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Agrarian crossroads: rural aspirations and capitalist transformation

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ABSTRACT

Aspirations bring different versions of the future into the present. This introductory essay asks what we can learn by attending to the myriad ways in which rural subjects and collectivities articulate and institutionalise aspirations. We argue that aspirations are conditioned by constellations of power, which shape what can be done and what can be imagined. These visions of alternative futures can be either affirmative or transformative, but will always entail negotiations over the meaning of self and community. This conceptualisation cautions against policymaking based on individualised aspirations, and invites readers to inquire into how rural populations negotiate and embrace, accommodate or reject rural transformations.

RÉSUMÉ

Les aspirations ramènent différentes versions du futur dans le présent. Cet essai d'introduction demande ce que nous pouvons apprendre en examinant les nombreuses façons dont les individus en milieu rural et les collectivités articulent et institutionnalisent les aspirations. Nous soutenons que les aspirations sont conditionnées par des constellations de pouvoir qui façonnent ce que l'on peut faire et imaginer. Ces visions de futurs différents peuvent être soit affirmatives ou transformatrices, mais elles entraîneront toujours des négociations sur le sens du soi et de la communauté. Cette conceptualisation met en garde contre l'élaboration de politiques fondées sur l'individualisation des aspirations. Elle invite les lecteurs à réfléchir aux façons dont les populations locales négocient puis embrassent ou rejettent les transformations rurales ou s'y accommodent.

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Introduction

Questions of agrarian transformation have been a staple of the social sciences since its early days, and understanding transformations of rural spaces remains a crucial concern in the twenty-first century. Today, the intensification of plantation economies and the ubiquity of extractive activities continue to shape profoundly unequal exchanges

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of resources and labour and wreak havoc on rural economies, ecologies and social relations. However, agrarian transformations and processes of capitalist restructuring of the countryside more broadly are not exclusively the outcome of the predatory manoeuvring of external forces; they are also informed by rural aspirations for alternative futures and new possibilities that are internalised and reproduced locally. In the cracks of the dire picture of violent land grabbing, industrialisation and extraction we encounter people and communities who navigate the shifting economic, social and political seas of the ongoing transformation of rural spaces. Though often situated at the margins of the grand schemes of agrarian transformation, local people seek to make meaningful connections and disconnections to the capitalisation of space, resources and social relations. Here, rural responses to and engagements with capitalist transformations go beyond peasant resistance (Borras and Franco 2013) to encompass various forms and combinations of complicity, compliance, manoeuvring and speculation.

In this special thematic section, we argue that “aspirations” provides a useful lens through which to analyse the historically contingent negotiations of imagined futures that are part and parcel of this ongoing transformation of the global countryside. We show how people, even in the direst of circumstances, continue to plan, to think about futures and create strategic and tactical pathways toward these. At the same time, we caution against seeing aspirations as a panacea for rural development. Aspirations easily lend themselves to economistic interpretations of the role of human capital in rural life (Appadurai 2004): if only “we” could make room for aspirations to flourish – if only “we” could get the aspirations right – poor people could themselves unleash their development potential. The articles in this special section bring out how deeply problematic this individualising and “self-improving” reading of aspirations is. In contrast, our contention is that aspirations need to be understood as profoundly conjunctural, social and temporal. Aspirations, we argue, are produced, conditioned and articulated at particular conjunctures where processes of rural transformation and imagined futures fold into the present.

This point of departure allows us to engage ongoing debates within critical agrarian studies, and to provide a novel way of looking at the breadth of contemporary rural “pluriactivity” (Marsden 1990). It is a perspective that highlights different pathways of rural agency amid shifting conjunctures. Studies on agrarian social movements and contentious politics tend to highlight the spectacular and the radical (Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Borras, Edelman, and Kay 2008). We are inspired by this scholarship, but our interest lies elsewhere. Most agrarian transformations are “uneventful” and interstitial; change does not occur through spectacular forms of social mobilisation, but rather through the continuous and everyday strategic and tactical manoeuvring that explores the limits of the possible (Scott 1976, 1987, 1990; Li 2014). By focusing on gradual and contradictory agrarian transformations through the lens of “aspirations” we thus aim to escape the spatial and temporal boundedness of the “event” (Povinelli 2011; Nielsen 2018). Through this, we break down any clear distinction between the agrarian and post-agrarian, and show how people navigate a wide range of on- and off-farm activities.

