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Land Reform and Belonging in South Africa: A Place-making Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Political debate around South African land reform peaks in the run up to the national elections. 2019 was no exception. Escalating urban ‘land grabs’ in 2017 had already increased emotion, tension and political urgency on the issue. However, the debate again carried surprisingly little weight at the polls. It was overshadowed by the burning issues of jobs, housing, crime, corruption and service delivery. We offer some insights into the racial and cultural topography of the attachment to land in South Africa, and how historical processes of settlement affect the nature of land hunger and demand in South Africa today through a place-making lens. The article is based on our own experiences, research and observations in rural and urban and urban areas, along with two recent studies of urban and rural land hunger we jointly undertook in 2017 and 2018. In retrospect it seems that, despite the perversely unequal nature of the South African spatial economy, there is an uncanny stability to local settlement patterns. Despite urbanisation, the homelands remain favoured spaces for African homemaking, while white South Africans cling to the coastline as a preferred place of investment. The debate about the productive use of land for development, we argue, should not be abstracted from an appreciation of the complex way in which land is inhabited, used and valued.

Introduction

Land reform remains a political and emotive lightning rod in South Africa and most of the rumpus around land seems to occur in the periods between national elections (Netsebeza and Hall 2007). Thus, land reform seems not to play much of a role in securing new votes or losing political party support. Indeed, Schwikowski (2019) observes, political commentators suggest that land reform is not the reason South Africans vote for a party or candidate: ‘They are more interested in jobs, health and increased security’. In previous elections, political parties have always included some mandate about land reform, jobs and housing, but this has not necessarily been realised. More than four million houses have been built by the state in urban areas and only an estimated 8–10% of commercial land has been distributed – less than the desired target of 30%. The desire for land redistribution has politically waxed and waned since 1994, yet it remains an issue that cannot be ignored by major political parties because of the importance of land redistribution for nation building and addressing inequality. The 2019 General elections were no different in respect to the significance of land redistribution. Despite the furore over expropriation
without compensation (EWC) during the two years preceding the 2019 General Elections and millions of Rands spent on determining if changing Section 25 of the Constitution was acceptable to the populace, no such change is in fact necessary (Netsebeza 2007; Ngcukaitobi 2018). Section 25 of the Constitution is quite clear on how land and other property can be expropriated in terms of existing law and allows for expropriation under certain circumstances, including those highlighted during the various workshops during 2018. The two new parties with land as a major political mandate and rallying point, the Black First Land First party and the Land Party, failed to secure seats in the National Parliament. The same fate befell the new Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, also having land as a core part of its mandate.

With regard to land reform and party-political promised mandates in the 2019 General Elections, most of the key parties represented in Parliament had little new to add to their usual beliefs about land reform. These parties focused on rural areas, agricultural development and agrarian reform in these areas. Only the Democratic Alliance (DA) specifically mentioned urban areas, where the greatest need for land is felt by South Africans. The African National Congress (ANC) continued with its past rhetoric of focusing on agricultural production and economic development along with collaboration with established agribusinesses (Ngcukaitobi 2019). According to the ANC no structural shifts, as necessary as they are, were tabled (ANC 2019). The farming economic model remains unexplained or even challenged, despite its lack of success for most land beneficiaries. The ANC dismissed EWC as a harmless necessity for ensuring faster and better land reform within the rule of law; as if a change in the Constitution or how land is acquired will really make a difference to the outcomes. Much more is needed and requires not only an egalitarian focus and greater investment by the state, but also a clear understanding of the demand for land and intended use so that diverse needs can be understood and catered for. Ironically, Ms Thoko Didiza, the former minister who drove land reform towards its current inegalitarian pathways, has returned as Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform to lead land reform into the future. Such an appointment seemingly illustrates that the government is unaware of local land hunger and the diverse purposes for which land is demanded.

