

A Political Ecology of Agricultural Change in Post-Soviet Russia



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Almost overnight Russia switched from being a communist country in the Soviet Union to an independent country attempting to secure its place in the global capitalist system. With this transformation came great changes in all aspects of life, especially in the countryside with regard to agricultural production. Russia is the world's largest country and has much potential for a large agricultural output, although it has faced difficult times during the 1990s. Because of its northern location only 7.3 percent of its land is arable, but 7.3 percent of Russia's land is equivalent to about 125 million hectares, meaning a large area to grow a variety of crops (Csaki, 2002). But Russia is not living up to its agricultural potential, and has actually started importing a high percentage of its food. In 1997, Russia was the world's largest importer of poultry, not something one would expect from a country that was once a world superpower and has so much potentially productive land (Wegren 2005). Since 1991, agricultural production has actually decreased across the country and the country is now caught between a population returning to subsistence farming, while the government and development agencies are hoping for Russia to enter the global economy. This paper seeks to analyze how Russian agriculture has changed after the fall of the Soviet Union, as well as examine how the new agriculture reforms from Moscow have been implemented in the Republic of Buryatia, a marginal region of Eastern Siberia, by using a political ecology framework. The paper will provide some background on political ecology, explain the methods and literature used for the research, briefly discuss the Soviet system of collective agriculture, before analyzing the reforms of the 1990s, and looking at the case study of Buryatia. Finally conclusions about Buryatia and Russian agriculture in general will be discussed.

Political Ecology in the Post-Soviet World

Political ecology has not traditionally focused on the second world, but using the framework provides new insight into important issues, but also presents some problems. Traditionally political ecology has focused on the third world and increasing attention is now being given to the first world, but work on the second world is noticeably absent. Paul Robbins, in his book Political Ecology, suggests that attention should be given to the Eastern European transition, because it has not been the focus of past research (Robbins, 2004: 215).

Political ecology is important when examining the case of Russian agriculture because it aims to give a voice to all of the actors involved and examines how political policies and structures affect land use. Much of the literature written about the agricultural transition in Russia focuses on the broad policies and goals, rather than seeing how those policies and goals have been implemented on the ground. Using political ecology allows one to combine the broad policy initiatives with the actual situation at a local level, thus providing a more complete picture of the state of agriculture. Secondly, political policies and land use in Russia are inextricably linked and the shape of agriculture has changed dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union, in large part due to the changing policies. Because of the changing society and political system, agriculture went from a large industrial collective enterprise to a system trying to determine its place within national and international markets.

Although political ecology provides valuable insight into agricultural change, some problems arise when attempting to apply the entire framework to Russia. Because political ecology is a relatively new subfield of geography, many definitions exist and the field is constantly expanding and evolving. Robbins nicely summarizes a variety of definitions of the field, but applying them in the Russian context poses some problems. One of the most commonly cited definitions is from Blaikie and Brookfield, which states that political ecology

“combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself” (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 17 in Robbins, 2004: 6). Out of Robbins’ definitions, this idea of political ecology is most applicable to the Russian agricultural situation because of its focus on the relationship between society and land-based resources can be applied to the changing agricultural production systems. The final part of the definition allows for analysis of discrepancies amongst the local population, which have been overlooked in some political ecology work.

Robbins also identifies four main themes of political ecology research, which are degradation and marginalization, environmental conflict, conservation and control and environmental identity and social movement, but none of them directly apply to the Russian agricultural situation. For this context it would seem that the degradation and marginalization theme would apply, but the current situation in Russia is the opposite of that thesis. The degradation and marginalization thesis argues, “Otherwise environmentally innocuous local production systems undergo transition to overexploitation of natural resources on which they depend as a response to state development intervention and/or increasing integration in regional and global markets” (Robbins, 2004: 14, 131). The degradation and marginalization thesis is applicable to the collectivization of Soviet agriculture, but does not account for the poverty rural Russians now face because of the lack of state intervention and the inability to join the global economy. The current situation in the Russian countryside provides a challenge to one of the main themes of political ecology, because reverse causes have caused similar situations.

Methods

This paper combines secondary sources with fieldwork from a village in the Republic of Buryatia. Since political ecology has not traditionally focused on Russia or the transition from the Soviet Union, work from other disciplines was examined. Sociology and economics have contributed many articles and books about the topic and in particular, Stephen Wegren, a rural sociologist, has written a great deal on Russian agricultural change. Academics are not the only ones focusing on this important subject; the World Bank and other development agencies have produced many reports on the Russian agricultural situation. Development reports provide data and information, which in turn, can be analyzed using the tools of political ecology. Political ecology has also been used to examine the agricultural transition in China, although Muldavin's finding of peasants switching to cash crops does not seem to be occurring in Russia (Muldavin, 1997).

The dissertation "It Didn't Used to be this Way": Households, Resources, and Economic Transformation in Tunka Valley, Buriatia, Russian Federation by Katherine Metzko also provides valuable insight for the Buryatia case study and the agricultural transition. Few researchers have focused on the agricultural changes in Siberia and finding research from the same republic greatly adds to the understanding of how agriculture has changed in Buryatia. Other dissertations using political and cultural ecology in the post-Soviet world, including William Rowe's work On the Edge of Empires: the Hisor Valley of Tajikistan and Susan Crate's dissertation Cows, Kin and Capitalism: the Cultural Ecology of Viliui Sakha in the Post-Socialist Era. Since younger scholars have started to focus on the second world, hopefully the field of second world and/or post-Soviet political ecology will soon develop.