Aspirations are located within a contentious space where desire for new social, economic and political orders is projected into the future, and where their viability is assessed against other future prospects that shape the present. In contrast to affective categories such as hope and desire, we thus see aspirations as involving conjuncturally conditioned negotiations of alternative futures between subjects and collectivities. With this in mind,

we approach rural aspirations on the basis of three core propositions. First, we highlight the ways in which aspirations are conditioned by the particular historical conjunctures of a transforming countryside that is shaped by partial and shifting integration into capitalist forms of production and accumulation. Second, we propose that aspirations can be situated within a conceptual space stretching between two antithetical visions of the future: one anticipatory, the other transformative. The former's relatively fixed ideas about the future translate into tactical practices to ensure the best possible position within this scenario. The latter, with a more open-ended approach to what the future may hold, translates into strategic practices to promote alternative development trajectories. Third, we argue that aspirational practices involve inherently contentious negotiations over developmental futures between subject and collectivity that coalesce around, and are mediated by, institutional and infrastructural arrangements.

The articles in this special section grow out of a conversation on how to understand the position of our respective collaborators – people from vastly different rural settings – in relation to the ongoing transformation of their environment. Although conditions in the global countryside are often dire, we encounter very little apathy. Rather, we find a broad range of aspirational practices seeking to shape individual and collective lives through anticipatory engagement with imagined futures. Many of our collaborators in the field engage in a continuous assessment of transforming and uncertain rural landscapes, an active “looking at the situation” (Vigh 2009), with a view to acting on the future in the present. At the edge of capitalist integration, the anticipation of future booms shapes contemporary aspirations and real-life choices (Bennike 2019); busts are followed by the nostalgic reappropriation of ruined infrastructures in the pursuit of new aspirations (Dorondel and Şerban 2019; Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld, and Quick 2019); industrial agriculture expands (Jakobsen and Nielsen 2019); and rural aspirations take non-agrarian paths (Bennike 2019; Dorondel and Şerban 2019; Rasmussen 2019). All the while, migration and abandonment remain perennial options (Aguilar-Støen 2019). Through historical and ethnographic explorations, the collection unpacks the multiple ways in which people in rural areas seek to reshape their conditions of possibility through aspirational practice.

The remainder of the introduction is structured as follows. First, the section “Agrarian crossroads” locates our core concerns within the critical agrarian studies literature, with particular reference to debates about the conceptual deadlock of the agrarian question. The section “Rural aspirations” then surveys the diverse recent literature on aspirations, highlights what we see as an inherent shortcoming in its reliance on individualisation and offers instead a conceptualisation of aspirations as historical, relational and conjunctural. The section “Conceptualising aspirations” builds on this by identifying three interlocking domains: conjuncture, futurity and subjectivity/collectivity. Combined, these domains reveal the spatio-temporal specificity of aspirations as they are negotiated in the space between subjects and collectives. The final section introduces the articles in this collection and points to broader implications of our analysis for development.

Agrarian crossroads

Rural society and rural problems ... must be understood in terms
of labor and capital flows which are broader than agriculture.

(Shanin 1986 cited in Bernstein 2010, 110)

Rural aspirations are crucially shaped by the differing forms and varying degrees to which rural locations are integrated into capitalist modes of production. Against this background, our concern in this thematic collection resonates with and contributes to long-standing debates on rural development, agrarian change and livelihood transformations within the critical agrarian studies literature.

