Peasantry?* by Grigory Ioffe, Tatyana Nefedova and Ilya Zaslavsky. Unlike the book by Lerman and his colleagues their focus is on Russia only, but – in a different way –

they are also attempting to place Russian agriculture in a broader context. Whereas for Lerman et al., the context is provided by international comparisons, for Ioffe and his colleagues the context is provided by the broader geographical characteristics of Russia, its size, natural and climatic variations, and transport and settlement patterns. Indeed, to some extent the book's title is misleading since the main focus is not on the Russian 'peasantry' but on the spatial characteristics of Russia as a country and their relation to the prospects of the development of a viable commercial agricultural sector. This book also contrasts in style and structure with that of Lerman et al. In contrast to the tightly organized and concisely expressed development of the argument of Lerman and his colleagues, the book by Ioffe and colleagues is more loosely structured, straying occasionally into tangential discussions which are always interesting but which sometimes distract the reader away from the main theme.

Ioffe and colleagues consciously draw on a long tradition in Russian geography in which 'characteristics of the broadly defined environment' are viewed as 'causative agents as well as constraints on Russia's socioeconomic development' (p. 1). The authors' approach is to relate statistics on a range of physical geographical variables such as climate, soil types and density of population to indicators of agricultural performance including productivity and crop yields, as well as extent of commercialization. They describe how, historically, Russia was characterized partly by a 'west-east gradient' in which different regions could be plotted, ranging in terms of output, productivity and farming expertise from 'the Baltics' through western Russia and central Russia to eastern Russia. However, superimposed on these differences were others defined in terms of soil fertility, especially the difference between the black earth and non-black earth zones, and centre-periphery differences in which productivity can be correlated with distances from cities and transport routes. The combination of these factors provides the context in which successive Russian policy makers have attempted to organize and reorganize Russian agriculture and to set policy aims. Under the influence of the Soviet modernizing project the state attempted, partially successfully to overcome natural and spatial determinants and to achieve a greater uniformity across the Russian space than before. However, even in the latter years of the Soviet Union, and more since its demise, the older 'environmental' influences were beginning to reassert themselves.

As a result of the post-Soviet policies of economic liberalization and the withdrawal of state subsidies there has been a withdrawal from more marginal areas where poor climate, poor soil and distance from markets make it difficult to engage in successful farming. As a result, the 'European' pattern of continuous settlement of the countryside is becoming less prevalent: 'In summary, rural Russia is morphing into an archipelago, and the driving force of the process is depopulation of the least favorable fragments of the Russian countryside, where least favorable connotes less fertile, more remote or both' (p. 154). This has involved net migration away from Siberia to European Russia as well as the above-mentioned archipelago pattern within European Russia. The authors provide an account of these changing spatial patterns that is compelling; it is based on a rich array of data and detailed analysis, all graphically illustrated by an excellent series of maps demonstrating each of the detailed relationships between factors that are explored in the book. This is clearly the strongest aspect of the book.

What is less clear however is how the geographical trends relate to the fate or prospects of the peasantry that feature in the book's title, or for that matter, any of the different kinds of farming currently found in Russia. The changing spatial patterns are clearly seen by the authors as an important element in the explanation of the varying performance of agriculture in different regions. Moreover, rival accounts are less effective, they suggest, because they have ignored the idea that 'agricultural development constraints ... arise from Russia's environment (physical and social alike)' (p. 44). Based on statistical analysis correlating grain and milk yields with rural population density, they argue that, for former collective farm productivity 'the sheer number of people per unit of land is still the most important predictor' (p. 91). They also suggest that there is a degree of 'spatial selectivity' concerning which areas different kinds of farms do best in. However, the relationships are only strongly pronounced in the non-black earth zone where 'productive collective farms tend to be found near the cities, [household farms] tend to dominate farming output in the outlying districts, and [registered family farms] do best "in between"' (p. 127). The authors also argue, based on fieldwork observations rather than statistics, that the quality of labour and its productivity are higher in farms in areas where there is higher population density, while problems of alcoholism and poor quality of work are higher in more remote areas.

