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The 'Agrarian Question of Labour' and land reform in South  
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## **The 'Agrarian Question of Labour' and land reform in South Africa: farm work dynamics on redistributed land in the eastern Free State**

*Mnqobi Ngubane*

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines patterns of agricultural labour on small and medium-scale farms owned by an emergent class of black capitalist farmers in the eastern Free State, South Africa, who were first granted land by the state in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Few of these farmers are accumulating successfully, and most struggle to secure their 'simple reproduction'. A process of de-capitalization has taken place over time, with much land currently rented out to large-scale white commercial farmers, and others sold off by the farmers themselves or through Land Bank auction sales as a result of indebtedness. Many of those who benefited from land redistribution had originally been labour tenants on white-owned farms, where they engaged in small-scale farming using household labour. Family members continued to be the main source of farm labour in the early years of settlement, but subsequent lack of success in farming has led to their exit from the 'family farm'. Most able-bodied family members are now absent for much of the time, seeking employment elsewhere, or self-employed in small-scale enterprises off-farm. This trajectory can be understood as a response to a gathering crisis of social reproduction for these farming families, as their farming enterprises experience severe problems. On the surviving farms, labour is now provided by "footloose labour" from a neighbouring country, Lesotho, under precarious conditions characterized by informality and low wages. Henry Bernstein's notions of an 'Agrarian Question of Labour' and 'fragmented classes of labour' are utilised to explore these dynamics.*

## 1 Introduction

Accumulation, and simple reproduction occurs simultaneously on the studied redistributed land in the eastern Free State province of South Africa. However, those farmers who are on upward trajectories of accumulation are very few<sup>1</sup>, and attributable to their relative success is mainly access to off-farm income, especially ‘resignation/retirement packages’ from full-time skilled employment that get invested into the mixed farming enterprises – i.e. grain (dry beans, maize, wheat, sunflower, and soya)<sup>2</sup>, as well as livestock (beef cattle and sheep in particular)<sup>3</sup>. For example some of the accumulating farmers, and their spouses are former civil servants (teachers, government officials, army officials), businessmen<sup>4</sup>, as well as former employees of companies who had permanent clerical jobs and resigned to farm on a full-time basis. Some of the latter are second-generation farmers who also benefited from investments in education derived from farm profits since the late 1980s.

Furthermore, some of the accumulating farmers are still first generation farmers who are currently in their 70s of age. The latter have been reinvesting, and spending less on the education of their offspring, and their offspring continue to be part of family farm labour. However, the latter cases are extremely rare – the tendency is for the abled bodied family members to pursue their livelihoods off-farm, in differentiated ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2004; 2010), ranging from skilled/unskilled, permanent/casual work, and remit very little back home, if anything at all, as many of them face the pressures of having established their own households off-farm in townships as far as Johannesburg.

Research findings<sup>5</sup> highlight that for accumulation to take place it is important for farmers to access capital for investments in mainly capital intensive, and profitable grain enterprises, as well as the less profitable, yet viable livestock enterprises (beef cattle and sheep in particular) in a mixed farming environment conditioned by the relatively dry climatic locality of the eastern Free State province. For those farmers who are simply reproducing themselves as capital on the same scale, similar conclusions about access to capital can be drawn.

The struggling farmers who constitute 70% of the sample (n = 70) are failing to reproduce themselves as capital, and are mainly renting-out arable fields to more efficient grain producers<sup>6</sup>, and opt to focus more on more manageable, and less capital intensive livestock enterprises for social reproduction. For the struggling farmers, access to rental income, and income from minimum livestock sales, i.e. selling

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<sup>1</sup> 30% of the sample (n=70) can be categorized as ‘accumulators, and successful reproducers’ (Genis 2015). These categories are fluid in that the farming household can be accumulating in a given season, and can only manage to successfully reproduce itself as capital in another, depending on circumstance such as rainfall patterns, grain and livestock market price fluctuations, access to off-farm income and so on.

<sup>2</sup> The ecological zone of the eastern Free State permits summer rain-fed dry cropping. These grains are marketed at the following companies/silos: Afgri, VKB, Ladysmith Grain Zone depending on price fluctuations, and conditions of contract farming in some cases.

<sup>3</sup> Beef cattle and sheep are mainly marketed at ‘weekend informal ceremonial markets’ (Hornby 2014) in the former homeland, Qwaqwa, as well as other black townships in the vicinity of the eastern Free State. Some livestock are marketed at formal auction sales operated by Vleisentraal in Bethlehem. Both formal and informal livestock markets are important for the relatively thriving livestock enterprises in the eastern Free State, especially for the social reproduction of struggling farmers, and those who directly, and indirectly depend on farm income.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, farming on redistributed land in the eastern Free State, as elsewhere in South Africa, is male dominated.

<sup>5</sup> These research findings are from an ongoing ethnographic study of family farms on recently redistributed land (72-1050ha) in the eastern Free State province of South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> The efficient grain producers who rent-in arable land for dry cropping from struggling farmers in the eastern Free State province of South Africa are mainly white commercial farmers, and the few accumulating black farmers. Renting-in of recently redistributed land by white commercial farmers or agribusiness is an occurring trend in other parts of South Africa as well (see Genis 2015).

one or two or more sheep/beef cattle in any given year is enough for annual Land Bank loan installments to prevent repossession<sup>7</sup>, as well as for the payment of herders<sup>8</sup>, and living expenses (or social reproduction) of family members who mainly reside off-farm since the family farming units have little to offer. To be sure, these findings illuminate that access to land is an important supplement to the social reproduction of the studied struggling family farming household members who may or not reside on the family farm. One can, therefore, argue that the struggling farmers under study, regardless of the lack of accumulation or simple reproduction success on their farms, are relatively well off on survival terms<sup>9</sup>, compared to the majority of poor landless black households located in black townships in many parts of South Africa, who currently face a generalized crisis of social reproduction. However, against this backdrop an important question to ask is probably the one posed by Scoones (Forthcoming:4) in the context of Zimbabwe, but still relevant for South Africa, especially against the backdrop of a gathering crisis of social reproduction for ‘fragmented classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2004; 2010) in the global South, especially those fragments of the latter that have become beneficiaries of land reforms:

Could it be, then, that under conditions of extremely insecure formal employment, smallholder production on land reform sites is simply a survivalist response, reliant on informal livelihood activities across urban and rural spaces, combining agriculture with employment and off-farm enterprises, but ultimately with little prospect of escaping long-run, deep poverty and marginalization?