Within and beyond critical agrarian studies, there is a general agreement that the global countryside has changed markedly over the past decades. As argued by Borras, “agrarian transformations within and across countries have been significantly and dynamically altered during the past few decades compared to previous eras, provoking a variety of reactions from rural poor communities worldwide” (Borras 2009, 5). In Edelman’s summary, “the peasants of today are not the same peasants of the 1960s and 1970s, when ‘peasant studies’ began to occupy an important place in the social sciences” (Edelman 2005, 336). Contemporary rurality is shaped by non-farm activities, the flexibilisation and feminisation of rural work, rural–urban interactions and migration and remittances (Borras, Edelman, and Kay 2008, 923–928). Current empirical work on rural transformations describes intense contests over resource control triggered by global land grabs that restructure rural spaces and introduce new forms of property, production and labour exploitation (Peluso and Lund 2011; Wolford et al. 2013; Keene et al. 2015; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). While rural residents are rendered increasingly redundant to the needs of capital (Sanyal 2007; Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 180), most of the world’s poor continue to live in rural areas, despite rapid global urbanisation (World Bank 2007). Here, “Although agriculture remains quite important to the livelihoods of more than three billion people, evidence suggests that rural households have increasingly diversified their ways of earning a living” (Borras 2009, 8). Non-agricultural employment and various forms of “entrepreneurial” activity have become essential for the rural poor’s survival almost everywhere (Edelman 2005, 337).

These ongoing processes of rural transformation have spawned a renewed scholarly interest, and a proliferation of perspectives. Over the past decades, the classic view on the agrarian transition has been challenged and “the agrarian question” has been pluralised into several more-or-less compatible “agrarian questions” (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 2010b). One perspective holds that the agrarian question has been “solved” with the full incorporation of agriculture into capitalist forms of production and the removal of feudal arrangements in the countryside (Bernstein 2006). In contrast, others rooted in the “mode of production” debate continue to highlight the uneven and incomplete character of agrarian transition and the resulting hybrid forms of rural production (Patnaik 1990, 1996; Sugden 2013; Sugden, Seddon, and Raut 2018). To yet others, the agrarian question has largely been bypassed insofar as an agrarian transition no longer appears to be a necessary precondition for the development of capitalism (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 2010b; Lerche 2013). Such disagreements have led some scholars to describe the debate as a theoretical cul-de-sac (Lerche 2013; D’Costa and Chakraborty 2017; Levien, Watts, and Yan 2018).

In this special thematic section, we recognise that contemporary questions of rural transformation must be posed in broader ways and address more than the conditions and viability of agrarian livelihoods. As Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld and Quick argue, research on agrarian change has largely sidestepped “the post-agrarian question” and the formation and effects of post-agrarian aspirations and politics (James 2015; du Toit

2017). Non-agrarian rural livelihoods tend to enter discussion as an involuntary, residual category. As Kay argues, the “crisis of the peasant economy ... has forced many peasants to engage in multiple activities to make ends meet. Their dwindling access to productive resources has led to their de-agrarianisation and forced them to engage in non-farm activities” (Kay 2008, 934). Yet, several of the collection’s articles highlight how non-agrarian livelihood choices may also be born out of rural aspirations. As Child and Choedup report from a Himalayan countryside shaped by two decades of massive educational out-migration, “most young men and women view the prospects of pursuing an agrarian lifestyle as a reversion to something they evaded through education” (Childs and Choedup 2019, 170; see also Metelerkamp, Drimie, and Biggs 2019; Jacka 2018).

The ostensible timelessness of rural livelihoods belies conjunctural shifts that shape individual and collective ideas of alternative futures. Relations between capitalist forms of production and time are widely discussed in the literature, including several classics within the Marxist tradition (Thompson 1967; Harvey 1989; Marx 2013), yet these discussions attend mainly to global, urban and industrial dimensions of time in places already fully entrained to the clock of capitalism. In contrast, the temporal dimensions of emerging or faltering rural capitalism(s) remain largely overlooked (Li 2017). As the widespread notions of “adaptation” and “resilience” imply, people occupying the outskirts of capitalist expansion are often cast as more or less passive respondents to the forces that capitalise their spaces and social relations and threaten their environments (Watts 1983; Head 2010). However, with shifting resource frontiers and increasing global attention to “emerging markets”, the rural backwaters of the global economy are increasingly stepping out of the ostensible “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty 2000; Kaur 2018a, 2018b). As the monolinear meta-narrative of development is challenged, new avenues open up for the conceptualisation of different temporalities and horizons. The articles in this collection contribute to populating this space with local imaginaries of the future that grow out of rural realities.

