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BRICS, middle-income countries (MICs), and global agrarian transformations: internal dynamics, regional trends, and international implications

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ABSTRACT

The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries are emerging as key sites of agricultural commodity production, distribution, circulation, and consumption, contributing to major shifts in the character of regional and global agro-food systems. Their growing importance within the world food economy presents new challenges for scholars, activists, policy-makers, and development practitioners. The articles in this collection are located in their wider context, and the significance of their insights for a longer term research agenda within critical agrarian studies is explored. Four key themes are discussed: processes of agrarian change under way within BRICS countries; the role and impacts of BRICS countries in their respective regions; the rising importance of middle-income countries (MICs) within global and regional agro-food systems; and how the recent emergence of forms of populism, authoritarianism, and combinations of these two (i.e. 'authoritarian populism') is linked to the rise of the BRICS.

KEYWORDS

BRICS; MICs; agrarian change; land; authoritarian populism; critical agrarian studies

Introduction: framing a research agenda for critical agrarian studies

The economic and political rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries and powerful middle-income countries (MICs) such as Argentina, Chile, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Turkey, more or less from the early 1990s onwards, has far-reaching implications for global agrarian transformation. These countries are emerging as key sites of commodity production, distribution, circulation, and consumption, including in relation to agricultural commodities, and are contributing to major shifts in the character of regional and global agro-food systems. The five BRICS countries are working both separately, and increasingly together, to shape international development agendas, both as partners in and perhaps as an alternative to the mainstream development paradigms promoted by the traditional hubs of global capital and western-dominated international financial institutions such as the World Bank.

The rise of the BRICS countries alongside some powerful MICs, and emerging alliances between them, has sparked debates about whether or not they herald a new era for international economy and politics. Do they constitute an alternative to the conventional North Atlantic-anchored neoliberal prescription for capitalist development, or are their models of development problematic in both

old and new ways (Bond & Garcia, 2015; Scoones, Amanor, Favareto, & Qi, 2016; Taylor, 2014)? More profoundly, the growing importance of BRICS countries within the world economy challenges dominant conceptions of global inequality, in which the North–South divide is viewed the most significant axis of major differences in power and wealth. What appears to be an evolving polycentric world order presents new challenges to, as well as opportunities for, scholars, activists, policy-makers, development practitioners, and other actors, and processes of knowledge production need to respond to these.

In this introduction, we locate the articles in this special issue in their wider context, and explore the implications of the rise of the BRICS countries for critical agrarian studies. The latter focuses on questions of fundamental social change in relation to rural worlds, including the role of unequal power relations among and between agrarian classes and other social groups.

Constructing a research agenda for critical agrarian studies of the BRICS has to build on the insights of what other scholars have contributed to understanding the dynamics and impacts of this grouping of countries, especially those located in the disciplines of international political economy, international relations, international development studies, strategic, and geopolitical studies. A critical agrarian studies focus is urgent and necessary, in our view, because the rural dimensions of the BRICS are a strategically important component of these emerging realities, but are somewhat under-studied at present. It is true that academic research on the role of agriculture in bilateral relations between BRICS countries has blossomed in recent years, but most of these initiatives have been somewhat Africa-centric to date, and have tended to focus on the impact of development policies pursued by a specific BRICS country in African contexts: China in Africa, Brazil in Africa, and so on (Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Cabral, Favareto, Mukwereza, & Amanor, 2016; Hall, Scoones, & Tsikata, 2015; Scoones et al., 2016; Scoones, Cabral, & Tugendhat, 2013). This work has produced important insights, for example, on the influence of a country's history of agrarian development on how it frames programmes of developmental assistance to African countries. In attempting to construct a wider research agenda, it is important to build on high-quality scholarship of this kind – but also to expand the focus of work, as required.¹