This paper analyses these dynamics of social reproduction and the gathering crises of employment for the struggling farmers and their families through the lenses of the ‘Agrarian Question of Labour’, and ‘fragmented classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2004; Cousins 2013). These farm work dynamics are traced historically, when the studied farmers were granted land by the state in the late 1980s (Claassens 2014). Such historical context highlights that since the land beneficiaries under study were selected on the basis of their business astuteness or economic footing in order to qualify for land redistribution, they were petty commodity producers involved in various forms of business in the former homeland, Qwaqwa, and such family businesses relied on family labour, as well as hired labour (Bank 1990b; 1991; 1992). The paper traces such family enterprise labour dynamics from back then, to the early years of settlement on the redistributed land, when the norm of family labour began to dissolve as the vicissitudes of ‘globalised’ capitalist farming began to manifest in various forms such as the withdrawal of state subsidies in agriculture, and unfavorable price fluctuations, which gradually led to the exodus of abled bodied family members of the studied family farming household units into various forms of ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2004) off-farm, depending on employment prospects conditioned by levels of education, and skills (see Table 1, 2 & 3).

Furthermore, based on fieldwork data (see Table 1, 2 & 3), the paper sketches the current farm labour dynamics on the studied redistributed land (see Figure 1), and the implications of such farm labour dynamics for the social reproduction of struggling farmers and their households members in particular

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<sup>7</sup> Many farmers have failed to pay Land Bank loan installments, and have faced auctioned sales by Land Bank. Consequently, many struggling farmers have opted to rent-out arable fields, and have negotiated with the renters to deposit the rental income directly to Land Bank on their behalf – this is often spelled out in rental agreements. Indeed, renting-out arable fields has rescued the struggling farmers from forced sales of their farms.

<sup>8</sup> The herders are mainly Lesotho nationals who are paid R500 – R1300 per month. Some of the herders are South African, and are paid similar wages, which may also include payments in kind or food. However, white commercial farmers may offer higher wages, for example a Lesotho national, very well known to the author, left a farm where he had been working for R800 per month, and currently works for a renter and earns R3500 as a herder. This illuminates the challenges that black commercial farmers have in terms of paying their workers, compared to their white counterparts in South Africa.

<sup>9</sup> That is in terms of social reproduction.

who mainly reside off-farm, as well as implications for the social reproduction of ‘footloose’ labour from a neighbouring country, Lesotho, employed as herders on the studied farms. Bernstein’s notions of the ‘Agrarian Question of Labour’, and ‘fragmented classes of labour’ are useful lenses in the analysis of these farm labour dynamics against the backdrop of gathering crises of social reproduction for struggling farmers, their family members, and (landless) farm workers, i.e. the various forms of ‘fragmented classes of labour’ who ‘directly, and ‘indirectly’ depend on the sale of their labour power for social reproduction in the rural, and urban areas of southern Africa, and the global South, more broadly (Bernstein 2004; 2010).

## **2 Historical context: labour tenancy to black entrepreneurship in Qwaqwa (1960s – 1980s)**

In-depth life history interviews of the land beneficiary family farming household units under study revealed that many of these households share a common history of labour tenancy on white owned farms, to their (forced) relocation into the former Qwaqwa homeland in the 1960s, and 1970s. This historical background context is an important backdrop towards unraveling, and reconstructing the economic paths of these households, especially the ‘family labour’ dynamics in ‘small family enterprises’, as well as accumulation or ‘decapitalisation’ paths since then, to date. This section of the paper therefore highlights that even though the studied family farm household units share a common history of forced relocation from white-owned farms in the Free State province, there were differences in terms of how they coped with living conditions in both rural and urban Qwaqwa. Some were better-off than others, especially those who left white-owned farms much earlier on, in the late 1960s, and established themselves as entrepreneurs in Qwaqwa by converting their assets, mainly livestock, into commerce (Slater 2002a, 2002b; Bank 1992).

Indeed, not everyone in the villages of Qwaqwa was chronically poor in the 1970s, some people brought with them livestock and capital, and had good relationships with chiefs and headmen; and could thus capitalise on the lack of amenities as entrepreneurs providing various forms of services in Qwaqwa, as Rachel Slater notes:

.... well-placed individuals in Qwaqwa who had access to land and close relationships with chiefs were able to establish themselves as a class of petty-bourgeois traders. Whilst traditional leaders and traders climbed ladders towards social and material wealth, those at the sharp end of differentiation were not simply a homogeneous mass of poor people (Slater 2002a:601).

Furthermore, Slater (2002a:604) states that:

In rural parts of Qwaqwa, a process of differentiation was established in the 1970s through which a small number of individuals who left white-owned farms in the late 1960s managed to place themselves on an upward trajectory of accumulation.