The DA’s electoral promise on land reform starts by pointing out the corruption within the land reform programme, elite capture, lack of political will, post-acquisition support and training (DA 2019). The party then highlights the idea that EWC will negatively impact on the rights of all property owners and argues that they will protect these rights, despite their being enshrined in the Constitution. For the DA, the redress component of land reform and the emphasis on its importance for economic development is crucial. But much of what they have to say is almost an antithesis of the mandates outlined by the EFF and the ANC, while in other instances they like the ANC will work with existing farmers and agribusinesses (ANC 2019; DA 2019). They also don’t envisage much structural change and are keen to push for share equity scheme farms – a partnership of commercial farmers and their workers (DA 2019). The DA, like the ANC, largely remains unclear about how what they will do will create jobs and bring about economic development.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are against private property rights and want all land under the custodianship of the state, while certain game parks will be nationalised (EFF 2019). Since 2006, as part of the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS), recent
land redistribution means that this redistributed land is already under state custodianship. Yet, as Hall and Kepe (2017) observe, there has been little fairness or justice in this process, which largely manifests as elite capture whereby multinational firms and local elites lease this land from the state at relatively low costs, as opposed to redistribution to the poor. The EFF is silent on how this can be prevented. Unlike the DA and the ANC, the EFF is committed to passing legislation that will affect land redistribution and agrarian reform, which may lead to tangible structural change in these policy areas (EFF 2019). They are also willing to address communal and customary land rights and the protection of indigenous people from dispossession of land rights. Rather than working with existing farmers and agribusinesses, the EFF’s populist rhetoric wants to regulate these roleplayers (EFF 2019). Like the ANC, the EFF does not address corruption, which is as evident in land reform as elsewhere (AG 2019).

All three leading parties fail to address the plight of labour tenants and labour dwellers (farmworkers and their families). The DA might envisage them as part of their shared equity schemes, but these are actually very small in number and largely Western Cape-based. These schemes would not account for the numerous farmworkers and their families who become homeless by default when they resign or are dismissed. They are ignored by the ANC and the EFF.

While many academics and researchers have written about the inadequacies, inefficiency and even the historical continuities of land reform policy and practice in South Africa over the past 25 years (Aliber et al. 2013; Cochet, Anseeuw, and Fréguin-Gresh 2015; Cousins 2013; Cousins and Walker 2015; De Wet 1997; Greenberg 2010; Hebinck and Cousins 2013; James 2007; Kepe and Hall 2018; Weidman 2004), we consider a slightly different and less instrumentalist approach to understanding the contemporary ‘land issue’ in South Africa. Much has happened since 1995 that shapes the land reform debate. Policies and practices have changed, and financial resources allocated to the land reform budget has dropped significantly since 2008 (APLRA 2019, 13).1 Black South Africans now own farmland individually and have title deeds, and, despite training and infrastructure constraints, some of these farmers farm regularly and productively. South Africa experienced significant changes politically, economically, socially and culturally since the 1913 Land Act. We cannot simply return to a pre-1913 land status quo. Agriculture, the main driver of rural development in South Africa’s rural countryside, has changed. Since the 1960s farming units have got larger through consolidation, while the number of farming units has decreased (Liebenberg 2013). There are now fewer farmers (landowners), more capital-intensive technology is being used, and labour has been consistently shed. In this article we avoid offering a solution to the many constraints that have negatively affected land reform in so many ways as this goes beyond the space available. We believe it is more helpful to explore what land means to South Africans in the twenty-first century. Our starting point is that land reform should be considered from the perspective of land and its connectedness to social belonging (homemaking), i.e. from a cultural and not simply economic perspective. For years political parties have ignored the land needs of South Africans and the significance of land. Similarly, they continue to ignore the consequences of policies and thereby continue with the same strategies, based on little evidence.

In exploring rural livelihoods in the former Transkei, Shackleton and Hebinck (2018) argue that when trying to understand farming practices in the southern Transkei, we
should start from the premise of this place as a landscape of belonging. Here, they mean as a place for Xhosa home-making, where farming is still a critical component of multiple livelihood strategies, but not a necessary condition for homestead building (see McAllister 2001), which in turn is the building block for a connection to place. In this context, they suggest that household involvement in agriculture in the former Transkei simply cannot be seen as either a linear process of proletarianisation (the shift from a peasantry to a rural working class) nor as a process of de-agrarianisation (marking a permanent shift away from agriculture as a livelihood strategy). Instead, they speak of the conditions under which both ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ farming persists in a region of belonging (Shackleton and Hebinck 2018, 277), where the former focuses on field production and the latter on keeping a garden plot and small livestock next to the homestead to save money on food expenditure and to use the savings for other purposes, such as clothing, health and education (see Hart 2011).

