

HENRY BERNSTEIN

Zimbabwe's Land Reform. Myths and Realities. By Ian Scoones, Nelson Marongwe, Blasio Mavedzenge, Jacob Mahenehene, Felix Murimbarimba and Chrispen Sukume. Woodbridge: James Currey; Harare: Weaver Press; Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2010. Pp. xv + 288. £16.99. ISBN 978-1-84701-024-7.

The 'Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme' (FTLRP) in Zimbabwe is the world's most comprehensive state-sponsored redistributive land reform of the twenty-first century. Is it possible to separate its social significance, rooted in that country's history of colonial occupation and racialized land dispossession, from the political character of the much reviled Mugabe regime that launched the reform in 2000 (after 20 years of vacillation on the land question following independence in 1980)? Mahmood Mamdani (2008) tried to do so in an article in the *London Review of Books* which generated a barrage of hostile responses from liberal critics in the letters column of the *Review* and a spectrum of left critics in a special issue of *Concerned African Scholars* (Jacobs and Mundy, 2009). Both kinds of critics typically proceeded on the mistaken assumption that the purpose, or at least the effect, of Mamdani's intervention was to 'defend' Mugabe. In short, there is a potent and near universal political binary: either you totally repudiate the Zimbabwean regime and all its works on grounds of 'principle' or you are stigmatized as 'pro-Mugabe'.

This ideological noise - and the analytical stalemate that results from it - drowns out serious consideration of the *effects* of FTLR, especially any based in proper empirical investigation. The new book by Ian Scoones and his Zimbabwean co-workers - Nelson Marongwe, Blasio Mavedzenge, Jacob Mahenehene, Felix Murimbarimba and Chrispen Sukume, several of whom are 'resettlement' farmers - is an extremely important attempt to fill part of the empirical vacuum (and only the second attempt I know of, after Moyo et al 2009). In it they contest five principal 'myths' concerning Zimbabwe's land reform: that it has been a total failure; its beneficiaries are mainly 'political cronies' of ZANU-PF (Mugabe's political party); there is no investment in the new settlements; agriculture is in

complete ruins, creating chronic food insecurity; and the rural economy has collapsed (8 and *passim*).

To contest such dominant ‘myths’ - in the sense here of generalizations held to constitute an unassailable *empirical* truth wrapped up in an *ideological* consensus - is not to aim to replace them on the basis of a single research project, especially in relation to an agrarian structure shaped by great ecological variation and by the social and political complexities and contradictions of Zimbabwe’s modern history. The authors suggest, nonetheless, that what they found in Masvingo concerning ‘what happened to whom, where and with what consequences’ (1) is relevant to other provinces outside the highly capitalized farming areas (of settler provenance) of the highveld, in the best endowed of Zimbabwe ‘s five ‘natural regions’. Their research was conducted at various times from 2000 to the end of 2009 in four clusters of 16 sites ‘along a north-south agroecological gradient across the province’ (38), comprising Types III-V in the standard classification of ‘natural regions’ and which had been used mainly for cattle ranching, combined with wildlife management in the Mwenezi cluster, and with one area of (irrigated) commercial sugar cane cultivation. The sites included different kinds of settlements arising from land reform: the A1 model of small-scale farming, divided into ‘villagised’ and ‘self-contained’, the A2 model of small- and medium-scale commercial farms, and ‘informal schemes’ not registered under the FTLRP.

The research deployed a range of methods including a census of 400 households in 2007, 120 detailed household histories and in-depth interviews, and - of central importance to how the findings are presented and analysed - a wealth ranking exercise from which three ‘success groups’ (SGs) were derived: SG1-3 in descending order. The use of SGs allows the authors to chart and illustrate their concern with social differentiation by class and gender, signalled early in the book, and to present instances of ‘accumulation from below’ and its dynamics. In short, there is a great deal of both statistical and qualitative evidence, which is presented in a series of thematically well-designed chapters with many tables, enriched by vignettes from in-depth interviews, and concluding with neat summaries of main themes and findings.

Chapter 1 sets the scene with an overview of land reform in Zimbabwe since the early 1980s, locating the FTLRP in a conjuncture of ‘economic chaos and electoral violence’ that marks the most recent period of the Mugabe regime (25-8). The chapter also includes an outline of four perspectives on the character and prospects of ‘smallholder agriculture’ in modern capitalism, to pose the question: ‘What are the possible agrarian futures for Zimbabwe’s countryside and its people?’ (14). Chapter 2 provides rich detail on the complicated processes of land reform in Masvingo, including who got which land since 2000, in terms of class and gender categories, and their motivations and ambitions in acquiring land, and introduces the three ‘success groups’ (SG1-3) noted above. Chapter 3, titled ‘New Land, New People, New Livelihoods’, explores further the characteristics of SG1-3, summarising their features across the 16 research sites in a remarkable table on pp.62-4. A striking feature of that summary is how often matters of access to, and management, of labour - and especially hired labour - are indicated as factors in relative success (and failure). The last substantive section of this chapter on movement into *and out of* resettlement schemes is one instance, among many that follow, of the authors’ alertness to the complexities (and tensions) of rural economy and the nuanced approach they bring to their consideration.

