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Land for the Landless: conflicting images of rural and urban in South Africa's land reform programme

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Abstract

South Africa's land reform programme has been underpinned by ambivalence about land and what it signifies. One set of discourses and practices shows that ownership of or access to rural land is a key part of many African families' well-being and livelihood. But it is only a part: small-scale agriculture in South – and southern – Africa has been shown over the past decades to have become impossible without inputs from labour migrant remittances. The corollary is that the desire to acquire or retain access to land exists alongside the (real or desired) capacity to earn money in the urban sector. Land represents a series of things – a sense of security, identity and history – rather than being an asset to be used for farming alone (or at all). But despite this, land has featured in the assumptions of some policy-makers (and some academic researchers, closely associated with them) as a key asset in its own right. Reforming its ownership, and redistributing it to poorer sectors of society is thought to provide the key to solving poverty and inequality, and is seen as the starting point in any real debate about redistributing wealth. Ignoring the interplay of rural and urban sources of income and identity, this set of assumptions is one which envisages the worlds of town and country as separate: it reconstitutes Africans either as rural 'farmers' or as urban 'wage earners'. Ironically, there are striking continuities between this discourse and that of apartheid, with its attempts in the 1950s to promote successful African farmers and in the (linked) attempts to divide urban from rural people through such means as the infamous influx control regulations. This paper reviews published academic work, policy statements, and case studies of labour migrancy and land reform to illustrate some of the contradictory impulses behind, and outcomes of, the land reform programme in the new South Africa. It demonstrates that the idea of rural and urban as separate worlds has been strongly entrenched in South Africa's 'development discourse' from long before apartheid's demise.

When one considers the rural/urban dichotomy in the context of South Africa, it is useful to take guidance from Ferguson's innovative articles (1990, 1992). In these, he recognizes the importance, not only of local representations of this dichotomy, but also of the way it has featured in debates - between state planners, policy makers, and social science researchers - about the projected and desired direction of social change. My paper attempts to look at some of the interrelations between these two in relation to South Africa's land reform programme, and makes two claims:

- That there has been a reciprocal relationship between broader debates about policy on the one hand and local ideas and practices on the other, but that the form taken by this influence has not always been what one might expect. In particular, the rural/urban dichotomy, used to represent divergent racial identities in the making of apartheid policy about South Africa's rural areas, has been re-appropriated by local people to mark age, gender and even class divisions between people within particular socioeconomic units such as households.

- That there have been significant mismatches between these two arenas of knowledge and practice. In particular, the image produced by this spatial dichotomy has obscured the intimate interdependence between rural and urban as sources not only of income but also of identity. In populist and neo-liberal debates about land reform in the new South Africa, there have been some remarkable continuities with that discourse which informed previous government' projections about the future of rural areas. For both, rural and urban appear as separate worlds, with plans to bolster the agricultural sector and to plan for the future of farming being seen as largely unrelated to peoples' capacity to earn a living in, or derive a sense of belongingness within, the context of town.

The regional setting

Recent events in Zimbabwe, in which large numbers of squatters have occupied white farms, amidst claims that the freedom struggle will not be over until the country's land has been redistributed, have raised questions in some observers' minds about the relevance of these events for South Africa. Although it is recognized that Zimbabwe's farm occupations have been largely instigated by a regime in crisis and fearing for its survival, the question of whether similar land invasions and outpourings of wrath might occur south of the border, some decades down the line, is a pertinent one. It is particularly pertinent because of the raising of expectations - through media publicity given to government promises of reform and to the (relatively few) cases where historically-owned land has been returned, through posters calling for land claims to be registered by the cut-off date, and the like. There have also been early warning signs, in which officials in the Department of Land Affairs have admitted that they cannot 'deliver' and hence that these expectations will necessarily be thwarted.

The similarities between the two countries should not, however, conceal one major difference between them: while Zimbabwe's economy has been, and remains, a primarily agricultural one, South Africa's has been based on its mineral wealth and on industry. Its white agricultural sector, after a brief period of competition with black peasant farmers, became predominant over them, and expanded considerably during the apartheid era - but it was bolstered by a complex set of institutional arrangements and artificial supports such as government-funded loans, marketing boards and co-operatives. In its attempts to secure labour, it competed with urban-based industry in a manner which grew increasingly fierce, but in which the odds were stacked against it, despite government attempts to retain a rural labour force by regulating the free movement of Africans to the cities through influx control, labour-recruiting agencies operating in rural areas, and the like.

