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Not About Land, Not Quite a Grab: Rural Transformation and Dispersed Dispossession in Russia

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Abstract

Rural transformation in Russia went along with historic changes in production and property patterns, and it provides exemplars to revisit questions of rural dispossession. In much of the critical agrarian studies literature, rural dispossession is neatly related to land rights or access. But since farmland's role in securing livelihoods cannot be taken for granted, there is no 'nature of rural dispossession' that could be derived from the 'nature of land'. I show how the stakes and temporalities of dispossession in Russian rural political economies are more complex, and take this as a point of departure to argue that dispossession itself should be taken into view as something that deserves both careful empirical study and conceptualization.

Keywords: Dispossession, rural transformation, Russia, land, post-Soviet political economies.

1 Introduction – The problem of rural dispossession

Rural dispossession is a well-established and longstanding research focus in the agrarian change literature. In recent years, a new "wave of dispossession studies has been prompted by the apparent acceleration of 'land grabs'" (Fairbairn et al. 2014, p. 654). As a consequence, what is arguably the most lively and influential current debate on rural dispossession (Borras et al. 2011; Hall et al. 2015; Wolford et al. 2013) was and remains much centered on questions around farmland.

This paper critically interrogates this focus on farmland in much of the current literature on rural and agrarian change, and sets it against the backdrop of the older and more fundamental assumed nexus between rural dispossession and farmland. Drawing on long term fieldwork in rural Russia, it does so against an empirical background that is particular in this respect: Unlike most rural contexts around the world which are shaped by smallholder and family farming (FAO 2014), large agricultural enterprises are predominant in commercial agriculture in Russia—and have been so since Soviet times (Lindner 2007; Spoor 2012). As a consequence—and as I argue over the next sections—farmland is not *the* central good at stake in agrarian transformation for most rural dwellers in Russia.

Albeit this empirical case is particular, the resulting argument is of broader relevance. It concerns the scope of the concept of dispossession. It also tackles the question what established ideas of—and debates about—rural dispossession tend to bring into focus or to skip over. The question is: Does the emphasis on landed dispossession prevent us from seeing forms of rural dispossession that do not boil down to the question of farmland? I depict the need to better capture and criticize forms of dispossession beyond land, and thus argue to widen and sensitize concepts of dispossession in ways that allow adapting to the contingent stakes of dispossession in particular empirical instances.

One does not necessarily have to describe rural transformations and related losses in terms of dispossession; there are alternatives at hand (e.g. approaches drawing on concepts of access or livelihood). But there are good reasons for sticking to the notion of dispossession: The term raises attention and has proven politically (Harvey 2006, p. 158), and also analytically effective as it is employed to channel critique, name injustice and mediate between critical academic and popular discourses. The latter makes it well compatible with empirical research as it resonates with actors' accounts on what they lack, what they've lost, and whom they blame for it. Finally, as far as studies of agrarian change are concerned with fundamental transformations of social relations, dispossession is a concept much engaged and also adequate concept to address such level of questions (Balibar 2002; Butler, Athanasiou 2013; Levien 2013; Nichols 2015, 2017). I return to these points below.

I go on to describe the role of large scale agricultural enterprises and the normalization of poverty in post-Soviet rural transformation as a background for understanding rural dispossession in this context. The following section sketches out how 'land grab' criticism has brought rural dispossession in Russia on the agenda of international debate, but in how far the empirical and political solidity of this claim may be called into question. I then reflect on the more general assumptions behind the land-dispossession-nexus in the literature. Returning to findings from long term fieldwork conducted in rural Russia, I describe stakes in rural transformation beyond farmland, and temporalities of rural dispossession beyond eventful 'grabs'. Before concluding, I introduce the concept of dispersed dispossession which aims to bring dispossession itself into view as something that deserves empirical investigation and conceptualization, and to sensitize for stakes beyond land, and temporalities beyond the grab.

2 Post-Soviet rural transformation: Large scale agriculture and the normalization of poverty

In post-Soviet Russia, family farming is not the prevalent form of agricultural production. Large scale agriculture—established with the state and collective farms (*sovkhozes* and *kolkhozes*) in Soviet

times—persisted market reforms (Amelina 2000; Lindner 2008; Nikulin 2003; Visser 2008). Enterprises often changed hands and juridical forms, but in many regions large scale agriculture is still prevalent.

Planners' original expectations towards the post-Soviet land and agricultural reform were remarkably different (Rylko, Jolly 2005; World Bank 1992): When entitlements in farmland and farm property were distributed amongst former farm (and certain other) workers in the early 1990ies (Lerman, Shagaida 2007), the expected result was that "independent 'family' farms would rapidly replace the obsolete and inefficient collective and state farm" (Spoor 2012, p. 179). However, since the early years of what has been described as an incomplete land reform (Wegren 2009), the dispersion and concentration of agricultural assets went on parallel. Many of the largest agricultural producers today started as Russian food-processing or commodity-trading companies that deepened their vertical integration and successively bought up their supply base, some of them before the turn of the century (Barnes 2006, pp. 155–163; BEFL 2013a, p. 3).[1] In the new millennium, state legislature and subsidizing shifted to benefiting large agricultural enterprises[2], and thus strengthened the tendency that comparatively few individuals and households were ready, able, or willing to start small private farming enterprises. From the beginning, many were lacking capital, knowhow, market access, or were facing reluctances and hurdles at different levels (Allina-Pisano 2008). Some successful private farmers outgrew the Soviet type large scale enterprises in size, while many of those that remained 'small' and household-based eventually disappeared (Wegren 2011).

