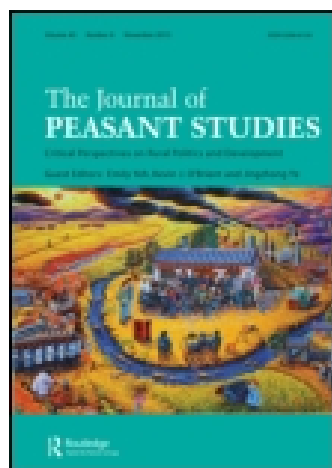


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Introduction: New directions in agrarian political economy

Madeleine Fairbairn, Jonathan Fox, S. Ryan Isakson, Michael Levien, Nancy Peluso, Shahra Razavi, Ian Scoones and K. Sivaramakrishnan

For four decades, *The Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)* has served as a principal arena for the formation and dissemination of cutting-edge research and theory. It is globally renowned as a key site for documenting and analyzing variegated trajectories of agrarian change across space and time. Over the years, authors have taken new angles as they reinvigorated classic questions and debates about agrarian transition, resource access and rural livelihoods. This introductory essay highlights the four classic themes represented in Volume 1 of the *JPS* anniversary collection: land and resource dispossession, the financialization of food and agriculture, vulnerability and marginalization, and the blurring of the rural-urban relations through hybrid livelihoods. Contributors show both how new iterations of long-evident processes continue to catch peasants and smallholders in the crosshairs of crises and how many manage to face these challenges, developing new sources and sites of livelihood production.

Keywords: agrarian transitions; land; dispossession; financialization; vulnerability; urbanization; migration

Introduction

Forty years have passed since the first issue of *The Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)* was launched. The ‘broadly based but rigorous political economy’ of peasant societies called for in its first editorial statement continues to flourish (Byres and Shanin 1973, 1). New trajectories of agrarian change generated by advanced capitalism, transformed political contexts and the emergence of new actors and social forces are prompting fresh research and theoretical reconstructions of classic questions of agrarian transition central to debates in *JPS* for many decades.

The contributions to this anniversary collection are testaments to the ongoing relevance of these questions to scholarly, activist and policy research. The essays in Volume 2 will focus on questions of agri-food systems and food sovereignty. In Volume 1, four themes are highlighted: land and resource dispossession, the financialization of food and agriculture, vulnerability and marginalization in an era of crisis, and the blurring of the rural/urban dichotomy in hybrid livelihoods. Many of these have been the subject of debate over the last 40 years, yet contemporary processes of agrarian change have generated fresh theoretical insights and important new lines of research.

Land and resource dispossession

Processes of land and resource dispossession, as well as their political drivers and consequences, have long been an emphasis of research on agrarian change. Yet in the last decade, diverse forms of land dispossession – often called ‘land grabs’ – have refocused

scholarly research, debate and analysis. *JPS* has been a key site for documentation of the unprecedented extent of land and resource dispossession in the past few years, including many papers and several collections. This collection does not comprehensively address these contributions' arguments, but instead highlights several new dimensions of dispossession in relation to land and other resources.

Current research on land and resource dispossession builds on at least two previous waves of scholarly interest. The significance of European enclosures for capitalist development spurred fierce debates among Marxists and other social theorists for many decades (Dobb 1947; Hilton 1976; Aston and Philpin 1985), while their implications for agrarian transitions outside of the West were hotly contested in *JPS* and other journals in the 1970s and 1980s. In this first generation of dispossession scholarship, expropriation was largely seen as an historical stage in the development of capitalism – or so-called 'primitive accumulation' – although paths to capitalism varied (Lenin 1967; Bernstein 1982; Kautsky [1899] 1988; Byres 1991). At the time, expropriation was rarely viewed as an ongoing process recursively linked to advanced capitalism.

