Call for Papers

“Land to the Tiller?” Hopes and Ruins of Agrarian Reform in Africa, Asia and the Middle East

12-13 November 2020, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

This conference revisits practices and models of agrarian reform and revolution that have been promoted across the Middle East, Africa and Asia in the 20th and 21st centuries. It will explore current research from historical as well as contemporary perspectives, ranging from radical schemes to give land exclusively to “the tiller”, to other practices and measures such as the establishment of cooperatives, as well as educational and organizational transformations targeting rural and peasant populations.

We are particularly interested in interrogating the conceptual and principal tensions that underlie agrarian reform schemes, arising, for instance, from the incongruity between the need for establishing social justice, on the one hand, and the wish to increase the productivity of agricultural land, on the other. Another tension exists between the promises and hopes associated with agrarian reform schemes, and the discontent and disorder that many of these schemes have left in their wake.

Under this premise, the conference aims at developing a comparative topology. While different cases of agrarian reform schemes may share ideas and slogans across geographical, linguistic and historical settings, each instantiation is embedded in their respective, particular historical and regional context. The conference asks what this means for the conceptualization of agrarian reform.

Discussions will revolve around (at least) three main themes:

We ask, first, how specific cases of agrarian reform were embedded in particular political contexts. In which historical period and configuration – post-colonial, post-imperial, or (neo)colonial – did they take place? Who were the driving forces behind each project, and how did reform schemes transform local political landscapes in the mid-term to long run? In which ways were agrarian reform schemes associated with wider political projects, for instance related to demographic change or social engineering? What do we learn about the ways in which ideas and slogans travelled, can we pinpoint particular locations or political movements as beacons and role models of agrarian reform? Which role was ascribed to social or cultural local particularities in shaping specific modes of agrarian reform?

Secondly, what are the social implications of such schemes? Who were the populations that were enrolled in such reform schemes? How were agrarian reform schemes related to wider progressivist or revolutionary schemes, to social reforms and welfare, and to notions of the “new man”? How
were these notions gendered, how were they associated – implicitly or explicitly – with generational belonging or age group? Who was “the tiller” imagined to be, how exactly was “tilling the land” understood, and how did this relate to existing practices and structures of cultivation? How were rural spaces transformed through the introduction of peasant unions, cooperatives, accessibility of education, etc.?

Finally, what are the lasting consequences of agrarian reform schemes? What was promised, which promises were kept, which hopes were disappointed? What are the consequences of uneven or incomplete practical application of agrarian reform? How did agrarian reform schemes impact current legal frameworks, what are their lasting environmental and ecological imprints? Where did counter reforms, new initiatives for economic liberalization and privatization of land overlay agrarian revolution and reform? What is the afterlife of agrarian reform slogans and ideas; how are they invoked or resurrected under current political circumstances, characterized for example by land-grabbing, enclosures, but also in situations of war and violence that turn land into loot?

To explore these and other questions, we invite papers that present original research on differently situated cases of agrarian reform in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Please send a brief abstract (not more than 1 page) and bio to the organizers, Katrin Bromber (katrin.bromber@zmo.de) and Katharina Lange (langekatharina@web.de). As limited funds will be available to help cover travel expenses, please also indicate if you would need financial support. Deadline for applications is 1 May 2020.