Introduction

The vast expanses of post-socialist Eurasia, spanning from the territory just outside of Berlin to Russia’s sparsely inhabited Far East, have experienced arguably the most dramatic and large-scale agrarian transformations of the past century. These include the shift to socialist agriculture with – often violent – collectivization sweeping through the countryside following the Russian October revolution, and then an unprecedented wave of market-oriented land reforms taking place in over 25 countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The large number of countries starting market-based land reform almost simultaneously from a roughly similar (socialist) background, yet with different outcomes, makes the region a unique ‘laboratory of land reform’ (Spoor 2012) and agrarian transformation. Yet insights generated by research on this region tend not to make it
into wider agrarian studies. During the socialist era, difficulties in conducting independent fieldwork in the countryside hampered agrarian research, although a few excellent ethnographies were produced (see for example Humphrey 1983 and Kideckel 1993). Following the demise of socialism, most rural research was framed in terms of transitions from socialism to capitalism or accession to the European Union (EU), rather than as (agrarian) development more broadly.

This chapter ventures into the largely uncharted territory of research on socialist and post-socialist Eurasian agrarian issues, with the aim to uncover some key concepts that have sprouted out of this region, and that might be of wider relevance. It will discuss three major sets of insights (and/or research agendas) emerging from the region. First, we argue that the region constitutes fertile ground for nuancing and interrogating the concept of the peasant, and ideas of predictable trajectories of either the disappearance or re-emergence of peasants. This is largely due to the region’s uneasy fit in development studies classifications (Global North versus South), and agrarian studies’ influential theories. In terms of food regime theory (McMichael, this volume) for instance, during the Cold War the region was the alien – largely blank – ‘other’ in the second food regime. Meanwhile Russia, as the USSR’s largest post-socialist successor, sits somewhat awkwardly within the global corporate food regime, given the Russian government’s growing protectionism in the agricultural sector in general and pressure on multinational food traders and foreign large-scale farmland investors (Lander and Kuns 2020) in particular. This protectionism and pressure is in line with Russia’s recent push for food sovereignty, not along the lines of La Via Campesina, but via Kremlina style (Visser et al. 2015, 14), i.e. top-down, state-controlled and oligarch-led.

Second, research from/about the region unsettles the idea of smallholders versus corporate farms as separate worlds, instead stressing co-existence, symbiosis, overlap and fuzzy boundaries. It directs attention to how farms might not easily be pinpointed as belonging to either alternative or conventional food networks, with some post-socialist rural dwellers pragmatically having a leg in both worlds.

Third, this chapter argues that it is crucial to go beyond ideological and discursive aspects of food systems and movements, to pay more serious attention to the theoretical implications of every day experiences and their – sometimes striking and underestimated –

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1 Only very recently, more sustained efforts in this direction seem to be developing, with special issues or joint articles that aim to distill more general and/or theoretical insights form the post-socialist world and bring them to agrarian studies audiences (see Jehlička et al. 2020; Visser et al 2019b; and Wegren and O’Brien 2018).
cumulative impact. So far, within agrarian studies, the study of local micro-encounters and their cumulative influence is still overshadowed by protests and large-scale mobilizations as research angles. International scholars in East European studies – and particularly Soviet studies – also have long focused predominantly on large-scale mobilizations, with much research devoted to the period just before and after the socialist revolution (including the resistance against collectivization), while the decades of socialist agriculture following it have received sparse treatment by critical social science scholars. We will highlight the unappreciated resilience of weakly organized, and muted, yet culturally rich smallholder food provisioning with food practices that cross class boundaries and are largely environmentally friendly.

**Post-Socialist Re-Peasantization?**

Views on the ‘agrarian question’ in the post-socialist region are quite divergent, even if most studies have not explicitly framed research in terms of the agrarian question. While some authors have argued that there has been a return of the peasant (Dorondel and Serban 2014; van der Ploeg, this volume), and a continuation or reinvigoration of a peasant moral economy, others have vigorously criticized the idea of a moral economy driving post-socialist producers, arguing that rural dwellers have behaved as rational economic actors, either by remaining farm workers, or trying to become commercial farmers. Still others have argued, more matter of fact, that the label of peasant is not easily applicable considering the hybrid character of rural producers, as well as the huge variety in smallholder farming across a country like Russia (Pallot and Nefedova 2007).