Agricultural land expropriations and other forms of dispossession nevertheless showed no sign of abating; scholars in every region of the world documented their various forms, causes and effects.¹ The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of political movements and both scholarly and activist documentations of 'development-induced displacement'. This period brought other kinds of contemporary and historical capitalist expropriations into critical view, including conflicts over dams, roads and other infrastructure projects (Hirsch 1990; Baviskar 1995), forestry and large-scale cattle production (Guha 1989; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Peluso 1992; Fairhead and Leach 1996), and mega-mines and plantations (Mintz 1985; Stoler 1985). Many of these studies shifted attention from 'conflict in the factory and the field' to 'conflict around forests and rivers' (Baviskar 1995, 40). This period also saw the rise of political ecology as an approach to understanding environmental relationships and conflicts, including in agrarian settings (Blaikie 1985; Peet and Watts 1996; Neumann 1999; Carney 2001). This lineage of scholarship on displacement and the politics of resource access and control might be termed the second generation of dispossession studies, and it continues as a vibrant research program in the pages of *JPS* and other social science journals.

A third wave of dispossession studies has been prompted by the apparent acceleration of 'land grabs', mentioned above, as well as resistance to them in many parts of the world since roughly the mid-2000s. Though the precise extent of such grabs is difficult to quantify on the ground, the resurgence of publications and research on these latest, extensive dispossessions is not just an artifact of the academy. As conflicts around plantations, mines, dams, conservation projects, Special Economic Zones and other forms of urban-industrial development proliferate, new questions are being raised about land and property relations under advanced capitalism. This has generated renewed interest in Marx's theory of primitive accumulation and its reformulation by David Harvey as 'accumulation by dispossession' (De Angelis 2004; Kelly 2011; Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Hall 2012; Levien 2012). To what extent and how, scholars ask, can such concepts be reconstructed to illuminate the regionally diverse land expropriations of globalized but locally articulated capitalisms?

¹This literature, as well as many others alluded to in this introduction, is vast and impossible to do justice to here.

Recent research on regional political economies of dispossession has greatly enriched our understanding of the ever-shifting relationships between land, varied social formations and capitalism. New forms of agrarian politics and power relations, involving diverse actors and an array of natural resources, have opened up fresh avenues for debate, generated novel interpretations of the most classic works, and promise to inspire future generations of agrarian researchers. Two contributions in this collection cleave particularly closely to the traditional concerns of agrarian studies: in their contribution, Liam Campling and Elizabeth Havice explore the extraction of ground rents from an unexpected source, while in his paper, Julien-François Gerber analyzes the impacts of rural indebtedness.

Current debates about agrarian change extend beyond 'land' and landed property to encompass the air, climate and bodies of water. Of course, control over water resources has long been a concern of agrarian scholars, particularly the political economy of irrigation (e.g. Frankel 1971; Boyce 1987) and state-led river basin development (e.g. Barkin and King 1970). Yet the focus has broadened in recent years and *JPS* has featured many papers on new forms of water control, including its governance for consumption or production, or as a socio-natural context for the Earth's contested and stressed fish stocks (e.g. Gibbon 1997; Woodhouse 2012; Magee 2013; Tapela 2013). The latter focus is represented in this collection by the Campling and Havice contribution, which extends Marxian theories of ground rent to the property relations of marine fisheries. The authors argue that we need to understand 'exclusive economic zones' (EEZs), the fisheries between 12 and 200 nautical miles from land that contain 90 percent of global marine catch, as a form of modern landed property, challenging the claims of neo-classical economists who consider these fisheries as open access or non-property. Campling and Havice demonstrate that coastal states have had property rights in these fisheries since the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), allowing them to capture ground-rent through access payments from private capital. Following Marx's analysis of rent in Volume 3 of *Capital*, Campling and Havice argue that the neo-classical understanding of rent as a market-determined payment for accessing unevenly productive resources neglects the 'absolute' dimension of rent, which is based on historically contingent and politically contested claims to ownership. Their contribution underscores the potential extensions of agrarian political economy analysis to non-landed resources.

