

## SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LAND QUESTION

I have called my talk "Some questions about the Land Question" - and let me warn you in advance not to expect any answers. Answers to the land question cannot, in any case, be supplied by any academic - any individual - but will only take shape in the course of struggle. What people want, how they are organised to express their wants, what kind of leadership and programme is available, what kind of opposition is forthcoming from the state and from other classes - these will determine the answers to the land question.

At the same time, like NCAR, I believe that it is vitally important to raise the land question, to ask a whole range of questions about it, to place it upon the political agenda. It is essential to think about and discuss the issues critically, collectively; perhaps more than any other major political problem, that of land cannot be solved by a few slogans, cannot be left to good intentions in the future, and must not be ignored. If popular forces do not shape an answer to the land question, then an answer certainly will be provided - by capital, by De Klerk, and by imperialism.

What is "the land question"? Very simply, it is about the ownership and control of land. Who owns land, and on what terms? What access to the land do non-owners have? What legal and political rights are attached to land ownership. There are also another set of questions, sometimes referred to as the agrarian question: these have to do with what system of production takes place on the land, how the land is used, and what sort of social relations exist in rural areas. Who does the work, and for whom, and under what conditions? Who makes a profit, and in what form?

These issues fundamentally affect the structure of any society. They have a great deal to do with patterns of power and privilege, authority and obedience. This is very, very obvious in the South African case, in ways which are well known to all of us.

- \* Here, land ownership is starkly and unevenly divided along racial lines: the wars of dispossession and other forms of colonial conquest created the original divide; the 1913 Land Act, segregation and apartheid cemented it into law.
- \* Here, there are two broad categories of rural land: first, the so-called white farms: massively subsidised capitalist farmers own huge tracts of land; although these farms are increasingly mechanised, they still depend for their production upon the labour of 1,5 million full time farm workers - workers who are exposed to the most repressive and reactionary forms of exploitation and brutality. (Note: about 58,000 farmers, 18,000 of whom produce 75% of agricultural output and control 80% of resources)
- \* Secondly, there is land that is largely owned and entirely controlled by the state: the Bantustans. These house over fifty per cent of the total African population - and only a tiny proportion of that population can any longer be regarded as farmers or peasants. The Bantustan population is overwhelmingly a ruined peasantry, a proletariat forced to live in rural squalor but which depends upon wages and



pensions from the cities. The Bantustans have also become dumping grounds for people pushed off white farms, driven off their own freehold farms, expelled from the cities, or concentrated in rural slums as a result of betterment schemes inside these regions.

- \* And upon this basic pattern of land-holding there rests the system of cheap migrant labour; inscribed in it are the injustices and cruelties of apartheid and racial capitalism. There are direct links between the existing pattern of ownership and control of land with both national oppression and the exploitation of a working class denied fundamental human rights.

These basic realities are familiar enough to an audience like this one: and so is a determination that they cannot be permitted to endure, that they must be changed. So, we might say that the Land Question is: What changes are needed in the ownership and control of land? What patterns of control and ownership do we want in a post-apartheid South Africa? The question is centrally important for two main reasons. First, because of its direct implications for the very large numbers of people who live in rural areas - and upon whom are concentrated the most extreme forms of poverty, deprivation, backwardness and powerlessness.

Secondly, and perhaps less often appreciated, a solution to the land question will not only affect rural people. It will also affect the lives of the most urbanised, industrialised communities in South Africa - because the ownership of landed property is so closely tied up with other forms of power, with other social and political relationships. The way in which the land question is answered in South Africa will be a very good guide to how much - or how little - transformation takes place; how much, or how little, redistribution of wealth is possible; how much, or how little, ordinary people will be involved in the emancipation of their own lives. Free elections, on universal suffrage in a unitary South Africa will not by themselves guarantee real changes in society: as perhaps the Zimbabwean example may reveal.

The rest of my talk has two parts. First, it is important to recognise that the history of resistance includes earlier attempts to raise the land question and to seek answers to it - so I shall look briefly at these, and especially at the ANC's thinking on the land question. Second, I will try to outline what policies and options are available; to suggest the range of possible answers to the land question.

### **The liberation movement and the land question**

Between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, within a number of different political groupings, there was a good deal of analysis and theorising over rural issues; and there were also, in the 1950s, a series of intense and desperate struggles waged by rural people - in Witzieshoek, in the Hurutshe reserve, in Sekhukhuni-land, in the Natal countryside, and in Pondoland.

