

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Land reform in developing countries: property rights and property wrongs**, by Michael Lipton, New York, Routledge, 2009, xiv + 384 pp., US\$130.50 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-415-09667-6

No one else could have written this book. It is encyclopedic in scope and clearly represents decades of research and passionate involvement with the subject of land reform. Lipton offers clear, balanced retorts to many of the arguments against the feasibility and effectiveness of land reforms and provides a fresh perspective on the achievements of past land reforms that are often denigrated by academics and activists. While Lipton is clearly passionate about his viewpoints, he generally provides empirical evidence to back his assertions where possible and is usually frank about the nature of his statements when the evidence is sketchy. Despite his strong advocacy of land reform policies to address poverty and reduce inequality, he is no starry-eyed romantic. He does not prescribe land reform universally or argue that it is always and everywhere effective.

In the first chapter, he describes the goals of the various actors in the land reform debate, including government officials and agents, those directly affected by land policies, and the disinterested ‘outsider’ whose primary concern is to promote policies that s/he believes will improve social well-being; the book is written from the perspective of this ‘outsider’, whose goals are the reduction of poverty and gross inequality as well as the promotion of efficiency. Clearly these goals are not universally accepted, which takes Lipton on a detour to moral philosophy to justify this position. The rest of the book examines to what extent past land reforms have accomplished the goals of poverty/inequality reduction and promotion of efficiency and their potential for doing so in the future.

The second chapter reviews the existing research on the relationship between farm size and productivity and gives a clear elucidation of the theoretical arguments that predict a positive relationship between the two and those that hypothesize a negative one. Lipton takes the view that the inverse relationship holds most often in developing countries since small farms tend to use more of the abundant factor of production, labor, and less of the scarce input, capital. Lipton points out, however, that in developed countries where labor is scarce and capital is relatively more abundant, a direct relationship between farm size and land productivity is more common. He lays out the conditions under which a land reform is likely to promote efficiency via an inverse relationship between farm size and land productivity as well as the conditions under which it is unlikely to achieve such a result.

There is one serious omission in his review of arguments and evidence on the inverse relationship that many readers of this journal may find disturbing. He does not directly address the critique of some Marxists that the inverse relationship is a manifestation of pre-capitalist class relations and near starvation that leave peasants

with little choice but to work hard in order to survive (Bernstein 2002, Byers 2004, Dyer 1997). The implication of such a view is that a land reform that turns these farmers into capitalist producers would not necessarily lead to an increase in productivity since these farmers would no longer have to work so hard to survive. While I do not subscribe to this argument myself, since Lipton makes a concerted effort to take on all potential criticisms of his views, it is a notable lacuna in his discussion. Even though he does not take on this Marxist critique directly, however, he does review some evidence that indirectly refutes this argument in the developing country context. Thus Lipton claims that the data that exist for developing countries show a downward trend in farm size over the past 40 years, even in countries with no land ceiling laws and no enforcement. He argues that this provides some indirect evidence that markets are responding to the higher efficiency of smaller farms in developing countries. He acknowledges, however, that the inverse relationship is unlikely to exist in developed countries and indeed reviews evidence confirming the existence of a positive relationship between farm size and productivity in some upper middle and high-income countries. This lends some indirect support to the Marxist critique since developed countries are presumably less likely to be characterized by pre-capitalist class relations. Thus while Lipton attributes the variation in the size productivity relationship between economically developed and developing countries to differences in factor scarcities, it is also conceivable that it could be due to differences in class relations.

Chapters three to six examine the main types of land policies that have been implemented over the past century and explore whether or not they constitute land reform as defined by the objectives laid out in chapter one. Thus, besides what Lipton calls the 'classic land reform' of government imposed land floors and ceilings on ownership, he also considers tenancy reform, land titling, patrialization, collectivization, de-collectivization, and what he calls 'New Wave Land Reforms', which ostensibly rely more on markets and negotiation than coercion. He lays out the strengths and weaknesses of each measure in theory and reviews the evidence from a series of case studies that highlight under what conditions each approach is likely to achieve the twin goals described in chapter one and when they are likely to fail. Ultimately his position is that while classic land reform is not necessarily the only or best policy choice in all circumstances, having the option on the table as a last resort is probably a pre-condition for other methods to be effective.

The final chapter questions the prevailing wisdom found among many that 'land reform is dead'. He critically examines some of the underlying, often contradictory viewpoints that are used to arrive at such a conclusion. Thus there are those who claim that while land reform might have been successful in some places in the past, the political and economic support for similar policies has disappeared. Others believe that it never really succeeded in the past due to evasion and corruption of those in power. And finally there are those who argue that it is counterproductive to push for smaller farm size today since globalization and development are strengthening the case for larger farms. He takes on each of these viewpoints and convincingly argues that land reform is far from dead.

