



## Editorial

## Land, labor, livestock and (neo)liberalism: Understanding the geographies of pastoralism and ranching

Livestock production is the world's most extensive land use, having nearly exclusive hold on the roughly 41% of the earth's land surface that is too dry or cold for crop agriculture, as well as on significant areas in moister and warmer climates. In Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia, livestock production has long been a major part of the economy of many nations; in the United States, roughly 31% of the land area is rangeland (Havstad et al, 2007). The environmental ramifications of livestock production are correspondingly significant, not only on rangelands but also on croplands—more than half of US corn output, for example, is fed to livestock (Pollan 2006)—and even on fisheries (whose products or by-products are often fed to poultry or other livestock (McEvoy, 1986)). Finally, livestock raising is at the center of pitched political struggles around the world: over coerced sedentarization of nomadic pastoralists in Africa and Asia, land reform and deforestation in Latin America, and environmental impacts, trade policy, and public health in North America and Europe.

Compared to crop agriculture and forestry, however, livestock production has received relatively little scholarly attention in geography and related fields.<sup>1</sup> More than two decades ago, Crosby (1986) advanced a thesis later made famous by Diamond (1997): that Eurasian livestock played a decisive role in the conquest of the Americas, both directly and, above all, indirectly through the asymmetrical evolution of deadly bacteria and viruses. “The most important contrast” between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds, Crosby (1986, p. 23) wrote, “involves the matter of livestock.” Recent scares about avian flu, West Nile virus, and swine flu echo some of Crosby's points, resituated in the present context of global contagion and epidemiology (Davis 2005); in the US, food scholars such as Schlosser (2001) and Pollan (2006) have drawn public attention to the pervasive and profound effects of corn-based beef production. Otherwise, however, the contemporary significance of livestock passes rather unremarked.

This themed issue of *Geoforum* begins to fill this gap by examining the roles of livestock in the geography of capitalism, particularly in the current neoliberal period. The six papers gathered here have their origins in a three-session panel entitled “Pastoralism, Ranching and Capitalism—or, What's New About Neoliberalism?” held at the AAG meetings in San Francisco in April 2007.

<sup>1</sup> A keyword search using the OvidSP geography database (<http://ovidsp.tx.ovid.com/spa/ovidweb.cgi>, accessed 8/16/09), found the following numbers of articles in the period 1990–present: 22,208 for “agriculture,” 7735 for “forestry,” 11,901 for “forests,” 2159 for “agrarian,” and 927 for “peasants,” compared to just 5208 for “livestock,” 2118 for “rangeland” and “rangelands” combined, and 1467 for “pastoralists” and “pastoralism” combined.

The first three papers present cases from Latin America (Colombia, Guatemala, and Brazil), where cattle production has long been closely tied to deforestation and the expansion of frontiers. There follow two cases from West Africa (Mali and Cote d'Ivoire), where conflicts between mobile herders and settled farmers over land access and tenure predominate. The final paper examines sheep production in New Zealand, which in recent decades has implemented a more complete ‘neoliberalization’ of the agricultural sector than almost any nation in the world.

Our hope is that these papers, taken together, will illuminate the importance of livestock, historically and in the present, at scales ranging from particular landscapes and regions to the global political economy. To capture the complexity of the subject, the authors employ various and multiple methods—including ethnography, participant observation, interviews, surveys, archival research, remote sensing and GIS. The historical periods covered range from 1850 to the present, with a significant emphasis on the post-World War II period. Two commentaries, which follow the papers, initiate the comparative and analytical discussion that is needed to advance geographical scholarship on this important topic. Readers seeking an overview of the papers may wish to turn to the commentaries first.

As suggested by the panel's title, we sought to explore the effects of neoliberal capitalism on pastoralists, ranchers, and the landscapes where they live and work. This focus reflected not only the burgeoning interest in neoliberalism and the environment within geography at the time, but also a certain skepticism, on the part of the organizers, that neoliberal policies regarding pastoral societies were really all that new. After all, many of the definitive features of neoliberal policy—privatization, commercialization, ‘free’ trade, and an emphasis on market mechanisms to address economic and social needs—have been hallmarks of international pastoral development projects since the 1950s.

The goal of such projects, broadly stated, was to transform pastoralists into ranchers: that is, to make *both livestock and land* into commoditized and exclusively held property (Ingold, 1980) whose production and use, in theory, would thereby become (more) economically ‘optimal.’ The means of effecting this transformation included land tenure ‘rationalization,’ fencing, water development, ‘improved’ breeds of animals, and the imposition of carrying capacities. Despite massive investments from multilateral donors and lenders such as the World Bank, these efforts were almost universally unsuccessful, whether viewed from an economic, environmental, or social perspective (Sandford, 1983; Fratkin, 1997). The contemporary, neoliberal cases presented here show remarkable continuities with their ‘liberal’ predecessors, even as

they simultaneously demonstrate the diversity of political, economic and ecological conditions and outcomes that may result.

What is new in neoliberal policies regarding rangelands and livestock production, then, is not so much the policies themselves but rather the larger geopolitical and economic context within which they are being implemented and taking effect. The papers amply demonstrate this, and in the process they underscore the importance of the geographical tool-kit—the range of methods listed above—to any adequate understanding of ranching and pastoralism in the present period. That the activities and preferences of international environmental NGOs, British meat consumers, or Chinese soybean buyers can have such profound impacts on particular places located half-way around the world—as shown here by the cases of Guatemala, New Zealand, and Brazil, respectively—is something quite different from the dynamics observed in, say, 1960. Understanding and analyzing such linkages cannot be done only at one scale, and geography is better prepared to tackle these challenges than most other disciplines.

Livestock have long occupied a complex position in human economies and societies: as sources of meat, milk, traction, fertilizer and an array of raw materials; as repositories of wealth and status; and as both a medium and an object of production, exchange and reproduction. Depending on the social relations in which they are embedded, livestock can take the form of capital, labor, commodity, or any combination of the three. Moreover, due to their ability to live in marginal environments, livestock and their owners are often at the leading edge of colonization, state-building, and/or the commodification of land, labor and nature—whether as dominant agents, subordinated targets, or incidental victims. Strong continuities in the transition to ranching across historical and geographical divides—colonial/post-colonial, liberal/neoliberal, developed/developing—suggest that extensive range livestock production has been and continues to be both a frontier and an elusive target of liberal market and state formation.

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Nathan F. Sayre  
 Department of Geography,  
 507 McCone Hall #4740,  
 University of California, Berkeley,  
 CA 94720-4740, USA  
 E-mail address: [nsayre@berkeley.edu](mailto:nsayre@berkeley.edu)