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Book Reviews

Grigory Ioffe, Tatyana Nefedova, and Ilya Zaslavsky
The End of Peasantry? The Disintegration of Rural Russia
University of Pittsburg Press, 2006, 249 pages.

Rural Russia has undergone at least five major upheavals since the mid-19th century: serfdom was abolished by a decree in the 1860s, but the peasants were left in debt owing large sums of money to their former landlords; Stolypin freed the peasants of their debts after 1906 and encouraged family farming; land was nationalized in the revolution of 1917; agriculture was collectivized forcefully and the kulaks were "eliminated" in the 1930s; and the land was again privatized and farmers freed to leave the land after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Throughout this time Russia was industrialized and urbanized and many young and able people left the villages to seek their fortunes in the new sectors of the economy. In addition, revolution and war, particularly WWII, devastated large agricultural areas and resulted in death and maiming of many rural youngsters. All these are reflected in the present Russian rural society that Ioffe, Nefedova, and Zaslavsky describe and analyze. They focus mainly on the European parts of the country, home to close to 40 million rural residents.

The authors are geographers and the central motif of the book is Geography *Is* Destiny. Geographic determination is realized in several ways. First and foremost, Russia suffers from an inferior climate. Most of the country is colder than other farming areas in the world and the weather is subject to extreme variations, growing season is short, and animals have to be kept in barns for many months. Consequently, as the book reports, yields in Russia have always been lower than in western countries: a west-east gradient of agricultural productivity can be identified when moving from western and central Europe to Russia and inside the country itself.

Russia is vast, agricultural land occupies less than 8% of its area, distances are great, and infrastructure is poor. Many farming communities can be reached only on dirt roads and are effectively isolated from markets and services for long seasons. Inside Russia, geography affects farm productivity in two dimensions: soil quality and location. Soil quality determines the fertility of the land: the chernozem

regions of the southwest are better suited for crop production then the other parts of the country. And close to urban centers agriculture fares better than that at a distance: it received favorable treatment by the Soviet authorities and enjoyed then and continues to enjoy now access to secured markets of vegetables, fruits and livestock products.

In the wake of World War II and its food shortages, the Soviet regime devoted a great share of its economic resources to the promotion of agriculture. It was done in two stages. The first was extensive, through area expansion: by 1960, the cultivated land was twice the arable area of the 1920s. The second stage was intensive: the supply of fertilizers was augmented, farm income and salaries were increased, and yields grew. The expansion was costly and heavily subsidized.

The large collective farms of the Soviet Union—kolkhozes and sovkhozes—were not only agricultural production units; they provided their members and employees with municipal, social, and welfare service: roads, schools, hospitals, and assistance with inputs for the household plots. Remuneration was mostly in kind; money was seldom used. Members of kolkhozes and employees of sovkhozes worked the large farms and received in return grain for household use and animal feed, their cattle grazed on the kolkhoz meadows, and farm teams built and repaired their homes. Household plots helped to supply families in collective farms with home grown food but in some product they were also important contributors to the national food market: more than 50% of the potatoes and 30% of the vegetables were produced on household plots.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union changed the rural scene markedly. Federal subsidies were eliminated and production was exposed to economic considerations. Large tracts of marginal land were abandoned, out-migration intensified, and rural communities were fading away. The last count found 30,000 villages (out of 145,000) with less than 10 inhabitants each. Land privatization and farm restructuring is still an ongoing process.

Many of the remaining large farms operate in the old kolkhoz tradition, often run by the former Soviet managers, and employing some of their former members; but quite a few are not economically viable. A smaller number of large units have been completely privatized and run as corporations, financed by local “investors” or foreign interests. Some are operated directly by food processors in the sugar, dairy, and meat sectors. Two types of family farms have emerged: many household plots expanded their land and market oriented production. However, they are still mostly auxiliary farms—part time or run by retirees. In addition, a smaller number of “registered family farms” were established by accumulating privatized land. Often they cultivate field crops but most are still too small to assure a reasonable level of income.

