

The Agrarian Question in the 21st Century

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Drawing from the late Archie Mafeje's work and revolutionary spirit, this article revisits the "classical" agrarian question and responds to scholars who argue that the "agrarian question is dead"—indeed, those who feel that "we have been liberated from the constraints of agriculture, land and nature." Far from being dead, it is argued that the agrarian question remains real to people's politics in the 21st century and will remain so, especially in the global South where rural movements are finding alternative ways to wrestle monopoly-finance capital that continues to run amok.

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Our intention in this article is to reflect on the "classical" agrarian question and how we might look ahead to the 21st century.

Such a reflection continues to require a critique of Eurocentric and economic tendencies which have been influential in Marxian political economy, to the point of pronouncing the classical agrarian question dead, purportedly for no longer serving its primordial function, industrialisation. Absent in these approaches is acknowledgement of a series of questions, namely, the national question and its land and peasant components, which are irreducible to industrialisation (Moyo, Jha and Yeros 2013). These are precisely the questions that marked the culmination of the classical agrarian question, and remain the cornerstone of the contemporary agrarian questions. However, before beginning to reflect upon Mafeje's views, we find it important to trace the trajectory of the "classical myth of the agrarian question," particularly its obsession with industrialisation.

1 Making of the Classical Myth¹

The notion of "agrarian question," which became central to Marxian political economy in the late 19th century, has always been a complex one, with different dimensions of a large canvas and interconnected themes getting privileged in alternative conceptual renderings. Nonetheless, soon after its inception, there was a strong tendency to shape its analytical contours in the light of Eurocentric modernisation experiences, in spite of richly textured discourses in which it was embedded. For instance, reviewing the early literature, Byres (1991) distinguishes the agrarian question in three distinct senses: (a) the Engels sense, (b) the Kautsky–Lenin sense, and (c) the Preobrazhensky sense.

As he notes, each of the three senses referred to the political, social and economic dimensions of backwardness, respectively. Yet, they also converged in their underlying concern with obtaining, whether by capitalist or socialist means, the modern industrialised outcome that England had obtained earlier, ahead of her "great power" rivals.

As for industrialisation, while the early European thinkers who converged around this objective had divergent views on how to obtain it, those working on the agrarian question, essentially reduced it to the question of industrialisation. It was a question which permitted a variety of perspectives on the politics and economics of industrialisation, but without managing ultimately to transcend the political and ideological limitations of turn-of-the-century Europe. In other words, the Eurocentric Marxist discourse on the agrarian question evolved largely in relation to the theme of backwardness and prescribed industrialisation as its main remedy. This binary of backwardness/industrialisation, we submit, became the basis of latter-day myth-making.

The theme of backwardness/industrialisation gained a new life after the World War II and it got oriented either towards a radical reinterpretation, or a conservative rendition which reduced it to a technocratic exercise and accentuated Eurocentric distortions. At the crux of it were matters deeply political, namely, land concentration, mass peasant populations, etc, which continued to determine the relation of forces of economies and societies, but unfortunately, these remain largely ignored. Instead the backwardness/industrialisation binary became an axiom with strongly conservative tendencies.² Stating the essence of such a conception of the classical agrarian question, Byres (1991: 9) at the close of the 20th century remarks,

An unresolved agrarian question is a central characteristic of economic backwardness. In its broadest meaning, the agrarian question may be defined as the continuing existence in the countryside of a poor country of substantive obstacles to an unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development, both inside and outside

agriculture. Originally formulated with respect to incomplete capitalist transition and certain political consequences of that incompleteness, the agrarian question is now part, also of the debate on possible socialist transition in poor countries.

This notion of agrarian question (despite evading land reform and speaking of socialism almost stoically) is supposedly of profound relevance to all the backward countries, even though specificities in each case (of their respective agrarian questions) and the consequent trajectories of transcending economic backwardness may vary a great deal. For instance, Lenin gets drafted into this discourse through his distinction between the two broad trajectories of capitalist transition in agriculture, (namely, “capitalism from above”—the Prussian path, and “capitalism from below”—the American path), which presumably provided the necessary foundation for escaping economic backwardness (Lenin 1964: 33).³ Subsequent Marxist scholarship on the subject has produced an impressive literature on the diversity of historical experiences. Byres distinguishes between six paths of agrarian transition, depending inter alia on contingent agrarian structures, the nature of state, the linkages with non-agricultural sectors and embedding of the particular country in the “combined and uneven global capitalism.” Such explanations by then had already been established in the South, such as on the socialist transitions in Asia (Amin 1981) and the capitalist transitions in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Amin 1972; Williams 1994 (1944); Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Mafeje 1991). Yet, it is surprising that industrialisation was now being reinstated as an end in itself, even by some of the best-known and highly regarded Marxist scholars.