In this article we consider the implications of a wider focus on landscape and home-making as a lens for understanding of the implications of land reform in South Africa. We suggest that the process of investment in, and the struggles for land, are profoundly shaped by cultural and place-making considerations that have important implications for the capacity of land reform policy and practice to build a more inclusive and productive economy and society. We also argue that contemporary shallow and increasingly exploitative, exclusionary forms of rentier capitalism on the land undermines the longer-term prospects for growth and development through more productive land use. Such strategies also offer limited capacity to address the challenges of economic inclusion and inequality – in fact they tend to do the opposite. Political manifestos and policies continue to ignore these realities and remain focused on 1994 (ANC 1994) and 1997 (DLA 1997) ideals of land redistribution and ignore the importance of place-making and social relationships.

**Methodology**

This article is drawn from our experiences as anthropologists, each with more than 20 years of research in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. It is supported by two studies we undertook together on Land Hunger and Access to the City by the poor in 2017 and 2018, respectively. These two studies respectively drew on literature reviews and ethnographic fieldwork in nine rural districts and five urban metropoles across South Africa.

**Homelands as ‘heartlands’**

The anti-apartheid discourse of the 1980s often presented the Bantustans or homelands as ‘concentration camps’, where ‘surplus Africans’ who could not be accommodated in the white economy were sent to die. This actually happened, as the ethnographies and reports from rural slums in places like QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana and the former Ciskei attest (Desmond 1971; Platsky and Walker 1985). Mass relocation camps were set up in the open veld without services, agricultural land or employment. The former homelands were also created through an earlier history of African resistance to colonialism and land alienation. They were places where African polities, clans and families dug in their heels in a desperate struggle to protect their sovereignty, land and homes from colonial
dispossession. These places are simultaneously heartlands of great cultural and emotional significance and products of apartheid history.

Today, rural home-making in the former homelands is a multi-dimensional process linked to this history, as well as the challenges of the urban job market in the twenty-first century. The homesteads that Shackleton and Hebinck (2018) describe were embroiled in the system of labour migration throughout the twentieth century. The capacity to access the urban labour market as migrants and to bring wages home to supplement rural income and subsistence was always vital to the process of building a homestead; especially where households generally did not have sufficient land to produce enough food for their own subsistence (also see Wilson 1972; Wolpe 1972).

In a spirit of resistance, rural regimes of value were created to neutralise the alienating power of enforced wage labour, colonial control and a cash economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Coplan 1994). In the townships African men and women judged each other by the clothes they wore, the goods they purchased, the education they acquired, and even the cars they drove, but this was not the case in the countryside. Here, cash and consumerism were more ambiguous and often viewed as ‘hot and dangerous’, morally threatening and corrosive (see Bank 2011; Niehaus 2010). Hence, it created an imperative for labourers to convert their cash into cattle to anchor the security and prestige of rural homestead in traditional values and cater for the needs of social reproduction, which revolved around bride wealth payments and cattle exchanges (see Ferguson 1990; Kuper 1980; Murray 1980).

Attempts by the colonial state to cull cattle to protect the rural reserves from overstocking and soil erosion during the 1940s produced rural rebellions across the reserves in the 1950s, from the Eastern Cape to the North West and Limpopo (see Kepe and Ntsebeza 2011). In a context where rural patriarchs and chiefs were judged by the size of their herds, it was difficult to accept state-imposed limits to cattle keeping. Rural communities also revolted against the replacement of trusted traditional leaders, who upheld local rural regimes of value, with authorities selected by the apartheid government under the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951. Extreme force was used to restore order and shifted emphasis away from individualised patriarchal strategies of home building to a collective culture of shared poverty based on the reconstruction of ideas of tribe and ethnicity, which underpinned the homeland system.

In post-apartheid South Africa, as in the post-Soviet territories of Eastern Europe, older values have re-emerged as the repression and controls of the past ebbed away. The Soviet regimes of enforced collectivisation weakened and collapsed in many places when older social organisation, values and cultural capital resurfaced after socialism (see Hann 1996; Humphries 1996; Verdery 1998). In rural South Africa, the loyalties of tribe and ethnicity are no longer as important as in the past and have become articulated with new versions of South African and African nationalism in a globalised world. Similarly, as apartheid settlement and population controls fell away, many people reconnected with their histories, place-based identities and family tradition at ‘home’, while many family members urbanised.

