

Review

Maxim Bolt (2015) *Zimbabwe's Migrants and South Africa's Border Farms: the roots of impermanence*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

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The 2012/3 farm worker protests in the Western Cape exposed to a wide public the explosive nature of structural inequalities in South Africa's commercial farming landscape, especially the internationally acclaimed winelands. The moment prompted immediate debate about the post-apartheid realities for farm workers in a neoliberalised agricultural landscape (see Hendricks et al 2013). In *The Roots of Impermanence*, Maxim Bolt provides detailed insights in the lives of farm workers on export-oriented fruit farms situated on the South-African/Zimbabwean border. Bolt conducted 17 months of field work during 2006-8 by residing on the labour compound of a farm he calls Grootplaas Estates. The result is a well-researched, award-winning¹ narrative that makes a fascinating read about ways in which profound inequalities are generated under conditions of neoliberal agriculture and regional crisis. I will first engage the rich empirical material presented in the ethnography that contributes to our understanding of the agency of farm workers, migrants and to some extent black women on border farms. At the end of this review I critically engage Bolt's explanation for the roots of impermanence, in particular the notion of 'accidental' neoliberalism.

The book consists of eight chapters in which Bolt vividly portrays life on the border farms in the Limpopo Valley focusing on the ways in which the work place shapes social life on the farm. The book portrays how the farm workers organise space and social hierarchies into stable arrangements on which flexible capitalism depends (25). At Grootplaas,

the workforce consists of mostly Zimbabwean migrants who navigate regional instabilities on both side of the border; they are pushed out of Zimbabwe by economic and political upheavals and pulled into South Africa where export-oriented fruit farmers are in search for flexible labour to compete in a neoliberalised agricultural sector. Bolt situates the study in both literatures of labour migration and displacement to understand the mobility of Zimbabweans. In conversation with Polanyi, he asserts that disembeddedness is a precondition for the establishment of the workforce, yet webs of dependencies and relationships enable workers to establish a sense of permanence. In showing how this happens at Grootplaas, Bolt builds his argument that migrants produce permanence and assert belonging, in various ways, almost *despite* the fragmented environment and uncertain future they face. They root themselves in highly structured arrangements in the work place through relations with senior figures, women, soldiers and the spatial arrangements in the compound and in the rooms. In the process notions of masculinity, ethnicity, and class are negotiated and contested to establish hierarchies in the work force.

After the introduction follows a chapter that introduces the owners of Grootplaas Estates and explores how employers – white farmers – see themselves in relation to black people and the land. Bolt asserts that for South African or Zimbabwean white men, farming is no longer a rooted way of life, but a series of strategic business investments, a life ‘project’. Political and economic pressures fuel their sense of uncertainty. Bolt mentions farmers’ attempts to convince him of their truths, assuring him that they belong on the land due to their hard work and efforts to make a success of farming. Through their self-understandings we learn how farmers continue to assume their superior position in commercial farming and how this is linked to the process of becoming a man.

Chapter three draws on archival data to investigate the trajectory of border capitalism by exploring the relationship between the state and white capitalist miners and farmers during the first half of the twentieth century. In the Limpopo Valley, white farmers were able to use the tension created by the state’s interest in securing the border and their own interest in recruiting labour, to build stable conditions for production and their capitalist enterprises. Bolt traces how notions of farmers’ sovereignty and authority to control land and mobile black people, are embedded in the region’s history. For employers, mobility has always been a major problem shaping their labour recruitment practices. Bypassing state control has

been a consistent response to this frustration. An example of this are the laminated employment cards (103) issued to workers by farmers which are generally accepted by the police and soldiers. They connect (tie) workers to specific farms and ‘protect’ them from the state’s policing.

The following three empirical chapters are about the social arrangements of black people at Grootplaas based on Bolt’s survey data and structured interviews with 160 seasonal employees and 105 permanent workers and dependants. He worked with five research assistants as mentioned in a foot note on page 31. It would have been interesting to read and learn more about Bolt’s relations with them – as in the case of ‘Margaret’ – and the process of generating this impressive body of data. Perhaps more importantly would be to know how the research assistants contributed to the ideas presented in the book given the challenges faced by Bolt concerning his race, gender and class position as a British white male anthropologist having to constantly negotiate the linguistic complexity and extreme power differences in that setting.

The biggest differentiation in the workforce emphasised throughout the book is between *mapermanent* and seasonal workers. There are distinct residential boundaries and differences in housing conditions in the compound. Between and within these categories of workers there are various patterns of settlement and movement and ways of producing permanence depending on access to relative privileges. These include adapting housing, planting gardens and forging relationships with women and soldiers. Especially permanent workers are able to reproduce a form of domesticity through relationships with transient women for domestic work and sex. Throughout the book, although not its immediate focus, it is clear that black women sustain capitalist production and life on the farm while being at the bottom of the hierarchy of power. As Benya (2015:546) argues in her study of the relation between conditions in the mines and life beyond the workplace, the often invisible labour of women (the sphere of social reproduction) underpins production and sustains an economy premised on cheap labour power. The interdependencies at Grootplaas highlight this too.

