SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET INEQUALITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY: A FOUNDATION FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

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This article considers the issues of inequality in contemporary Russia from a political ecology perspective, in terms of human-nature relations. Taking a historical perspective on Soviet uses of nature, post-Soviet consequences of Yeltsin's agrarian reform, and the complexities of present day resource politics, including land grabs, I argue that the political ecology of globalization in Russia and Russia's practice of leveraging natural resources to secure its place as a powerful economic actor in the global arena contribute to the continued reproduction of national and regional inequalities. The medium of nature in Russia is used by certain political actors and factions to create and reproduce inequalities, but it can also be a lens for illuminating and analyzing them.

Keywords: *Russia, inequality, environment, resources.*

The Relevance of the Political Ecology Approach for Contemporary Russia

There is a consensus among scholars on the growing inequality in post-Soviet Russia, and there is much scholarship on the subject (Berkowitz and De Jong 2011; Collier 2011; O'Brien *et al.* 2011; Round and Williams 2010; Meurs and Ranasinge 2003; Allina-Pisano 2010). Quite often such analyses are class-based and express concerns regarding such issues as the workers' rights, the efficiency or inefficiency of collective action, the experience of the working class in the post-Soviet environment (Crowley 1997), the polarization between classes, and attempts to define and locate the middle class (Maleva 2008; Gorshkov and Tikhonova 2008; Shlapentokh 1999; Ashwin 1999; Remington 2011) which in the 1990s the scholars repeatedly declared as missing (Baltzer 1996). And now such scholars as Nancy Birdsall (2010) define the middle class as an indispensable indicator of development that allow attributing Russia to the category of countries where one can distinguish three classes: the poor, the middle, and the rich, that is to the category of countries which differ from a number of so-called developing countries (at least the ones with a high GINI coefficient) where the political economy approach can help distinguish only between the wealthy oligarchy and the massive underclass.

Some other analyses of inequality in Russia focus on prospects for social mobility, and processes by which social mobility is accessed and achieved (Breen and Jonsson 2005). Besides, the studies of inequality are often geographical in their frameworks, focusing primarily on rural-urban division (Fedorov 2002; Macours and Swinnen 2008) and considering such issues as rural-urban and intra-regional migration (Andrienko and Guriev 2004), and their effects on life chances and outcomes. There are analyses of inequality that examine the specific domains of socioeconomic well-being or particular social categories and put inequality in a broader socioeconomic context of post-Soviet Russia. Such analysis varies from policy-oriented and instrumentalist to intersectional

ones and studies such aspects as public health, gender, experience of post-Soviet youth, and ethnic discrimination. Yet, others have engaged with long-term outcomes of specific restructurings or reforms. For example, O'Brien, Wegren, and Patsiorkovski (2011) analyze, as they put it, the winners and losers of the Russian Agrarian reform.

However, at least for the moment, the issues of inequality considered in terms of environmental and human-nature relations are not given much attention in domestic or foreign scholarship of post-soviet Russia. Of course, the scholars have given some consideration to environmental issues in Russia, and Soviet and post-Soviet environmentalism has been an object of attention for many of them. But the majority of such investigations because of the disciplinary conventions, are conducted within the framework of conventional environmentalism. The topics of such scholarly undertakings focus on the reorganization of the state management of nature with the ontogenesis and 'impactology' of articulated environmentalism emerging as the primary subjects, tackling topics such as Russian law as a 'source of environmental injustice' (Donohue 2009); the effects of post-Soviet environmental deinstitutionalization (Mol 2009) and shifts in post-Soviet environmental governance (Oldfield 2005; Nystén-Haarala 2009). None of these approaches quite map onto the framework of political ecology, and in general there is not a strong tradition of political ecology in the studies of Russian natural environments.