Businesses that mushroomed in the 1960s and 1970s in the former Qwaqwa homeland included small-scale brick making industries, taxi operations, general dealers, shops/kiosks, and other informal small-scale self-employment activities (Slater 2002a, 2002b; Bank 1990). In elaboration, Slater uses an example of a former farm worker/labour tenant who settled next to the chief’s homestead, got more land than others, accumulated livestock and was often seen stocking up his general dealer family enterprise using the chief’s vehicle. The latter could be interpreted as the interface of both processes of ‘accumulation from below and above’ (Mamdani 1987).

However those who left Free State labour tenant farms from the 1970s onwards had conditions imposed on them in terms of how much livestock each household could bring with

into Qwaqwa homeland, and were thus forced into forced sales of their herds at derisory prices. These households in particular were to face the harsh realities of the homeland, without arable land for agriculture, nor commons for grazing livestock (Sharp & Spiegel 1984; Slater 2001). The only solution, it seemed then, was to find employment, locally, and within the then migrant labour system into South Africa's industrial hubs such as Johannesburg. On arrival from farms across the Free State, former labour tenant household heads anticipated recruitment into migrant labour, as some of them had some prior experience in migrant labour systems whilst they lived on farms (Niehaus 1989; Keegan 1990). However they soon found out that access to employment through local TEBA administration offices was not guaranteed, and many by-passed it to Phuthaditjhaba, Qwaqwa's only town, where employment opportunities were much higher (Sharp & Spiegel 1984; Bank 1984), regardless of the fact that they 'had only limited experience of labour migration and no experience of the conditions of work-seeking through the Bantustan system of labour bureau' (Sharp & Spiegel 1984:137); but after some time they gained more experience in job seeking, including walking over 10 kilometers to Phuthaditjhaba to stay overnight at a friend's or relative's place, to be at the Phuthaditjhaba recruiting agency in time for anticipated recruitment (Bank 1984; Slater 2001).

Against the backdrop of limited employment opportunities within the closer settlement villages in Qwaqwa, Leslie Bank underscores the proliferation of small-scale brick-making industries along the banks of the Namahadi river that provided some employment opportunities and shaped class differentiation:

...the opening up of the brick market provided both valuable employment for men and women relocated from white farms as well as facilitating a certain amount of petty accumulation by aspirant Basotho entrepreneurs in an open and competitive market (Bank 1990:5).

These were mainly family enterprises premised on family labour by those who could afford to; i.e. those who had arrived into the homeland with significant assets to invest, and those migrant workers who remitted income to invest in the informal business sector, which was relatively booming, as entrepreneurs took the advantage of the shortage of services in the homeland (Bank 1990b; Slater 2002a). The brick making industry was but one of the informal income generating activities in the closer settlement villages<sup>10</sup>, amongst general dealers, informal liquor trading (shebeens), transport services, coal distributors, and so on (Bank 1990b, 1991, 1992; Slater 2002a). As Leslie Bank notes:

The existence of minimal government enabled local entrepreneurs to ignore state controls and respond directly to market opportunities. The paucity of licensed traders in the new closer settlement villages resulted in a proliferation of illicit business undertakings. Backyard grocerers, shebeens, hardware shops and clothing outlets sprang up everywhere. Hawkers walked the streets selling anything from coffins to ornaments, while vehicle owners offered their services in transporting these operators backwards and forwards to nearby farms and towns. Migrants also responded to these conditions by sending home consumer goods for resale in the closer settlements rather than cash, which was quickly whittled away at local stores (Bank 1990b:7).

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<sup>10</sup> Closer settlement villages were basic relocation camps, where those evicted from farms, and elsewhere could reside on a temporary, and permanent basis. Relocation camps proliferated from the 1960s, and 1970s, in line with the then South African apartheid/segregationist state's brutal homeland consolidation project, which uprooted black families from private farms, and the so-called 'black plots' or farms owned privately by black individuals, or groups (see Walker & Platsky 1985).

Furthermore, the migrant labour system facilitated the development of the long distance taxi industry owned by local aspirant accumulators, transporting migrant workers from Qwaqwa to Johannesburg, and back home (Bank 1990a). Some of the latter were to become land beneficiaries of redistributed land in the late 1980s, on the basis of their economic footing as other black entrepreneurs who were selected and screened by authorities, to become land beneficiaries (Claassens et al. 2014). The extra-economic dynamics and political economy within which black entrepreneurs in Qwaqwa operated, since the 1960s are traced and reconstructed in the next section.

### **3 Black entrepreneurship, social differentiation and class dynamics in Qwaqwa (1960s – 1980s)**

Leslie Bank traces the process of class formation in Qwaqwa, and analyses the livelihood trajectories of entrepreneurs in relation to the state, which responded rather harshly to their aspirations. According to Bank (1985) the Black Investment Corporation (BIC), a well-known state enterprise for establishing a class of black capitalists in other homelands, did the opposite in Qwaqwa. In Qwaqwa the BIC was occasionally referred to as a 'wolf in sheep skin' or 'the hawk that will certainly eat the chicken' by some traders who felt its abuse of power to bar them from economic opportunities (Ibid).

It was, therefore, extremely difficult for local traders to obtain trading licenses from the BIC, which also appeared competing with local traders, and flexible enough to appear as abiding by the law to the extent of forming partnerships with local entrepreneurs in some services such as transport, which can, in today's terms, be described as 'window dressing' or 'fronting' in the context of 'black economic empowerment'.