Key themes: agrarian change in BRICS countries

Much current scholarly research on the rise of the BRICS and MICs, while focusing on critically important themes such as impacts on the character of the global political economy, has left key gaps in relation to agrarian change, which the current collection attempts to address. It is important to note some key features of this work. First, the primary concern of these authors is not the nature and impacts of BRICS as an organization, but rather processes associated with individual countries within the grouping, both *within* their national borders and in their regional contexts. Second, although this collection does focus on the role and impacts of BRICS countries in other regions, such as investments by Chinese companies in Brazil (i.e. on *inter-regional* dynamics), equally important, but generally absent in the literature, is a key focus on BRICS countries in their respective regions (i.e. on *intra-regional* dynamics). Third, as a result of this intra-regional lens, authors also focus on the role of other important players within the respective regions, namely, MICs. The rising importance of MICs within global and regional agro-food systems is another under-explored dimension of contemporary agrarian transformations. These are evident in differences between the expanding activities and impacts of China in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis those of Thailand in East and Southeast Asia, and the complex role of Argentinian soya seed firms in the Brazilian seed industry. Fourth, the rise of different forms of populism, authoritarianism, and combinations of these two

(i.e. ‘authoritarian populism’) is one of the defining features of the current political moment among BRICS countries, as well as many of the MICs, and key developed countries such as the United States and many countries in Europe. Our hunch is that the rise of populism, authoritarianism, or authoritarian populism in various parts of the world is interconnected, and that their rural roots and dynamics, although largely under-studied to date, need to be better understood (Scoones et al., 2018).

This collection, together with the recent set of papers published in *Third World Thematics*, can be seen as a preliminary attempt to help kick-start a conversation around these themes, and to shape an emerging research agenda. Below we argue why such a research agenda matters for critical agrarian studies.

Internal agrarian transformations within BRICS countries

In each of the BRICS countries, profound changes are under way in rural society and their agrarian economies. These include increased levels of concentration in landholdings, changes in the character of rural–urban links, shifting patterns of migration, the promotion of smallholder farming alongside the rise of corporate agribusiness, increasing degrees of vertical integration within value chains, the intensified ‘supermarketization’ of food retailing, and different combinations of these processes. Understanding why BRICS countries have aggressively crossed borders to seize and take control of natural resources (land, water, seas, forests, minerals, commodity chain, and so on) in distant places requires getting to grips with the concrete conditions found in these settings, as well as identifying accumulation imperatives within the BRICS countries. These play out in various interrelated ways, including: (a) an over-accumulation of capital and hence the need to invest it elsewhere; this is evident in the Belt and Road Initiative of China; (b) the need to secure cheaper sources of the means of agrarian production (land, labour, raw materials); this is largely what has been driving the global land/resource rush that has involved the BRICS countries as farmland investors; (c) the limits of domestic markets within the BRICS countries, and the need to gain control of lucrative markets abroad; and (d) more straightforward political motivations, such as the need to secure a stable supply of cheap food for internal consumption, to appease an inherently politically volatile working class and ensure affordable food provisioning.

In addition, and closely linked to the above processes, a fuller understanding of why the BRICS countries have engaged in aggressive cross-border economic and political activities over the past two decades requires a systematic understanding of internal agrarian transformations within these countries. This in turn requires us to examine BRICS countries as key sites of the contemporary commodification of remaining agrarian commons’ (land, water, seas, forest, and minerals) and labour, intimately related to the extension of the broader spheres and structures of commodity production, distribution, circulation, and consumption – and how these are dialectically linked to ‘external’ social, economic, and political processes. This is evident in a number of ways, two of which are strategically important.

On the one hand, we see a significant restructuring of commodity production, distribution, and circulation dynamics within these countries and beyond. For instance, the demise of soya production inside China was not an accident. Considerations of productivity and competitiveness motivated a government policy decision to aggressively outsource soya production (Hairong, Yiyuan, & Bun, 2016), thus triggering the rise of a BRICS country, Brazil – in combination with an MIC, Argentina, as a new global hub of soya capitalism, with far-reaching implications for the United States, the traditional site of most soya production and consumption (Oliveira, 2016, 2017; Oliveira & Schneider, 2016). Ripple effects included the emergence of a soya complex in the southern cone of Latin

America (Escher, Schneider, & Ye, 2017; Sauer, Balestro, & Schneider, 2017). McKay (2017) has shown how the global-regional restructuring of the soya complex in turn prompted the creation of the Bolivian soya complex, facilitated by both the Brazilian and Bolivian states and dominated by Brazilian capital.² Similarly, Craviotti (2017) discusses how Argentinean soya seed companies have responded to these processes by becoming *multilatin* firms, merging or joining (multi-) national companies taking advantage of governmental support (Sauer & Mészáros, 2017).