In consequence dual agrarian structure (Spoor 2012) emerged in which large agricultural enterprises provide most commercial agricultural production and waged labor, while many households are engaged in subsidiary farming around their houses to supplement their own food supply.[3] These two modes of agricultural production barely compete with each other directly; oftentimes they rather remain variously entangled (Pallot, Nefedova 2007), and many rural dwellers depend on large enterprises for jobs and often even technical support for their own subsidiary production.. They do not compete about land since those lands that large enterprises seek to control have been worked by large agricultural enterprises since Soviet times. Competition between the two production modes is mediated through market and state mechanisms, but it is rarely about exactly the same resources. For instance, large companies benefit from subsidies distributed on federal or regional level, while small farmers turn to rural districts. More generally, they benefit from federal political schemes that favor large enterprises (Wengle 2017). At the same time, since large enterprises provide social functions,

[1] The post-1998 partial readjustment of agricultural markets spurred the systematic integration of producers and the growth of large agricultural companies usually called agroholdings. In the years 2001 and 2002, new land legislations were passed (and came into force in 2003) that lifted earlier regulations on land purchase and ownership (Uzun et al. 2012, p. 5; Lerman, Shagaida 2007, p. 16), and thus enabled and spurred the growth of agricultural holding companies. In 2002, the legislature passed the federal law "On the financial recovery of agrarian commodity producers" (*O finantsovom ozdorovlenii sel'skokhoziaistvennykh tovaroproizvoditelei*; Federal Law N 83-F 3; 07/09/2002) that enabled state-backed restructuring of enterprise debts. In order to benefit from this measure, enterprises had to 'prove' their capacity to operate profitably in future. For enterprises that were not found capable of achieving profitability bankruptcy procedures were initiated—which generated a large supply of massively devalued farms and land (Uzun et al. 2012, pp. 5–6).

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[3] Differences amongst regions and places are stark. Some areas cultivated under the Soviet (size- and output-oriented) system fell fallow and was not taken back into production again, while in some of the most fertile and lucrative regions competition by various means drove all but the most powerful players out of business. In some regions, there is a considerably strong private farming sector, in others large agricultural enterprises, state branches, or various combinations of the two hold control of most agricultural assets and markets.

technical and monetary support, or infrastructures that benefit the broader village populations, large enterprises usually are not perceived as standing in an antagonistic relationship to smallholders.

This is not meant to indicate that rural dwellers would not face huge difficulties and inequality, or not strongly depend on agriculture. With villages planned and shaped as monofunctional settlements for agricultural production in Soviet times, and often located far distance from surrounding towns and cities, alternatives to agriculture are often scarce in these places, and economic conditions in agriculture have been harsh for many years. The breakdown of organizational, subsidiary and distributary state structures, the import of cheap agricultural produce, and agricultural policies during market reforms resulted in a deep agricultural crisis during the 1990ies. While the general economic condition recovered after the turn of the century, poverty and relative disadvantage remained characteristic for many rural dwellers' living conditions (Independent Institute for Social Policy 2002; Nivorozhkin et al. 2010; Wegren 2014), a tendency which has been termed the 'ruralisation' of poverty in Russia (Gerry et al. 2008). For instance, according to official statistics, over 80 percent of the agricultural workforce received a nominal salary at or below subsistence minimum by the year 2000 (Rosstat 2005, p. 162). This percentage declined in the years that followed, but the percentage of agricultural workers with an income below the official subsistence minimum remains to be higher than in any other economic branch (Wegren 2014, p. 78),[4] and rural unemployment remains significantly higher than in the overall economy (Kalugina 2014, p. 125).

Rural poverty and disadvantage appear as little exceptional, however, in both historical and geographic terms: Poverty characterizes rural livelihoods in many parts of the world (World Bank 2016, p. 42), and it was characteristic—albeit articulating differently—for Soviet and pre-Soviet rural life in Russia, too (Scott 1998, pp. 209–218; Timofeev 1985). Such are forms of disadvantage and suffering that do not constitute an event (Povinelli 2011, p. 4), that seem little spectacular and often draw little public and even academic attention (Li 2014a; Nixon 2011; Stoler 2013). They easily appear as normalized forms of distress, and arguably this has been the representational fate of rural disadvantage and suffering in Russia for a long time: Rarely addressed as dispossession (Kalugina 2015, 231), debated within a rather narrow circle of experts. Rural poverty in Russia has become normalized in a double sense: It has become a usual characteristic of many rural households and life stories. And it has become a reality not regarded as very exceptional or scandalous, but structural, static, silent, and hidden to the perception of most (Galtung 1969). In short, it became to be perceived—if at all—through the rather dull picture of normalized suffering.

3 Call it a land grab!?

The picture of rural disadvantage in Russia seemed to get more spectacular with the acceleration of farmland takeovers and the growth of large agricultural companies. Over the last years, corporate land banks throughout Russia have grown at a great pace and to huge sizes. In late 2009, 22 companies controlled land banks of more than 100,000 hectares (BEFL 2010), a number that already increased to around 30 companies in 2013 (BEFL 2013b; Novirost 2013), and further to around 40 by 2015 when some of them controlled more than half a million hectares (BEFL 2015). Companies grew by equally spectacular transactions, as they often bought up the already large successors of former *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, or other large agricultural enterprises (Visser et al. 2012).