These articles explore the potential of “aspirations” as an entry point for analysing the dynamics of this changing countryside – yet without losing the fundamental critical thrust of the “agrarian question” literature (Borras 2009, 17). Thus, our foregrounding of aspirations should be read neither as an attempt to trivialise the existence of agrarian crises, nor as a celebration of an ostensibly new or “postindustrial” rurality (Edelman 2005, 342; Kay 2008; Borras 2009, 17). As Marxist political economists have long argued, uneven development is at the heart of capitalism and the increasing “pluriactivity” of rural livelihoods is unlikely to change that. Indeed, diversified, non-agrarian livelihoods and aspirations may well be just as unequally distributed and precarious as their agrarian counterparts (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011, 118–144). Yet how and to what extent they are so remain empirical questions of central concern in all the contributions to this thematic section. We highlight a range of rural aspirations – both agrarian and non-agrarian – to foreground the varied and contradictory nature of contemporary rurality: some forms of agriculture are under stress, others are booming, and agrarian practices transform alongside new non-agrarian forms of rural capitalism. Rather than pointing to “incomplete transitions” in rural areas, we mobilise historical and ethnographic insights to explore the lived realities of partial and shifting integration into capitalist relations. Whether shaped in relation to aspirations “from above” or “from below”, such partial integration provides the conditions of possibility for many rural inhabitants across the globe.

Rural aspirations

Our focus on rural aspirations is part of a growing scholarly interest in aspirations more generally that has emerged over the past two decades in particular across the social sciences and humanities. In the domain of rural transformation, however, studies that explicitly engage questions of agrarian/rural aspiration are few in number. Within the “aspirations literature” we find instead a clear and visible dominance of educational and migration studies (for example, Finnis 2017; Lim 2018; Meyer 2018), and of studies that integrate these two fields (Corbett and Forsey 2017). While arguments that aspirations are important but understudied (Giuliani et al. 2017; Sentías Portilla 2017) are being made, a dominant strand of analysis establishes an explicit and “increasingly recognized” (Kosec and Mo 2017) connection between aspirations and well-being, or mobilises ideas of “aspiration failure” (Janzen et al. 2017; Mekonnen and Gerber 2017) to argue for particular kinds of development or state interventions. This, of course, aligns well with policy interventions geared toward “raising”, for example, people’s educational aspirations without addressing the structural factors that condition such aspirations (Zipin et al. 2015). Indeed, aspirations are often straightforwardly attributed to the individual, either as a “cognitive dimension of well-being” (Silva, Loboda, and Strong 2018) or as an internal or psychological factor (Mekonnen and Gerber 2017) that underpins choice and (in)action in the present. Particularly in work on “aspiration failure”, aspirations are upheld for their emancipatory potential for people in search of a better future, generally defined in terms of material well-being. These “better futures” are often decidedly post-agrarian, but ambiguously so. To be sure, the material and aesthetic demands of modernity tend to push rural people toward salaried off-farm sectors. These are peasant aspirations beyond farming (Metelerkamp, Drimie, and Biggs 2019). At the same time, aspirations for a distinct form of rural modernity might linger or even be urgently felt, although they are increasingly undermined by the material impossibility of their realisation (Sentías Portilla 2017): farmland might be impossible to acquire; lack of state support might render agricultural infrastructure useless; global markets might make production unprofitable.