On the other hand, we see significant global shifts in relation to specific commodities that in turn trigger the restructuring of commodity chains within BRICS countries. For example, the rise of the 'flex sugarcane complex', in which commodities produced from sugarcane crop can be used for multiple purposes (as sweeteners, ethanol, and other commercial and industrial uses), has seen a net increase in the area of sugarcane area planted globally over the past two decades. Brazil is a key player in the global flex sugarcane complex (McKay, Sauer, Richardson, & Herre, 2016; Borrás, Franco, Isakson, Levidow & Vervest, 2016), which is shaping the sugar industry in regions such as Southern Africa (Dubb, Scoones, & Woodhouse, 2017) and in countries such as India and China. Borrás et al. (2017) trace the trajectory of the boom of sugarcane production in south-eastern China during the past decade or so, that has significantly different features from crop booms elsewhere. This is partly because it is based on production on the small plots of thousands of smallholders, who have either leased their lands to companies or have engaged directly in sugarcane production themselves. Unlike the soya sector, signals from the sugarcane sector indicated that production in south-eastern China could be globally competitive. However, recent indications suggest that the inability of Chinese producers to secure productivity increases through mechanization and irrigation may undermine the sustainability of the sugarcane boom, forcing companies to cross borders and tap into the cheaper means of production and labour in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, as argued by Mills (2017) and Schoenberger, Hall, and Vandergeest (2017).

Interconnected processes of social change within and in relations between the agrarian sectors of BRICS countries, MICs and other countries, and the broader patterns they reveal, require deeper empirical investigation. Contributions to the current collection, together those in the special issue of *Third World Thematics* (2016), have been able to undertake only initial explorations. Many relevant and consequential questions require further reflection and investigation, including: what are the key similarities and differences between the agrarian structures of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa? What are the historical processes that shaped these countries' current situation, with special attention to convergences and divergences between these countries? What is the role of smallholders and family farmers in the agrarian system? What challenges and pressures are they confronted with, and what patterns of social differentiation are emerging? What forms of collective action are evident and possible? How are local and national processes of agrarian transformation being shaped by global and transnational processes of investment, trade, and inter-state relations (and vice versa)? What contradictions and antagonisms have emerged, and, as Escher et al. (2017) ask, how should social struggles in these contexts be characterized (e.g. in terms of Polanyi's notion of a 'double-movement')?

The role of BRICS countries within their regions

Internal agrarian transformations in BRICS countries are in turn interacting with changes in rural societies and agrarian economies in their neighbouring countries. As several articles in this collection discuss, BRICS countries are expanding their presence in their respective regions, partly by promoting state and corporate partnerships and investment deals, as well as supporting private individual

business transactions. These processes do not simply represent the expansion of these countries into their respective regions, as ‘imperial or sub-imperial’ powers (Bond, 2015); rather, the strategies and actions of both states and companies interact with dynamic changes already under way within these regions. At least three important social processes are underscored by articles in this collection.

First, the cost of the means of production, principally land and labour, could, and did, rise to a level that rendered production inside BRICS countries relatively less competitive regionally or globally. This forced them to try to secure access to and control over cheaper land and labour supplies elsewhere, and their neighbouring countries have offered vast opportunities. When labour became scarce and expensive in the production of sugarcane in southern China, it was possible to maintain the level of crop production only by employing cheap Vietnamese migrant workers (Le, Vu, & Borrás, 2017). In recent years, between November and March, up to 80,000 Vietnamese migrant workers per annum have illegally crossed the border into China to seek employment cutting cane. When land becomes scarce and expensive, and production costs in general rise in relation to output, expanding into the wider region becomes the most logical step to secure profitability, as demonstrated by South African sugarcane corporate giants in recent years (Dubb, 2017; Martiniello, 2016).

Second, the availability of both finance capital and relatively more lucrative investment opportunities elsewhere often entice companies from BRICS countries to cross borders. Available capital may either be that accumulated within the BRICS countries themselves, or originate elsewhere, and then invested in (or alternatively, passed through) a BRICS country. A dollar invested by a South African company in farmland in Zambia may yield better profits than when invested inside South Africa, for various reasons. That dollar may be drawn from over-accumulated capital held by a South African company, or it may be held by a German bank wanting to invest in farmland, but for a variety of reasons prefers is invested via a South African intermediary. Hall and Cousins (2017), Campbell (2016), and Martiniello (2016) have explored these dynamics quite extensively in the African context.³ We see similar regional dynamics elsewhere. They are at the core of what is known as Trans-Latina Corporations or *multilatin* firms (Borrás, Franco, Gómez, Kay, & Spoor, 2012; Craviotti, 2017; Sauer et al., 2017). In these processes, the ultimate provenance of much the capital that is invested, although apparently originating from the Cayman Islands or Panama, is often Europe, Russia, China, Brazil, or the United States (Borrás et al., 2012).