Thus, despite the rapid urbanisation in South Africa since 1994, the former Bantustans have not lost their value as ‘heartlands’ and ‘home-spaces’. In fact, Jacob Zuma almost lost his presidency when he scandalously used state funds to build a palatial rural family home.
in Zululand. For Africans, dignified and legitimate rural home-making comes with struggle and commitment, it cannot be built on ill-begotten state funds. Zuma’s sleight of hand marked his political downfall. Nevertheless, the Zuma home-making project also confirmed the new aspirational template of post-apartheid, rural home-making, which is not anti-agrarian, but places greater value in the symbols of suburban citizenship and affluence than agrarian investment.

In this frame, modern houses and cars are the forms of value most coveted in the countryside. To be sure, gardening is still useful to symbolise tradition and keep consumption costs down at home, while social grants are vital for every day subsistence needs. The status of the rural homestead, however, rests now on the suburban look and feel of the main house matters – and also whether household members have smart phones, post-school educations, government jobs and personal cars – all of which are conspicuously displayed. They are also a source of great envy amongst neighbours and kin, which can be socially very divisive.

The vitality of the rural house as a symbol of modernity and citizenship in the former Transkei and Ciskei was confirmed by the general manager of the hardware chain store, BUCO, George Williams. He noted that sales in the rural Eastern Cape were, on average, 40% higher than in the Western Cape: ‘Those from the old homelands are investing more in their country homes than in their city houses’. He also observed that BUCO stores in ex-homeland towns are among the top performers for the company, while the Eastern Cape is the best performing region in South Africa, despite the dire state of its productive economy: ‘This is a growth market for us, stores like the one at Butterworth now does more than R4 million turnover a month’ (Personal Communication June 2019).

Other industry representatives, like Cash Build, said that volumes in old Eastern Cape homelands have been increasing between 5% and 10%, year on year, over the past decade. Store managers also noted that flexible payment schemes allowed urban migrants to purchase goods in Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town and have them collected at the store by a local builder or relative. To be sure, cattle still retain their residual value and remain a basis through which families can express their upward mobility and status in the rural sector (Bank and Kenyon 2019; Shackleton and Hebinck 2018). Fields are also still used, and gardens planted, sometimes only very occasionally.

Since the 2000s, the youth have left the rural areas in ever larger numbers to find urban jobs. They display little or no interest in low-status agriculture job at home, nor in making careers in farming. There primary aim is for urban education and employment. There is consequently little overt land hunger for crop farming in homelands because the focus of household investment and aspiration is not located in the agrarian economy. Moreover, where chiefs or headmen sell and barter land (illegally), it is mainly to families seeking residential plots close to towns, or for mining, rather than agricultural use.

The investment in brick and mortar in the former homelands and coloured rural reserves, particularly in rural villages, far exceeds the levels of investments in farming and cattle keeping (authors’ own observations). Urban transfers and remittances are no longer primarily converted into ‘goodly beasts’, as much as they are into ‘beastly goods’. Cash and commodities are also not hot and morally dangerous in the way they used to be, as they are now key markers of rural upward mobility and status differentiation. Family rituals are also much less about affirming wider social connection and sharing, than
about demonstrating to neighbours and kin that migrant families continue to make investments in rural home-making.

Reduced rates of marriage in rural and urban areas has also encouraged this aggregation, because building a homestead of one’s own is usually only expected after marriage. Until you are married, you remain part of the larger family and are socially obliged to work towards its well-being. Siblings now work together from the cities to build the dignity and status of their family homesteads. The insecurity of the urban labour market is another reason why building at home seems sensible to urban migrants and even immigrant. Rural areas remain places for anchoring in family, culture and tradition in an uncertain world (see Bank 2015a; Perry 2017).

The form that rural anchoring has taken since the end of apartheid has profoundly affected not only the urban property market, which has been slow to development in poorer communities, but also the demand for agricultural land in rural areas. Ineffective rural development policies are also to blame. Moreover, part of the intensity of the struggle for urban land today is related to the desire of urban household to use that land to raise rent (cash), which can be reinvested in rural home-building, affirming a pervasive commitment to doubled rootedness in African communities. There is currently a development paradox in South Africa between urban dwelling and rural building, where the spirit of suburbanisation in the city is being enthusiastically embraced in the countryside. Thus, while the state imagines the former homelands as landscapes of productive, small-scale farms, the residents and migrants from there have prioritised turning family homesteads into suburban houses and compounds as a key post-apartheid development priority. They have chosen sub-urbanisation over agrarianism. So, to discuss the agrarian change in the former homelands today without an appreciation of the process of popular suburbanisation would be to ignore the current connections between dwelling and building (see Bank and Kenyon 2019; Sennett 2018).