While peasants have repeatedly been declared to be a thing of the past or on the verge of extinction, peasants stubbornly refuse to wither away. Today, after often violent and harsh collectivization, and many decades (up to seven in the Soviet Union) of varying denunciation and repression of peasants, post-socialist villagers are still not devoid of peasant characteristics. At the same time, while numerous observers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have celebrated widespread re-peasantization in other parts of the

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2 Wegren (2005) argued against a moral economy amongst rural dwellers in CEE, whereas Chris Hann (2003) - and other authors linked to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology - widely applied a moral economy lens.
world, there is insufficient evidence that rural dwellers across Eurasia have turned into full-blown peasants, or widely identify as such.

Expressions such as ‘hybrid’ or ‘partial’ as adjectives for peasants are clearly not exclusive to (post)socialist Eurasia (van der Ploeg, this volume), but it is almost impossible to proceed without them in this region (Kaneff and Leonard 2002). Even terms like ‘hybrid’ or ‘partial’ might understate the manifold contradictions and complexities that surround characterizing small agrarian producers in the region, such as the blurred distinctions between rural and the numerous (peri)urban ‘peasants’/smallholders (Kaneff and Leonard 2002), or the co-existence and/or symbiosis with large farms, all discussed further on.\(^3\)

A strong post-socialist re-peasantization has only taken place in the agriculturally marginal pockets, mostly the mountainous areas. In the socialist era, in isolated, marginal areas such as swamps and highlands far away from the centers of power, collectivization occurred cosmically or not at all, with peasant farms persisting. As a result, mountainous countries, such as Georgia and Armenia (see Spoor 2012) and Albania, or regions, such as Romania’s Transylvania or Tajikistan’s Pamir (see Hofman and Visser 2014), saw a widespread re-emergence of peasants (cf. Hann et al 2003).\(^4\) Steppe regions of Ukraine and Russia (Allina-Pisano 2008), and areas of Russia and Kazakhstan with roughly similar agro-climatic conditions, had remarkably similar agrarian transformations, despite different national land reform policies, with a patchy re-peasantization, occurring mostly in outlying districts. The difference in the level of re-peasantization in post-socialist countries, as indicated by the agricultural area utilized by smallholders and their economic contribution, is also illustrated in Table 1 (see below).

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is still observable that geography (e.g. topography and the landscape) often has had a more lasting influence on agrarian structures than post-socialist land reforms (cf. Hofman and Visser 2014). Human-made physical infrastructure in the form of farm fields and irrigation works (Kuns 2018; Sikor et al. 2017), rather than land reform policies, seem to have had an equally profound effect on agrarian structures.

For the majority of the post-socialist rural population inhabiting the vast tracts of fertile land in the agrarian heartland of the former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine,

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3 For discussions on the - often ambivalent and complex - (self)-perceptions see Kaneff and Leonard (2002).
4 Poland is unique in the post-socialist world with the persistence of smallholders in most of the country.
Kazakhstan) and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Romania’s southern planes, Hungary, Czechia), it is difficult to speak of widespread (let alone voluntary) re-peasantization. Instead, collective and state farms were privatized, but stayed largely intact as large-scale enterprises (as in most of the former Soviet Union) or were quickly rebuilt through leaseholds (as in various CEE countries). What is more, in most post-socialist countries large-scale farms have grown even bigger, and the corporate farms (‘agroholdings’) in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan are currently among the largest in the world (Spoor 2012). As a result, rural dwellers have mostly remained farm workers or out-migrated to the cities (or abroad), while many urban dwellers have maintained – and often intensified – food production on their small ‘subsidiary’ plots (usually located on the outskirts of cities) after the demise of the socialist regime (Kanef and Leonard 2002; Pallot and Nefedova 2007; Spoor 2012; Visser et al 2015), or after the shift to more market-oriented socialism as in China\(^5\) and Vietnam. In countries where the dissolution of collective farms was enforced by the post-socialist state, such as, for instance, Romania, many villagers were unable to work all the land they were allocated, and ‘stopped working four out of five hectares’ (Sikor et al. 2017, 200) ending up with an effective size similar to the subsidiary plots of farm workers in countries with less drastic privatization, such as Russia and Ukraine.