As with the book by Lerman and his colleagues, although based on very different arguments and data, the general outlook for the development of a productive and successful agricultural sector is unpromising: 'Now that the state budget is thinner and the rural population is being depleted by the negative rate of natural increase and by outmigration, further contraction of farmland is unavoidable' (p. 224). However, *The End of the Peasantry?* ends with an expression of hope since the authors go on to suggest that 'because the land that is likely to be retained under cultivation is a better match to the peoples' actual ability to cultivate it, not less but more food is likely to be produced on significantly contracted farmland and fewer resources will be wasted' (p. 224). This leads them to the conclusion that 'we believe that the positive effects of land abandonment in Russia will eventually outweigh the negative effects' (p. 227). However, it is not clear what the consequences of this eventual outcome may be for the rural population that remain in the more impoverished areas of low population density and low productivity. Will the archipelago pattern become even more pronounced, leaving huge areas of unpopulated land between widely dispersed urban and periurban areas? And for how many years, or even generations will the dwindling numbers of rural people in the declining areas suffer from increasing impoverishment and isolation? It would be very interesting if such issues provide the research questions of future study by the authors.

Standing in contrast to the previous two books, but also sharing a focus on the 'peasantry' or household and private farming, is *Measuring Social and Economic Change in Rural Russia* by David O'Brien and Valery Patsiorkovsky. This is the most recent book-length publication from a prolific team of Russian and American researchers who have produced a unique collection of time series data based on panel surveys of selected locations in different regions of Russia. In all there have been five waves of the research so far: the first was conducted in 1991 and the most recent in 2003. Different members of the team have been responsible for producing a large number of books and articles reporting different aspects of the research. As O'Brien and Patsiorkovsky note, their work provides 'the only long-term indicators of micro-level changes in the attitudes and behaviors of households and villages in the Russian countryside during the transitional period' (p. xxv). The premise on which the surveys are based is that the rural household is the basic unit of analysis for their research because this is the level where the impact of

reform can be most accurately judged. Their main aim is to measure ‘changes in human and social capital within the household and how these changes affect the ability of households to adapt more or less successfully to the exigencies and opportunities posed by new market reforms’ (p. xxvi). In focusing on human capital within the household they make explicit acknowledgement to the work of Chayanov and the tradition of focusing on the ‘moral economy’ in Russian agrarian studies.

For O’Brien and Patsiorkovsky, the significant changes to explore are those at the micro-level through which households adapt to the macro-level reforms affecting their existence. In this process households initially draw on their Soviet-era experiences and practices in which household production was ‘subsidiary’ production, geared to supplementing the consumption of rural dwellers whose main job was in the collective or state farm. However, in the process of adapting to the post-communist reforms the same households can be seen becoming ‘a full fledged economic production unit in the new emerging market economy’ (p. xiv). As a result of this adaptation and reorientation of the ‘peasant’ household, the two most important changes have been ‘the increase in the proportion of agricultural production in Russia that is accounted for by household enterprises and private farmers and the creation of new forms of inequality in the Russian countryside’ (p. xiv).

On the issue of the strengthening position of household farming, the results of the surveys revealed that the shift in the proportion of agricultural production accounted for by household farming was accompanied by a shift in the place of employment from the large farms to household production or self-employment for an increasing number of individual respondents. The percentage of adults working for the large farms declined from 86 per cent in 1991 to 33.6 per cent in 2003 and the percentage ‘reporting some kind of self-employment rose from 0 in 1991 to 39.4%’ in 2003. For the authors this represents ‘a major structural shift not only in the social organization of the household and village, but also in the institutional fabric of rural Russian life’ since the household members ‘have shifted their traditional reliance upon the large enterprise for their economic security to their own resource base of household human and social capital’ (p. xxi).

The problem with this interpretation of the results however is that it is unclear what they show about the extent of change in the relation of households to the large farms, as opposed to the relation of individual household members. It may be that individuals who leave employment in the large farms are part of a household in which another member remains employed there. It may even be that households adopt a strategy of maintaining a link to the large farm so that the household may still benefit from support it can offer to their farming activities. Circumstantial support may be offered for this hypothesis from the figure the authors do provide on gender differences in employment in large farms: ‘a much larger number of women than men left their jobs in the large enterprises in order to devote all their energies to their household agricultural production and sales’ (p. 59). According to the most recent of the authors’ surveys for 2003, while 27.2 per cent of women identified the household farm as their ‘primary employment’, only 14.9 per cent of men did the same. It may be that men are maintaining links with the large corporate farm in greater numbers than women in order to ensure continuing access to infrastructure and services to support the functioning of the household farm that can only be obtained locally from the neighbouring large farm. Similar reasons may be behind the ‘sharp increase in the number of extended family households’ observed in 2001 (p. 65). It may be that extended kin may also help maintain links to resources outside the household. Such an interpretation would certainly be compatible with the idea expressed by other authors under review here (including Ioffe et al as well as Pallot and Nefedova discussed below) that a ‘symbiotic relationship’ exists between household and large corporate farming and that each needs the other for its continuing operation. If this is the case, it remains open to question to what extent the trends identified by O’Brien and Patsiorkovsky really do represent ‘a major structural shift’.

