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Beyond the urban-rural divide: linking land, labour, and livelihoods

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In the initial post-apartheid period, much social research shared in a general euphoria that South Africa's journey was to follow a 'high road' of industrial development – high skills, high wages, new technology, SMMEs, exports and global competitiveness. Narrowly focused on industry and on the main metropolitan centres, this work assumed that the South African economy would generate a rising tide of remunerative urban jobs ensuring a better life for all. This euphoria trapped a large chunk of scholarship into an iron cage of instrumental knowledge and policy recommendations that were sharply at odds with emerging realities.

More recently there has been an explosion of statistical information that maps the contours of persistent and growing poverty, shrinking employment, and collapsing livelihoods in painful detail. These volumes of data, their classificatory grids, and the narrow positivism they employ, are supposed to inform careful policy interventions. One obvious critique of such data-gathering is that it signals what Timothy Mitchell (2002) terms 'the rule of experts', and illustrates how constructions and deployments of such categories, classifications, and data embody technologies of power. Yet to the extent that this sort of critique focuses simply or primarily on grids of legibility, it is itself quite limited. The danger, in short, is that the production of knowledge will become caught between an instrumental positivism on the one hand, and endless deconstructions of the categories of the new South Africa on the other.

There is, in fact, remarkably little critical, sustained research and reflection on the changing power relations and processes of acquiescence and opposition that are emerging in the post-apartheid era. Our purpose in this note is to outline a new research initiative that seeks to illuminate key

forces and processes taking shape in the post-apartheid period – the ongoing importance, but changing character, of rural-urban connections; histories of racialised dispossession and their continuing salience; land and livelihood struggles and their relationship to organised labour; and the significance of new local government demarcations in reconfiguring acquiescence and opposition.

Until now, most researchers have pursued each of these elements in isolation: ‘the land question’, the ‘labour question’, or ‘the question of livelihoods’ (usually meaning non-formal employment). With a few key exceptions, such research has also been sharply divided across rural and urban lines. We argue that these themes constituted, constitute, and will continue to constitute in their social and spatial *interconnections*, a central challenge to research, policy, and social action for decades to come. In this context, there is a pressing need for a new cohort of young researchers who can work across disciplines with a deep understanding of these social and spatial interconnections, and ready to confront this challenge in creative new ways.

This research and training agenda grows out of, and seeks to extend, detailed work conducted in Durban, Newcastle, Ladysmith, Mooi River, Mpumalanga-Hammarsdale, Dundee, and Phongola (Bonnin 2001; Hart 2002; Lund 2001; Mosoetsa 2000; Sitas 1999a, 1999b; Skinner 1999). The purpose of this brief comment is to suggest four related domains in which in-depth research is needed if substantive alternatives are to be constructed in South Africa’s democratic transition.

The continuing importance – but changing character – of rural-urban connections

Historically, male labour migration associated mainly with the mines and factories was the major form of urban-rural connection. This fact, and the ability of the post-1973 trade union movement to bridge the divide until the early 1990s, was reflected in some of the labour studies scholarship of the 1980s focussed on the form and nature of primarily urban struggles, and the interconnections between ethnicity, nation, and class (eg Sitas 1984, 1987; Bonnin 1999) In organising migrant labour in mines, metalworks, and plantations, and bringing them together with urban (Section 10) workers within the same democratic shop-floor structures, unions and federations, the trade unions united what the apartheid state sought to keep apart. Furthermore, by bringing together ethnically diverse groups of workers, it

created a solid opposition to homeland policies of segregation. Migrant and urban black workers often differed on community issues and community struggles. Yet in creating new comradeships and using diverse traditions in novel ways to express an emergent common consciousness, the trade union movement became the epicenter of opposition to the apartheid status quo.