So, the BIC roamed in Qwaqwa during the 1970s, partly because there were no organised political forces to confront it (Bank 1985). But that was short lived, especially when the Dikwankwetla political party led by Dr T.K. Mopeli incorporated the frustrations of Qwaqwa traders in its 1980 election campaign for its own political gain (Bank 1995). But Mopeli's thrust on the political economy of Qwaqwa was not that effective for the majority of traders, who had, by the 1980 elections, formed a new opposition party Matla Wa Setshaba, with the support of the teachers union that was disgruntled by Mopeli's Bantu education policies (Bank 1995). So, after the 1980 elections, which were won by Dikwankwetla, beyond claims of vote rigging, Mopeli embarked on a Kwena consolidation of power (a form of exclusive tribalism), and rewarded those entrepreneurs who distanced themselves from opposition political parties (Ibid). Bank draws anecdotal evidence to illuminate the latter and also uses the example of a kiosk owner in a stadium in Phuthaditjhaba (known as T.K. Mopeli stadium today) who had to join the Dikwankwetla Party in order to be immune from the harassment that other traders received from Dikwankwetla controlled trade licensing bureaucracy.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Qwaqwa entrepreneurs faced challenging economic times as a result of the changing political economic relations in that small 'Bantustan'. Those challenging economic times were mainly as a result of competition from 'big capital' or the BIC itself, which put many traders out of business. This was exacerbated by the withdrawal of state subsidies that lured foreign investment in the area, which led to the exodus of major industries out of Qwaqwa into major urban centres such as Durban and Johannesburg. Tens of thousands of people were rendered unemployed as a result (Slater 2002).

In a nutshell Slater's (2002) work on livelihood diversification can be associated with work on processes of accumulation and rural class formation (Bank 1990b), in that she illuminates how households were differentiated in terms of their livelihoods and income, and also how some 'climbed ladders towards social and material wealth', and how some saw their fortunes decline in the early 1990s as a result of deindustrialisation in the former homeland, Qwaqwa (Slater 2002:601).

By the 1990s, many traders who had accumulated capital through the 1980s saw a downturn in their fortunes. Only those who successfully diversified their economic interests remained on an upward trajectory of accumulation (Slater 2002:601). Some of these traders diversified into farming, on the so-called 'New Qwaqwa Farms' (Slater 2002) or simply "Qwaqwa Farms" (see Figure 1) that were purchased by the South African Development Trust in the mid-1980s.

The black entrepreneurs of the former homeland, Qwaqwa who diversified into agriculture from the mid-1980s (Slater 2001) are the family farming units under study. Of course the potential land beneficiaries, then, were 'screened and selected' (Claassens et al. 2014) on the basis of their economic footing i.e. the state targeted the black business elite as land beneficiaries. This illuminates that the discourse of developing black commercial farmers by the state on small to medium-sized ( $\approx 100 - 1000\text{ha}$ ) or larger farms is not new in South Africa. The eastern Free State region provides a case where this can be traced to the 1980s when a 63000ha (Bank 1995; see Figure 1) chain of farms was purchased (or expropriated with compensation), and subdivided by the South African Development Trust (SADT) from neighbouring white commercial farmers and incorporated into the former Qwaqwa homeland in the 1980s (Bank 1995; Murray 1997; Slater 2002; Aliber 2006) and partitioned to 114 'novice' black commercial farmers from 1987 to 1994 (Claassen et al. 2014:125). Some of 'these farms were later redistributed to black farmers under the South African Government's Land Reform Programme after 1994' (Slater 2002:118).

However, it must be pointed out that the farm workers or labour tenants that were found on the farms under study in the 1980s were forcibly removed by the state in order to make way for the new farm owners. But on some farms, though very few, the labour tenants remained, and became farm workers for the new owners, and some became land beneficiaries of the ANC government since 1994.



Figure 1: Map of the studied redistributed land in eastern Free State province of South Africa

#### **4 Agrarian Question of Labour & Fragmented Classes of Labour in South Africa**

According to Bernstein (2004), for international capital, there is no longer an agrarian question of capital, i.e. the era(s) of capital's thrust with penetrating, and incorporation of agrarian societies into commodity relations on a world scale has passed (Bernstein 2004; 2010; see also Cousins 2013). According to Bernstein, the unresolved question in the global South today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is that of 'fragmented classes of labour', especially the landless poor masses in the global South, who currently depend 'directly', and 'indirectly' on the sale of their labour power in the current era of globalisation (Bernstein 2004; 2010). In elaboration, Bernstein notes that:

The reverse side of the thesis that 'globalization' represents a new phase of the centralization and concentration, as well as mobility (and 'financialization'), of capital, is that it also generates an intensification of the fragmentation of labour. That is, the growing global army (or reserve army) of labour pursues its reproduction in conditions of increasingly insecure and oppressive wage employment combined with a range of likewise insecure 'informal sector' ('survival') activity, typically subject to its own forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste and ethnicity. And, of course, many of its number pursue their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment (Ibid.: 204-4).

The off-farm migration towards urban areas by the abled bodied family members of the studied land beneficiary family farming units in the eastern Free State province of South Africa can be problematized within the analytical lenses of the 'Agrarian Question of Labour', and 'Fragmented Classes of Labour' in the era of globalization (Bernstein 2004). The current farm labour dynamics on the studied family farming units are in contrast to labour dynamics of typical petty commodity producers that rely on unpaid family labour (Neocosmos 1993), as it was the case, to some extent, for the studied family farming units prior to settlement on the redistributed land in the late 1980s (see the historical context section of this paper above).

Off-farm migration by the abled bodied family members of the studied family farming units can be described as 'footloose labour' (Breman 1996 in Bernstein 2010:110) for its mobile character, driven by distress in making a living in this era of globalisation characterized by 'fragmented classes of labour', unemployment, precarious employment, and informal self-employment (Bernstein 2004; 2010). Indeed, most of the abled-bodied family members of the studied family farming units, i.e. those family members who are in good working ages, are in most times of the year absent from the family farm, pursuing their means of reproduction off-farm, in various forms of employment, self-employment, and many of them are unemployed, but do not reside and help out on the 'struggling family farm' (See Table 1).