In addition to secondary sources, this paper draws upon fieldwork from the Republic of Buryatia. The fieldwork was conducted in the Republic of Buryatia because of connections with

a local village and because that village was once a collective farm, making it an ideal place to study the agricultural transition. In November 2005, I spent about three weeks in the village of Desyatnikovo conducting fieldwork. Living with a female pensioner, who had worked in the finance department of the local collective farm, allowed me to be fully immersed in the community, which facilitated my observation. Because I am an American, I did have a Western bias during my fieldwork, but I was able to somewhat overcome the “us versus them” barrier. My relationship with my host provided me with a gateway into to the community and allowed me to participate in a variety of village tasks, such as carrying in water, helping prepare food, watching a pig be slaughtered and plucking feathers out of three chickens after turning down the opportunity to actually kill them. Participating in these activities gave me insight into rural Russian life and demonstrated that I was considered a temporary member of the community.

Because of the connection with the community I was able to conduct five semi-structured interviews, as well as have numerous informal conversations with my host mother. All of my informants were over the age of sixty five, were former collective farm workers and had retired before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their positions on the kolkhoz included bookkeepers, a vegetable worker, a Lenin Award winning pig farmer and a Lenin Award winning tractor driver.

Soviet Historical Context

To understand the current situation of Russian agriculture and its recent transition, one must have a basic understanding of Soviet history. Soviet agriculture was collectivized starting in 1929 under Stalin because he wanted to industrialize agriculture, along with other sectors of Soviet society, and to have greater political and social control over the rural village people (O'Brien, 2002). During collectivization, agricultural production was organized into large scale

agricultural enterprises. All of the peasants were forced to turn over their land and livestock to the government, which in turn became part of kolkhozes, collective farms, or sovkhozes, state farms. Kolkhozes were “economic and social units” which were forced to deliver a certain amount of foodstuffs to the state. The government planning commissions determined the amount of foodstuffs that needed to be produced and the kolkhozes were forced to comply (Kirchner, 1991). The state had such tight control over the production because the entire Soviet economy was planned. Although the kolkhozes were forced to comply with the state’s demands, they had a greater level of freedom and autonomy than the sovkhozes. Sovkhozes differed from kolkhozes because they were completely run by the state and a goal of Soviet agriculture was to have all kolkhozes eventually turn into sovkhozes, thus having the state in total control of agricultural production (Kirchner, 1991).

Collectivization did not go as well as the Soviet leadership had hoped so some incentives were given to the peasantry in order to appease them, and with the hope that they would join the new farms with less resistance. The peasants often reacted angrily to the forced seizure of land and herds, often slaughtering much of their livestock before it could be turned over to the state. The losses in livestock hurt the Soviet economy so the government decided to allow every household to farm a small piece of land, known as a private plot, and raise a limited number of livestock. In 1935, at the Second Congress of Outstanding Kolkhozniks, the state officially declared that each peasant family was allowed a “plot between one quarter and half a hectare, at least one cow, calves, a specified number of sheep and pigs, and unlimited numbers of fowl” (Lewin, 1994: 331). Allowing peasants and collective farm workers to harvest their own private plot and raise their own livestock is not something one would expect to find in a Communist society, where private property is not supposed to exist and the state is supposed to take care of

everyone's needs. When dealing with the rural areas, the state took the opposite approach, having the peasants farm their own land and making them responsible for their own food. The private plot phenomenon is important because when looking at the current situation of Russian agriculture one can still see its presence after many years and various governmental decrees.

Throughout the rest of the Soviet period the basic form of collective agriculture remained the same, although some minor reforms were passed. State regulations defining the private plots varied, but the rural residents were always allowed some degree of independence regarding their personal small scale agriculture. This shows that the agricultural workers in Russia were able to maintain a certain degree of power because they were never completely dependent on the state and the state did not completely wipe out their previous lifestyle, although it did alter it somewhat by requiring the rural residents to practice their own agriculture while also working long hours on the kolkhozes or sovkhozes.

Agricultural policy began to shift with the Gorbachev administration in the 1980s. Under Gorbachev the Soviet Union promoted personal agriculture (Alanen, 2001). Although Gorbachev supported personal agriculture, he also believed that collective agriculture was still a valid idea and that the system currently was not producing as much as it could and simply needed to be fixed (O'Brien, 2002). Therefore Gorbachev's reforms worked within the collective system rather than by trying to drastically change it (Wegren, 2005). A greater change in the agricultural system occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Transition from a Soviet Collective Agriculture to Current Russian Agriculture

New Legislation and Agricultural Enterprise Structures

The Russian agricultural sector really started to change more drastically with the Yeltsin administration. Changes brought by the new regime included land privatization and various

agrarian reforms (Wegren, 2005). Although Yeltsin did drastically alter the shape of Russian agriculture his goal was never to decollectivize the system completely. He wanted the main producer of agricultural products to be the private sector (Wegren, 2005). President Yeltsin signed a decree in December of 1991 that “allowed collective and state farm members to withdraw from their parent farm with land shares and property shares” (Wegren, 2005: 66). The division of the old collective and state farms at first did not give all of the workers an equal share of the enterprise, but a decree in September 1992 required the equal distribution among the workers. The recipients of the new shares could also exchange or lease their rights to the shares. Although exchanging and leasing were legalized, the right to buy and sell land was still restricted (Wegren, 2005).

