Review Essay

Land Reform, Rural Social Relations and the Peasantry

A. HAROON AKRAM-LODHI


A new book, Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform, edited by Peter Rosset, Raj Patel and Michael Courville is considered. This book, via both general analytical treatment and a series of case studies set in Latin America, Asia and Africa, offers a powerful critique of the World Bank’s market-led agrarian reform (MLAR) and provides an alternative model of agrarian reform, the ‘food sovereignty movement’, that has been articulated by La Via Campesina. Food sovereignty requires that priority be allocated to the domestic production of food and that a right to land be given to small farmers and their families. It is a vision of agrarian reform, with an emphasis on smallholder farming and the transformative power of rural social movements, that has truly emerged ‘from below’. The critique of MLAR is compelling. It is argued in this essay, however, that two crucial questions are abstracted from. The first is that of the vastly differing sets of social relations that exist (compare, say, socialist Cuba and capitalist Brazil) and their implications. It is not clear that food sovereignty can, in effect, offer a coherent political economy of an alternative global agrarianism. The second relates to the implicit assumption, found throughout the book, that the peasantry is a homogeneous, undifferentiated social group. This is manifestly not so, and what the existence of socially differentiated peasantries implies requires careful examination.

Keywords: agrarian reform, rural social movements, inverse relationship, differentiated peasantries, World Bank, Latin America, Asia, Africa

For people living in the countryside of poor countries, access to land is the most critical means through which subsistence can be sought and income generated.

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Access to land allows families to use their labour in farming, either as the central productive activity or as a supplement to rural off-farm, rural non-farm or urban work. Moreover, land, as a resource, can, in addition to being directly used, be lent out, rented out, or sold, all of which can sustain the financial security of rural people. At the same time, land can be transferred across time, providing a possible source of livelihood for future generations. Finally, and vitally, land is a cultural resource, being a principal way in which the social and cultural identities that shape power and powerlessness within the myriad diversity of rural societies are formed.

One key message of the overview of the World Bank’s World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development in a Changing World is that a central focus of development policies in poor countries globally should be pressing ahead with economic reforms that result in ‘assigning property rights and recognizing current use rights over land resources’ (World Bank 2006, 16). Thus, access to land and reforming access to land is currently at the centre of the global rural development policy agenda of the Bank. That reforming access to land has returned, front and centre, to the development policy agenda is also witnessed in the resurgence of a scholarly literature on the subject in the early years of this century. This started with the publication, under the aegis of the UN World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER), in 2001, of Access to Land, Rural Poverty and Public Action (de Janvry et al. 2001). This was followed, in this journal, by an important paper by Griffin et al. (2002) and, in part as a response to both the book and the paper, a suggestive and thoughtful intervention by Bernstein (2002). Cumulatively, these served to re-ignite the critical academic debate over the efficiency, equity and efficacy of land and agrarian reform in contemporary capitalism, one result of which was a memorable special issue of this journal on the political economy of redistributive land reform (Byres 2004). There then followed, in 2005, a major collection on the politics of contemporary land struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Moyo and Yeros 2005). Concurrently, the United Nations Development Programme was funding a small global research programme on the impact of land markets on poverty reduction, the outcome of which was Land, Livelihoods and Poverty in an Era of Globalization: Perspectives from Developing and Transition Countries (Akram-Lodhi et al. 2007). To this rapidly growing recent literature now comes what is without doubt an important addition – Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform.

As Carmen Diana Deere points out in her Foreword to Promised Land, land and agrarian reform are back on the global development policy agenda of international financial institutions and national governments as a consequence of ‘two contending forces’ (p. ix). The first is the global failure of neoliberalism over the course of 25 years of structural adjustment, in agriculture and beyond, to confront rural poverty and establish the preconditions of poverty elimination. The second is the rise, during the same period, of a new generation of rural social movements. These peasant movements challenge the social exclusion generated by capitalist models of rural development, predicated as they are on: external food trade liberalization and the resulting increase in externally-subsidized food
imports that undermine local food production; internal food trade de-regulation and the resulting elimination of local input and output subsidies for food producers; as well as the privileging of market-biased strategies for rural development, based as they are on facilitating the entry into and dominance of agro-food transnational capital seeking to consolidate privately-regulated food input and food output markets in most developing and transition countries. To these two forces could be added a third, conjunctural, factor: the events of the early 1990s, when the end of apartheid and the collapse of the Soviet Union both required that the international financial institutions develop a market-friendly policy response to the need for asset redistribution in politically fragile circumstances.