Furthermore the notion of 'fragmented classes of labour' is an important lens in analyzing the continued reliance on 'footloose' herders from Lesotho, a neighbouring country, by most of the studied farmers (especially struggling farmers) in their livestock enterprises<sup>11</sup>. As other migrant workers on South Africa's commercial farms, the herders from Lesotho are driven by a gathering crisis of their own social reproduction as well, especially since Lesotho, unlike South Africa, has no social grants (none for the children, the elderly or anyone). In similar vein, Ulicki and Crush (2000:63) state that "the growing poverty, falling per capita agricultural production and rural differentiation in Lesotho, coupled with increasingly limited employment opportunities are driving migrants from Lesotho, mostly women, to Free State farms as seasonal workers". For example a single herder found

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<sup>11</sup> As mentioned above, struggling farmers in the sample (n=70) rent-out their arable land to mainly white commercial farmers, and focus more, on more manageable livestock enterprises (beef cattle, and sheep in particular).

on one of the studied farms, earns a monthly wage of R800, and may send all of it home to Lesotho, and then survive on the food that is offered in kind by the employer, the farm owner.

However, in contrast to research findings of Ulicki and Crush (2000), in most cases the ‘footloose labour’ from Lesotho, who are employed as herders on the studied farms in the eastern Free State, are middle-aged men, and younger, with recently established homesteads in Lesotho, to whom they are obliged to remit as much money as they can, given the crisis of social reproduction back home.

Footloose farm workers from Lesotho are found in other parts of South Africa as well, particularly in the Eastern Cape province closer to the border of Lesotho (David Neves, pers. comm), as well as in the wine producing districts of the Western Cape, such as in Robertson<sup>12</sup>. A common trend of the lack of access to proper immigrant documentation, and increasing vulnerability, underpin precarious employment, low wages, and (gender based) violence against foreign farm workers, who also include other migrants from other southern African countries, such as Zimbabwe working on the commercial farms of South Africa (see Visser & Ferrer 2015).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that ‘footloose farm labour’; especially foreign labour from poorer regions is a common workforce on small-scale capitalist farms in southern Africa (see Pérez Niño 2016), as well as in other parts of the world, for example in Turkey (Pelek 2017). Again, these abstract, and concrete reflections point out to the masses of ‘fragmented classes of labour’ facing a gathering crisis of social reproduction on a world-scale (Bernstein 2004). Of course, it is in the best interest of aspirant accumulators, such as the farmers under study, especially struggling farmers, and not accumulators per se, to keep wages low, for their own crises of social reproduction within the current challenging macro-economic context of South Africa characterized by concentration, and relatively unfavorable market price fluctuations for farmers (Visser & Ferrer 2015; Genis 2015).

In a nutshell, the dynamics of farm work on recently redistributed land in South Africa can be located within differentiated forms of ‘fragmented classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2004; 2010; Manenzhe 2015), within the macro-economic context of that country. These labour dynamics are inseparable from strategies of (social) reproduction of farm workers, farm owners, and their family members, and the reproduction of farming enterprises themselves, especially in cognizance of the ‘consumption’, ‘reproduction’, and ‘ceremonial’ funds, as well as the ‘fund of rent’, which are central to the social reproduction of these differentiated ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2010:18-20).

The geo-political historical context of racialised capitalism, and white agrarian capital in South Africa’s economic history is an important background context towards understanding the causal dynamics of current employment and unemployment trends, labour markets or lack of, and poverty in that country. Furthermore the historical context of the so-called ‘black entrepreneurs’ is part of the story, especially in cognizance of the class dynamics shaped by fluid processes of ‘accumulation from below, and above’ (Mamdani 1987) examined in this study. Against this backdrop, the paper traces these class dynamics historically in relation to the studied farmers economic histories of accumulation, and decline. Methodologically this has involved consideration of the historical development of the studied family-farming units whose economic histories demonstrate the fluid nature of processes of accumulation from below and above, as well as the current farm work, and social reproduction dynamics on the studied farms. The latter are analyzed in detail in the next section of this paper.

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike the male ‘footloose herders’ in the eastern Free State, and Eastern Cape, the Western Cape wine producing districts also has female farm workers from Lesotho who are employed mainly as seasonal workers. The latter experience various problems, ranging from the lack of access to legal documentation, sexual harassment by male farm managers, and low wages [see also Addison (2014) for the gendered dynamics of farm work for Zimbabwean nationals working on farms in Limpopo]. Furthermore on the various problems faced by the ‘foreign’ farm labour force in South Africa see Visser & Ferrer (2015); Crush et al. (2000).

## **5 Farm work dynamics on redistributed land in the eastern Free State province of South Africa**

Land beneficiaries of the studied small to medium-scale family farms in the eastern Free State province of South Africa gradually settled onto these farms from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. By the 1980s, and due to internal processes of social differentiation, and class dynamics driven by competition, the studied farmers were already a differentiated class of petty commodity producers before settlement onto the redistributed land, with various forms of small businesses in the former Qwaqwa homeland (Bank 1990b; Slater 2001; 2002). As mentioned above, such small-scale family enterprises ranged from brick, and coal industries, general dealers/traders (kiosks/tuck shops), taxi business, small supermarkets, informal trading of various sorts (including the so-called vegetable and fruit bakkie traders), and small-scale capitalist agriculture. In those family businesses, family labour was the norm, even though there was hired wage labour from poorer residents in the former homeland (Slater 2001; 2002), and Leslie Bank (1994a) traces such family labour, commanded by the male household-head, back to the labour tenant farms, from which the family units under study originated. Indeed, such economic footing in the form of petty commodity production i.e. ‘accumulation from below, and above’ (Mamdani 1987; Cousins 2013) secured the studied farmers selection as beneficiaries of land redistribution entrusted with the political task of ‘deracialising’ South Africa’s white agrarian structure<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, there were petty commodity producers who had, by the late 1980s, accumulated from below due to ‘internal processes driven by competition’ (Mamdani 1987), but there were also those petty commodity producers who benefited from their close relationships with the local indigenous administrative elite (chiefs in particular), and the former homeland state (Slater 2001). The latter can be categorized as accumulators from above, even though these processes of accumulation were often blurred, and often depended on chance, and not so simple to distinguish. In fact, it is in the best interest of aspirant accumulators to accumulate from above, especially through political connection.