Like land and natural resource control, the role of debt in agrarian formations has been central to agrarian studies since its inception and has remained an important topic for scholars of agrarian societies over the past several decades. As a mechanism of exploitation, social differentiation, labor control and dispossession, debt continues to be a defining feature of rural lives and an important theme of scholarship, including sharp debates within *JPS*.² Gerber's contribution to this collection offers a panoramic survey of this literature, while advancing a broader conception of debt's numerous roles. Debt has been an important lever of accumulation, differentiation and labor control since early modern agrarian transitions. In addition, it has frequently enabled the diffusion of capitalist cultural practices and rationalities, dissolved social solidarity and contributed to ecological destruction (e.g. via subsidized credit for the expansion of livestock production). Gerber's fine-grained categorization of the forms and effects of debt thus consolidates the findings of agrarian studies over many decades and illuminates avenues for future research on rural livelihoods enmeshed in debt.

²See Banaji (1977); Hamid (1982); Islam (1985); Brass (1986); Srivastava (1989); Nazir (2000); Washbrook (2006); Shah (2012); Gray and Dowd-Urbe (2013).

If agrarian political economy continues to examine, as Kautsky ([1899] 1988, 12) put it, ‘whether and how capital is seizing hold of agriculture’, it has thus also expanded in the last few decades to examine the ways capital is seizing hold of land and natural resources more broadly, both destroying and reconfiguring social and socio-natural relations (e.g. Van der Ploeg 1993; Akram-Lodhi 1998; Hart 2002; Guthman 2004; McMichael 2012). As global capitalism penetrates agrarian formations and commons in new ways, agrarian scholars continue to reconstruct the theoretical heritage of the classic ‘agrarian question’, producing fresh insights on trajectories of agrarian change and politics.

The financialization of food and agriculture

One of the most important engines of transformation of the global agri-food system – and therefore of agrarian livelihoods – relates to the financial sector’s recent rise in power and prominence. In the early 1970s, a suite of inter-related developments referred to generally as ‘financialization’ initiated sweeping changes across the global economic landscape. These changes have provided powerful new mechanisms of accumulation, and they intersect in numerous ways with the current wave of land and resource dispossession (McMichael 2012; Russi 2013). If early modern enclosures in western Europe and European powers’ control of arable land in Asian, African and Latin American colonies were wedded to ideas of agricultural improvement and increased productivity, the early twenty-first century has unleashed international processes of land appropriation driven largely by speculative interests. Three contributions in this collection – by Ryan Isakson, Madeleine Fairbairn and Jennifer Clapp – explore the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which finance is transforming agriculture and agri-food systems.

In seeing financialization as another dimension of ever-expanding capitalist processes, we recognize that its multi-faceted forms and effects have historical precedents, both in changing political economies and in scholarly analyses. Marxist scholars have, today and in the past, noted a growing reliance on financial profits in response to capitalist crises of accumulation caused by increasing international competition (Arrighi 1994; Harvey 2010) or by corporate concentration and the rise of monopoly capital (Magdoff and Sweezy 1987). On one level, therefore, contemporary mechanisms of financialization represent changing paths of capitalist accumulation (Arrighi 1994; Krippner 2011). The size and profitability of the financial sector in many national economies has ballooned relative to other sectors. Further, many non-financial corporations have expanded into financial service provision as a lucrative supplement to their regular productive activities (Krippner 2011). Buoyed by investor expectations, and only loosely tethered to real assets, financial profits can soar even when the productive economy is stagnant. The shift to finance, however, is a double-edged sword: some scholars argue that its rejuvenating effects have been coupled with increasingly frequent market bubbles and economic crises (Kindleberger and Aliber 2005; Parenteau 2005).

On another level, financialization has meant a reconfiguration of the institutional relationships between corporations and investors. Over the last three decades, the doctrine of ‘shareholder value’, which dictates that the purpose of a corporation is to create returns for shareholders above all else, has taken hold in corporate boardrooms everywhere (Useem 1996; Fligstein 2001). The shareholder value revolution has meant an increased alignment between the interests of stockholders and those of corporate managers via such mechanisms as manager compensation in stock options. Davis (2009, 5) compares these shifts to a Copernican revolution: ‘from a social system orbiting around corporations and their imperatives, we have moved to a market-centered system in which the corporations

themselves – along with households and governments – are guided by the gravitational pull of financial markets’.