Set in the context of this competition between different sectors of the economy, the history and past use of the land whose use is now being reformed has been a complex one. Official apartheid discourse, as discussed below, represented all Africans as having resided eternally in their 'tribal homelands', but the reality is that there were large numbers of rurally-resident families living on white farms, where they engaged in a complex juggling act to satisfy farm owners' demands for labour and to pursue their own activities as cultivators and pastoralists, while also having migrant members at work in

town. Smaller numbers lived, independent of farmer control, on freehold farms in white areas which were later to be designated as 'black spots', where they engaged in equally diversified combinations of wage- and subsistence-oriented activities across the town/country divide. There had been considerable mobility within country areas even before the onset of apartheid's massive project of social engineering. But this movement intensified from the 1960s onwards, when many evicted labour tenants and forcibly resettled freeholders – and even some people relocating voluntarily, as I will show – moved into the African 'homelands', reserves or Bantustans. These were not large enough to accommodate the newcomers, but had been augmented (albeit insufficiently) by the addition of extra territory, itself purchased from former white owners, which came to be known locally as the 'Trust'. While for some families the move from white farm to Bantustan necessitated the onset of waged work for the first time, many others had had fathers or brothers involved in wage work from long before they moved from the farms where they had resided.

Official discourse on town and country

In industrializing areas of Africa, to represent people as belonging on a particular point of the rural/urban continuum has been an enterprise which is highly ideologically charged. The depiction of Copperbelt African workers as primarily "tribal" or as "target workers", for example, has been shown by Ferguson to be related to colonial settler fear, whereas a later view - exemplified by Gluckman's famous statement that 'an African miner is a miner' - which saw African workers on the Copperbelt as assimilated and urbanized, derived from a liberal argument developed in opposition to settler conservatism. Both positions owed more to the political and ideological predispositions of those who held them than to the orientations of the Africans in question (1990:617).

In South Africa, representations of urbanness - or its lack - have been similarly loaded.ⁱ Apartheid's planners, in their attempts to envisage and legitimate a way of controlling the flux of African movement to the cities, used spatial forms of identification. From an official point of view, defining people as being "from another place" was the basis for denying their political inclusion and rights of common citizenship, as Ashforth shows in his analysis of the discourse used in the series of official Government Commissions which investigated "the Native Question" from the early decades of the 20th century onwards (1994:129). While some of the earlier Commissions addressing this question were inclined to deal with the unprecedented influx of people by planning to provide sanitized and separated housing in town, the definitive Tomlinson Commission of 1955 laid out the apartheid government's new political vision by concentrating on the rural areas. According to this, there would be alternative citizenship for the African majority because they "belonged" elsewhere - within ethnically-defined cultural units with specific territorial bases, the 'heartlands' of the reserves. Thus did the Commission remap "the social landscape according to a whole new conception of the innate relationship of people to place" (ibid:158).

Rather than concentrating on finding ways to integrate African labourers into the urban economy as some earlier policies had done, this was a perspective focused on the rural "home" areas to which, it was claimed, these people really belonged. As part of this

focus, a plan was authored for the agricultural development of these areas through creating a viable small- to medium-farm economy. But this particular Commission's recommendations –involving social engineering on an even grander scale than apartheid's implementers were later to accomplish - were never carried out. In its insistence upon the need to develop these areas as part of a master plan of divided citizenship, its report revealed itself as a manifestation of apartheid ideology rather than as a blueprint for workable rural development (Ashforth 1994:177-8).

But it left its ideological stamp on the bureaucratic mind, and also, as I argue here, on the way in which apartheid's opponents, some of whom are now in government, think about and plan for the future of those who live in the rural areas. Its notion that South Africa's African population has its rightful dwelling-place and political home in the rural areas - and in particular the rural "heartland" of each ethnic reserve or bantustan - was drawn upon and perfected by subsequent Commissions whose recommendations were implemented in varying degrees (such as those led by Wiehahn and Rieckert) in their attempts to entrench the division between those Africans legally residing in cities and the excluded - 'rural' - majority. The politically-charged nature of its insistence on the rural nature of the African population can also be discerned in the writings of those opposed to this viewpoint. As in Ferguson's discussion of the Copperbelt, the scholarship which tended to stress the possibilities for integration - and to emphasise the proletarian and/or urban nature, and future - of the African population, was that written in a liberal/radical tradition.ⁱⁱ Adopting a similar perspective, anthropological writings emphasised the inextricable intertwining of rural and urban sources of livelihood - and later of identity, as I will discuss below in further detail. But the insistence that rural and urban are separate worlds has remained, and has now found expression in debates and contestations which have occurred since 1994, both within and beyond the policy arena, about a series of issues with an apparently "rural" focus - and in particular about the aims and intended outcomes of land reform, how to end rural impoverishment by providing employment, and the like.

