Land and human-soil relations in Southeast Europe

by Katarina Kusic

Abstract

This short piece presents some of the different ways in which land has been engaged in multi-disciplinary scholarship and proposes human-soil relations as another possible mode of investigation. I, firstly, review some of the existing approaches to studying land and highlight a particular absence of Southeast Europe (SEE) within this literature. In the second section, I turn to a brief overview of land issues in SEE by drawing on my fieldwork in agricultural governance and foreign direct investment in Serbia in 2016, and the early findings of my current project. In the final part, I conclude by reiterating the potential of studying human-soil relations in SEE, highlighting not only what we can learn from scholarship that has engaged land politics in SEE but also asking what else we might find out if we see land as different constellations of human-nature relationships.

Using, owning, and living with land has become a central topic in scholarly and policy discussions. Southeast Europe (SEE) sits uneasily within these developments. On the one hand, the strong developmentalist trajectory of the post-socialist restoration of capitalism is claiming fields, rivers, forests, and cities, and encountering resistance along its path. On the other hand, the peculiar position of SEE outside the usual framing of the Global South removes it both from scholarship on the global land rush and the struggles for land that we see in Asia, South Americ,a and Africa. Within SEE, scholarship on land examined the complex processes of socialist modernization and the subsequent neoliberalisation.[1] Land, however, has not been a topic in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship in the region.[2] Given the intimate relationship between decolonial thought and thinking *from* specific territories[3], the omission of land from the current efforts to develop decolonial thinking in SEE is far-reaching: How can we think of alternative ways of living without the connections to land on which these visions would be based? The decolonial impulse when paying attention to land in the Balkans is, thus, not only to analyze colonialism and its manifold historical and present relations but also to study different ways of living with land as the basis for imagining different futures.

This short piece presents some of the different ways in which land has been engaged in multidisciplinary scholarship, and proposes human-soil relations as another possible mode of investigation. Human-soil relations are made and remade as people interact with soils to make land property, an object of policy, and a way of life. This approach brings together the efforts to capture the 'strangeness' of land as an object through its malleability and relationality[4], the importance of humanity's relationship to soil in the unfolding of modernity[5], and an understanding of nature, including its soils, not as given but as products of specific relations in particular times and places. Human-soil relations, therefore, cast land not (only) as property or an object of policy but as a living engagement that speaks beyond the themes of political and economic transformations. In doing this, I hope to

[1] Stefan Dorondel, Disrupted Landscapes. State, Peasants and the Politics of Land in Postsocialist Romania, New York 2016; Milenko Srećković, Istorijat agrarnih reformi i posledice privatizacije u poljoprivrednom sektoru [History of Agrarian Reforms and the Consequences of Privatization in the Agricultural Sector], in: Darko Vesić et al. (eds.), Bilans stanja – doprinos analizi restauracije kapitalizma u Srbiji, Centar za politike emancipacije, Belgrade 2015, pp. 509–573; Katherine Verdery, The Vanishing Hectare. Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania, Ithaca 2003.

[2] Nikolay Karkov, Decolonizing Praxis in Eastern Europe: Toward a South-to-south Dialogue, in: Comparative and Continental Philosophy 7 (2015) 2, pp. 180–200; Nikolay R. Karkov / Zhivka Valiavicharska, Rethinking East-European Socialism. Notes toward an Anti-capitalist Decolonial Methodology, in: Interventions 20 (2018) 6, pp. 785–813; Katarina Kušić / Philipp Lottholz / Polina Manolova (eds.), Decolonial Theory and Practice in Southeast Europe, Sofia 2019.

[3] Arturo Escobar, Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South, in: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana 11 (2016) 1, pp. 11–32; Walter Mignolo, Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking, Princeton 2000.

[4] Tania Murray Li, What Is Land? Assembling a Resource for Global Investment, in: Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 39 (2014) 4, pp. 589–602.

[5] Marc Edelman / Wendy Wolford, Introduction: Critical Agrarian Studies in Theory and Practice, in: Antipode 49 (2017) 4, pp. 959–76.

position SEE rurality as a specific epistemic space that does not 'fit' either the Global North or South.[6]

In the following, I, firstly, review some of the existing approaches to studying land and highlight a particular absence of SEE within this literature. In the second section, I turn to a brief overview of land issues in SEE by drawing on my own fieldwork in Serbia in 2016 and the early findings of my current project. In the final part, I conclude by reiterating the potential of studying human-soil relationships in SEE.

