Over the last four decades, Zimbabwe has earned ‘pariah’ status twice. At the time of writing, it is in the midst of its second bout – the first having been the Rhodesian UDI (1965) – related to its worst economic, social, and political crisis since independence (1980), exactly one decade after its adoption of structural adjustment (1991). While Zimbabwe has particularities of its own, deriving from its white-settler colonial experience, it is a typical late-twentieth-century, semi-proletarianised, sectorally and socially disarticulated, neocolonial country, whose deep historical contradictions have only been inflamed by the onset of liberalisation.\(^1\)

The sources of the present crisis have been the subject of heated debate not only in Zimbabwe, but also in the United Kingdom, its former colonial master, as well as internationally, due to the intense media coverage that the crisis has received. The liberal establishment has used the authoritarian image of President Mugabe to its benefit, detaching the phenomenon from its context as a matter of course, and

\(^1\) I wish to thank Sam Moyo and the Editorial Board of *HM* for valuable comments. This article was written on the eve of the March 2002 elections.
rendering the crisis as a particularly acute case of ‘bad governance’. But this was to be expected. Perhaps less predictable was the response from the Left, especially within Zimbabwe, and, here, one discerns two opposite positions: one takes the side of civil society and concerns itself with ensuring free and fair multiparty elections, while remaining cognisant of the bourgeois nature of the ‘civil’ electoral platform; the other takes the side of the ‘uncivil’, endorsing the radical land acquisition programme of the ruling party, while remaining cognisant of the latter’s democratic deficit. A tense and violent conjuncture has not engendered easy third options, nor bridge-building; it has triggered polarising forces.

The polarisation within the Left is not merely conjunctural, however; it is grounded in concrete political differences, of which two are identifiable: one is a difference with regard to the ability of urban-based movements to provide leadership on the agrarian question; the other is a difference as to the possibility of national-civil solutions to global problems. In what follows, I will briefly review some of the conceptual approaches to Zimbabwe’s past and present, before outlining and weighing the dilemmas of the Left.

**Interpreting Zimbabwe’s past and present**

Two basic concerns among students of Zimbabwe have pertained to the nature of the Zimbabwean state, on the one hand, and Zimbabwean nationalism, on the other. These concerns find their origins in the pre-independence period, in the historical materialism of Giovanni Arrighi and the ‘Africanism’ of Terence Ranger. In an article written almost four decades ago, soon after the Rhodesian UDI, Arrighi sought to explain the divergence of the Rhodesian experience from the neocolonial trends underway on much of the continent, that is, the relinquishing of colonial state institutions to small, deliberately nurtured, friendly African (petty) bourgeoisies. Focusing on inter-capitalist conflict, Arrighi concluded that Zimbabwe was being held hostage by white agrarian capital which insisted on extending its colonial occupation into the nationalist period.² Arrighi did not make much of African politics, but, in his turn, Ranger did, in two studies of African resistance and ‘proto-nationalism’ stretching back to the colonial encounter. Here, Ranger painted a picture of