It is not only in the corridors of power and influence that the impact of such discourses has been felt, however. Nor has the direction of influence been entirely one-way. Whether policy has been directly informed or only indirectly influenced by them, the recommendations made by Government Commissions were based on the collection of large amounts of evidence from African chiefs, their subjects, and various other spokesmen. Tomlinson was particularly thorough in this respect, having gathered 69 volumes of it (Ashforth 1994:150). That African migrant labourers and their dependents have developed a self-image as people rooted in the countryside rather than having any fundamental connection to town is borne out by numerous accounts, and it is likely that this image has not only been shaped by but has also shaped the discourse of policy makers and those in government. To some extent, then, the perception of the two worlds as separate and discrete, having been constructed through a process of reciprocal interaction, is shared by actors at the level of both village and government. Both have an ambiguous attitude about acknowledging the interactions between these worlds.

Rural-urban continuities in South African studies

One strand of scholarship in southern African social studies, informed by an E.P.Thompson-inspired “social history” tradition of writing, and trailing somewhat behind the period, at the height of South Africa’s economic expansion, when labour migrancy was at its most prevalent, has explored in detail the interdependence between the urban and the rural poles of the migrant world. Studies in this vein, written against the backdrop of a legislative system which disallowed most labourers from setting up house in town, spoke of the cruel irony which required that a man, in order to support his rurally-based family, must live apart from them for most of the year (Murray 1981); and showed that such a man had little choice but to support the agricultural enterprises of his dependents since this represented an investment in the rural social system on which he would be dependent when returning home after retirement (*ibid.*; Vail 1989). A similar irony has been noted in the fact that men have undertaken virtually life-long participation in the urban labour market as a means to preserve a primarily rural way of life (Delius 1996), and as a way in which to secure the building of a homestead - in social as well as in purely physical terms - in their home villages (McAllister 1980). At the level of individual households, these forms of interdependence were acknowledged by referring to the necessity of understanding the difference - and the relationship - between the *de facto* residents (migrants’ dependents residing in the countryside) and the *de jure* ones (the wage-earning migrants themselves): a relationship which has been more recently expressed as that between the “migrant” and “resident” components of a household (Baber 1996:274).

While the decline of the mining and manufacturing industries in South Africa has meant significant changes in the rate and extent of labour migration, and hence in the degree of success of such strategies (many households’ cash component is now provided by state pensions rather than by a migrant wage), studies conducted during the 1990s indicate that the two worlds remain fundamentally interdependent. Indeed, to the extent that a larger number of households are threatened by the effects of unemployment, there may even be a greater dependence on the relatively fewer links which remain. In the semi-arid Northern Province and in Natal, for example, it is still considered necessary to understand the interaction between the wider, urban-based economy and the local, rural one in order to grasp how apparently ‘rural’ people sustain themselves in the countryside (Baber 1996:275; see also Ardington and Lund 1996), while, in the context of the Free State, Murray has assessed the applicability of DfiD’s ‘Sustainable Livelihoods’ approach to the South African context, commending it for its acknowledgement of the impossibility of transcending discrete sectors - urban and rural, industrial and agricultural. (He does, though, state that ‘how this might best be achieved in respect of development planning and practical intervention remains deeply problematic’ (Murray 1999b:3).)

These writings form part of a scholarly trend which denies the discreteness of the rural and the urban worlds by showing that they are intrinsically interlinked and that incomes within the rural one depend upon wages earned within the urban. There are two things to note about this. Firstly, there is the fact that awareness of these linkages, although widespread in the scholarly literature, has not - in anything other than a superficial manner - informed debates about the future of the rural areas, as I will demonstrate later in the paper. Secondly, these writings have tended to emphasise the economic aspects of

interdependency without recognizing the extent to which urban/rural dichotomies and interdependencies have also come to be used by migrants and their families in cultural processes of building and affirming identities. Referring to my own fieldwork among Pedi- or Northern Sotho-speakers in the Northern Province (formerly Transvaal) and on the Witwatersrand conducted over a fifteen-year period, I show how there has been a complex interplay between those forms of representation and identification which stress the reciprocally constitutive nature of town and country, and those which appear to enshrine them as discrete, separate worlds. I then show how the “rural” and the “urban”, in the process of signifying different things, have also come to denote shifting and indeterminate spaces and geographical areas.