A False Resolution

Indeed, this tendency has reached new extremes, particularly in the hands of Henry Bernstein who has gone further to declare the classical agrarian question resolved on a global scale, independently of the degree or quality of industrial transitions in the South (details argued later). To understand this

argument, we might recall a simpler notion of transformation, much simpler than Byres’s numerous transitions above, but present in a wide spectrum of discourses in heterodox economics on structural economic transformation—or “modern economic growth” in Simon Kuznets’s expression. This notion holds that a significant spurt in agricultural growth either precedes or accompanies early to middle stages of modern economic transformation, until a stage is reached when the share of agriculture in total output, as well as labour force, starts declining: the faster this decline, the more successful and complete is supposed to be a process of agricultural transformation. Such a rendering of “resolution” hinges on the view that agriculture plays a central role in modern economic transformation and that its success or failure may be measured with reference to the nature of overall economic transformation.

A “minimalist” sense of resolution may specify a set of changes in economic and social relations of production within agriculture, necessarily required for significant increases in productivity and investible surplus to facilitate a process of successful transition from pre-capitalism to capitalism. Once the logic of capitalist social relations in agriculture are firmly in place (for example, agrarian capital and agrarian proletariat), resulting in technical development of enhanced surplus generation (via increased productivity of both land and labour), it may be said that the agrarian question has been addressed.

We would suggest that a substantial strand of Marxist scholarship often treated as the “classical interpretation,” appears to subscribe to this minimalist sense of the agrarian question. We have already referred to Henry Bernstein, who is possibly one of the most prominent exponents of such a “classical” view. In his 2004 piece in the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Bernstein provides a “stylised” outline highlighting what he considers to be core dimensions of the classic agrarian question, and goes on to conclude that

The ‘classic’ agrarian question, I would suggest, is the agrarian question of capital. To

the extent that its logic of agrarian transition succeeded (and may still succeed?) in accomplishing the social transformation and technical development of agriculture and in ways that contribute to industrialisation, then the agrarian question of capital is also that of labour as the two definitive classes of a new mode of production, representing historical progress (Bernstein 2004: 200).

As should be evident, Bernstein’s classic agrarian question hinges on what he considers to be the necessary economic and social wherewithal for the launch of capitalist development. Further, he also suggests that the logic of capitalist development in his scheme of the resolution of “classic” agrarian question subsumes the “agrarian question of labour” by which, presumably, he implies the absorption of dispossessed producers from agriculture (via primitive accumulation) in industrial and related non-agricultural sectors.

Bernstein goes on to argue that across the “times and places,” the changing material and social conditions underlying initiation of capitalist trajectories may imply very different expectations and demands with regards to the resolution of the agrarian question in specific contexts. He suggests that the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, by the time of their decolonisation and developmentalism had already been permeated by capitalist social relations of production and reproduction, and thus for them to embark on their respective (capitalist) economic transformations would have required unlocking the critical constraint of capital investments, or adequate agrarian capital. But if agrarian capital has sources beyond the local countryside, and if “the range of non-agrarian capital” may diversify and expand over time, in accordance with expectations (Bernstein 2004: 201), then clearly the critical constraint above may be diluted both for the capitalist transformation of agriculture, as well as towards its contribution to industrialisation.

Given the nature and direction of Bernstein’s argument, it leads him to suggest that

with contemporary ‘globalisation’ and the massive development of the productive forces in (advanced) capitalist agriculture, the centrality of the ‘classic’ agrarian question to

industrialisation is no longer significant for international capital. In this sense, then, there is *no longer an agrarian question of capital on a world scale*, even when the agrarian question—as a basis of national accumulation and industrialisation—has not been resolved in many countries of the ‘South’... (2004: 202, italics in original).