Another reform from December 1991 was “On the Procedure for the Reorganization of Collective and State Farms.” This resolution “instructed all state and collective farms to re-register themselves by the end of March 1992, and if the farm was unprofitable, to reorganize” (Wegren, 2005: 66). The time period for reorganization was eventually extended to January 1994. The kolkhozes and sovkhoses had four options for their new structure. For unprofitable farms it was required that the farm be split among the workers and completely disbanded and this option applied to about ten percent of the Soviet farms. The second option was to remain a collective farm. This choice was possible because in March of 1992 Yeltsin signed another decree saying that farms could keep their collective status if their members voted for it. The government enacted this decree because it did not make political or economic sense to have all of the large farms disband, since they were still producing much of the food for the country at that time (Wegren, 2005). The third and fourth options for reorganization were to form either an open or closed joint-stock company. In the open joint-stock company, persons inside and outside

of the kolkhoz could purchase stock in the operation by using their land or property shares. In a closed joint-stock company, only prior members of the kolkhoz had the opportunity to purchase stock in the new enterprise (Abrahams, 1996). Data from the time period shows that the most popular option for restructuring was the closed joint-stock company, with 47 percent of the former collective and state farms choosing that option (Abrahams, 1996).

Another major piece of legislation occurred in October 1993 when President Yeltsin signed a decree which, “instructed that the members of state and collective farms were to receive a certificate of land ownership entitling them to a share of the farm’s land” (Wegren, 2005: 67). Workers who received the certificates also had the right to sell their land, although it still needed to be used for agriculture (Wegren, 2005). After all of Yeltsin’s decrees, land was privatized, but since the large collective enterprises were allowed to remain intact, not much appeared to change in the countryside. This apparent lack of change was problematic when combined with the economic system, which changed drastically during the same time period.

Shock Therapy and the Transition into a Market Economy

During the Soviet period, the state and collective farms were given specific quotas to meet and all of their production was planned. They automatically had a buyer for their products and a fixed price. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the certainty and security vanished and new agricultural organizations had to try to survive in the market economy. This sudden emergence into the market economy was known as shock therapy. Shock therapy was supposed to satisfy two goals of the new government: the first was to help facilitate the rapid transition into capitalism and build new markets and the second was to prevent the Communists from regaining power (Wegren, 2005).

Although the Communists were unable to regain power, the transition into the capitalist system proved more difficult for the agricultural sector. The larger collective farms no longer had the monopoly over domestic food production they enjoyed during the Soviet period and were unable to compete with cheaper prices and better quality of food imported from the United States, the European Union and China (Wegren, 2005). The transition to the market economy actually witnessed a decrease in the output of goods. A forty five percent decline in agricultural output was estimated from 1992 to 1998 when compared with the 1990 levels (Wegren, 2005). The overall output may have declined, but rural Russians were still finding ways to feed themselves, especially since most of the imported food was just going to the urban areas and not the countryside.

New Types of Agriculture Actors: The Winners and Losers

Out of the tremendous agricultural transition three main types of agricultural actors have appeared: the individual household unit subsisting from their private plots, larger private farms and finally the large-scale collective enterprises. In 1990, before the redistribution of land almost ninety nine percent of arable land was part of either a state or collective farm and 1.3 percent of the land was allocated to private plots. By 1996 the redistribution had changed the percentages substantially. State and collective farms were twenty nine percent of the arable land, cooperatives and joint stock companies fifty nine percent, private farms seven percent, and household plots (including collective orchards and vegetable gardens) were five percent. State and collective farms still had a fairly substantial percentage of the land because many, especially in Siberia, did not disband until later in the 1990s (see section on Buryatia for specific examples) (Mudahar, 1998).

One may assume that the large scale collective enterprises or smaller private farms would be the most successful producers during this time, but actually the best producers were the individual households, who generally practiced subsistence agriculture, although they sometimes produced a little extra to sell at a market or along the roadside. Even though productivity was higher on the private plots and gardens, but these agricultural endeavors produced different products than the larger scale farms. At the household level, people mainly produced fruit, vegetables, potatoes and some animal products, where as the large scale enterprises produced grain, sunflower seed, sugarbeets, meat, milk, and eggs (Mudahar, 1998). This difference in production makes sense when one considers that households had only a few hectares available to them, while the larger farms were on the scale of thousands of hectares. Also, household production was meant to meet the families' food needs rather than be sold competitively on a market.

Often it was easier for peasants to simply increase the size of their personal plot rather than start a small-scale private farm, where the focus would be profit and production on a larger scale, rather than the subsistence level of the personal plot (O'Brien, 2002). Even though a main goal of the Yeltsin government was to create a thriving sector of private farms, in the end it was often too difficult to make a profit and survive. In order to attract people to private farming the government offered a variety of incentives including free land, moving expense grants, and a five year land tax exemption. People took advantage of this opportunity and the number of private farms increased from 50,000 in January of 1992 to 284,000 in July of 1994 (O'Brien, 2002). Many people did take advantage of the governmental incentives, but were unable to stay in business and in 2000 the number of private farms decreased to 260,000 (which employed between 800,000 and 900,000 people) (Wegren, 2005). The number of farms may have

decreased, but the amount of land used by private farms has increased. In 2004 private farms constituted 17.6 million hectares, where as in 1992 they only used 1.3 million hectares. Because more land is being used for fewer farms, private farms have increased from a mean of 42 hectares in 1992 to a mean of 67 hectares in 2004 (Wegren, 2005). These statistics seem to indicate that some private farms have been successful and able to consolidate their land, while others have been forced out of business. Although Russian agriculture differs from other systems around the world, the trend of the successful farms becoming larger at the expense of the smaller farms is a common occurrence in most market economies.