As soon as the studied family enterprises/petty commodity producers diversified into agriculture on state redistributed land through simultaneous processes of ‘accumulation from below, and above<sup>14</sup>’, the notion of family labour slowly disintegrated with time, as soon as the vicissitudes of middle, to large-scale capitalist farming began to manifest in differentiated forms such as withdrawal of state subsidies, indebtedness, and failure to repay loan installments – from the Land Bank for example. Consequently, most of the abled bodied family members of the family farms under study are in most times of the year absent (see Table 1), trying to ‘pursue their means of reproduction’ (Bernstein 2004) off-farm in permanent, casual, part-time, skilled, unskilled work, and various forms of small-scale self-employment (see Table 2 & 3) in as far as Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, and other urban spaces: i.e. in various forms of “fragmented classes of labour” across the urban-rural spaces, as Bernstein (2004; 2010) puts it (see also Cousins 2013).

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<sup>13</sup> The rhetoric in Radio Sesotho in the late 1980s was the redistribution of white-owned commercial farms to a local Basotho before Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, since that was the ‘right thing to do’ in liberal terms. A closer analysis of such rhetoric or propaganda reveals that the studied redistributed land somewhat played a role in homeland consolidation efforts of the former Qwaqwa homeland regime, as well as forming a geographical buffer between white owned land and the former Qwaqwa homeland itself during a time of political uncertainty of the late 1980s, and early 1990s.

<sup>14</sup> That is through their efforts associated with petty commodity production, and internal differentiation driven by competition, as well as through political connections with the former Qwaqwa homeland state from the 1960s to the 1980s, which both guaranteed their selection as beneficiaries of land redistribution in the late 1980s, since it was imperative (politically) for the state authorities to have black business families as beneficiaries of land redistribution then. The logic has continued to inform land redistribution discourse of South Africa today.

Table 1: Presence of abled bodied family members on-farm

Age	Full-time	Part - time	Absent
20 - 29	11	3	33
30 - 39	7	10	44
40 - 49	8	6	30
50 – 60	14	8	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>131</b>

Table 1 shows that out of 198 individuals in working ages between 20 and 60 truncated into age categories of 20 – 29; 30 – 39; 40 – 49, and 50 – 60; 66% are absent from the family farm on a full-time basis, whilst 13% reside part-time on the family farms, and 20% are present on the farm on a full-time basis. As Table 1 illuminates, especially the column labeled “Absent”; the abled-bodied family members of the studied family 12farm units have become “footloose labour” (Bremen 1996, in Bernstein 2010:110) elsewhere in differentiated forms across the social division of labour, whilst on their family farms, back home, their labour has been substituted by mainly “footloose labour” from Lesotho, driven by their own distress as a result of a gathering crisis of social reproduction, back home, in Lesotho.

Table 2: Income source 1 of family members on and off-farm

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not applicable	47	14.7	15.9	15.9
	Full-time farming	97	30.4	32.9	48.8
	Farm rental income	4	1.3	1.4	50.2
	Old age grant	6	1.9	2.0	52.2
	Disability grant	1	.3	.3	52.5
	Skilled permanent work	42	13.2	14.2	66.8
	Skilled casual/part-time work	1	.3	.3	67.1
	Unskilled permanent work	34	10.7	11.5	78.6
	Unskilled casual/part-time work	1	.3	.3	79.0
	Self-employed off-farm (small business)	18	5.6	6.1	85.1
	Self-employed off-farm (medium-scale business)	1	.3	.3	85.4
	Unemployed	43	13.5	14.6	100.0
	Total	295	92.5	100.0	
	Missing	999999	24	7.5	
Total		319	100.0		

Table 3: Income source 2 of family members on and off-farm

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not applicable	213	66.8	71.5	71.5
	Full-time farming	3	.9	1.0	72.5
	Farm rental income	54	16.9	18.1	90.6
	Old age grant	17	5.3	5.7	96.3
	Skilled permanent work	1	.3	.3	96.6
	Skilled casual/part-time work	1	.3	.3	97.0
	Self-employed off-farm (small business)	6	1.9	2.0	99.0
	Self-employed off-farm (medium-scale business)	3	.9	1.0	100.0
	Total	298	93.4	100.0	
Missing	999999	21	6.6		
Total		319	100.0		

Table 2 and 3 report on the income sources of abled bodied family members of the family-farming units under study. However, social grants, such as the old age grant, were not left out of these tables because they contribute to the social reproduction of the farmers under study, especially when combined with other income sources such as rental income from renting out arable fields, and income from minimum livestock sales. The cases that were recorded as “not applicable” are simply those cases where persons are too young to work or still at school, or university, and not recipients of social grants. Respondents were asked to list their income sources, including those of family members, who may or not reside on the family farm unit, even cases where family members may be unemployed. However, there are cases recorded as “missing values”, where family members, especially the abled-bodied, may have left home on a permanent basis, and not communicating at all about progress with job seeking, and such cases were recorded as “missing values”.