We acknowledge the importance of interrogating the ambiguous character of (post-agrarian) aspirations, yet we also recognise a need to move beyond individualising readings of aspirations. In doing so, we draw inspiration from an emerging literature that explicitly seeks to free aspirations from their individualist moorings by thinking across spatial and temporal scales. For example, Flachs (2019) shows how localised aspirations among cotton farmers in India are entangled with political, economic and social desires on local, national and even international scales. Farmers’ aspirations, he argues, are not the outcome of simple cost–benefit analyses, but of a wish to overcome historical marginalisation and generational poverty. Flachs thus adds both historical depth and inter-generational historical memory as repositories for forming aspirations in the present. Comparably, Jacka (2018) highlights the intimate connections between rural Chinese families’ translocal strategies for meeting reproductive needs and their changing aspirations for reproduction, and other aspects of agrarian change, including de-peasantisation, de-agrarianisation and social differentiation. Crucially, Jacka explicitly upholds aspirations as drivers of agrarian change: by affecting rural strategies for family reproduction, they play a key role in changing the agrarian political economy and society.

In this collection of articles, we build on the understanding that aspirations are historical and relational, and entail ideas about the socially acceptable. We also push these insights further into the context of a transforming countryside by focusing on the production and mediation of rural aspirations in places where many competing social institutions and rural organisations struggle to define development pathways that are both viable and desirable. Below, we identify three interlocking dimensions of aspiration: we argue that aspirations are profoundly shaped by the conditions of possibility and historical experience (conjuncture); that they entail anticipatory and transformative visions of the future (futurity); and that they involve negotiations and reconfigurations of the relationship between subject and collective (subjectivity/collectivity).

Conceptualising aspirations

As highlighted above, overemphasis of the individualistic properties of aspirations has registered within much developmentalist discourse as an individualisation of responsibility that places additional burdens on the individual. In a widely read paper on the capacity to aspire among the urban poor, Appadurai has criticised this tendency to situate aspirations within the domain of the economy and the discipline of economics (Appadurai 2004). By thinking about the future solely in terms of economic development, culture has come to stand as its opposite: as something that hinders and drags down development. But culture, Appadurai counters, should rather be seen as a resource that can nurture the capacity to aspire. His assertion that aspirations are not only an integral part of everyday life but also relevant to questions and trajectories of development is well taken. Approached in this way, aspirations provide a productive entry to a more nuanced study of development in which rural residents “may be discursively constructed as objects of development (or even as subaltern subjects of resistance), but ... also act individually and collectively, creating their own room for maneuver within and beyond any constraints these categories may place on them” (Bebbington 2000, 499).

Aspirations necessarily imply an orientation to the future that connects to attitude, motivation and action (Tieken and San Antonio 2016). Yet as we have argued, analysing aspirations implies a good deal more than focusing simply on “bundles of individual and idiosyncratic wants” in a given sociocultural context (Appadurai 2004, 68). Moving beyond both individualist and culturalist approaches, we see aspirations as conjunctural constellations that are simultaneously navigational, part of wider ethical and normative systems and circumscribed by the material conditions in which people live (Fischer 2014; Saleminck and Rasmussen 2016). Taken together, conjuncture, futurity and subjectivity/collectivity reveal the spatio-temporal specificity of aspirations.

Conjuncture

Fundamentally a Gramscian perspective, conjunctural analysis suggests that not everything is possible. Structural constraints shape not only action, but also imagination. Taking a conjunctural approach to aspirations thus combines attention to the articulation of alternative social projects with attention to the factors that enable such arrangements. As Li argues, “a conjuncture isn’t radically contingent: all the elements that constitute it have histories and there are spatial configurations that make certain pathways easier or

more difficult” (Li 2014, 150; see also Li 2016). A conjunctural analysis thus fundamentally historicises aspirations, examining how they are shaped by political and moral economies and unpacking the conditions of possibility under which aspirations materialise into social action.