The number of private farms decreased for a variety of reasons, including the high cost of machinery and inputs. The 1990s witnessed serious de-capitalization of the agricultural sector as the amount of farm machinery used decreased dramatically. In 1990 143,700 tractors were acquired while only 6,416 in 1998. The amount of trucks fell from 97,600 in 1990 to 980 in 1998 and grain combines fell from 37,800 in 1990 to 717 in 1998 (O'Brien, 2002). The decrease in the acquisition of farm machinery shows that people could not afford to buy and use machinery on their farms and is a reason why people turned back to only farming their private plots, thus again making the personal plots vital for survival, as well as accounting for their drastic increase in production (Polubina, 2002). Depending on the size of the farm the old equipment from the kolkhozes and sovkhoses may not have been appropriate because they were designed for very large scale farming. Therefore it is not uncommon to see fields of combines and tractors rusting away, while local villagers struggle with small farming enterprises.

Another difficulty private farms face is the rising cost of inputs such as fertilizer, electricity and fuel. Because of the skyrocketing prices, uses of inputs have plummeted. From 1991 to 1999 overall agricultural inputs increased in price by eight times, making it exceedingly

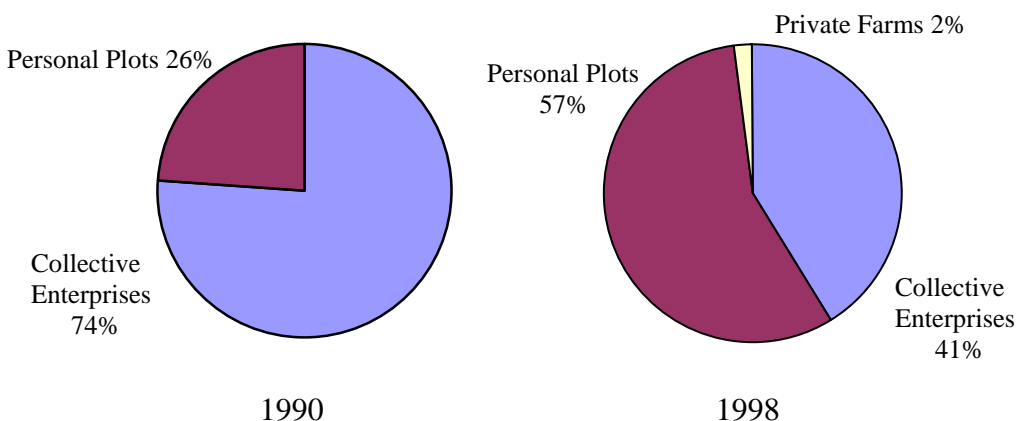
difficult for farmers to pay for everything. Even if a farmer was able to afford some type of machinery, the price for fuel and lubricants increased by 17.4, times so using one's equipment often proved challenging. In 1990, 11.3 million tons of gasoline was used, but in 2000 this number was reduced to 1.8 million tons. The use of mineral fertilizers also drastically decreased, which led the World Bank to wonder about the fertility levels of Russian soil (Csaki, 2002).

After looking at the role of the large collective organizations and household production, it appears that the private farms were the losers during the economic transition. One World Bank report estimates that their contribution in 2000 to the agricultural sector was three percent of the output, although this number did increase from only one percent in 1992 (Csaki, 2002). Yeltsin's desire of having private farmers as the economic backbone of the agricultural sector has not yet happened, fifteen years after the first reforms.

After 1992, six million hectares of land were used for personal plots; a fifty percent increase from the 1970s (O'Brien, 2002). The three million new hectares allotted for personal plots went to increase the size of existing plots and to create some new ones (O'Brien, 2002). World Bank surveys show that personal plot size in five Russian provinces increased from 0.24 hectares in 1990 to 0.35 hectares in 1994, an increase of almost 50%, although they still remained less than half a hectare (O'Brien, 2002). In 1994 personal plots were producing 46% of the gross agricultural product on only 3.3% of the arable land (O'Brien, 2002). This shows that even though the government had hoped private farms would dominate agricultural production the personal plots were still the most productive in Russia considering the proportion of total land cultivated. The percent of agriculture outputs produced on the personal plots actually increased from 26% in 1990 to 57% in 1998, though collective enterprises still had a

place in the Russia agricultural sector, but these were on a smaller scale than the previous enterprises and their outputs decreased from 1990 to 1998.

Figure 1
Structure of Agricultural Production in Russia Based on Market Value of Agricultural Commodities, 1990 and 1998 (O'Brien 371) (Data from Moscow: Goskomstat, 1998).



Whether or not reforms have been successful is still debated when discussing the agricultural transition. The World Bank argues that the reforms have not been effective because much of the agricultural sector is still not in the market economy, but rather production is coming from single small household units and is of the subsistence level. On the other hand Stephen Wegren, a professor who has spent a great deal of time studying Russian agriculture and has published numerous works on the subject, argues that the reforms have been successful and that much change has occurred in the countryside, especially with regard to the behavior of rural Russians (Wegren, 2005). Both sides argue that current household production will not be the future of Russian agriculture and the larger scale farms will eventually become the leading producers. This is not a new idea, since it was the hope of the Yeltsin administration, and by looking to the Russian countryside one can still see that this notion has not fully come into being and the actors advocating it as the answer have not provided adequate solutions.

