

Book Review: Rural Change and Development in Albania by Orjan Sjoberg. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991. xii + 192 pp. (paper).

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At the time this book was researched and written relatively little information on Albania was available and the reliability of much of it was questionable. Nevertheless, Orjan Sjoberg has managed to read between the lines, extrapolate from incomplete data, and generally patch together an impressive statistical account of changing rural conditions in Albania over the past five decades. Along the way he chronicles the economic consequences of Albania's rift with the Soviets in the early 1960s and subsequent alliance with the Chinese which in turn soured around 1978. He also makes references to the isolationism and the effects of the country's leaders' determination to function independently of any outside influence or source of funding, the Albanian "self-reliance model."

Sjoberg focuses on an assessment of rural/urban and regional differences. His consideration of the latter encompasses differentials between provinces, north/south differences, and includes an additional component distinguishing lowland communities from those in the highland and mountainous regions (and even introduces an intermediate elevation at some points in the analysis). Various categories of workers are also compared and contrasted -- peasants and collectivists (in the period before full collectivization), agricultural and industrial workers, workers and state-assigned managers.

The record of Albanian rural development (or lack thereof) is, on the whole, rather depressing and although it is never explicitly stated here, it is clear that government policies are largely to blame, not only for the failure of rural development, but also for the substantial degree of disproportionate development between rural and urban areas as well as between various rural regions. Sjoberg does not discount such factors as the unequal distribution of natural resources among different regions of the country, but there can be no doubt that the situation in Albania has been exacerbated by policies of the state since the communist revolution of 1944. Moreover, the policies have failed further in that economic and social development in general have been severely retarded in Albania resulting in perhaps the lowest standard of living in all of Europe. Without saying so explicitly, Sjoberg makes little effort to disguise the fact that he believes the policies of the Albanian government have had a disastrous effect on living standards in the country and that their consequences for meaningful development (rural and urban) have been largely negative. Virtually alone among the nations of the Eastern bloc, Albania stuck to a rigid Stalinist model of increasing collectivization and the discouragement of private initiatives. Isolated from the rest of the world, the Albanians went their own direction, a disastrous course in which full collectivization of land was achieved in 1967, cooperative peasant markets were shut down in 1981 and a drive for the

collectivization of livestock raising persisted for much of the eighties.

Although the Albanian case is different from that of its socialist neighbors in some respects, there are strong parallels in many areas. For example, one of the main conclusions of this study is that Albania, like the other Eastern bloc countries, largely failed to integrate its rural sector into the national economy and society in any sort of meaningful way, a phenomenon not altogether unknown in the West as well. What is more, most of the major findings of this study indicate that many conditions in Albania are typical of those found worldwide in underdeveloped and developing nations regardless of their geographical location or political economy.

Understandably there are many gaps in this study, but the author can hardly be blamed for them since information is so scarce. Nevertheless, it would have been useful to have some information on the banking system (which cannot be totally unknown) as it surely has had some bearing on rural development. Also, in the demographic section, there is no mention at all of such factors as ethnicity and religion, subjects for which there are some data available, however dated they may be.

This volume should prove an important source book for scholars working in the Balkans for the author has collected information on his topic from a wide variety of sources (there is a fine bibliography) and has very judiciously distilled the data into a form that gives us one of the few reliable pictures of conditions in this enigmatic country. It is likely that, with the changes presently taking place in Albania, we will eventually have access to much more accurate statistics and data and thus Sjoberg's study could be superseded by more comprehensive ones. However, it is doubtful that such studies will contradict much of what appears here and Sjoberg's contribution should survive as an important benchmark for years to come. New studies may fill gaps and help us understand things Sjoberg cannot explain (and he is very candid about what he can and cannot do in this volume), but it seems unlikely that they could displace altogether this careful study. What is preferable is that future studies take account of the issues raised by Sjoberg in his penultimate chapter where he presents a shopping list of topics for future consideration. In this way subsequent research on Albania would complement this useful book.