Political ecology is a multidisciplinary perspective that attracts anthropologists, rural sociologists, human geographers, and others, and it is a perfect lens for looking at inequality because of its ontogenetic links with political economy and Marxist analytical frameworks. The term was popularized by Marxist anthropologist Eric Wolf, who used it in the article 'Ownership and Political Ecology' (Wolf 1972) to frame his analysis of local property and inheritance rights and the ways in which they 'mediate between the pressures of the larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystems' (Wolf 1972: 202). The framework of 'political ecology' integrates the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy, canonically grounded in neo-Marxist analysis. Its central premise is that environmental problems cannot be understood in isolation from the economic and political contexts within which they are produced; and *visa verse*, socioeconomic inequality is linked to environmental uses, and to describe environmental problems is to consider the political and economic processes (contexts) that generate and reproduce these problems. As David Harvey puts it (1996: 189), 'All ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and *vice versa*'. The political ecologists consider the distribution of costs and benefits of nature use and how that distribution correlates with other existing inequalities, power asymmetries, and unbalanced burden allocations, thus incorporating issues of environmental racism, ecological debts in postcolonial context, gendered environmental impacts, and other similar topics into their analyses. In politicized environments actors negotiate over environmental issues and conflicts on material and discursive levels. From the dialectic point of view, politics can be a medium for regulation of nature; nature can be a medium for enactment of political relationships and inequalities. The central themes explored through the lens of political ecology are power relations and the contestations and claims over politicized (and monetized) environments. Bryant and Bailey (1997) have linked political ecology and studies of inequalities through the following postulates: costs and benefits associated with environmental change are distributed unequally, and thus environmental changes affect societies in non-homogenous ways with political, social, and economic differences underlying uneven distribution of such costs and benefits; such unequal distribution affects the political and economic *status quo*; and also such unequal distribution and its consequences on pre-existing inequalities hold political implications for the resultant power relations.

In the era of globalization, political ecology offers a perspective on economic, political, and environmental processes. Similar to the commodity chain approach, political economy illuminates the links between natural resources – in the broadest sense possible – and economic prosperity and disenfranchisement on a large scale. Political ecology allows us an anthropocentric view of nature; as Wapner and Mattheh wrote (2009: 203), 'Although many moral issues arise with regard to the way people treat nature, much environmental harm involves people exploiting, abusing, or otherwise mistreating each other. Nature is the medium through which they do so'. The anthropocentric view of environment, which nicely fits the project of political ecology, does not just focus on how people exploit nature, but rather how people exploit each other through nature. Nature as the site of resources, including of course land, and raw materials that constitute wealth of any resource-based economy is a medium through which social inequality is produced and reproduced, historically all around the world throughout the *longue durée* history of globalization (as Nederveen Pieterse [2009] shows, globalization is not a new phenomenon, but rather an ongoing historical process) from settler-colonialism by the Spaniards, Portuguese, and British in the Americas, to contemporary land grabs in Africa.

A Historical Perspective

Since every political and economic system produces a particular set of human-nature relations that encodes and reproduces the ideology and the praxis of the system itself, and since nature and the industrial infrastructure interfacing with nature in Russia have spanned two regimes, let us shortly return back in time to the creation of the Soviet Union, and human-nature relations therein. The Soviet Union with its visions of a new socioeconomic regime for the population also presupposed a new regime of value and governance for nature, the one wherein nature's power would be harnessed for the common good, while collective ownership would help avoid the excesses and inequalities inevitable under capitalism. Environmental concerns within that ideological framework resulted from private ownership and individual profit-seeking, and thus would not be a problem under the collective ownership model. After all, even Karl Marx himself was interested in capitalist agriculture, located the causes of environmental degradation in capitalist regime, as he introduced the notion of human-nature 'metabolism' in *Das Capital*. In original German the term is *stoffwechsel*, where *stoff* means substance or material, and *wechsel* means exchange. Thus, *stoffwechsel* literally refers to processes of exchange of substances and materials between two actors or domains, namely between humans (and their economic activities) and nature. Marx employed the concept of metabolism to describe the human relation to nature through labor:

> Labor is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature ... It [the labor process] is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence (Marx 1976: 283, 290).