The Republic of Buryatia: A Case Study

The Republic of Buryatia is located in Siberia, east of Lake Baikal. The Republic is predominantly Buryat, an ethnic group related to the Mongols, although Russians and other minorities live in the republic as well. In 2002 the entire population of the republic was 981,238 people. The largest urban area is the capital Ulan-Ude and agriculture is the main economic industry, but 93 percent of the population lives below the poverty line (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 2002). The republic government stresses that agricultural production is going to increase by six to twelve percent by 2008 and recognizes that most of the production comes from household or private farms rather than the collective enterprises (Agriculture, 2006). By closely examining two villages in the area, one can have a better understanding of how the rural reforms from Moscow have manifested themselves in the countryside. Both villages, Desyatnikovo and Tory, were once part of kolkhozes during the Soviet Union and now many villagers are practicing subsistence agriculture.

Figure 2 Map of the Republic of Buryatia with Approximate Case Study Locations (source: <http://www.cip.nsk.su/fund/BuryatRepublic/BuryatRegion/BuryatiaMap/index.html>)



Desyatnikovo

The first village for the case study of the Republic of Buryatia is Desyatnikovo, which is located about sixty kilometers from Ulan-Ude. The village total population is about 1,300 people according to a local resident, but it appeared that the population was much smaller (informant 1). It is located along a main Russian road that stretches from Moscow to Vladivostok and is the only paved road in the village.

The population of the village is made up of the religious group Old Believers - or *Semeyskiye*, as they are known in the area. The Old Believers were sent to Siberia in the eighteenth century, because they did not accept the new reforms passed in the Russian Orthodox Church, during the Schism. One aspect of their culture that is important to agriculture is their work ethic; they believe in hard work and getting things done themselves. When thinking about how governmental reforms are implemented in rural parts of the country, it is important for the

case study of Buryatia to remember that most of the republic consists of minority or historically marginalized people, such as the Old Believers.

Residents of the village stressed that they provided for themselves and had successful household production. The fact that people produced almost everything themselves was one of the first things they would share during conversations (interviews 11/05). This shows among the elderly population at least, a certain amount of pride was taken in being able to support themselves by subsistence agriculture.

The village is located in a valley, with sloping hills on either side and the town stretches along the main road, although there are a few other streets parallel to the main road to the South. After the row of houses to the north there is a hill, which is covered in large fields and provides a place for cattle to graze and some larger scale agriculture. Behind the houses to the South is a smaller hill where the remains of the old pig farm, which was part of the kolkhoz, are located. Behind the pig farm is a larger hill covered in forest.

Figure 3 Picture of Desyatnikovo (Source: Betsy Engebretson)



Currently, the village has a variety of services for its residents, although it lacks running water and indoor plumbing. People can buy a limited selection of food, alcohol and some household items at one of three small stores all located along the main road and about 200 kids attend lessons at the local school. A post office is open on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and a hospital offering limited services is located along the main road. The local club puts on different cultural events and runs a discotheque for the young village residents on Friday and Saturday nights. The local village government also has an office in the village.

Money enters the village through a variety of methods. The government pays the retired residents monthly pensions providing them with cash. The informants from my fieldwork had pensions ranging from 1300 to 4000 rubles, depending on what their position on the kolkhoz was. The government also pays the salaries of the teachers at the local school, the few people who work for the village administration and the employees at the cultural club.

Although the distances to larger urban areas are relatively short, transportation between the areas is not readily accessible. If one owns a car or has easy access to a car, the trip is not a problem. A car also provides villagers with much more freedom to travel around the area to either different fields, the forest to pick berries or to other places they may need to go, but not everyone has the luxury of owning a car.

Without a car the journey is more challenging because the only way to get to other urban areas is by *marshrutka*, which come infrequently, or the more expensive option of a taxi. A *marshrutka* is a common form of mass transportation throughout Russia since Perestroika and is a minivan, with room for about fourteen passengers that follows a set route shuttling people where they need to go along the specific route. If one is unable to get a *marshrutka* to the closer larger village the only other option is to try to “catch a car,” which is hitchhiking, to a closer village and then take a *marshrutka* from there to Ulan-Ude. Patience is required for this method, because although a fair amount of traffic is on the main road, much of it consists of trucks and motorcades of new cars bought in Vladivostok, neither of which often stop to pick up hitchhikers.

Tory

Tory is located in a more western part of the Republic of Buryatia. The village of 1,177 residents is located near several rivers at the lower end of a valley. Because of its geographic location it has some of the best soils in the region (Metzo, 2003). Tory is a predominantly Buryat village, which is more typical of the republic, considering that the majority of the republic's population is ethnically Buryat. The village has more amenities than Desyatnikovo, including numerous shops, a café, clinic and a three-story brick school (Metzo, 2003). Households in both villages are often organized with a main house, a variety of outbuilding and

sheds, a Russian bathhouse known as a *banya*, their private plot or plots depending on the wealth of the family and animal pens if they raise livestock (Metzo, 2003). Plots are not always located next to the owner's house, which can make transportation more difficult, but plots are often a little larger the farther they are from the village center.

