Beyond the Political Impossibility Theorem of Agrarian Reform

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Reconceptualizing Agrarian Reform

Recommendations for agrarian reform are often met with the understandable response that good policies are often political impossible -- thus unworthy of further consideration. The impossibility theorem rests on good political economy. Land confers power in agrarian systems; reform policy must work through a system of power to restructure its base (Herring 1983: Ch 8). One would predict not only compromised policy, but as importantly little implementation: power is expressed at various levels, from agenda setting to administration. The impossibility theorem has certainly held for most of the history of agrarian reform. Exceptions have occurred through communist revolution (China), external intervention (Japan) or social democratic mobilization of the poor majority (Kerala state in India). In the classic landlord-tenant system, in which the landless are economically dependent and politically powerless, the model is not surprisingly predictive. Even in agrarian systems dominated by smaller and more numerous farmers -- what the Rudolphs (1987) call “bullock capitalists” -- a political coalition for pro-poor reform is difficult to conjure.

For these and other reasons, poverty discourse within powerful institutions has moved to expanding the pie rather than redistributing it. William Thiesenhusen (1995) notes the impact of debt crises and structural adjustment as reasons for dropping agrarian reform from the agenda; Alison Brysk (forthcoming) makes this case explicitly for Ecuador. Market solutions to poverty in general replaced concerns with redistributive policy in the 1980s. The waning, then end, of the Cold War reduced political motivations for removing the agrarian base of communist movements. The architect of many agrarian reforms in poor countries, the United States, has moved in its external agenda from fighting local communisms to such issues as human rights, gender equity, humanitarian assistance and democratization (McHugh, forthcoming).

But political conditions are not so limiting as often believed. The reasons are several. Perhaps most obviously, the declining importance of agriculture throughout the poor world reduces the political power of landed oligarchs nationally. Urbanization and economic diversification simultaneously reduce the political salience of agricultural land ownership. Part of this transition is abetted by political controversies surrounding land reform and residues of

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unenforced agrarian legislation; it is prudent for agrarian elites to diversify, even divest. In Jeffrey Paige’s model of agrarian conflict (1975), the necessity of political control of land was rooted in the absence of alternatives for landed elites.

Second, concern over environmental crisis and recognition of both services of ecological systems and the public goods entailed in biodiversity is creating the structural bases for new pro-reform coalitions motivated by both ‘deep’ ecology and social ecology. Political ecology joins political economy. The poor may prove to be better managers of ecological systems than the state in terms of preventing environmental degradation and preservation of biodiversity (A. Kothari 1997; Kothari et al. 1996). Social forestry and collaborative management of forests redistribute access, power and opportunities.

Refocusing on land as landscape -- not simply as agricultural capital -- is necessary because environmental degradation produces and is fed by poverty (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) and because a number of public goods beyond production and justice are at stake. Privatization of landscapes has historically spawned significant conflict between states pursuing developmental objectives and marginal peoples whose livelihoods are premised on access to nature and its products (e.g. Peluso 1992; Guha 1989).

This macro controversy over landscapes is now joined by a growing conflict over the distribution of property rights in biota. Advances in biotechnology enable new forms of ownership; a global system of property rights in biota is in formation. For this system to support the poor requires property reform similar to that of traditional agrarian reform and adds important potential partners to the coalition. Biotechnology enables ownership of the building blocks of life itself, and the power to create organisms not found in nature. A great global public good is at stake. Natural systems have historically provided living laboratories, counter-intuitive insights and raw materials for remarkable innovations (Weiss and Eisner 1998; Reid 1996). Moreover, biotechnology offers significant prospects for conserving biodiversity by limiting destructive practices while obtaining higher and more stable yields on less land (Horsch and Fraley 1998). Yet just as advances in biotechnology increase the payoffs of discoveries from wild biota, declining biodiversity threatens depletion. There is then a pressing question of the appropriate balance of public interest and distributed rights in these resources. Though concern for biodiversity is often termed an elitist enterprise (e.g. Saint 1987), the first victims of environmental degradation are the poor. Environmental integrity must then be a central developmental concern, neither a separate desideratum nor a luxury.

There is no space to cover here the intense debates around poverty, property and environmental protection. There are critical areas which deserve more policy attention for poverty alleviation: 1) resurrection of the commons: experiments in restructuring command-and-control systems to include joint-property and state-society linkages at a very local level may overcome some of the political inequality that corrodes governance of nature; 2) establishing and distributing intellectual property rights in biota: as biotechnology enhances the prospects of commercializing genetic materials, those who have foregone the opportunities of exploiting
their environments destructively need intellectual property rights and the benefits that flow therefrom (Gupta 1996; 1998); 3) **ecologically-sensitive land reform**: pressures for expanding cultivation destructively to ever more marginal land can be alleviated by rationing productive land and redistributing away from rentiers and speculators (e.g. Adger 1997). Justice in land systems may be made to coincide with environmental protection. Taking these issues seriously expands the coalition for redistribution of property rights in land considerably, and with it the potential for reform.

Third, recognition of property-differentiated deprivations opens new policy space for assessing control of rural assets. Increased mobilization of women potentially adds a political force for redistribution. International and domestic NGOs committed to this cause increasingly recognize the roots of gender disability and powerlessness in property distributions.