In a nutshell, Table 2 and 3 report on the income sources that are combined by the respondents for mainly social reproduction, and some accumulation, hence “Income source 1 and 2”. For example, one respondent may be getting income from full-time farming, farm rental income, and an old age grant – the latter cases are quite common given the tendency of the aging farming population in the study area. With regards to Table 2, 97 individuals directly, and indirectly receive income from full-time farming through at least one family member, either residing or commuting to the family farm, on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.

Farm income can support distant family members, living in cities for example, to keep them going, against the backdrop of a crisis of unemployment, depending on the nature of family bonds. For struggling farmers, farm income can include minimum livestock sales, and for the accumulators, and successful reproducers it can include income from both livestock and sales from grain yields.

Furthermore, on Table 2, excluding full-time farming, farm rental income, and social grants for a moment, it is discernable that 97 individuals depend on the sale of their labour for social reproduction in various occupations, ranging from skilled permanent work<sup>15</sup>, skilled casual work, unskilled permanent work, and self-employment in small, and medium businesses off-farm. The latter are the abled bodied family members who reside off-farm on a permanent basis. Very little of the latter are part-time resident on farm, partly because of the dual family house ownership – one farm-house, and another house in the former homeland, Qwaqwa, as articulated above.

The crux of Table 3 is to illuminate the combined sources of income by the respondents for social reproduction, and some accumulation. The combinations of farm income (from minimum livestock sales) with social grants (especially old-age grants), and arable land rental income by struggling farmers for social reproduction has been mentioned above, and also reflected in Table 3. For the accumulators, Table 3 shows that they may also combine farm income with income from self-employment in small, and medium scale businesses off-farm. The latter dovetails with the economic histories of black entrepreneurship, which can be traced back to the 1960s, as sketched in the historical context background section of this paper. Indeed, some, but very few accumulating farmers, and some successful reproducers have some form of business on the side, besides farming, and that can be attributable to their relative success as reflected in the introduction of this paper.

The wider significance of both Table 2, and 3 is a recurring theme of off-farm migration by the abled bodied family members of the family-farming units under study for their own social reproduction within the macro-economic context of South Africa in a globalized economy, where family farming has little to offer, given the pressures that capitalist farming has to absorb in generally unfavorable market environments conditioned by prices (for both input and output markets) set elsewhere, off-farm (Genis 2015). Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that, even though the majority (70%; n = 70) of the studied family farming units can be categorized as struggling farmers, their access to land for minimum livestock sales, and arable land rental income does contribute to their social reproduction, including funding the living expenses of unemployed family members living off-farm or job seeking off-farm. In contrast to the landless black poor masses in urban, and ‘rural slums’ (Murray 1987), the struggling farmers in this research study are relatively well-off, on survival terms, because they have access to land.

## **6 Footloose labour as substitute for family labour on the studied family farms**

Indeed, on the farms under study, labour is mainly provided by “footloose labour” from a neighbouring country, Lesotho, under relative precarious conditions characterized by low wages, informality, and ethnic stereotypes<sup>16</sup>. For example, as other farm workers in the study area, the latter are under-paid, and receive no more than R1000 per month, which is insufficient for the social

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<sup>15</sup> Those in skilled permanent work are mainly those who benefited from investments in education, especially tertiary education, often funded by farm income or farm profits. Some of the latter day contributions of the salaried offspring residing off-farm are not directed to farm investments, but luxuries as a Mercedes Benz case highlighted in this paper, as well as investments in luxurious home interior, and exterior design as in some cases, where off-spring are in permanent skilled employment in particular.

<sup>16</sup> A dangerous, and unfounded accusation against ‘footloose herders from Lesotho’ is stock theft, which wrongfully, and stereotypically leads to the ethnic discrimination of the Lesotho nationals working as herders on the farms under study. The fact that some cases of livestock cross-border illicit sales can be traced to Lesotho does not mean that ‘footloose herders from Lesotho’ are stock thieves. One cannot make such accusations without evidence, beyond reasonable doubt. In contrast, a much more important discussion is that of low wages, and precarious employment conditions the workers in question are subjected to in that part of the country.

reproduction of themselves, as well as their dependents, as articulated by a farm worker found on one of the studied farms. However, it is noteworthy that “footloose labour” from Lesotho on the studied farms is mainly employed as livestock herders, and is predominantly male. To be sure, the employment of “footloose labour” as livestock herders on the studied farms reflects the economic distress (or crises of social reproduction) of the herders themselves, as well as the social reproduction strategies of their employers, the struggling farmers, as most of them lease out arable land to more efficient farmers (mainly white farmers), and focus more on livestock production, for which they hire mainly “footloose labour” from Lesotho. The main reason towards focusing more on livestock enterprises, and renting-out arable fields on the part of struggling farmers under study is the fact that livestock is relatively manageable, and less capital, and labour intensive than grain crop production<sup>17</sup>.

However, it must be pointed out that employment trends on the studied farms in the eastern Free State province of South Africa “are similar to those of (advanced) capitalist agriculture almost everywhere, namely a diminishing core of permanently employed, relatively secure, skilled farm workers; much larger (possibly growing) numbers of casually employed, insecure and poorly paid workers; and declining average real wages” (Bernstein 2004:207). In other words, the black capitalist farmers under study have similar forms of labour regimes, and forms of labour remuneration as other capitalist farmers elsewhere in the country, within the current macro-economic context of South Africa. The exodus of abled bodied family members of the studied family farm units to urban areas is understood against this backdrop, as well as within the context of greater/more extensive, and more recent social divisions of labour associated with education levels/skills, and corresponding employment, and unemployment trends within the contemporary macro-economic context of South Africa in the era of globalisation today.