Figure 4 Aerial View of Tory (Source: Google Earth, 2006)



The Transition and the Current Agricultural Situation

Gorbachev and perestroika brought few positive changes to the village, according to a seventy eight year old village man named Mikhail (Informant 2). He said that before 1989 the kolkhoz had a great quantity of livestock, but with Perestroika, all of the livestock perished or

was lost. He may have been exaggerating, but even with the exaggeration his statement shows that he associates the end of the Soviet system with the negative event of the loss of livestock and a turn for the worse.

Although government reforms started in 1991 neither kolkhoz (in either village) stopped operations or reorganized at that time. In Tory, the workers on the kolkhoz decided to keep their status as a collective farm around 1992, but in 1995 the kolkhoz ceased operations and its current legal status is not completely clear (Metzo, 2003). In 2000, the kolkhoz in Desyatnikovo officially ceased operations and held an auction to divide the land and resources amongst the villagers (Informant 1).

After the collective farms ceased production, different forms of agriculture took place in the villages, including smaller collective enterprises, successful and not so successful attempts at private farms, as well as continued household production and subsistence. In both villages the fact that people still practice agriculture and are making attempts at trying to become part of the new capitalist system with larger scale enterprises shows that people want to make a living in the agricultural sector. In Desyatnikovo, a smaller collective farming operation is trying to continue larger scale agriculture in the area, but is struggling. It currently employs sixty workers and last year's grain harvest was only three quintals. This current operation has a long way to go if it wants to become close to the size and production levels of the previous kolkhoz, which employed over 16,000 workers and harvested over 67,000 quintals of grain in its richest year (Informant 1).

Even though the collective enterprise in Desyatnikovo has had some success others have had hard times trying to start private farms. According to Mikhail, Desyatnikovo did not receive any of the reforms that government passed during the 1990s, and farmers trying to make it on

their own had a difficult time (Informant 2). The lack of government reforms and assistance is also echoed in Tory, where four households identified themselves as having commercial farming operations rather than just practicing subsistence agriculture. Of these four none said that they received any “financial or in-kind support from the government” (Metzo, 2003: 113). One reason they have been able to survive is that they also run other businesses on the side to supplement their agricultural income. Zhargal, a Tory resident, has been able to run a farm, but in addition he “has a small shop, collects and resells tractor parts, and negotiates timber sales with potential buyers” (Metzo, 2003: 108). Without the additional income from his side operations Zhargal, would not be able to operate his private farming operation.

The success of the farmers in Tory contrasts with failed attempts at private farms in Desyatnikovo. A probable cause of this difference is the lack of additional businesses in Desyatnikovo. Since Desyatnikovo has fewer businesses than in Tory it seems that residents of Desyatnikovo have not tried to employ this strategy. Mikhail’s son started a small-scale private farm but after two years had to close it down and is now unemployed. Mikhail believes his son had to give up the farm because he did not have a tractor, which made practicing agriculture at a larger scale much harder, and also he did not receive any subsidies or support from the state and was not able to fund the operation entirely himself (Informant 2).

Mikhail’s son is not the only person who has had difficulty with the lack of machinery in the villages. People, in both villages who want machinery and technology do not have the means to pay for it and some of the old kolkhoz machinery is simply rusting away in a field because it is now in disrepair and not always suitable for the desired type of agriculture. When people who simply farmed their small plots in Tory were asked why they did not have a larger scale farm they cited the lack of machinery as one of the reasons (Metzo, 2003). It is inefficient and almost

impossible to cultivate one hundred hectares of land by hand. In order to be successful and competitive peasants need to have farm machinery available to them. The desire to become private farmers is present in the villages, but circumstances do not always allow it to happen. One woman's son in Desyatnikovo wants to start a private farm, but his only piece of machinery is a "small old tractor purchased twenty five years ago" (Informant 1). He wants to buy a bigger one, but cannot afford it and thus he is in charge of heating the village administrative buildings and school in the winter and relies on his private plot to feed his family.

Lack of machinery is not the only factor preventing villagers from operating successful private commercial farms in Tory. Because the position of the kolkhoz is still undefined, receiving one's share of land from it can be difficult (Metzo, 2003). When Zhargal talked about starting his farm he said that "he exchanged blows with everyone" over receiving his share of the land (Metzo, 2003: 108). If peasants do not have access to the land they do not even have a chance at trying to operate at a larger scale.

Raising livestock on a small farm poses even more challenges. Villagers are often able to afford to raise a small number of animals, but increasing the herd size to be competitive on a larger market is much harder because the feed and time put into the endeavor are not profitable. Keeping an animal alive during the cold Siberian winter is quite challenging. Subsistence farmers in Desyatnikovo only raise pigs during the warmer months. They often buy the pigs in March and then slaughter them in mid November. With this schedule the pigs have all summer to fatten up and when they are slaughtered provide enough meat to last the winter until a new pig is bought. To keep a milking cow and a calf alive for a winter in Buryatia requires two or more hectares of land yielding two tons of hay (Metzo, 2003). Many residents do not have access to that amount of land and lack the money to pay for the required amount of feed.

People and families, who are not part of a collective organization or do not have a private farm, practice subsistence agriculture. The land they use is generally the same land that was given to them during the Soviet period as their private plot. Now, for some residents, their private plots are their sole sources of income, so sometimes people are dependent of them for survival. In Tory more people harvest their private plots than participate in some other form of agriculture (Metzo, 2003). In Desyatnikovo pensioners use their private plots as their main source of food and would not be able to survive without them. People have been able to increase the size of their private plots with some land given from the kolkhoz (interviews 11/05).

