
This volume is a collection of studies on agricultural development with great variation both in geography and time. Chapters range in focus from 17th century South Africa to modern day Peru. The underlying goal is to explore the process of agricultural transformation in the different times and places studied, in an attempt to provide some direction on the factors important to this major contributor to development.

The editors Ellen Hillbom and Patrick Svensson open the volume with an introduction that does an excellent job of summarizing much of the “big-think” or meta-historical work on agriculture and development. They make a good argument that while this literature often paints the agricultural transformation as a homogenous process that varies only in its timing across countries, there is in fact a diversity of experience in the world regarding this process. Adding to this diversity, they rightly point out that agricultural transformation takes place over such long time periods that trying to study it in isolation is doomed to fail given the other changes taking place at the same time within countries and around the globe.

While the diversity displayed in the chapters is unmistakable, it is almost impossible to try and draw some broad conclusions. Peter Timmer provides a postlogue to the volume, giving an integrated view of the included chapters. Timmer tries to place the works back into the context of a general model, and those familiar with his earlier work will recognize the discussion of Mosher, Johnston–Mellor, Schultz–Ruttan, and Johnson stages of agricultural development.

In the introduction, the editors themselves lay out several themes they find working through the various chapters. Their theme topics certainly come up sporadically, but the chapters all end up centering around the distribution of land. At the risk of ignoring the diversity that is a highlight of the volume, all of the editors themes can in some sense be brought back to land. Natural pre-conditions are important in the sense that Engerman and Sokoloff hypothesized: they help determine the distribution of land. State and government policy are important to the extent that they foster a broad distribution of land or not. Population growth is an issue when land is in short supply and institutions do not allow for it to be redistributed to support this population efficiently. Markets and non-agricultural opportunities turn out to depend in large parts on the land security enjoyed by rural farmers. The themes of equity and access to factors of production are by definition concerned with the distribution of land.

What the chapters find repeatedly is that where land is widely available, and large proportions of peasants have meaningful access to land, agricultural production is robust and the conditions supporting agricultural transformation are in place. Those places where land is unequally distributed suffer for several reasons. First, large landowners tend to either passively or actively oppose development, as in the work of Galor et al. (2009), Wright (1996), or Conning and Robinson (2007). Secondly, severe land inequality tends to imply that a large portion of peasants are too poor to afford the fixed costs necessary to move out of poverty, as in Banerjee and Duflo (2005). It is important here to distinguish between the institutional structure surrounding land – titling, tenure arrangements, and the like – and the effective distribution of land holdings. There is nearly infinite diversity in the institutional structure around land, and determining precisely what institutional structure is appropriate for the agricultural transformation is nearly hopeless. What the chapters in this volume show, though, are that regardless of the institutional structure an unequal distribution of land appears to be concretely related to a lack of development.

Looking at Spain, Jose–MigueL Ana–Berazain (Chapter 1) on the southern Navarre and Carlos Santiago-Caballero (Chapter 6) on Guadalajara both document high inequality associated with low agricultural production and an outflow of resources from rural areas. Henry Willebald (Chapter 3) traces the origin of the land-owning elite in Uruguay, showing that they arose despite notional institutions similar to those in low inequality countries.

The ability of large landowners to influence agricultural development comes in part from their market power over a necessary input to production, land. Erik Green (Chapter 9) shows in Malawi that when peasant farmers have outside options, this market power is lessened and peasants maintained a higher standard of living. This contrasts with Peru, where Jackeline Velazco and Vicent Pinilla (Chapter 10) document that peasants depend heavily on wage income when they have no land, and in this kind of situation landowners are able to exert market power.

Ellen Hillbom (Chapter 7) discusses farmer’s access to finance in Tanzania, finding that they are almost universally unable to access formal financial channels, relying instead on contract-farming or perhaps NGO’s. This contrasts with credit relationships in Swedish agriculture, analyzed by Mats Olsson and Patrick Svensson (Chapter 8). Here, nearly all families were involved in webs of informal finance, with some even serving as central clearing-houses for local villages.
Looking specifically at the large landowners as well as the peasants, Steven Nafziger (Chapter 4) traces the composition and decisions of self-governing local councils in Russia. He finds that despite representation on the councils, the interests of peasants were often not the guiding force. In Indonesia under Suharto, support for agricultural development went around local landowners and came from the top down, as discussed by Tobias Axelsson (Chapter 3). The distinction between public and private institutions for fostering agricultural development is also made clear by Chapato et al. (Chapter 11) in Zambia. Private institutions tend to allow for the greatest productivity increases, but are unattainable for many peasants without sufficient land to make initial investments.

While focused on the distribution of slaves and not land, Johan Fourie (Chapter 5) studies the impact of inequality in the Dutch Cape Colony. Here the conclusions are similar, with severe inequality inhibiting broad agricultural transformation.