Approaches to land

Land has forcefully entered both scholarly and media discussions with the rise of land grabbing since 2008. Land grabbing is commonly defined as a process where powerful national, international, and economic actors acquire large pieces of land and threaten the rights and livelihoods of local communities, smallholders, and indigenous peoples. An abundant literature on land grabbing and large-scale land acquisitions investigates the drivers and effects of the global land rush in particular contexts[7], highlights the transformations of state and global governance in these processes[8], and identifies East, Central and SEE as vulnerable to land grabbing due to their complex histories of post-socialist property transformations.[9]

[6]Martin Müller, In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South, in: Geopolitics 25 (2020) 3, pp. 734–755.

[7]For a good review of this extensive literature see Ariane Goetz, Land Grabs, in: A. H. Akram-Lodhi et al. (eds.), Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies, Edward Elgar Publishing 2021, pp. 346–357.

[8]Saturnino M. Borras et al., Towards a Better Understanding of Global Land Grabbing: An Editorial Introduction, in: The Journal of Peasant Studies 38 (2011) 2, pp. 209–216; Wendy Wolford et al. (eds.), Governing Global Land Deals: The Role of the State in the Rush for Land, Chichester 2013; Matias E. Margulis / Nora McKeon / Saturnino M. Borras, Land Grabbing and Global Governance: Critical Perspectives, in: Globalizations 10 (2013) 1, pp. 1–23.

[9]Jennifer Franco / Saturnino M. Borras, Land Concentration, Land Grabbing and People's Struggles in Europe, Transnational Institute 2013; Jan Douwe van der Ploeg / Jennifer C. Franco / Saturnino M. Borras, Land Concentration and Land Grabbing in Europe: A Preliminary Analysis, in: Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement 36 (2015) 2, pp. 147–162.

The 'first generation' of this literature relied on problematic methodologies and utilized simplifying binaries – local and foreign, big corporations and small peasants, and resistance and acceptance. This made the complexities of specific outcomes difficult to access. Mandacı and Tutan[10], for example, writing about Serbia, reproduce the discourses of 'peasants' and 'smallholders' that are so common in reports of international non-governmental organizations. While their article makes important points about the continuities of land government in the Balkans, my own fieldwork in Serbia – which included interviews with people who contested land deals in different stages – complicated this understanding of resistance to land grabbing as coming from smallholders.[11] I was told in conversations with the people involved, that large landowners usually organized these protests in defense of their own privileged positions. Where smaller producers were involved, they often followed scripts prepared by those with more land, money, and power.

The 'second generation' of land grabbing literature developed significantly both methodologically and conceptually but stayed away from SEE. Here, scholars turned to a wider study of the „ways in which agrarian life and livelihoods shape and are shaped by the politics, economics and social worlds of modernity" and moved to study „the social life of soil."[12] These critical agrarian studies continue the work of peasant studies of the 1960s and 1970s that were institutionalized in the expanded Journal of Peasant Studies (from 2009) and the Journal of Agrarian Change. Interestingly, neither of these journals addresses the post-socialist transformations of rural life and labor in SEE. Pondering why this might be, I think, is important when trying to locate our own scholarship within the wider global political economies of knowledge

[10]Nazif Mandacı / Mehmet Ufuk Tutan, Global Land Grab and the Balkans. Continuity and Changes in a Unique Historical Context, in: Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies 20 (2018) 3, pp. 230–250.

[11]Katarina Kušić, Locating Subjects, Disrupting Intervention. Youth Empowerment and Agricultural Modernisation in Serbia. PhD thesis, Aberystwyth University 2018.

[12]Edelman / Wolford, Introduction.

production. A possible answer might be that SEE is missed in a wider condition of Eurocentric orientations that focus on issues and topics defined in the Global North. This, however, cannot be true for the journals mentioned above which are known for their global scope and activist character. On the contrary, I suggest that understanding why SEE is missing from these discussions requires one to consider three overlapping dimensions of knowledge production: global hierarchies that divide the world into 'theory-' and 'data-generating' spaces; the incompatibility of slow violence with neoliberal knowledge production; and gatekeeping concepts that govern what we see in and how we approach particular regions and spaces.