On the question of growing inequalities in the Russian countryside, the main finding of *Measuring Social and Economic Change in Rural Russia* is that ‘household entrepreneurial activities, agricultural sales, and income derived from other types of household business, rather than salaries or government transfers, are the primary sources of inequality between households’ (pp. 106-07). Moreover, they argue, future developments may accentuate the trends towards greater inequality since those

households with greater entrepreneurial skills and market opportunities may well be more able than others to adopt new technology and gain access to further marketing opportunities than those that have lower productivity and a weaker resource base. The other side of this question of course, is that growing inequality is accompanied by growing poverty. Perhaps a surprising finding of the surveys is that ‘not only the greatest incidence of poverty but also the most severe poverty is found in households with two parents and dependent children’ (p. 123). The explanation, for the authors, is that most of the poor are former employees of large-scale farming who are now trying, with varying degrees of success, to make a living mainly from household farming. However, in their view, the fact that ‘at least half of the poor ... have found survival strategies, largely through increasing their household productive capacity, provides a more hopeful view of the resilience of rural Russians than has been presented in many other scholarly and popular reports’ (p. 126).

Unfortunately, what is not explored here with the same degree of detail is the question of what solutions may be available for the other half of the poor who have not been able to develop such household-based survival strategies, and at what costs to physical and mental health people struggle to achieve subsistence even when they have adopted household farming as their survival strategy. The only such cost to be explored is that concerning mental health, which is discussed in chapter nine of the book, where it is revealed for example, that symptoms of depression are highest among the lowest earning households. However, possible solutions to the growing problems arising from the increasing stratification of Russian rural society are only explored in some rather vague calls in the book’s conclusion for new public policy initiatives to create new forms of institutional support and to encourage the development of civil society.

The authors’ rather sanguine view of the consequences of the emergence of a minority of entrepreneurial households and of the increasing social differentiation that may accompany this seems to stem from the conceptual foundations of the study in Chayanovian views of peasant society as based on the moral economy. At an analytical level there is no clear recognition that differentiation and poverty are unavoidable outcomes of the commercialization of agriculture that are fundamentally incompatible with the development of small private and household farming. Also missing from the

central focus of the book is the question of what will be the consequences for the agrarian development strategy favoured by the authors, based on the development of commercial agriculture from the household and private farming sectors, if Russian governments continue to pursue policies that favour the large corporate farming sector.

According to some other recent research, in recent years the large farm sector has begun to consolidate its hold on the land. For example, as Serova has noted, ‘a new phenomenon’ has been emerging in Russian agriculture:

It is a quite opposite direction to the one Russia’s agricultural development was supposed to take after the collapse of the Soviet system: the former collective and state farms are not being split into individual farms but are being united into even bigger agricultural companies (Serova 2007, 19).

Moreover, as Wegren has commented:

Russia’s contemporary land reform did not deliver on early intentions in that large farms continue to use most of Russia’s agricultural land. Individuals have not become “masters of the land”, most rural households continue to have small land holdings (2008, 143).

Furthermore, he argues, no significant support can be expected from the government in that agricultural policy is geared specifically to promoting increased production rather than achieving a redistribution of the land, and it will be more straightforward administratively to channel funds mainly to the large farm sector.

Finally, as with the other books reviewed here, the focus of *Russia’s Unknown Agriculture*, by Judith Pallot and Tat’yana Nefedova, is also on household farming. However, their work is distinctive and different from the others in two main respects. First, they do not begin from a position of giving any conceptual or political priority to household or peasant farming. Secondly, their aim rather is to present a comparative account, across a range of selected regions of Russia, of the whole range of varying forms of household agricultural production. As geographers they are concerned, like Ioffe and his colleagues, with the relationship between location and different characteristics of household farming. However, instead of focusing on statistical relations of environmental and spatial factors, their main aim is to present insights from in-depth qualitative

research, especially observation and interviews that provide a detailed impression of selected individuals who are engaged in each of the variants of household production that they find. The book is engaging and very readable, and as an account of what it is like to be a household-based farmer in contemporary Russia it is by far the best of all the works currently available.