**Symbiosis and co-existence**

The manifold complexities and contradictions, mentioned above, surrounding small agrarian producers in the region can be traced, in part, to what is usually referred to in the literature as ‘symbiotic’ relations between communist-era peasants and the industrial farming complex of the collective farms (Allina-Pisano 2008; Kitching 1998; Kuns 2017; Pallot and Nefedova 2007; Visser et al. 2015; 2019). More specifically, symbiosis refers to a state of mutual dependence, which arose in the late communist period between, on the one hand, farm workers, many of whom spent considerable time working privately on small garden plots to produce food (for their own consumption and for surplus sales), and collective farm management, on the other hand, who in theory were focused on delivering production quotas. According to this arrangement, farm workers received a salary under urban norms, but could avail themselves of collective farm resources for use in their small plots. Such resources could include, among other things, fertilizer, antibiotics for animals or ploughing services from collective farm tractors, and these inputs were obtained in some cases legitimately and openly

and in some cases through informal channels in ways that legally speaking could be considered squandering of state/collective resources (and for which the perpetrators were occasionally prosecuted). These resources were one important reason why small garden production in communist countries could be so productive; private plot production was in essence subsidized by the industrial farming complex (Ioffe et al 2006).

 Particularly in the Soviet Union, household plot production proved remarkably persistent, among other reasons, because collective farm workers would not have had enough food were it not for the produce from their own gardens and because the broader Eastern European public was reliant on the surplus produce from these gardens. Thus collective farms were constituted by two, interwoven food production systems (Small 2007): a large-scale, ‘modern’ industrial system focusing on bulk production of grains, oilseeds, dairy and meat that required a large and cheap labour reserve to help with labour intensive seasonal operations, and a small-scale, supposedly ‘primitive’ system that produced food that in Soviet conditions were less amenable to scaled up industrial operations, such as fruits and vegetables, but also produced important staples such as dairy, meat and eggs. This small garden production then allowed farm workers to both feed their families and sell surplus on collective farm markets to meet the broader public’s demand for food (Ioffe et al 2006; Pallot and Nefedova 2007).

 Official attitudes towards widespread garden production on collective farms ranged from hostile to indifferent and there were various, mostly unsuccessful, attempts following WWII to curtail garden production – Wegren and O’Brien (2018) refer to this as ‘regime bias’. Only in the 1980s did the Soviet regime express appreciation for and seek to increase the possibilities for garden production.

 This duality of the “actually existing” kolkhoz is a microcosm of communist rule in general that helps to understand the contradictions of late communist political economy. Thus, the establishment of collective farms was achieved through communist domination of the countryside, a domination backed by extreme violence, particularly in the Soviet grain-belt of Ukraine, southern Russia and Kazakhstan. But the collective farm is also emblematic of the late communist failure to establish basic control over production. Kitching (1998, 63) refers to this late communist state of affairs as a “balance of power”, with peasants deploying various weapons of the weak to affect that balance (see e.g. Mincyte 2009). Peasants were forced to join collective farms, and most did so reluctantly under force of arms, but this did not prevent
“subsequent generations of rural dwellers from cultivating affective ties with the land and farm where they worked and lived” (Allina-Pisano 2009, 194). Collective farms were production units, but they also became “living spheres” (Wädekin 1971, 160) providing a variety of different welfare services (in addition to farm inputs), and they were regulated by a powerful but ultimately uncodified “social contract” (Pallot and Nefedova 2007). Collective farm members were workers, drawing a salary, which was ‘progress’ according to communist ideology, but still dependent on their garden plots for their livelihoods, thus not losing all features of a peasant. This state of affairs occasioned a complex mix of attitudes ranging from recognition of some material progress to disappointment and bitterness that the standard of living had not improved more, particularly in relation to communist promises (Kitching 1998). That being said, if we compare the late communist period to today’s situation, ‘strong arguments can be made that land grabbing, social and economic exclusion, and rural poverty are worse than the regime bias during the communist period’ (Wegren and O’Brien 2018, 6).

