David Moore

Marxism and Marxist Intellectuals in Schizophrenic Zimbabwe: How Many Rights for Zimbabwe’s Left? A Comment

Paris Yeros’s ‘Zimbabwe and the Dilemmas of the Left’, published in these pages recently, invoked Ibbo Mandaza’s characterisation of ‘schizophrenic’ to characterise the state and class struggle in Zimbabwe.1 This theorisation describes a petty bourgeoisie in charge of an array of state apparatuses in the immediate aftermath of a war of liberation from a ‘white-settler-colonial’ state-society complex. This class was schizophrenic because it had to condemn white capital yet rely on it for a material base.2 For Yeros, the (conditional) success of a ‘semi-proletarian’ land revolution offered a way out of such a messy conundrum. In this edition of Historical Materialism, Brian Raftopoulos and Ian Phimister outline a deep and multilayered crisis, the resolution of which will likely take more than the 127,000 potentially small-commodity-producing farmers (and perhaps 7,300 middling ones)3 on which Yeros’s hopes rest, even if

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2 Yeros 2002, pp. 5–10 on state theories in Zimbabwe.
3 Statistics on the ‘new farmers’ are unclear; tenure relations are even more so. In 2002, Yeros estimated 160,000 households had gained land in ‘fast-tracked’ reforms. However, by 2004, state commissions advised by Sam Moyo estimated 127,192
they would be producing optimally and creating a surplus large enough (in proportional terms) to answer the classical agrarian question. Yet Yeros and Sam Moyo – Zimbabwe’s most noted agrarian social scientist and co-author of a recent chapter featuring in this commentary – portray Raftopoulos and Phimister (by extension, one surmises) as part of an ebullient group of postmodern and middle-class denizens living in an NGO-driven ‘civil society’

Bernstein 2003, 2004a and 2004b, is crucial here. Moyo and Yeros thank Bernstein for comments on their 2004 chapter, but a close look at his ‘World Historical Perspective’ on the agrarian questions in southern Africa throws caution on implicit claims of his support: Moyo’s notion for the superiority of small scale farming is criticised as the ‘simple confusion’ of ‘neo-classical populism’ (2003, p. 214), and ‘romanticism about “peasants” or indeed “worker-peasants” or general assumptions of the superior productive virtues of either large-scale or small-scale farming’ is debunked (p. 218). On contemporary Zimbabwe, Bernstein writes that ‘it is pointless – or counter-productive – to present it, and its current moment, as the pursuit of struggle and exercise of will of any coherent, and idealised, collective class or other subject/agent, whether “peasant”, rural “community” or “worker-peasant”. Such views are supported by neither the social nor political “facts”’. In 2003, he wrote that the land invasions point to a ‘significant, and “objectively progressive,” expression of a (new) agrarian question of labour’ (p. 220), yet cautions that benefits will be contingent on extensive state provisioning or the relatively quick accumulation processes of a highly differentiated, yet productive, formation. In 2004a, he was ‘unconvinced by the sweeping nature of [Yeros’s] ... “semi-proletarianization thesis”’ and more critical of ‘populist ideologies [and by implication practices], of various stripes and in various ways, claiming to articulate the injuries of exploitation, oppression and injustice generated by “structural inequality of resource access” in the countryside, and ... address[ing] them through redistributive land reforms’ (pp. 205–6). He was also clearer that ‘employment as well as productivity benefits (and macroeconomic benefits such as foreign exchange earnings) are under direct threat from any redistributive land reform that divides up ... [large-scale capitalist farming] enterprises’ (pp. 207–8). Such empirical questions rest on evidence of increasing productivity and distribution. There is no evidence to date to show improvement on any of these scores in Zimbabwe, except in the case of a conspicuously consuming ‘élite’ (wealthier than a ‘middle class’ but with little interest in the production, signifying a ‘proper’ bourgeoisie) with its base in ‘trade’ and rent-seeking at best, speculation and crime at worst. Does this group represent the embryonic stage of a productive bourgeoisie, creating an industrial proletariat along with it? Reports on the new capitalists’ farms suggest much lower and wages and worse conditions than those that afflicted the now decimated agricultural workers historically.