The post-socialist restitution of property as dispossession: Social dynamics and land development in Southern Albania

Loukas Triantis

Urban Environment Laboratory, National Technical University of Athens, 22 Laodikeias str., 11528 Athens, Greece

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the post-socialist restitution of property as a process of land dispossession related to coastal tourism development. It focuses: first on Albania, a former socialist country with distinct particularities regarding property issues which call the notion of “restitution” in question and, second, on the coastal area of Himara in Southern Albania, as a case of extreme insecurity in land tenure, absent owners, intense pressures for tourism development and particular ethnocultural features. Methodologically, it builds on the concept of accumulation by dispossession but also land rent in order to examine the benefits from land development, while it mainly rests on qualitative approaches and systematic fieldwork. The article argues that the framework on the restitution of property in Albania has been key in supporting land dispossession in the area of Himara, especially linked to tourism development. In this case, the land dispossession regimes present contextual configurations regarding the specific conjuncture and land features, the scales of capital investment and ethnocultural parameters. At the same time, the article situates land dispossession within the context of the wider land development dynamics in the area of Himara. Although accumulation by dispossession tends to favour the domestic real estate companies and investment groups, the local population has also a share in the benefits from land development mainly through informal practices and the support of local networks. By recalling the notion of land rent, the article brings evidence that rents do not only stem from the post-socialist restitution of property and accumulation by dispossession, as much of the academic scholarship suggests. They also stem from diversified social dynamics and informality, which support tourism development and mobilise rent’s distributional role, especially in a context of land tenure insecurity.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the disposition of land has (re-)emerged as a particularly crucial field for policy-making on a global scale. The contemporary quest for resources, including land, has been linked to the crises of the capitalist system which, according to David Harvey (2003), create surpluses of capital and labour that can be absorbed either by temporal or spatial displacements. Both theoretical and empirical evidence since the 1990s and increasingly after the mid-2000s demonstrates that land has become a dire need for the new world economy, a phenomenon often coined as “land rush”, attracting capital investments of various scales and of growing intensity (Harvey, 2003; Sassen, 2013; Hadjimichalis, 2014a). This contemporary quest for resources has mobilised critical theoretical elaborations, among which Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), which focuses on how value is appropriated by means of dispossession rather than by means of production. Building on Karl Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation, the analytical scheme of accumulation by dispossession describes the enclosure and subsequent disposition of resources for capital accumulation often implemented by force, fraud and looting and including the commodification of land and the conversion of various forms of property rights into exclusive private property rights. This conjunctural shift towards accumulation by dispossession is understood as facilitating capital to adapt to the crises of the capitalist system, by opening up new spaces for production and new markets for consumption, and creating new geographies and new space relations. Overcoming the substantial challenges that accumulation by dispossession as a concept may entail, given its abstract and all-encompassing nature (Hall, 2013), it is evident that the processes of dispossession may present significant differentiated effects to the extent that they depend on geographical, historical and cultural specificities, as well as gender and class relations, kinship and family structures (Harvey, 2003). Equally diversified are the claims against dispossession, as supported by diverse social groups that range from progressive, bottom-up movements, to nationalistic and regressive groups. In this context, the notion of dispossession regimes (Hadjimichalis, 2014b) constitutes a useful analytical tool, in terms of...
bringing together local specificities, social relations and practices.

When it comes to the dispossession of land, although much of the literature has largely focused on agrarian issues and “land grabbing” related to agricultural land (e.g. White et al., 2012; Wily, 2012), other aspects are also attracting the attention of both academics and policymakers, including those of tourism development (e.g. Nepal and Saarinen, 2016). Of particular interest for this article, although rather understudied, is the dispossession of land in the former socialist countries, given the extended reserves of unexploited land (e.g. Visser and Spoor, 2011), along with the massive disposal of any kind of property, including land, in the free market after 1989. As can be noted, the processes of the “transition” of the former socialist countries from a centrally planned model of economy towards the free market were coupled with the emerging need for the creation of new institutions, in contrast to those of the socialist era (Elster et al., 1998; Goodin, 1996), quite often under the guidance of supranational organisations. Among the institutional reforms promoted in the former socialist countries, the land and property reforms stand out. As has become evident, the redistribution of property rights has been the central component of the “post-socialist transition” (Smyth, 1998) and contained numerous provisions, among which some sort of restitution of property or compensation to former owners, given the radical limitation of private property rights in all the socialist regimes.

These sweeping institutional reforms have been promoted and implemented in all the former socialist countries, though with remarkable variations, following different paths and speeds (Marcuse, 1996). Albania, one of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, presents its own particularities regarding land and property issues, also because of historical factors, since at the time of the establishment of the socialist regime in Albania in the end of the Second World War, most of the land, at least in the countryside, had not entered into capitalist relations, as was the case in other parts of Eastern Europe. By bringing together the literature on accumulation by dispossession and the post-socialist redistribution of property rights, this article aims to show how the restitution of property has supported land dispossession in Albania, particularly related to coastal tourism development, by providing empirical evidence through the case of Himara.