Third, the combination of increasingly vibrant regional economic hubs and relatively loose regulation of capital facilitates the emergence of layers of individual entrepreneurs, speculators, brokers, and scammers straddling increasingly porous national borders. The past decade, for example, has seen an increase in farmland investments but without the visible involvement of well-known, iconic corporations. Many of these are ‘stealth transactions’, only some of which are legal. The rise of the soya complex in Paraguay and in Bolivia, for example, has been anchored not by iconic Brazilian soya corporations, but by a migrating and enterprising mass of *gauchos* – rich southern Brazilian farmers of European descent. Some of them are already citizens of Paraguay or Bolivia, others are not, but they remain firmly linked to Brazil and are even encouraged by the Brazilian state (McKay, 2017; Sauer & Mészáros, 2017; Wilkinson, Valdemar, & Lopane, 2016). There has been a similar process involving individual white commercial farmers from South Africa moving north in to the rest of Africa (Hall, 2012; Hall & Cousins, 2017). This kind of process is also responsible for the profound transformation of land holdings in the northern states of Myanmar (Franco & Borrás, *in press*). It can involve areas of farmland larger than those openly acquired by corporations, and is difficult to govern because it operates below the radar of formal regulatory institutions.

In this collection, authors have managed to only scratch the surface of these kinds of intra-regional dynamics. Many questions remain, including the following: what kinds of agrarian

transformation are underway in the regions in which BRICS countries are located? What are the dominant (but also countervailing) directions of change in agro-food systems, and what endogenous and exogenous forces are driving such changes? What role is played by state policies, and how do these condition the behaviour of private sector actors – and in turn, how are private sector forces shaping state responses? What are the outcomes of changes in demographic structure, patterns of settlement and migration, input systems, levels investments in agriculture and other rural productive sectors, levels of agricultural production and the rise of boom crops, agro-processing and the rise of manufactured foods, and the relative importance of formal and informal markets for agricultural products? What is the character of relations between the BRICS countries and other MICs located within their regions? What food system is emerging at the regional level, who are the winners and losers in this, and where is this spatially located? What are the changing dynamics of the patterns of production, circulation, and consumption of food, at national, regional, and global levels? What factors – including political, demographic, economic, environmental and climatic – are driving these changes?

In addition, we can ask: in what ways are agricultural and food value chains being restructured? What are the roles of, and interests shaping, the retail sector's expansion and what is the scope, significance, and politics of its promotion of alternative food production and restructured value chains (organic, buying local, preferential procurement)? How is concentration of ownership and control in these value chains occurring, and how have power relations shifted between family farmers and agribusiness sectors, and among them? With what effects on production and accumulation? What is the role of BRICS countries in the emerging financialization of agriculture? How are the BRICS countries' roles in global trade in food and agricultural commodities changing? What are their histories of trade and trading partners, and through what historical processes have they helped to constitute the current global agro-food system? Through what political, legal, and other processes are the current changes unfolding? How is membership of the BRICS group influencing and enabling this change, and how are other actors responding, and to what effect? What new sites of contestation around food production, circulation, and consumption are opening up and what possibilities for alternatives are emerging?

The rise of MICs in relation to BRICS

What makes the rise of the BRICS countries both interesting and complex is the parallel rise of a small number of powerful MICs that have become important sites of agricultural commodity production, distribution, circulation, and consumption in their own right. Examples include Chile and Argentina in Latin America; Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia; and Nigeria and Kenya in Africa. These countries are also sites of important internal agrarian transformations over the past few decades, marked by deepening commodification of their natural resources and labour. Articles in this collection contribute two key insights.

