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Land reform politics in South Africa and the crisis of social reproduction

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Donna Hornby

1 Introduction

In a recent paper, Scoones *et al* (2017) characterise the emergence of a global authoritarian populism as typically depicting “politics as a struggle between ‘the people’ and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged ‘Others’, at home or abroad or both”. South Africa’s violent colonial and apartheid history (Crais, 2011), significant land dispossession and the spatial segmentation of the country into labour reserves to provide highly exploited labour for mining and commercial farming (Wolpe 1972, Legassie and Wolpe 1976) provides a deep well of animating narratives for this land talk. However, it is also a response to a growing social crisis indicated by poverty levels that are once again rising, in the context of declining employment and worsening economic growth forecasts. The World Bank, for instance, has halved its 2017 growth for South Africa from 1.1% to 0.6% (Times Live, 20 September, 2017) while recent unemployment figures show that 37% of the population, most of whom are young adults between the ages of 16 and 35, are either seeking work or are too discouraged to seek work (Stats SA 2017a). Furthermore, child support grants are now provided to 34% of the population, with social protection constituting 16% of the total national budget. Poverty levels, which had declined by 2.4 million people between 2006 to 2011, have again been rising, and in 2015 exceeded 2006 levels by nearly half a million people (*ibid*, 14)

“Give back the land!” Political land talk in SA, 2017

- Julius Malema, the leader of the Economic Freedom Front tweets: blacks remain a “conquered” nation because the land of “our ancestors”, which was the founding principle of the EFF “revolution”, had not been retained. “We are scared of the truth because we seek rating approvals of our enemies, we seek whiteness to approve land expropriation.” (September, 2017)
- Land minister, Gugile Nkwinti, responds “...we are going to investigate land expropriation without compensation (Bendile, 2017).
 - Land has thus returned to the centre of South Africa’s populist politics.

2 Argument

- This paper reconceptualises the political demand for land reform, following Henry Bernstein (2003), as a response to the crisis of social reproduction that is at the centre of the “new agrarian question of labour”.
- SA’s land reform programme benefits capitalist agriculture and thus follows an “inverted logic” (Hall & Kepe, 2017) but land question is both “central and marginal” (Laughlin et al, 2013) to meeting SR crisis
- Even if land were restored, Besters case study shows that differentiation will re-emerge, and these dynamics are one explanation for “failed’ land reform to date
- The key learning is not that land should not be redistributed or restored but that the local dynamics of differentiation require new institutional and financial investments to prevent the re-emergence of social reproduction crises.
- Failure to do this will result in the underlying problems that generate the populist land politics in the first place to re-occur

3 Fragmentation of classes of labour in SA

While Hart argues that local government is a central target of this populist politics, Bernstein (2003) suggests that this crisis of social reproduction, which is at the centre of the “new agrarian question of labour”, has created the conditions for a political demand for land in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Bernstein (2003) argues that the moment of globalisation in the 1970s signalled the resolution of the classic AQ in which peasant agriculture is converted into capitalist agriculture, and the surplus labour generated by the changes are absorbed in industrial development through processes of proletarianisation. However, the global re-organisation of the food regime – what Bernstein refers to as the resolution of the industrial question of capital - together with the collapse of developmentalism and the emergence of liberalisation, has had a major impact in the South on those who secure their reproduction through agricultural labour or capital, or through various combinations, such as petty commodity producers. Bernstein cites Arrighi and Moore (2001:75) who argue that: ‘the underlying contradiction of a world capitalist system that promotes the formation of a world proletariat but cannot accommodate a generalised living wage (that is, the most basic of reproduction costs), far from being solved, has become more acute than ever’. In this sense, the AQ of capital has been resolved but the AQ of labour has not, particularly in the South. Livelihoods are secured through combinations of wage work and petty commodity production (both agricultural and non-agricultural), and these combinations are riven through by social relations differentiated by class, gender, generation and ethnicity. In this sense, the working class can no longer be viewed as a sociologically homogenous category, or as constituting a ‘class for itself’ in terms of political actions to secure the conditions of its social reproduction.

Land demand – such as in Zimbabwe and perhaps now in SA – can be viewed as a response simultaneously to 1. the “unfinished” business of the ‘national question’ located in historical re-organisation of property relations; 2. huge pressures on the reproduction of labour in agricultural production, petty commodity production and wage employment; and 3. the fragmentation of the classes of labour in response to these pressures and their origins in globalisation.