Marx located the breakdown of the metabolism in the capitalist mode of production, linking the crisis of urban pollution with the crisis of soil depletion. The capitalist logic that he maintained created a rift between town and country, and between society

and ecology. He wrote that capitalist production 'disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, *i.e.* it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man...' According to Marx, capitalism depleted the soil, undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker (Marx 1976: 638). Marx's notion of metabolism, rephrased by Foster (1999) as a 'metabolic rift', has been utilized by a number of political ecologists to address the convergence of environmental problems and socio-economic inequalities in the context of capitalism, from the guano-nitrates trade of the 19th century (Clark and Foster 2009) to contemporary issues in water inequality (Truelove 2011), climate change, indigenous peoples' displacement (Shearer 2012), and contested forms of forest resource governance (Andersson and Agrawal 2011) and more.

The dislocations of socialist modernity are not identical to the dislocations of capitalist modernity, but with regard to human-nature relations and the material transformations of the biophysical environment, Soviet industrial development reproduced the same social design that Marx faulted for the metabolic rift – resources becoming decoupled from the land that produced them as active urbanization creating a rift between man and land. But for ideological reasons, the early Soviet planners thought the environmental degradation to depend on the system of ownership of means of production, rather than the processes of industrial exploitation *per se*, and because the Russian Revolution of 1917 took place in the period when the Russian empire was an agrarian, rather than an industrial power, the early Soviet state put a priority on a large-scale industrialization. As Henry and Douhovnikoff (2008) synthesize in their annual review of environmental issues in Russia, the Western scholars, writing on the Soviet environment during the Soviet years, came to a consensus that a large-scale environmental degradation was due to the following factors:

– the state economic planners treated the resources like air or water as 'free of charge' or having 'no value';

– the communal ownership of natural resources did not encourage conservation;

– the persistent supply shortages led to an exaggeration of resource needs; and

– the size and resource capacity of the Soviet Union resulted in a complacency of sorts about the environment.

As Henry and Douhovnikoff (*Ibid*.) also point out, this Soviet legacy has created dramatically different levels of environmental quality throughout contemporary Russia. The Soviet economic planners believed that the concentration of industries can maximize investment, production and transportation efficiency. As a result, the landscape of Russia at the end of the Soviet era was and until today remains a mixture of relatively untouched areas and environmentally degraded sites of concentrated industry. Thus, according to 2007 Blacksmith Institute Report, the most polluted cities in the world are in Russia: Dzerzhinsk – because of improper chemical waste disposal; Dalnegorsk – because of improper transportation of lead from the mines; and Norilsk which is the home to the world's largest smelting operation.

Nature and Inequality Today

The environmental dynamics described above not only account for ecological inequalities across Russia, but also points to a broader context of complex, fluid inequality dynamics. At the regional level the areas of active industry may enjoy a higher flow of capital, although the distribution of such capital in these areas is often far from equal and, if anything, creates sets of marginalized and disenfranchised actors, promoting local hierarchies of inequality. For obvious reasons such increased economic activity, tends to flourish at the expense of, for instance, public health, producing health and

well-being inequalities between industrialized and non-industrialized areas. Industrial areas are also self-limiting with built-in expiration dates, And once the resources in question run out or lose value due to unpredictability of the global market, these areas are poised to bear the double burden of the loss of industry, frequently compounded by the fact that such areas often have undiversified economies concentrated around the newly defunct industries, and still contend with ecological and health problems that in many cases remain much longer than the industry boom. At the same time, the rural communities lacking resources may find themselves with no job market and in situations of food insecurity. Though land is a resource, most part of Russia is situated in the climate zones that do not readily support year-round subsistence economy. Generally speaking, the Soviet-era policy of putting priority on economic concerns over the environmental ones persists in contemporary Russia, whose economy is increasingly dependent on the export of natural resource. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development analysis suggests that the export of resources accounts for 4 % of Russia's annual 7 % economic growth rate in the recent past. The pattern of concentrated industries continues as well with oil and mining industries generally working together with logging industries, leaving indelible marks on the map of Russia, from Karelia to the Kola Peninsula to Yakutia.

