From the commune to the 'borderless world': Russian conceptions of land and ownership

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Abstract

This contribution engages with the episodes in the history of the Russian 'property debate' to showcase its decolonial temperaments and their contested outcomes. Russia has offered a wide-ranging and disputed decolonial optic built in opposition to the Eurocentric idea of private property, which was then swiftly mobilized against Russia's own citizens and neighbors. Among many, the ideas of 'commoning,' ingrained in the everyday life of the peasant land commune, were utilized by the Russian philosophical movements as an antithesis to the liberal property based on legitimate ownership and a bundle of rights. This decolonial project was then, in turn, mobilized to attach people to the land, limit their mobilization and produce compliant subjects of the late imperial and later socialist regimes. Moreover, some took this imaginary to argue for the expansion of a pan-Slavic nation-state based on the unity of narod *(the people) and their collective ownership of all-Slavic soil beyond Russia's national borders. With these points in mind, this essay seeks to stimulate a discussion about the conceptual roots of Russia's complicated relationship with both the private property of its own citizens and the territorial sovereignty of its neighbors.*

Introduction: Russia in the 'property debate'

Russia's long and disputed history of private property has attracted the attention of numerous scholars beyond the confines of the post-Soviet world. While the familiar idea of property based on Eurocentric experiences frames exclusionary and individual claims to land, Russia offers a different model. The study of the Russian property relationships was undertaken through different thematic lenses of agrarian reforms, post-socialist transitions, large-scale land grabbing and informality in rural development, with 'critical agrarian studies' as a primary contribution of Russian intellectual tradition on land rights to the global scholarship. Revolutionary events of the twentieth century, in which peasant society played a critical role, contributed particularly to the production of iconic and recognized works related to the study of agrarian class struggle, primitive accumulation of land, communal land management and bottom-up peasant land rights.[1] The original explorations into the Russian peasant land tenure – its ill-conceived and widely debated backwardness, customary social organization and political-economic characteristics – have been central to this scholarship. However, since similar issues around the political economy of rural life were examined in detail at the turn of the century, scholarly interest regarding the study of land privatization in Russia lost its global center stage. Despite the foundational role of communal land management in critical agrarian studies, Russia's complicated relationships with private property are often taken for granted, without much needed reference and reflections on the early traditions of the Russian land commune and its later conceptualizations.

Russia remains a challenge for understanding property in land, constituting what Maxim Trudolyubov recently termed the „tragedy of property"[2] – or the chronic inability of landowners to acquire and legitimately maintain the bundle of guarantees often assigned to the right of ownership in a modern liberal sense. There are, thus, two issues concerning the Russian property debate that call for more consideration. Firstly, practices of land privatization do not fall easily under the Eurocentric conceptual frames of private property, often leading to mistaken judgements. The right-bearing quality of property in modern Western discourse particularly faces challenges in the study of post-socialist land relationships that find a better explanation through alternative frameworks of „debts, obligations, and liabilities," „slow violence," „dispersed dispossession" or „fuzzy" qualities of property

[1] James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State, Yale University Press 1998; Alexander Gerschenkron, Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1962; Teodor Shanin, Peasants and Peasant Societies, Penguin Modern Sociology Readings 1971; Eric R. Wolf, Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, University of Oklahoma Press 1999.

[2] Maxim Trudolyubov, The Tragedy of Property: Private Life, Ownership and the Russian State, John Wiley & Sons 2018.

in the context of incomplete and ambiguous land rights.[3] Secondly, the proliferations of informal property regimes and a complicated legacy of collective land management found in pre- and post-socialist Russia have been either perceived as a temporary stage prior to property or systemically lacking in global discourse on the topic, while they still require a more careful investigation.