The presence of the rural in the urban and vice versa was revisited in the early 1990s after the devastating violence in the hostel system of Gauteng (Sitas 1992; Mamdani 1996), while other scholars documented various ways in which rural-urban connections remain crucial (eg Delius 1996; Hart 1996, 2002; James 2001; Levin and Weiner 1996). What was unprecedented were the strains and qualitative shifts that occurred during the years of violence. Firstly, the hostel violence polarised Zulu migrants in Gauteng against other migrants and township dwellers. What unions could not cope with was the alienation of migrant workers from the mounting political campaigns in the townships. What made matters worse, and continues to haunt trade unionism, was that the process of retrenchments and downsizing in manufacturing affected migrants (and therefore the ‘unskilled’) more than others.

The post-1994 democratic dispensation not only ignored the persistence of migrancy; in addition, scholars influenced by claims of a high-wage and high-skill society, post-fordism, participation, co-determination, and workplace restructuring, moved swiftly to reconfigure the field of labour studies (eg Joffe et al 1995). Much of this work was heavily focussed on the major metropolitan centres. In addition, black workers appeared as a class of brand new wage-earners and ‘stake-holders’ – in other words, as a collective *tabula rasa* without a history rooted in prior struggles and negotiations across different socio-spatial arenas of practice. As a consequence of such representations, this research lost track of enduring and changing urban-rural interconnections.

In practice there are many indications that, for huge numbers of South Africans, rural-urban connections remain a central feature of everyday life. Yet these connections seem to have shifted fundamentally, with new and intensified forms of urban-rural entanglement emerging as the costs of increasing urban insecurity are being displaced to the countryside. In effect, impoverished rural regions in the former bantustans appear to be taking on – or extending – the function of social security of the last resort, with old-age pensions forming a crucial resource. At the same time, new nodes of rural power and wealth are appearing in certain areas as some ‘traditional

leaders' and rural representatives consolidate their influence and access to resources (eg Ntsebeza 1999).

These broad patterns raise a series of important questions. How are multiple sources of insecurity – including the decline of urban employment, escalating service costs, and the ravages of HIV/Aids – connected with one another, and with efforts by many urban residents to forge or maintain rural connections? How are these processes playing out in relations between genders and generations; and the cultural and political conditions of access to land and other resources? What are the key patterns of regional variation?

Land and livelihood struggles and their relationship to organised labour

In recent years a number of social movements have emerged concerned with the land question, as well as with struggles over the rising cost of urban services, electricity/water cutoffs, rent evictions and urban environmental problems. At an organisational level, leaders of these movements have often actively distanced themselves from organised labour. Furthermore, such outbreaks of discontent seem to be emanating from constituencies that remained outside the social movements of the anti-apartheid period. Similarly, trade union leaders have distanced themselves from many of the emerging social movements. Despite COSATU's endorsement of the need to form alliances with sectors of the working poor and marginalised and between urban and rural workers, there has been very little thinking about the form and nature of such initiatives.

Yet in actual practice, there are many links between these groups. In many instances, from Phongola in the north to Umzimkhulu and Northern Pondoland in the South, waged labour forms a core component of multiple and spatially extended livelihood initiatives. In many instances too, the 'politics of encroachment' (Bayat 1997) of the new poor are intimately linked to working people employed in the formal sector. In short, people's lives cut across multiple spaces and arenas of everyday practice. At the same time, the specific forms and dynamics of struggle over resources vary widely even in places that on the surface appear quite similar. Rather than focusing primarily on particular social movements, new research is needed that clarifies the links among land, labour, and livelihoods, that traces rural-urban connections, and that explores the conditions that enable or constrain such movements, as well as the possibilities for connections with organised labour.

Histories of dispossession and their contemporary significance

Pervasive urban-rural dichotomies derive from understandings of the development of capitalism as a linear process. For many on the left as well as the liberal right, dispossession from the land is an inevitable part of the creation of an urban, industrial working class.

Comparisons between South Africa and East Asia, where industrialisation was preceded by redistributive land reforms, call into question the widespread presumption of racialised dispossession from the land as a ‘natural’ event en route to industrial capitalism (Hart 2002). Instead, these comparisons encourage us to think of dispossession as an *ongoing process*. Histories, memories, and meanings of racialised dispossession continue to reverberate in the present, shaping both the material conditions of reproduction of labour power and people’s understandings of themselves as social actors, as well as the terms on which they lay claim to land and other resources as part of historical redress.