Of course, the ur-resource is always land, and Russia is no exception. In the Marxist political ecological perspective, the metabolic rift is preceded by primary accumulation, which involves consolidating the profitability of land and the separation of subsistence labor from it. With Russia's agricultural past, Russian land has always been explicitly considered one of Russia's main natural resources. Land is often attributed to a different category of resources than, for instance, oil, or natural gas – land, after all, is immobile, its materiality is such that it cannot be physically disembedded from its eco-social context and exported abroad. From the theoretical point, land if managed properly is a renewable resource. 'Clean' land, especially in the aforementioned areas, that have not been 'industrialized', is imagined to be a solution to the insecurities and inequalities of contemporary Russia, and, in fact, becomes the site of fantasies of various eco-conservative back-to-the-land social movements (like the conservative eco-movement 'Ringing Cedars'), that emphasize the link between the Russian nationalism and land. Land was the subject and the medium of the agrarian reform initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev but implemented by Boris Yeltsin, as urban areas were becoming the places of new ventures in market capitalism, the reform that was meant to decollectivize the Russian countryside, privatize land and agricultural production, and to create legal institutions to support the new agricultural model. Virtually all analyses of consequences of the agricultural reform suggest divergent income trends between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, unequal terms of trade between industrial and agricultural model, farms operating at a loss, and disadvantaged food producers, all amplifying rather than alleviating urban-rural inequalities.

However, a less publicized, but relevant for an analysis of inequality consequence of the agrarian reform pertains to land itself. Land in Russia is not as inalienable and embedded as it may seem when initially considering it in comparison to oil, which flows through pipelines across borders, or precious wood that leaves the country day and night on large trucks. Although land grabs are not commonly thought of in relation to Russia, since in debates about land grabs the high-profile site of land grabs is primarily Africa, the phenomenon has existed in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and land does not have to be physically mobile to be circumscribed, taken out of local uses and in the technical sense exported, while remaining in place. Perhaps, such processes in Russia are not thought of as land grabs, because land grab as a term is used

to discuss a contention process of large-scale land acquisitions – the buying or leasing large pieces of agricultural land, primarily in developing countries by either domestic, or, increasingly, transnational companies or governments. The connections emerge and are articulated in the debates about the ethics and neocolonial implications of such endeavors, and the term has gained visibility and prominence after the 2007–2008 world food crisis. Russia is tenuously positioned in such symbolic debates because it does not neatly fit into the dichotomies of 'colonizing' and 'colonized' nation, or a 'developed' or a 'developing' one. However, whether termed a land grab or not, the process of foreign purchases of large-scale tracts of land in Russia is happening, with all the concerns articulated about land grabs in general attached to it. As Visser and Spoor write, 'most recently, investment in the agro-food sector has been accelerating, and the accumulation of land in the former Soviet Union has taken on an international dimension. In 2009, in Ukraine a land deal of around 100,000 hectares with the government of Libya attracted the most attention, but more importantly, Western investors (from the UK, Sweden, and Denmark, amongst others) as well as petro-dollars from the Gulf States are starting to make their way into the Central Eurasian countryside' (Visser and Spoor 2011: 301, 306).

In short, private foreign investors set their sights on formerly state-owned farms, and continue to claim the nutrient-rich surface soils today, and scholars like Atkin (2009) project that such investments will only increase in the coming years. The investors in the Russian countryside include firms from the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Scandinavia, *etc*. The Gulf investors have acquired over 500,000 hectares of land in Russia. As Atkin and others point out, although often condoned by regional authorities, as is the case in Russia, such large-scale international investment in commercial agriculture can have great consequences for both former land-users and the rural communities, and also for general amplification of inequalities across local, regional, national, and international scales. As Spieldoch and Murphy note, 'the land-lease and land-purchase agreements raise a number of troubling issues. These include unequal power relations (in particular, between the contracting partners and between host-country governments and their people); conflicting interpretations about land use; scarce natural resources; and the potentially negative implications for smallholders and women' (Spieldoch and Murphy 2009: 43). And as Meinzen-Dick and Markelova (2009) point out, the land transferred from smallholder production to industrial agriculture almost never reverts to original users, which can lead to soil transformation and loss of farming skills. Foreign land leasing and land purchasing takes land out of local and national circulation and links it into the flows of goods and capital of the global economy, essentially mobilizing this supposedly immobile national asset without providing local jobs or food security. It is not difficult to see the links between land purchases and increasing rural-urban inequality, and the rural-to-urban migration, yet unlike self-evident 'failures' of agricultural reform that disenfranchised a segment of the rural population, land sales are classified a 'success' from an economic perspective, and strongly encouraged in local settings.

