

Sam Moyo & Paris Yeros, Editors. 2005. *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Zed Books, London, 426 pp.

This book seeks to examine socio-economic change in the rural South by highlighting the “politics of rural movements.” Moyos & Yeros draw on new social movement theory, influenced by neo-Marxism and dependency theories (citing work by James Petras & Petras & Veltmeyer) that find that rural peoples are not disappearing but, in fact, their movements in land struggles, land occupations & land reforms are a powerful source for rural improvement under neoliberalism:

...despite the immense economic and political forces arrayed against them, the rural poor have been striking back in a progressive way...[relying] most commonly, though not exclusively, on the mass land-occupation tactic...they confront land-based political power head-on, pry open oppressive national debates, and challenge neo-liberalism outright. Indeed, we claim that the countryside of the periphery today has become the most significant location of anti-imperialist politics worldwide (p.34).

The book includes 14 chapters that present the theoretical and regional context of rural socio-economic change in Africa, Asia & Latin America and ten case studies that consider rural movements in Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, the Philippines, Brazil, Colombia & Mexico. The introduction to the book (chapter one) and to each regional section (chapters 2, 7 &10) are useful contributions as are the case studies. One weakness of the book is that it does not contain a concluding chapter.

The book considers the role of state-led agrarian reform (e.g., Zimbabwe) but is primarily focused on rural struggles for

land and control from the grassroots. Some of the movements examined are large and nationally significant, e.g., MST in Brazil; other movements are not as large but sub-nationally significant, e.g., Zapatista struggle in Chiapas, Mexico; other movements are small, e.g., various local-level land occupations in India. Some of the case studies focus on central rural struggles today (e.g., MST in Brazil), while other chapters miss key land struggles. For instance the chapter on India excludes discussion of tenancy reform in West Bengal and land reform in Kerala.

Chapter one by Moyos & Yeros provides a survey of contemporary research on what they call the “agrarian question.” It places the book in the context of contemporary research that examines such issues as conflict resolution/failed states, food security & the international agro-food system. They highlight how globalization and neoliberal policies have led to a declining role for the state; but Moyo & Yeros argue that the national level continues to be a critical focal point for understanding rural change today. Chapter one does the following: it surveys changes to national and international agriculture since World War II; it argues that the Southern peasantry is not ‘disappearing’ (which seems to be debated among the authors, see chapter by Bernstein, p.84) but in fact turning into a semi-proletariat; it examines the limited role of formal social organizations (e.g., NGOs, trade unions) to advance rural interests; and finally it examines the characteristics of new social movements.

Chapter five considers land policy and land occupations in South Africa and finds post-apartheid land reform less successful than expected. This is due to the limitations of market-based reform (requiring a willing buyer and seller); limited additional supports provided to new farmers; and limited support from government and NGOs (p.150-151). The chapter then examines grassroots struggles for land and states that some programs hold some promise but finds that, “the struggle for land is largely defensive in nature. It is not underwritten by a coherent political programme of social change” (p.157) and the author concludes that, “the social movements in South Africa have some considerable way to go before they find the unity and resolve to identify and fight their common enemy (p. 161).” In contrast, Moyo’s & Yeros’ chapter 6, concludes on a more positive note regarding land reform and grassroots land occupations in Zimbabwe. This chapter examines land reform dynamics in Zimbabwe from the

colonial period and considers its relationship to land occupations led by the War Veterans' Association, particularly since 1997. They argue that the heavy international criticism of the land reform process in Zimbabwe is misplaced as it fails to recognize the class nature of the struggle: "There is certainly much to criticize in Zimbabwe's land reform process. But this would be impossible without identifying its class structure and dynamics, its weaknesses and failures, but also its successes and, indeed, its fundamentally progressive nature (p. 188)." The positive assessment of the land reform is premised in the authors' identification of internal (proletariat & capital) and international (national & imperial) conflicts that constrain the process. The authors do not directly address criticisms of the land reform process (e.g., disorganized land allocation, limited state support for new farmers).

Again, the absence of a concluding chapter is a limitation of the book. A conclusion that uses the evidence from the case studies to test the authors' hypothesis that grassroots rural movements are a significant progressive force would have been very useful. In my reading of the case studies, the evidence is mixed.

I think this is an important book that provides significant case studies and surveys that would be useful for studies in agriculture, rural development and rural sociology at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

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