This concentration of agricultural assets and farmland in Russia has been related to the global "land grabbing" debate: as one important case (Edelman et al. 2013; Hall 2013b) as prototypical for the

[4] In 2012, the proportion of those with incomes below the poverty level, i.e. less than RUB 6,500 (around 166 EUR), was 56.3 percent in rural areas compared with 29.6 percent in urban areas (Rosstat, 2012b, p. 14–15). The 2013 average nominal monthly income in agriculture, hunting and forestry (the statistics aggregate these three branches) was 14.129 RUR (around 350 EUR) Rosstat 2014, p. 435 which was 53 percent of that years' national average Rosstat 2014, p. 440.

large scale of land grabs more generally (Grain 2008), and for the expulsions that result from it (Sassen 2010, 2014). Studies with a more regional focus on Russia also framed accumulation tendencies here as "land grabbing", or the effects of a "land rush" (Atkin 2009; Visser et al. 2012; Visser, Spoor 2011; Wengle 2017). Doing so, some of them gained considerable attention, such as the classic contribution on "land grabbing in post-Soviet Eurasia" (Visser, Spoor 2011) which—although relatively recent—has already been cited more often than *any* journal article and most books published issues around post-Soviet rural and agrarian transformation over the course of two and a half decades. In short, the 'land grab' diagnosis—focused as it is on questions of farmland[5]—arguably represents the 'best-selling' narrative pattern on agrarian and rural transformation in post-Soviet Russia so far.

This transfer of the 'land grab' diagnosis to the 'Russian case' can be questioned on two levels. First, from market reforms' first decades onward, the accumulation of agricultural assets was rooted in the *massive devaluation* and crisis of the agrarian sector, rather than a rush or competition for agricultural assets (the latter were sometimes understood as assets of negative value). Primary agriculture often was—and partly remains—unprofitable for both large or small farms, and investing enterprises with a fundament in other branches mainly bought up land and agricultural assets (mainly) from bankrupt enterprises (Barnes 2006; Nikulin 2003; Uzun et al. 2009). Albeit it is true that a renewed interest in the agricultural sector has accellerated and altered this accumulation tendency, it should be perceived as closely bound to foregoing rounds of devaluation (Nikulin 2011; Uzun et al. 2012), rather than interpreted in land-rush-patterns in a narrower sense.

Second, the application of the 'land grab' pattern can be questioned with regard to its emphasis on farmland as the central good at stake. I set this paper's focus on this aspect. Below I describe in more detail why for many rural dwellers the access to farmland as such is of limited use under given circumstances. But the problem here is not only with empirical inaccuracy; it is also with the critical scope and the solidity of the resulting argument. For instance, a study on investment trends in primary agriculture in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) stresses the *difference* between agricultural investment in CEE/CIS countries, and those contexts in the Global South more frequently associated with "land grabbing" (Luyt et al. 2013, pp. XI–XIII). The study mentions a "growing risk of 'land grabbing'" (Luyt et al. 2013, XII) which it then relativizes with references to these contextual differences. Critically, it introduces the "issue of 'land grabbing'" as *the only* explicit concern of what *may* be problematic about current investment projects: Possible problematic implications are narrowed to the question of land grabbing; and since the land grab diagnosis does not hold, there is no problem here. In line with this, the image of the potentially dispossessed is the figure of the "local landholder" (Luyt et al. 2013, XIII), and not figures such as the wage laborer or the unemployed, the self-employed who depends on enterprise supports, or the person who leaves behind family and property and migrates to a city despite landed property, but without sufficient income.

"If it is a land grab, call it a land grab!" I recall one of the proponents of the land-grabbing-in-Russia-diagnosis insisting in a public discussion with a World Bank representative. My objection—which I elaborate over the following sections—is that when the 'land grab' turns out to be a questionable diagnosis, this may weaken critique's validity and strength. Thus it is not my point that 'land grabbing' critique was too radical, one-sided or exaggerated. Quite contrary, I argue for a more solid critique and also more radical critique insofar as it has to let go of assumptions about ideas of the self-sufficient land-owning subject and rural subsistence immanent to some land-focused frameworks. A focus on land relations here is much more consistent with popular registers in the land grabbing debate than with most rural dweller's concerns.

[5] Applying such a pattern to the 'Russian case', authors e.g. ask: "Will land grabbing cause rural dwellers to lose their land rights, soon after they received them in the 1990s?" Visser et al. 2012, p. 901.

"Land grab" critics brought the important question of dispossession in contemporary rural Russia on the agenda, and my own contribution shares this concern. Setting focus on the problematic of dispossession, it asks for critical stakes in post-Soviet agrarian transformation comprising—but not limited to—questions of farmland, and therefore introduces the concept of dispersed dispossession. It thus also echoes some general skepticism about the 'literature rush' (Edelman 2013; Edelman, León 2013; Oya 2013a, 2013b), or the 'hype' in parts of the public, activist and academic debates (Zoomers, Kaag 2014) that went along with the land grab diagnosis. These criticisms and critical self-assessments acknowledge that the numerous articles, edited volumes and special issues around questions of land (and related) grabs have contributed much to a more differentiated and specific understanding of current rural dispossession. However, they articulate concerns with methodological and epistemological issues, and a debate often focused rather narrowly on current and spectacular land takeovers, and on farmland as *the* object at stake. In such a vein, Carlos Oya poses the provocative rhetoric question: "Focusing on land and land rights may be fashionable… but is land everything to the 'poor'?" (Oya 2013a, p. 516) see also (Li 2011). In the following section, I explore how—beyond being fashionable—a focus on land is rooted in a more fundamental assumed nexus between rural dispossession and land.

4 Farmland ontologies, farmland politics

In this section, I suggest that assumptions about the centrality of land access to rural livelihoods, and the strong consensus that rural dispossession is primarily about farmland should be considered when asking how 'land grabbing' diagnoses travel well across contexts, and what possible problematic implementations may be. It is an invitation to think about the specific status ascribed to land relations not only in the "land grabbing" literature, but in the agrarian political economy literature more generally. Doing so, I will not dwell on the countless examples and ways in which a focus on land relations has proven fruitful, but rather reflect on how its status may be generalized in ways that hamper analysis in specific instances.