The conceptual potential of alternative property relationships developed in Russian rural society is rather underutilized despite the recent turns to decolonize property from a myriad of regional perspectives. This comes as a surprise in a geographic discipline that has recently undertaken a long project of conceptual decentering and decolonization of space/power relationships from the 'containers' of Anglo-American knowledge production. The decolonial project, however, has been successfully accomplished in relation to the fundamental concepts, such as state, nation or territory.[4] Yet, property is one concept that most often still remains grounded in the ideas of legitimate ownership, individual rights and clearly defined boundaries.[5]

[3]Petr Jehlička, Eastern Europe and the Geography of Knowledge Production: The Case of the Invisible Gardener, in: Progress in Human Geography 45 (2021), pp. 1218–1236; Katarina Kusic, Studying Human-soil Relationships in Southeast Europe. In this issue; Michael Burawoy / Katherine Verdery, Fuzzy Property: Rights, Power, and Identity in Transylvania's Decollectivization, in: Michael Burawoy / Katherine Verdery (eds.), Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 1999, ch. 3; Caroline Humphrey / Katherine Verdery (eds.), Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy, Routledge 2020; Alexander Vorbrugg, Not about Land, Not Quite a Grab: Dispersed Dispossession in Rural Russia, in: Antipode 51 (2019), pp. 1011–1031.

[4]Sam Halvorsen, Decolonising Territory: Dialogues with Latin American Knowledges and Grassroots Strategies, in: Progress in Human Geography 43/5 (2019), pp. 790–814; Alison Mountz, Political Geography I: Reconfiguring Geographies of Sovereignty, in: Progress in Human Geography 37/6 (2013), pp. 829–841; Anke Schwarz / Monika Streule, A Transposition of Territory: Decolonized Perspectives in Current Urban Research, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 40/5 (2016), pp. 1000–1016.

[5]Nicholas Blomley, Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid, in: Annals of the Association of American Geographers 93/1 (2003), pp. 121–141; Nicholas Blomley, The Territory of Property, in: Progress in Human Geography 40/5 (2016), pp. 593–609.

However, some recent works have already started to question the fundamental nature of property embedded in Eurocentric rationality.[6]

Analyzing collectivist property regimes as a clear-cut alternative to Western ideals of land ownership would, however, be a crude oversimplification. Russia's practices of the land commune, though seen in many renowned works as an antipode to capitalist relationships (e.g. works of Lenin, Marx and Luxemburg), has generated a lot of debate. The practices of 'commoning' in the Russian countryside have not only produced stateless enclaves for the collective struggle of peasant societies[7], but were also swiftly rediscovered and utilized by the influential statist philosophical movements to denote Russia's otherness from the West and, at the same time, develop different forms of subjugation and colonialism. Throughout the early 20th century, these customary traditions of peasant relationships with land were rediscovered by Russian intellectuals only to frame and legitimize new practices of spatial appropriation in its near neighbors and amongst its own populations. It is with the intention to uncover these complex relationships that I take a careful account of the Russian practices of collective property relationships and their various representations in the traditions of Russian political thought as the main point for discussion in this essay.

The Russian land commune, or the famous *mir*, was simultaneously a space of peasant resistance to capitalist pressures and a strategic site intended for the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of the landless. As Rosa Luxemburg believed, *mir* could potentially offer a „shortcut to the blessed land of socialism and lead directly to a higher social development [...], without the capitalist phase and its

[6]Naama Blatman-Thomas / Libby Porter, Placing Property: Theorizing the Urban from Settler Colonial Cities, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 43/1 (2019), pp. 30–45; Ananya Roy, Dis/possessive Collectivism: Property and Personhood at City's End, in: Geoforum 80 (2017), pp. 1–11.

[7]Dorothy Atkinson, The End of the Russian Land Commune, 1905–1930. Stanford University Press 1983; Carol S. Leonard, Agrarian Reform in Russia: The Road from Serfdom, Cambridge University Press 2010.

attendant misery as experienced in Western Europe."[8] There were also others who saw the land commune as an anachronism of the past and a backbone of Russian „backwardness"[9], as often considered by many proponents who used the means of property to „distinguish civilized man from the primitives."[10] With this, one could use Russia not only as a characteristic example of the „tragedy of property," but also the tragedy of the commune. While landed property is often used to „fix people to territory" and provide for rightful form of ownership[11], the early Soviet state managed to utilize the land commune to achieve the forced attachment of mass labor and uncontrolled subjects to the soil and limit their mobilization. These contested ways of framing land use and ownership contribute significantly, if not directly, to the 'unrule of law' and the rise of landed oligarchy in Russia today. Russia's possession of one of the biggest mineral and energy reserves and the largest masses of productive (and largely unused) arable lands[12], which were opened up for foreign investments after the 1998 financial crisis and the 2001 Land Code, created a murky ground for further speculations. This picture intensified with the global recession of 2008 that was met with a wave of a full-blown land grabs and contributed to the consolidation of the land in the hands of the few.