Migrant representations of rural and urban

In contrast to the government’s use of territorial location to denote racial identities and forms of political exclusion, and later to denote insider/outsider status, South African migrants have mapped a series of locally-relevant social statuses and moral meanings by reference to the spatial locations of rurally-based households, or of individuals within these. The poles of a rural/urban dichotomy are used to represent the complex interrelations and interdependencies between people involved in a series of overlapping and oscillating movements between town and countryside.

Before demonstrating the use of spatial motifs as a means to map the intricacies of household life in an itinerant culture, however, it is necessary to register a warning. There has long been a horror, by those writing on labour migration, of acknowledging the existence of long-term trends which appear truly entrenched, or of describing repeating patterns with terms such as “domestic cycle” (Murray 1981). In part, this may be due to a reluctance to acknowledge that a practice which is apparently so inimical to stable family life can have developed its own rhythms and regularities, but it also owes something to a very real recognition of the reality and rapidity of historical change. Although labour migration has in some cases lasted longer than people might suspect, having been engaged in for example by 19th century youths in part fulfilment of their obligation to chiefs to help stock up on weaponry (Delius 1983), it has also, in many cases, lasted for a very much shorter time than is suggested by notions of an entrenched “migrant culture”. In the picture of labour migrant households which I sketch below, one can, on the one hand, discern recurrent patterns congruent with ideas of ‘habitus’ and ‘structuration’ but one must, on the other, acknowledge historical changes and contingencies, and individual motivations and actions, which disrupt such patterns.

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In Northern Province villages, as in other rural areas of southern and South Africa, the process of a young man’s leaving home to find work became inextricably entwined with rituals of manhood, and with preparing to marry (Coplan 1994; Delius 1989; McAllister 1980). This often involved a series of successive journeys, commencing with short forays to work on white farms later followed by much longer stays on mines or in the cities (James 1999). A long view over several generations within a single family reveals a number of variations over time. Before moving to the ‘Trust’ village of Sephaku,

Kibidi Madihlaba and his son Jacobs, for example, each in his turn traveled from the white farm Buffelsvallei on which the family was living to work in town, but did so only for long enough to earn money with which to pay bridewealth. One generation later, Jacobs' children, who reached adulthood during the 1960s-1970s, found themselves entwined in the urban economy for much of their adult lives. Despite such variations, these expectations assumed a patterned and habitual quality over a series of decades, such that men who were *not* undergoing such journeys were judged to be both inappropriately located and lacking in masculinity. Such was the expectation that men ought to be working in town that, when lowly-paid jobs became available in the village in the 1980s, unemployed youths would not consider these to be appropriate forms of work, choosing rather to let them be done by women. The work considered appropriate to a young or pre-retirement man was that situated in an urban area: to be a man, hence, was to be away from home, while the identity of a wife or daughter in many cases had a stay-at-home status associated with it.

Seen in purely economic terms, such an absent male features in accounts of the migrant labour system as one of the *de jure* household residents - the 'migrant component' - whose presence in town has been necessary to ensure the family's survival. That his dependents - the *de facto* residents - must remain in their village, taking care of the family's rural assets and agricultural activities, has been seen, again in mostly economic terms, as essential to the success of his 'long term investment' in the rural social system. But there are processes of identification at work here beyond the economic level. A migrant household in Sephaku, through a tenuous balancing act in which different members were positioned at different points on the polarity between town and country, both maintained itself economically and affirmed a moral, home-based identity for its members, expressed in terms of the customary values of *sesotho*.ⁱⁱⁱ

In many cases, like the ones cited above, the spatial mapping of migrant and non-migrant members was one which separated men working in town from their dependent and rurally-resident wives. But in the case of some better-off families, men resided in town together with their wives, and the spatial mapping was one separating members of succeeding generations from one another, and placing the elderly at home while their children, later to inherit, occupied the urban pole of this spatial dichotomy.

The Makeke family of Sephaku is an example. John Makeke retired in the early 1980s from his work in Kempton Park, on the Witwatersrand. Together with the house he had built for his family on the edge of his parents' plot in the village, where he now lived together with his wife, daughter and several grandchildren, the household's assets included a small house in the African township - or 'location' - of Tembisa, where they had resided together while he had been working in town. It was of key importance to John, like many people in a similar position, that he be able at the moment of his retirement to move back home immediately - thus having to incur none of the costs and payments of rental, etc., associated with living in an urban setting - and leave the family's Tembisa house to be occupied in turn by his son, Rudolph, and his wife, while they worked and sent money home. John's projection was that there would be a similar deployment of people across geographical space when this son Rudolph later retired: that he would come back to occupy a house to be built on his parents' village plot while leaving his youngest son (currently a child, being raised in the village by his

grandparents) to work in town and live in the 'location'. All these existing and projected arrangements were endorsed by reference to the sotho custom of ultimogeniture, and to the idea that a last-born son's inheritance of his parents' residential and agricultural plots were given as a reward for his support of his parents during their years of retirement (James 1987).