Regarding global hierarchies of knowledge production, it is by now well argued that non-Western spaces are overlooked as epistemically generative locations and instead approached as containers of data and laboratories of policies.[13] In short, there is a „geopolitics of knowledge" that refers to „a geographic unevenness in where knowledge is produced, for whom and with what effects."[14] In response, spaces in the Global South were recast as loci of potential decolonization and are now approached as important archives able to provincialize Europe. This process, while providing a powerful critique of Eurocentrism and pointing to concrete alternatives, paradoxically 'doubly' removed East Europe from the discussion: East Europe cannot claim a space in a conversation about the relationship between former colonies and the colonizers. It is „not quite North" and „not quite South."[15]

When rurality and land are studied in SEE, they are seen through particular „gatekeeping concepts" that predefine what the important issues in specific regions are, thus, removing them from wider knowledge production and theory building.[16] Rebecca Kay and colleagues, for example, highlight how understandings of East European rurality are overdetermined by macro-changes in agriculture, land and property rights.[17] Petr Jehlička similarly argues against seeing food systems in exclusively economic terms. Moreover, he and his colleagues explain how such terms are products of global inequalities of knowledge production and illustrate the potential and importance of studying East European food systems differently.[18] In my own current project on human-soil relations in SEE, I aim to see land outside of the conceptual frame of post-socialist transformation, understood as the macro-restructuring of economic policy and property. Instead, I want to treat it as an outcome of particular human-nature relations that both shape and reflect processes on multiple scales. By moving away from established gatekeeping concepts, I hope to redefine questions that drive our research and ask what *else* we might learn from particular ways in which humans and soils are entangled.

This also requires moving away from the spectacles of violence that capture the attention of the public, funders and scholars seeking to be politically relevant. Spectacular violence has been easily found in SEE: The prevalence of studies that examine wartime violence and postwar reconstruction is unsurprising. Within studies of rurality, however, the need for a concrete understanding of violence – such as land grabbing and agricultural restructuring – might further obscure important processes of what Rob Nixon calls „slow violence" that happens „gradually and out of sight."[19]

Alexander Vorbrugg writing about post-Soviet Russia shows that

[13] Syed Farid Alatas, Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences, in: Current Sociology 51 (2003) 6, pp. 599–613.

[14] Elena Trubina et al., A Part of the World or Apart from the World? The Postsocialist Global East in the Geopolitics of Knowledge, in: Eurasian Geography and Economics 61 (2020) 6, pp. 636–662.

[15] Petr Jehlička, Eastern Europe and the Geography of Knowledge Production. The Case of the Invisible Gardener, in: Progress in Human Geography Online First (2021), 19; Müller, In Search of the Global East.

[16] Arjun Appadurai, Theory in Anthropology. Center and Periphery, in: Comparative Studies in Society and History 28 (1986) 2, pp. 356–374, here p. 357.

[17] Rebecca Kay / Sergei Shubin / Tatjana Thelen, Rural Realities in the Post-Socialist Space, in: Journal of Rural Studies 28 (2012) 2, pp. 55–62.

[18] Jehlička, Eastern Europe; Petr Jehlička et al., Thinking Food Like an East European. A Critical Reflection on the Framing of Food Systems, in: Journal of Rural Studies 76 (2020), pp. 286–295.

[19] Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, Cambridge 2011, here p. 2.

understanding the lives of his interlocutors requires moving beyond thinking about land and land grabbing to thinking about dispersed processes of dispossession that transform the „social life of soil" in less spectacular ways.[20] This happens in SEE through structural disadvantages and historical developments that contribute to two simultaneous processes: on the one hand, the devaluation of land and agricultural production, and, on the other hand, the European Union (EU) mandated reconfiguration of rural areas within the 'multifunctional' (rather than agricultural) understanding of rural development.

Vorbrugg noticed „forms of violence which seemed rather uneventful, drawn-out, and distant: decisions taken elsewhere, the piecemeal disintegration of places and lives, and the successive and partly tangled crises of Soviet and post-Soviet periods"[21] during his fieldwork. My own fieldwork in Serbia pointed to similar processes: While there were occasional events that drew attention to foreign direct investment in agricultural land and changes in ownership legislature, the stories and images I encountered pointed to anything but spectacle. They were roads slowly left to rot, former socially owned cooperatives abandoned to crumble, stories of migration, old age in deprivation, and aborted efforts of collective contestation. These stories are reflected in the emerging studies of rural inequality in the region that highlight not only economic deprivation but the overall feeling of „being stuck," particularly prominent among young people.[22] It is precisely this lack of spectacle (further normalized through a narrative of 'post-socialist transition' and the positing of EU membership as a teleological development goal) that removes rural areas in post-Yugoslav spaces from both public and academic attention.