Isakson’s contribution to this collection provides a comprehensive overview of such transformations in the agri-food system, touching everything from agricultural inputs to the final products found on the supermarket shelf. Most evident has been the increasing role of financial actors in markets for agricultural commodity derivatives. Formerly a means for agricultural producers, traders and processors to hedge against possible price changes, these markets have recently seen major increases in the participation of financial speculators (Clapp 2012). The food crisis of 2008 brought this speculation into sharp relief, as commentators began to argue that the herd-like behavior of financial investors could be behind the increasing volatility of global grain markets (Masters 2008; De Schutter 2010b).

Beyond grain markets, financialization is reshaping the ways that food traders and retailers do business. Supermarket chains are subject to takeover and restructuring by private equity consortia, while they themselves increasingly offer financial services such as credit cards and check cashing to consumers (Burch and Lawrence 2009). Financial actors are increasingly investing in grain storage and transportation infrastructure, while the major grain trading companies have also begun selling commodity derivatives to third-party clients (Murphy, Burch, and Clapp 2012). In his essay, Isakson stresses this blurring boundary between financial and non-financial economic action. He further argues that financialization has exacerbated the already unequal power relations within agri-food supply chains. Retailers and traders, now beholden to financial backers, are finding new ways to produce shareholder value at the expense of the most vulnerable food system actors. In this way, food workers and small farmers find their positions further weakened in the drive for financial profits.

Madeleine Fairbairn addresses a critical finance-related development of interest to *JPS* readers and other scholars of agrarian change: the financial sector’s growing interest in farmland since 2007. Students of the current land rush, mentioned above, have made clear that high agricultural commodity prices and the search for dependable investments in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis have made farmland an increasingly attractive investment, with many new farmland funds available. Following Harvey’s (1982) early arguments about land as fictitious capital, Fairbairn argues that new farmland investors treat land as a financial asset in itself and that this drive to own real and productive assets is unusual for the sector. Fairbairn concludes that farmland financialization could increase land prices and volatility, ultimately fueling smallholder dispossession.

The question of potential paths to resistance in the food sector is primarily addressed in Volume 2 of this collection, but it is also taken up in this volume by Clapp, who uses the concept of ‘distancing’ (Princen 1997) to shed light on the political dynamics of the financialized food system. She contends that the immense geographic distances within agri-food supply chains are being compounded by another kind of distance that stems from increasing financial activity and the proliferation of agriculture-based financial investment tools. The growing number of financial intermediaries and the abstract nature of many financial investments, she argues, create a knowledge gap that obscures the negative social and environmental outcomes of financialization. This distancing has political ramifications; it opens up space for competing narratives that counter post-2008 calls to regulate financial investment. Taken together, the contributions by Clapp, Isakson and Fairbairn illuminate multiple dimensions of the financialization of food and agriculture, revealing developments

that have produced new forms of vulnerability and precarity for rural people across the world.³

Vulnerability and marginalization in an era of crisis

From its inception, *JPS* has been a key forum for analyses of the marginalization and vulnerability of the rural poor within their broader historical, social and political-economic contexts (e.g. Byres and Shanin 1973; Bernstein and Byres 2001). These contexts have, however, changed dramatically in the four decades since the journal was launched. Two essays in this volume address important new stressors in the lives of marginal populations: climate change and rising food prices.

Increasingly, scholars predict that climate hazards will be crucial influences on agrarian livelihoods, particularly for subsistence and other small producers (Eakin 2006; Mercer, Perales, and Wainwright 2012). In this volume, Jesse Ribot argues that policy makers and scientists tend to depoliticize the anthropogenic origins of climate change, occluding the social processes that render certain populations more vulnerable than others to climate hazards. Ribot sees the causes of climate change and a group's relative vulnerability as inextricably linked. Reducing vulnerability is partially contingent on afflicted populations possessing the entitlements (i.e. rights and opportunities) to control resources that allow them to withstand climatic events (Sen 1981; Drèze and Sen 1989). Yet surplus extraction from the agrarian economy leaves certain people unable to act on their own behalf or to influence the provision of social protections. Reducing vulnerability is thus contingent on the ability of all population segments to influence the broader political economic processes shaping both entitlements and governance (Watts 1983, 1991; Appadurai 1984; Ribot and Peluso 2003).