This essay aims to put a start to a project of uncovering the liberatory practices of collectivist land ownership throughout Russia's late imperial and early Soviet history, while, at the same time, understanding how this outright rejection of the Eurocentric ideals of 'property' by the Russian state often legitimized new modes of appropriation and exploitation. After briefly illustrating the history of the Russian land commune and its 'discovery' by the intellectual society in the following section, I explore its role as a 'decolonial' construct in Russia's political and geographic thought that justified other modes of appropriation and dispossession. This essay relies on extensive archival material collected during my fieldwork at the federal and municipal archives in Moscow and Saint Petersburg[13], and the tropes of discourse analysis of agrarian periodicals, 19th century imperial societies' surveys of the land commune, and iconic works in Russian critical agrarian studies.

(Re)discovering the Russian land commune

Land was foremost 'God's property' for peasants in the margins, distributed equally among those who worked it.[14] This 'sacralization' of soil in traditional Russian society was historically grounded in the common right to land that had been exercised in the peasant land commune for centuries. Urban intellectuals and members of imperial parties termed the commune '*obshchina*,' derived from the same root as 'society' or the 'common' (*obshchestvo* or *obshchii*), while, by contrast, peasants would use an older customary term '*mir*' to describe collective land tenure, which could also be directly translated as the whole 'World.' These contested etymologies often overlapped, but the members of the commune most often used the latter term.[15]

Despite the shared and unregulated nature of landed relationships, the land commune itself was a complex spatial unit of production. Its unique 'peasant geometry' was first 'scientifically' analyzed and rediscovered by urban intellectuals, who tried to apply the logics of classification and calculation to understand and quantify the phenomena of collective land management deeply engrained in East Slavic culture. The spatial and social organization of *mir* in the Russian Empire was initially analyzed in a survey collected by the Imperial Free Economic

[8] Rosa Luxemburg, The Accumulation of Capital., Routledge 2003, here p. 251.

[9] Yanni Kotsonis, Making Peasants Backward: Agricultural Cooperatives and the Agrarian Question in Russia, 1861–1914, Springer Berlin 1999.

[10] Henry Morgan, 1877, in Katherine Verdery / Caroline Humphrey, Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy. New York: Berg publishers 2004, here p. 4.

[11] Katherine Verdery / Caroline Humphrey, Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy. New York: Berg publishers 2004, here p. 4.

[12] World Bank, Arable Land (Hectares) 2018. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.HA?locations=RU-1W&most_recent_value_desc=true (accessed).

[13] Russian State Historical Archive, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, and the Central Municipal Archive of Moscow.

[14] Andrey Medushevskii, Proekty Argarnykh Reform v Rossii: XVIII–Nachalo XXI Veka, Berlin: Direct-Media 2015.

[15] Fedor Barykov / Anatoly Polovtsov / Pavel Sokolovskyi, Sbornik Materialov dlia Izucheniia Sel'skoi Pozemelnoi Obshchiny. Sankt Peterburg: Imperiatorskoe Vol'noe Ekonomicheskoe Obshchestvo 1880, here p. 1.

Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Husbandry and the Russian Geographical Society in 1877. Both agencies issued and distributed two surveys across the district statistical committees and local councils with questions ranging from the demographic composition of each commune to requests for freehand drawings made by the peasants of each commune's spatial plan, division into land strips and norms of land redistribution. Surprisingly, this curious but strategic surveying of the life in the Russian land commune by governmental institutions also coincided with a contrary popular movement of 'going into the people' (or *khozhdenie v narod*), during which young intellectuals, students and revolutionaries dressed in peasant clothes roamed villages learning about peasant lifestyles and inciting the locals to revolt against the state, that achieved its height in 1874.