The contraction of the cultivated area modified the spatial distribution and social structure of the rural communities. Agriculture is still active and productive around urban centers. But these are far apart and the space between them is becoming an archipelago of low productivity farmland—islands in an ocean of forests, shrubs, and deserted fields. The remaining rural population is left with deteriorating infrastructure: roads, telephone lines, health services are disappearing. Many of the rural inhabitants fail to find employment; they are old and often addicted to alcohol. Exceptions are the non-Russian ethnic communities (many Muslims) where family ties have kept strong farm households together and economic opportunities have been exploited on and off the farm.

Modern Russia is a superpower, strong militarily and rich in natural resources. A great part of its national budget is financed by oil money. The government can therefore conveniently neglect the difficult task of restructuring agriculture (and manufacturing). Moreover, mineral sales create an overvalued ruble, imports are encouraged and the profitability of exports is depressed; the rehabilitation of agriculture is slowed down. In the wake of the recent (spring 2008) rise in the prices of grains, the government—so the news indicate—intends to tax food exports and to lower import duties. If true, Russian agriculture will be deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the world's improving terms of trade.

In the concluding chapter the authors recognize the possibility that low agricultural productivity is due to weakened population and deteriorating social foundations. It seems therefore that not only geography is determining the welfare of the Russian rural residents; a stronger influence may be the Soviet legacy of oppression, neglect, and urban bias. The authors also recognize in the conclusion that abandoned land and depopulation may be a healthy waste-reducing reaction to Soviet over-expansion. But the impression from reading the main parts of the book is that the authors view the post-Soviet transformation in rural Russia as a catastrophe that can be remedied only with financial subsidies and protection of Russian agriculture from the influence of world markets. The reader may wonder whether a more appropriate recommendation could not have been encouragement of healthy economic restructuring coupled with assistance to the farm population and rural infrastructure that were neglected and left behind in the country's march to progress. Modern Russia can afford it.

A short review cannot do justice to this richly informative volume. Despite slight disagreements, the book is wholeheartedly recommended to anyone interested in Russia and its society. It offers a colorful, vivid, detailed, and non-conventional picture of this huge land and its people.

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Michael Woods
Contesting Rurality: Politics in the British Countryside
Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005. 209 pages.

This book is about the political implications of rural restructuring in Britain. It consists of seven chapters in which the author surveys the changing power relations within the British countryside over the last century, and analyzes the impact of this process in terms of the appearance of conflicts over new rural issues and the growing importance of such issues on the national political scene. Part of the book is based on research carried out in the mid-1990's in Somerset.

The main thesis put forward in the book is that the British countryside, which was dominated for generations by local power elites, mainly conservative landed gentry and later large-scale farmers and local businessmen, has become in recent years an arena of conflict among a growing number of interest groups, each of which has a different view of what is actually "rural". This situation reflects a major change in the politics of rural areas, previously centered on local affairs with an emphasis on farming, and currently concerned with various community and development issues, involving conflicts which are scaled up to national politics. This change is described as a transition from "rural politics" to the "politics of the rural", implying that rural issues and conflicts no longer focus on local problems, but actually revolve around the question of the meaning of the very concept of "rurality" within the general society.

The book starts with a critical examination of the long-lasting myth of the British countryside as a-political, stable and idyllic space. This myth, which has been supported by the media and also by some academic studies of rural communities, served the interests of the local power elites, and allowed them to retain and perpetuate their hegemonic position despite major socio-economic restructuring of the surrounding urban society. The longtime hegemony of the landed gentry was based on its control of material resources, social networks and the compliance of the local population with its leadership. This was reflected, among other things, in the occupation of most, if not all, public office-holding positions by members of the gentry.

The transformation of the traditional power structure was a gradual process which started between the two World Wars, when the landed gentry was forced, due to financial difficulties, to sell part of its land. This brought about the rise of the agrarian elite, based on farmers who bought their tenanted land when it was offered for sale. These farmers took over most leadership positions as councilors of the local parishes and as representatives in the rural district councils. Their local power was enhanced also through the increased influence of the National Farmers Union on the rural scene. Other groups which came into power at that stage were

people who held prominent positions in the community and the business elite of the small towns. These groups shared similar conceptions of the rural with the old aristocracy, based on agriculture as the principal defining element of rurality, and supporting this concept by a symbolic construction of the rural community as an organic and stable agricultural community, and of the countryside as a primarily agricultural space.