This focus on dispossession and redress makes it possible to reframe understandings of the land question, while also opening new and potentially fruitful avenues of research and action. In post-apartheid South Africa, references to the land question continue to carry tremendous symbolic and moral force, broadly evoking ‘that which was stolen, that which was used to dispossess, that which fueled the struggle against apartheid by the black majority’ (Walker 2000:5). Yet in practice, post-apartheid land reforms have been radically underfunded and technocratic, and land redistribution increasingly limited to the creation of a black commercial farming class. Even if land reform were to receive more attention and resources, Walker (2003) has recently argued, a sharp disjuncture is likely to remain between popular aspirations and expectations and the transformative potential of land reform itself (see also Aliber and Mokoena 2003).

Redefining the land question in terms of racialised dispossession and redress offers several ways of moving beyond this impasse. First, it makes clear how the the land question derives its evocative power from the imperatives of redress. At the same time, broad and general invocations of the land question leave open *how* such redress should take place, and which groups and classes should be the recipients. In practice, of course, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) represents the major thrust of post-apartheid redistributive redress, in which land forms a relatively small element. Key questions then turn around how redistribution – not only of land but also other resources – is and is not happening in different areas, and the forms

of contestation and acquiescence through which this is taking place.

Second, focussing on dispossession as an ongoing process underscores the limits of official policy discourses that define the land question and related questions of land reform in terms of ‘the rural’ and agriculture. For example, research on Taiwanese industries in KwaZulu-Natal makes clear the direct connections between dispossession from the land and access to housing, water, and electricity (Hart 2002). From this perspective principles of cost recovery for urban services can be seen as an ongoing form of dispossession, and it appears that township residents in a number of areas are making precisely these connections.

A third, closely related set of issues concerns the terms on which different groups and classes are staking claims to land and other resources. Research in different parts of KwaZulu-Natal suggests how specific histories and memories of dispossession remain vitally important elements of local and regional political dynamics. Yet histories of dispossession from the land vary widely in different regions. How are these histories being remembered and used in the present, by whom, and how they are re-shaping current livelihood strategies? These questions assume additional importance in light of new systems of local government.

The significance of new local government demarcations

In 2000, the Demarcation Board defined vastly enlarged new municipalities that cut across the rural-urban divide. In formal terms, the new system inaugurates a structure of local governance in which, for the first time in the country’s history, each vote counts equally. Simultaneously, it has unleashed new and intensified rounds of contestation.

Most immediately, new structures of local government threaten to reduce the powers and functions of traditional leaders, replacing them with elected representatives. Other struggles over access to, and control of, resources are also intensifying. The national government has assigned an array of responsibilities to these ‘developmental local governments’ on the grounds that they are both more democratic and more efficient. At the same time, fiscal austerity has meant that the resources available to these local governments are minimal, particularly in areas outside the major metropolitan centres.

Research in different areas of KwaZulu-Natal suggests (a) that new demarcations have been accompanied by major reconfigurations of social and political forces at the local level, and (b) that these social and spatial

shifts in power relations have important implications for patterns and processes of economic development and the distribution of benefits. Yet even in closely adjacent areas that appear quite similar, these local dynamics are assuming strikingly different forms (Hart 2002). There is a pressing need for an array of new comparative ethnographic studies of local dynamics and trans-local connections that can contribute to understanding the possibilities for progressive social change at the level of local communities and their wider connections.

Conclusion

Escaping the technocratic – and counter-technocratic? – snares requires more than a research framework: it needs a new generation of scholars embedded in a complex and evolving reality who, together, develop fresh understandings that contribute to efforts to grapple creatively and constructively with questions of contemporary social change. This sort of approach focusses particular attention on detailed historical and ethnographic studies. Yet it is important to emphasise that these are *not* simply ‘case studies’ of the impact of larger economic and political forces. Instead, they represent vantage points for illuminating processes of social and spatial interconnection, and a means for gaining a fuller understanding of the possibilities for social change.

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