In the chapter called ‘reimagining men’, Bolt looks at the workers’ models of masculinities, ethnicity and class. He illustrates the notion of middle-class respectability aspired by educated Zimbabwean migrants who want to distinguish themselves from Venda farm workers who have a lower status and are marked as uneducated. Ethnic differences between

Shona, Ndebele and Venda function as important markers of status. Especially in the picking teams, the middle-class conscious workers want to distance themselves from the sexualised male bravado type of masculinity dominating the orchards. Women, as spouses or housekeepers, are central in upkeeping notions of propriety in formal and informal marriages with male workers.

Chapter 6 illustrates vertical dependencies in the workforce through zooming in on two senior black workers at Grootplaas: the Zimbabwean personnel manager Michael, and South African foreman Marula. They embody two seemingly incompatible models of agriculture, namely paternalism and managerialism. Michael's and Marula's competing notions of authority, seniority and their relations with the workers form what Bolt calls a 'mediated paternalism' in which he argues these different visions of agriculture constitute each other.

In the last empirical chapter Bolt offers insights into the border economy, consisting of relations beyond the farm and informal livelihood strategies. The argument is that informal trade as well as remittances are directly linked to wage work and should not be viewed as separate spheres of the economy. Again, Bolt manages to show in detail how small-scale businesses and settled populations on the border farms are interrelated. In fact, informal goods and services (like credit) underpin the farms' formal production (189) and women again play a crucial role in this sphere.

In the concluding chapter Bolt asks what the prospects are for the workforce in relation to the uncertain future of the border farms. The area is targeted by Australian coal prospectors and farmers consider leaving for greener pastures. A paradox in South Africa is that the land reform process has led to more aggressive land transactions by farmers. Those who are in the position to search for profitable businesses elsewhere, destroy webs of vulnerable relations and dependencies in the process. According to Bolt (see also Bolt 2016), these realities should be understood as a process of 'accidental neoliberalism' (24) by which he means that the profound inequalities as described in *Roots of Impermanence* are not a reflection or effect of a planned singular process of global neoliberalism. It is rather the confluence of different context-specific political economic processes that shape the social structures and spatial arrangements on the border farms. I want to critically discuss the implications of presenting the Grootplaas realities as 'accidental' neoliberalism.

Interpreting the inequalities at Grootplaas as ‘accidental’ excuses the unjust intentions behind these realities and diffuses debate about ongoing racism and violence on farms. It steers away from a critical analysis of the balance of powers and focus on the agency, and responsibilities, of those who are best positioned to protect their self-interests or promote transformation. Indeed, the notion of ‘unintended consequences’ hides contested ideologies and values and it naturalises inequality (McCluskey 2012). In the context of the border farms, farmers might *perceive* their future as uncertain, but this is a white man’s *anxiety* about loss of power and a privileged belonging in Africa. Bolt states on the final pages of the book that ‘farmers’ enterprises...only survive through continual investment and competitive expansion’ (217). By presenting farmers’ choices as inevitable the analysis legitimises the consequences of these choices. Besides, there is a whole range of choices that reveal the harmful intent of the border farmers: how to speak to and approach black workers, how to distribute income and profits, how to accommodate workers, and so on. Employers are not forced to maintain the extreme differences in wealth and lifestyle, they choose to protect their privilege at the cost of black people whom they don’t regard as persons (see page 55 on their experience of being ‘isolated’ on farms where they live close to hundreds of black workers). The ethnography portrays very well how large-scale (white) landownership in a neoliberal jacket continues to generate extreme inequality and violence, but it fails to critically analyse power and agency of those who gain in the process.

The protection of power and property relations by nation states supporting neoliberal agriculture contradict efforts to protect workers, migrant labourers and black women in search for livelihoods and belonging. Farm workers’ struggles focus on fighting these systematic injustices. As result of the Western Cape protests, vulnerable people managed to force the state to listen to them and raise the minimum wages for farm workers, and they are still below living wages. On the border important questions remain, such as: what forms of resistance (Hendricks et al 2013) emerge in the context of border farms in the Limpopo Valley? Some permanent workers at Grootplaas imagined they will occupy the land and farm themselves or remain resident after the farm is sold to the mining company (210). What seeds of resistance are planted next to the roots of impermanence?

Note

1. Winner of the 2016 BBC Thinking Allowed/British Sociological Association Ethnography Award

References

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