The editors of Promised Land suggest that the result of the clash of these contending forces has been the emergence of two dominant ‘models’ (p. 305) of land and agrarian reform in the early years of this century. The first model, promulgated by the World Bank, is market-led agrarian reform (MLAR). The systemic failure of structural adjustment led the Bank to re-examine its prevailing orthodoxy: that global poverty was caused by the lack of productive utilization by the poor of their principal asset, their labour-power. Rather, the Bank came to argue that there was a need to both formally increase the assets under the exclusive control of the rural asset-poor as well as to diversify assets beyond labour-power, principally by redistributing predominantly individualized property rights to the assets that the poor were already using. In this, the Bank was building upon the arguments offered by Hernando de Soto (2003). Moreover, building upon policy advice offered to a number of countries by USAID from the 1980s and the World Bank from the early 1990s, it was argued that this redistribution did not have to work against markets. Rather, properly designed redistribution that used financial systems rather than state fiat could build asset markets, and in so doing enable a deepening of market-enabling relationships. The MLAR approach was crystallized in the pivotal Policy Research Report principally authored by Klaus Deininger, Land Policies for Growth and Poverty Reduction (World Bank 2003), and which, interestingly, often reflects, in part, the already-noted earlier research undertaken for WIDER. What is intellectually curious about this fresh emphasis in the Bank on the need for market-enabling land and agrarian reform, however, is the extent to which the proposed solutions to the well-documented failures of global capitalist development over the past 25 years are, in effect, a reassertion of the primacy of the very same policies that facilitated failure in the first place (Akram-Lodhi et al. forthcoming).

The second model of land and agrarian reform that has emerged is that of the ‘food sovereignty movement’, as articulated, in particular, by La Via Campesina (Rosset 2003; Patel 2007), the global peasant movement. For La Via Campesina and its constituent elements, principally in Latin America and Asia, but also, to a more limited extent, in Africa, the right to food articulated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 requires the promulgation of a right for countries and peasant producers in those countries to produce food for their own use and for wider consumption by a country’s citizens. Food sovereignty therefore requires that priority should be given to the domestic production of
food, rather than the international trade of food. Food production, in turn, according to La Via Campesina, requires a right to land, as food is principally produced by small farmers providing for their families and communities operating land under insecure and tenuous conditions. Moreover, argues La Via Campesina, food sovereignty, by building internal markets and local economies, establishes the pre-conditions of poverty elimination on a global scale. Finally, as the small farmers that receive land are more likely to act as its trustees than is the case with land under the control of agro-food transnational capital, food sovereignty is a rural development strategy that suggests an ecologically-friendly alternative to corporate industrial agriculture. La Via Campesina’s vision of land and agrarian reform is thus, in its emphasis on smallholder farming and the transformative power of rural social movements, truly one that has emerged ‘from below’.

The recent literature on land and agrarian reform has come from academics and analysts working in policy-making institutions. Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform is different, being an outcome of the research and analytical work of the Land Research Action Network (www.landaction.org), which consists, in addition to a set of politically-engaged partisan scholars, of committed non-governmental organizations as well as representatives of rural social movements struggling for land and agrarian reform. As a consequence, the book is firmly grounded in the world view of rural social movements exemplified by La Via Campesina. As such, the book seeks to present evidence-based, empirically-grounded and activist-friendly arguments that demonstrate both the fallacies of and alternatives to MLAR.

Part I begins by providing an overview of the reasons behind and rationale for the resurgence of agrarian reform in the early years of this century. In setting the tone for the rest of the book, the overview is important in that it comprehensively and accessibly reviews a wide range of theoretical and empirical material, as well as providing a useful and important typology of historical experiences of land reform. Thus, land reforms in the twentieth century are divided into four distinct categories: ‘cold war proxies’, ‘endogenous social revolution’, ‘postwar Allied consolidation’ and ‘endogenous political compromise’ (p. 16). Part I also presents four case studies of the last-named, defined as reform emerging as a consequence of ‘pressures exerted by large social movements, landless organizations and government policy making that aimed to meet new demands of export-oriented agricultural production’ (p. 16). The case studies are of Guatemala (‘The Agrarian Question in Guatemala’, Hannah Wittman with Laura Saldívar-Tanaka), Zimbabwe (‘An Introduction to Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe’, Tom Lebert), South Africa (‘Land and Agrarian Reform in South Africa’, Wellington Didibhuku Thwala), and India (‘Land Reform in India: Issues and Challenges’, Manpreet Sethi); and in each the contextual origin of movements for land and agrarian reform are investigated, as well as counter-movements in the state and countryside in support of privileged dominant classes and which resulted in land reform falling far short of the aspirations of the rural poor.