First, BRICS countries are in either alliance or competition with other regional powers. Agribusiness, mining, food, real estate, finance, and banking corporations from MICs have also become large and powerful in their domestic markets, and hence have begun to look beyond their national borders for opportunities to engage in expanded accumulation (Campbell, 2016; Hall & Cousins, 2017; McKay, 2017). From a regional perspective, corporations from MICs are just as pervasive, entrenched and influential as their counterparts from both BRICS countries and traditional hubs of capital. In some instances, companies from BRICS countries forge alliances with these other economic powers, on other occasions they compete with them. Chinese and Vietnamese companies, for

example, are among the most dominant farmland and mining investors in Cambodia and Laos, and they appear to coordinate decisions on which corporation will acquire which lands in these countries, facilitated by supportive and friendly governments (Thuon, 2017). In the sugarcane boom and eucalyptus tree plantation expansion in south-eastern China, foreign companies, including Thai sugarcane companies, and an Indonesian pulp and paper company, compete fiercely with Chinese companies (Borras et al., 2017).

Second, companies in MICs also aggressively cross national borders, including into BRICS countries, in order to secure access to cheap raw materials, land and labour (often cheaper than their own), or because the targeted country has a more lucrative market than their own home market. In doing so, they have become either coveted investors or despised land grabbers in neighbouring countries. They tend to target two kinds of investment destination: (i) poorer neighbouring countries and (ii) equally powerful and wealthy countries in their regions. Thuon (2017) describes why and how a Vietnamese company seized control of land in Cambodia for rubber production, generating much conflict with Cambodian villagers.

This is not an isolated case. Vietnamese corporations are active in many countries, and entrenched in Cambodia and Laos. A Malaysian oil palm company has seized control 48,000 acres of Karen villagers' land for oil palm plantation (Franco & Borras, *in press*). Thai sugar companies are among the largest and most dominant corporate players in the sugarcane boom in south-eastern China (Borras et al., 2017). One of the foreign paper and pulp companies that has seized control of an enormous amount of villagers' land in China in order to produce eucalyptus is Indonesian (Xu, 2018a, 2018b). Argentinean soya companies are among the most significant investors in Paraguay, while Chilean timber companies are among the biggest firms operating in Brazil (Andrade, 2016).

In the context of the global land rush literature and the many debates it has generated, it is clear that: (a) the role of MICs is often missed and (b) the reality is that BRICS countries – often portrayed as the domestic base of large-scale land grabbers – are actually also important sites of land grabbing by foreign companies. This complicates how we think about agro-commodity booms and global commodity chains, and these insights should inform both strategies to resist land grabs and attempts to formulate alternative approaches to agro-food system governance.

Populism, authoritarianism, and authoritarian populism

The rise of the BRICS countries and other MICs has coincided with the rise of populism, authoritarianism, and authoritarian populism, worldwide. Is this a random occurrence, or is there a link between these two phenomena? Our hunch is that there is a connection between the two, and this can be seen in a number of ways.

First, the economic rise of BRICS countries and MICs was partly the result of manufacturing capital migrating from industrialized countries to the Global South, seeking greater profits by securing cheaper raw materials, cheaper labour, fewer environmental regulations, reduced taxes, and access to lucrative markets. As industrial jobs multiplied in the BRICS and MICs, they began to disappear in parts of the Global North, resulting in abandoned industrial belts such as the so-called Rust Belt in the mid-West of the United States, or in zones marked by the absence of jobs, enterprises and economic opportunities, such as rural America or the north of the UK. This has in turn contributed to the rural population's support for right wing, nationalist and xenophobic forms of politics that have capitalized on the issues of rural marginalization and powerlessness. This helped to get Trump elected in the United States, and nearly led to the election of Marine Le Pen in France, for instance (Scoones et al., 2018; Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018).

Second, the rise of right wing, nationalist, and xenophobic political movements in several industrialized countries, e.g. United States, France, Germany, and Austria, have generated forms of public rhetoric in which BRICS countries and MICs are accused of ‘stealing’ jobs and factories from citizens of ‘industrialized’ countries. In turn, this has provoked right wing and nationalist posturing and rhetoric from leaders in some of these countries, e.g. the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia and the Duterte government in the Philippines, with negative socio-economic and political consequences for rural inhabitants in these countries.

Third, the increased traffic of (usually illegal) migrant farmworkers and other members of the rural poor across national borders, such as Morocco – Italy/Spain, Mexico/Central America – USA/Canada, Zimbabwe/Mozambique – South Africa, and Vietnam – south-eastern China, has further contributed to the rise of xenophobic and nationalist-populist tendencies in many countries, even when the rural jobs they take up are unlikely to be filled by citizens of host countries.