To put it simply, for Bernstein, given the possibility of large capital inflows for developing countries in the era of contemporary globalisation, the classical agrarian question is dead!

Capital sans Labour?

There are a number of problems with Bernstein’s arguments and it may be useful to flag the major ones. First, as stated earlier, his rendering of “classic” agrarian question is of a minimalist variety and simply reduced to the “question of capital.” However, even if the “classical” agrarian question is broadly construed as social and material changes in the countryside of a poor country required for overall economic transformation, then Bernstein’s reductionism is unwarranted. Second, the analytical rupture between the agrarian question of capital and the agrarian question of labour for the countries of the South, as visualised by Bernstein, seems to be misleading and is certainly a misreading of the classical perspective in which questions of capital and labour were viewed in an integrated fashion (and it was certainly not the case as Bernstein claims that in “classic” agrarian question in capitalist transition, the question of labour was simply subsumed by the question of capital). Finally, the claim that mobility of international capital in the era of globalisation implies that the classical agrarian question no longer exists is a travesty of even the minimalist rendering of the theme, as there is no automatic/organic connection between the flow of capital and successful capitalist transitions in agriculture and elsewhere. In a nutshell, Bernstein’s argument, in this sense, may be a non-starter.

Moving away from minimalist to broader renderings of the agrarian question in a classical Marxist perspective, it seems evident from the advantage of hindsight that there are significant gaps, troubling silences and even serious errors

which underpin several arguments in this tradition. However, given the complex web of multidimensioned concerns associated with the broad sense of the agrarian question, it is hardly surprising that the meanings associated with the resolution of the agrarian question in classical Marxist discourse tend to get interpreted in conflicting ways. Sure enough, as suggested earlier, in a general sense, such a discourse organically and essentially links it to “escape from economic backwardness” or “successful economic transformation” (whether capitalist or socialist). But as should be evident immediately, such a general conception of resolution of the agrarian question raises more questions than answers, and in fact opens up, both analytically and empirically, slippery terrains. For instance, presumed simplistic relationship between capitalist transition in agriculture and its contribution to industrialisation (as well as overall economic transformation) has received considerable critical attention within Marxist discourses in the recent years. To take one example, by now, it seems quite clear that the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England and elsewhere in Europe was indeed characterised by a process of “primitive accumulation,” but it did not lead to “agricultural revolution” and automatic indigenous foundations for industrialisation (Patnaik 2011).

It is not our intention in the rest of the article to engage in a detailed discussion of the range of problems underlying classical Marxist discourses on the agrarian question. The attempt of the arguments made in this section was to clarify how a Eurocentric and economic version of the agrarian question has sustained a myth around industrialisation.⁴ We have also suggested that this classical myth-making has not only drawn on the earlier European generation, but “purified” it. Yet, neither did the classical agrarian question end with Preobrazhensky, nor did the original European vanguard have enough insight on, or organic experience of, the struggles and transitions in the South. The steadily escalating land-grabs in the South throughout the neo-liberal period (Moyo 2008a; Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012),

demonstrate the fact well that capital accumulation, whether linked to contemporary Western finance or Chinese industry, remains closely integrated with agriculture and this is just one of the many dimensions of the agrarian question at the current juncture. We must therefore concur with Mafeje (1997: 7) when he argues that “the fault of socialist internationalists was to elevate the European historical experience, if that, to a universal theory.”

2 Looking Ahead with Mafeje

We have argued elsewhere that the classical agrarian question incorporated two sets of questions: that of industrialisation and that of national liberation (Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012). While the earlier European vanguard, in the course of imperialist rivalries, was called upon to respond to the challenge of industrialisation, the nationalist vanguard under imperialist domination was presented most immediately with the task of liberation. As anti-imperialist nationalism spread and gained its footing in the South, the agrarian question itself evolved, reaching its most robust expression first in Maoism, then in African nationalism and the new revolutionary thought emanating from Latin America and the Caribbean. It was in these tectonic shifts of the mid-20th century that the political, social, and economic dimensions of the agrarian question, which the European vanguard had previously articulated, were ultimately restructured and submitted to the quintessential cause of the time—national liberation. The great feat of the agrarian question of liberation was to incorporate industrialisation without surrendering to it; and thereby to create political space for the elaboration of new agrarian questions.