The next seven chapters that present the bulk of the authors’ findings amplify this observation and the analytical skills at work in their account. Chapter 4 presents their data on investment in land. Who is investing and in what: clearing land for cultivation; building houses; cattle; farm equipment; water and sanitation; means of transport; trees and conservation? It also asks: Where do settlers’ means of investment come from? The answers to these questions exemplify, and highlight, two dynamics that are central throughout the study (as of studies of many African countrysides): the ubiquity and importance of ‘straddling’ between own-account farming and other activities and sources of income, and class differentiation manifested in ‘accumulation from below’ by petty commodity producers, with some evidence of ‘an emergent group of capitalist producers’ (93).

Chapter 5 continues on these lines with a focus on the diverse forms of agricultural production by the ‘new farmers’, subdivided by maize cultivation, gardens and irrigation, sugar and more briefly cotton, and, of strategic significance, livestock production. The

conclusion from the data is that ‘Around 40% of households are producing well and selling regularly’ (125); the more general conclusion the authors derive, and seek to support, is a familiar one (to which I will return): that ‘Small-scale farming, under the right conditions, can generate livelihoods and be a motor of wider growth’ (126). Chapter 6 is on ‘Labour’ with a focus on ‘the new farm workers’ It concludes that ‘With a fundamental reconfiguration of labour on the farms, new agrarian relations are emerging.’ (146), including a dramatic increase in the scale of farm wage employment, according to the authors’ calculations. This is a notable finding which in part is an effect of the switch from commercial cattle farming to crop cultivation (combined with livestock). That ‘Much labour is casual, informal, seasonal, underpaid and often female.’ (145) is not surprising and does not undermine the important analytical point: that wage labour is key to farming success by petty commodity producers as well as emergent capitalist farmers. Indeed, given its somewhat populist leanings, this recognition is one of the refreshing aspects of the study, as is its incorporation of class differentiation in the countryside, already noted.

Chapter 7 on ‘Real Markets’ sets the context of ‘an economy in chaos’ at the time of FTLRP, and since, and presents findings on the circuits of marketed maize, beef, sugar and cotton. It provides a fascinating picture of how petty (and sometimes not so petty) commodity enterprises in trade, processing and retail fill the gaps left by the collapse of many state structures and, furthermore, of corporate dominated chains in certain commodities - a result of the assault of FTLRP on (most) large-scale commercial farming. This dynamic, of course, throws up much informalization of marketing arrangements as well as blurring notional boundaries between informal and formal circuits of exchange. Included here is illicit but profitable cross-border trade, which connects with Chapter 8 on ‘Livelihoods Beyond the Farm’. Framed within recent debates about ‘livelihood diversification and deagrarianisation’ in sub-Saharan Africa, this chapter explores more fully the crucial significance of off-farm income and migration to *all* resettlement farmers while showing that the kinds of off-farm activity pursued, the remittances from migration, and their investment in farming, follow different patterns across the three differentiated ‘success groups’. Education and kin and other social networks are, of course, central variables in the relative gains from off-farm activities, including migration. Zimbabwe, like other African countries, has a long history of rural-urban relationships in the pursuit of livelihood but these have changed, and intensified, in recent

decades as a result of ‘an economy in chaos’ and the FTLRP - respectively representing additional pressures on simple reproduction and access to land as a means of relieving those pressures and providing opportunity for ‘accumulation from below’, at least to some.

Chapter 9 on ‘Territory, Authority and Social Dynamics’ switches tack somewhat to consider complicated issues of land tenure and security in FTLRP settlements. These include contested control and conflict over land due, among other factors, to disputes of jurisdiction between chiefly authorities and the claims they make in the name of their ‘communities’, as well as issues of ‘tradition’ concerning gendered rights to land. This can not provide a full ethnography of the research sites but gives useful examples of, and insights into, the vexed matter of ‘local land governance’. The authors’ predispositions perhaps incline them to look for signs of ‘emerging (new) communities’ (207-10), ‘emergent forms of public authority’ (210), and ‘reconstructing the state from below’ (210-12) - with interesting observations on how important church participation can be - but they do so in their consistently judicious manner: ‘The new settlement areas are a highly differentiated, highly fractured social space’ (210) in which ‘A huge array of livelihood strategies and class positions exists’ (209) that generate ‘severe limits to voluntarism and localism’ (210).

A general summation of the findings and analysis comes in Chapter 10 on the ‘emerging impacts of land reform’, charted through sections on ‘wider economic linkages’ that help shape ‘a new social and geographical configuration of the rural economy’ (219), and patterns of differentiation and accumulation (along axes of ‘social class, gender, age, ethnicity and location’, 223). It concludes with a livelihood typology, which deploys the classification by ‘success groups’ to suggest how well different categories are able to meet the demands of simple reproduction and to pursue opportunities for accumulation, including through diversification out of farming.