Rising and increasingly volatile food prices are another contemporary stressor. Since 2007, wide swings in food prices have not only exacerbated the uncertainties faced by agricultural producers, but the record spikes punctuating that volatility have hurt the poorest food consumers (FAO 2009; De Janvry and Sadoulet 2010; Ghosh 2010; Spratt 2013). The corresponding erosion of food entitlements has generated food protests and political instability throughout the global South (Schneider 2008; Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009; Bush 2010; Moseley, Camey, and Becker 2010).

While dominant narratives attribute food protests and riots to population growth and Malthusian-style scarcities, critical analyses suggest that they are driven less by shortages than by gaps between expected and actual food entitlements (Hossain 2009; Patel and McMichael 2009; Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013). Much as the commodification of agricultural output unraveled the moral economies of 'pre-capitalist' societies (Scott 1976; Watts 1983; Swift 1989; Thompson 1991), neo-liberal policies restructuring agriculture and international commerce have exposed contemporary peasantries to a variety of interrelated threats, including: competition from subsidized industrial agricultural products from the North, streamlined supply chains that reduce the market power of small producers, rising input costs and reduced access to formal credit, and increased competition for farmland.

As Hossain and Kalita argue here, contemporary food protests are driven by beliefs about how food economies should function and the sense that governing authorities are not meeting their responsibilities. Drawing upon research in multiple sites in Asia and

³A trend noted by Friedmann (1993), much earlier.

Africa, they compare food politics during the 2011 global food price spike with the politics of ‘moral economies’ expressed during the eighteenth-century English food riots described by E.P. Thompson (1971, 1991). Hossain and Kalita document the widespread belief that access to food should not be governed by markets alone because markets can be manipulated by powerful actors. As in Thompson’s examples, the poor and working classes protest to spur public authorities to act.

However, the feudal paternalism of eighteenth-century Europe has given way to *laissez faire* capitalism and representative democracy. The terms of negotiating moral economies have evolved accordingly (Scott 1976; Edelman 2005; Patel and McMichael 2009). As Hossain and Kalita argue, protesters no longer appeal to the reciprocal obligations inhering in patron-client relationships; instead, they must play to the electoral accountability of governing leaders. They also appeal to moral sentiments that basic subsistence needs should trump speculation and other forms of profiteering. Correspondingly, there has been a growing movement at multiple scales, both national and transnational, to formalize access to food from a moral claim to a codified right (Edelman 2005; De Schutter 2010a; Narula 2010). Attempts to ensure food rights include guaranteed access to wage labor (Argentina, Bangladesh, India), the public provisioning of agricultural inputs (Nicaragua), access to affordably priced food (India), and cash transfers (Brazil). Though their effectiveness varies, right-to-food programs and other social protection mechanisms contribute to the continued viability of many rural livelihoods.

Hybrid livelihoods and the blurring of the rural/urban dichotomy

As the literatures on rural livelihoods have highlighted, the dichotomies between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ that are conventionally deployed to define peasantries and the poor in general do not hold in the contemporary context, a condition referred to as the ‘new rurality’ (Kay 2008; Hecht 2010). Rather, rural households are, in the words of Susana Hecht (this volume), ‘largely semi-proletarianized, semi-globalized and increasingly semi-urban’. In response to the various encroachments of capitalist development, smallholders’ agrarian livelihoods have not disappeared so much as diversified and hybridized, albeit with varying degrees of success. In many countries, agricultural income and rurality have been largely delinked, with various classes of labor remaining in rural areas but relying less and less on agricultural earnings (Wilson and Rigg 2003; Bernstein 2009; Fox and Haight 2010). Three of the contributions to this collection – by Andries du Toit and David Neves, Thi Nguyen Minh Nguyen and Catherine Locke, and Susana Hecht – evaluate the contemporary processes of agrarian change producing these hybrid livelihoods.

