



**Lungisile Ntsebeza, Ruth Hall, eds.** *The Land Question in South Africa: The Challenge of Transformation and Redistribution*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007. viii + 256 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7969-2163-5.

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## Debating the Politics of Land in Southern Africa

The editors, Lungisile Ntsebeza and Ruth Hall, have brought together a useful and interesting collection of papers presented at a 2004 conference in Cape Town about the land question in South Africa, a central and still highly controversial problem, as the divergent views within this book demonstrate. Readers of this volume will get both a sampling of some of the main analytical approaches to the land question as well as a sense of the direction in which the different positions lead, especially concerning the impasse of large-scale land redistribution and transformation of the rural economy in South Africa.

Since the death in 1996 of Harold Wolpe, an engaged Marxist sociologist, the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust has organized a number of debates and conferences (such as the one from which these essays are derived) on political topics, including land, continuing in Wolpe's radical political economy tradition. Wolpe is perhaps best known for challenging, in the debates of the 1970s, existing liberal theories and for his pathbreaking analysis of the importance of precapitalist modes of production in the African reserves, making possible large superprofits in capitalist industry and heavily subsidized white commercial agriculture—both modes serving one economy.[1] Historian Helen Bradford once referred to these passionate debates, from the 1970s onward, over the advent of capitalism in the colonies' countrysides and the ways in which it changed social relations and class structures as an agrarian "battlefield." [2] The debates have persisted, as this volume demonstrates.

The strength—or interest—of *The Land Question in South Africa* may be one of its drawbacks, in the sense that as readers make their way through it, they will find it hard to put aside the nagging wish that more of the authors had engaged directly with the other theoretical approaches expressed at this conference. These are views with which they are very familiar given the renewed round of intense political debate over land and the agrarian economy in South Africa since the early 1990s, when activists, scholars, government, and outside agencies (like the World Bank) began to dig into, discuss, and clash over approaches to land reform before and after the handover of power to a national unity government in 1994. A thoughtful introduction helps to attenuate this regret by providing background for the complex and contentious areas and drawing out some of the main conceptual differences toward land reform and the underlying questions.

Why is the land question still so important—and why so controversial? Although it is sometimes distorted beyond recognition and reduced to a series of policy or technical issues, the land question represents one of those "won't go away" political problems. In South Africa, it touches a fundamental pillar of social organization essentially left in place from the apartheid and colonial eras that not only divided the territory and society by race but also monopolized an important means of production in white supremacist hands and was central to reproducing inequalities in many spheres. Thus, in addition to how one understands the political economy of

the land and agrarian questions, the longstanding controversies are closely connected to the national question—that is, land ownership has been tied to a settler colonial white minority—as well as to the nature of the negotiated political transition from apartheid rule and the African National Congress’s (ANC) political and economic objectives and priorities. As Ntsebeza shows in his chapter, the ANC-led state in South Africa acknowledged the importance of land through a moderate land reform but tied its own hands constitutionally, and, as the book describes, under greater macroeconomic pressures it has shifted even further away from its initial discourse to the black electorate promising land to the rural poor.

The type and content of democracy, too, are involved in these debates, including the democratic demand for land. The reasoning is that for the disadvantaged rural population land is a main component of socially transforming a dominated economy, shaped initially by colonization. Land concentrates around it more than the issue of who controls farming, but since capitalist agriculture under apartheid became largely dependent on private ownership, the former property relations remain a huge obstacle to democratization in a country where wholesale land dispossession has purposely severely reduced the ability of the majority black population to farm over the course of the twentieth century. So, these debates spill into larger politically touchy ones over what is possible and necessary to democratize in South Africa—and whether this is only “realistic” in the legal sphere, with the result that well-intentioned policies may be developed that are poorly, or essentially not, implemented—a major focus of discussion throughout the book. Yet, democratically correcting land injustice has tended to be reduced to a set of prescribed rights to land for a relatively small number of blacks who can prove they were dispossessed by apartheid and opened for a finite period of time through the restitution aspect of the program.[3]

The land issue quickly calls into question the virtues of capitalist development models as well. To what extent can colonial and apartheid structures be challenged when they are closely intertwined with the skewed capitalist growth that continues, on the one hand, to impoverish the black majority and, on the other, to benefit both an enlarged black middle class and existing elites? What kind of qualitative changes can be expected given capital’s global tendency to develop countries in the South unevenly, with little consideration for their actual needs? In describing the neoliberal orientation of the post-apartheid state, the editors’ introduction explains the shift from state-led development to liberalization,

self-imposed structural adjustment, and even greater reliance on regulation by the market. While much of the debate in the book tends to be focused on the mechanisms of land redistribution and support, and who should benefit from reform, tenure, and land rights, these relate to and flow from the broader underlying political economy issues of the land question, which are sometimes addressed directly in this volume and sometimes not, or only by implication.

