

CONSENSUS AND CONTENTION: A NOTE ON THE CURRENT STATE OF THE LAND DEBATE

Anne Vaughan

In his Comments on the Harare Recommendations published in the last issue of *Transformation*, Alec Erwin states that the processes of 'interacting with the constituencies, mobilising around and defending key issues and co-ordinating research' should be pushed forward with some urgency, because otherwise 'we'll have nothing to debate with capital' (Erwin, 1990:18). This note on the ways in which the land question in South Africa is being contended, takes as its starting point, and uses as a framework, this central issue of the debate with capital. How is the debate around the land question being constituted, and what are the key substantive issues which are being (or which should be) formulated and defended? The core of material referred to here consists in the two articles focussing on land reform which appeared in the last issue of *Transformation* (De Klerk and Dolny), the Harare Document which also appeared in that issue, and the recently published Private Sector Council on Urbanisation (PSC) policy document, *Rural Development: Towards a new framework*. The material is taken as 'representative' for the purposes of a broad-brush review of the debate. It is impossible to deal with the differences or nuances of position within the opposing camps in the present context.

The central point which I wish to make is that progressive organizations and academics are now likely to be pre-empted by capital on many land issues which might at one time have seemed extremely contentious. The arena of debate appears to have shrunk, and within that shrunken arena, progressives seem to have very little of substance to say, either because their positions remain vague and ill-defined (and bedevilled by a compulsory rhetoric), or because they fail to articulate these positions at the level of concrete economic realities, and policy formulation.

It may, of course, be argued that the pre-emptions which capital can effect are substantially founded on an appropriation (and perhaps a degree of reshaping) of earlier research findings of progressive and left academics. There are a number of examples in the PSC policy document of such appropriation. The outline of the history of black agriculture presented in that document is obviously derived from the work of Beinart, Bundy, and other agrarian historiographers.

The thesis that the viability of black agriculture was deliberately and systematically destroyed by racist legislation and policy, is not only uncontested, it is accepted as the key to an understanding of the present state of black agriculture. The iniquity of 'black spot' removals is illustrated through a summary of the Driefontein case, and clearly draws on the analyses of Claassens.

The PSC document does not base itself only on secondary material. It is substantially grounded in primary research commissioned over the last five years, and according to Ann Bernstein none of the researchers was 'constrained in any way in respect of their research framework, methods or conclusions' (1990:407). The list of commissioned research reflects a diversity of positions across the political spectrum. Given the closeness of parts of the PSC document to De Klerk's *Transformation* article, it is unsurprising to find that his work is heavily represented in the list.

There is no point, in the context of political debate, in bemoaning this appropriation of research findings or of policy proposals. In effect, what the appropriation means is that areas of contention become areas of common ground. More important is to understand why it is that previously contested terrain is no longer so, and to clarify, in the light of this understanding, the parameters of a redefined debate. And it seems likely to be a debate in which many politically high profile issues will be dealt with quickly and perfunctorily, so accruing little kudos. A residue will be left of difficult knotty questions over which it may be much harder to interact with constituencies, and around which it may not be so simple to mobilise.

When the four pieces under consideration are placed side by side, it is clear that there is little disagreement on a number of key questions. Dolny starts off by emphasising the need for a 'long-term economic policy of a decisive socialist orientation', because otherwise, she asserts, there will be 'no hope of redressing the historical injustices of apartheid capitalism' (Dolny, 1990:90). This is a very sanguine view. What the PSC document and De Klerk's article illustrate is that it is quite possible to redress many of the injustices of apartheid capitalism within the parameters of a market-based economy which preserves the principle of private initiative - and to redress these in such a way as to gain the credibility and legitimacy which is recognized in the PSC document as crucial to the continued survival of such a system. It is precisely this issue of credibility and legitimacy which explains why capital has moved so quickly to appropriate, and present as its own, previously ignored or contested ideas and solutions which were formerly the comfortable prerogative of the left. In the PSC document, a giveaway observation is made in connection with the possible contradiction between efficiency and equity. 'Equity is an essential consideration both on moral grounds and for sustained legitimacy. Furthermore, in the

long run, inequity induces instability which makes the attainment of efficiency impossible and brings into question the continuation of the existing system of wealth generation' (PSC 4, 1990:42).