Especially in the western Cape, in NEUM and its affiliates, there were very heated debates over the land question. Without going into much detail, one can identify three main positions. One,



pushed especially by I.B. Tabata, called essentially for the scrapping of all discriminatory laws and the creation of a free market in land. Another, theorised by Kies and Jaffe, demanded that land be nationalised and "given free to the toiling peasants from whose ancestors it was stolen by force." A third, FIOSA position, also called for the nationalisation of land, but sought to put it at the disposal of farm-workers rather than of rural peasants. What all three positions had in common was the concept that productive farmland should be divided into small, privately used plots.

But I am going to concentrate upon the ANC, which during this period clearly emerged as the leading element within the liberation movement. What was the thinking of the Congress Alliance during the 1950s on the land question, and how has it developed or altered since then?

Ever since 1913, of course, the ANC had been hostile to the provisions of the Land Act and had pressed demands for greater access by Africans to land. But the mobilisation of rural people, and rural issues generally, did not play a large part in the concerns of the ANC before the 1950s. In 1955 the Freedom Charter was adopted, and its clause on the land question ran like this:

The land shall be shared among those who work it. Restriction of land ownership on a racial basis shall be ended, and all the land re-divided amongst those who work it, to banish famine and land hunger; the state shall help the peasants with implements, seed, tractors and dams ... freedom of movement shall be guaranteed ... all shall have the right to occupy land wherever they choose; people shall not be robbed of their cattle, and forced labour and farm prisons shall be abolished.

Both at the time, and subsequently, people have argued about just what was meant by "all the land redivided". Did these mean that all existing ownership would be ended, or did it merely mean that all existing barriers to acquisition of land would be ended? In the Treason Trial, Mandela explicitly stated that "the Freedom Charter does not call for the nationalisation of land" and that large-scale expropriation of land had not been envisaged. He did propose expropriation of absentee landlords. But the main emphasis was "to remove restrictions and to introduce the idea of a free economy as far as land is concerned." In summary, the Freedom Charter envisaged a redistribution on the basis of private property.

The other thing to notice about the clause is that (like other clauses in the Freedom Charter) it echoed and embodied concrete demands that were being expressed in popular struggles at the time. Opposition to cattle culling, the expose of forced labour and prison farms in the Eastern Transvaal, and resistance to tighter influx controls were present in rural struggles, and are all reflected in this clause.

The next major statement by the ANC on the land question came in 1969, at the Consultative Conference in Morogoro. Let me read the passage dealing with land:

The land must be taken away from exclusively European control and ... divided among the small farmers, peasants



and landless of all races who do not exploit the labour of others. Farmers will be prevented from holding land in excess of a given area ... Lands held in communal ownership must be increased so that they can afford a decent livelihood to the people ... Land obtained from land barons and the monopolies shall be distributed to the landless and land-poor peasants... Restrictions of land ownership on a racial basis shall be ended and all land shall be open to ownership and use to all people, irrespective of race.

Partly, this was a restatement of the 1955 position - it is still a call for land reform envisaging land ownership on a private and small-scale basis. But it has two main additions. Firstly, it proposes expropriation of certain categories of land: that owned by "land barons" and "monopolies". Secondly, it called for an extension of land in communal (or tradition or tribal) ownership. This second demand has been criticised for simply assuming that, by the end of the 1960s, there still was a viable communal or traditional agriculture.

More recently, the in 1988, the ANC has issued the Constitutional Guidelines: these of course are presented in the spirit of the Freedom Charter, but attempt to convert it "from a vision of the future into a constitutional reality". The clause on land reads as follows:

The state shall devise and implement a land reform programme that will include and address the following issues:

- Abolition of all racial restrictions on ownership and use of land
- Implementation of land reform in conformity with the principle of affirmative action, taking into account the status of victims of forced removals.

And it should perhaps be read alongside the section on the economy, which states that "the economy shall be a mixed one, with a public sector, a private sector, a co-operative sector and a small-scale family sector."

In part, this is familiar enough. The historic - and essential - demand is repeated that all discriminatory restrictions on land ownership be abolished. Beyond that, the intentions are less clear. There is no reference either to expropriation or to nationalisation of land or other private property; but there is a commitment to land reform on the basis of affirmative action - a kind of redress for historic wrongs, mentioning in particular the victims of forced removals.