While this appears to typify a timeless 'migrant' model, there are some qualifications. It is important to note, first, that this apparently highly patterned set of projections was founded upon the experience of only a single generation, since John Makeke, although himself a dutiful inheriting son, was the first person in his immediate family to have left to work in town. Second, this two-house pattern, although aspired to by many, was not by any means a feature of all families in this village (several migrant men had no more than a room – or a bed in a room - in a hostel in town). And third, the obedience and willingness of the inheriting son - a cornerstone in such an arrangement - could by no means be expected of the youngest sons in all such families. Indeed, it may be that the tendency towards patterning reflects an inclination to control precisely the kinds of exceptional circumstances and long-term changes and contingencies which threaten to disrupt the projectedly cyclical character of the migrant existence. Accompanying the basic rural-urban polarity which distinguished this family's successive generations from each other, it should also be noted that there was a haphazardness and contingency about the way in which the other children within it oriented themselves and foresaw their futures, partly depending upon where their parents had been situated when they were born. Their youngest daughter Theresa, for example, having been raised in Tembisa but having been forced to accompany her parents back to the village upon their retirement, was - like some of her friends in a similar position - bored by the rigours of village life. She identified herself with the life of Tembisa and Kempton Park, and longed for the more interesting pursuits of her earlier existence in these areas.

Nevertheless, it can be seen in this case, and in many others like it, how appropriate roles and positions for members of succeeding generations within a household have been mapped according to their spatial situation. Having worked in town during his adult life, John Makeke, in retirement, could take an active role in the family's farming activities, since such forms of rural labour were considered appropriate to an older man where they would not have been so for a younger or middle-aged one. For the Makekes in retirement, seeing themselves as securely placed at 'home' was dependent upon, and also enabled, the positioning of key members of the larger household in the 'location' at Tembisa. Here, in contrast to state discourses which had used town/country distinctions to map racial identities, such polarities were being employed locally as temporal markers, to denote the location of different family roles in a process of oscillation.

But accompanying a model which lays out the interdependence of localities in this way, there was an insistence on the separation of 'location' from 'home'. Town was thought of as a necessary evil; as a place in which one could earn the money necessary to raise one's children. Children should not, however, be kept in town, they would become bad there. To send them home to be cared for by grandparents was somehow to ensure that the undesirable practices and attitudes of town would be avoided or escaped from. If town was the place for working, home, in contrast, was the desired place in which one should be based, and in which one should live out one's days. Both for families with

only a single male migrant wage earner, and for those like the Makekes in which mother, father and children had resided in the location for years, the sense of urgency about moving away at the moment of stopping work was extraordinary. There was a moral dimension to this insistence which went beyond the concern, significant though this was, to avoid incurring unnecessary expense in town where ‘everything must be paid for’: the morality of home as a place to return to, with its security and good values, was expressed by Monica Makofane in biblical terms - ‘I now have a place to lay my head’. Without rehearsing the extensive commentary on similar cases of separation between the two worlds – of work for money on the one hand and a recreated moral economy where capitalist values are denied on the other (JL and J Comaroff 1987; Roseberry 1989), I go on in the next section to elaborate on the morality associated with home and location respectively.

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In this section, I show how ideas of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ – or rather ‘home’ (*gae*) and ‘location’ - have come, in the process of signifying different things, to denote shifting and indeterminate spaces and geographical areas.

