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The Vanishing Hectare: Property And Value In Postsocialist Transylvania (Culture And Society After Socialism)



Synopsis

In most countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the fall of communism opened up the possibility for individuals to acquire land. Based on Katherine Verdery's extensive fieldwork between 1990 and 2001, *The Vanishing Hectare* explores the importance of land and land ownership to the people of one Transylvanian community, Aurel Vlaicu. Verdery traces how collectivized land was transformed into private property, how land was valued, what the new owners were able to do with it, and what it signified to each of the different groups vying for land rights. Verdery tells this story about transforming socialist property forms in a global context, showing the fruitfulness of conceptualizing property as a political symbol, as a complex of social relations among people and things, and as a process of assigning value. This book is a window on rural life after socialism but it also provides a framework for assessing the neo-liberal economic policies that have prevailed elsewhere, such as in Latin America. Verdery shows how the trajectory of property after socialism was deeply conditioned by the forms property took in socialism itself; this is in contrast to the image of a "tabula rasa" that governed much thinking about post-socialist property reform.

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Customer Reviews

"Where the poet William Blake saw a world in a grain of sand, Ms. Verdery finds global collisions of values and culture in the manner that Aurel Vlaicu, a small Transylvanian town nestled at the foot of

the Western Carpathian Mountains, privatized its landholdings after Romania's 1989 revolution. . . . Verdery often leavens her work with entertaining anecdotes. . . . Her intimate knowledge of the town proved useful when she delved into local corruption and ill feeling. Her larger critique of Western misprisions never dulls her eye for local failures."â •Richard Byrne, Chronicle of Higher Education, 20 February 2004"Verdery's conclusions are bleak. She vividly describes how the efforts of individuals she depicts as conscientious, energetic, highly intelligent, and very charming all founder in the face of widening price scissors production costs and market returns. . . . The Vanishing Hectare showcases the value of long-term fieldworkâ •anthropology's core methodologyâ •to illuminate the real-world consequences of wishful thinking, and deserves particular attention from scholars and practitioners concerned to understand the kinds of regime change formerly known as transition."â •Keith Brown, Slavic Review, Spring 2005"Verdery's 30 years of fieldwork research in Romania supplied the groundwork for The Vanishing Hectare, enabling her to offer some alternative versions of the changes in rural life and reasons behind the supposedly irrational behavior of rural people. . . . Her account is not so much of the laws and administrative paraphernalia that established private ownership but rather of the broader social and economic conditions that make for what the author terms 'effective ownership.'"â •Andrew Cartwright, Anthropological Quarterly, Fall 2004"This is an example of ethnographic enquiry at its best. In Katherine Verdery's hands it becomes a superb vehicle for exploring the tragedy of reformist intentions. Using economic means to achieve social ends, and the consequences this has for people's livelihood, is a story told over and over again in twentieth-century history. Here the socialist and postsocialist experiments of Eastern Europe have a special poignancy, not least in the way the people contribute to their own predicaments. Verdery dignifies their endeavours with breathtaking documentation and a fine-grained analysis of social realities. A remarkable feat."â •Marilyn Strathern, University of Cambridge"The Vanishing Hectare is the polished work of a scholar who, after several decades of ethnographic fieldwork in a single place, brings her knowledge to bear on a problem of world-historical significance: the transformation of property following the collapse of state socialism in the former Soviet bloc. Katherine Verdery traces how collective forms of land use were transformed into 'private property,' and does so methodically, documenting and analyzing with neither polemics nor circumlocution."â •John Borneman, Princeton University"Here at last is Katherine Verdery's magnum opus. Extending out from a village in Transylvania to regional peculiarities, government policies, and the demands of the IMF and World Bank, Verdery illuminates the forces at work throughout the postsocialist world. This is a tour de force, the very best of ethnography with a historical and global reach, setting new standards for the study of market

transition." •Michael Burawoy, University of California, Berkeley

Katherine Verdery is Eric R. Wolf Professor of Anthropology and Interim Chair, University of Michigan. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Post-socialist market transformation" underscores Pharaoh's old curse to the Hebrew slaves: let them make bricks without straw, and if they say they can't, it's their own fault so cut off their unproductive hands. The "market transition" of Romania did just this, by insisting on the division and individualizing of property without concern over the recipient's assets to give it value. Said value was (with foreseeable intent) appropriated by those with such capital assists: the IMF and other global financial institutions without, and the state-subsidized within, as well as those individuals benefiting from extra or outside connections. All these had a vested interest in "kicking away the ladder" (in Ha-Joon Chang's phrase), to ensure privatization did not and could not work for the ordinary citizen. We see here the mechanics of "really existing capitalism", formed not according to self-serving theoretics but by the actions of the well-placed (foreigners, hereditary feudalists, state managers, etc.) transforming their insider legal advantages into market value, while throwing the "competition" (the majority) under the wheels of a market far from free or fair. I do take issue with Verdery's description of re-emerging traditional agriculture as a symptom of present inequity, rather than a mere return to the past. She has a point; but traditional rural agriculture was **always** a forced reaction to systemic inequity and poverty. It is a recreation of the past, insofar as that past was an adaptation to parallel circumstances. This raises the issue of why collective farms were instituted upon the village in the first place: to prevent it from becoming a mere rural ghetto and a source of transient urban lumpen, as in so much of the "developing world." Removing the subsidized status of the collective farmer, giving him "property" that he can't profitably use because he can't afford to invest in it, created this very dynamic in Romania as it did elsewhere. Verdery demonstrates that this is exactly how market value - and not just in land - is **designed** to work: to derive profit for the pre-advantaged few out of the intentionally impoverished majority; the latter hamstrung with liabilities derived from "austerity" and the desubsidizing of risk for those of "marginal utility." The whole scheme was skewered, like the market in general, for privileged insiders. For this reason I also take some issue with her characterization of national and local elites "still behaving like Communist apparatchiks." What did said apparatchiks behave like, if not feudal barons and bureaucrats? So again there is unbroken continuity in monopolizing land for the benefit of a self-chosen few. And - again - I can't help but see this as rooted in the nature of propertization itself.

A more equitable (and realistic) distribution would have been based on use, and use-right, rather than exclusive entitlement. Land would still be a public trust, with usufruct privilege traded, sold, or bequeathed, but not the land itself. An essential work for demythifying post-socialist studies and the "market revolution" in general: a deadly myth, like Pharaoh's, still forcing lethal consequences on millions of subjugated Europeans.

I agree with the previous reviewer! Verdery's latest book makes the market transition studies of Nee, Keister, and Guthrie look obsolete, simplistic, uninformed, off-the mark, and BORING. (David Stark is somewhat better than the names listed above so I cut him some slack.) A must-read for students of social change AND policy makers! Great work!!!!

To: Doug Guthrie, Lisa Keister, and David Stark: Please, spare publishing houses of your crap. Read this book and try to learn something from it!

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