

## [Moore on Bowyer-Bower and Stoneman, 'Land Reform in Zimbabwe: Constraints and Prospects'](#)

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**T.A.S. Bowyer-Bower, Colin Stoneman, eds.** *Land Reform in Zimbabwe: Constraints and Prospects*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000. xiv + 206 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-1547-7.

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### **Keeping up to the Mugabes**

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This book is a testament to the days when all progressive and relatively peaceful thinking people concerned with Zimbabwe had some hope that a well-planned land reform strategy could work. It is the result of a conference held at the Department of Geography at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies in March 1998. This was just after President Mugabe had been forced in late 1997 by his last-chance alliance with the so-called war veterans to target 1,471 large-scale commercial farms (LSCFs) for acquisition. The participants at the conference seemed not to realise that the targeting came about due to what one participant, Sam Moyo, later admitted was the 'more or less at gunpoint'[1] a few months before the conference, members of the War Veterans Association had marched into the Zimbabwean State House and forced the country's president to hand them over more than Z\$4.5 billion worth of pensions, and to guarantee land reform (including twenty per cent for them). The conference went on as if under the illusion that the 1998 phase of reform was the rational extension of previous quite successful strategies--as if things were about to take off from the mid-1980s when the process, so well tracked in Bill Kinsey's and Lionel Cliffe's contributions, had all but stopped. It proceeded to analyse the results of those attempts and their stalling after a few years of good progress, and to prescribe for the future.

In spite of the editors' introductory chapter and a post-script indicating a lot of the problems evident by mid-2000, by the end of the book there seems to be an air of optimism that the process just might work this time. This was undoubtedly the tone of the conference, which hosted over 300 people and preceded a September 1998 donors' conference in Harare promising millions from the World Bank and the British to fund the new phase. Reading the book is a bit like being in a time machine, and reminds one of the need, in this fast-changing age, to publish the results of such timely conferences quickly--perhaps even on the Internet. History conferences can wait for books, but political economy and policy conferences in volatile parts of the world should be rushed onto the web! If this book had been ready in early 1999, a better perspective on Zimbabwe's land question would have been on hand for many academics and observers. All commentators would not have been able to say the land invasions were 'just' about 'politics,' but would have recognised the intractable links between land and polity.

In the months after the Harare conference, it was clear that the British component of the foreign

donors was not going to contribute.[2] But even by the end of 1998, administrative courts in Zimbabwe ruled against compulsory acquisition for most of the farms.[3] Within the next year, opposition political forces had shown their organizational strength. In any case, by early 2000, Robert Mugabe and his allies decided to use their last card. They and their conscripts forced their way onto the land, thus hoping to solve the immediate political problem--fear of losing the June 2000 parliamentary elections, triggered by the loss of a constitutional referendum forced on ZANU-PF by the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)--at the same time as the land issue.

As noted, the editors' comments record the gloomy results of the land invasions and the June 2000 election, and contemplate more of the same up to the March 2002 presidential election, but the rest of the volume goes on as if time had stopped in early 1998. Some of the more prescient writers allude to the ticking time-bomb at the same time as they were aware of the problems of undertaking land reform without careful planning (see Kinsey's last pages), but there is a sense while reading the book that the participants were suffering under the delusion that such intrinsically conflict-laden matters could be resolved with good faith and bureaucrats, with a little dose of popular pressure to keep the state on its toes. Meanwhile the social forces of conflict were simmering below the surface.

Lionel Cliffe saw the 1998 plan as including secure title to land allocations and a 'participatory institutional structure:' he called it 'substantial, imaginative and practicable,' but wondered if financial resources and institutional capacity would bear the strain, even if foreign donors seemed at the time to be supporting it. Jocelyn Alexander may be the only contributor without such faith in technocratic rationality (even when in full gear), given its roots in colonial agricultural 'science,' but in retrospect one might ask her: were the invasions the sort of 'resistance' and 'new political relationships' for which she was hoping (in a gently anarchistic/Foucauldian/post-development sort of way)? The rest of the contributors saw generally good welfare and gender results (and what could be called 'neutral' impact on woodlands) in the areas resettled by the around 71,000 people to date, and seemed to assume that even the complex array of tenure arrangements foreseen in Professor Rukuni's chapter could be ironed out in the wash of a wave of participatory consultations and technically feasible plans in the post- 1998 era.