The contributions to this special thematic section all emphasise the importance of deep ethnographic engagement and contextual analysis to explore “how multiple forces come together in practice to produce particular dynamics or trajectories” (Hart 2004, 97). As Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld and Quick aptly puts it, aspirations are a structured terrain shaped by historical experiences, rights and obligations. Aguilar-Støen focuses on shifting constellations of power and possibility in her examination of cooperatives in Guatemalan rural communities, where the aspirational is shaped by multiple intersecting forces including migration, drug trading, agricultural legislation and community dynamics. Jakobsen and Nielsen push the Gramscian perspective even further in their analysis of “compounding aspirations” in India. The authors suggest that aspirations from below are constitutive elements within a broader hegemonic process. By relating aspirations explicitly to hegemony, they argue that even when compounding aspirations are rooted in popular lifeways they will always be conditioned by political economic forces. Like other contributions to this collection, this approach grounds capitalist processes in everyday life by emphasising how capital’s aspirations “from above” intersect with popular aspirations “from below”.

Futurity: anticipation and transformation

Aspirations come into being at the intersection of forces that position subjects and collectivities in relation to futures which appear either inevitable – thus prompting anticipatory practices – or malleable – thus prompting transformative practices. As in de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between strategy and tactics, this rough categorisation of aspirational agency points to the considerable variation in the degree to which people find it feasible or useful to change the environment in which their actions play out. As Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1995, 82) has pointed out, affirmative and transformative courses of action are different. While the former seeks to correct “inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them”, the latter corrects “inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework”. In the articulation of aspirations, we see that these two temporalities of aspirations – one affirmative and anticipatory, the other alternative and transformational – often do not exclude each other because they work in different temporal registers. Rural organisations, for example, work with intersecting and sometimes contradictory social projects that seek to both accommodate and challenge the status quo within different temporal logics.

At the affirmative end of this spectrum, our conceptualisation of aspirational futures connects to a growing literature exploring anticipatory and speculative dynamics in the context of various “modernist schemes” (Scott 1998), including special economic zones, mega-infrastructures such as dams and airports, communication infrastructures such as roads, urban expansion and “greenfield” development projects of all sorts (Levien 2011; Bear, Birla, and Puri 2015; Nielsen 2017; Nielsen and Da Silva 2017). As Cross suggests, the establishment of special economic zones fuels “economies of anticipation” in which dreams of profit are shared not only among “developers” but among “those who are set

to be most affected by their construction, creating arenas in which diverse modes of speculation are brought into a generative engagement.” (Cross 2015, 426). Here

accumulation by dispossession appears less as an external project driven by the interests of corporations and capitalists than [as] a bottom-up process [in which] the willingness of people to accept the loss of land and livelihoods is rooted in social histories of agrarian change, land reform and inter-caste conflict but also [in] *the specific ways in which people imagine possible futures* (Cross 2015, 429, 434; emphasis added).

Within this social space, economic anticipation may intersect with environmental risk. For instance, major investments in hydropower in Nepal involve speculation about economic futures as well as seismic risk (Lord 2018), and the prospect of an oil boom in São Tomé and Príncipe has spawned anticipatory strategies to mitigate a “resource curse” yet to come (Weszkalyns 2014). Yet, anticipatory aspirations are not limited to the sites of modernist schemes; they are also at work in the remote Himalayan countryside (Bennike 2019).

At the transformative end of the spectrum, aspirations may link to vernacular critiques of capitalist development by suggesting alternative pathways to a reformulated future. Social movements, NGOs, local institutions and grassroots organisations do not just anticipate a predetermined future, but actively engage in formulating alternatives. Borras and colleagues have documented the importance of La Vía Campesina in the articulation of agrarian alternatives at a more global scale (Borras, Edelman, and Kay 2008; Borras et al. 2012). Dominant within Latin American scholarship inspired by Arturo Escobar (Escobar 2010) and his colleagues, “alternatives” builds upon the social movement critique and in particular the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre in 1992. Other social movements such as the Zapatistas of Mexico also served to advance the idea that “Another World Is Possible”, and social movements emphasising agroecology and food sovereignty (Hart et al. 2016) are contemporary examples of rural organisations that seek to break with existing patterns of production and rural domination in the pursuit of alternative futures. These attempts at formulating futures otherwise engage in an ontological critique of modernity and its social organisation, but are also rooted in historical narratives of communities past. Contemporary social movements related to environmental justice (Walker 2012) as well as the critiques voiced by feminist and queer scholars (Povinelli 2002), scholars of colour (hooks 1989) and decolonial scholars (Coulthard 2014) all engage in transformative projects, where the aim is to rearrange social structures of domination. As in the examples above, there is a productive convergence between social activism and academic thought. While our contributors do not describe radical and transformative social movements, we see transformative practices folded into the everyday, as people manoeuvre between anticipation, speculation and the (im)possibility of alternative futures.