The key difference between the agrarian questions of industrialisation and liberation is that the latter has articulated with unprecedented clarity and conviction the requirement of sovereign industrialisation, or the safeguarding of the capacity to determine one’s own external relations and internal balances. Moreover, by its very logic, it has enabled the posing of new agrarian questions in a

universal way, namely, gender equity and ecological sustainability—these being the dimensions that have most defined the contemporary agrarian question—as well as the incipient debate on regional integration. Thus, the agrarian question of liberation has been the common thread between the classical and contemporary agrarian questions, consisting in the maturation of the former and cornerstone of the latter.

We submit that the agrarian question of liberation remains at the heart of the contemporary agrarian question, for its fate will continue to have a preponderant influence over the fate of gender relations, ecology, or regionalism. Put differently, neither gender equity, nor ecological sustainability, nor autonomous regional integration can be expected to progress under the tutelage of monopoly capitalism. It is this which leads us to reject Bernstein's grand claim that the "agrarian question is dead" and justifies our own exclamation—long live the agrarian question!

In looking ahead to multiple challenges of the 21st century, we draw inspiration on Mafeje's vision, which so distinctly embodies the continuity between the classical and contemporary agrarian questions. We draw especially on one of his last major statements, published at the turn of the century (Mafeje 2003), where one finds the wisdom acquired over a lifetime is condensed in a few pages on no less a question than "what is to be done" in 21st century Africa. We highlight, in particular, three basic and interrelated issues raised: the long duration of agrarian transition, land alienation and resistance and the role of small producers in national development.

Mafeje steadfastly argued that the specificity of agrarian transition in Africa has been obscured by concepts imported from Europe, Asia and Latin America. He defended that Africa's long transition has differed in the persistence of a "lineage mode of social organisation for production," which is neither a separate mode of production, nor a mere creation of the capitalist mode of production. Basic to this are social affiliation and access to land by kinship, which serve as a counterweight to individualist

accumulation strategies and private use of natural resources. He further argued that the lineage system has not been restricted to subsistence production, or to the countryside, but for over a century has given structure to Africa's integration into the capitalist market and the expansion of rural–urban relations. Mafeje shared the view that the continent under colonialism embarked on three distinct transitions, identified by Amin (1972) as the peasant trade economies of the West, the concessionary economies of the central region, and the labour reserves of the South, the latter being the only region where mass land alienation occurred and a land question created. Nonetheless, the lineage system and its values continued to pervade the continent and have been remarkably resilient in structuring social relations and struggles among the exploited classes.

It is notable that Mafeje viewed the lineage system in its modern functions and as a social fact not to be taken lightly—as by modernisers of the left and right. He argued, in particular, that the "customary" tenure relations of the lineage system are neither an obstacle to investment and accumulation, nor to technological advance. He identified the main obstacles to development as the surplus appropriated from small producers by monopoly capital and the comprador state; the domination of women, the main agricultural producers, through the same lineage system; and the degradation of the soil, possibly the main cause of productivity decline in the long run. He further argued that in the specific case of Southern Africa, where monopoly capital settled physically, peasant agriculture historically has been stifled more directly, as has accumulation by black capitalists all around, in the interest of the settler order.

From a long perspective, Mafeje's argument regarding the resilience of lineage society and its ideological force has been corroborated in the most unlikely of places, Southern Africa—indeed, the exception that proved the rule! In Zimbabwe, the alienation and privatisation of land by the white-settler minority over a whole century never obtained legitimacy, being ultimately reversed by

a popular land occupation movement and a radicalised state (Moyo 1995a; Moyo 2001; Moyo and Yeros 2007; Moyo and Chambati 2012). On the other hand, the penetration of capitalism has also advanced after independence, and especially under neo-liberalism, creating new economic facts, social classes, demographic trends, and structural tendencies. Mafeje was initially reluctant to recognise the qualitative impact of these changes, but did accept the facts when they were presented systematically (Moyo 2008a).