These late communist, collective farm dualities⁶ can help to account for contemporary attitudes in many rural areas that are somewhat more forgiving and, in some cases, even supportive of today’s emerging corporate farms⁷, in contrast with less ambiguous rural fault-lines in other parts of the world. Despite the fact that they were the notional beneficiaries, many former collective farm workers in the post-Soviet grain-belt opposed post-Soviet land reforms, because, among other things, these reforms are seen as facilitating land grabbing. However, they did not oppose the idea of being farm workers in large-scale corporate farms, and promises of employment to former collective farm workers have helped agroholdings acquire land in the region. Furthermore, research on the above-discussed symbiosis has been used to speak to international debates on (varieties of) inclusion of smallholders in large-scale farmland investment (Mamonova 2015), particularly with respect to the investors’ Corporate Social Responsibility (Visser et al. 2019a), and debates on food sovereignty (see below).

**Quiet alternative agrarian practices**

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⁶ Now a tripartite agrarian structure has emerged in many parts of post-Soviet Central Asia as household plot production tends to co-exist with a substantial private (commercial) farming and with large farm enterprises (LFEs) (Veldwisch 2008).

⁷ While there is nostalgia in much of the post-Soviet grain-belt for the period of ‘high collective farming’ (the 1970s and 1980s), the collective farm is also seen as a symbol of oppression in other parts of Eastern Europe (Mincyte 2009).
Many of the more well-known studies on Eurasian agrarian relations were framed by debates on the degree of revolutionary potential of the peasantry, and on their appetite (or lack thereof) for mobilization and resistance (see Taiger 2010 for a discussion). While studies on the former died out after the different countries became socialist, some debate on rural resistance – but then against socialism, and more specifically collectivization – was continued by Western researchers. These debates, we contend, have mostly focused on resistance against the socio-economic aspects of socialist industrial farming (loss of autonomy, livelihoods), whereas environmental causes and motivations have received scant treatment.

The theoretical apparatus of concepts around resistance and mobilization (and even to some extent everyday resistance), currently so widely, and often fruitfully, applied to agrarian studies, faces major limitations when applied to the (post)-socialist agrarian context. The limitations are largely due to: 1) the ambivalent status of the smallholders as peasants and, related, their symbiosis with large-scale farms (as discussed above), as well as 2) the historical experience of post-socialist societies reflected in specific forms of political (dis)engagements. Regarding the latter point, the concept of ‘antipolitics’ (Gille 2010) inherited from the socialist era is relevant. In the socialist era, political critique and resistance often took the form of skepticism of state power and civil organizations (which were mostly tightly controlled by the state) and an ethical stance of distancing oneself from the public sphere with its constant political mobilizations and imposed activism (Gille 2010). The fall of the socialist bloc, and its ideology, further reinforced ideological disillusionment. As a result, even in post-socialist countries that experienced a stable trajectory of democratization and integration in EU structures, a ‘model of resistance as unobtrusiveness, nonshowiness, and refusal to enter into overt political debates’ (Aistara 2018, 40) has been prevalent.