Between subject and collective

Rural development and agrarian transformations fall squarely within a social terrain. Our emphasis on both the conjunctural and the future-oriented suggests that aspirations have profoundly temporal dimensions, simultaneously incorporating the historically conditioned present and imagined futures, whether fixed or relatively malleable. These visions of alternative futures, we argue, always entail negotiations over the meaning of self and community. The mobilisation of aspirations is a core element in contemporary

approaches to rural development that interpellate rural residents as entrepreneurial subjects who are, indeed, expected to aspire (Rose 1992; Cross 2014, 135; Bröckling 2016; see also in the present issue Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld, and Quick 2019; and Bennike 2019). Yet, as “people encounter development in the process of trying to build something of their own” (Bebbington 2000, 513), rural aspirations stretch beyond their interpellation by such programmes. Fuelled by the affective registers of hope and desire (Aguilar-Støen 2019; Jakobsen and Nielsen 2019), aspirations are an inherently contradictory resource for development interventions. As such, aspirations can be thought of as vectors that both originate in and extend out from thoroughly conjunctural conditions of possibility. The capacity to aspire is also (if rarely) a capacity to aspire otherwise.

We have suggested that the individualisation of aspirations is problematic. Similarly, critiques of development interventions have pointed to how most projects that have taken the “community” as a convenient scale of intervention often homogenise social structures with scant regard for internal differentiation (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; De Sardan 2005). We follow this line of thought to argue that aspirations are produced in the contentious spaces between individual and collective ambition, and ideas about progress and modernity – between a nostalgia for past forms of social coherence and identity, and a drive toward enhanced well-being that must reconcile individual and collective desires and hopes. The articulation of aspirations can thus shape emergent collectivities and break down old forms of social coherence. Here, institutions and infrastructures are crucial conduits for the emergence and stabilisation of collectivities (Coleman 2014), in that institutional and infrastructural arrangements become structuring forces for the articulation of aspirations as well as their outcome.

Aspirations stand in a recursive relationship to subject positions, conditioned by them while also shaping them. A focus on subjectivity brings out how actors position themselves within larger fields of power, but also how different forces limit the range of the possible, and structure and position subjects. Feminist scholars (Katz 2004; Anzaldúa 2012) suggest that “development” transforms not only places but subjectivities. The articulation and subjectivisation of aspirations are necessarily contradictory processes that dissolve neat distinctions between, for example, the modern and the traditional (Anzaldúa 2012). The structuring force of social positions highlights that not everything is possible: imaginative horizons are deeply influenced by the perceived limits of possibility. Gender and race are mutually reinforcing social formations that differentiate access and user rights (Mollett and Faria 2013). Our cases similarly show how subject positions are structured by social differences such as caste (Jakobsen and Nielsen 2019), class (Dorondel and Şerban 2019) and ethnicity (Aguilar-Støen 2019; Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld, and Quick 2019; Rasmussen 2019). People must thus reconcile seemingly contradictory imaginaries of community, individual identity and progress in capitalist modernity. A case in point is Bennike’s analysis of economies of anticipation in a remote region of Nepal’s Himalaya. Here, the newly perceived possibilities of a future tourist economy draw on notions of communal authenticity while simultaneously transforming culturally rooted notions of morality. Similarly, profound social transformations produced by emergent tourist economies in Ecuador (Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld, and Quick 2019), negotiations over the meaning of community in the Peruvian Andes (Rasmussen 2019) and responses to capitalist integration in rural India (Jakobsen and Nielsen 2019) all entail contests over authenticity and morality.