[20] Alexander Vorbrugg, Not About Land, Not Quite a Grab. Dispersed Dispossession in Rural Russia, in: Antipode 51 (2019) 3, pp. 1011–1031.

[21] Alexander Vorbrugg, Ethnographies of Slow Violence. Epistemological Alliances in Fieldwork and Narrating Ruins, in: Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space 40, (2022) 2, pp. 447–462.

[22] Sretan M. Jelić / Vukašin Kolarević, Subjective Poverty of Youth in Rural Areas of Serbia, in: Sociologija i Prostor 56 (2018) 1, pp. 35–52; Orlanda Obad (ed.), Socioekonomske Nejednakosti Na Relaciji Selo-Grad [Socioeconomic Inequalities in the City-Village Relation], Zagreb 2021.

Governing land in SEE

Anthropological studies of land relationships and politics have engaged these slower processes through extensive fieldwork. They highlight ways in which land takes on meaning and structures sociopolitical outcomes. Even though East European post-socialist decollectivization from the 1990s onwards received a spate of attention[23], Yugoslav spaces remain largely overlooked. There are important exceptions that study, for example, agricultural land relations in Serbia[24] or issues of land property in refugee return in Croatia.[25] While they show the potential and importance of studying land in SEE, they remain few and far apart.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, even before land moved to the status of private property central to liberalism[26], the political and ideological visions of different regimes reshaped landscapes. Yugoslavia's ideological vision was similarly imprinted in land policy. The 1960s are referenced in Branko Horvat's account of the Yugoslav economic system as the time when Yugoslavia had „the most egalitarian distri-

[23] Verdery, The Vanishing Hectare; Dorondel, Disrupted Landscapes; Johannes Stahl, Rent from the Land. A Political Ecology of Postsocialist Rural Transformation, London 2010.

[24] Slobodan Naumović, Fields of Paradox. Three Case Studies on the Europeanisation of Agriculture in Serbia, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy – SGC, Belgrade 2013; Jovica Luković, The Country Road to Revolution. Transforming Individual Peasant Property into Socialist Property in Yugoslavia, 1945–1953, in: Hannes Siegrist / Dietmar Müller (eds.), Property in East Central Europe: Notions, Institutions, and Practices of Landownership in the Twentieth Century, New York 2015, pp. 163–190; Srđan Milošević, Contemporary Notions and Practices of Landownership in Central Serbia. The Case of Mrčajevci, in: Siegrist / Müller (eds.), Property in East Central Europe, pp. 246–267; Jovana Diković, The Practices of Land Ownership in Vojvodina. The Case of Aradac, in: Siegrist and Müller (eds.), Property in East Central Europe, pp. 268–288.

[25] Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, Post-Dayton Ethnic Engineering in Croatia through the Lenses of Property Issues and Social Transformations, in: Journal of Genocide Research 18 (2016) 4, pp. 485–502.

[26] Hannes Siegrist / Dietmar Müller, Introduction, in: Siegrist and Müller, Property in East Central Europe, pp. 1–28, here p. 3.

bution of land in the world" – a point of international pride.[27] This international positioning – the split with Stalin and the integration with the world (Western) markets – shaped Yugoslav land policy and its legacies. The split with Stalin (along with the resistance to efforts of collectivization) enabled Yugoslavia to abandon collectivization of land as its goal.[28] In the reworking of Yugoslav socialism away from Stalinist ideology, the state was imagined to ultimately wither away, and, thus, could not take ownership of land. Consequently, land ownership in Yugoslavia was not as thoroughly transformed as in other socialist spaces, such as Romania and Albania. Cooperative ownership after 1953 was transformed into social ownership through the process of *podruštvljavanje* ('socializing property'), as the 'basis of socialist transformation.' Peasants' private holdings were limited, and they expanded by buying land in socially owned enterprises. Peasants in Yugoslavia transformed notions of ownership and the amount of socially owned land grew accordingly.[29]