**Home-making in townships and suburbs**

The existence of these practices and values in rural South Africa does not, of course, prevent people from urbanising or building permanent homes for themselves in the cities. This process is happening on a massive scale there too, especially as townships and suburbs have become the permanent and desired home of many Africans (Bank et al. 2018). The former apartheid urban settlements were initially rejected as match boxes on postage stamp plots – relative to what white South Africans had – but since the end of apartheid these have emerged as desirable and appropriate places for African home-making in the pursuit of urban permanence. Soweto is now so popular as a place that it has its own TV channel. Many of the classic old apartheid townships, like Soweto or Orlando in Johannesburg, Mamelodi in Pretoria, Mdantsane in East London, Umlazi and Kwa-Mashu in Durban, or even Khayelitsha in Cape Town have developed a new post-apartheid urban identity, charisma and style which sets them aside from the past. The capacity of these areas to transition from townships to African suburbs seem to be predicated on the stability of a social core of original families, which anchor the place. The identity of place here is associated with these families, with their unique political and social traditions of resistance to apartheid and to the cultures of their well-known streets, taverns and places.
Where home-making has not yet been achieved in the cities, it is generally seen in the new Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) settlements and sprawling shack areas, many of which have been transformed into dense, informal slums with minimal basic services. Ironically, and contrary to the intention of state housing policy, it is from within these peripheral spaces and the surrounding shack areas that the strongest impulses for rural home-making exist (see Bank 2015a). It is precisely where the post-apartheid state has promised new opportunities for urban access and opportunity that the least powerful desire exists to transform shacks and houses into homes. It is here that those with resources continue to look over their shoulders to rural villages and settlements for the possibilities of dignity and belonging after their struggle for survival in the city wears thin.

As research shows (Bank et al. 2018), most residents in informal settlements come from other urban settlements or shack settlements as they struggle for the best location in the city, yet this does not necessarily diminish their appetites for rural investment and retreat. In fact, the commodification of everyday life in these under-serviced slums, which are characterised by rising shack rents, rampant crime and extractive commercial and social practices, is that they remain unsettled and express a sense of placelessness, as well as the pain of homelessness that people here feel all the time. This is a driving factor to ensure home-making in rural areas.

Shack settlements often initially enjoy a sense of social cohesion based on ideas of struggle. They are frequently named through an insurgent language of land claim, referencing liberation icons such as Joe Slovo and Chris Hani, or alternatively through some hopeful reference of co-operation for survival, such as Imizamo Yethu (our effort) or Masiphumelele (hope for success). This sense of identity is usually lost in the process of their conversion of RDP settlements as only the chosen few get houses or services. Divisions emerge, which are exacerbated when the beneficiaries of RDP houses are transformed into rent seeking landlords, who transform their suburban lots into shack farms. The absence of the common Nguni (IsiXhosa and IsiZulu) prefix Kwa (meaning, place of), as in KwaMashu in Durban or Kwazekele in Port Elizabeth, in the naming of informal settlements is indicative of this feeling of urban alienation. New forms of urban alienation, dislocation and exclusion fuel feelings nostalgia for home and encourage rural investment in what Bank (2015a) calls the displaced urbanism.

Land hunger and coastal whiteness

So, what does this mean for land reform? The first point to make is that the desire of black South Africans is for a place they can call home in a society which has for more than 300 years tried to render them homeless – and still does to a considerable extent. Not surprisingly, many of these homes are made in the former homelands, where there is little demand for land for agrarian crop production. Range land for cattle is still needed, but people in these areas are generally less interested in crop and horticultural farming for a living (Hebinck and van Averbeke 2013). Families in these areas also generally cannot work much more than the land they have because so many of their family members are seeking a living in the cities (Hebinck and van Averbeke 2013). Since the main focus in individual and family livelihood strategies today centre on urban employment or wages, rather than rural production, land hunger has unsurprisingly been expressed through ‘land grabbing’ in the metros. In the old ‘heartlands’, there is no need to ‘grab
land’ because access to residential land is not restricted or refused. And, as we have explained, because of the lower rates of marriage, families are mainly building new suburban-style homes on land their families already hold or control rather than opening up new Greenfield sites. In areas closer to thriving rural towns, where well-located land for settlement is scarce and valuable, there is now clear evidence of the commodification of communal land, as chiefs and headmen sell un-serviced sites for a once off fee (Bank 2015a).