A useful exercise is thus to delineate the broad areas of substantial agreement in the material under consideration, and then to focus in on the differences. How substantial and practical are the distinctively *different* policy proposals which are made? - and how specifically capitalist or socialist are they?

The repeal of all racially discriminatory legislation, as well as the repeal or serious review of the Subdivision of the Land Act, is an agreed-upon first line of action. The holding of land by individuals is an accepted principle, as is the productive use of land by those who hold it. However, the PSC document stresses that in the interests of people in black and 'Coloured' rural areas, there should be no immediate or arbitrary change to the land tenure system in those areas. There is agreement that mechanisms should be set up to facilitate land claims. (The proposed mechanisms are, however, suggestive of different orientations. The emphasis in the PSC document is on a politically neutral judicial process, whereas Dolny points to the ANC recommendation of a Land Claims Campaign.) The claims of the victims of forced removals and of evicted labour tenants should be dealt with particularly urgently. The agricultural support system to which whites have had exclusive access should be reoriented so as to serve the interests of a restructured agrarian economy. Farmworkers should be subject to the same labour legislation as industrial workers, and should enjoy the same rights and protection. The PSC document adds that farmworkers should not be inhibited from access to amenities and community institutions, whereas Dolny places a particular stress on training and skills acquisition for farmworkers. The importance of the agricultural sector in offering employment opportunities is highlighted, as is the problematic effect of labour-saving technology on the number of agricultural jobs. Communities should participate in the processes of rural restructuring. Environmental and conservation issues should be key considerations in policy formulation.

What is there to disagree about? The rhetoric in Dolny's article (phrases like 'definitive socialist orientation' and 'the repossession of land and its means of production' (1990:90 and 99) would certainly be most unpalatable to the PSC, which undoubtedly has as its agenda the 'de-raced capitalism' Dolny warns against (1990:91). Instead of the non-racial land market which the PSC advocates, and which constitutes the parameter for De Klerk's discussion, Dolny recommends state control of the land market. The state would intervene in the market by prohibitions on form and scale of ownership, and with regard to leasehold, state control would be effected through the operation of a Land Board. The recommended forms of production differ considerably. The whole emphasis

in the PSC document, and in De Klerk's paper, is on private initiative in a market-based system, with reliance on limited state intervention and on a degree of manipulation of market processes to effect restructuring. Dolny and the Harare Document place a stress on co-operatives, and on joint ventures between co-operatives and private enterprise, or between the state and private enterprise. Dolny advocates state farms, which, she says, 'may offer the best potential for a radical transformation of the relations of production' (1990:98). There is no mention of state farms in the Harare Document.

With regard to smallholder production there are quite widely differing perspectives. The PSC document presents specific proposals for the development of smallholder farming (special agricultural areas with flexible ownership and tenurial patterns), as well as a costing exercise for small farmer settlement and support. De Klerk's article is strongly oriented towards the legislative and support needs of smallholders. The Harare Document mentions the promotion of smallholder production along with co-operatives and joint ventures. Dolny's attitude to smallholder production is highly ambiguous. Using a mixture of marxist and neo-populist (Chayanovian) conceptions (capitalist economies create and sustain smallholder production, which through the super self-exploitation of the producers can provide cheap food and raw material), she initially rejects outright the development of small-scale farming. However, there are references in her paper which seem to assume the existence of a petty producers' sector. She states, for instance, that 'farmworker unionisation, peasant association, and the right to strike are key factors in the struggle to redress imbalances' (1990:95).

The productive core of agriculture is a bone of contention. The PSC document argues that proficient production should not be tampered with, and De Klerk says that 'efficient existing producers should be protected' (1990a:85), whereas Dolny asserts that 'without taking over that sector of agriculture which is efficient and profitable we would be condemning millions of black South Africans to long-term poverty in the less profitable sector of agriculture' (1990:103). This difference of attitude is consonant with the difference in approach to the process of land acquisition. The PSC document refers approvingly to the Zimbabwean 'willing buyer, willing seller' model (PSC 4, 1990:39), although this does not necessarily mean that other modes of land acquisition are precluded. De Klerk considers in some detail the consequences of expropriation of various categories of land with and without compensation. He points out that it is the quality rather than the quantity of expropriated land that will be crucial, and 'will determine whether a land reform is merely redistributive or developmental as well' (De Klerk, 1990:12).¹ The Harare Document is silent on the mechanisms of land acquisition and redistribution. Dolny is clearly in favour of

a programme of selective nationalisation and expropriation, with resources for compensation being created through a tax on businesses.