Traditional land-reform literature has been largely blind to the gendered nature of property and its consequences (Agarwal 1992, 1994, 1997). Bina Agarwal argues that not just land reform, but poverty programs generally assume that money or benefits going to the male “head of household” reach the household. She finds that to the extent women have resources outside the family -- in civil society and economy -- their position inside the family is improved. Gender-

Agarwal finds that Sri Lanka and Kerala do better on four factors that affect female bargaining power and also have the highest ratio of females to males. This ratio discrepancy is especially marked in comparison to Northwest India, where the females are notoriously missing from the demographic data (1992: 201-202).
sensitive agrarian reform could thus improve intra-family outcomes and smooth out inter-temporal crises. “Empowerment” via property ownership is therefore more important than “entitlement,” which is subject to shifts in a fickle public moral economy.  

3 Mere recognition of gendered property is not enough, however. Carmen Diana Deere’s (1997) study of 14 Latin America countries indicates significant progress in gaining access to land through agrarian reform legislation influenced by activism of women’s groups. But Ambreena Manji’s (1998) treatment of the Commission of Inquiry into Land Matters in Tanzania confirms concretely Agarwal’s generalizations about deeply embedded gender bias even among reformers. Political obstacles that preclude assuming women’s activism as a powerful force for agrarian reform include “urban bias” and class divisions in activist groups (Manji 1998:664-5). Her analysis also demonstrates that there is no necessary connection between progressive stances on women’s issues internationally and within the domestic state. Nevertheless, from everything we know about oppression, exclusion and opportunity, redressing gendered inequalities in much of the world must include property reform.
Agarwal also reflects a growing recognition (e.g. 1992:186; 1997) of the intersection of common property institutions, nature and poverty: the commons provides an income source, and thus bargaining strength, independent of men for women and children. [In general the typical commons is a crucial resource for everyone with a low opportunity cost of labor]. Privatization of commons, which is a global phenomenon, reduces the supports -- and reservation wage -- of the most vulnerable. Contemporary agrarian reform cannot be limited to correcting inequities in private land distributions, but must address privatization or degradation of common lands -- or, more proactively, resurrecting the commons as a property form (Herring 1990) and regenerating its natural resource base. Regeneration of “wastelands” is both labor intensive and restorative of security and opportunity for weaker sectors, given an appropriate property structure.

Fourth, democratic transitions, though often fragile, open new possibilities for reform. In cases such as South Africa, post-Marcos Philippines or Zimbabwe, agrarian reform emerges as a pressing political agenda. In newly opened systems, political entrepreneurs seek new bases of support and constraints on mobilization decline. New nations, such as Eritrea (Joireman 1996), consider alterations in rural property from the perspective of nation building and economic growth.

Fifth, technological change in agriculture should in principle continually lower the subsistence threshold size of holding while expanding options for small farmers (Conway 1997). One result is that the scale of necessary redistribution is reduced and therefore more politically feasible. The extent to which new technologies, including transgenics, benefit the poor will depend heavily on property systems -- in land, water and intellectual property rights -- as well as supportive institutional reforms in credit, marketing and other ancillary services.

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The Philippines presents an important caveat: weak political parties organized for patronage with few local organizational roots proved ineffectual furthering reforms after the fall of Marcos (Riedinger 1995). Nevertheless, the politics of transition reinvigorated land reform politically.
An enabling sixth factor affecting all of the above is the proliferation of NGOs, including international NGOs, and their legitimation by the international development assistance community. These actors represent a force for exposing the abuses of human rights and political freedom that have often blocked effective collective action by agrarian movements. It is so numbingly consistent how often human rights abuses involve those without standing or economic autonomy in the agrarian underclass that the phenomenon is almost naturalized. NGOs, by their presence in both rural communities and national and international institutions, can alter the political environment in which the rural poor attempt to mobilize for their rights.

To argue that new coalitions are possible, new balances of power emerging, and new conceptualizations useful is not to bury the honored tradition of land reform as an intellectual and political project. So long as there are regionally concentrated incidences of increasing landlessness, land concentration, under-utilized land and underemployed rural people, the traditional model rings true. The forces which historically have moved agrarian reform persist, with their familiar regionally and temporally uneven character; likewise, land reforms of the past remain foci of contemporary politics.

Reports of the Demise of Agrarian Reform are Premature:

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5 Hendrix (1996/97) argues that the causes of many domestic conflicts and human rights abuses which fall on international agencies seeking reconstruction and reconciliation reside in land tenure conflicts, but are typically ignored by international agencies.

6 This list of factors altering the potential balance of power in politics of reform is by no means exhaustive. To take one example: the New York Times of December 18, 1996 contained an article entitled “Turning Colombia's Drug Plots Over to Peasant Plowshares,” by Diana Jean Schemo. A new law authorized the seizure of drug dealers' assets. The Minister of Agrarian Reform was sanguine that the result would ease the plight of landless peasants. The article noted that about 250 people who had been forced off their parcels by a nearby landowner and drug dealer “were camping at government agencies in Bogota, seeking protection, after several of their number were killed and others threatened.” Seizure of assets of criminals engaged in land-based illegal activity offers an untapped pool of resources; international pressure on such activities as drug trafficking adds to the political weight of redistribution. It is not that drug growers are always rich and powerful, nor that the power of those who are is easily broken; it is the accumulation of similar pressures that suggests a need to reconceptualize the political possibility of agrarian reform.