The book is divided into two sections: the first part, “Regional Context and Theoretical Considerations,” includes two chapters; and the second section, “Perspectives on Existing Policy and New Directions for the Future,” includes six chapters that illustrate a range of perspectives on South African land policy. In the first part, while agreeing that globalization has brought major changes to agriculture, Sam Moyo (who directs the African Institute for Agrarian Studies in Harare) and Henry Bernstein (a London-based economist) diverge over the consequences of these changes. Their ideas differ on the ways in which globalization has influenced rural classes and class alignments—in particular small producers and their aspirations and need for land—how to accurately characterize social relations in the rural areas, and the importance of the land question today, including land reform as an expression of it. These are reflected in a broader ongoing debate to which each has contributed extensively.[4]

For Bernstein, these changes mean that new definitions are required. The centrality of the classic agrarian question (which he considers broader than the land question—their relationship is also a longstanding subject of debate among social scientists) to industrialization is no longer significant for international capital. He argues that the rationale for redistributive land reform disappeared with precapitalist landed property. Despite the fact that it is not resolved in many countries of the South, “the agrarian question of capital,” as he terms it, no longer exists on a world scale (p. 38). Struggles over land may be included into something that he calls an “agrarian question of labour” and may be important across class lines for survival strategies and generating employment (p. 40). Bernstein argues that despite the incompleteness of the capitalist transition in agriculture in many countries of the South, for international capital, there is no longer an agrarian and by implication a land “question” on a world scale and thus no real rationale for redistributive land reform. While he is clearly measuring the criteria of the classically defined land/agrarian question in today’s conditions—a serious endeavor—it could also be ar-

gued that most of the rest of the book, along with the first decades of very uneven land reform experiences throughout the region since the end of white rule, is testimony not only to the continued existence but also to the *centrality* of the land question in southern Africa.

Specialists, in particular, will find Bernstein's historical analysis an interesting and worthy read for understanding different models of development of which the land question is a part. Among other points, Bernstein emphasizes both the international and internal dynamics of the transition to capitalism. However, he may be throwing the land question "baby" out with the (agrarian) bathwater in his polemic against populism in which he opposes efficiency arguments of small-scale farming and disparages the significance of developing the struggle in a national context for land and *against* the destruction of livelihoods and distortion of the economies of the southern countries by capital. One also wonders why international capital and the institutions governing it reacted to large-scale land redistribution in Zimbabwe with such virulence if, as he argues, such reforms are of little consequence in today's world.

Bernstein does not devote himself to rural class analysis in this chapter, yet makes a point of disagreeing with the concept of "semi-proletarianization" as argued by Moyo and other scholars, such as James Petras, Henry Veltmeyer, and Paris Yeros. He quotes Yeros's use of this term as "a workforce in motion, within rural areas, across the rural-urban divide, and beyond international borders" (p. 47). One might argue that this intermediate position between the traditional peasantry and fully proletarianized labor is, in fact, one of the results of the phenomena Bernstein describes in reviewing the changes in agriculture that globalization has accelerated. The rural landless or "land-hungry" poor populations straddling independent farming (or other) activity and often partial waged work, including farmwork, mixed with other not fully capitalist forms of exchange (kind, land), are not reducible to an unemployed rural proletariat, to "labor"; nor, as Bernstein would agree, are they adequately absorbed into the formal economy, even if they choose to try to be. Yet, large numbers of them *are* in much of the countryside of the South, including in southern Africa, still partially attached to the land and to land-based livelihoods, even if apartheid social organization and capitalism have shed their jobs, displaced them, or reduced their access to land and other resources.