The next stage began towards the end of the 20th century, and is closely connected with the rapid economic and social restructuring of the rural space during the last decades. This restructuring is attributed, among other factors, to the decline of agriculture, the change in government farm policies, due in part to the CAP reform, and the social re-composition of the rural population - the weakening of old rural elites and the rural gentrification prompted by the in-migration of urban middle class people, sometimes described as the "service class". These processes led to the decline of farming as the major economic and social base of rural communities and to the weakening of the farm sector power in the countryside, with a parallel increase in the role of the new in-migrant population in rural politics. These incomers have different conceptions of the rural space, its functions and desirable lifestyles, and have been working their way into the local political system, creating their own social alliances and pressure groups in order to defend the image of the rural as they see it. As a result, the contemporary power structure in the countryside is becoming much more complex, with new actors assuming leadership positions and new political issues raised by emergent interest groups.

A significant part of the book is devoted to a detailed analysis of contemporary power groups and organizations, which campaign for different issues and represent different views of the nature of rurality and the national role of the countryside. Chapter 4 outlines the rise of rural conservatism, the persistence of the Conservative discourse of rurality over most of the 20th century, and its decline in favor of diverse concepts and pressure groups that form the rural lobby of today. Chapter 5 is devoted to the Countryside Alliance, an organization created in 1997 in order to mobilize public support against the proposed ban on hunting and other rural sports, and later assuming the role of the countryside defender against the interests of the urban majority. In its campaign the rural space is presented as an idyllic space, where the national heritage, identity and values are preserved, and the rural culture as superior to that of the urban society. As a consequence of this traditional view of the countryside the organization has been criticized for an imbalanced representation of the interests of the diverse sections of the rural population. Chapter 6 discusses the changing structure of agricultural politics, as expressed in the reversal of government farm policy, the diminishing power of the established National Farmers Union and the appearance of new, more militant,

farming organizations, which compete for the representation of farmers' interests. The last chapter is concerned with current development issues of the countryside, arising out of the changing public perception of the rural, from an agricultural space to a space of nature. One aspect of this change is the growing opposition to modern agriculture and large-scale infrastructure, industry and housing projects, which is in contrast to previous pro-development policies, and the growing pressure for the protection of rural landscapes. The preservationist approach to the countryside is described through the increased activities of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and its campaign against new housing development.

In conclusion the author reiterates the role of the rural middle classes in the reconstruction of the rural space according to their perceptions of rurality, and the contemporary reconfiguration of the power relations in rural Britain. The rural power base is now dispersed among various groups and at different levels of intervention, with each group pursuing its particular cause, but sharing with others a common issue – the question of defining the meaning of rurality.

As a non-British reader I found the book to be a highly illuminative analysis of the political restructuring of the British countryside. However, although the construction and reconstruction of the rural in Britain, in practice and in concept, is clearly dependent on the distinctive attributes of British society, the general direction of change in the nature and perception of rurality is less place specific than it seems, and similar trends are discerned in other countries as well. From this point of view a more universal conclusion might have added to the excellent presentation of the remarkable changes that took place in British countryside during the last decades.

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Guy M. Robinson (ed.)
***Sustainable Rural Systems: Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Communities* (Perspectives on Rural Policy & Planning Series).**
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 200 pages

Sustainability is commonly regarded as a strategy by which communities follow economic development approaches that produce benefits to their exploited resources, their local environment and natural habitat, and improve their quality of life. In this context, this book is about the conflict between the combined “system of production and consumption”, which initiates exploitation, versus “conservation

and protection attitudes", which look at the environment and future use of resources, and the ability of coexistence of these two entities, scholarly and in reality.

This book is a well tied collection of papers, the majority of which were first presented in the sessions of two commissions of the International Geographical Union – The Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems and Commission on Land Use Cover – during the International Geographical Congress held in Glasgow in 2004. The key terms covered in this congress appeared with a particular British dimension. Knowing more than a little about these commissions' work and publications, the editor took on himself a task and stood up to its fruition.