Regarding the territorial delineation of the *mir*, the surveys identified arable lands divided into long and narrow strips assigned to each household, along with hayfields, forests, and pastures open for everyone's use.[16] Land redivision among the emancipated peasants was structured around a normative unit that was based on either demographic characteristic, such as the amount of male power or 'male souls' (*dushy*), number of 'eaters' (*edoki*) and 'foreheads' (*lby*), or socioeconomic parameters, such as the size of capital stock (*kopeiki*) or amount of 'good' or 'bad' land divided into quarters (*sokhi*).[17] The unit of measure of the land itself, however, varied widely across the regions and was hard to classify. Most communes underwent yearly land repartitioning to meet changes in the demographic composition of the households or adapt to economic instabilities, which was fairly progressive compared to peasant societies worldwide. This right to communal territorialization „defined the very essence of *obshchina*" and was seen by many as „one of the most important functions of the Russian land commune" with little analogy found in world history.[18] While serfs were assigned to use the land, owned by their seigneurs, it was still repartitioned and redistributed collectively by the village community, unlike in Western Europe and England in particular, where peasant households held hereditary rights to one or several scattered strips of land.[19]

The commune at the turn of the 20th century became a disputed ground for debate. The philosophical movement of the Slavophiles praised the ancient origins of the _obshchina and its emancipatory capacity of „accommodating social needs [...] and interests of the people."[20] While the populist proto-socialist intellectual groups celebrated the commune's potential to achieve the „highest socialist form skipping the negation of private property," since it represented a possibility of a revolutionary separation from the logics of capital and the „assembling of an autonomous alternative sociality".[21] Others believed that the commune was a mechanism of state control and a tool for tying people to the soil – one of the main aspects and goals of serfdom. Richard Pipes, for example, a renowned historian of Russia, has argued the state knew that if peasants were allowed to abandon the soil, they would „roam the country in search of easier and more remunerative work."[22] In order to accommodate serfdom, the peasants were attached to the commune where it existed or this attachment was introduced where it had been unknown previously.

[16] RGIA, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (Russian State Historical Archive), Repository 91, Inventory 2, Imperial Free Economic Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Husbandry. Sankt Peterburg: RGIA.

[17] Fedor Barykov / Anatoly Polovtsov / Pavel Sokolovskyi, Sbornik Materialov, here p. 8.

[18] Steven Nafziger, Communal Property Rights and Land Redistributions in Late Tsarist Russia, in: The Economic History Review 69/3 (2016), pp. 773–800; Judith Pallot, Land Reform in Russia, 1906–1917: Peasant Responses to Stolypin's Project of Rural Transformation, Clarendon Press 1999; Pavel Zyrianov, Krest'ianskaia Obshchina Evropeiskoi Rossii 1907–1914, Moskva: G. Nauka 1992, here p. 775

[19] Jason W. Moore, The Crisis of Feudalism: An Environmental History, in: Organization & Environment 15/3 (2002), pp. 301–322; Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons, in: Antipode 47/4 (2015), pp. 999–1020.

[20] Atkinson, The End of the Russian Land Commune, here p.21

[21] Atkinson, The End of the Russian Land Commune, here p.21

[22] Richard Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, New York: Scribner's Sons 1974, here p. 164.

Despite wide-ranging debates about the purpose and the history of the Russian land commune, it became the center stage for the revolutionary struggles throughout the early 20th century. Peasant customs of land management and collective relationships with the soil became the core of this struggle, as the peasant land law was based on oral tradition and informal agreement, incomprehensible to the statist measures and unknown in feudal Europe, where the rule of private property prevailed. The commune, surrounded by the growing industrial pressures, proletarianization of rural labor and capitalist land reforms, offered peasants the means of resistance and revealed itself as a „generator of egalitarian ideology, and a school for collective actions of the kind capable of turning into well-organized revolt overnight" as Teodor Shanin, a prominent sociologist, believed.[23] While both feudalism and socialism were built on the homogeneous systems of land ownership, meticulous practices of customary territorialization persisted in the commune.[24] Without any hand from the state, these practices served as a core of the commune's own autonomous and democratic territorial reproduction from the bottom-up.

Exploiting landed collectivism

The ideas of commoning, derived from the historical experiences of the Russian land commune, were swiftly mobilized by Russia's key political and philosophical movements to not only highlight its difference from private property but also to denote the country's unique path of development dissimilar to the West. The knowledge about collective land practices was extrapolated to construct a new decolonial project of alternative socio-spatial relationships outside the Western traditions of private property and modernity. Depicting European experiences of collective land management as „the meeting of persons brought together by chance, whose relations were established as much by the governmental and legislative measures from above, as by customs and traditions"[25], *mir* became an episteme of egalitarian society and liberatory land rights. In the words of Boris Chicherin, the Russian jurist and political philosopher, based on the ancient beginnings of Slavonic law, *mir* was a „family at large, it was the owner of the land," in contrast to the means of European land ownership based on individualism and scientific rationality.[26] These ideas became the core principle of the leading philosophical movements of Narodnichestvo ('peopleism'), Pochvenichestvo ('return to the native soil') and Slavophilism, that searched for a suitable image to illustrate Russia's political project of the unity of *narod* (the people) and their collective ownership of all-Slavic soil that spills beyond Russia's boundaries.

