



David W. Darrow. *Tsardom of Sufficiency, Empire of Norms: Statistics, Land Allotments, and Agrarian Reform in Russia, 1700-1921.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 376 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-5507-5.

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Published on H-Environment (July, 2020)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Review of *Tsardom of Sufficiency, Empire of Norms: Statistics, Land Allotments, and Agrarian Reform in Russia, 1700-1921*

David Darrow's 2018 monograph, *Tsardom of Sufficiency, Empire of Norms: Statistics, Land Allotments, and Agrarian Reform in Russia, 1700-1921*, is an important contribution to the history of Russia's relationship to land and peasantry. Focusing on the construction and development of the *nadel* (land allotment) over the course of more than two hundred years, Darrow seeks to understand how categories of land allotment and agrarian reform carried over from the tsarist era to the establishment of the Soviet Union. Central to the argument of the book is the issue of the *nadel*. According to Darrow, the *nadel* was an important marker and measurement of peasant well-being. The state took such concerns seriously, and in doing so, it attempted to categorize peasant households through statistical data based on land allotments and income. Darrow contends that the state had a vested interest in providing sufficient land for peasants based on moral obligation and authority. He writes, "In this way, the quest to remove the shackles of backwardness strengthens or reinvents traditional forms, combining in one institution the traditional moral authority of custom with the new moral authority of the modern" (p. 4).

In this context, Darrow understands the moral economy to be a perceived state obligation to allot land. His theoretical interpretation of the moral economy differs from earlier versions put forth by E. P. Thompson and James Scott in their respective works. Unlike Thompson and Scott, who use the term "moral economy" as an investigative lens to better understand peasant behavior and action in relation to their social environment, Darrow argues that the perception of the Russian state to provide adequate land and resources for peasants was an invented tradition lodged in the thinking of morality.[1] He argues for "approach[ing] the 'moral economy' not as a model for understanding peasant behavior but as an invented tradition that, over the course of the nineteenth century, took on the moral force of custom and became manifest in a public perception that the state was required to meet peasant land needs" (p. 7). Darrow's conceptualization of this invented tradition also relies on the idea that peasants needed the state to maintain their livelihoods. Here, the author suggests that concerns of food shortages helped peasants to rationalize state control. Writing about the moral economy paradigm, Darrow notes that "rational choice from the peasantry's

perspective was thus guided not by a drive to maximize return on investment but by a grimmer realization of its position on the edge of subsistence” (p. 7). Thus, according to Darrow, the Russian state perceived itself to be the moral director of the peasant question (*krest'ianskii vopros*), an elite-led project to provide sufficient land allotments and adequate resources to Russia's peasant population.

In order to fulfil their moral obligation, Russian elites had to learn more about the land on which peasants lived. The state had a relatively accurate notion of how many peasants there were, but it knew a great deal less about how much land the peasants lived on and about the quality of such land. The rationale behind the state's thinking was that it could learn to measure and calculate how much land a peasant needed to maintain their household and income. Darrow states that “measurement was a means to ensure that peasants had sufficient resources. This would increase and regularize revenues while also encouraging social and political stability” (p. 37). In the Scott sense of the term, Russian elites attempted to “see like peasants.” Darrow traces the Russian land project back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to show the longer trajectory of state-led land granting initiatives. The author observes, “Thus, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the state developed its role as the grantor of land allotments, a strong precedent rooted in its patrimonial sense of self” (p. 23). Darrow strengthens his argument further by linking the development of state land grants to the Enlightenment principles of Catherine II in the eighteenth century. A known Francophile and friend of the Enlightenment, Catherine used ethics and morality as philosophical justifications for addressing the needs of the masses. Although she was originally in favor of emancipating the serfs of Russia based on Enlightenment values, Catherine eventually pushed aside the idea, as she relied on the allegiance and support of nobles who owned serfs. Nonetheless, the issue of the moral state was an idea that continued

to exist in the minds of Russia's leaders across generations.

While the Russian state attempted to learn more about the large swaths of land that occupied the country, the issue of land hunger (*malozemel'e*) emerged. Officials found that large numbers of peasants did not have enough space to adequately sustain themselves. The issue of how many *desiatinas* (unit of area) of land to provide each peasant with became a problem that the state would have to solve. But how to calculate this? The answer was statistics. State authorities, who often discussed these matters in salons and cafes far removed from rural life, relied on the measurements of income and environmental statistical data collected by the *zemstvos* (rural councils). These councils helped to normalize the peasant economy, which separated them from the communes and posited them as an entity that could contribute to the Russian national economy. However, behind the moral veil of the state was a more authoritative intention: power. Darrow says, “First, early modern state building in Europe, including Russia, included a spatial or territorial component wherein mapping and enumerating space and people came to define the state and its power” (p. 24). With the help of statistics and measurements, elites could quantify the land and the people who inhabited it as a way of assessing their growth and prominence. Statistics allowed the state to reflect internally about its role in sustaining the peasant economy. Darrow notes, “This reinforced the idea that the state was an agent of agrarian reform as well as the precedent that state intervention—particularly measurement by state organs—could and should be used to ensure peasant economic well-being” (p. 44). Agrarian reform, as Darrow highlights in the book, contributed to an elite practice of quantifying both environment and man.