Mobile Resources and Globalization in Russia

Geological resource maps show that Russia is criss-crossed with oil and natural gas pipelines – material resources that are important both in the economic universe and in the symbolic narratives of Russia's abundance, its growth as a part of the BRIC block, which is challenging the outdated dichotomies of the so-called 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries. The corporeality and materiality of oil and gas makes them easy to commodify and circulate; thus, they represent an easily appropriable and excludable

source of wealth. The privileged stratum, which has gained access to oil and gas revenues, enjoys a disproportionate increase in their living standards, enlarging the gap with the rest of the population. Such scholars as Fedorov (2002) and also Bradshaw and Vartapetov (2003) suggest in their analysis that oil production increases inequality between regions. Furthermore, Buccelatoo and Mickiewitz's analysis (2009) suggests that regions rich in oil are characterized by a higher intraregional level of income inequality. The inequality arises partially due to the fact that natural resources are easy to appropriate, and constitute an excludable source of wealth – but that, one could argue, is a normative assessment, situational, rather than ontogenetic, locating the problems with the same set of actors and circumstances that figure heavily in the 'resource curse' thesis (Auty 1993; Karl 1997; Ross 1999) that links resource abundance in non-Western countries with poor governance, corruption, and overall negative outcomes. But inequality around the resource economy in Russia is not the matter of mismanagement or improper governance – it is the inequality constructed through decisions about political and resource geography made first by the Soviet state. During the Soviet era the natural resource rents were reallocated from the oil and gas producing regions east of the Urals towards the European part of the USSR. As Glatter (2003) noted, this re-allocation was facilitated through fixed low prices on natural capital and high prices on machine capital. The profit generated by the trade of natural resources remained in the capital and was invested in the military-industrial complex and grain imports from the West to compensate for a failing agriculture. Perhaps, it was a 'resource curse' in a way – not in the sense that the ecological economists use it, as something that inherently triggers corruption, greed, and mismanagement, but in the same sense that former European colonies were 'cursed' with raw materials, which destined them to become structurally marginalized satellite producers to the colonial metropolis in an asymmetrical system of power. The situation today is not that different – the transregional re-allocation of resource rents through mechanisms like transfer pricing and through taxation systems which ensure that the revenues are not reinvested into the resource-rich regions. According to Bradshaw and Vartapetov (2003), although the mechanisms of equalization payments exist, they are not comparable to the abundant natural resources transferred from the producing regions.

In January 2012, the Market Watch website of the *Wall Street Journal* published an article titled 'Russia's WTO entrance redraws global resource map' and subtitled 'membership raises prospects for global commodities trade' (Saefong 2012). The article discusses Russia's benefits and improvements, and emphasizes that entering the WTO will integrate Russia into the global economy more firmly. The implication is that being able to leverage its natural resource assets in the arena of the WTO will help Russia in the so-called 'development' project, that is supposed to produce equality on the greatest scale – the global one – as developing countries with which Russia is grouped by multinational institutions (although such a classification is a contested one [Picker 2004, as well as literature on BRIC nations]) are supposed to catch up, bridge the gap, and, in the process, in theory help reduce the global inequality. But the political ecology of globalization in Russia and Russia's practice of leveraging natural resources to secure its place as a powerful economic actor in the global arena contribute to the continued reproduction of national and regional inequalities. And, consequently, the categories and frameworks of political ecology have a lot to offer in the analysis of social inequality in contemporary Russia. The medium of nature can be used to create and reproduce inequalities, but it can also become a lens for illuminating and analyzing them.

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