Whereas research on societal initiatives in post-socialist Eurasia has often featured an exclusively negative interpretation of such antipolitics (Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Telešienė and Balžekienė 2015), recent agrarian studies in the sphere of food provisioning have offered a different reading of these ostensibly non-political behaviours. The widespread self-provisioning of the (post)socialist population should not be interpreted in narrow economic terms, as just a survival strategy (Alber and Kohler 2008) or even backward practice (Rose and Tikhomirov 1993), as is mostly done in policy and scholarly debates (see Smith and

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8 Out-migration, which is especially widespread in South-Eastern Europe and the periphery of the former Soviet Union, e.g. Tajikistan, (see Hofman and Visser 2014), can be interpreted as a form of unobtrusiveness or ‘exit’.
Jehlička [2013] for a critique). Instead, as several observers have claimed, producing food for own subsistence, and selling and/or exchanging through informal food chains or networks – rather than through supply chains dominated by the state (socialism) or corporations (postsocialism) – can be seen as form of autonomy and political agency (Mincyte 2009). Yet while providing rich descriptive and analytic examples, the literature has faced difficulties with conceptualizing these post-socialist self-provisioning practices in generalizable terms that, first, fundamentally depart from the negative (or even demeaning) views that have haunted the debate on post-socialist smallholders, and, second, build fruitful connections with other – international – debates.

The introduction of the concept ‘quiet sustainability’ (Smith and Jehlička 2013) substantially contributed to reconfiguring these debates. Based on research on self-provisioning in CEE countries (Czechia and Poland) the concept highlights the remarkable nature of such post-socialist practices, which are not motivated by activism or political engagement. At the same time, however, these small, but widespread practices, silently aggregated, have far-reaching, positive implications in terms of sustainability (for instance, short food supply chains, limited or no use of inorganic pesticides, etc.) (Smith and Jehlička 2013), as well as in terms of social and ecological resilience of these practices (Jehlička et al. 2019). Socialist and post-socialist food self-provisioning has also proven to be remarkably resilient, by offering a refuge from the communist regime’s political mobilizations, the introduction of market economy and the arrival of ‘supermarketization’ and consumerism, the 2008 financial crisis, and for CEE countries the EU accession and the adoption of CAP directives. Social resilience and the relevance of these practices is also illustrated by the finding that food self-provisioning remains a socially diverse and remarkably evenly spread practice regardless of class, age, income and educational attainment. It is also practised by both rural and urban dwellers (Smith and Jehlička 2013). While high percentages of rural populations in Poland and Czechia producing food in their households are perhaps to be expected, 21 per cent of Prague dwellers are also involved in these practices. Forty-three per cent of Czech middle class people and 37 per cent of the working class produce food in their households; in Poland these figures are 55 and 51 per cent (Smith et al. 2015).

Although post-socialist smallholders often occupy a minority (and sometimes even tiny) share of total agricultural land, they manage to produce large volumes of food (see Table
1). All across post-socialist Eurasia, their share in production is substantially larger than their share in agricultural land.

Table 1. Smallholders’ share in land and food production, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Utilized agricultural area as % of total agricultural land</th>
<th>Smallholders’ agricultural output as % of total output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>63.4% (2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Only household plots with less than 2 ha are included.


Even people who do not grow food themselves are often involved in informal, non-market food sharing networks as recipients of home-grown food. Forty per cent of Czechs grow some of the food consumed in their households. Home production combined with food received as a gift accounts for 35–40 per cent of their consumption of vegetables, fruits, potatoes and eggs (Jehlička et al. 2019). Importantly, the motivations for these practices are manifold and in some CEE countries can be primarily non-economic – it is an enjoyable hobby practised with the objective of obtaining fresh and healthy food – and financial savings are only a secondary consideration (ibid). Further East in countries like Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, and even more so in the more rural societies of Central Asia like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, economic motivations (reducing costs of food consumption and/or gaining some income from limited sales) are relatively more predominant (Hofman and Visser 2014; Pallot and Nefedova 2007; Veldwisch 2008; Visser et al. 2015).

9 In the small Baltic countries, the share of smallholders in food production is smaller (up to 2.5%), yet also here, as in the rest of Eastern Europe their share in production is substantially larger than their share in agricultural land (Wegren and O’Brien 2018: 875).
The concept of ‘quiet sustainability’ (sustainability by outcome rather than intention) has stimulated further conceptualization of the deeply interlinked political and environmental dimensions of post-socialist agrarian practices. Visser et al. (2015) speak of ‘quiet food sovereignty’ to denote how practices of quiet sustainability in the former Soviet Russia embody the key notions of food sovereignty without the existence of the organizational structure and outspoken ideologies of a food sovereignty movement. Aistara (2018) in her monograph, which innovatively compares organic and/or alternative farmers in post-socialist Latvia and post-colonial Costa Rica, sees quiet sustainability (with a longing for quiet food sovereignty) as a key element of what she calls the local ‘organic sovereignties’ in Latvia.