The focus on the dispossession of land is embedded in long and influential intellectual legacies and traditions that emphasize land's central role for both human existence and capitalist relations. Concerning agricultural land, two classics are amongst the main references underlining land's existential character, namely Marx' *Capital* (Marx 1982 [1867]) and Polanyi's *Great Transformation* (Polanyi 2001 [1945]). Marx describes land as amongst the most basic means of subsistence and production, and the separation between peasants and their land as basic for the "primitive accumulation" which is constitutive for capitalist class and social relations (Marx 1982 [1867]): Through this separation, peasants lose the possibility to sustain themselves, and begin to depend on capital and wage labor. Present-bound employments of the concept of primitive accumulation look at this separation as part of an ongoing process of dispossession, loss of the means of subsistence and incorporation into capitalist relations (Hall 2012; Li 2014a; White et al. 2012). Polanyi, too, emphasizes land's very *particular* role in human existence and economic relations: As a constitutive basis of life, it cannot be understood as, or smoothly transformed into an ordinary commodity (Polanyi 2001 [1945]). Of lasting influence is his conclusion that attempts to render land in an (always fictitious) commodity will continuously trigger countermovements (Cotula 2013; Hall et al. 2011, p. 9; Levien 2013).

Many others elaborated on this nexus of land's existential importance, and processes that foreclose access to it. They point out that "control over land is indispensable to almost all human activity" (Hall 2013a, p. 9), but as a "fixed resource" (Bridge 2009, p. 262) that "has presence and location" (Li 2014b, p. 589) it is basically individable. Thus "all land use and access requires exclusion of some kind" (Hall et al. 2011, p. 4), since when "land becomes scarce, the exclusive access to land that is productive for some comes into tension with the fact that others cannot access it" (Hall et al. 2011, p. 8). *Land politics* are thus defined by the fact that diverse actors aim to access land, but may be excluded by various means, such as being dispossessed of their land rights.

For Michael Levien, who grounds his argument in Polanyi, Marx/Harvey and an extensive review of the agrarian political economy literature, the link is so substantial that "the dispossession of land creates a specific kind of politics, distinct not just from labor politics, but also from various other forms of peasant politics that have been theorized in the social sciences" (Levien 2013, p. 356). This bold and far reaching claim rests one some fundamental assumptions about the specificity of the *dispossession of land*. Levien mentions the

> fundamental difference between the exploitation of labor and the dispossession of land: while the former is an ongoing expropriation of surpluses within limits, the latter constitutes a total and one-time threat to people's means of production and subsistence… (D)ispossession of land always poses a sudden, exogenous and irreversible threat to people's livelihoods, homes, and ways of life. That dispossession entails the expropriation of not just surpluses but means of production or subsistence themselves thereby raises the stakes of dispossession politics (Levien 2013, p. 363).

For Levien, the dispossession of land thus comes with "inescapable transparency. Unlike the appropriation of labor, the dispossession of land cannot be obscured…, any farmer can see perfectly clearly the threat this poses to his or her existence" (Levien 2013, p. 362). One reason is that "land is essentially a zero-sum asset. Its supply is finite, it is currently in high demand for both agricultural and non-agricultural uses, and these uses are not compatible.… Land can either stay with a farmer or be given to a capitalist" (Levien 2013, p. 379). In short, at the center of this very clear and explicit argument about the nexus of land and dispossession lies the assumption that land relations in particular are highly important and existential.

The land grab diagnosis echoes such *assumptions*. The very notion suggests that land was *the* central good at stake: The "global land rush" triggers a zero sum game in which either one or the other party will control and thereby reap the benefits from this resource. This takes farmland's resourceness as given or at least accomplishable by the means available to respective actors. Given this precondition, rural dwellers are dispossessed exactly because and when investors (or states) reach out for farmland, since it is then when they lose access to land as the basis for subsistence or family farming. Farmland is 'naturally' the central stake, and different actors' (investors' and rural dwellers') self-evident interest in farmland generates conflicts about this resource. This very likely results in dispossession since interests are conflicting, it results in a zero sum game in which either one or the other party will reap the benefits from land access, and business and state actors involved are powerful. The relation very immediate and it is easily captured: A company or state agency grabs land, and thereby dispossesses peasants. Dispossession is *about* land, and *caused by* the action of a particular subject that constitutes *an event*. Critique of this sort of dispossession emphasizes farmland's existential status as what makes it particularly bad and critical.

There is a risk here to let the assumption and the diagnosis collapse into one: Given land's essential status, land appears as the central object of dispossession—naturally. But what if this self-evidence crumbles? What appears as so overtly evident in this pattern (or in Levien's above given ontology of land dispossession) appears in an almost opposite way in the accounts of many rural dwellers in Russia. Here, investors' takeover of farmland is exactly *not* coincident with the loss of means of production or subsistence, it is *not* transparent so that people knew for sure what deprives them and how (Li 2014a), and it is commonly *not* understood a zero-sum game in which investors grab what should belong to the peasants. Dispossession usually does *not* constitute an event (Povinelli 2011, p. 4), and is *not* attributed to someone's particular action (Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969). The pattern does not hold. One may take this to suggest that the issue was not about dispossession. I decisively take this to suggest that it is not about land.

What, if possibly not land theft, may be the indicators for dispossession then in this case? Resistance is often treated as such an indicator of dispossession, and contributions dealing with organized resistance

are prominent in "land" volumes (Hall et al. 2011, pp. 170–191; Hall 2013a, pp. 139–166) and the broader "land grab" debate (Hall et al. 2015; Reid Ross 2014). With regard to rural Russia, scholars notice the relative absence of rural social movements or open forms of resistance and point to rural populations' alleged compliance (Mamonova 2016; Wegren et al. 2003), at times reproducing ridiculous images of Russian villagers' general apathy (Ruzhkov 2012).