Individual aspirations condition the emergence of collectivities, but this stands in a productive relationship to the ability of the collectivity and its institutionalisation of control over resources to become conduits of such aspirations. The first three contributions in this special section all address community institutions and their role in variously generating, articulating and foreclosing local aspirations (Aguilar-Støen 2019; Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld, and Quick 2019; Rasmussen 2019). The shifting institutional landscapes described in these articles is formative for collectivities. Institutions mediate the interface between individuals and collectivities by stipulating social norms and conventions, and formal rules and regulations (Lund 2006; Cleaver and De Koning 2015). When local community institutions in Ecuador, as described by Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld and Quick, expand their realm of influence by engaging in new activities, their ability to shape aspirations changes in tandem. Similarly, Rasmussen describes how Andean peasant communities have shifted both meaning and orientation from being a rural institution focusing exclusively on land rights to becoming a multi-purpose organisation with considerable economic leverage through its community businesses. Institutional arrangements thus change, and with those changes, different constellations of community emerge.

Physical infrastructures are a comparable structuring force, and it is well documented that big infrastructural projects drive economies of anticipation (Cross 2014). However, because these projects are undertaken on socially uneven terrain not all actors are equally successful, and their ability to entice developmental aspirations may be short-lived (Levien 2018). Dorondel and Şerban show how water infrastructures may be conducive to and generative of aspirations. Infrastructural ruins in Bulgaria become efficient and durable conduits of aspiration because of their ability to connect community nostalgia to an imagined future of prosperity and well-being. Moral and economic aspirations thus coalesce around the ruined infrastructures and the promise of renewal by capitalist fantasies exactly because infrastructures by definition cannot be individualised. In that way, the relationship between collectivities and infrastructural projects reveals the subtle negotiations over possible futures, and how aspirations may become institutionalised through organisational structures and procedures.

Aspirations compared

The six contributions in this special section present case studies from South Asia, Latin America and Europe. Each article is designed to stand on its own, yet in combination they substantiate our conceptualisation of aspirations and the value of diverse methodological approaches to rural aspirations. Aguilar-Støen investigates the institutional and organisational community responses to decades of unrest in Guatemala. Similarly, Rasmussen describes how an Andean community in Peru has successfully reconstituted the land-based social and political institution, now increasingly entrepreneurial. Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld and Quick compare two cases in Ecuador where communities seek organisational responses to tap effectively into new tourist economies. The promise of tourist economies is also the subject of Bennike's contribution about Himalayan Nepal. Here, rural and remote communities fundamentally negotiate both political and moral economies in anticipation of a trekking tourism boom. Dorondel and Şerban are concerned with shifting fortunes and the rehabilitation of the past in post-soviet Bulgaria, where people seek to resurrect the collapsed leisure economies of healing waters. Finally, Jakobsen

and Nielsen embark on a more conceptual mission as they frame aspirations as central to the conjunctural grounding of hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation in lived experience, in contemporary rural India.

Looking across the articles, we find an interest in the site-specific articulation of aspirations and the processes and social forces that enable such articulation. In line with this, our conceptualisation of rural aspirations insists on a fine-grained attention to the micropolitics of place and the history of embedded social processes. Conjunctural histories matter for the comparative analysis of aspiration: they allow us to unravel the processes through which aspirations are structured by social, political and economic dynamics, but also how aspirations may create grounds for the emergence of new social forms.

In combination, the contributions show how aspirations are conditioned by structures of possibility. Collective and individual aspirations are deeply rooted in local contexts, historical experiences and structures of domination and power. They involve complex negotiations over viable and desirable futures, collectivities, moral economies and their roots in the past.

To make aspirations a fertile ground for development interventions requires that we take a step back. While apparently speaking about the future, aspirations are firmly embedded in the present. Articulating a critique of the current state of affairs, aspirations are therefore also diagnostic. However, aspirations are shaped by context and social position. This means that it is only some versions of the future and certain pathways to these that are imaginable. This recognition shifts the attention from how individuals might imagine a better future to the forces that structure such articulations, imaginations and actions, and calls for development interventions that produce deliberative and reflexive social and political spaces rather than individualistic fixes.

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