Policy recommendations which are specific to the PSC document are the opening and development of amenities and facilities in small towns; access to residential land, security of tenure, and infrastructural development for people living in closer settlements or subsistence farming areas; and the provision of opportunities for non-agricultural rural development. PSC recommendations which derive quite explicitly from De Klerk's work are the provision by leasehold of state-owned land for communal grazing; a re-evaluation of policies and administrative procedures which favour large farmers; the protection of tenants through the creation of tenants' rights legislation; and the extension of the at present bantustan-based farmer support programmes to include farmers in all areas. There are (very important) prohibitions which are specific to the PSC document. South African Development Trust Land should not be arbitrarily disposed of, and there should be no immediate alteration of the tenurial forms in black and 'Coloured' rural areas.

What light is thrown on the land debate by an attempt to separate from a tangled skein the threads of consensus, and the threads of contention? The forms of production advocated in the Harare Document and by Dolny call for comment. The notion of the joint venture as an economic form transitional to worker management and control may sound like an attractive option, because it has a strongly socialist orientation, while at the same time offering a means of preserving economies of scale. But is it realistic or practical? Joint ventures have been mooted and tried before. In 1918, Lenin envisaged a rapprochement between the Soviet state and capitalist industry. The logic of the collaboration with capitalists, which Lenin called 'state capitalism', was that capitalists represented the progressive forces because they 'possessed "organizational capacity on the scale of millions", and habits and knowledge of accounting and distributing goods on a scale of a national economy' (Lewin, 1975:75). The 'state capitalism' experiment, which foundered on the rocks of capitalist non-cooperation, was extremely shortlived. The circumstances were inauspicious, but it is hard to imagine what possible motivation capital could have, even under the best of circumstances, for co-operating with a state or a co-operative which intended eventually to eliminate it. Careful attention is paid by De Klerk to circumstances or conditions which might provoke a flight of capital, or lack of business confidence. It is important to consider proposals about future forms of production in this light.

The co-operative seems like a good idea because it accords with socialist organizational forms. And it is precisely the internal dynamics of the co-operative which Dolny focusses on. Co-operatives should be privileged with regard

to credit, taxation, marketing and training because they 'pay attention to community democracy, the numbers of jobs, the nature of the work, the distribution of the product and the improvement of the social welfare of the community' (1990:103). What must be borne in mind, however, is that, as Preobrazhensky points out, co-operation can exist within capitalism without undermining it in any way, which 'shows quite plainly that co-operation in itself contains no active principle of transformation in the direction of socialized production-relations'. Even though co-operation might have more affinity with the socialist organisation of labour than with the capitalist, it is fragile and very susceptible to the pressures of the economic laws which dominate the wider economy (Preobrazhensky, 1965:218-23).

Dolny's advocacy of state farms is hard to take seriously, given the utterly abysmal economic performance of this form of production in the Soviet Union, and taking cognisance of Soviet attempts to restructure socialized agriculture through the introduction of market forces and strong elements of private initiative. Gorbachev stated recently that an agrarian policy should be worked out which will 'restore the farmer as the master on the land and dependably resolve the food problem', and that 'The essence of economic change in the countryside should be in granting farmers broad opportunities for displaying independence, enterprise and initiative'. This would involve a restructuring of forms of property and economic relations 'on the basis of the continued development of commodity-money relations' (Gorbachev, 1989:2, 22, 28).

The argument that genuinely socialized forms of production have never emerged in Soviet-type economies can, of course, be made. And the need for restructuring can be attributed to this. However, it is a thin and unconvincing thesis in the current context of the collapse of what is popularly understood to be a communist system. De Klerk's point that 'small individual farms in general offer a more productive access route to land for blacks in South Africa than the failed large state farms and production co-operatives of Eastern Europe' is sound (De Klerk, 1990b:12).²

The forms of production Dolny proposes have a strong socialist connotation. But in the absence of an attempt to ground them in the specifics of the current South African conjuncture, so that they become feasible ways of meeting frustrated and suppressed aspirations and needs, they will remain purely prescriptive - the meaningless gesturings of a tired socialist rhetoric. Furthermore, there is in the advocacy of forms of production, and in the prescriptive statements about the management of leasehold land, a strong overtone of the 'statist approach', and a suggestion of the 'planning from first principles rather than from empiricism' which Cross has noted to be features of an approach to land issues common to the ANC and the National Party (Cross, 1990:537).