- In *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, Gillian Hart (2013) argues that the rise of the EFF is underpinned by “... an uneasy recognition that the anger and alienation of large and growing numbers of young men and women rendered ‘surplus’ to the requirements of capital will continue to burgeon even if Malema disappears” (2013: 4). She argues that South Africa’s post-apartheid trajectory has become an extreme (although not exceptional) reflection of the intensifying inequality together with a ‘wageless’ existence that characterises many regions of the world. These processes have given rise to new forms of protest and populist politics pulling in many different directions.

4 Besters: the context

- East coast province of KwaZulu-Natal, agro-ecological zone highly suited to cattle farming.
- Land claims settled in 2005 nearly 15% of district farm land transferred to 178 labour tenant and farm worker households at cost of R25 mln
- Within a year, beneficiaries are selling cattle, soya and maize signalling ‘successful’ land reform has taken place
- Project falls into the ‘Mbeki era’: 1998-2005: redistribution of agricultural land for commercial farming purposes through ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ principle to groups organised as Communal Property Associations (CPAs)
- Research into social differentiation on 6 farms involving 84 households through Q&Q methods: socio-demographic asset survey and life history interviews

5 Hybrid farm production: in summary

- Household farm production
 - ✓ Households farm “to live” – sell cattle for cash, use in ceremony and marriage transactions
 - ✓ In 2010, 94% of households on the six farms studied owned a total of 1813 cattle
 - ✓ Mean household herd sizes of 22 and a range of 0 to 154.
- CPA farm production
 - ✓ CPA farms “to be commercial” – aims to generate profits
 - ✓ In 2010, total CPA stock was 529 cattle with a mean herd size of 132 but in a range of 15 to 278.
 - ✓ Of the six CPAs investigated, four still owned cattle as CPAs, while the other two had disbursed their herds to member households.

6 Reproduction-accumulation dynamic in hybrid farming systems

The financial deterioration was driven in the short term primarily by the members’ demands for annual cash dividends and subsidies, while over the longer term, the members’ demands for heifers to replenish their household cattle stock resulted in the CPA’s own breeding herd declining both in size and fertility, while reduced inputs lowered the condition of the CPA’s cows and resulted in delayed pregnancies.

In effect then, the demands from members that the CPA’s enterprise top-up the households’ social reproduction fund was met at the cost of the profitability of the CPA’s own beef production enterprise.

- Reproducing the Mphuzanyoni CPA:
 - ✓ must reinvest some income from the sales of beef animals into recurrent costs (such as, veterinary inputs, nutritional supplements, maintenance of equipment and infrastructure, and farm worker wages etc).
 - ✓ use income to pay annual dividends to its member households in the form of cash, heifers, collective burial fund, meat at Christmas, and subsidize household cattle production by covering veterinary, feed and wage labour costs.
- Value of dividends over six year: R427,000 in cash, R640,000 in heifer transfers and R840,000 in input subsidies to household farming.
- Subsidy raised the cost to CPA of producing a weaner from R760 to R1,648 raising issues of CPA profitability
- CPA had a positive income only once (in 2010) when it suppressed cash dividends to members and reduced expenditure on inputs.

7 The other CPAs

- Ngula Kayishazwe: severe conflict when committee resists demands for dividends results in dysfunction and disbursement of all CPA stock
- Nkuthu Kayishazwe: keeps a small herd to cover shared costs (fencing, dipping, tractor) and disburses to insulate CPA from intra-household conflicts over distribution of farming benefits
- Sizisizwe: ended wage work and benefits when its breeding herd’s fertility levels declined. Only maintained input subsidies.
- Nyakanyaka Yomshini: split into two groups. One continued as a CPA disbursing cash, heifer and subsidy benefits; other disbursed all CPA property except land.

8 Outcomes

Given the importance of CPA production to ongoing household production and social reproduction, why did the members of some CPAs decide to disband CPA production?

- Members' demands for regular and increasing CPA dividends tended to destroy the CPA's reproduction capacity
- But, ongoing transfers made an important difference to household herd stocks, and were thus a key component of household social reproduction.
- In 2010, the mean number of cattle owned by households that were members of CPAs that had *stopped* providing inputs was 20.1 and 23.5 in those CPAs that had *continued* to provide inputs.
- Difference more noticeable in mean herd sizes below the median: in CPA's that that had *stopped providing inputs* the mean herd size was 23.5 and 45,8 in those CPAs that had *continued to provide inputs*