The book consists of three parts. The first, an excellent introduction written by the editor, deals widely with the meaning of "sustainable development" and "sustainable rural systems" and an additional chapter which deals with issues related to the era of productivism and post-productivism. These two concepts, widely debated in the U.K. and in Australia, are actually two facets of the rural systems sustainability conflict. In recent years a significant amount of British work has raised attention to a transition towards a post-productivist era in the rural space. It has been suggested as a model around which the changes in rural production and organisation (rural restructuring) are interpreted, and sustainability is achieved, through certain forms of agricultural activities and environmental goods. In the developed world productivism remains dominant and the annunciation associated with the environmental oriented post productivism is at a low pace. In the chapter by Tilzey and Potter they suggest that policy interventions and a series of fundamental socio-economic adjustments are required for the achieving of greater sustainability.

The second part contains five papers dealing with sustainable agriculture. The post 1945 productivist form of agricultural production is economically efficient and effective but is not sustainable ecologically. Moreover, as different authors in this part claim, the productivist era eroded a number of environmental pillars such as diminishing biodiversity, destruction of the natural habitat, increasing soil erosion and salinity, reduced water tables, pollution of soil and water resources, and growing reliance on an evolving narrow range of crops and livestock. Declining income from agriculture brought about "a flight from the land" and the number of active farmers has declined, while the average land per active farmer has increased. Some areas have suffered from rural depopulation, processes of geriatrification have lead to declining service levels. The search of new sources of income has led to the developed of an entrepreneurial form of agricultural production as shown by the different chapters in this part: organic farming, genetically modified farming, developing alternative food networks and combining

agriculture and conservation. Besides these strategies the phenomenon of developing non-agricultural activities, with or without farming, has been extended.

The third part deals with three case studies concerning sustainable rural communities in Ireland, England and Canada. It is here that the negative economic and social outcomes as a result of shrinking resources, declining employment and social infrastructure, are widely raised. Sustainable development here is taken in a more holistic approach, involving besides the environmental-ecological aspects also the social and cultural dimensions. Thus, concepts such as culture economy and social capital are considered and the process regenerating of rural economies is debated as well. Issues such as the pressure of urban labour markets, availability of local economic opportunities, establishing new businesses, improving infrastructure, maintaining services, improving rural networks and local collective actions are raised and discussed. A major consequence is that a more sustainable countryside should successfully integrate different components of productivism and post-productivism, environmental goods should get a prominent place in the production chain, and a support system maintaining the required economic and social infrastructure, including subsidising the production of environmental goods, should be considered.

How does a person go about reading an academic book? Starting at the back cover, one than reads carefully the table of contents and looks whose of the authors he is familiar with his writing, and than, in my case, goes to the index to find what is all about. In this context I would like to say I expected to find in the index items such as pluriactivity, peripheral areas, gender, rural-urban fringe and multifunctional, which are at the core of the current discourse of rural systems. These are not in the list, though it seems that some of them are mentioned in the text, but clearly none of the papers deals directly with these concepts and only look through them at issues of sustainability.

Scholars and students of rural change and development in developed market economies will appreciate the appearance of this book, a well-presented collection of British-centric papers that provides those interested in the subject an interesting in-depth view of experiences and conflicts of sustainable development in the rural space. It unravels all the conflicts, difficulties, intricacies and issues of rural sustainability. It is well written, clearly presented and thought provoking. To those familiars with rural development it may offer a further insight into the mechanisms and processes underlying current issues of rural sustainability as well as farmers and communities using sustainability in their survival strategies. It can also nicely serve as teaching material. It has taught me a great deal.

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Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt and Brynhild Granås (eds.)
Mobility and Place: Enacting Northern European Peripheries
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 272 pages.