By contrast to these ideas, which seem remote from South African realities, are the practical and locally-rooted proposals of the PSC. The PSC may be contradictory, evasive, and mealy-mouthed about land redistribution. (The productive core of agriculture should remain untouched, yet special agricultural areas, which should not be perceived to be associated with marginal land, should be established on high potential land!) However, it has much to say which will appeal to a spectrum of constituencies. For instance, it addresses itself to issues which are of relevance to new commercial farmers, and to existing or potential small farmers. And it deals with the crucial question of tenancy. Furthermore, it has no less to say to farmworkers than progressive organizations and unionists. Pre-emption in the debate implies also pre-emption with regard to constituencies.

The PSC document has throw-away lines about 'the relationship between development and democracy', and 'the role of community participation in development' (PSC 4, 1990:40). The PSC does not have the political/organizational base which would enable it to give substance to these ideas. But these tokenist statements touch on a dimension of policy and practice which should be of great political concern to progressive organizations participating in the land debate. This has to do with the specific nature and orientation of rural restructuring. The principles of farmer settlement and farmer support, the structuring of credit and of extension services, and the systems that farmers, particularly smallholders, are or will be keyed into, are all political issues, and are not neutral or merely technical ones. The land debate needs to be reconstituted to include these matters. How settlement is implemented, and how support, credit and extension are structured at the community/bureaucracy interface impact on the balance of class forces in the countryside, and therefore have vast implications for the cast of agrarian relations. Dolny's question - what kind of economic orientation? - needs to be posed at this micro-level of policy formulation and implementation.

And failure to begin articulating feasible macro policy proposals which strongly resonate the experiences and aspirations of rural people, and which push both capital and the state beyond the limits of what they are presently prepared to concede, will mean the risk of a serious loss of credibility. 'The land question' is a phrase to which the adjective 'emotive' is often appended. But for the fact that the state is likely to be less conciliatory than capital, its 'resolution' might turn out to be a sadly flat and humdrum affair.

Notes

1. This quotation is taken from the revised version of De Klerk's paper.
2. This quotation is taken from the revised version of De Klerk's paper.

References

- Cross, C (1990) - 'Mythology and mystery tours in land reform: Getting some focus on the South African debate', in *Development Southern Africa* Vol 7 (Special issue).
- De Klerk, M (1990a) - 'Market-based options for land reform', in *Transformation*, 12
- De Klerk, M (1990b) - 'Market-based options for land reform' (Battle, East Sussex: Newick Park Initiative, conference paper)
- Dolny, H (1990) - 'Agriculture: conflicts of interest in a mixed economy', in *Transformation*, 12
- Erwin, A (1990) - 'Comments on the Harare document', in *Transformation*, 12
- Gorbachev, M (1989) - *On the Agrarian Policy of the CPSU in the Present Conditions* (Moscow: Novosty Press Agency Publishing House).
- Lewin, M (1975) - *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates* (London: Pluto Press)
- Preobrazhensky, E (1965) - *The New Economics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Private Sector Council on Urbanisation (1990) - *Rural Development: towards a new framework* (Jhannesburg: The Urban Foundation)
- 'Recommendations on Post-Apartheid Economic Policy - The Harare Document' - (1990) in *Transformation*, 12

A JOURNAL ABOUT WOMEN AND GENDER

P.O. BOX 3743
OVERPORT 4067

AGENDA aims to provide a forum for comment, discussion and debate on all aspects of women's lives. Our specific concern is to understand the position of women within South African society.

CONTRIBUTIONS of articles, biographical stories, interviews, poetry or photography that will enhance an understanding of women position and gender issues are welcome.

SUBSCRIPTION rates are available from **AGENDA**, PO BOX 37432, Overport, 4067. Phone (031)- 3054074