If there was apathy towards dispossession in rural Russia, however, it certainly would not be that of rural dwellers alone. Issues of rural dispossession are widely bracketed from academic debates within and without Russia (Kalugina 2015, p. 231). Regarding international debates on agrarian change, their double focus on *land* and *resistance* arguably comes with a twofold tendency to neglect forms of dispossession in Russian settings as what they are: Mainly not about land, and often rather silent. Given the extent to which livelihoods in rural areas eroded over the last decades and only partially recovered, this seems odd.

Authors have voiced concerned about a bias towards open resistance with regard to the 'land grab' debate (Oya 2013a). Others put forward the concern that emphasis on acts of resistance, even in their not so obvious forms (Scott 1985), may detract from instances in which people experience violence and deprivation and do *not* resist (Farmer 2004, p. 307; Li 2014a). Authors emphasize that dispossessions and dislocations "do not always take place in obvious and abrupt acts of assault and seizure, but in more drawn out, less eventful, identifiable ways" (Stoler 2013, p. 5), some not openly and obviously violent but "far less dramatic, even mundane" (Li 2014a, pp. 3). They put forward concerns that the less eventful and dramatic processes of dispossession are set aside as less relevant vis-à-vis their "more attention-grabbing counterparts" (Stoler 2013, p. 5)—such as the "spectacular episodes of dispossession by corporations (land grabbing)" (Li 2014a, p. 9)—that the media, policy makers but also social movements tend to focus on.

How can one avoid the conclusion that a relative absence of visible resistance indicates the relative absence of relevant forms of dispossession? Should the relative neglect of dispossession in the literature on post-Soviet agrarian transformation—besides the more recent 'land grabbing' diagnosis—count as symptomatic for the difficulty to understand and name relevant forms of dispossession here? What is dispossession in these contexts about? I approached these question by way of long term fieldwork (totaling 9 months) in rural places in different Russian regions (Lipetsk, Voronezh, Rostov and Perm' regions), participant research with a range of agri-business and village actors, and around 70 recorded interviews.

5 Not about land…

In Russia, rural dwellers often describe the land documents they obtained during the post-Soviet land reform as bearing little use or exchange value. Very few work this land privately: If they farm, they work their individual household plots. Market prices for farmland have long been miserable and increased rather recently and unequally across regions. Land titles are often perceived as property that makes little difference since rural dwellers' ability to *benefit* from it (Ribot, Peluso 2003) is low. Those who consider working more land than their household plots often lack access to other means: Money, subsidies, machinery, infrastructure, markets and rentable sale options, legal and economic knowledge or consultancy, or advocacy groups. Access to farmland alone often does not provide them sufficient income. Sale prices may not cover production costs, and interests (for credits to buy machinery, seeds, chemicals, or to compensate losses in years of unfortunate weather conditions etc.) may keep swallowing their returns. For many of them, the promise of subsistence through land right based family faming turned out to be a mirage: Structural and other constraints hindered them to become this peasant kind of economic subject.

Others prefer staying employed rather than becoming entrepreneurial. With this choice, they depend on employment options which—in places planned as and often remaining monofunctional agricultural

villages—are first and foremost those provided by large agricultural enterprises. Last but not least, many of those who remained living in these rural sites are pensioners, some still active in household farming, but beyond that depending on supports provided by family members, state departments, or—again—those large agricultural enterprises that remained in place and remained accountable for village populations' needs.

It is thus that the central antagonism in this context of agrarian change is often not about land rights. Nor is it about subsistence farming. Household agricultural production is important for many dwellers to secure some livelihood baseline. However, I have not met a single rural dweller who would have described building a living on household subsidiary farming alone as an acceptable, let alone desirable option: It provides little monetary income, rests on much manual family labor, and often—far from peasant autonomy—goes along with unfavorable dependencies on large agricultural enterprises and middlemen for access to machinery and markets. Thus being thrown back to household production is experienced as regress (c.f. Kalugina 2014, p. 118), providing goods such as potatoes and cabbage as means of basic subsistence, but not means of income or a decent livelihood. If rural dwellers' needs are not to be reduced to most basic levels, access to a piece of farmland may be less important than other options for generating value.

In line with this, rural dwellers describe the forms of dispossession they encounter and from which they suffer as rarely bound to rights or access to farmland. I sketch out four dimensions along which they rather articulate their criticism and complaints.

First, many still emphasize how the collapse of the agricultural system in the 1990ies went along with a massive and lasting devaluation of agricultural assets, including their labor power. The threat of bankruptcy hung over and was mobilized by many agricultural enterprises. Many closed down or were unable to pay wages, and many were restructured. Labor intensive production branches were cut and workers dismissed, employment numbers declined steadily over the years (Kalugina 2012). Agricultural labor was devalued, and great parts of the younger and better qualified population left the countryside. From the late 1990ies onwards, parts of the sector began to recover, and became a more profitable sector especially for companies reaching higher up the value chain and equipped with better access to markets and government programs and subsidies. But for most players primary agriculture remains a risky and often unprofitable economic sector, average wages remain to be lowest across economic sectors, and unemployment rates the highest (see section 2). In consequence, many rural dwellers see themselves bound to a *historically disadvantaged and devaluated sector*, and—in this respect—sometimes in the same boat with the economically struggling agricultural enterprises that employ them.