Furthermore, even those who are unemployed tend to be absent from the family farm units on a part-time, and permanent basis, which is telling of the vicissitudes of capitalist farming pursued in conjunction with other social reproduction strategies/income sources. The latter may as well be more remunerative, and less labour intensive than capitalist farming, especially in the context of the vicissitudes of farming practiced by struggling farmers, against the backdrop of current difficult times faced by capitalist farmers as price takers in the market, dominated by concentration (Genis 2015; Visser & Ferrer 2015).

However, those family farm units that have signs of accumulation, as little as they are, tend to keep abled bodied family members on-farm as workers and managers. But this has to be understood against the backdrop of “unemployed graduates, and diplomates” (van Broekhuizen & van der Berg 2013) in contemporary South Africa. The latter tend to stay at home whilst hoping to get a phone call from a prospective employer after submitting curriculum vitae on-line.

Having that said, rental income, as well as some income from livestock sales, no matter how little the latter is, does contribute to the reproduction of the struggling family farming enterprises under study, and towards the social reproduction of (off-farm) family members in many ways, such as supplementing living, educational, and farming expenses. To be sure, access to land for the struggling

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<sup>17</sup> William Beinart’s (1994) research in the eastern Free State also found white commercial farmers shifting from grain towards livestock enterprises, for the less capital intensiveness of livestock production than grain enterprises. Grain production demands constant machinery upgrades for farmers to remain competitive. However, those farmers who do have access to capital in order to upgrade grain production machinery in the same district, have become successful accumulators, especially those white commercial farmers who also rent-in land from struggling black farmers in the eastern Free State. The secret seems to be access to capital for the purchasing or hiring-in of grain production machinery (i.e. high capacity tractors, planters, combined harvesters, and transporters to grain silos). For more on both grain, and livestock production dynamics of the studied family farm units, see Ngubane, M (Forthcoming) *The Rise and Fall of Black Capitalist Farmers in the eastern Free State province of South Africa*. PLAAS Working Paper.

farmers under study does work for them, compared to the landless poor black people living in black townships or 'urban slums' or displaced urban slums (Meth 2001), or 'rural slums' (Murray 1987) in many parts of South Africa, who are trying to eek out a living from whatever livelihood strategy they're pursuing. Compared to the latter, the struggling farmers in the eastern Free State are relatively well-off, because they have access to land, and access to land gives them the annual rental income, and allows them to sell minimum livestock<sup>18</sup>, and such income (from minimum livestock sales, and rental income) is used for various necessities such as groceries, payment of herders, and education fees for off-spring, and other family members off-farm. For the struggling farmers, selling minimum livestock per year does work, in terms of social reproduction.

This is further illuminated by the fact that most of the studied family farm units have kept their residence in the former Qwaqwa homeland (see map on Figure 1), from where they originated, and there is evidence of investments in those homes, particularly necessities such as living expenses (municipal bills, food and so on), as well as luxuries such as interior, and exterior home decorating material. Ben Cousins has emphasized that such dual residence is common amongst capitalist farmers (or beneficiaries of land reform) elsewhere in southern Africa (Ben Cousins, pers. comm). However, whether farmers should invest in luxuries instead of farming is a question beyond the objectives of this paper, but does to some extent point out to the causal factors of incremental de-capitalization, and disinvestments in the family farm units, and hints to 'performances for good social standing' (Sarah Berry, pers. comm) or 'social wealth' (Slater 2002) – a good example of the latter is a Mercedes Benz motor vehicle that was purchased by a daughter of a struggling farmer, for her father, instead of re-investing the money used towards purchasing a luxury motor vehicle in the family farm enterprise. Nonetheless, the latter reflects that for some of the offspring, farm profits/farm income in good years, has contributed to their education, and social mobility.

## 7 Conclusion

The introduction of this paper invoked a question by Ian Scoones (forthcoming: 4), which is relevant for the most recent land reforms in the global South, given the generalized tendencies of crises of social reproduction on a world-scale. The question is:

Could it be, then, that under conditions of extremely insecure formal employment, smallholder production on land reform sites is simply a survivalist response, reliant on informal livelihood activities across urban and rural spaces, combining agriculture with employment and off-farm enterprises, but ultimately with little prospect of escaping long-run, deep poverty and marginalization?

Indeed, this is a valid question, and research findings from this study corroborate, and expand Scoones' question. For example by illuminating that for the struggling farmers under study, minimum livestock sales, combined with arable land rental income, as well as social grants goes a long way towards the social reproduction of family members who may or not reside on-farm, especially those who are unemployed or job seeking but living in cities, and still maintain strong links with the family farms for their own social reproduction.

By way of conclusion, incremental de-capitalisation of the family farm enterprises presented in this paper, has contributed to the exodus of abled-bodied family members from the family enterprise to seek employment elsewhere in mainly unskilled permanent work. A small minority is on skilled permanent work made possible by investments in education derived from the good years of farm

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<sup>18</sup> That is one or two or more beef cattle or sheep in a given year. Livestock markets include formal livestock auctions in small towns in the eastern Free State (e.g. Vleisentraal in Bethlehem), as well as informal 'ceremonial' (Hornby 2014) weekend and holiday markets in black townships in Phuthaditjhaba, Tshiame, Kestell, Ntabazwe in the same locality.

income. But the most predominant trend is unemployment, and precarious forms of unskilled labour for the abled-bodied family members of the studied farm units who live off-farm. However, their crisis of social reproduction and unemployment is somewhat absorbed by some farm income in the form of rental income from renting out arable land, as well as some income from minimum livestock sales per year, which keeps the struggling farmers, and their dependents going from year to year. Building on Scoones' question reflected above: will the struggling farmers under study ever escape 'deep poverty, and marginalization', without state support? The latter question is beyond the scope of this paper, and addressed in a separate paper.<sup>19</sup>

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**New Extractivism, Peasantries  
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