From the outset Pallot and Nefedova are keen to stress the variety of kinds of household production that have arisen in the aftermath of the Russian agricultural reforms. They show how the standard tripartite typology of household, small private and large corporate farming conceals as much as it reveals for an understanding of how farming is actually conducted and what legal and economic constraints farmers experience. Alongside the legal private and household farms there are many other types of farm operating illegally or in a grey area where the lack of a clear status makes them potentially vulnerable to changes in policy or to the opposition of neighbours with different interests. These other types of farming range from immigrants to a particular area who have established squatter's rights and in some cases have developed commercial farming; to semi-itinerant 'brigades' who travel around the country to carry out contract work of various kinds, but who sometimes also have an unofficial base location that they return to each year; and to local households who are farming without a legally recognized plot of land of their own. This focus on variety is important, not only for an understanding of how people actually make a living, but because it also offers insights into the wider complex picture of the socioeconomic character of the contemporary Russian countryside. The authors summarize this in their concluding chapter:

Instead of an orderly transition to an agrarian structure of appropriately sized officially sanctioned private farms, Russia's emergent capitalism has peppered the landscape with petty commodity producers and other "primitive" forms of agricultural enterprise occupying the interstices between the large farms. Many of these are built on insecure legal foundations and among them household producers are by no means the most vulnerable (p. 202-03).

However, for the authors, the character of the Russian countryside should not be understood only in its complex variety of forms of production but also in their inter-relatedness. As with some other authors reviewed here, they refer to the existence of a ‘symbiotic’ relationship between household and large corporate farming, but more than this, ‘production and marketing of produce in the household sector takes place within a framework of social, economic, and political processes that bind rural households into a relationship with other actors in rural Russia, so that the future of one part of the system is dependent upon developments in other parts’ (p. 8). Some of these ‘other actors’ take on the role of ‘gatekeepers’ that control access to a range of the resources that household producers need to carry on farming. Among the gatekeepers are ‘local authorities, large farm managements, other private landowners and the community at large’; but ‘by far the most important in most regions are the large farms or “agricultural enterprises”’ (p. 106). In many ways household producers are in a dependent position in relation to gatekeepers such as the large farms – they need them for example for supplies of animal feed, pastures, transport services and marketing – but the relationship is not necessarily all one way. For example, especially in a region where there is a shortage of labour, the large farm has an interest in maintaining good relations with local households and ultimately, ‘the threat that local people will transfer their land shares to a private farm can act as an incentive for large farms to “look after” the local population’ (p. 107).

Implicit in the approach adopted by Pallot and Nefedova, but crucial for an understanding of the processes currently at work in the Russian countryside, is a broader perspective on the context of capitalist development within which the complex changes in agriculture are taking place. Whereas some other works reviewed here place their stress on the policies that Russian governments adopted to promote capitalist development, with a stress on the key role of small private farming and the ‘peasant’ household as the main agent of change, Pallot and Nefedova seek rather to understand the complexity of agrarian capitalist development in its early stages, exploring possible paths of development, but with no specific policy prescriptions in mind. Thus their aim is mainly to examine: ‘the “nature” of household production and its place in Russia’s evolving agri-food economy’. They argue that

it seems to us self-evident that the degree and character of household production's subsumption to the market is the key to understanding the different directions in which it might be taken in the future. ... [T]he market is the dominant transformative process whether, as in the case of households located in the suburbs of major cities, it is to bind them ever more tightly into the market nexus or, as in the northern peripheries, its very absence reproduces their marginality (p. 188).

The further development of market processes, the authors argue, will necessarily result in further differentiation, both on socio-economic grounds (although not necessarily to the formation of a definite class structure) and geographically 'with spatial clusters of market-oriented household production standing in sharp contrast to places that have witnessed a consolidation of the natural economy or that have been caught up in a downward spiral of poverty and deprivation' (p. 189).

All four books reviewed here are informative and provocative in offering many useful insights and contrasting interpretations of the processes currently unfolding in the Russian countryside. Each however, produces results that are shaped by the analytical and normative assumptions of its authors. For Ioffe, Nefedova and Zaslavsky these are rooted in the tradition of Russian geography that stresses environmental factors as determinants of the economic and social characteristics of farming. For Lerman and his colleagues in the main inspiration comes from the prescriptions of the World Bank and previous Russian governments in favouring a strategy of capitalist development in agriculture based on the development of the small family farm. For O'Brien and Patsiorkovsky also, the family farm or household unit is seen as the central agent of change, although their theoretical inspiration stems more from the neo-populist tradition in Russian agrarian studies. Pallot and Nefedova also choose household production in all its many forms as their empirical focus but they examine it in a wider context of capitalist development that avoids giving conceptual or political priority to household production as necessarily the main agent of change. To this reviewer at least, this more open-ended but analytical approach seems to offer the best basis on which future research should build. [This is one of the best written 'first drafts' that I have ever seen! It's an excellent piece of work, but I felt a little disappointed by the conclusion. Could you build on some

of your points and insights, differentiation between the books/their approaches and deepening them.]

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