In particular, the area of Himarë/Himara in Southern Albania presents a particularly challenging case for the investigation of issues related to land and land development. This is a coastal area, close to the Albanian-Greek border, of 12,000 people registered population (in 2010). It is an area of natural beauty, which remains relatively less developed in comparison to other parts of the Albanian coastline, mainly due to land tenure insecurity. Since the collapse of state socialism in Albania, agricultural production, which formed the basis of the local economy, collapsed while tourism emerged as the main economic alternative. Furthermore, this is an area of particular demographic and ethnocultural features: first, due to the massive emigration since the early 1990s, with around ¾ of the population to have moved to Greece. Second, due to a mixed ethnic background, composing of both Greek-speaking and Albanian-speaking population.

Methodologically, the article mainly rests on qualitative approaches and systematic fieldwork in Himara but also in Tirana/Albania and Athens/Greece, where most of the emigrants from Himara permanently reside. The qualitative approaches stemmed from the need to describe the complexities of the issues examined and to interpret them in their natural environment along with their social significations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, the article builds on the review of laws, reports, the Press and material from blogs referring to emigrants in Albania, Greece and USA. Fieldwork research was conducted within the period from 2011 to 2014. It included in situ observation and 40 semi-structured interviews with informants from supranational organisations, the central and local governments, NGOs, universities, as well as residents, professionals and tourism entrepreneurs. The material from the interviews provided information that could not derive from the bibliography, while also highlighted the perceptions of the informants. The article initially draws attention to the “restitution” of “former” owners in Albania in the context of the post-socialist redistribution of property rights and moves on to discuss the particularities of the real estate market along with the dynamics of tourism development in the area of Himara. Subsequently, it monitors processes of land dispossession in Himara, by uncovering the activities of various actors on the local and national level together with local perceptions, further discussing the role of ethnocultural parameters. In the final part, the article situates the land dispossession regimes within the wider social dynamics around land development and the diversified scales of capital investments.

In order to examine the social dynamics around land development in the area of Himara, the article is framed by the analytical tool of land rent; namely the value attached to land when property rights are assigned to it and/or when capital or labour are invested on it. According to Massey and Catalano (1978, p. 38), under capitalism, due to the separation of the use of land from its ownership, land becomes a form of capital “not because of any specific function performed, (…) but because it is a privately-owned, non-reproducible condition of existence of that mode of production”. Rents may derive from the assignment of property rights, privatisations and real estate deals, when landowners monopolise the access to – or supply of – land (absolute rent), as well as from functional, technical and legal factors (differential rent), due to favourable land features, location, conjuncture, or subsequent infrastructure investments (Mantouvalou 1995, 1996; Vaiou and Hadjimichalis, 2012). Over the last years, rent has attracted the attention of theoretical debates which investigate its prominent role for the circulation and accumulation of capital. For instance, Harvey (2010, p. 183) has claimed that “rent has to be brought forward into the forefront of the analysis, rather than being treated as a derivative category of distribution”, as increasingly central to the reproduction of contemporary capitalism. To this direction, more recent elaborations have explored the relations between rent and accumulation by dispossession, in examining how resources acquired and/or property rights assigned through accumulation by dispossession are linked to rent relations, also introducing the notion of “value grabbing” (Andreucci et al., 2017).

The question of who appropriates rents provides a framework of analysis for the ways that rent connects to the processes of land development. Given that the assignment of property rights creates rents and establishes rent relations, the redistribution of property rights in the former socialist countries can be understood as a complicated process of creating rents. This results to multiple social contradictions, conflicts and struggles over the appropriation and distribution of rents, since rent plays a coordinating role in allocating and distributing investments (ibid.). Thus, the reconfiguration of property rights means a redistribution of privileges, wealth and power (Marcuse, 1996) stemming from the distribution and appropriation of rents. In this context, one of the main paradoxes identified by Peter Marcuse (2011) has been the “equal laws vs. unequal power paradox”. This asks the question of who benefits from the existence and the exercise of property rights and who appropriates rents, bringing in a series of parameters such as power relations; the role of political parties; central and local governments; economic interests; as well as ethnocultural issues.

Bearing that in mind, the article will examine the appropriation of rents in the area of Himara during this specific conjuncture. If we accept that rent itself is a social relation (Massey and Catalano, 1978), then it is also geographically, historically and socially embedded. For this purpose, the article employs a classification of scales of capital investments; namely the large-scale domestic capital, the small-scale local capital and the large-scale global capital. This classification refers to scales of capital investments, land ownership patterns, spatial typologies of

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1 Although the area is excluded by the Greek Minority Zone by the Albanian state, part of the local population defines themselves as such, while population originating from Himara have been recognised as part of the Minority by the Greek state.
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