7 El-Ghonemy (1990) makes the general case that increasing concentration of holdings and growing landlessness -- agrarian degeneration -- still necessitate land reform; he argues that land-reformed countries do better on a range of development indicators than unreformed countries (Chapters 6-7). James Putzel’s work on the Philippines (1992: Chapters 1, II) makes an archetypal case for one society.
In a short space it would be impossible to survey contemporary agrarian politics surrounding land reform. But the traditional issues of social justice and redistribution are by no means unimportant in the contemporary political objectives of the rural -- and urban -- poor.

First, even dead land reforms are not dead. Promises unkept keep movements alive; past misdeeds are not forgotten. Both become nodes around which politics precipitate. Nancy Abelmann (1996) examines the social and political activism of the 1980s in South Korea through the lens of the Koch’ang Tenant Farmers’ Movement. In the turbulent "summer of protest" of 1987, North Cholla province farmers organized to protest against the Samyang Corporation's ownership of tenant plots which should have been distributed in the 1949 land reform. Potts and Mutambirwa (1997) document the continuing conflicts in moral economy caused by promised land redistribution and pressures for commercialization of redistributed plots in Zimbabwe. Nicaragua’s tumultuous land reforms under the Sandinistas redistributed more than one million hectares -- about a third of the nation’s arable land -- to about 200,000 families, setting in train controversies over permanent titles resolved only in December 1997 with conferment of rights to beneficiaries. Vietnam’s land reforms were the core of controversy in the civil war; reconstruction continues to rearrange landed rights in the direction of longer-term security of holdings for individuals and groups (Haque and Montesi 1996).

Among the most difficult dilemmas in agrarian reform is that it is a statist project; without reform of the state, its alleged beneficiaries are seldom the driving force or priority. State socialism’s global collapse introduced a “third wave” of reforms, restructuring land rights long held by non-democratic states (Swinnen et al 1997). Donald Williams (1996) argues that land reforms in Africa have likewise often increased state power and patronage in ways inconsistent with traditional reform objectives. Powelson and Stock (1990) make the claim globally (and too harshly, with insufficient attention to positive outcomes). Writing on South Africa, Henry Bernstein (1998:28) warns against “the seductions of voluntarism, whether of statist (substitutionist) or populist (‘communitarian’) varieties.” Bernstein captures the central dilemma of advocacy of agrarian reform: popular forces are seldom sufficiently formed, or powerful, enough to drive political change and yet substitution of the state may result in despotism, complicity with local elites or irrelevance for lack of local roots. The brief explication of the case of former slaves in the United States below both confirms and modifies Bernstein’s caution: without the substitutionist power of the state, beginnings of agrarian reform may subject dependent populations to continued or enhanced oppression. It is wrong to write off the central

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8 Enriquez 1991. The Economist of December 28, 1997 (31-32) reports that titles will be conferred on urban dwellers who received 100 square meters or less, rural people who received 35 hectares or less. Larger properties are subject to review before title is granted.

9 See Bethell’s quirky “Land Reform Lost Vietnam” (1995) for a view of antagonists in the United States policy debates.
state, whatever its class composition. Agrarian reform opens one more dimension of the urgent reform of the state, and offers one mechanism.

10 Bernstein is concerned with “decentralized despotism,” in consonance with Mamdani’s (1996) work on “citizen and subject.” The pernicious effect of celebrating the local will be discussed below.
South Africa offers a case of cumulative political pressures for agrarian reform driven both by traditional agrarianism based on dispossession and reverberations of political pledges during mobilization. Land control overlaps significantly with gender inequalities (Meer 1997). As in Zimbabwe, past promises of land reform present current political and economic dilemmas for newly democratic governments: using market criteria and mechanisms halts the pace and limits the effects of reform, uncertainty for current holders depresses investment, communal arrangements and chiefly prerogatives present political contradictions and it is not clear where the money to finance compensation will be found.

Not all contemporary politics of agrarian reform are based on residues of past failures and mobilizational promises. New peasant movements are born; James Petras (1997) writes of “the resurgence of the left” generally in Latin America, particularly in the countryside. The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (movement of rural landless workers) in Brazil emerged from a coalition of redistributive forces in the 1980s to become the principal exponent of agrarian reform; among social movements it has been described as “the best organized, and the most effective, with a record of concrete achievements and considerable support (Veltmeyer 1997: 154).” Important for the dynamism of the MST -- and for understanding the new coalitional possibilities for agrarian reform -- is the “eruption of a new generation of young women militants (Petras 1998:132).” Likewise important in considering new political environments for social movements, financial assistance from the European Community and international religious organizations (Charitas, Bread for the World, and others) aided significantly. The MST was able to transform itself from a militant sectoral agrarian reform movement of the classic sort to a national movement with broader political and developmental objectives -- literacy programs for adults, consumer co-operatives, small agricultural industries and about a thousand primary schools (Foweraker 2000). Success in redistribution has been, however, more the result of militant land occupations than of altered government policy. Success has also been geographically uneven, as one would expect in a complex political system such as Brazil. Though the nation-state remains the typical unit of analysis in development studies, such variations are of great analytical importance (see Putzel 1992). Decentralization of political authority -- much touted by development assistance agencies -- may offer on balance more local

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11 The Economist of June 24, 1995 quoted Nelson Mandela -- who had received some land in his own village -- as saying: “You have to be on good terms with your chief, and fortunately the chief in my home is my nephew.” Not everyone is so well connected. The ANC has been understandably reluctant to tackle the issue of “traditional” forms of authority and their concentrations of local political and economic power.
and regional potential for agrarian reform movements and their success, though the danger of further empowering local elites remains more real than is often appreciated (Mamdani 1996).