New Debates in the Global South

This new debate on transitions in Africa, in which renowned scholars such as Thandika Mkandawire, Mahmood Madmani and Samir Amin participated directly, occurred within the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) a whole decade before the onset of the major land-grabs. It had the effect of placing a new land and peasant question on the research agenda in non-settler Africa, while also turning the spotlight on settler Africa, and even on South Africa where the "proletarianisation" thesis has reigned supreme. Moreover, the debate synergised with like-minded debates among major South–South research networks, including the Dakar-based Third World Network, the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLASCO) and the Delhi-based International Development Economics Associates (IDEAs), to promote a peasant-friendly agenda generally across the South. Perhaps this has been the most lasting effect, galvanising a series of collaborative and autonomous research initiatives, recuperating ground on a variety of issues, inspiring young scholars and fomenting a convergent point of view on basic matters.⁵ When the global land-grabs escalated in 2007–08, one could indeed speak of a convergent Southern response on the nature and future of the agrarian question.⁶

This perspective has been substantially different from mainstream analyses of land alienation. Prior to the major land-grabs, those who took interest in transitions construed land alienation as possibly the final blow to the "disappearing

peasantries” (Bryceson et al 2000; Graziano da Silva 1999). It amounted to a narrow notion of transition, springing from an implicit (if not also explicit) desire for a post-peasant world which appeared to be on the horizon, on account of structural adjustment, outmigration and the flowering of “multi-occupational” survival strategies. The analysis was linked to a new set of reformist and welfare policies to be undertaken by the development industry, especially support for the “livelihood strategies” of the dispossessed (what Bernstein called “the agrarian question of labour”) and the technical upgrading and market integration of the remaining farmers (Graziano da Silva and Tavares 2008). With the onset of major land-grabbing, such thinking could only take flight in a moralistic discourse and an empiricist vocation without a clear perspective on what is at stake. To this day, neither imperialism nor sovereignty has become relevant enough a category to the mainstream of agrarian studies to organise the discussion on the agrarian question.⁷ Indeed, how can one defend the national question after having wished away the inhabitants of whole nations?

The “multi-occupational” deepening of the last 30 years—which we have called “semi-proletarianisation”—has been neither a new, nor a linear phenomenon. Even in non-settler Africa, as Mafeje (2003: 15) noted, “virtually all small producers practiced more than subsistence production.” Moreover, semi-proletarianisation has never gone without a fight, which Mafeje (2003: 5) pointed out as well. So-called de-peasantisation has produced a new wave of land occupation movements, across the South, this being one of the most important political facts of our times (Moyo and Yeros 2005). The land movement in Zimbabwe may have been the most successful in reclaiming land, but the depth of the political work that has been underway on all continents has set the stage for consideration of “re-peasantisation” as a modern, sovereign project in the 21st century.

The forces arrayed against such a project are certainly enormous. Above all, the new scramble is set to deepen

semi-proletarianisation, intensify militarisation and spread instability and conflict from one region to the next—none of which is conducive to development. But there are counter-forces at play, arising especially from small countries like Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nepal, which have weathered crisis and radicalisation to bring back the national question to the development agenda (Moyo and Yeros 2011). It is no coincidence that the idea of a “return to the countryside” has been most clearly expressed in these countries, uniquely in every case.

A further counter-force may also emerge from the large semi-peripheral countries, namely, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. To date, these have remained contradictory in their systemic functions, but depending on the relation of forces within and around them, they do have the potential to drive a wedge in the workings of monopoly capitalism (Moyo, Yeros and Jha 2012). One indication of these contradictions, among many others, is the “family agriculture” model for food security promoted in Brazil and now projected into the Food and Agriculture Organization by the election of José Graziano da Silva to the top job. It amounts to a “middle peasant” response which, by design, implies a diversion from the land question, but which is subject to capture by diverse forces, from green revolutionaries backed by Rockefeller/Gates philanthropy to radicalised states with a “Look East” policy (Moyo and Yeros 2012).

Learning from Mafeje

It is necessary, therefore, to start spelling out what development and modernity must mean in the 21st century, and there is no better mind to pick than Mafeje’s. First, the peasantry is the only force which has remained untested as an agent of development in Africa (and elsewhere, with few exceptions in the South), despite the failure of all other agents. As Mafeje (2003: 28) argued,

[b]y investing in the small producers, African governments could hope to reap multiple benefits, namely, elimination of absolute poverty and acceleration of agricultural expansion by pushing into the expanded petty

mode of production as many small producers as possible, and reduction/elimination of rural unemployment.