Second, rural dwellers and local producers describe not only a lasting devaluation, but also *disintegration* of the sector and respective economic structures. On the level of institutions, they lament shifting and hard to access subsidies, insurances or government programs (which often benefit large enterprises and companies), volatile markets, and the absence or weakness of unions or organizations to provide support and expertise with legal, financial, agronomic or sales issues. On the level material facilities, the deterioration of the sector in many places went along with the temporal abandonment and disintegration of production infrastructures: Bases, roads, silos, repair shops, stables, or irrigation systems. Great parts of the machinery were old and inefficient, and parts of the fields fallow. In short, the institutional and infrastructural means to turn villages' agricultural potential productive and valuable are often need to be (re)established, and their weakness or absence appears as a wide gap between the potential and the actual.

Third, rural dwellers lament the relative lack of alternatives to such often unfortunate conditions in agriculture. Accordingly, managers of large agricultural enterprises describe how large distances to cities keep people from leaving a village or commuting to work, and that this guarantees them a relatively stable supply of workers low wages notwithstanding. As one manager puts it: "If you live in the village, where else can you go? What choices do you have there? Not a lot. Expect from just keep

on working for the company that is there. Unless you would move to the city or would move to Moscow and do something completely different" (Production manager Voronezh). Moving to a city is what particularly many young people after school do. For many others, leaving the place would be harder. People stay for reasons such as attachment to place and people, responsibilities towards elderly family members, or a lack of job and other opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, 'exchange rates' for transferring their various capitals to urban spheres are often very unfortunate, for instance when the amount you may get for selling a 100 m² house in a village will not suffice for a single room apartment in a town or city. Agricultural qualification and work experience are barely valued in urban jobs and thus those who flee villages may, again, lack access to acceptable job alternatives. Subsidiary farming, enterprise support and land rent may provide a livelihood minimum and make some difference within low-budget village economies, but much less in a city. Instances of persons or families choosing to return to villages after having experienced difficulties and disappointment in cities are not unusual. In short, the relative disadvantage bound to agriculture and rural political economies is not something that people would get rid of easily by leaving the place.

Forth, rural dwellers lament the loss of various forms of social, technological and monetary support which Soviet-type large scale enterprises formerly provided to village households. Such enterprises may provide food for the local kindergarten and school, sponsor the local football team, and contribute to festivities and cultural events. At cost price, they provide technical means or fodder for villagers' subsidiary production. Enterprise will send workers and tractors to clean the roads during winter, to maintain houses and village water or electricity infrastructure. In situations of exceptional need like marriages or family members' illness or death, workers and villagers may borrow money from enterprise directors. The enterprise will often provide a car to carry the dead and a tractor to dig out a grave—in some sense it thus quite literally accompanies villagers from cradle to grave. It holds a monopoly position over many means and powers in a rural micro-system. These are not things you would expect from a capitalist enterprise, but even many of the 'new' investing enterprises stick to such responsibilities; because state actors oblige them to do so, or since it is necessary for them to keep village populations satisfied and in place. Hence whether such supports are provided or not often hinges more on whether enterprises can afford them, rather than on how large they are, or if they represent investment companies. But whether they are provided or not is critical for making villages livable places, creating platforms for village publics, upholding basic communal services, and supporting individual households in making a living.

Taken together, these dimensions show that rural livelihoods in these contexts are contingent on a wide web of relations, means, and supports rather than the property in or access to farmland—or any other single resource alone. For rural dwellers, weak webs and the absence of critical means and supports result in a wide distance between the potential and the actual: A wide gap between the agricultural potential and the state of realization, the promises of landed property and its actual benefits, skills and labor potential in villages and the degree to which they are valued and turned productive, settlements that used to be lively but are often at the fringe of extinction.
Such distance between the possible and the actual, and the question for its causes define what has been termed the problem of structural violence (Galtung 1969): Silent, rather static and stabilized forms of violence that harm certain groups of people, and forms of violence which unfold their effects in the absence of direct action, committed by clearly circumscribed actors, and constituting clear events (Ibid.). A condition characterized by such permanent basic disadvantages and blockages fundamentally alter the meanings and scope of dispossession as I show in the following section.

6 Not quite a grab

I showed how a narrow focus on land relations risks adhering to market reform's *failed* basic promise that the distribution of land rights will provide a sufficient basis for an independent peasantry to develop, and to enable small private farmers to participate in a restructured agrarian political economy. A property right is useful as far as it secures benefits from valuables (Graeber 2001, p. 9). But if the

problem is not with the guarantee, but with the value and benefits, broader factors have to be taken into account (Ribot, Peluso 2003). It turns out to that land property can be "an unattractive prospect for individual households" under post-Soviet economic conditions (Allina-Pisano 2008, p. 194). Many hardly care about land documents which they may have never claimed, forgotten, lost, or sold for some derisory amount, and for some land entitlements rather symbolize market reforms' failed promises.

As a consequence, the forms of dispossession which rural dwellers usually emphasize here are not congruent with land and enterprise takeovers. They do not coincide temporally, nor are they attributed causally to investment projects.[6] Quite contrary, state withdrawal and economic crisis left behind gabs which many rural dwellers hope a "good investor" with its economic, organizational and technological capacities may fill. Of course such dependency on capitalist enterprises is highly problematic, and rural dwellers *do* criticize investing companies. However, they rarely accuse investing companies of *causing* their deprivation. Rather, they may criticize them for *perpetuating* existing ones and not living up to promises to improve local socio-economic conditions, which often played an important role in legitimating investment projects in the first place.

From local perspectives, it often seems extremely hard to pin down dispossession in temporal terms: It does not occur as a grab. This blurs the distinction between events and the histories that shape them. Rural actors point to the recurrent and interrelated crises and failures of schemes and promises, associated with state Socialism, market reform, or private investment projects respectively: They recall poverty and hard work, and enterprises in bad shapes during State Socialism. They recall how, in early years of market reforms, new enterprises were unable to take off and old ones unable to carry on, to pay wages and to uphold production. They saw the parallel failure of two big promises associated with both state Socialism and the market economy.