The importance of this change cannot be overstated: other communist countries with histories of forced collectivization entered the 1990s with large areas of land in state ownership and embarked on complex processes of restitution.[30] Yugoslavia, on the other hand, had a smaller percentage of state-owned land but similarly intricate difficulties of determining who exactly owned the land that was accumulated as 'social' ownership. In Serbia, for example, even though the 1996 Constitution once again recognized cooperative ownership (after merging it with social and state ownership in 1962), the land owned by cooperatives was never untangled from the socially owned enterprises that used the cooperative land. When the 2006 Constitution removed the category of social ownership (turning it into private ownership), the land was not returned to cooperatives but registered as the ownership of the state enterprises.[31]

This set the stage for an incredibly complex and corrupt process in which land was turned into state property to facilitate privatization. The ruined agricultural companies were worthless without the land attached to them, while, according to a document prepared for the Food and Agriculture Organization in 2006, around 70 % of all state-owned enterprises in Serbia at the time were in agricultural production and food processing.[32] This made the sector crucial for privatization, but without land, there would be no interested buyers.[33]

Today, there are a few commonly debated issues in agricultural land use in SEE: the small average plot condemned for its lack of productivity that invites consolidation efforts; the preoccupation with unproductive 'wastelands'; and the ownership legislature that must deal with the increasing allure of EU capital markets. Serbia, for example, signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU which guaranteed EU nationals the right to buy agricultural and forest land in Serbia from September 1, 2017. The issue was exaggerated by the fact that previous EU accessions included moratoriums on the liberalization of the land market that could subsequently be prolonged. Serbia, for reasons unknown, did not even try to negotiate these terms.

People explained it to me in different ways: some believe that the negotiating team could not possibly imagine Serbia would still be outside the EU in 2017 and, hence, did not take the date seriously,

[27] Branko Horvat, The Yugoslav Economic System. The First Labor-managed Economy in the Making, Abingdon: Routledge 2016, here p. 90.

[28] Melissa K. Bokovoy, Peasants and Communists. Politics and Ideology in the Yugoslav Countryside, 1941-1953, Pittsburgh 1998.

[29] Luković, The Country Road to Revolution.

[30] Dorondel, Disrupted Landscapes; Verdery, The Vanishing Hectare.

[31] The privatization is usually described as having 'low legitimacy,' as in Jelena Živanovic-Miljković / Vesna Popović, Land Use Regulation and Property Rights Regime over Land in Serbia, in: Spatium (2014), 25. For details on the privatization of agricultural enterprises and cooperative land, see the 2012 and 2018 reports by The Anti-Corruption Council available on their website. http://www.antikorupcija-savet.gov.rs/page/home/ (accessed July 4, 2022).

[32] Country Report: Serbia, Study on the State of Agriculture in Five Applicant Countries. Arcotrass GmbH for the European Commission 2006.

[33] For a longer overview, see Katarina Kušić / Sladjana Lazić, Land on the Move. Inequality and Consolidation of Agricultural Land in Serbia, in: LeftEast, March 11, 2022, https://lefteast.org/land-on-the-move-inequality-and-consolidation-of-agricultural-land-in-serbia/ (accessed June 9, 2022).

some blamed it on stupidity and others saw private interests from people who knew they would be able to sell land acquired through privatization. No matter what the logic was, the moratorium was not negotiated and the requirements for the free movement of capital spelled out in Article 63, point 2, of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, thus, came into direct confrontation with the Law on Agricultural Land from 2006, which prohibits foreign nationals from owning agricultural land.[34] Civil society groups called for legislative changes that would, instead of *forbidding* foreign nationals from owning land (which would put it in direct confrontation with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement), *'demotivate'* foreign nationals from buying land in other ways – by setting restrictions other than the nationality of the buyer, for example, the number of years living in the village where the land is.[35] Croatia joined the EU in 2013 and has similarly limited its land markets, obtaining another three-year moratorium on the sale of agricultural land to foreign citizens in 2020.

These regulations, however, do not prohibit the sale of agricultural land to companies, and land emerges as a dimension of lucrative foreign direct investment deals. I have written elsewhere about the German and United Arab Emirates investments in Serbian agriculture and the resistance with which they were met. The investments themselves, coming from the UAE, were interpreted through the racialized categories of 'Arab' arrival.[36] Croatia has similarly witnessed an increased interest in land investment. In the restructuring that followed the bankruptcy of the largest food and beverage holding in Croatia (Agrokor), all state land that was leased by the company was automatically transferred to a newly formed investor group, for a while completely obscuring who controls over 32,000 ha of state-owned agricultural land.