"Mobility and place become together" (p.1), tells the opening sentence of this volume, and its objective has, thus, been set to present the fusion between mobility and place within the context of Northern European peripheries. These regions are of special interest in this regard, given their harsh topographic and climate conditions, and hence their being sparsely populated, on the one hand, and the long tradition of highly developed telecommunications media in Nordic countries, on the other. Attempting to meet its *raison d'être* the book is divided into three parts: the first, *Placing Mobility*, focusing on places, the second, *Connections and Encounters*, devoted to mobility, and the third one, entitled *Mobilizing Place*, connecting the two. Jointly with the opening chapter the book contains nineteen contributed chapters. Twenty-five out of the 26 contributors for this volume are affiliated with Nordic universities in all Scandinavian countries, and most have also studied in such universities, whereas John Urry co-authored a chapter in the book.

The opening chapter makes the case for the enacting of Northern European peripheries via mobility and place, with enactment defined as combining "spontaneous and political practices" (p. 2). This notion becomes central in several of the chapters in the third part of the book.

The first part of the book, focusing on place, begins with three chapters in which place and mobility are conceptually interpreted, in light of place sensing and human practices. The first of these chapters highlights place and placelessness in rather general ways, whereas the second is more specific in its focusing on the Sámi people and their interpretations of place, for instance through place names. The third of these three chapters is an intriguing one in its focus on experiential place-making while walking into far distances. The second group of three chapters in the first part of the book focuses on the far North of Norway and the Faroe Islands from the perspectives of place practices and sensing. Thus the first chapter of these interprets the negotiation of time and space in Northern Norway, and the second chapter tells the story of Faroe Islands villages, turning into networked and mobile society being efficiently interconnected now through undersea tunnels, while the third of these chapters focuses on fishing villages in Northern Norway, with place identity always on the move for residents who by their very work are constantly mobile.

The second part of the book devoted to mobility is centered on the Internet and mobile phones as mobility media in specially localized societies, such as migrants, refugees, transnational married couples and temporary workers. Thus, the first chapter of the five chapters in the second part of the book portrays distanciated social networking with some attention to transnational migrant networking. The

second chapter tells the story of young refugees in Tromsø, Northern Norway, in which refugees from some 45 countries live, not feeling too much attachment to their new locality. Similarly the next chapter is dedicated to labour migrants notably in the fishing industry. A special population is in the focus of the fourth chapter of the second part of the book centered on transnational marriages, notably but not only, between Norwegians and Russians since the opening of the borders between the two countries in the 1990s. The last chapter in this part is about Longyearbyen, a town in the most Northern Norway Svalbard region, characterized by mobile populations of miners, tourists and government service providers.

The third part of the book attempts to combine mobility and place within the enactment of places in Northern European peripheries. Thus, the first chapter in this part is devoted to tourism, describing an Icelandic village turned into an attractive environment for tourists. In the following chapter we are introduced with cultural industries in the form of furniture production in Nordic countries, and in the third chapter in this group of chapters the town of Narvik in Northern Norway is examined from the perspective of its transport industry. The two following chapters in this last part of the book focus on nature. The first chapter of these is devoted to Russian-Finnish attempts to preserve forests, whereas the second one deals with politics of nature in Iceland. The last two chapters of the book focus on the city of Tromsø, Norway, which hosted the meeting in which the chapters of the book were originally presented.

This book will be found as illuminating and intriguing for the growing interdisciplinary community of mobility scholars, in its coverage of a wide variety of topics, dealing with place, people and mobilities within a special region combining the natural with the human, the old industries with the new ones, and the veteran populations with newcomers. This book will reach even more importance if similar projects will be carried out focusing on other parts of Europe, and the world at large. Like most collections of articles, this book too present a variety of theoretical backgrounds and diversified approaches to research, some being more conceptual and others more empirical. Interestingly enough, none of the chapters attempted at the collection of quantitative data and their analysis. While the division of the book into three parts of place, mobility, and place and mobility sounds logical, it turns out to be a bit artificial as chapters of one part can easily fit into the other two parts of the book as well. All in all, the editors should be praised for daring to present such a varied picture within one frame, benefitting our understanding of place and mobility in harsh regions under quite intensive technological and social change. The Tromsø meeting yielded a significant and important product in form of this book!

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