I have done a disservice to all of the chapters contained within this volume by focusing here on land (or asset) distribution to the exclusion of other topics. The chapters all contain rich narratives and detailed data on the particular times and places studied. The authors have provided vivid snapshots, and anyone interested in the history of agricultural change would benefit from reading through these chapters.

If there is a complaint about the volume, it may be that in the interest of providing richly detailed historical snapshots of different agricultural experiences, chapters forget to return to the overall motivating questions. One is left to tease out the implications of these individual chapters without much guidance. The introduction by Hillebom and Svensson makes a good effort at tying the various chapters into a broader narrative regarding agricultural transformation, but the individual chapters do not exert enough of an effort to make their place in this narrative clear. Someone who only picks up the volume to read one or two chapters will not get the idea of how all these pieces of evidence fit together.

Linger above the entire volume is also the broad question of whether in fact agricultural transformation is a cause or a consequence of wider development. The assumption at work in the volume appears to be the former, consistent with a long line of thinking in development that agriculture must lead countries towards sustained growth. However, this need not be the case, and there is little evidence that can provide a definitive answer. The chapters here remain intriguing studies of the agricultural experience regardless. But one should keep that fundamental question in mind while reading the volume.

References

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El estudio de Jordi Planas centra su atención en una problemática compleja que comprende cuestiones de carácter técnico-productivo, mercantil y de relaciones sociales. La etapa escogida, 1890-1939, permite analizar el papel de los diversos grupos sociales —propietarios y rabasaires fundamentalmente— en la respuesta a la crisis finisecular y en el establecimiento de nuevas formas de solidaridad y de una mejor relación del rabasaire con la tierra. El autor ya mostró en trabajos previos el vínculo de algunos propietarios haciendas catalanes con los planteamientos agrarista y catalanista, y explicó cómo la creación de sindicatos reformistas fue promovida por la clase propietaria catalana para ejercer su influencia sobre el campesinado (Planas Maresma, 1994).

En la comarca de Igualada se sigue el doble modelo de desarrollo cooperativista catalán (Mayayo Artal, 1995; Saumell Soler, 2002; Planas Maresma, 2003, 2006): uno de carácter más reformista, que ve en este instrumento una forma de mejorar el acceso a los inputs y la comercialización, y un sindicalismo de clase, que en nuestro caso tiene que ver con los rabasaires. La Càmara Agrícola d’Igualada i sa comarca, creada en 1908, responde a la necesidad de hacer frente a una doble problemática: en primer lugar, una mejor relación del viticultor con el mercado, mediante la destilación cooperativa, la lucha contra los vinos adulterados y haciendo de lobby para que el gobierno central limitase la competencia de vinos extranjeros; y en segundo lugar, la búsqueda de la paz social. Para ello era imprescindible que la cámara, como en el resto de Cataluña, tuviese un carácter interclasista. Ello explica que tuviese casi 2.000 socios en la segunda década del siglo xx y los superase moderadamente a principios de la década de 1930.

Aunque contribuyó con la venta de abonos y anticiptogámicos y con el establecimiento de un servicio de trilla mecánica, el rasgo más característico fue el desarrollo, con éxito, de la destilación alcohólica. De hecho, 2 años antes ya se había creado la Sociedad cooperativa para la elaboración de alcoholes vínicos del distrito de Igualada, sociedad que impulsó la creación de una entidad con un objetivo más amplio que el citado: la Cámara Agrícola.

Según el autor, el cooperativismo era algo secundario para los propietarios impulsores de la cámara. Interesaba, sobre todo, la integración del campesinado para poder frenar así sus reivindicaciones; la Cámara servía también para defender sus intereses ante la administración. Ello será, de hecho, una de las limitaciones de este tipo de institución, ya que beneficiaba de manera muy limitada al pequeño viticultor, más interesado en una práctica de compra y venta cooperativa mucho más amplia.

En 1916 existían en la comarca de Igualada, la Anoia, 11 sociedades cooperativas. El proceso de creación de cooperativas continuó hasta el punto de que Capellades, Vallbona d’Anoia, Piera, los Hostalets de Pierola y Masquefa —y, por supuesto, Igualada— tenían más de una, generalmente como resultado de la división social existente. En las décadas de 1920 y 1930 se produjo esta expansión cooperativa, consiguiendo muy pocas establecer una bodega cooperativa. Su alto coste y la mayor complejidad de la gestión de la producción y la comercialización del vino dificultaron su éxito, dado que, a diferencia de otros países como Francia, no hubo ayudas públicas para su financiación. En todo caso, Cataluña fue pionera en la creación de estas bodegas cooperativas, mientras que su desarrollo en buena parte de España no se produjo hasta la segunda mitad del siglo xx.

El Sindicat de Vinyaters de Igualada, creado en 1921, recogerá el proyecto de crear una bodega cooperativa que proponía la Cooperativa Agrícola de Igualada, creada 2 años antes. Aunque este sindicato aglutinaba en su seno a muchos rabasaires y era un