

CAPITALISM AND AGRICULTURE: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE

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The Transition to Capitalism in Agriculture?

Capitalism's greatest ideological achievement has been its ability to naturalize itself, to make capitalist relations of production appear to be part of the normal fabric of society and to make their emergence seem to be the result of the inevitable unfolding of historical progress. Karl Marx points out in part 8 of *Capital*, volume 1, that there was nothing natural about the original accumulation of capital in England. Its various moments all required the use of force, including specifically the force of the state, both at home and abroad, to create the conditions for capitalist production (Marx 1973: xxx).

According to Marx, the original accumulation of capital required the separation of the producers from their means of production. This is the defining feature of capitalism. However, the dispossession of the producers and the displacement of non-capitalist relations of production have proved to be neither final nor complete. Nor has "the market" been sufficient to secure unaided the reproduction of labour-power for capital. Resistance by producers to their dispossession and to their consequent subordination to the direction of capitalists, and the use of extra-market forms of coercion, are continuing features of capitalism and not only of its pre-history.

Nowhere is the incompleteness and instability of the establishment of capitalist relations of production more evident than in agriculture. Landowners have often found it impossible to recruit, direct, and maintain a labour force through wage payments alone. They have used their access to national governments, and commonly their control over local government, to secure various measures to restrict the mobility of labour and to deny farm workers access to better jobs or to independent incomes. To gain control of the labour of others, or of the products of that labour, they have had to engage in a variety of rent-, share-, or labour-tenancy contracts. They have often recruited migrant wage workers from members of landholding rural households rather than from a resident, landless proletariat.

Whereas in England capitalist relations of production were widely established in agriculture, and in mining, before manufacturing, in most countries the expansion of capitalism in commerce and industry was accompanied by the development, rather than the displacement, of peasant or of family farming in agriculture. England, where capitalism saw its first comprehensive development, was an exceptional case; it did not prove to be the typical exemplar of capitalist development.

The expansion of agricultural production has not always required, or followed from, the concentration of holdings into large-scale enterprises. Smallholders have often proved capable of making better use of land and of other resources, of better adapting production to changes in demand, and of delivering crops to the market more cheaply, than have large landowners. Economies of scale are to be found in agricultural production, and more markedly in agricultural marketing. However, they operate under definite conditions, which define their specific limits. Scale economies are specific to particular relations of production; the appropriate range of farm sizes will be quite different for family farms from that for capitalist farms. They will depend on the nature of the crops grown, on the availability and costs of means of production, including land, livestock and labour, on access to transport and markets, and on the levels and volatility of the prices for which crops can be sold. The most distinctive advantage of large landowners has been their ability to secure privileged access to markets and protection and subsidies from governments, and credit from banks, usually on

more favourable terms than have generally been available to smallholders. Thus, progress in agriculture has often followed the breaking up of large estates, and sometimes a transition from more capitalist relations of production to peasant or family forms of farming.

Rural households usually combine farming with other ways of earning incomes, both craft production for local and for distant markets and, especially in the twentieth century, wage employment. Farming is commonly a part-time activity for many members of rural households. Wage earning may enable families to maintain their farms. Resident farm labourers, and members of their households, may also work on other farms or as migrants to mines or towns for part of the year. Farm and non-farm, wage and non-wage incomes complement one another; most rural households depend on both to meet their needs and obligations. Peasant farming and wage labour complement one another, both as sources of incomes for peasant-workers and by allowing capitalists to pay workers wages only for that period when their labour is required. But peasant farming and wage labour also compete with one another, and with domestic tasks for the labour time of the different members of rural households, as well as for grazing and arable land and access to markets.

There is nothing inevitable about "the transition to capitalism" in agriculture. Capitalist farming may develop by drawing labour from tenant households or from independent peasants. Capitalists' control of labour-power, of land and of access to markets and state support will be constrained by the competing claims of peasant households. The "transition to capitalism in agriculture" may take a variety of forms. Sometimes it even appears to be going backwards.

Labour and Land

Central to any system of agricultural production is access to, and command over, labour. People may recruit labour through a variety of relations - family ties and marital obligations to spouses and their kin, reciprocal exchanges, slavery, tribute and compulsion, tenancy of land, and cash payments for a day's work or a job to be done. They may bring together different elements of these relations to secure access to the labour of others. Different forms of labour relations are usually combined within any farming enterprise. The seasonal requirements of agriculture mean that both the amount and the character of the labour required vary considerably over the year, as does the time available to farmers and their families for non-agricultural activities.

People seek access to land to cultivate crops and to graze their animals. They may also acquire land in order to secure control over the labour of others. Squatters may gain access to land in exchange for a portion of their labour time and/or that of their families. Those without sufficient land to provide for their needs may be forced to sell their labour cheaply to others. Limits on access to land may be supplemented by other means of restricting the mobility of labour and thus enhancing its control by employers and reducing its price. In Africa, white settlers commonly prevented Africans from competing with them in the production of lucrative crops and, in particular, for a limited supply of labour-power. Control of land is bound up with control of markets, and both are linked with the need to command the labour-power of others.

The employment of wage labour has long been widespread in many parts of Africa. Nevertheless, Africans widely regard permanent subordination to wage labour as akin to slavery - especially when they are resident on their employers' land and continuously subject to his authority. In Africa, as in the Americas, it proved difficult to compel former slaves to work as wage labourers. Nor does the expansion of wage employment necessarily eliminate the demand for land. People want access to land, not out of a petit-bourgeois concern with the values of property ownership, but as one way of securing a measure of independence from control by others. They see Land as the condition for Freedom.