New peasant movements use different idioms, and have more ambiguous ties with established political parties, but exhibit continuities of analysis and personnel with previous struggles, even while representing creative political practice under new circumstances. Veltmeyer’s (1997:139) survey of resistance to neoliberal policies in Latin America concludes that “new peasant movements” constitute the “most dynamic forces.” Armed struggle in Chiapas illustrates Veltmeyer’s point; putting agrarian reform back on the policy agenda was a predictable response by the Mexican state (Johnson 1995) -- though that response has to date been limited. Both Veltmeyer and Petras stress neo-liberal policies as a condition for new political movements in Latin America. Alison Brysk illustrates the fusions of which they write concretely with an analysis of new opportunities for identity politics in the face of deprivations of structural adjustment in Ecuador in her tellingly titled “Indian Market (forthcoming).” As mandated cuts in social programs, and deceleration of land reform, threatened rural progress and security, specifically agrarian issues were joined to and expanded by concern with national development strategy writ large, built on a mobilizational base of “Indian” ethnicities.

Neo-liberal policies produce (unevenly) new grounds for mobilization at the same time that growth seems to offer a plausible substitute for direct poverty-alleviation policy. Since the growth discourse has silenced the redistributive discourse in many arenas, it is useful to ask if this silence is legitimate.

**Why Redistribution? Social Democracy, Growth and Poverty**

If a rising tide raises all ships, the legitimacy of all politically difficult, fiscally burdensome and administratively complex interventionist schemes for the poor is called into question. This challenge for students of the South Asian subcontinent — which contains a large share of the world’s absolute poor — was posed sharply by the World Bank’s study of poverty reduction in India (1997). The conclusion was that economic growth has been the major factor reducing poverty. Secondly, liberalization was held to be the major reason for growth. Growth would provide the needed resources for public safety nets and investment in human capital which round out the desirable poverty-reduction scenario. The clear prescription is growth encouragement as the major anti-poverty mechanism; the rest (safety nets, human capital) is desirable if affordable.

Though India is often considered a failed development state, there is enormous regional variation in both growth (Sinha 2000) and poverty reduction. Inter-state comparisons within India indicate that Kerala state has been especially successful in reducing poverty. Though the percentage of poor in India's population has declined by official measures since Independence, the long trajectory has been an increase in poverty, measured by absolute numbers of poor, which now outnumber the entire population of India at Independence. Consistent with contemporary
celebration of the "Kerala model," the Bank noted an extraordinary range in rates of poverty reduction: Kerala's progress in lowering the headcount index of poverty (2.4 percent per year, on average, between 1957-58 and 1993-94) was "more than 120 times that of Bihar and more than four times that of Rajasthan (p v)." One implication is that we should understand Kerala better: what separates it from Bihar and Rajasthan? The puzzle in the Bank’s conclusions on growth driving poverty reduction is that Kerala’s growth rate has been quite anemic (Tharamangalam 1998).

An alternative conclusion is that social democracy contributes to poverty alleviation. Kerala produced what was arguably the first elected communist government in the world in 1957, and remains -- contrary to the global pattern -- an electoral stronghold of left politics. Its agrarian reforms have been radical, abolishing an especially oppressive rentier landlordism integrated with agrestic serfdom, in a period of Indian history dominated by inaction on the agrarian question (Herring 1983). Agrarian labor legislation establishes entitlements anomalous for the poor world and radical by the standards of rich nations. The conditions include broad coalitional mobilization of the weakest sectors of society, a political party with roots in those movements and sufficiently adaptive strategy to ride the whirlwinds of political conflict successfully and the integrity to stay the course. Atul Kohli (1987) finds similar conditions in his comparative study of Indian states.

Though the Bank is ambivalent about agrarian reform in India, and gives it only passing reference, about 80% of India's poverty is rural poverty. By class, agricultural workers are especially likely to be poor; landlessness remains the major cause of poverty. The absolute numbers of poor continue to increase in India as a whole: by World Bank estimates, from 164 million in 1951 to 312 million (about 35% of the population) in 1993-94. Indonesia is taken as a contrasting model: an annual decline of 10% between 1970 and 1993, from 58% to 8% of the

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12 For a representative range of positive and critical commentary, Dreze and Sen, 1989, pp 221ff et passim; Parayil 1996; Heller 1994 Chapter 1; Mencher 1980; Herring 1980; Tharamangalam 1998; Jeffrey 1993. The "model" has become so ubiquitous that Vice President Al Gore of the United States called Kerala a "stunning success story."
population. The Bank’s report makes a common comparison: India has fared badly in growth and poverty reduction in comparison with South East Asia (p xiii). Yet the Asian collapse beginning in July 1997 clearly had a more dramatic impact on nations following the neoliberal path than on India, where there has been significant backsliding and halting compliance on reform (Herring 1999a). Poverty is created very quickly in general economic collapse. What we do not know is the tectonics of macro-economic change: the extent to which unfettered liberalization of financial markets in particular is responsible for both rapid growth and vulnerability to dramatic collapse - much as rapidly moving plates in the earth's crust create greater potential for catastrophic earthquakes.

In cross-national macro comparisons that legitimate a liberalization-growth strategy, there is a danger in the pseudo-precision of our measures outrunning their validity and reliability for fine-tuned conclusions. Michael Lipton notes (1997: 1004) that "disparities between successive PPP [purchasing-power parity] measures, and between all such measures and national-accounts data, are sometimes huge and unexplained." Errors of the magnitude Lipton discusses -- exceeding three times the poverty ratio by adopting alternative PPP deflators for China, for example -- seriously undermine the confidence we can place in the macro-comparative literature on relationships between growth and poverty reduction.