Analysts confirm cross-system interrelations of crises and failures. Under its relatively stable surface, late Soviet agriculture was strongly dependent on state support and thus relatively prone to crisis even before market reforms, for instance when around the year 1990 decreasing state income from oil and gas exports had a direct impact on the agricultural system (Nefedova 2014, p. 76).[7] When market reformers stressed that the Soviet agricultural system was far from sustainable—economically, politically, and environmentally—they carried on a diagnosis and radicalized a reform agenda that began under Soviet governments in the 1980ies. More recently, with new management taking over farms, rural dwellers get to hear how farms must operate more efficiently and get rid of any Soviet baggage if they are to survive which—as usual—is no good news with regard to the number of people employed, supports and securities provided. Seeing farms going into bankruptcy around them, however, many villagers do not take this as a strategy enterprises would adopt voluntarily.

[6] This diagnosis applies to the sites where I conducted fieldwork and—from what I know from the reports or Russian colleagues—probably to most regions. There are other regions, particularly in the fertile most Southern parts of Russia, were competition and struggle for farmland is reported to be more common.

[7] Indicators of farm productivity had increased up to the 1970ies but remained rather stagnant at a time of significant increase of state subsidies Nefedova 2014, p. 76. According to Soviet statistics, three out of four kolkhozes and two out of three sovkhozes were loss-making in the year 1980, a situation that—restructuring and debt conversion notwithstanding—had not changed much around 1990 Nefedova 2014, pp. 74–75; Uzun et al. 2012. Such figures are complicated by the fact that state subsidies compensated for deliberatively low food prices Nefedova 2014, p. 75, and that late Soviet agricultural enterprises did not only receive substantial transfers from state budgets, but also carried out a variety of functions such as setting up village infrastructure and providing social provision which—from a Western social state perspective—one would expect from the state Lindner 2008, pp. 81–82. It is estimated that about one fourth of enterprise expenditures at that time were spent on social infrastructure Nefedova 2014, p. 76; Serova 1995: Rural housing, social and medical provision, schools or culture. Around 1990, agricultural wages nearly reached urban wage levels and rose above average wages in industry.

This resonates with calls to take more seriously history as what shapes the conditions under which shorter term processes of agrarian investment, disinvestment and deprivation occur (Edelman et al. 2013; Edelman, León 2013; Mintz 1986; Ouma 2016; Oya 2013b). Besides the need to acknowledge that there is a *history to* particular forms of dispossession—how, for instance, current land grab perpetuate colonial patterns—there is the need to understand how history is a *constitutive part of* current problems of dispossession and the conditions under which they occur. I turn to this point now.

7 Dispersed Dispossession

Decentering the idea of dispossession enables us to take into account dispossession before the event (of e.g. land or enterprise takeover), and beyond land, individual property and smallholder economic self-sufficiency. The notion of dispersed dispossession which I propose here is meant to capture such dimensions of dispossession that cannot be boiled down to clearly circumscribed events and objects. In this respect, I suggest to pay more attention to a *variety of means* of value creation and subsistence at stake, especially those infrastructures and institutionalized supports that easily elude land-centered approaches. This allows drawing a clearer picture of the stakes and temporalities—or the patterns of dispossession—to which critical scholarship should respond. This is not to argue for downscaling analysis to individual experiences and judgements of dispossession, or for a new empiricism. Rather, it is an argument for bringing *dispossession itself* into view as something that deserves careful empirical study *and* conceptualization: Avoiding the question of dispossession on a conceptual level easily feeds into narrowing imaginaries of what may be at stake in risky transformations, and the empirical lens on what *may* count as dispossession. This is why thorough on-the-ground work is necessary but not sufficient: It cannot replace the theoretical labor necessary to make ourselves aware of the limits to '*our'* imaginaries of what dispossession may mean, for instance to arrive at ways to "think about dispossession outside of the logic of possession" (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, p. 7).[8]
If there is no clearly demarcated dramatic event causing the foreclosures of possibilities, livelihoods and futures—what will be the temporalities of dispossession? If the shifts under consideration occur within situations which are not perceived as worth preserving, but rather as calling for change and improvement, how does one take into account the histories which have shaped this kind of present? What if land rights are, by far, not the main issue for many rural dwellers? How to understand dispossession beyond individualized possession, but rather as bound to infrastructures and institutions that sustain and support (collective) life?

Contrary to a scenario in which dispossession comes with 'inescapable transparency' and the dispossessed see clearly what happens to them, the moments, actors and objects of dispossession in the situations I studied often seemed hard to grasp and pin down. There was no single act or event of dispossession constituting the division between an intact foregoing state and a damaged one. There was, indeed, no intact state before the dispossession over the last years. Along with this, it seemed difficult to demarcate clearly what has been lost, when and how. There were no functioning commons, no flourishing peasantry, and no land rights guaranteeing some degree of prosperity.
In order to deal with more complex constellations than a situation to better be left alone as it used to be, it is helpful to distinguish between the 'state' and the 'events' of dispossession, between 'being' and 'becoming' dispossessed, and to investigate into how they relate to each other. For Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, the state of "being dipossessed" points to social beings' "disposition to

[8] The central role that questions of property in and dispossession of land play for a diverse range of thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Marx, Polanyi and others provides reason to assume that 'our' thinking about land property and dispossession tends to bear much implicit theoretical baggage. Various authors emphasize the centrality of land an property ownership in Western onto-epistemologies Nichols 2017; Balibar 2002. One may think of John Locke's famous figure a subject's property in her body and labor power constitutes the legitimacy of her property claim to the land transformed by her labor. Hence property precedes dispossession here, and dispossession has property as its condition Locke 1988 [1689], pp. 287–288.

relationality". It is different but not independent from the kind of "enforced deprivation" by which people become dispossessed (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, p. 5). As they write,

> if we are beings who can be deprived of place, livelihood, shelter, food, and protection, if we can lose our citizenship, our homes, and our rights, then we are fundamentally dependent on those powers that alternately sustain or deprive us, and that hold a certain power over our very survival. Even when we have our rights, we are dependent on a mode of governance and a legal regime that confers and sustains those rights. And so we are already outside of ourselves before any possibility of being dispossessed of our rights, land, and modes of belonging (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, p. 4).