Du Toit and Neves analyze how the interplay between institutionalized inequality and economic agency give rise to the hybrid livelihoods of South Africa’s poorest rural people. Specifically, they examine what they call the ‘truncated agrarian transition’ of rural South Africans who are dislodged from agricultural commodity production but lack opportunities in the non-farm economy. Du Toit and Neves’ research challenges two dominant yet competing narratives – one which asserts that displaced populations will be seamlessly integrated into capitalist employment and a second in which they will be cast asunder as ‘waste lives’. Instead, they describe the creative and resourceful manners by which poor South Africans cobble together complex livelihoods. These strategies muddle conventional dichotomies: households straddle rural and urban spaces, combine formal and informal sources of income, and draw upon the social care afforded by the state even as they generate revenue outside of publicly regulated spaces. Even within the context of de-agrarianization, agricultural self-provisioning is an important component of this ‘recombinant bricolage’ of

complementary activities. While it does not allow for accumulation, subsistence agriculture helps to insure vulnerable South Africans against the vagaries of market-oriented activities (see also Lipton 1968; Annis 1987; Isakson 2009).

The complementarities between market and non-market, capitalist and non-capitalist, and multi-sited urban and rural economic activities are not unique to the South African context (e.g. Bebbington 1999; Barkin 2002; Isakson 2009). Indeed, several foundational texts in agrarian studies have documented similar relationships across space and time (Warman 1980; De Janvry 1981; Deere 1990; Bryceson, Kay, and Mooij 2000). De Janvry's (1981) 'functional dualism' thesis, for example, posited that the agricultural self-provisioning of semi-proletarianized farmers subsidized their workplace wages, thereby allowing their continued marginalization and the viability of capitalist production. Nguyen and Locke make a similar argument in their contribution to this volume, albeit with an important twist: rather than subsidizing capitalist activities, non-market reproductive labor in the countryside is essential to the functioning of market socialism (see also Deere 1990).

Analyzing rural-urban migration under market transformation in Vietnam and China, Nguyen and Locke show how the two socialist governments have manipulated gender norms and the complementarities between market and non-market activities to advance their economic and development goals. The dismantling of state support for household reproduction, combined with the enclosure of land and other assets, have catalyzed circular forms of rural-urban migration. At the same time, state control mechanisms, especially systems of household registration, have helped to separate the labor of migrant workers from their social reproduction. The resulting trans-local households, which are strained by evolving gender norms and expectations, provide a low cost and flexible labor force that has fueled economic growth in the two countries.

These new spatial complexities of contemporary rural livelihoods are reshaping environmental contexts. For the first time in human history, more people live today in urban areas than in rural, and more rural people than ever depend on remittances from urban and 'Northern' sites where family members have migrated to work (Padoch *et al.* 2008). Remittances constitute the largest international transfer of funds used for bolstering livelihoods, exceeding the amount of all international aid. Some scholars have suggested that various forms of permanent and circular migration and the concomitant transfer of wages have contributed to the de-agrarianization of the countryside (Wilson and Rigg 2003), forest resurgence (Hecht *et al.* 2005) and generally more complex urban-rural relations (Padoch *et al.* 2008), in addition to the long-recognized volatilities of commodity prices.

In her contribution to this volume, Susana Hecht explores the relationship between the surprising dynamic of 'forest transition' (i.e. declining rates of deforestation and, in some cases, reforestation) and the hybridization of rural livelihoods in Latin America. Through the critical lens of a political ecologist, she considers the potential linkages and impacts that various components of new ruralities, specifically migration and remittances, cash transfers, de-agrarianization and the emergence of green markets, have on tree cover. Much like earlier political ecological accounts that challenged the Malthusian notion that deforestation is the result of population growth (Hecht 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Peluso 1992; Fairhead and Leach 1996), Hecht cautions against the simplistic narratives that attribute reforestation to urbanization and the exodus of humans from the countryside. She takes these arguments further by noting that many of Latin America's forests are inhabited but that those inhabitants' land use practices are changing in tandem with their livelihoods. Further, income from sources outside immediate agricultural production such as remittances, social care initiatives and non-farm employment have helped

reconfigure rural livelihoods and, in some instances, underpinned the continued ability to engage in agricultural production. Of course, those livelihoods have followed a variety of trajectories, including some well-off actors engaging in activities that negatively impact forests, such as cattle-ranching, mineral extraction and plantation agriculture. Even so, however, the growth of tree plantations in the region also plays into forest transition, albeit in different ways than other forms of reforestation (Kroger 2014). In short, the agrarian roots of forest transition are complex and, as Hecht suggests, beg for a reconfiguration of the classic agrarian question, one that considers the contemporary hybridities of rural and urban landscapes and livelihoods. In so doing, she lays the foundation for a fascinating line of future research.