Moreover, it seems that growth which alleviates poverty works better in relatively egalitarian settings, which are themselves more amenable to growth (Lipton 1997). Secondly, whatever the effects of growth, there will be a role for public intervention to alleviate particular forms of poverty and to address people passed over or harmed by growth processes; public intervention by states catering to unreconstructed elite dominance are less likely to play those roles well compared to states reacting to a field of power in which there is more voice among the weakest sectors. Growth alters the distribution of political power; advocates for the poor are naive to lean on the reed of altruism of the new rich. The notion that growth creates the financial conditions for "safety nets" presupposes a political morphology sympathetic to those needing nets; strengthening of vested interests opposed to redistributive transfers are as likely an outcome. Given these uncertainties, direct and knowable results should have precedence; agrarian reform has a strong track record in terms of the trajectories of states which have grown rapidly and with some equality (South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, for example).

13 Though the Bank’s study (1997) concludes that their results "clearly refute any presumption of 'immiserizing growth,'" Gaiha and Kulkarni’s panel data from Maharashtra (1998: Table 1) indicate significant fractions of village population who either were poor and became poorer or were non-poor and became poor despite aggregate growth. It seems unlikely that the Bank position has sufficiently disaggregated and reliable data to make the sweeping claim above. There are always victims of economic change, whatever the net vector sum.

14 See Herring 1983: Ch 9,10 for the logic. Besley and Burgess (1998) present evidence that land reforms explain some differences in poverty reduction across states in India, but their data and method are not convincing, though they get what seems to be the obvious right answer.
Social democracy provides both the political space and the political energy to effect changes in property systems. Contemporary Kerala has the type of political institutions that are often desiderata but seemingly impossible choices for other societies. The electorate is informed, extraordinarily participatory, alert and assertive; political parties are representative and competitive; the state is responsive; political behavior matters. As a consequence, political institutions work (Heller, In Press). Yet these parameters of the political system are the product of long evolution, of struggle, and of reforms -- social and economic. They were born not entirely of policy choice but through popular reaction to repression and exclusion: landlordism, casteism, degradation of women, slavery and untouchability.

There is a serious chicken-and-egg problem embedded in this association: asset redistribution also enables social democracy. Though social democracy is not a direct policy choice -- there is a lot of historical contingency at work -- policy choices do matter. One of the means through which these institutions were developed in Kerala was popular responses to state initiatives and state failures on the ground in agrarian reform, beginning in the late 19th Century (Herring 1987). A reach exceeding the state’s grasp encouraged mobilization of newly benefitted groups seeking to obtain their de jure rights; creating coalitions of the poor necessitated reaching across traditional social barriers and extending the scope of reform. Some policies empower more than others. It is in this set of desiderata that the optimal policy mix is to be located. It is difficult to imagine an optimal set that did not include agrarian reform.

Path Dependency, Poverty and Democracy: A Comparative Illustration

That there is a reciprocal relationship between agrarian reform and democratic development seems almost self-evident. Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966), in his Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy — a book significantly subtitled “Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World” — made sweeping claims about the political importance of breaking landed aristocracies for democratic development. In Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992), Moore’s early findings are confirmed across a broad range of cases (though with little attention to Asia). Prosterman and Riedinger (1987) make a sustained argument on the relation between land reform, citizenship and democratic development. This literature depends on an essential tenet of political economy: concentrations of economic power enable, sometimes necessitate, concentrations of political power. Landlessness, in a reciprocal dynamic, enables dependency, political inequality, sometimes subjugation.

These dynamics are illustrated by the divergent paths of agrarian underclasses in the United States and Kerala. Comparing Kerala to less effective states within India -- Bihar, for example (Jannuzi 1974) -- is one way to highlight the potential effects on governance and poverty, but it seems more telling to compare the historic failures in the United States. The comparison to contemporary India, or other parts of the poor world may seem strained, but is not; our propensity to think in static categories (e.g. "third world") misses interesting

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15 For a reasoned comparison of the agrarian structure of rural India to that of the
longitudinal comparisons.

The period after the Civil War in the United States (1865-1877) is called "Reconstruction," reflecting (in retrospect) more the pious hope of reformers than capacity. The greatest challenge was to reconstruct social structure. Some political leaders wanted to punish the southern land-holding aristocracy for instigating war; others saw land reform as the only realistic means of creating citizens from slaves. The rumored/promised land reform came under the slogan "forty acres and a mule." That amount of agricultural capital would in many parts of the South have afforded subsistence. But no bill survived politics in the Congress. To the contrary, experiments in land redistribution in the South were dismantled after occupation by federal troops ended. Land reform under martial law -- which worked fairly well in Japan after World War II -- was abandoned. Not only did redistribution not become law, but even preferential distribution of public lands in favor of freedmen (as opposed to railroad companies) failed as well (Foner 1989:451). With the departure of federal troops, Southern elites re-established rule with terror, fraud, intimidation and economic power. In the aftermath of failed reconstruction, backsliding in land policy -- then entirely in the hands of the state governments -- reduced the limited gains of reform and produced for blacks in particular an agrarian system rivaling that of the more extreme cases of landlord rule in the South Asian subcontinent.

