
Introduction: Agrarian change, rural poverty and land reform in South Africa since 1994

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Abstract

This introduction sketches the context and dynamics of agrarian change, rural poverty and land reform since the end of apartheid in 1994, drawing attention to structural continuities and new elements in the countryside of South Africa, and of the Southern African region in which South Africa must be located. Two key historical and theoretical reference points help focus attention on some central issues: the 'classic' model of dispossession/accumulation in South(ern) Africa, and 'decentralized despotism' as the distinctive mode and legacy of colonial governance. In conclusion, we introduce the papers as contributions to answering some central questions which require further research and debate.

Introduction

The 'Land Question' in post-apartheid South Africa retains a powerful political charge, given the continuing depth of rural poverty and the manner in which a long history of racialized land dispossession can be invoked as a potent symbol of historical injustice and oppression in general. Some argue that the ability to use even small plots of land for cultivation, for food provisioning and for sale has promise for rural residents (see Altman et al. 2009: see also Aliber and Cousins, this issue; Cousins, this issue). Others are sceptical about the potential of land reform to support smallholder farming, intensify agricultural production, generate employment and reduce poverty (Sender and Johnston 2004; echoed by Marais 2011, 218). Even the sceptics, however, acknowledge the political necessity of resolving (or defusing) the 'Land Question', and public commentary often refers to the spectre of Zimbabwe-style land invasions as a warning of what might happen should land reform fail.¹ Land reform can thus be seen as simultaneously both central and marginal (or 'necessary but not sufficient') to meeting South Africa's crises of employment, livelihood and social reproduction, and tensions within and between its political, social and economic dimensions permeate both public discourse and scholarly analysis.² Fuelling these controversies is the slow pace of land reform since the transition to democracy in 1994 in terms of transforming the racialized pattern of ownership of productive land, and even more so in terms of reconfiguring an agrarian structure dominated by large commercial farms. These challenges

¹ For example, 'ANCYL warns of Zim-style land invasions in South Africa' (<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-06-05-ancyl-land-reform/>), 'Minister warns farmers to co-operate', Pieter du Toit, News 24 (<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Minister-warns-farmers-to-co-operate-201003290>) and 'Land reform cannot be wished away' (<http://fstimes.co.za/?p=9712>) (all accessed on 13 March 2012).

² For sensitive and incisive analysis of such tensions, see Walker (2008).

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