Contrary to purist interpretations of social differentiation, broad and sustained support for small producers does not necessarily imply the unleashing of a new round of social differentiation and land alienation. “[I]f by accumulation from below is meant class differentiation,” Mafeje (2003: 7) said, “then not all forms of social exchange lead to class formation:”

[t]he least troublesome mode of accumulation from below that has occurred in Africa is the one that did not involve alienation of land but took advantage of customary tenure that allows perpetual use and inheritance of allotted plots of land (Mafeje 2003: 20).

Moreover, this type of accumulation from below may certainly be bolstered by collective farming and cooperatives which “have not been given a fair chance” (Mafeje 2003: 7). Second, re-peasantisation must be accompanied by industrialisation. This must be of the type that serves the technical upgrading of agriculture and the attainment of food sovereignty, but it does not need to originate in agriculture. Mafeje (2003: 30) defended these two conditions clearly when he stated:

Africa will have to industrialise as a matter of urgency, not only to survive economically but also in order to meet the technical and scientific requirements for the development of agriculture,

Mafeje added:

[t]he immediate implication is that, contrary to the usual Eurocentric assumptions, primary accumulation for industrialisation could not possibly come from the depressed African agricultural economies. The immediate task for African planners and policymakers is to make sure that agriculture can in the foreseeable future feed the rapidly growing African population. African governments ought to derive great satisfaction from this for both social and financial reasons and think of other ways of financing industrialisation, which is fast becoming the *sine qua non* for the future of the continent.

Finally, the new dimensions of gender equity and ecological sustainability will prove fundamental to any resolution of the agrarian and national questions. Mafeje saw the deep connections between gender

and national development, mediated especially through the land question. “The immediate solution,” he argued, “would be to grant the same usufructuary rights to men and women, whether married or not,” considering that “fullusufructuary rights would enable women to expend their labour power on their own behalf and would grant them the right of disposal over the product” and given that it would be “most unlikely that married women would neglect the subsistence needs of their households” (Mafeje 2003: 21). He concluded that “in African agriculture it is obvious that there is a social and an economic imperative to liberate women from male domination. This is not only their democratic right but also a liberating force in the agrarian sector in general” (Mafeje 2003: 23; see also Moyo 1995b; Mbilinyi 1997; Tsikata 2003, 2009; Tsikata and Golah 2010). When combined with appropriate technology and protective measures for the soil and environment, Mafeje saw a real (indeed, the only) possibility to reverse the decline in agriculture and sustain an autonomous development project (2003: 30).

Reclaiming the Question

Thus, unlike what is claimed by some, that “we have been liberated from the constraints of agriculture, land and nature,” the authors of this article believe that the agrarian question continues to evolve and is among the most fundamental questions of the 21st century. Indeed, this is the century in which nature, the current system of agriculture, and historical capitalism will reach their reproductive limits. The agrarian question today is a question of wresting global agriculture, land and other natural resources from the predatory logic of monopoly-finance capital and of submitting them to the logic of autonomy, equality and democracy. Under conditions of a new scramble, it still remains a question of national sovereignty. However, what is pertinent is to understand what type of political organisation can attend to the expelled population, the semi-proletariat in town and country? And how to join the expelled with the exploited, those in formal employment?

From the 1990s onwards, rural movements proliferated in Latin America (Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia), Africa (most notably Zimbabwe) and Asia (Nepal, India, Philippines) have become the organising centres of the semi-proletariat and are pursuing the agenda of recuperation of land, by means of mass occupations, among many other tactics. Given that the destruction inflicted by big capital occurs most immediately at the expense of marginalised communities, the movements have often come into direct confrontation with the enduring hegemonic structures of the landed power, such as race and caste. Moreover, women, for whom land as a reproductive space is most crucial, have obtained a more pronounced role. This explains why rural movements have converged with indigenous rights, feminist and environmental movements.

Rural movements have also made few organisational inroads into urban areas. However, the journey is going to be long and arduous. The organisational unity between the rural and the urban and between the expelled and the exploited, has not materialised, or been sustained to the expectations in most cases. On the one hand, the tendency to occupational corporatism (or workerism) among conventional trade unionism continues, which lays emphasis on wages and working conditions in discrete occupational sectors; and on the other, there is an organisational segmentation among the landless, tending to single-issue platforms, such as land access and basic services.