There is a demand for the wealth and income of the white commercial farms, but there is currently little desire to transform this land into thriving commercial farms. Where communities have seized land in the rural areas, they have generally made new homes and accumulated new assets, rather than developing agricultural businesses. The startling figures of the failure of land reforms projects to generate large-scale economic returns is evidence of this trend. The reasons for failed land reform projects are, of course, the result of many other factors as well, such as a lack of inputs, training, refusal to subdivide land into accessible and pragmatic parcels, and poor administration of projects that seem to require continual funding (Aliber et al. 2013; Bank et al. 2017; Cochet, Anseeuw, and Fréguin-Gresh 2015). The home-making impulse is also a result of the generally enforced communalism of some of these projects, which makes it difficult for individual families and entrepreneurs to break out of the apartheid model of ‘shared poverty’ (Bank et al. 2017; James 2001).

A recent national scan of land needs and demands revealed that rural residents wanted to work land as families rather than as communities, and that their interest was primarily in small scale farming that could be incrementally supported by the state and developed over time (Bank et al. 2017). The mismatch between the desire for land reform and the redistribution process is plainly seen in the state’s refusal to resize farms or offer individualised opportunities for low- and middle-income families, which stunts the ability of those who do want to farm in the rural areas from making a go of it.

Nevertheless, the bulk of land demand in South Africa is for urban land where poor families in shack areas and informal settlements seek alternative modes of accessing the city outside of the exploitative rental arrangements that earlier arrivals in the city have set up in the main receiving areas (Harber 2011). Some want land to escape these relations, others seek it to replicate them so that they can build resources to find a better place to live in the city or extract enough income from new arrivals to rebuild rural homes into the image of suburban life to which they aspire.

White South Africans’ land hunger is also limited to the city and the coastal resorts to which they have migrated since the end of apartheid. In the Eastern Cape, for example, many white people with resources who owned or worked on farms under apartheid have moved to coastal towns, like Jeffreys Bay, Kenton-On-Sea or Port Alfred, to settle and set up guesthouses or small businesses. Farm murders are another reason for the coastal drift (Bank 2015b). The massive rise of agribusiness and the escalating size of farms in South Africa is thus not merely a function of the economic imperatives of globalisation and the concentration of capital. It is a product of the fact that many rural white South Africans no longer see farms as safe or even viable places for home-making. Outside of landscape niche areas, like the winelands of the Western Cape, parts of the Natal midlands or game farms, where lifestyle, tourist opportunity and farming intersect in mutually beneficial ways for white people, the desire is to leave the land for a good
price and retire to a coastal town or city away from the vagaries of climate change, rising farm murders, and fear and insecurity in the heart of the country.

The investments white South Africans make in suburban and coastal landscape has as much to do with home-making as they do with profit seeking. It is often a form of exit, what some call ‘semi-gration’, from a society where they feel increasingly alienated and realise that seeking refuge is a better strategy than committing their capital to new economic ventures that are shrouded in uncertainty. The opportunity of extracting rent from property in the suburbs, or better still, from tourists at the coast or on a game farm seem to have far more appeal to them than reinvesting in growing the productive economy. The land expropriation without compensation decision offers a massive threat to the exit and new low-key accumulation strategies of the economically dominant class since it removes the capital on which their escape from black domination is predicated.

**Agribusiness and the ‘empty land’**

New formats of more rapid rural land reform have been adopted where the state has acquired large farms in the former white countryside and then leased them to new elites, who hold the land under lease from the state. Hall and Kepe (2017) have criticised this state-led process as elitist, because it fails to effect fundamental transformations in the way the land is used, farmed and occupied. They suggest that the new version of the land reform programme, PLAS, looks like a thinly veiled attempt to reward and enrich politically connected elites, who use the state land leased to them to build their own asset portfolios, without actually farming it themselves. They explain, that the new mode of accumulation is predicted on rent extraction from agribusinesses which produce on land they do not own. Moreover, Hall and Kepe (2017) argue that the model contradicts the spirit and content of the post-apartheid land reform programme because it fails to address the needs of poor and emerging black farmers in any significant way. It excludes them completely.

However, the difficulties that the state is currently experiencing in finding enthusiastic young black farmers to transform the mainly white-owned commercial agricultural countryside are not only the consequences of these dynamics, nor simply a consequence of appropriate training, inputs and failures in policy administration. They also relate to the longer-term processes of colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid land alienation and the social ‘thinning’ of the connections that Africans have too much of the formerly white, commercial farmland.