Rukuni's complicated collection of tenure possibilities indicates a question. It may be unfair to ask it with the benefit of hindsight, but it arises nonetheless. When have such issues--involving what is essentially a change of land tenure relations amounting to a transformation of a mode of production--ever been resolved peacefully? What we see in Zimbabwe is a double process of something like 'primitive accumulation.' One is the transfer--or breaking up--of already capitalist farms from one racially defined group (which took the land in a 'primitive' way a century ago) to another. The latter is composed of many classes with differing subjective agendas and objective interests, but to some extent the process is a deracialisation of capitalist farming. Of course such processes take a great deal of state action: thus the primitive force. The other side of the primitive accumulation process is the commodification of communal or 'pre-capitalist' agrarian relations in the 'communal areas' existing in many degrees of articulation with the capitalist agricultural system. To some extent this process has been complicated by degrees of state control and market relations, but in many cases 'chiefs' have as much control as more 'modern' agents. In other cases a *de facto* market exists for land transfer. In the resettlement areas, state-appointed officers have the power to control some aspects of tenure and lease renewal: this is not quite 'private property.' The current wave of invasions

seems to be oriented only to the 'solution' of the question coloured by the relationship between race and land, and no clear delineation of land rights seems to be emerging from the 'revolution from above.' The real nitty-gritty of primitive accumulation among the nearly seven million Zimbabweans still living in communal areas is yet to be tackled. It will remain for whatever political party inherits the current imbroglio.[4] Rukuni's catalogue of choices tries to make the aggregation of tenure relations compatible with the Commercial Farmer's Union world-view, but in the end it appears as utopian as Mugabe's current efforts. (Perhaps the MDC's hope for the elimination of communal tenure in five years is idealistic too.) Academics and policy-planners seem ill-equipped to contemplate the sheer force at the bottom of such processes, even when some of them use methods of analysis with some roots in historical materialism. Mugabe and the 'veterans,' schooled in the tough side of the war of liberation, at least have that 'common sense,' brutal as it may be, about them.[5]

Post-2000 meltdown aside, *Land Reform in Zimbabwe* is absolutely essential reading for anyone needing a look in at the lay of Zimbabwe's land question at the turn of the millennium. Many of the actors--but not the 'veterans'--were at the conference. They ranged from representatives of the Zimbabwean state who laid down the 1998 position, to Zimbabwean academics (e.g. Moyo and Rukini) who have participated in many of the country's land reform attempts, and to representatives of Zimbabwe's various farmers' unions (who all seemed to agree on the necessity of transforming land tenure so it is 'secure,' but whose apparent agreement seemed to hide a lot). In addition to the British efforts in the areas noted above, there were UK academics who had evaluated their government's role in previous land reform attempts, the effects of reform on women, woodlands, and customary law (regarding, separately, women and land inheritance), its relation to poverty alleviation, and just what the Zimbabwean people think of it all. It makes up a fascinating backdrop to the current crisis: one cannot understand today's events without the book, even if one can also not understand why the conference participants could not see it all coming. The book should be made available to a Zimbabwean publisher able to put out a cheap edition ready for the post-2002 presidential election era.

#### Notes

[1]. Integrated Regional Information Network, *Zimbabwe: Interview with Land Expert Sam Moyo*, 14 August 2001, [http:// www.reliefweb.int/IRIN/sa/countrystories/zimbabwe/20010814.phtml](http://www.reliefweb.int/IRIN/sa/countrystories/zimbabwe/20010814.phtml)

[2]. Stoneman and Bowyer-Boyer (p. 11) say that Britain pulled out of funding promises made at a September 1998 donors' conference because Zimbabwe planned to impose an obligation on Britain to pay for confiscated land: Britain said no country could impose such obligations on another. Media versions had it that British enthusiasm had waned because the farms were slated to go to cronies instead of the deserving poor or meritorious yeomanry. Other accounts state that the requisite 'transparency' was not forthcoming from Zimbabwe, while still more claim the Zimbabwean government pulled out of the plan in November claiming lack of donor support. Moyo (see above note) states that the international community refused funding because of Zimbabwe's support of Laurent-Désiré Kabila's efforts to maintain control of an invaded Democratic Republic of the Congo: the stalemate lasted throughout most of 1999. Perhaps a ZANU-PF conspiracy version would have it that the British and the Commercial Farmers Union decided that pulling out of such promises, in the context of an opposition movement based in the working and middle class 'civil society' organisations,

was the best way to bring Mugabe down and to create 'democracy' for yet another African post-colony. Both the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) were born in the wake of the compulsory acquisition notices.

[3]. See Sam Moyo, 'The Political Economy of Land Acquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe: 1990- 1999,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26,1 (March 2000), pp. 1-28.

[4]. These issues are pursued at more length in David Moore, 'Is the Land the Economy and the Economy the Land? Primitive Accumulation in Zimbabwe,' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 19, 2 (July 2001), pp. 253-266, and 'Neo-liberal Globalisation and the Triple Crisis of 'Modernisation' in Africa: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe and South Africa,' *Third World Quarterly*, 22, 6 (December 2001), pp. 909-929.

[5]. I question the term 'veterans' with quotation marks because the leaders of the War Veterans Association are not representative of all veterans. Still less so are the foot soldiers and followers on the invaded farms. More radical and democratic groups within the liberation army challenged Mugabe and authoritarian militarists in the late seventies, but were imprisoned with the assistance of Mozambique until 1980. The Zimbabwe Liberators' Platform, created in 2000 to challenge the invaders' perspective, represents this group.

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