Because the (white) landed elite retained economic power, and eventually returned to

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American South, see Echeverri-Gent 1993. He notes that Southern United States, particularly in the 1930s, exhibited social-structural similarities with rural India: a caste-like system of political-economic oppression and marginalization, high rates of dependency of laborers, share-tenants and marginal farmers, small-scale labor intensive agriculture, extortionate sharecropping, credit exploitation and extensive poverty. Likewise, politics was characterized by "elite domination, intraparty factionalism, agrarian populism" (p 76).
rule, efforts to resurrect a subject class had no base. The failure of "reconstruction" left in place an agrarian political economy of subjugation and dominance, largely coterminous with race, but affecting the white agrarian poor as well. W.E.B. Du Bois remarked that "the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (in Foner 1989:602). When radical agrarian populism of the 1890s subsequently swept through the South (Goodwyn 1976), blacks were not politically available for a biracial coalition that might have altered the national distribution of power. Eric Foner (1989:604) argues that the failure of reconstruction led directly to one-party (and white) dominance in the "Solid South" which "helped define the contours of American politics and weaken the prospects not simply of change in racial matters but of progressive legislation in many other realms."

The period following Reconstruction saw steady erosion of black rights: restrictions on the rights of former slaves to vote, be admitted to equal public schools or fully participate in dominant institutions of public or civil society. Prosterman and Riedinger’s comparative study of land reform concludes more generally that reforms "provide a village-level underpinning that reinforces the national-level freedoms rather than contradicts them (1987:232)." Of special importance for the long trajectory of poverty, human capital development was restricted; social safety nets and educational facilities remained comparatively underdeveloped in the South generally, and especially for blacks, into the contemporary period. Land policy from Washington failed as a lever in reconstructing the South but left behind antipathy to intervention by the federal government so severe that military force was required in the 1950s to enforce court orders to enroll blacks in public schools.

Land reform by itself would not have solved the economic, much less social and political problems of former slaves, but there is evidence that it would have made a difference. Foner (1989:109) notes that "well into the twentieth century, black who did acquire land were more likely to register, vote, and run for office than other members of the rural community." Subsequent evidence indicates that the counter-factual argument is strong. Lester Salaman’s (1979:129) work on the effects of “New Deal” experiments in land distribution indicates that landless black tenants who benefitted from very limited and truncated land distribution in the 1930s created “a permanent middle class that ultimately emerged in the 1960s as the backbone of the civil-rights movement in the rural South.”

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16 On the links between land ownership to independent social activism among Southern blacks in the 1960s, Salamon 1979.
The effects of this lost historical moment were not merely economic. Education was systematically denied blacks and educational qualifications were used as tests for eligibility to vote. To the extent that racism (or caste17) explains some of poverty's persistence, the implications are profound. Eric Foner (1989:604) writes that "Reconstruction's demise and the emergence of blacks as a disenfranchised class of dependent laborers greatly facilitated racism's further spread, until by the early twentieth century it had become more deeply embedded in the nation's culture and politics than at any time since the beginning of the antislavery crusade and perhaps in our entire history." The failure to break local landed power in the South had the further pernicious consequence of creating suspicion in voting publics policy from Washington and a blind allegiance to local rule. The irony of contemporary development thinking is that a premature celebration of the local [the product of what Pranab Bardhan (1995) calls the “anarcho-communalists” -- displacing responsibility from bad states to good communities -- reinvents precisely the scale structure that kept racial dominance alive in the Southern United States (Herring 1998).

Kerala's long historical struggles for agrarian reforms likewise confronted extraordinary subjugation in the form of agristic slavery and serfdom, persisting into the 1960s in local perceptions. Agrarian reform had a significant impact on citizenship -- the transformation of subjects to citizens. This transformation puts pressure on political systems for redistributive public policy -- not all of which is unambiguous in terms of long-term poverty-reduction.18 Kerala is a social democracy on a sub-national scale, with all the warts and messy politics of any democracy, but without the control of policy that nation-states have. That democracy owes its form in large part to decades of pursuit and final implementation of fairly radical agrarian reforms.

17 Gaiha and Kulkarni found in their empirical work (1998) in India, that caste was (not surprisingly) important: "a significant effect on movement out of poverty" (p 17). They attribute this result to discrimination in specific markets or weak motivation (internalized identification); it may also, I would think, reflect the variable distribution of connections; it is easier to get a job, a loan, any advantage if one has caste fellows in positions to help.

18 The World Bank's report on poverty in India (1997:xvi) notes the crowding out of social welfare spending by subsidies.
The core of the Kerala’s agrarian reforms -- legislated in 1959, then defeated by machinations in Delhi, and finally implemented in the 1970’s -- was the abolition of landlordism as a system of social control and exploitation (Herring, forthcoming). The long process began peasant insurrections and then ratcheted episodes of reaction to agrarian reforms beginning with the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929. It is this historical process -- not simply the effective date of land to the tiller in 1970 -- to which the argument of this paper refers.

Agrarian reform was one of the focal points around which social mobilization occurred. The outcome was land reform and labor reform in the 1970s which aided materially in producing objective measures of human welfare -- mortality, longevity, literacy, male-female population ratio -- anomalous for the level of per capita income (below the mean for India) and for the rate of growth in agricultural production (below the mean for India). Poverty reduction has been achieved via land reforms, labor reforms and transfer payments. All three presupposed an effective political and administrative system and popular pressure on the state. Anti-poverty values are embedded in real institutions, guarded and refreshed by participation. In the absence of these conditions, public programs often degenerate into boondoggles for the middle class, rent subsidies for the bureaucracy and patronage for politicians (cf Bardhan 1995). Strong local institutions allowed the current leftist coalition government to engage in quite radical decentralization of economic development authority and expenditures -- an experiment in new forms of democracy (Tornquist and Tharakan 1996). In Kerala, because of popular mobilization and agrarian reforms, this experiment is unlikely to lead to elite cooptation of local control, a familiar phenomenon in unreformed rural systems.