As comprehensive as this book is, it cannot do everything. The discussion of land reform in sub-Saharan Africa was a little disappointing. There is a good discussion of land reform policy and evidence from Ethiopia, South Africa, Kenya, and Zimbabwe with a few brief references to experiences in other countries; but this is quite sketchy coverage for a region with almost 50 countries where many of the

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world's poorest farmers are found. Clearly this is in part due to the scantier coverage in the literature as well as the limited availability of data. A frank statement to this effect would have been preferable to the inclusion of generalized statements lacking in empirical support. Lipton claims, for example, that while land was relatively abundant in sub-Saharan Africa and its distribution not very unequal in the past,

... [s]preading land scarcity has eroded not only soil but communal tenure systems, partly by creating demand for their replacement by private systems, but more by increasing the pressures to bend or exploit rules of communal tenure systems to concentrate land control on influential people from politics or business. (p. 294)

He fails to provide details on where in sub-Saharan Africa land distribution was equal in the past or evidence to support this contention. No data or sources are offered for the statement about increasing land scarcity or the erosion of communal tenure systems.

Lipton has been labeled a neo-populist before because of his insistence that the twin goals of poverty/inequality reduction and efficiency are compatible (Bernstein 2002, Byers 2004). Readers of this book will find that he has not changed his stripes. However, his argument here is more nuanced than that caricature implies. He argues that while both of these goals can be furthered in most developing countries through land reform, that will most likely not be true in more developed countries and those that are further along the idealized 'path of industrialization'. Thus he is not against large farms *per se*; in a discussion of the former socialist countries that have undergone de-collectivization of agriculture, he states:

... [b]ut where labour-absorbing industrialization is dominant, rural workforces small and shrinking, and agriculture increasingly competing with large farms in the industrialized world, the most efficient farms are not the smallest; it would be silly to lock decollectivised agricultures into a path towards Japanese or South Korean agriculture, in which, despite scarce farm labour and plentiful capital, subsidies and cossetting maintain tiny, high-cost farms on scarce peri-urban land for politico-sentimental reasons. (p. 219)

His willingness to consider how non-traditional land reform policies that rely more on negotiation and less on confiscation might be successful and complementary with classic land reform also confirms that he is not a pure 'neo-populist'. Ultimately he takes the pragmatist position that policy makers should be open to incorporate strategies from any of the different types of land reform policies that are suited to a particular time and place. He acknowledges that this view will be criticized by some who will argue that since the type of land reform that is deployed will be shaped by both ideology and the structure of power among classes, only a particular set of policies will work. Lipton's response to such objections is that 'getting land, and hence power and income, to the rural poor is difficult. No credible ally in the cause should be rejected out of hand' (269).

Lipton's contention is that classic land reform has achieved much more than is widely believed among scholars. He provides evidence from a wide range of countries where observers have often lamented the failures of past land reforms to show that many, if not most of them, have actually succeeded in getting substantial quantities of land to poor farmers. These successes are often denigrated in his view because they hardly ever meet the goals of academics or activists. This tends to blind observers to the actual gains that have been obtained and can result in the incorrect and

ultimately counterproductive view that land reform does not work. Thus in showing past successes in a new light, he is able to convince his readers of land reform's contemporary potential to improve the lives of the poor.

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**Raising cane in the 'Glades: the global sugar trade and the transformation of Florida**, by Gail Hollander, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, ix + 348 pp., US\$45 (hardcover), ISBN 9-7802-2634-9503

*Raising cane in the 'Glades* narrates the story of how one of the world's leading sugar industries emerged out of the inhospitable and far flung wetlands of the Florida peninsula. It also, as the title suggests, points to an ongoing concern in the region, as cane planters keep one eye on the future to re-legitimize the industry and preserve their favorable market conditions. Thus, in historicizing the narratives promulgated by its proponents, Hollander's book not only shows how the political claims for Florida's sugar industry have twisted and turned over time, but also how they are carried forward to today, shaping policy from national trade agreements to state water storage.

To distil the approach taken in the book, it is useful to begin with Hollander's own list of theoretical influences – discursive geography, political ecology and global food systems – which drive the analysis in differing ways. The first – discursive geography – is used more as a point of principle than analytical guide. The premise that places are socially constructed is intrinsic in Hollander's attention to the way claims made by regional 'boosters' have transformed over time, from visualizing Florida variously as an agricultural frontier, a southern cane belt, or a National Sugar Bowl. The second set of literature on political ecology is employed more explicitly. Closely linked to discursive geography but bringing the biophysical environment to the fore as the relational entity with which politics engages, political ecology is used by Hollander to illuminate the creation and rewinding of a 'second nature' in Florida. The sections on the draining of the upstream Everglades in the nineteenth century and its attempted restoration in the late twentieth, along with the tales of opportunism in which politicians sought to embarrass their rivals over their environmental inaction, successfully demonstrate how a theory of complexity can be used to explain humanity's changing relationship to its natural surroundings.

It is, however, the third strand of literature that most animates Hollander's analysis. Bringing with it an avowed internationalism, the global food systems theory