New Alliances and Strategies

Nonetheless, there have been silver linings. A different response to the political question has been given in a handful of cases, where internal contradictions have escalated towards the radicalisation of politics, involving often the same movements. In Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Zimbabwe and Nepal, rural–urban unity has been realised by broad-based mobilisation, in the course of successive crises and political polarisation, which have fused the land and related questions with the national question as a whole. In these cases, the correlation of forces has surpassed conventional channels of

political expression, to recast “the people” and “the nation” as belonging to the oppressed, and to clinch electoral victories.

The question thus becomes—what alliances are likely to enable the resolution of the agrarian question in alternative ways? There is a need for a systematic regionalist perspective on the agrarian question (Moyo 1997, 2008b). In the interest of building broad consensus on the agrarian question, focused on a state-supported peasant path, there is an urgent need to prioritise alliances that are rural–urban and South–South, as they have the potential to confront the Eurocentric monopoly and propose an alternative global society in response to the structural imperatives of our times. Such an alternative society will most certainly be forced to take seriously “repeasantisation” (or re-agrarianisation) as a modern project, along with new collective forms of production, labour absorption and sustainable industrialisation. Moreover, such an alternative society must be able to go beyond the nation state and propose forms of expressly regional agroindustrial integration; against the market- and rule-based integration that neo-liberalism has imposed. We take heart in the renewed interest in Mafeje’s work and hope that his persistent critique of Eurocentrism, his dedication to innovative political economy and his revolutionary spirit will inspire a new generation of researchers and activists, as it has inspired us.

NOTES

- 1 This section draws on our earlier work, Moyo, Jha and Yerros (2013).
- 2 We have argued elsewhere that in its most conservative rendering, backwardness was posited as a quality innate to non-European societies, and industrialisation as an end in itself, best left to trained economists and development planners. Be it in terms of “stages of growth” of W W Rostow or the “dual economies” by Arthur Lewis. The Marxian discourse of Soviet vintage running parallel to the view mentioned earlier propounded a “stage” theory, which recognised land reform as an obstacle, but it rather chose not, for the most part, to support radical alternatives, or a peasant path, until the Chinese divergence. The “Western Marxism” (to use Perry Anderson’s term) in the meantime, drifted away from the political economy towards the political philosophy, as disenchantment and social democracy set in. There emerged a new generation of theorists, who were more organic to the peasant struggles of the Third World, but backwardness remained a dynamic process intrinsic to imperialism, and industrialisation as an aspect

- of a larger strategic objective national liberation even for them. Thus the North–South dialogue remained problematic (Anderson 1976).
- 3 One must not forget that this speaking-of-a-new-level-of-sophistication, had been raised by Lenin with special programmatic purpose, that is, to defend the American path against the Prussian, while also explicitly leaving open the possibility of a wider spectrum of transitions.
 - 4 One of the gravest consequences of connecting the agrarian question to backwardness has been the displacement of the debate over politics and policy from North to South, absolving the North of any transformative obligation, other than providing “aid” to the South, or removing subsidies to help the poor “compete.” Such a line of thinking permeates both left and right, with few exceptions, arguably the *Monthly Review* school. Today, there is great effort in affirming one tendency—the economic. One might again protest, pointing to the recent attempt by Henry Bernstein (2010a) to marry “political economy” with “political ecology” as an intellectual project. But without genuine recognition of the silences and evasions of the past, this project is likely to founder, as indeed it appears to have done in a book published simultaneously on “the class dynamics of agrarian change” (Bernstein 2010b; Yeros 2012).
 - 5 See Moyo (1997); Moyo et al (1998); Moyo (2000); Moyo (2008b); Moyo and Romadhane (2002); Jha (2002); Jha et al (2007); Jha, Mahajan and Acharya (2010); Moyo and Yeros (2005, 2008, 2011); Amanor and Moyo (2008); Tsikata (2009); Shivji (2009); Tsikata and Golah (2010); Rosa (2011). It is notable also that this momentum has led to the founding of a South–South journal, *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, of which Mafeje would certainly have been proud.
 - 6 See Patnaik and Moyo (2011); Amin (2012); Ghosh (2012); Patnaik (2012); Moyo, Yeros and Jha (2012); Kamata (2012).
 - 7 The usual proviso applies to *Monthly Review*, but the challenge remains for the specialised journals, *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Journal of Agrarian Change*.

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