Forced removals and homeland development after the 1960s was a direct response to what the apartheid perceived as a deepening attachment of black families to ‘white land’ in the context of increasing white urbanisation. In the early twentieth century, Afrikaner nationalists frequently argued that when Afrikaners trekked into the interior, they found that the land was ‘empty’ and thus they did not seize it as much as occupy it. They also argued that their forms of occupation and the domestication of land were beneficial to the country. Amongst others, they brought a social thickness to occupation which embedded particular pieces of land into the culture and history of God-fearing families who were sons of the African soil.

The absence of sufficient labour in Afrikaner families to produce significant surpluses for the market, encouraged them to partner with African tenants and sharecroppers,
who in partnership with Afrikaner farmers modernised production in a labour-intensive model during the first half of the twentieth century. By the 1950s, the apartheid state was appalled by the continuing extent of the ‘Beswarting van die platteland’ – Afrikaans for the blackening of the countryside – (the title of an influential government report in 1950) and introduced massive new capital-intensive schemes to replace subsistence labour tenants with technologies and machinery across the sector, sponsored by the Land Bank and the state (Van Onselen 2005).

This resulted in massive forced removals across South Africa, which aimed to disconnect black farmers from white land and re-domesticate them as land holders under tribal authority in the new homelands (Meredith 2006, 417). In 1994, the threat of land reform and enforced measures to shore up the security of tenure for blacks who remained on white land also resulted in farmers pushing their workers off the land and into small towns, thus effecting a new wave of social disconnection.

The effectiveness of these programmes in disconnecting black Africans socially and culturally from the white owned countryside and reconstituting it as ‘empty land’ should not be under-estimated in considering the current formats for land reform and limited success of the post-apartheid land reform programme. As many white farmers, especially in marginal areas, now seek to cash in their land assets for profits that can assist them in making new homes in coastal locations, the state struggles to find appropriately qualified and committed black landowners who want to farm in the formats that the state requires. When land is transferred or seized, the most common response observed in the literature and empirical research is a process of social thickness and repossession rather than economic transformation (Bank et al. 2018). Clearly the state has not got a suitable, pragmatic or economic plan to use the land it already has in its possession. Expropriation, without any pragmatic economic plan is going to negatively affect the countryside in multiple ways.

If land expropriation without compensation is to be predicated on the productive use of land for economic purposes and food security, then the current formats of opening the countryside to large-scale agribusiness, who use the land in partnership with black elites from the urban middle class, will be difficult to displace in the short term. To be sure, the transition from semi-feudal to capitalist farming by Afrikaners on the land in the twentieth century occurred in several phases, of which recreation of the countryside as culturally white was a critical precondition for the successful agrarian transition to state-subsidised capitalist farming under apartheid. The lack of success in the post-apartheid era in reconnecting black Africans to the land constitutes a major threat to the new expropriation for production programme achieving both its political and economic objectives.

Conclusion

As South Africans seek new homes and reassert their connection to historic places of comfort in a society where new forms of home-making have proved challenging, it is likely that many of the farms transferred under land reform will be run by absentee landlords or urban elites, and that agricultural production will not necessarily increase, under the pressures of climate change, to above the current 2.5% of GDP. Coastal and rural home-building will continue to be sponsored by a variety of forms of rentier capitalism,
targeting vulnerable members of the aspirant urban working class at the margins, international agribusinesses and visiting tourists on holiday. In South Africa, both urban shack rentals and tourist accommodation are massively overpriced and seem to be destroying the very markets they rely on for survival. While the transfer of land to international investors in the Cape or renting it to international agribusinesses in the interior does very little to move an inclusive post-apartheid land reform agenda forward.

The persistence of the cultural legacies of colonial and apartheid land occupation and the current economics of home-making has created a stark disconnection between land, production and place-based economic development in South Africa. This limits the capacity of a rapid land reform to be able to fix South Africa’s economic problems, create an inclusive economy, or meaningfully reduce poverty and inequality. History is not on the side of that kind of transition, and many opportunities for change have been wasted over the past 20 years. The failure of the ANC to acknowledge these failures re-colonises the land issue as a question of lost racial assets and space, rather than a failure of appropriate forms of place-making (see Kepe and Hall 2018).