Part II next offers a critical review of the theoretical rationale for and evidence supporting the efficacy of MLAR. Following a succinct, well-written contextual
overview of the section by co-editor Raj Patel, Saturnino M. Borras Jr (in his ‘The Underlying Assumptions, Theory, and Practice of Neoliberal Land Policies’) reviews the changing global context for land and agrarian reform, compares the key features of state- and market-led land and agrarian reform within the context of the argumentation offered by adherents to MLAR, and then systematically and persuasively demolishes the arguments of the proponents of MLAR in a ten-point barrage. Borras cogently and passionately argues that the exchange of goods in a market is not the same as the redistribution of assets necessary for a truly redistributive land reform, in that a ‘redistribution of wealth is absent’ (p. 127) in MLAR, while the claim that state-led reform fails to sustain rural development and poverty alleviation ‘is not supported by empirical evidence’ (p. 128).

Part II then continues with country case studies of MLAR in Thailand (‘Thailand’s Land Titling Program: Securing Land for the Poor?’, Rebecca Leonard and Kingkorn Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya), Mexico (‘Land Concentration in Mexico after PROCEDE’, Ana de Ita), Colombia (‘Colombia: Agrarian Reform – Fake and Genuine’, Héctor Mondragón) and Brazil (‘The World Bank’s Market-Based Land Reform in Brazil’, Sérgio Sauer); before providing excellent thematic chapters on gender and land (‘Gender and Land’, Sofía Monsalve Suárez) and indigenous rights and land (‘Indigenous Peoples: Land, Territory Autonomy, and Self-Determination’, Rodolfo Stavenhagen), both of which constitute ‘actively constructed engagements with existing institutional politics’ (p. 192) around land and agrarian reform. Written in clear and comprehensible prose, the case studies in this section, as in the other sections of the book, will be extremely useful for students and activists seeking to grapple with the global realities of MLAR.

Part III of Promised Land offers a further two-fold critique of MLAR. First, it reviews current state-led alternatives to MLAR, which are presented in a sympathetic but not uncritical manner. Thus, the book contains an excellent, thorough and challenging chapter on the emergence of sustainable agriculture in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union (‘Surviving Crisis in Cuba: The Second Agrarian Reform and Sustainable Agriculture’, Mavis Alvarez, Martin Bourque, Fernando Funes, Lucy Martin, Armando Nova and Peter Rosset), as well as a chapter that discusses efforts at initiating land and agrarian reform through constitution-building in Venezuela (‘Land for People Not for Profit in Venezuela’, Gregory Wilpert). Secondly, Part III offers two first-class, authoritative, chapters on the practice and impact of Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST (‘Learning to Participate: The MST Experience in Brazil’, Monica Dias Martins; and ‘Regional Impacts of Land Reform in Brazil’, Beatriz Heredia, Leonilde Medeiros, Moacir Palmeira, Rosângela Cinfrao, and Sérgio Pereira Leite). These demonstrate the potentialities and pitfalls of pursuing an agrarian reform that seeks to transform production and power relations within the context of the specific correlation of political forces and class struggle that is contemporary Brazil (p. 266). Agrarian reform is, after all, only a ‘tool and what makes the difference is who controls it’ (p. 267). Part III then ends with a thought-provoking discussion by Peter Rosset of the meaning of food sovereignty for the politics and practice of ongoing national and global rural struggles.
for land and agrarian reform (‘Moving Forward: Agrarian Reform as a Part of Food Sovereignty’). Peasant-oriented land and agrarian reform, argues Rosset, enhances rural productivity, cuts rural poverty, facilitates economic development and sustains rural ecologies. Therefore, Rosset draws out a set of twelve guidelines that, he suggests, offer a way of ‘moving forward’ in the struggle for land and agrarian reform. These include, amongst others, the wholesale elimination of latifundia, the facilitation of expropriative reform, the promotion of small family farms, tenure security for families and communities, the construction of engendered rights to land, the respect of indigenous rights and customs, as well as a supportive policy environment, including infrastructural and social investment.

Although partisan, the rich and sophisticated analytical and empirical argumentation offered in Promised Land is extremely good: the book is by no stretch of the imagination one-sided, and it will, no doubt, become a standard reference for activists, students and teachers involved in the political economy of land and agrarian reform. That it will become a standard text will, no doubt, be aided by the fact that, as a result of grants from international philanthropic foundations, the entire book can be downloaded from the Internet at no cost (www.foodfirst.org), which means that it will be widely read. Nonetheless, Promised Land did, for this sympathetic reader, raise two somewhat provocative questions.