First, to understand the significance of the ‘rural’ or ‘home’ dimension, it is important to note the widely diverging set of experiences which underpin this idea. Among other things, one needs to understand the difference between people who have lived all their lives in strongly traditionalist rural areas - the ‘heartlands’ identified by the Tomlinson Commission - and the large number of people who have spent their lives moving from one part of the countryside to another.^{iv} Although such movements took place against the backdrop of a series of forced removals implemented by the South African authorities, many of them, especially those involving a drift from tenancies on white farms to the ‘Trust’ properties on the edges of the African reserves, were undertaken semi-voluntarily by families, or small sections of families, in search of *thabologo* (civilization) and a less backward way of life. They were movements driven, *inter alia*, by a desire to live near to churches, schools, shops and other amenities.^v Conversely, at the onset of particular stages in the life course when a traditionalist orientation was considered appropriate, most notably at the time of initiation for girls or boys, such families often sent their children back to the farms to stay with relatives while they were undergoing this key ritual. For labour migrants and their families, the difference between ‘Trust’ areas on the edge of the bantustans and the white farms they had left behind thus represented a series of strongly contrasting - but ambiguously assessed - values. The ‘Trust’ stood for an autonomous, independent and civilized way of life - but the flip side of this was the degree to which children in such settings could more easily slip away from parental control. The farms, on the other hand, represented a ‘backward’ life in which people had little freedom, were reliant on decisions made by farm owners and subject to the vagaries of the changing (white) agricultural economy - but were also thought of as places to which children could be sent to learn traditionalist values such as the value of sotho culture and the necessity of respecting one’s elders. Thus did different parts of the countryside, seen as geographical markers in the lives of families moving from one to the other, come to signify contrasting values associated with town and country life respectively.

But it has been in town, paradoxically, that the values of 'home' and the countryside have come into sharpest focus. My research on women migrant singers shows that 'home', represented as the seat of sotho traditions, was a concept which evolved gradually, after several years of working in town, and involving a process of cultural revivalism. 'Home' for these migrants signified a set of relationships constructed in town between people who gradually, through interactions, come to see themselves as sharing a common place of origin, even though their villages of residence were widely scattered (James 1999). (One means through which such home spaces have been made, and through which they have been marked off from other spaces in the urban world in which sotho morality does not apply, is through the construction of strictly-regulated codes governing all financial transactions and matters which involve the dealings of performance group members with each other). Interpersonal relationships in the 'location' constitute a moral economy of home. If, then, men are migrating to preserve a primarily rural way of life as Delius claims (1996) it is partly in an urban setting that the moral values of this way of life come to be lived out.

Town, country and land reform

I now turn to a discussion of whether migrant representations of town and country – and indeed, the very realities of the migrant life – are reflected in changing state policy on land reform in the new South Africa. In the complex and contested world of debate and policy-formation in which various players have been involved, in the run-up to the 1994 elections and subsequently, various positions have been taken. These tend to group primarily around two opposing positions, which have cohabited in an uneasy relationship over the last six or seven years, with much concern expressed about the inability of a programme of land reform to accommodate both approaches without allowing one to eclipse the other. But, as is the case with 'rural development' thinking elsewhere in the world, neither takes much account of labour migrancy and its urban/rural polarities (see de Haan 1999)

One, with a populist and egalitarian – or, as it is more commonly known in South Africa, 'progressive' – ethos nurtured during the years of anti-apartheid struggle, favours the restitution and redistribution of land to those removed from it or denied access to it during the era of state repression. The other, with a developmentalist focus associated with the influence of the World Bank, acknowledges the primacy of the market, and favours the development of small- through medium- to large-scale agriculture (Crush and Jeeves 1992; Walker 1994; Levin 1996; Williams 1996). The former approach enjoyed a brief period of influence under Mandela's Minister of Land Affairs Minister, Derek Hanekom, who appointed numbers of former NGO activists to his staff and established a legal framework to facilitate the reclaiming of land by those unfairly deprived of or evicted from it. The latter approach has predominated since February 1999 when Thoko Didiza, named by Mbeki as his new Minister combining the Land Affairs and Agriculture portfolios, placed a moratorium on all land distribution already in progress, and announced a policy prioritizing the provision of financial support for emerging commercial black farmers and apparently de-emphasizing the needs of the poor.^{vi} While those in the former camp recognized that much of the demand for land was by poor

people unlikely to use it for commercial farming, those in the latter have been more inclined to use the scientific language of ‘carrying capacity’, ‘optimum yields’ and the like. The statement of ‘vision’ of the agriculture department – applicable, some feel, to both ministries - is as follows: ‘a highly efficient and economically viable market-directed farming sector, characterized by a wide range of farming enterprises of varying sizes, which will be seen as the economic and social pivot of rural South Africa and which will positively influence the rest of economy and society’. Despite the apparent divergence between the two tendencies, however, the influence of the ‘rural/agricultural’ model has tended to predominate even before the change of ministerial personnel, causing even those in the populist/redistribution camp easily to drift into discussions about the best agricultural use of farming land and the like.