What the Kerala experience underscores, and does not really resolve, is the problem of the most awkward class -- the agricultural laborers. Income gains from more rapid growth in agriculture are uncertain, lagged and unevenly distributed among households and over time. Problems of the laborers in Kerala were addressed through distribution of homestead/garden plots for many, which are intensively used and quite important both nutritionally and commercially. If it is politically impossible to redistribute land, it is still possible to formalize the obligations that traditionally legitimated landownership (the obligation to take care of the landless) and redistribute the product of the land via higher wages and pensions. In Kerala, old-age pensions from farmer surplus were mandated by the Agricultural Workers Act of 1974. When

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19 This claim is not meant to ignore the points about history raised in the debate between Amartya Sen and Surjit Bhalla (Srinivasan and Bardhan 1988); certain improvements in social welfare predate land reform. Land reform was the culmination of a process that included caste reform, educational reform, altered priorities in social welfare spending and labor reform.

this proved politically and administratively impossible, the state took up the fiscal burden. Security of employment ("permanency") was the second method, and tough minimum wage legislation the third.

The Kerala reforms provide negative lessons as well as positive; there are many problems and unresolved issues, including growth and employment, but the trajectory for the poor is impressive in comparative terms. Space prohibits discussion here, but a treatment is available (Herring In Press). Slow growth is a worry if the rate of poverty decline is reduced and resources for safety nets are depleted. It is difficult to parse the trade-offs if they exist. In ethical terms, the Kerala model is quite defensible; democratic development and poverty alleviation have substantially improved the prospects of the most vulnerable people via direct and predictable public policy. Every social system, every institutional matrix, every policy profile has its warts; the crucial question is always: “compared to what?” It is quite wrong to romanticize the “Kerala model,” as is too commonly done; it is equally wrong to overlook its liberating potential.

Rethinking the Impossibility Theorem

A common response to agrarian reform is that, however desirable in theory, it is politically impossible. This perspective is both accurate and fundamentally flawed. First, predicting political possibilities requires extraordinary hubris; at one time the fall of both apartheid and Soviet regimes seemed politically impossible. It is not clear that the coalitions and regime imperatives that have driven previous agrarian reforms will be the only or most important ones in the future. Moreover, opposition to agrarian reform makes the dubious assumption that alternative pro-poor policies are somehow less politically difficult. Alternative proposals also make strong assumptions about either effective states or, increasingly, “communities” (Bardhan 1995). The World Bank’s World Development Report for 1997 makes the case for centering governance issues in development, but offers not much in the way of feasible mechanisms for generating new political capacities. If growth itself is dependent on the capable state, much more so is poverty alleviation which is efficient and effective.

21 Herring, 1989; Gulati, 1990. Old age pensions also improved intra-household income distribution for the most vulnerable sections of the most vulnerable class, as families recognized that non-working members were an economic asset, even if a small one.
Getting to an effective and representative political structure has a lot to do with historical junctures and subsequent path-dependency. What assumptions can we ethically make about the scope and limits of public authority and the malleability of political dynamics? If agrarian reform is impossible, how possible are alternatives?

Rural public works, for example, are politically easy: they promise something for everyone, so that elites have little cause to oppose or obstruct programs. For this reason, in India, Maharashtra State's Employment Guarantee Scheme is an archetype: developmental public works provide wages for the poor, means-tested by difficulty of the work and distance from the village, and infrastructural improvement for those who own rural Maharashtra, financed by the convenient cash-cow of Mumbai (Bombay) in a reversal of "urban-bias" dynamics (Herring and Edwards 1983). Though landowners reap the lion's share of benefits, and some projects were useless and there is significant corruption, benefits to the poor are considerable: not only a guarantee of employment, but such rarities as on-site child care, as well as maternity leave and allowance. But the costs are high and there are some indications, based on limited data, that the poor were to some extent "crowded out" over time by those with higher incomes and better connections (Gaiha and Kulkarni 1998:28; Gaiha et al 1998). Echeverri-Gent's (1993) critique of the scheme is that from a political developmental point of view it fails to mobilize and involve the rural poor on a trajectory of political development. Providing assets to landless people via agrarian reform would seem preferable on both fiscal and developmental grounds.

Universalistic entitlements generally have the problem of sustainability, as the backlash against welfare expenditures in the United States in the last two decades illustrates. The political problem is sustaining a public belief that the deserving are benefitting, the undeserving are not, and a public norm of capitalist society is not too far undermined: if you don't work, you don't eat (absent inheritance). For a univeralist welfare scheme to work, the moral economy must be solidly supportive (the blind are deserving) or produce widespread benefits across classes (public works) or empathetic possibility: it could happen to anyone (disaster relief, unemployment insurance). External policy advice urges moves away from (politically feasible) universalistic programs to (more politically difficult) targeted programs (Bardhan 1995). Land reforms are especially appropriate for this purpose, as they can be targeted to those with the strongest

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22 For an ethical argument, Herring 1983: Chapter 9; on the enabling effect of public policy toward political potential for alleviating poverty, Echeverri-Gent 1993.
normative claims and needs.

