

“Cotton, control, and continuity in disguise The political economy of agrarian transformation in lowland Tajikistan”

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What constitutes the political economy of agrarian transformation in post-socialist Tajikistan? How and to what extent does capital accumulation in the agrarian economy occur? These are the principal questions of this thesis, which is inspired by neo-Marxist theories on rural capital accumulation and extraction.

The focus is southwest-lowland Tajikistan, where the Soviet heritage continues to shape the agrarian political economy. To examine the agrarian question in 21st-century Tajikistan means taking into account both agrarian production relations and dynamics at the micro-level of rural households, and macro-level developments such as the arrival of foreign agri-businesses and the currents of international labour migration.

Theoretically this thesis has been informed by critical peasant studies, including agrarian political economy and rural livelihood analyses. In particular, this thesis addresses property rights, the anthropology of debt, and the logic of cotton production in order to understand the continuity in agrarian production relations and local land politics. Regarding property relations, I contend that we cannot understand actual, effective control over land if we do not unpack ownership as a bundle of rights, and untangle formal property from access and ability to exploit a resource, which, in this context, implies land. “The concept of control” (Burawoy 1985, 26) is central to my analyses, i.e. “whom or what is being controlled, for what ends, how, and by whom” – in line with Bernstein’s (2010) questions on the agrarian political economy. In so doing, the aim is to contribute to theories on agrarian transformation both within as well as outside the former Soviet and post-socialist realm. Innovative in terms of its analyses, this thesis firstly not only focuses on domestic state-society relations, but also on the way in which international financial institutions and foreign donors interact with the state. Secondly, unlike most studies informed by agrarian political economy that tend to pay little attention to nature and geography, this thesis explicitly looks at the way in which altitude, remoteness, and crop specificities interact with the political economy. These issues are examined in an introductory chapter, four separate articles, and a concluding chapter.

Among other conclusions, I contend that sheer access to arable land in Tajikistan alone is no guarantee for rural well-being. Arable land has little value when actors lack the capability to make effective use of it. In this regard the context of Tajikistan diverges from global dynamics in which financial institutions, (domestic) elites, transnational companies, and financial institutions increasingly buy up (or grab) farmland, as they (re)discover agricultural land as a highly lucrative asset. Furthermore, I conclude that Tajikistan’s pathway of agrarian change is characterised by a strong continuation in terms of relations of production; hence the title of this research work: cotton, control, and continuity in disguise. This has been the case in spite of the opening up and liberalisation of the economy, the ensuing exposure to the world market and the forging of transnational relations. Many actors in Tajikistan itself are unaware of this striking continuity, in part because reform statistics only focus on “progress” and “change.” Relations of dependency have continued, and that is why I refer to Burawoy’s (2001b) “transition without transformation”: under capitalist relations of production —a new order— we can observe continuity. Agrarian production relations carry a stamp of serfdom, as rural dwellers continue to be tied to land and are unable to build up an independent rural livelihood.

Genuine rural development and an improvement of rural wellbeing in Tajikistan can only be realised when farmers’ and rural dwellers’ autonomy is achieved. This entails decision-making power and control over farmland and farm revenues. It would require a thorough alteration of power relationships within the agrarian economy.