If the Zimbabwe style land reform process, with its disastrous economic consequences, directly resulted in half of Zimbabwe’s population migrating to South Africa, then alternative strategies will need to be found in order to ensure simultaneous change in agrarian and urban social economies in South Africa. In the rural sector, there is a need to focus on new kinds of partnerships and on the redistribution of wealth and opportunity through farming. The creation of decent jobs on farms is critical, as well as a focus on profit sharing within arrangements which bolster productivity for market production, for food security and rural development. One of the critical questions raised by this paper is: will there an appetite for new forms of agrarian investment in the heartlands and beyond, once the current drive towards rural suburban, home improvement has run its course? With the support of technology and renewable energy, there must be new and innovative opportunities for investment in farming and other sectors, given that urban wages and capital continue to gravitate to the former homelands.

In the urban sector, it is critical that the government finally effects a real transition from providing housing and services to the poor to the creation of proper human settlements that encourage local investment, civic pride and drive long-term urban place-making. The current policy shift to township revitalisation must be extended and enlarged. Since urban land will be taken, the government, civic bodies and the private sector needs to proactively start preparing sites for settlement before they are invaded. Titling and ownership of urban land and dwellings by families living on that land must happen very rapidly, together with the promotion of new forms of civic organisation and popular participation in settlement formation and construction. In this area, the physical and infrastructural features of the settlement creation process (such as taps, sewers, toilets and cement) cannot be disconnected from the socio-cultural dimensions of.

The disjuncture between dwelling, building and belonging noted above lie at the heart of some of South Africa’s most serious economic and social challenges. The fact that so few new productive and stable suburban communities have been able to take root in South Africa cities after apartheid and investment in home-making is still directed to the former homelands must be deeply concerning for the state. The current housing and settlement policies in South Africa seem unable to stabilise urban communities in ways that allow them to out a better life for all in place. Shack farming in RDP settlements is a
common way that housing beneficiaries now compensate for their failure to secure jobs and access to the city. This often undermines the possibilities of positive place-making in the long term.

Urban involution, community fracture, basic service breakdown, rising crime and violence are common outcomes of these processes of unplanned densification (Bank et al. 2018). In fact, the overheated rental market on well-located RDP sites drives new urban land invasions, to avoid rising rents, and accelerated rural home investment as the pathologies of place increase. The state has to find a way of creating space for the consolidation of urban communities without undermining the possibilities of positive place-making. Schools, parks, streets and other public infrastructure cannot be sacrificed for personal profit-seeking strategies by residents and councillors. The state must find incentives and strategies to convert the current forms of occupy urbanism into meaningful urban permanence. The state must try to prevent urban wages and income leaking out of the city on such a large scale to support rural home-making and suburban investment. The fact that political parties remain trapped in bifurcated discourses of communal versus freehold land tenure, formal versus informal settlements, or stolen land versus misused land denies them the possibility of meaningfully engaging with the complex ways in which land has been socialised, used and deployed in South Africa today.

It was Karl Marx who noted long ago that property is not a relationship between people and things, but a relationship between people about things (Marx 1990, 165). In the twentieth century, the brilliant Hungarian economist and anthropologist, Polanyi (2001) further enriched and developed these insights through his theories of substantive economics. These perspectives of socialised property seem lost to the EFF and even the ANC, as they both objectify land as a static racialized object, asset or thing that need only be released to ensure economic freedom for the majority. The belief of the DA that an extension of the way land is currently socialised will necessarily produce an inclusive economy is equally misguided. None of these political ideologies have worked. For land to become more productive in South Africa it must be re-socialised in new ways. Existing political mandates fail to realise this and remain focused on old and residual ways of doing things. In the light of more than a decade of state capture and corruption that has greatly reduced skills and resources, along with so many other policy mandates that the ANC has committed itself to, valuable and necessary land reform for the purposes of those who need it most (the rural and urban poor) remains major task that none of the political parties seem able to comprehend. Even those political parties that made small gains in the 2019 General Elections seem unaware that rural and urban South Africans want land for food security, settlement and close proximity to livelihoods. Political parties and their manifestos do not speak to the electorate and their relationships to land, nor do they appreciated that land reform will necessary require the restructuring of local level social relations, not merely the provision of support or the (re)allocated of assets.

Note
1. That this declining budget is evident after President Zuma came into power is not unsurprising in the light of the subsequent decade of State Capture and blatant corruption.
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