Table 1

Class trajectory	Processes: livelihood strategies and events	Wealth categories				Total
		AG 1	AG 2	AG 3	AG 4	
Stepping up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliance on permanent wage income and/or income source combinations Re-investing cattle sale income in livelihood diversification Secure CPA subsidies and land to expand herds 	2	1	3	8	14
Hanging in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary reliance on government old age pension and child social grants, suppressed consumption Retrenchment Balancing cattle sales and ceremonial off-take with CPA cattle transfers 	4	4	2	1	11
Dropping out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Death of pensioner, permanent wage worker Ceremonial use of cattle stock Reliance on cattle sale income 	4	2	1	0	7
Creeping back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restocking with CPA cattle transfers Using CPA workers and cattle knowledge Reliance on range of social grant income 	2	2	0	0	4
		11	8	7	10	36

This table on “Trajectories of incipient class differentiation at Besters” shows that “shocks” to livelihoods in the form of recent events such as death, retrenchment or long term unemployment of important income earners (particularly household heads), characterize households experiencing sharp production declines. These declines are visible in rates of herd off-take through sales and ceremonial use of cattle that exceed rates of replacement (through calves, purchases, and bridewealth and other cattle transfers). However, where CPA's have disbursed cattle and subsidized household farming (through inputs and labour), some households have been able to re-invest in cattle production and reverse their declining herd sizes or maintain their cattle herds at more or less constant numbers. Those households that have had no significant recent shocks to livelihood portfolios and have received CPA cattle disbursement and farm subsidies, have been able to expand herds and diversify into other livestock and crop production or farm services (hiring out tractors and ploughs).

Although all 36 households examined here have multiple and diversified livelihoods, their farming trajectories as petty commodity producers are not the same. Nearly all the households combine different livelihood strategies and therefore do not depend solely on farming. However, it is not the diversification of livelihoods *per se* that shapes the farming trajectories but the combination of a number of factors, including the range and number of income sources; household shocks such as the death, retrenchment or long term unemployment of a household head; farm production shocks such as cattle deaths, theft and persistent fertility; the original acquisition of cattle stock, particularly

inheritance; and most critically, whether CPA production supports household farming and to what extent.

9 Searching for a key cause... the hidden subsidy

- Together with livelihood combinations and their depth and range ... the differentiating effects of the hidden input subsidy is key
 - ✓ At a mean household herd size of 22, this amounted to a subsidy of R16,720 p/a to each house.
 - ✓ But household cattle ranged from 0 to 154, therefore the value of the subsidy ranged from zero per household to R117,040 p/a.
- The ideological response
 - ✓ Respondents said the subsidy was not a “benefit” (‘uxhaso’) but a mutual help (‘ukusizana’) and therefore the differential gain to households was not a problem
 - ✓ “The CPA wants to support the households but this is not a benefit because households have different capacities (*amandla*) for cattle farming” (Shabalala, 2011: per com).

10 Conclusions

- Pressure on CPAs leading to their economic collapse was the demand from members for regular and increasing extractions that led to CPAs being unable to reproduce their own conditions of production and to profitability crises.
- Households who had been able to accumulate cattle through past inheritance, CPA dividends, appropriations of subsidies and land, in combination with a range of social grants and wage work, were most likely to continue accumulating after collapse of CPA
- Households with “thin” livelihoods and suffering livelihood shocks (death, retrenchment, long term unemployment) draw down hard on cattle stock at a rate exceeding ability to replenish. Their demands on CPA dividends thus increase to meet social reproduction crisis.
- Where CPA can survive extraction demands, poorer households fare better and are able to hang in to farming as part of a diversified livelihood portfolio or to creep back in after falling out of production.
- Differentiating dynamics thus lead to small group of petty commodity producers gearing up for expansion, and to the dropping out of a larger group unable to maintain a foothold in agriculture or in wage work
- This latter group secures its social reproduction primarily through social grants transfers. Where these are “thin” (eg single child grant), a social reproduction crisis looms.
- It is this looming crisis that drives the re-emergence of a radical populist land talk.
- But simple narratives of restoration cannot, on their own, resolve the underlying dynamics and the crises of social reproduction they generate.

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Donna Hornby is a land activist. In 2015, she received her PhD from the University of the Western Cape, under the supervision of Professor Ben Cousins. The title of her thesis was "Cattle, Commercialisation and Land Reform: Dynamics of social reproduction and accumulation in Besters, KwaZulu-Natal." Since graduating, she has been a post-doctoral researcher at PLAAS, and the lead researcher on an action-research investigation into the tenure and living conditions of farm workers for the NGO, AFRA. Her most recent achievement is to have co-edited a book that has just been published entitled "Untitled: Securing Land Tenure in Urban and Rural South Africa" (Hornby, Kingwill, Royston and Cousins, 2017), to which she was also a contributing chapter author.



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