Walking around the village in 2005, one can see that every piece of harvestable land is being used as a plot. Some plots are shaped like triangles following the curve of the main road, while others are placed on hills and some use every inch of land until it sharply drops off into the floodplain of the stream. This use of land shows that land within the village is a valuable resource and people make every effort to use all of it. They must use all of it because it is their source of food, and cultivating land within the village is easier than having a field farther away. Having a field in the village allows one to get to it quicker and one does not have to have a car, which saves time and money. Also considering a portion of the village population is comprised of senior citizens, having a field within walking distance allows elderly people to continue their agricultural practices.

Some families are able to produce extra food from their plots and are able to sell it for a limited amount of additional income. In both villages, it is not uncommon to see women selling food along the road or outside of local buildings. Tory is located near a national park so the residents are able to sell to tourists passing by (Metzo, 2003). Because Desyatnikovo is on the road from Moscow to Vladivostok, the producers must compete with all of the other villages

along the road so sometimes sales can be difficult. The most common traffic through Desyatnikovo is people from around the republic traveling to Ulan-Ude or motorcades of new cars that were purchased in Vladivostok traveling west. Villagers who only use their private plot often do not take their food to markets in the closest urban centers, such as Sludianka, because of the high transportation costs (Metzo, 2003). Of my six informants in Desyatnikovo, none had recently been to Ulan-Ude even though the distance between the two places is relatively short (interviews 11/05). The time and money it takes to travel to the city is not worth the money they could possibly make selling at a larger market. From observations in the two villages it does not appear that there are middlemen, possibly because of the high transportation costs. It might not be a lucrative business for anyone, especially if they have to compete with goods that are located closer to the markets and are thus cheaper because of lower transportation costs.

From looking at the various experiences in the two villages one can see that people are not always satisfied with simply practicing subsistence agriculture. Lack of machinery, help and subsidies from the government, as well as the high costs of raising livestock, all prevent willing villagers from having private farms (Interviews 11/05).

Findings

The Negative Perceptions of Subsistence Agriculture in Buryatia

Political ecologists tend to emphasize the importance of subsistence agriculture because it is often what the local people want to practice rather than join the global economy, but in Russia some local people do not have such a positive view of subsistence agriculture. This view is exacerbated by the government's and development agencies' focus on private farms, increasing production and becoming incorporated into the capitalist global economic system. Although the

dominant narrative is that subsistence agriculture is bad, the elderly members of society often happily practice subsistence agriculture and do not want to become part of a larger structure.

Part of the negative feelings towards subsistence agriculture stem from the perceived loss of social status, nationally and internationally. As part of the Soviet agricultural system the workers were producing food for a world superpower. People were awarded honors for hard work, such as the Lenin Labor Award, and believed that they were furthering the goals of the Soviet Revolution. In short, they perceived their work mattered on an international scale.

As well as the perceived international importance, people also took pride in the amount of work they completed and now want to work to their full potential. This notion of being extremely useful in part is leftover from the Soviet work ideals, and in the case of Desyatnikovo, in part from the work ethic of Old Believer culture. Old Believers place great importance on hard work, self-sufficiency and being as productive as possible. During the Soviet era people would work a full day on the kolkhoz and in the mornings before their shift on the kolkhoz, or in the evenings afterwards would devote their energy to their private plot and few animals. Thus people would work a double, or in the case of women, a triple shift (Interviews 11/05). Now with just a private plot and limited amount of livestock to occupy their time people, especially among the middle aged population, do not feel as productive and almost like failures.

The perceived lost of status has caused depression and social problems because they see no other future and are unhappy with simply practicing subsistence agriculture. The unhappiness can be seen in the two examples of men from Desyatnikovo wanting to start private farms, but being unable to succeed and thus forced into unemployment or another menial job while practicing subsistence agriculture to survive (Informant 1 and 2).

Internalizing subsistence agriculture as a negative practice is not the only reason that some villagers are unhappy with their current situation. The government and development organizations have also contributed to the dominant narrative. The World Bank believes that the reforms of the 1990s have been unsuccessful because a large segment of the agricultural industry has not joined the global market, but this view fails to take into account that the rural population has, for the most part, been able to feed itself, which can be seen through the increase in household production during the 1990s. The Yelstin Administration thought that private farms would become the future of Russian agriculture and subsistence agriculture did not help join the global economy and was thus viewed negatively. The government and World Bank are two of the more powerful voices in the discourse about Russian agriculture and therefore their negative views on subsistence agriculture have an influence on the national and international communities. In addition to the government and World Bank, academics such as Wegren in America and counterparts in Russia have contributed to the dominant narrative (Wegren, 2005, personal communication). Even though the local people are not greatly influenced by the academics directly, academic thought funnels into development and government policy, both of which have a tangible impact to a certain degree on local people.