Interventionist alternatives to asset redistribution seem to fall into two broad categories: market rigging and political rigging. Market rigging (price supports, minimum wage legislation, "handicraft" subsidies, etc.) has its place, and has been so extensive in currently rich nations that it is naive or simply ideological to argue that growth cannot be built on a political economy. Yet there are observable problems with market rigging, from enforcement costs and consequent rent-seeking to distortion of incentives with unintended consequences. Political rigging assumes that the poor will not fully benefit even from targeted programs, nor get their share of general entitlements and development projects absent reconfiguration of local power. India's revision of its rules for local governance (panchayati raj) in 1993 represents one end of the continuum: mandated special representation for traditionally outcaste groups and tribals and a quota for women. Reconstruction in the southern United States attempted political rigging without redistributing economic power and largely failed. In India, village councils still often represent the interests of the locally affluent, who use poor retainers as pawns through the formal institutions (Gaiha and Kulkarni 1998: 34, 43). Capture of local institutions is a common outcome of devolution and decentralization, now almost totems of development discourse (Herring 1998).

Any purposive alleviation of poverty presupposes governance. Kerala is often considered a model for its success in human welfare, but as importantly is a political system that works. Education and ration shops are two examples often cited. Dreze and Sen, for example, note that in India generally "... it is quite possible for a village school to be non-functional for as long as ten years (due to teacher absenteeism and shirking without any action being taken and any collective protest being organized." In Kerala, however, "... a comparable state of affairs would not be passively tolerated (in Gaiha and Kulkarni 1998: 24)." Ration shops are far more successful in Kerala than in most other states precisely because both politicians and bureaucrats know they face monitoring and retribution from an anomalously alert and active citizenry. Citizens with secure rights are more likely to demand results. Transfer payments, public works and anti-poverty programs in India frequently engender corruption and miss their targets, or approach them inefficiently (World Bank 1997:xix, passim). A large part of this problem is lack of accountability of state to citizenry. Efficiency and sustainability of pro-poor policies then are by no means politically possible, any more than agrarian reform is inherently politically impossible.

Conclusions:

Normatively justifiable policy prescriptions must somehow separate the effects of any discrete change on poverty outcomes amid the myriad of factors affecting household well-being. Our understandings are crude and approximate, whatever the expressed certainty of policy prescriptions. Growth has of late replaced asset redistribution as a solution for the poor, in part on the strength of the political impossibility theorem. The dichotomy is fortunately false; agrarian reform is pro-growth and neither growth nor agrarian reform offers any panacea.
Though no longer fashionable, in part because its Cold War roots shriveled with the declining need to defeat communism, agrarian reform still offers significant advantages in comparison with alternatives. Though of immediate and direct benefit to the rural poor, more importantly it is capable of both serving as symbol for mobilization of powerless people and altering the path of societal development. Agrarian reform is therefore sturdier and more enduring than many alternatives; it takes a longer view. This argument is buttressed by comparative consideration of the historical experience of the United States. Aggregate wealth multiplied in abundance but poverty persists; growth has not been enough. Promised land reforms to rehabilitate former slaves as citizens after civil war in the nineteenth century were abandoned to political opposition; the result was an agrarian structure, and attendant political economy, which perpetuated abject dependency. Poverty not only persisted in the population of former slaves over generations, but remains disproportionate. In contrast, Kerala state in India abolished an agrarian system based on agrestic serfdom and slavery in a compressed historical time and has been notably successful in reducing the incidence of poverty despite growth rates below the Indian mean. Whether policy promotes more or less state intervention, agrarian reform remains a means of restructuring the field of power to which state functionaries respond, and therefore enables more possibilities for building an effective and responsive state, without which all other anti-poverty options -- including growth -- are reduced in efficacy.

Contemporary evidence reaffirms that classic agrarian reform is neither dead nor irrelevant; its dual contributions to direct relief of poverty and democratization remain potentials of great importance. The surest way to poverty reduction and empower the powerless in many rural societies is redistribution. Though there are other roads to purposive poverty alleviation, all are subject to distortions induced by social inequality, a major component of which is skewed distribution of property. Moreover, even compromise populist distributive programs work better with agrarian mobilization and secure rights for the rural poor than without. A difficulty with traditional agrarian reform is that it is a statist project -- as all policy is -- and as such has often increased state power and patronage in ways inconsistent with reform objectives. Without reform of the state, its alleged beneficiaries are seldom the driving force and may become its victims. Yet it is agrarian reform which enables more broadly based and equitably distributed rural power vis-a-vis the state.

Traditional conceptualizations of agrarian reform and its politics are, however, too limiting. The customary political focus on agrarian classes organized around agricultural production needs broadening to incorporate new forces motivated by the social correlates of land-based inequality -- “new social movements” and their domestic and international allies. A pro-poor policy agenda must thus retain elements of the venerable core of the agrarian project and yet recognize the potential of larger coalitions for the poor. These elements include not only environmental integrity and regeneration, but also women’s rights, human rights, cultural survival and democratization. What is “politically impossible” is in principle unknown, reflecting more ideology and speculation than knowledge, and subject over time to purposive public policy which shapes political development. The customary economic focus on intersection of landed rights and agriculture needs broadening to incorporate technological change enabled by the
biological revolution and the importance of ecological systems that support both agriculture and survival strategies of the poor. This conceptual broadening is important both for situating agrarian reform within a development policy for the poor and for understanding new political possibilities beyond the impossibility theorem.
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