In this view, a subject is never self-sufficient, never in full possession of herself, dependent as it is on "environments and others" (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, p. 4). This interdependency establishes it as a social being, but also its "vulnerability to social forms of deprivation" (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, p. 5). On the level of empirical analysis, the idea that lives and livelihoods inevitably depend on relations that support and sustain them directs attention to how and how much such supports (or their relative absence) are unequally distributed across places and subject positions, and how deprivation is already inscribed in situations before the event. How does the lack or withdrawal of such supports hamper the realization of persons' options and potentials? In how far is the lack of necessary supports (closely bound to "being dispossessed") a constitutive part of situations in which more event-like dispossessions ("becoming dispossessed") occur? How do existing deprivations determine emergent ones?

This concerns the broader array of supports which enable people to benefit from the access to land in the first place, when access alone is insufficient to secure livelihoods. By asking if, how, and to what extent foregoing land relations did or did not serve and benefit rural dwellers, it helps to decenter both the object and the process of dispossession, and thus to differentiate between the effects of enterprise and land bank takeovers and the less eventful, more silent and creeping effects of the deterioration of various levels of supporting and sustaining relations. In other words, the being-becoming-distinction helps to bring into focus the entanglement of different processes, or layers, of dispossession with their different appearances, temporalities, causalities and degrees of transparency. Not only is "being dispossessed" amongst the ontological conditions of human existence (the point that Butler and Athanasiou emphasize), it is also part of the *contingent conditions* under which 'new' deprivations occur.

In the empirical case at question, attention needs to be paid to dispossession before the event: As the contingent conditions under which rural dwellers encounter events such as enterprise takeovers and the involvement of new economic actors. The question what they risk to lose in such instances is an empirical one. The more general point is that a situation in which actors already lack a sustaining environment, and concrete means and supports to realize and stabilize livelihood options is different from one in which one is deprived of something that has well served one's needs and purposes before. The idea of dispersed dispossession thus also represents the attempt to stay attuned to the often slow and trickling pace in which certain forms of dispossession unfold, and to the gaps, lacks and silences they leave behind.

8 Conclusion

For rural dwellers in Russia, the breakdown of state supports, the devaluation of the agricultural sector and agricultural assets, the deterioration of infrastructures and institutions, and the foreclosure of livelihood options in rural sites that went along with post-Soviet rural transformation resulted in loss, disadvantage and harshly limited agency towards the reformatting occurring around them. For many, the promise of sustaining small scale household farming failed long before the raising interest in the agricultural sector, and it is thus that alternatives to large scale farming schemes and investments—

with their problematic implications—seem rare. What deprived them was not so much anyone's grab than the recurrent smaller and larger failures of the Soviet agricultural system, market reforms, state programs, and agricultural enterprises.

Amongst the tragedies from rural dwellers' points of view is not that corporate farmland takeovers would make them lose something existential or even valuable, but rather that what they are said to lose (land rights) never really served their interests in the first place. Throughout market transformation, they too often failed to secure rural livelihoods. Realizing land's agricultural and economic potential would presuppose means and conditions that remain out of reach for many. But the latter—various institutions and infrastructures supporting production and livelihoods, running enterprises providing jobs, machines and technologies, access to markets and government programs—are not merely supplementary aspects that hinder the realization of farmland potential: They represent resources and access options in their own right, and which of them will be indispensable in relation to particular ends remains an empirical question.

I thus argued that the 'nature of dispossession' cannot be derived from the 'nature of land relations'. Benefits from land rights—or other property relations—are not simply given (Ribot, Peluso 2003). Property does not necessarily support existence, and not everything that does is mediated through property. I suggest that the subsumption of rural dispossession in Russia under the 'land grabbing' label—successful in raising attention and building bridges to broader debates, but not quite in accordance with most rural dwellers' experiences and concerns—is symptomatic for a deeper tension: The relative difficulty to arrive at alternative terms and narratives, and thus the attractiveness of an apparently self-evident land-theft-pattern allowing for comparatively neat patterns of analysis and critique in which both the stake and the mode of dispossession seem clear. The idea of dispersed dispossession represents an attempt to arrive at alternative narratives.

With regard to the scope and pace of land accumulation, and size of players involved, the notion of dispersed dispossession seems counter-intuitive: Dispersion suggests diffusion rather than massive concentration, creeping rather than eventful transformation, and some elusiveness rather than single causalities and clearly circumscribed change. This tension is essential for my argument here. To speak of dispersed dispossession is not to deny the magnitude of accumulation processes, or the fact that some get super rich while others remain poor or become poorer. However, it refrains from taking the relation between these tendencies for granted and shows that a close reading of dispossession may well direct attention to rows of disinvestment, neglect and disintegration, all of which destabilized livelihoods, shrank economic options, deteriorated social fabrics, and turned futures uncertain long before capital found interest in Russian agriculture.

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