In short, it is possible that the rise of various strands and combinations of populism and authoritarianism within the BRICS and MICs is intimately linked to the rise of similar political tendencies in wealthy countries in the Global North. Articles in this collection have not tackled this issue to any significant extent. Yet, we argue that this is an important nexus of questions that require broad-ranging empirical inquiry and theorizing within the field of critical agrarian studies and beyond.

Implications for critical agrarian studies more broadly

Individually and collectively, the contributions to this collection offer multiple insights for contemporary critical agrarian studies in general, on the one hand, and for our efforts at developing a fuller understanding of the causes and conditions of the rise of the BRICS countries and MICs, and the consequences for global agrarian transformations, on the other hand. We conclude by discussing a few key themes.

First, the agrarian dimension of the rise of BRICS countries is critically important. Processes of agrarian change in these countries and in their neighbouring regions involve an extremely large number of rural people and an enormous quantity of natural resources located inside these countries and elsewhere in the world. Yet, this has been one of the most under-explored dimensions of scientific research and public debates on the BRICS. The available studies that engage with agrarian issues tend to be focused on how BRICS countries secure natural resources and markets in distant regions – involving inter-regional dynamics (e.g. McKay, Alonso-Fradejas, Brent, Sauer, & Xu, 2016 for China in Latin America), relations between BRICS countries (e.g. Zhou, 2017, for Chinese investments in Russia), and so-called South-South links (e.g. Milhorange, 2017, for Brazil in Latin America and Africa). This collection validates the importance of these, and at the same time demonstrates that the full range of agrarian dynamics is in fact far more extensive and complex, and requires systematic research. Our current collection, together with the special issue of *Third World Thematics*, has made only preliminary contributions to a deeper understanding of the BRICS phenomenon, perhaps provoking more questions than providing definitive answers.

Second, the parallel rise of MICs requires deeper examination. While an increasing number of empirical studies suggest that MICs have been transformed into key sites of commodity production, distribution, circulation, and consumption, none have examined such dynamics in a generalized manner or in relation to the rise of BRICS countries. We have barely scratched the surface of this issue in our own collection, but it does provide us with the basis for suggesting that this particular dimension of global agrarian transformation warrants deeper and more systematic empirical investigation and theorizing.

Third, multi-directional processes of change in social relations around land, labour, and capital within and between BRICS countries are most concretely observed when examined at a regional level, where the role of MICs is also most concrete. While there are quite a number of regionally situated studies in the context of contemporary agrarian transformations (e.g. Schoenberger et al., 2017), there have been few systematic empirical and theoretical studies of specific regional sites as a unit of analysis. This collection includes some interesting and provocative individual contributions on particular regions, e.g. Sauer et al. (2017) and Hall and Cousins (2017), but at best these allow us to argue that deeper and more systematic inquiry along these lines has great potential.

Fourth, this special issue demonstrates that the importance of current discussions about global governance of the agri-commodity boom and the global resource rush is both re-affirmed and questioned. Re-affirmed, because many of the global governance instruments being discussed at present clearly have great potential if interpreted and activated more universally. Questioned, because most discussions of these global governance instruments tend to be focused only on lower income countries in the Global South, rather than more broadly, but are highly relevant in MICs too (see related discussion by Franco, Park, & Herre, 2017).

Finally, we suggest that discussions of populism, authoritarianism, or authoritarian populism can be deepened and broadened if seen in the context of the rise of the BRICS countries and MICs. It is not an accident that the BRICS countries and many of the MICs are sites of the emergence of these forms of politics. They are not isolated from the rise of populism, authoritarianism, or authoritarian populism across the globe, but rather closely connected to the phenomenon in various ways and with a variety of implications. These ‘various ways’ and ‘variety of implications’ warrant deeper and more systematic empirical investigation if we want to better understand these kinds of politics – and how they link to the rural world.

Notes

1. A recent special issue of *Third World Thematics* (McKay et al., 2016 and others) contains an important set of contributions on processes of agrarian change in BRICS countries and their regions, and these are further explored in this collection. The articles in both collections arise from work undertaken for the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS) – see www.iss.nl/bicas and www.plaas.org.za/bicas. Most of the scholars participating in this initiative are located in BRICS countries.
2. For a broader perspective on this specific example, see Wilkinson et al. (2016).
3. See Campbell (2016) for why South African supermarkets are investing heavily in other Southern African countries.

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