In addition to looking at the formulations and effects of policy, a consideration of South Africa’s land reform programme must also include reference to a series of academic writings and publications which have tended to cluster around the arena of policy in its strictest sense. Some of these are the result of independent or development agency-funded research (Lipton, Ellis and Lipton 1996; de Klerk 1996), while others have emerged from the new government’s extraordinarily extensive practice of hiring consultants – for example, in the series of ‘Land Reform Pilot Programmes’ which were undertaken throughout the country after 1994. But several have been written by people who straddle the worlds of academe, NGO work, and – later – employment in the new government’s Department of Land Affairs (Walker 1994; Levin 1996; Levin and Weiner 1994). Overall, there has been a remarkable degree of overlap between those operating within these diverse institutional frameworks and arenas of knowledge. And what is particularly noticeable about much of it, taken as a whole, is the extent to which it speaks of the countryside as a separate place, counterposed against the city. There is little evidence in these writings of an awareness that the ‘stakeholders’ in the rural context may equally ‘hold stakes’ in urban settings.

I look first at the populist/redistributionist tendency, and the way in which its ideological position has influenced its rendering of the ‘land’ issue as having an exclusively rural dimension. My study of the land claim of Doornkop farm in Mpumalanga province shows that the origins of this populist approach within the era of anti-apartheid struggle have lent a sense of common purpose to the process of reclaiming land which has lasted well into the post-apartheid era. Its protagonists, both in the land-claiming constituency itself and in the NGOs and later government, have tended to depict claimants as homogenous groups with a primarily rural and agricultural orientation, and as strongly communal in nature basis. This has prompted the use of interventions with a “small is beautiful” orientation, and of development initiatives which owe much to Chambers-style participatory research, based on notions of widely-shared viewpoints within rural communities. Showing more influence from the ‘commercial farmer’ model, the consultants called in to do post-reclamation planning for such areas tend to base their *modus operandi* on earlier experiences as planners within apartheid frameworks such as the South African Development Trust, with its orientation to the ideals laid out in the Tomlinson report. All these processes have served to obscure from the view of such activists and policy makers the role played by short- and long-term migration to towns on and around the Witwatersrand: both in creating sharp differentiations between families

with differing assets based on widely divergent urban wages, and in giving claimants an interest in land which owes more to the 'I now have a place to lay my head' model than to aspirations to become viable small farmers (James 2000).

Intriguingly, where there is awareness of rural/urban interdependency, this is given qualified acknowledgement while in the same breath being partially refuted. IDS-based authors Merle and Michael Lipton, who have long championed the cause of small- to medium- farmer development in South Africa, have recently modified their stance to some extent, in the light of evidence from skeptics which they have collated in an edited volume (1996). Their new approach is to try to incorporate – and reconcile - both the populist/redistributionist and the commercial-farmer approaches mentioned above: but they do acknowledge the danger that the imperative to redistribute land could be sidetracked by a focus on 'emergent' or 'elite' black farmers, according to the model originally outlined by Tomlinson (Lipton, Ellis and Lipton 1996:xv). (This is, indeed, the direction that policy has now taken.) But they are still keen to promote the development of the African farming sector since, they claim, there has been a steep fall in the prospects for employment in the industrial and mining sector. They argue against the view, presented by a couple of their contributors and corresponding with my own position outlined in this paper, that an entrenched 'migrant culture' has turned the rural areas into places of retirement and refuge for labour migrants, and that young South African black men are averse to working at agriculture due to its being defined as an unmasculine form of labour (*ibid*:xii). They suggest that these forms of habituation are due not to longstanding cultural practices but rather are rational responses, given the context of sustained institutional bias which has favoured large-scale white agriculture and opposed the growth of African farming. Were this bias to be reversed, they claim, such forms of entrenched opposition to farming would be overturned.

Typifying the interpenetration of different institutional frameworks and discourses is one of the pieces in their collection by Richard Levin, an activist writer and former university lecturer who recently took up a senior position in government employment, implementing land reform. His work collecting local perspectives on the need for land (Levin and Weiner 1994), and researching specific land claims such as that by the Mojabelo people of the Northern Province (1996), is cast within the populist/redistributionist mould but favours a reform more 'radical' than any heretofore undertaken. He also rejects the pact-making by elites which he sees as having characterized the ANC's style of government since it came into power (*ibid*.:364-5), seeing the ANC as guilty of 'urban bias' in its policy concerns, as a result of the fact that most of the significant struggles precipitating the demise of apartheid involved town-based people engaged in town-based concerns (rental, wages, and the like). The protest action and insurrection occurring in villages was primarily youth-focused, and hence was centred on schooling rather than on access to land (*ibid*.).