As statistics became the standard used for measuring land and peasantry, new universal norms were created. These norms reflected elite attitudes and perceptions of the people whose lives

they were calculating. The author states that “this universalization of the *nadel* made it more possible to conceptualize the peasantry as a coherent whole” (p. 54). The once disparate land allotments of serfs were becoming more visible to the state with the help of modern norms created through statistics. Darrow makes the argument that after the emancipation of serfs in 1861, elites still relied on the income provided by their workers. He writes, “The minimum goal was sufficiency; the maximum goal was to ensure that the majority of the emancipated serfs would perceive their lives as improved as a result of the reform” (p. 64). One may find limits to the moral argument here as it seems likely that elites really only cared about their peasants to the extent that they were economically productive. This is further corroborated by the state’s attention to soil and other environmental factors that were used to gauge land output. Essentially, the state used statistics to become more efficient while claiming that its actions were a justified moral contribution to emancipated serfs.

While the use of statistics helped the state to better “see” the peasantry as a coherent whole, it ironically forced it to discern a number of local and regional identities. This was attributed to the large sets of data collected by the *zemstvos*. Darrow remarks that “given the diversity of the empire, the results of the process most likely varied enormously in ways that even increased information could not measure” (p. 92). Thus, statistics had their limits. However, this did not stop elites from attempting to reclassify individuals based on perceived moral contributions to the communal way of life. Elites started to label peasants as belonging to one of three groups: poor, middle, and rich. Through a series of statistical calculations based on land, environment, and income, elites determined that the middle peasant (*seredniak*) was the ideal worker. Poor peasants could not contribute due to lack of wealth and resources, and rich peasants (*kulaks*) threatened the common good. The author states, “The middle peasant or the peasant

holding the average amount of land thus stood as a bastion of the fundamental communal act: the repartition. As such, he was the embodiment of the commune itself, its moral compass” (p. 147). The classification of peasants was also a political act that became a topic of debate between the Populists and the Marxists. The Populists supported the idea of the middle peasant and believed the designation to be a marker for which one should strive. The Marxists disagreed; they were more concerned with the stratification between rich and poor households. To them, the average peasant represented only a moment in history, a fleeting norm. It was part of much longer Marxist historical arc wherein the middle peasant represented only a “transitory state” (p. 163).

In the final part of the book Darrow focuses on the continuation of agrarian policies in the twentieth century. Here, he focuses on the importance of the Stolypin reforms and their link to the longer history of tsarist policies of sufficiency. His section on the creation and use of the Land Bank is particularly insightful for understanding further how the state attempted to create self-sufficient peasants. On the role of the Land Bank, he notes, “the goal was to create the peasants the state wanted while at the same time meeting the needs of the landless and land-hungry (and the demands of their advocates) by facilitating their acquisition of land from the bank on the state’s terms” (p. 212). Darrow aptly argues that the Stolypin reforms were a continued bet on the middle peasant (*seredniak*), an idea that spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author concludes his book by pushing the “land norm” idea into the revolutionary era of 1917. He contends that the Bolsheviks inherited these norms and adapted them to fit their political needs. Concerning Lenin, Darrow states that “although for Lenin and his colleagues, land norms corresponded more to the needs of the moment than to their vision of an agrarian future of large-scale agriculture” (p. 229). Nonetheless, the idea of sufficient land allotment

survived because it was adaptable for various political purposes.

Darrow should be praised for his ability to trace the history of the *nadel* from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. Such continuities can be difficult to find and justify as political, social, and cultural contexts shift rapidly. His use of numerous Russian archives, serials, reference materials, and *zemstvo* statistical works contribute greatly to the elite-focused perspective of the book. Darrow states quite clearly in the beginning of his monograph that this work is a top-down approach, but I found myself wanting to read the thoughts and opinions of rural workers who were being statistically categorized and consumed by the Russian state. Did they subscribe to the labels put on them? Did contributing to the *seredniak* ideal actually change the daily habits and work ethic of the tillers? Were the rural workers cognizant of the “moral” agenda put forth by the state, or were they simply hedging their bets on the best economical outcome for themselves and their families? The missing rural voices left me wanting to know more about the population that so preoccupied the minds of the Russian elite. Despite these shortcomings, Darrow’s monograph is a salient contribution to the history of Russia, rural studies, and environmentalism. This book will be particularly useful for those scholars wishing to learn more about the longer environmental history of Russia and the Soviet Union.

Note

[1]. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); and James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

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Citation: John Vsetecka. Review of Darrow, David W. *Tsardom of Sufficiency, Empire of Norms: Statistics, Land Allotments, and Agrarian Reform in Russia, 1700-1921*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020.

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