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The Land and Its People: the land question and the South African political order

Why is the land debate in South Africa so difficult to resolve? Why is it that it has resisted the best efforts at resolution by land and agricultural policy experts? Why, in fact, those experts sometimes seem to be bystanders in a superheated and emotionally charged debate dominated by opportunist politicians?

Could it be that the land debate is, in fact, not actually, or at least not *only*, about who is entitled to get hold of agricultural land and on what terms? Could the reason why the debate is so charged be that the land question is not what it appears to be, is in actual fact a symbol or metaphor for a set of issues that are deeper, more emotionally charged, and more difficult to resolve than is imagined in land reform policy? And if this is the case, what do we do about it?

These are the thoughts I address in my latest PLAAS Working Paper, 'The Land and its People: the South African Land Question and the South African Political Order'. In it, I argue that our 'land question', as it unfolds in the public realm, is not amenable to land policy solutions because it is not in the first place a policy question: it is a *political* question. The core issue being put on the table by those pushing for large-scale expropriation without compensation is not the need to reduce the cost of land reform, or about the ownership of particular parcels of land. It is about whose **country** this is. The core challenge in the SA land debate is not to reach agreement about how agricultural land can be redistributed to best ensure food security, livelihoods, job creation and social justice. It is a question about how to deal with the moral and ethical illegitimacy of a political order founded on colonial dispossession. It is a question about the nature, meaning, limits and implications of political belonging in South Africa. It is about how – and whether – it is possible to create a national community in which the descendants of those who stole the land are allowed to live in relations of moral and legal equality with the descendants of those from whom it was stolen.

It is important to understand that fraught and emotive as this question is, it cannot be ignored or avoided. It must be confronted in its own right. In the Working Paper, I provide a broad framework to suggest how South Africans can go about starting to answer it. I also argue that this framework suggests a different angle from which to approach the South African land question: an approach that goes beyond addressing land as a factor of production, or even an essential component of agriculture and land-based livelihoods. Of course, land is all those things. But in addition, it is a constitutive dimension of South African political life: it is central not only to livelihoods, but to the quality of community and family life and the meaning of citizenship, in rural as well as in urban areas. This is why struggles around land are so important in South Africa: they not only struggles about livelihoods: they are also struggles around the content, meaning, and legitimacy of our entire political order.

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