The first question regards the standpoint of the editors and the contributors towards rural production systems and the structure of social relations under which they operate. The contributors to Promised Land are rightly critical of water- and hydrocarbon-intensive industrialized agriculture, and suggest that peasant-based farming offers a superior prospect for the stewardship of the planet’s soil, water and genetic resources, as well as meeting the food needs of the globally dispossessed. However, as is clear from the book’s chapters on socialist Cuba and capitalist Brazil, a number of alternative forms and systems of rural production may emerge, under vastly different sets of social relations, to promote greater access to, control over and stewardship of, land and other agrarian resources. In this light, it is not clear whether this book is suggesting that there is now a coherent political economy of an alternative global agrarianism. Certainly, much is made, especially by Peter Rosset, of the importance of the inverse relationship between size of farm and yield per unit of land as the basis of a smallholder farming that is stressed, in the final chapter, as the best means of ‘moving forward’. However, smallholder farming can be developed within a number of alternative systems of production, offering differing degrees of insertion into or protection from capitalist social relations and exposure to the ‘market imperative’ (Wood forthcoming). Moreover, the components of the ‘alternative paradigm’ (p. 247) suggested in Promised Land – agrarian reform, agroecological technology, fair prices for farmers and greater emphasis on local production – cannot be abstracted from the sets of social relations, and, in particular, whether they are predicated upon relations of exploitation, within which the alternative paradigm is located. Thus, it is not clear from this book whether rural social movements are developing an understanding of the ways by which they can seek to reconfigure
the social relations of capitalism – a problematic endeavour, to say the least – or are in fact forging ahead with the development of a non-capitalist alternative.

The issue of rural production systems, and the focus of rural social movements on the promotion of a small farmer strategy, also draws attention to the use of the inverse relationship as the core economic argument in support of land and agrarian reform. Farm size–farm productivity relationships are located within particular constellations of power and poverty, being emblematic of prevailing structures of social relations (Dyer 1997). Understanding farm size–farm productivity relationships therefore requires understanding prevailing patterns of power and privilege, which may result in greater smallholder productivity arising as a necessary survival mechanism of the poor, rather than being a mechanism of potentially poverty-eliminating accumulation, as suggested, for example, by the sustainable rural livelihoods approach. Moreover, it is wholly wrong to assume, as is done throughout Promised Land, that the cash income and social welfare benefits of an inverse relationship, if it is identified, flows to all those residing in a farm household. As Johnston and Le Roux (2007) have convincingly demonstrated, arguments that the inverse relationship improves rural welfare are based upon assuming that productivity benefits are pooled within the household. Well-documented patterns of gendered power and privilege suggest that this is not the case. Thus, even in circumstances where an inverse relationship is identified, the productivity improvements may not lead to poverty reduction within households, as suggested by Rosset; rather, it may lead to poverty reduction amongst particular household members.

A second question raised by the analysis contained within Promised Land follows. If the welfare benefits of land and agrarian reform have the potential to be gendered, this suggests that men and women may be located in differential locations with regard to both the purpose and the outcome of rural production. This means, in turn, that the implicit assumption found throughout this book that the peasantry is a homogenous, undifferentiated social group is problematic. This question can then be taken one step further. If the peasantry is not a homogenous social group but is rather a diverse group subject to differing and potentially conflicting interests, this means that the peasantry may be subject to contradictory tendencies towards stratification and polarization, generating, in turn, differential interests within peasantries in particular patterns of accumulation and depeasantization. This journal is testimony to the extent to which the histories of specific peasantries are the histories of differential processes by which they are to a greater or lesser extent incorporated into capitalism as it unevenly develops. The implication of these ‘trajectories of variation’ in the processes by which peasants, as petty commodity producers, are or are not incorporated into capitalism as it develops on a world-scale means that the politics of land and agrarian reform are embedded within a messy and complex substantive diversity that reflects differential interests within and between peasant households, the reality of which this book does not adequately address. Thus, the Indian, South African, Mexican, Thai, Brazilian and other peasants depicted in this book are not a homogenous social group – the opposite is rather the case. Mechanisms of
social differentiation within the peasantry have led to differences in command over assets, differences in the character of the production process, differences in productivity, differences in market integration, and differences in the behavioural motivation behind rural production. There have been, in short, processes of peasant class differentiation at work, albeit unevenly and incompletely. There is a need, therefore, to get a fuller and richer understanding of the class character of contemporary peasant movements struggling for land and agrarian reform within countries and within global peasant movements struggling for food sovereignty even as they engage with the forces of capital operating increasingly on a world stage. The implications of this cannot – and should not – be avoided if the challenges confronting global rural social movements in their struggles against agro-food transnational capital and the state are to be fully addressed.

While these issues are raised by a reading of Promised Land, they do not detract from its compelling civil society-focused critique of MLAR. In so proceeding, Promised Land offers a salutary riposte to Eric Hobsbawn’s famous declaration that ‘the most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this (last) century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry’ (1994, 289). As evidenced by Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform, the peasantry, however one defines it, is not dead. Indeed, around the world, peasant movements are incessantly pressing for land, food sovereignty and social justice. It would thus seem that, at least on the terrain of land and agrarian reform and rural social relations, the global peasantry may still have some surprises in store for the future.

REFERENCES