Conclusion

The authors in this fortieth anniversary collection document how the related pressures of financialization, transformed environmental contexts and diverse new forms of enclosure and exclusion are catching smallholders in the crosshairs of globalized food, energy, economic and environmental crises. They demonstrate the varied ways in which peasants and smallholders hold on, develop new sources of livelihoods and use mobilities to their advantage. The classic concerns around agrarian questions that filled the pages of *JPS* 40 years ago remain relevant in the radically changed political economic contexts of the present. Yet new contexts have also prompted new lines of empirical research and progressive theoretical reconstructions (e.g. Burawoy 1998). Forty years on, peasant and agrarian studies remains vibrant and relevant, offering new insights into the challenges of agrarian societies the world over.

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Madeleine Fairbairn is a teaching postdoctoral fellow at Goucher College. Her previous research has examined the global food sovereignty movement and land grabbing in Mozambique. Her current work explores growing interest in farmland on the part of the financial sector, as well as the policy debate surrounding foreign farmland investment in Brazil. Email: Madeleine.Fairbairn@goucher.edu

Jonathan Fox is a professor in the School of International Service at American University. His publications include *Accountability politics: power and voice in rural Mexico* (2007) and *Subsidizing inequality: Mexican Corn policy since NAFTA* (2010). He currently works with the Open Government Partnership and serves on the boards of directors of Oxfam America and Fundar. For publications, see <http://jonathan-fox.org/>. Email: fox@american.edu

S. Ryan Isakson is an assistant professor of International Development Studies and Geography at the University of Toronto. He has conducted research on peasant livelihoods and the cultivation of agricultural biodiversity, land reform, agro-food certification and compensation for environmental services. His current research focuses upon the financialization of agricultural risk and the political economy of oil palm development in Guatemala. Email: ryan.isakson@utoronto.ca

Michael Levien is an assistant professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. His current research focuses on the transformation of rural land dispossession in post-liberalization India. Email: levien@jhu.edu

Nancy Peluso is Henry J. Vaux Professor of Forest Policy and Professor of Society and Environment in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at the University of California, Berkeley. She has authored or co-edited a number of books, the most recent of which are *Frontiers of land control in Southeast Asia* (2012, with Christian Lund), and *Taking Southeast Asia to market* (2008, with Joseph Nevins). Her current project is an ethnography of globally connected, resource-based livelihoods and landscape transformations in Indonesia. Email: npeluso@berkeley.edu

Shahra Razavi is Chief of Research and Data Section at UN [United Nations] Women, where she oversees the preparation of two flagship reports. She specializes in the gender dimensions of development, with a particular focus on livelihoods, agrarian issues, social policy and care. Her recent publications include *the global crisis and transformative social change* (with Peter

Utting and Rebecca Varghese Buchholz, eds., 2012, Palgrave, Basingstoke) and *Seen, heard and counted: rethinking care in a development context* (special issue of *Development and Change*, 2011). Email: shahrashoub.razavi@unwomen.org.

Ian Scoones is a Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies and Director of the Social, Technological, and Environmental Pathways (STEPS) Centre, which is part of the Economic and Social Research Council at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. He is a member of *The Journal of Peasant Studies*' editorial collective. Email: I.Scoones@ids.ac.uk

Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan is Dinakar Singh Professor of India & South Asian Studies, Professor of Anthropology, Professor of Forestry & Environmental Studies, Professor of International & Area Studies and Co-Director, Program in Agrarian Studies, at Yale University. He is the author or co-editor of several books, most recently *India's environmental history* (two volumes, 2011), *Ecologies of urbanism in India* (2013) and *Shifting ground: people, animals, and mobility in India* (2014). His current research examines environmental litigation in India. Email: k.sivaramakrishnan@yale.edu