While the concept of ‘quiet sustainability’ and its offshoots emerged from the post-socialist context, its imperative of taking every day, silent forms of environmentalism seriously, combined with hidden forms of rural autonomy and resilience, arguably has an unrecognized relevance in food debates that often privilege the global and discursive, within a hyper-connected world ‘that can’t stop talking’ (as Susan Cain phrased it in her book *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can’t stop talking*). Quiet sustainability has recently been used to highlight silent resilience through self-provisioning in Greece, during its sharp economic downturn following the global financial crisis and austerity policies enforced by the EU. In Western Europe, the concept has been expanded to capture, for instance, grass-roots community gardening, characterized as a ‘quietly radical’ form of food justice (Kneafsy et al. 2017, 624) and the ‘quiet activism’ of seed sharing initiatives.

The concept of ‘quiet food sovereignty’ has been taken up beyond the CEE region, especially in research on groups which tend to be somewhat at the margins of the food sovereignty movement, such as youth or urban gardeners in the Global South (Siebert 2019). The concept was applied, for instance, in the study of food self-provisioning in urban South-Africa, where food sovereignty was not shouldered by organizations, but appeared to be grounded in everyday life, inherent in their local food practices (Siebert 2019).

**Conclusions**

Until recently, research conducted on the vast land masses of post-socialist Eurasia has remained largely under the radar within agrarian studies. The region remains virtually invisible in influential global treatments of agrarian issues, such as food regime theory
(McMichael, this volume), debates on cheap nature(s) (Moore 2015) and the global meat complex (Weis, this volume). This observation is particularly striking when the rising importance of the region within the global food system is considered.

From a net food importer during the Socialist era, the region’s agrarian heartland (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan) rapidly turned into a net exporter of staple crops over the past decade. In 2018, Russia overtook the US as the world’s largest exporter of wheat, the staple that was so central in the earlier US domination of the global food system. The region is also a ‘frontrunner’ in farm enlargement, corporatization and financialization of agriculture (Spoor 2012). Only two decades after the fall of socialism, the region accounted for some of the largest corporate farms on Earth (Lander and Kuns 2020; Spoor 2012; Visser et al 2019a) and half of the world’s publicly traded farm companies.

In contrast to the region’s headline making export oriented mega-farms, it is its almost invisible multitude of smallholders – or ‘ambivalent peasants’ – who, operating in the shadow of these mega-farms, provide a substantial proportion of the non-grain staples on the household table such as potatoes, fruit and vegetables (Pallot and Nefedova 2007; Hofman and Visser 2014; Veldwisch 2008). Voicing neither major anti-corporate nor environmental claims, these smallholders nevertheless manage to silently provide culturally appropriate food in considerable magnitude. Moreover, food provisioning by post-socialist smallholders is conducted in, for the most part, an environmentally friendly way, compared to corporate farms. The large share of people producing part of their food themselves in post-socialist Eurasia is unmatched in the Global North, and in terms of the urban population involved, even rarely encountered in the Global South.

The actually existing combination of widespread, localized and socially embedded Eurasian food alternatives such as food self-provisioning and sharing, side by side with strongly corporatized market-based food supply chains, invite us to think about the food system’s resilience and sustainability in novel ways. Studying interactions and mutual dependencies in everyday lives in post-socialist countries between binaries usually seen in opposition (formal vs informal, mainstream vs alternative, market vs non-market, local vs global), provide a fertile ground for creativity and offers opportunities for rethinking future developments of the food system in uncommon but important ways.
Further readings:


References:


Dorondel, S. Serban, S. (2014), *At the margins. The Agrarian Question in South-East Europe*, Bucharest: MARTOR.