Although Levin acknowledges the existence of 'multiple livelihoods' which straddle the urban and rural economies, his work is sprinkled with references to the key importance of 'rural people' and the importance of organizing them. Writing with co-researcher Daniel Weiner, he concludes on the basis of various participatory research exercises that 'a market-led land reform programme in the context of a neo-liberal macro-economic

planning framework would exclude most of apartheid's rural victims' (Levin and Weiner 1994:291): a conclusion reached, as well, by NGO workers who participated in the 1994 Community Land Conference which brought together land claimants in a gathering of considerable size. One detects a frustration at the fact that such people have not, as yet, grouped themselves into a social movement which would make its own political demands for land, and there is a call for the ANC, given its failure 'to develop an adequate rural programme' (1996a:366), now to make improved efforts at organizing rural people so that they come to recognize and act upon the land hunger they have in common. These issues are all conceptualised as being part of an overarching 'agrarian question': a phrase which, borrowed from Lenin, reveals that the relevant paradigm is one in which rural people are defined primarily by reference to their relationship to land, seen as a productive resource and hence as the basis of class identity.

Conclusion

Showing remarkable continuities with the earlier official discourse used in various government commissions on the 'Native Question', the issue of land in the new South Africa has been seen by those debating and contesting policy as something with primarily 'rural' significance. My claim is that this policy has both been based on evidence and inputs from rurally-resident people, and has influenced these, picking up on a local discourse which isolates the rural and emphasises the significance of 'home' as a domain separate from that of the 'location'. In reflecting this aspect of the rural-urban polarity, there has been a tendency within such debates to disregard the fact that, for most rurally-resident householders, village existence is merely one aspect of a broader world in which rural and urban interpenetrate and are interdependent.

What would it mean for policy if this interpenetration were more consistently recognized? It might imply an understanding that to concentrate on developing the urban infrastructure and on improving things for those living in towns does not necessarily represent a 'misplaced urban focus'. Urban-based developments of particular kinds, inasmuch as they would directly touch sections, or particular generational representatives, of country-dwelling families, could be at least as useful as initiatives designed to help "small commercial farmers". (The principle contribution of such initiatives to the welfare of the mass of country dwellers, now as in the 1970s, will probably in any case be no more than to draw some of them for brief periods into a pool of seasonal labourers).

Recognizing the polarity between town as a site of wage labour and home as a place 'to lay one's head' would likewise mean that, once lands were reclaimed or redistributed, the developers and planners who facilitate the process would no longer be blinded by their commitment to a farming paradigm. Claimants' reluctance to see reclaimed lands as sites of agricultural production is linked to the desire of many of them for a way of life characterised by development and civilisation (*tlhabologo*). This leads many to express their longing, instead, for these reclaimed lands to be provided with tarred roads, running water and other urban-style amenities, as happened in the case of Doornkop.

Such a desire, for country areas to become more like the town, suggests that rural and urban not only interpenetrate, but can fade imperceptibly into one another. There are suggestions that some of those who are the intended beneficiaries of land reform may have a shrewd idea of the ways in which this is possible. As larger and larger numbers of people search for the security which the 'somewhere to lay my head' model implies – a security which at least some of those in the redistributionist camp recognized as a motivation for land claims – many are laying claim to pockets of land in areas near large towns, such as King Williams Town in the Eastern Cape.^{vii} These, although claimed under conditions pertaining to 'rural' land claims, may later be sub-let and produce rental income more in keeping with land owned in an 'urban' setting.

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ⁱ This was true in academic debate as well: in assessing the Copperbelt scholarship in relation to that which was taking place in South Africa, Moore joins several other critics in accusing the Mayers, in their study of Xhosa migrants, of focusing too much on "tribal" survivals and of failing to heed the lessons of his counterparts studying migration at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (1994:48, 57).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Marks and Rathbone (1982); for comment on this phenomenon see James 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term denotes a way of life as well as referring to a language: see J and JL Comaroff (1987) for a discussion of the related way of life denoted by *setswana*.

^{iv} For the contrast between the two, see Baber (1996); James (1999); Sharp and Spiegel (1990); for movements and disrupted itinerant lives on the highveld see Keegan (1986); Murray (1999); Schirmer (1994); van Onselen (1996).

^v See James (1999). These movements between different rural areas, less well documented in the literature than the oscillating journeys undertaken by wage earners to town, were related to these latter journeys in particular ways - there are numerous cases in which farm-dwellers looked for town work only after moving to the reserves, but others in which specific family members, performing a delicate balancing act to keep farmer demands satisfied, had been engaged in labour migration for a generation or more.

^{vi} 'Observers concerned about new land reform policy', Marianne Merten, *Daily Mail and Guardian*, Feb 24 2000; Land reform at the crossroads: who will benefit?', Ben