A final Chapter 11 considers ‘Lessons from Zimbabwe’s Land Reform’. It revisits the five ‘myths’ in the light of evidence from the Masvingo study, and proposes ‘Ten priorities for policy’ with regard to land administration; land security and tenure; input supply; water, wells and irrigation; credit and rural finance; local economic development; agricultural

research and extension; safety nets and social protection; farmers' voice and representation; and rights and redistribution.

The book can be assessed from various viewpoints and concerns, two of which have been highlighted in the summary of findings provided above: first, as a major, and welcome, contribution to our knowledge of what has happened to farming and rural livelihoods in (one province of) Zimbabwe in the first decade or so of FTLRP; and, second, an investigation that uses a variety of complementary statistical and qualitative methods with considerable finesse, and that demonstrates a nuanced analytical approach to the circuits and dynamics of rural, and wider, economy that is relevant to many other African countrysides. For this reason I highly recommend the book to those engaged in political economy research on agrarian change elsewhere in Africa.

Two further sets of issues are similarly, and respectively, of more specific and more general interest. First, whether the study provides insights, at least, into what may have been happening in other areas of FTLRP characterised as 'natural regions' with less favourable farming conditions (regions III-V); on this there is no reason to dispute the authors' claim that it does, cited earlier. A somewhat associated but distinct question is whether the study enables any prediction of agrarian futures for Zimbabwe; at one level, it does not but then neither does any other position in (over-)heated debates about land reform and its effects in Zimbabwe. The authors are aware of this but want to inform consideration of possible futures with the empirical and analytical means their study provides, and rightly so. On one hand, the book embraces the chaotic, contradictory, contested, fractured, confusing, and so on, qualities of the conjuncture of FTLRP, and the diversity and complexity of local specificities - ecological, sociological, and political. On the other hand, its policy recommendations in Chapter 11 aim to sketch some of the conditions of supporting and sustaining, generalizing and developing, the gains made by significant numbers of resettlement farmers in the Masvingo research sites. These recommendations are familiar, and connect with the fourth, and again broader, set of issues concerning a small-farmer path of development signalled above.

That ‘Small-scale farming, under the right conditions, can generate livelihoods and be a motor of wider growth’ (126). resonates a longstanding populist tradition, applied to Africa as elsewhere, albeit qualified here by the authors’ keen awareness of class (and other) differentiation, the dynamics of ‘accumulation from below’, the ‘severe limits to voluntarism and localism’ (210), and so on. This awareness, and the honesty with which it is applied, inevitably generates tensions with the populist inclinations of the study, which can be traced through the key terms of the statement quoted. Does ‘small-scale farming’ exist in any pristine abstract or concrete sense? Their own findings, with their attention to differentiation and accumulation (hence exploitation), suggest otherwise. Why not consider those findings as a valuable contribution to understanding a particular path of capitalist development in the countryside? And how plausible is it to expect that ‘the right conditions’ - sketched by their policy recommendations - can be established? That is always a matter of practical politics, but the study at least indicates what the ‘wrong’ conditions are, awareness of which helps, in principle, to avoid them. In this context, they include not only a series of interventions (and non-interventions) by the Zimbabwean government since independence, many with resonances of colonial ‘modernization’, but also the kind of dominant corporate agribusiness structures based in large-scale capitalist farming of colonial settler provenance. ‘Generating livelihoods’ is of special interest because of the crises of simple reproduction (‘livelihoods’) of so many rural Africans today, experienced with particular intensity in Zimbabwe. This is among the strongest claims of the study, even if its evidence of how FTLRP has generated (class-differentiated) livelihoods does not suggest a path of development stretching indefinitely into the future. The key here is the last term of the proposition: small-scale farming as ‘a motor of wider growth’. Again, I am disinclined to reject this on *a priori* or deductive grounds, but it needs proper specification in terms of the linkages and dynamics of wider growth, and its conditions of accumulation, that can be expected in any particular economy.

The authors do not provide this and it is hardly reasonable to expect them to do so in a study of this kind. What they have provided is an immensely valuable investigation, both empirically and analytically. I have read the book twice (and parts of it more often) and will continue to turn to it for its stimulation concerning the social dynamics of agrarian change and how to research them.

REFERENCES

Jacobs, S. and J. Mundy, eds (2009), *Reflections on Mahmood Mamdani's 'Lessons of Zimbabwe'*, special issue of *Concerned African Scholars*, 82.

Mamdani, M. (2008), 'Lessons of Zimbabwe', *London Review of Books*, 4 December.

Moyo, Sam, Walter Chambati, Tendai Murisa, Dumisani Sibiza, Charity Dangwa, Kingstone Mujeyi and Ndabezinhle Nyoni, 2009. *Fast Track Land Reform Baseline Surveys in Zimbabwe: Trends and Tendencies 2005/6*. Harare: African Institute for Agrarian Studies.