Other political movements used this seemingly decolonial imaginary of 'commoning' to argue for the creation of a large imperial entity of Slavdom or a pan-Slavic nation based on the common Russian identity with the East Slavic culture. Building on the ideas of late Slavophilism, the Russian ethnologist and geographer Vladimir Lamanskiy developed a conceptual category of '*sredinniy mir*' (or the median world) to describe the unique aspects of the East Slavic realm that separated Russia from Europe. One of the core differences between the Greek-Slavic and Roman-Germanic worlds, Lamanskiy argued, lay in the persistence of the collective way of life in the former, or in the „extreme dissimilarity of relations between the principles of collective and private, unity and diversity, centripetal and centrifugal forces."[27] The Greek-Slavic world, in his words, was not familiar with the „Western kind of landless peasant; it lived under the beneficial rule of family life and communal self-governance."[28] Lamanskiy theorized *sredinniy mir* as a borderless concept, as it practiced no rules of uniform land repartition based on property and its unity was ensured by

[23] Teodor Shanin, Russia as a Developing Society: Roots of Otherness – Russia's Turn of Century, New York: Springer 2016, here p. 81.

[24] Vera Smirnova, Territory, Enclosure, and State Territorial Mode of Production in the Russian Imperial Periphery, in: Geographica Helvetica 74/1 (2019), pp. 13–25.

[25] Boris Chicherin, Obzor Istoricheskogo Razvitia Selskoi Obshchiny v Rossii, in: Russkii Vestnik 1 (1856), pp. 373–396, here p. 374.

[26] Chicherin, Obzor Istoricheskogo, here p. 377.

[27] Vladimir Lamanskiy, Tri mira Aziysko-evropeyskogo materika, Sankt Peterburg: Tipografiya Transhelya 1892, here p. 92.

[28] Vladimir Lamanskiy, Geopolitika panslavizma, Moskva: Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii 2010, here p. 92.

the absence of its internal redivision and bordering. The endless Slavic world, for Slavophiles, not only united the people under the rule of the commune but also despised territorial sovereignty and boundaries of other nations in order to allow for its continuous expansion. Hence, ideas of the 'borderless world' became the episteme of Russia's geographical thinking and practice, as the state undertook projects of mass exploration and exploitation of its extensive resource frontiers at the beginning of the 20th century.

Discussion: From the tragedy of the commune to the tragedy of property

After the socialist revolution, the ideas of commoning were brought back to introduce a new logic of 'people's property.' Land was still worked and held collectively, yet, it became measured, rationed and controlled by the state. The means of commoning re-emerged in the form of collectively-owned state enterprises to denote a new idea of the Soviet commune as a strategic unit of production and rational redistribution of resources, thus, attaching millions of peasant workers to the soil and under central control. The commune was temporarily revived in the form of state enterprises but lost its independent power to the new administrative structure that extended the old *mir* „from the political microcosm of the commune to the wider scale of the state."[29]

Russia's decolonial temperaments regarding collective land ownership versus private property left a local villager with neither the latter nor the former.[30] Land ownership in today's Russia is no more secure, even with the existence of legal property rights and open land markets, while ideas for recollecting the all-Slavic lands drive Russia's geopolitical desires across its near neighbors. From the cases of the 2010 land restitution reform for the Russian Orthodox Church and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (popular amongst the Russian people) to the recent blunt assault and violent war on Ukraine waged by Russia's president Vladimir Putin in February 2022, ideas of landed commoning, a borderless world and the accompanying discourses on the denial of territorial rights – from 'property' to 'sovereignty' – have returned as a motto for the Russian state. Hence, shifting our scholarly radars and learning from a situated position in the region is not only urgent for understanding these events but beneficial for decentering familiar geographic scholarship on the topic of space and power from its Eurocentric knowledge containers.

[29] Atkinson, The End of the Russian Land Commune, here p. 196.
[30] Vorbrugg, Not about Land.