It is apparent that within the ANC - as within the MDM - there are a number of different perspectives and positions on the land question. A debate is in progress. Some of the positions in this debate were aired during a conference in Amsterdam last November (Cde. Mbuyo may want to comment on these.) If one reads the conference papers, a number of different options are explored, ranging from outright nationalisation of all land, to the retention of private property and an acceptance of the need for large scale commercial farming on more or less existing lines. But I cannot summarise or discuss these papers in the time at my disposal. Let me do something rather simpler - and just outline what seem to be the options or alternatives which are under consideration.



## Policies, options and models

First, I am going to ask: What are the policy options available? What might a post-apartheid state actually do to solve the land question? Secondly, I will identify the possible outcomes or results of such policy choices.

### POLICY OPTIONS:

- (1) Repeal of all discriminatory legislation (the creation of a free market in land).  
Likely effects: would not significantly alter present pattern of land ownership and usage. Some white farmers, but probably not those making the largest profits, will sell to those blacks who can afford farms - probably coming from Bantustan ruling groups or from the small number of existing black capitalist farmers. Land prices would probably rise: in Zimbabwe, they have risen by 55% since independence. (Zimbabwe experience worth mentioning: Lancaster House conference forced ZANU-PF to accept that land would only change hands with "willing buyer, willing seller"; that state could only buy land against the owner's will if it was under-utilised, needed for public purposes, and if full compensation was paid in foreign exchange. One result has been that only 40,000 peasant families have been resettled since 1980 - the original target was 162,000 families in three years.)
- (2) Partial nationalisation of land: abandoned, marginal, under-utilised lands have all been suggested as well as land held by absentee owners.  
Likely effects: would certainly increase the amount of land at the state's disposal for redistribution on affirmative action principle - but might well mean settling people on land which is less profitable, less capitalised, less fertile, further from markets, and with less infrastructure in the shape of roads, rail, irrigation, etc.
- (3) Nationalisation of all land:
  - (a) with compensation
  - (b) without compensationLikely effects: in either case, the state would have a great deal of land under its direct ownership. It could rent this land (to existing owners, or to new owners, or to a mixture of old and new owners). It could distribute this land free to new owners, either on small-scale holdings or on large-scale holdings (state farms, co-operatives, Employee Share Ownership Schemes). Presumably, nationalisation without compensation would cause considerable political resistance; and, presumably, nationalisation with full compensation would create a public debt which would have to be serviced through high taxes for many years.
- (4) Reallocation of resources to rural areas: use of national revenue and foreign aid to help farmers; to provide skills, services, and material resources to rural areas presently starved of these;  
Creation of new structures to promote land reform: Land Commissions and a Land Fund have both been proposed.



Finally, the state could intervene at the level of social relations on farms - encouraging trade unions, establishing a minimum wage, outlawing barbaric practices, etc.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES:

Really only four possible outcomes:

- (1) Large scale capitalist farms  
Benefits: foreign exchange, food production; costs: relatively little change in pattern of ownership and control. (Zimbabwean option)
- (2) Peasant production (redistribution on small-scale private plots, **either** on basis of private property **or** on basis of tenancies  
Benefits: Would resettle large numbers of land-hungry and landless people; in some circumstances (e.g. Zimbabwe) peasant production could expand dramatically - but this presupposes a peasantry with skills and resources intact. Costs: loss of economies of scale; for peasant option to succeed in feeding an industrial workforce would be historical novelty.
- (3) Large-scale socialised production (retaining large units, but running them not as private enterprises but as collective enterprises - state farms/cooperatives under worker control.  
Benefits: would retain economies of scale; would empower rural people politically; costs: problems that have beset state-owned collective agriculture elsewhere - a reminder that collective structures must have popular support, cannot be imposed from above; would create hostility from capital nationally and internationally.
- (4) Combination of aspects of (1), (2) and (3): e.g., Zimbabwe hoped to combine (1) & (2); Mozambique has swung between (2) and (3).

Which options, which outcomes, are most likely? The answer will depend on which option has political support; on what the prevailing balance of forces is that attends the creation of a successor state to that headed by de Klerk's government.

What is crucial is that the outcome should not be surrendered by default. It is imperative that the land question should be on the agenda for any negotiations. Secondly, crucial that land question not be isolated from other struggles - a dangerous tendency has developed to do so, with the land question, the woman question, and other questions. Thinking about the land question should always be accompanied by thinking about houses, about employment, about democracy.