Focusing on the southern Africa region, Moyo's chapter addresses the lack of redistributive land re-

form since independence, which he considers the heart of the land question there today. He points out that much white-owned land is used for speculative purposes, and further that land devoted to wildlife ranching and tourism conceals its frequent underutilization. He argues that neoliberalism and the strength of white farmers have shifted land reform discourses, "refocusing the redistribution vision from the landless and insecure towards the capable and efficient indigenous agrarian capitalists" (p. 72). Moyo is critical of intellectuals and civil society who, like official policy, underestimate the peasantry/small producers, and for not supporting and not mobilizing rural people and rural movements, particularly for land reform. He regrets their tendency to limit their critiques to land acquisition and allocation, not going beyond the land market or expropriation measures. A key question is to address growing land concentration, he argues, in addition to poverty and redressing historical grievances while promoting social justice. Thus, beyond being an agrarian issue, the land question is a social question and essential to the national question, which formal political independence has not resolved, as well as to "processes of democratization and regional integration" (p. 81).

As several authors point out, South Africa's land reform has been based on the willing buyer/willing seller model employed with little success in many other countries (including Zimbabwe's first ten years of reform after independence in 1980), essentially depending on the market as it exists to boost land redistribution, with some state assistance. Market-based reform has resulted in the transfer of only about 4 percent of agricultural land from white owners to black farmers, all three parts of the land reform program combined. These include the redistribution program, in which black farmers must purchase land through a system of grants; the rights-based restitution program, which has primarily settled claims through financial compensation rather than by restoring land, but in the latter instances also involves paying owners market rates; and tenure reform, which aims to provide security of tenure to those living in communal areas and working on white-owned commercial farms.

Because of the poor performance of South Africa's program and white farmers' vociferous opposition (along with sectors of capital tied into the land market and commercial agriculture) to scrapping the willing buyer/willing seller policy, land reform still tends to be dominated by problems of acquisition, while inadequate post-settlement support to black farmers raises major concerns. Much of the book's discussion revolves around

expanding the current framework: how much the state can and should intervene, and if or how the market can be managed to better serve a new black farming class. Some authors argue that these measures, amounting to nothing more than slightly deracializing the existing commercial sector with a small group of black entrants, do little to alleviate rural poverty, and leave the thorny national question essentially untouched. They, therefore, look to more structural change and to social movements as levers of change. The class composition of the countryside and changing peri-urban areas with rural migrations also figure into the debate, as does foreign land ownership, currently a hot topic in the region.

The introduction calls attention to what the authors consider the flawed reasoning in South African President Thabo Mbeki's version of the theory that South Africa has two separate economies, and instead argues that the dualism between the poor, rural, landless, and peri-urban areas and the modern "developed core" are part of one single economy and one land question, an area that Ben Cousins's chapter goes into further. It also is relevant that the introduction does not shy away from pointing out one of the apparent pitfalls within the Left that may well coincide in a practical sense with what nongovernmental organization (NGO) and academic critics have called right-wing arguments, like those of the Centre for Development and Enterprise; its writers oppose large-scale land reform and defend the current commercial agriculture sector and economic structures as sufficient for generating jobs and development opportunities. The Left's version minimizes the land question and considers the poor rural population to be essentially workers, in the broad sense of the term. One might imagine that this stems in part from the strength of the urban sector, the fact that apartheid curbed black farming to an extreme extent and that South Africa is no longer considered an agrarian country, despite a 40-45 percent rural population (numbers also disputed). This position, apparently found within the labor movement, along with the thinking by some that land reform is not useful or even interferes with the urban (and therefore the *real*) class struggle, could well be contrasted with chapters in this volume by Mercia Andrews, Moyo, and Ntsebeza, who argue that the struggle for land is a feature of the broader struggle for social justice and cannot be ignored in a context of *national* land dispossession in former colonies. It appears that some elements of this "workerist" thinking concur with that of academics and others who argue that land is really only a "question" in so far as it creates jobs.