[34] Živanovic-Miljković / Popović, Land Use Regulation.

[35] Tatjana Jovanić (ed.), Režimi sticanja svojine na poljoprivrednom zemljište [Regimes of Acquiring Property in Agricultural Land], in: Student Economic Law Review 4 (2014) 1.

[36] Kušić, Locating Subjects.

After Croatia, in a similar legislative change to that in Serbia in 2016, transferred the leasing of state-owned agricultural land to local municipalities, the latter in some locations refused to sign the same lease agreements with the new company, thus, opening the doors for resistance to long-term leases.[37] These efforts tellingly did not lead to open or organized contestation. Moreover, similar proposals for investment in agricultural land are also interpreted through a national security lens. This is the case with the largest Serbian landowner/meat producer, who is trying to acquire agricultural land in Eastern Slavonia – a move that the local media see as a continuation of the fights over territory in the same region in the 1990s, thus, further complicating possible politicization of resistance to such deals.[38]

These land politics both shape and reflect political processes across scales. They bring together issues of sovereignty, global value chains and local politics. Yet, accounts of the way people live with soils are missing from these stories: What attachments were reconfigured during collectivization efforts? Which knowledge was used to produce food? How did they travel as land was collectivized and peasants relocated? How did plants, animals and humans interact to make the social life of soil meaningful? At this time, I can only start to glimpse possible answers, but it is clear that studying human-soil relationships can help complete the story of land in SEE.

Conclusion: A different approach to human-soil relationships

[37] L.F. / Hina, Slavonians refuse to lease land to former Agrokor companies!, tportal.hr, April 4, 2019,https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/slavonci-odbijaju-dati-koncesiju-na-zemlju-bivsim-agrokorovim-tvrtkama-to-nije-posteno-foto-20190404/print (accessed June 8, 2022); Suzana Župan, Agriculture Land Goes into the Hands of Foreigners? in: Glas Slavonije, http://www.glas-slavonije.hr/328435/1/Poljoprivredno-zemljiste-prelazi-u-ruke-stranca (accessed June 8, 2022).

[38] Zlatko Šimić, How an Immoral Offer of the Serbian King of Meat Moved Spirits in East Slavonia, in: Jutarnji list, January 13, 2020, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kako-je-nemoralna-ponuda-srpskog-kralja-mesa-uzburkala-duhove-na-istoku-slavonije-15018770 (accessed June 8, 2022).

Thinking in terms of conjunctural geographies in conversation with decolonial thought – as the editors of the Special Issue invited us to do – reminds us of the imperative to understand capitalism and coloniality from the perspectives of those marginalized. In SEE, they are often to be found in rural spaces and with lingering connections to land and food production. No less importantly, a focus on coloniality as a global system helps us to make sense of processes in which even those who are marginalized reproduce exclusions: it can help to make sense of why a UAE company would invest in Serbia, and why those investments would be interpreted through racialized narratives of 'Arabs arriving.'

In this project, it is imperative to stay attentive to drastic changes that move without spectacle and without overt contestation. Processes of slow violence rarely invite open protest. Instead, people respond through what Vorbrugg refers to as „slow politics" that are more difficult to access for researchers who explicitly want to contribute to local struggles.[39] With the benefit of hindsight that mirrors my own difficulties in creating alliances in rural fieldwork in Serbia, Vorbrugg suggests a different approach that would „begin with" the particularities of slow violence and „seek alliances" beyond the researcher-participant horizon.[40]

Thinking through human-soil relations as making land into property, an object of policy and a way of life can help this project. It can move beyond the legacy of understanding rurality through top-down processes of agricultural reform, neoliberal restructuring, and land ownership. What happens when we take the way people engage with land as epistemically generative beyond the categories of agricultural change, property, and economic transformation? How can we make space for different knowledge, memories, and ways of being? What if the questions are not about governing land – as the previous section proceeded – but about living on, with and beside soils in multiple dimensions, temporalities and ways?

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[39] Vorbrugg, Ethnographies of Slow Violence, here p. 7.
[40] Vorbrugg, Ethnographies of Slow Violence, here pp. 7–8.