The dominant narrative of subsistence agricultural as a negative practice is manifested in the middle aged population more so than amongst the elderly. One reason for this is that much of the elderly population retired before the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of state controlled agriculture. Therefore they did not lose their jobs with the changes to the agricultural system or even face a great disturbance to daily life. Many pensioners were already only practicing subsistence agriculture at the time and they still receive their pensions from the government. The elderly population practices subsistence agriculture for two main reasons:

survival and it is an activity they enjoy and cannot imagine life without. In some situations elderly people would not be able to eat without their personal plots because they lack money and/or family support to receive food by any other method. Even if one has money, it is difficult to buy all of one's food in Desyatnikovo because the two stores have an extremely limited amount of food, which is often too expensive for most people to buy a large quantity of on a regularly basis. The general rule is, if one can make the product it is better than buying it. Some people practice subsistence agriculture because they want to (Interviews 11/05). One 76 year old woman said her son offered to give her potatoes, but her response was that she would do it herself. She takes great pride in the fact that she grows the majority of her own food (Informant 3).

Middle aged people believe the dominant narrative about subsistence agriculture more so than other age groups because they lost the most during the economic transition. One day they were employed on the kolkhoz and the next day they were either unemployed or part of unprofitable agricultural enterprises and economically insecure. As mentioned above, this segment of the population felt the loss of social status more strongly than other groups and thus wants to practice agriculture at a larger scale than subsistence. The younger people who practice only subsistence agriculture and do not receive pensions or some other type of supplementary income are generally living in poverty and are worse off economically than during Soviet times. The state support offered in the Soviet Union has disappeared and if one only practices subsistence agriculture it is difficult to pay for electricity, food that cannot be produced from the private plot, such as flour, as well as livestock. Because of the increase in poverty and decrease in social status middle aged men often turn to alcohol. It is not uncommon to see drunken men wandering around the village at anytime. Along with alcoholism comes petty crime, such as

stealing other peoples' meat and flour, because the person may not have enough money to purchase the goods (Interviews 11/05). Instead of only practicing subsistence agriculture in the village, another segment of the middle aged and younger generations have left the village to look for work outside of the agricultural sector. In Desyatnikovo, the majority of the population is elderly because so many of the younger people have left. If this trend continues the village will die within the next few generations.

Considering the dominant narrative with regard to agriculture is against only subsistence practices, it seems fair to question if subsistence agriculture will continue to be practiced in Russia or if it will cease to exist. At this point in time it is likely that subsistence agriculture will continue because anyone living in a rural village must produce at least some of his food in order to survive. Beyond practicing subsistence agriculture solely as a means of survival, it appears likely that the practice will continue to at least some degree because agriculture is part of Russian culture. Even urban residents practice a limited amount of small scale agriculture on dachas because they like having the connection with the land. Also producing some vegetables means that they will be food secure, which is important considering the history of food shortages in Russia.

Marginalization in Buryatia

Farmers and villagers in Buryatia are not beneficiaries of government reforms possibly because of their marginalized position. The Republic of Buryatia is not one of Russia's best agricultural areas and the fact that the majority of its population is not ethnically Russian does not make Buryatia a priority for the government in Moscow. Historically Buryatia was a place for exiles, such as the Old Believer population, which shows that the government did not have a high opinion of the area. Although exiled populations have been successful in the region many

Russians still view Siberia, especially the rural areas as backwards, harsh and desolate. This view has an effect on how reforms and initiatives are manifested in Siberia as well as Siberia's priority in the government with regard to agriculture.

Beyond its minority population and history of marginalized exiles much of Buryatia is isolated and marginalized due to geography. Russia is a highly centralized country with the wealth and focus of the government concentrated in urban areas of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and, to a lesser degree, the rest of European Russia. The transportation system across Russia is not extremely developed. Only one highway connects Moscow to Vladivostok and the Trans-Siberian railroad is slow and not the most pleasant trip. Within Buryatia itself many areas are isolated because of the lack of a modern transportation infrastructure.

Finally Buryatia is one of the poorest regions of the Russian Federation. Because of the extreme poverty the government may have chosen to focus reforms and subsidies on more productive areas, because they would have the best chance of joining the global economy, which was a goal of the Yeltsin administration and agrarian reform in general. All of these factors combined show that the Republic of Buryatia is one of the more marginalized places in Russia and thus did not have as much success as other areas in the new agricultural system.

Conclusion

After examining the government's reforms and comparing the goals with the situation in Buryatia, a tremendous disconnect appears. Throughout the 1990s the government advocated for private farms, but the number of private farms across the country has decreased and the output of subsistence farmers has increased dramatically. From interviews in Buryatia it is evident that people want to start private farms, but are unable to due to lack of machinery and capital. The

government promised reforms and because of its inability to follow through people are forced into subsistence agriculture or leave the villages to try to find jobs in the urban areas.

Since the current system and strategy is not working, the Russian government and development agencies should critically examine the situation and change their tactics. Because the household producers are leading in terms of agricultural output, working within that framework, may yield more productive results than simply spreading the dominant narrative against subsistence agriculture. Focusing on the needs and desires of the local people, especially those who want to become incorporated into the global market, could provide valuable insight and possibly help make a successful transition into larger markets.

Often in political ecology research one does not find local people who want to join to the capitalist system and give up subsistence agriculture. Therefore Russia provides an interesting case study that challenges previously held notions of political ecology, such as the marginalization and degradation thesis. Although by looking at the situation through a political ecology lens, the local people may only think they want to join the capitalist system because that is the current dominant narrative. Whether villagers want to become incorporated in the global market or not, their standards of living have dropped significantly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, so something should be done so people can live more comfortably in rural Russia.

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Informants, all interviews and conversations during November 2005
 Host Mother: Informant 1, Mikhail (name has been changed): Informant 2, 76 year old woman
 Informant 3, other three informants referred to as Interviews 11/05, which includes all interviews