Although they differ on the means, the chapters by

Rogier Van den Brink, Glenn Thomas, and Hans Binswanger, on the one hand, and by Cheryl Walker, on the other, advocate a range of options to amend the parameters of current land reform to improve the quality of chance for the small minority of rural blacks who can be expected to benefit from limited reform. While pointing out the political nature of the land problem by citing a survey in which 85 percent of African respondents said whites have no right to the land today, Van den Brink, Thomas, and Binswanger develop a comparison of the productivity and efficiency of small and large farms, following the World Bank. They call for the market to play a greater role and for policy adjustments, such as a land tax, removing distortions and subsidies for large farmers that affect land prices and adding other grants to assist small farmers to purchase land. It is certainly debatable if these measures would "level the playing field" as they wish (p. 171). They insist on playing by the "rules of the game," which seem to include allowing land subdivision and gradually increasing access to smaller black farmers without disturbing current production or investor confidence. They admit that the even more moderate system of matching grants in the Land Redistribution and Development program (LRAD, as it is called since reorganization in 1999) has been slow, but argue that it should be the main mechanism for reaching the state's promised goal of 30 percent redistributed land by 2014. This view is representative of the "agrarian neo-populist" approaches that Bernstein's chapter targets.

Andrews argues strenuously against the market framework and why it has failed, basing her study on examples on the ground in several different provinces. She suggests that the state should play a much bigger role than it has to date using a variety of models of support to the poor. Both she and Cousins favor a shift, at least in the short-term, to area-based planning in conjunction with greater local political mobilization from civil society, while searching for longer-term political solutions.

Hall provides an overview of the past ten years of land reform, and Ntsebeza's chapter focuses its critique against the limitations of the constitution that protects private property rights. He questions the extent to which this is not just a legal problem, but also a political one, in which the government's intent will not be to use possible expropriation powers for public purposes (land reform) because the legal framework defends existing private rights—mostly remaining in the hands of whites. He disagrees with coeditor Hall over this, and by implication, Walker. The latter's proposals for more development projects (with a special mention of women's needs

and peri-urban land acquisition) are premised on both the legitimacy and adequacy of the constitution, arguing for the “achievable,” and on her politically charged dismissal of what she calls the “master narrative” of rural dispossession as “no longer directly relevant to today’s developmental challenges” (pp. 133-135).

The content and scope of the discussion in this book as a whole manages for the most part to get beyond the state-market continuum that tends to dominate much of the debate today. The editors’ cautionary note about the dangers of a technicist approach evident at the 2005 National Land Summit is well taken, and they, along with several authors, stress that the resolution of the land question is essentially a political process. In reading this book, one notices that the term “restructuring,” for example, is used across the spectrum of views to imply many different solutions. It would be quite valuable to also pull together different analyses within this political economy debate on what fundamental restructuring of the agrarian economy—breaking up the inherited white-dominated property system as it existed under apartheid—might mean and discussing the difficulties and possibilities arising from that, an aspect that fourteen years after the demise of formal apartheid has slipped somewhat into the background. Yet, there are few books on this subject, and this collection is a welcome addition to the broader discussion.[5]

#### Notes

[1]. See his seminal article, Harold Wolpe, “Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid,” *Economy and Society* 1 (1972):

425-456.

[2]. For an overview of the debates, see Helen Bradford, “Highways, Byways, Culs-de-sacs—the Transition to Agrarian Capitalism in Revisionist South African History,” *Radical History Review* 46 (1990): 59-88.

[3]. See Nancy Andrew, “The Dilemmas of Apologizing for Apartheid: The Modimolle Land Claim and Land Restitution in South Africa” (colloquium on “The Frontiers of the Land Question: The Social Embeddedness of Rights and Public Policy,” Montpellier, 2006), [http://www.mpl.ird.fr/colloque\\_foncier/Communications/PDF/Andrew.pdf](http://www.mpl.ird.fr/colloque_foncier/Communications/PDF/Andrew.pdf).

[4]. Among others, see Henry Bernstein, “Changing before Our Very Eyes: Agrarian Questions and the Politics of Land in Capitalism Today,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4 (2004): 190-225; and Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, eds., *Reclaiming the Land, The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 2005), esp. chap.1.

[5]. A few additional titles covering a variety of perspectives include Bill Derman, Rie Odgaard, and Espen Sjaastad, eds., *Conflicts over Land and Water in Africa* (London: James Currey, 2007); Mandivamba Rukuni, Patrick Tawonezwi, and Carl K. Eicher, eds., *Zimbabwe’s Agricultural Revolution Revisited* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Press, 2006); Archie Mafeje, *The Agrarian Question, Access to Land, and Peasant Responses in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Geneva: UNRISD, 2003); Ben Cousins, ed., *At the Crossroads, Land and Agrarian Reform in South Africa into the 21st Century* (Cape Town: PLAAS and National Land Committee, 2000).

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