Land is allocated through a variety of exchanges, governed by rules concerning gender, kinship and inheritance, membership of local or racial communities and national citizenship, rights of occupation and property ownership. The colonial state and its successors have claimed and enforced their authority to determine and apply these rules, and to impose conditions on how people use, and in what ways they cultivate, the land. Rules are open to manipulation; different conceptions of rights of access to land shape contending claims as to what rules should apply and how they should be interpreted. In a situation of conflicts over the appropriation of land by some and the dispossession of others, land acquires a powerful symbolic meaning. Claims to "land" are claims to the country (in Afrikaans to "*die land*"). Claims to repossess the land are claims to all the resources from which the dispossessed have been excluded. The land question is central to the politics of states and of communities, and also to the politics of kin groups and households.

States authorize, regulate, enforce and tolerate the rights of husbands, fathers, employers, chiefs and the state itself over the labour of others. They also define the rights of workers and their organizations. These rights typically do not extend to the sphere of domestic labour, whether by kin or by wage workers, and, by extension, to farm workers. Colonial governments either abolished slavery or withdrew legal support for the rights of slave owners. They introduced a variety of other institutions to restrict the mobility of labour, and to coerce labour to work for the state, for its intermediary office-holders, and for private employers. Settler farmers looked to the national state and local officials to secure their supply of labour and to support the farmer's patriarchal authority over "his people" (in Afrikaans, *sy volk* or even, diminutively, *volkies*).

Political authorities attempt both to maintain and to determine the conditions under which market exchanges take place, to greater or lesser effect. They regulate and tax external trade, and thereby allocate the rewards from it. They often extend their controls or claim monopolies over internal markets. Political authorities typically protect the access of specific groups to certain market opportunities, excluding others from them by criteria of race, community membership or national citizenship. They tax some and offer bounties to others. More often than not, they tax the poor and subsidize the rich.

South Africa

In South Africa, capitalism has come to predominate in agricultural production, as in mining and manufacturing. White settlers appropriated most of the country's land. They used the military, administrative and fiscal powers of the state to establish, subsidize, and sustain variants of capitalist agriculture, employing black farm workers and, in recent decades, adopting advanced mechanical and chemical technologies. Mining wealth provided the revenues and export earnings which allowed the state to subsidize the costs of capitalist grain farming in the twentieth century. Commodity production by African peasant farmers was marginalized.

Capitalist agriculture in South Africa had its origins in many forms of recruitment and control of labour - slaves, imported mainly from East Africa and from Asia, indentured labour from South India, "apprenticed" captives and tribute labour from African polities; labour has been provided by rent- and share-tenants, by resident labour tenants and by migrant contract workers, and obtained from forced labour and prison labour as well as the recruitment of wage labour. Free wage workers have never been the exclusive source of labour in South African agriculture; often they have not been the most important. Restrictions on access to land and obligations on all adult males to pay taxes were used to get Africans to "come out" to work for wages. Workers' freedom has always been constrained by pass and by vagrancy laws to restrict their mobility. In recent decades there have, in many farming districts, been sharp reductions in the seasonal labour force and wages have risen for permanent workers. Huge numbers of labour tenants and workers from farms and from rural towns have been relocated to resettlement and squatter camps in the Bantustans,

where they have often had no access either to arable or grazing land or to jobs.

Production has been expanded to meet South African, African and overseas markets. For maize, wheat, wine, sugar, milk, vegetables, and most other crops, other than wool and some fruits, the most important markets have usually been found on the mines and in the expanding towns and cities of South Africa itself. White farmers were served by railway branch lines and low tariffs on crops, and by the Land Bank. Poorer farmers sought state intervention to secure their access to cheap land, cheap credit, cheap labour and high prices. Agricultural marketing is dominated by state, cooperative, and corporate interests. The prosperity of capitalist farming, especially maize and beef production, continues to be dependent on state pricing policies and is vulnerable to an ever-rising weight of debts. Corporate interests owned extensive areas of land at the beginning of the century. Much of this land was left to African tenants to farm. Today, corporate firms again control large acreages of arable, grazing, orchard, and forest land.

Rural blacks engaged in a long and bitter struggle to maintain their control of land, and some form of access to land where whites had excluded them from it, and to recover, retain, and build up their herds of cattle. Indigenous peoples sought to defend their polities from white conquest. Some migrated beyond the frontiers of white settlement. Others migrated to work in the diamond fields and the gold mines, initially to acquire money to buy guns or cattle. Subsequently rural Africans migrated to mines, farms, and towns to secure their own subsistence needs and to contribute to the needs of their families and to the costs of farming in the reserves. Before 1913 some purchased land; others squatted on land owned by land companies or white farmers and engaged in share-, rent-, or labour-tenancies to get access to some arable and grazing land.

The expansion of towns and mining settlements created opportunities for Africans with access to land and to markets to increase the production of maize, sorghum, wheat, wool, and meat for sale. Peasant commodity production developed particularly in areas where black farmers acquired title to their land, or on mission lands. However, production also rose in the native reserves and black tenants extended peasant commodity production on to the land designated for white farming.

However, black farmers competed with whites for the use of land, for labour, and in the markets for commodities. White farmers in turn competed for labour with mine-owners and with commercial and industrial firms. "Native" policy, that is labour policy, was the outcome of a series of uneasy and unstable compromises between mining, agrarian, commercial and industrial interests. Africans were to be confined to land in the areas designated as, or added to, the "native reserves". These lands would be protected from purchase by white farmers, but not against the state's own capacity to dispose of them. These areas could provide a reservoir of migrant labour for the mines, and also for farms and towns. Whereas mine-owners looked to the reserves, and to neighbouring territories, to supply their labour, farmers were generally more concerned to restrict blacks' access to land and the ability of black farm labourers to seek work elsewhere.

In most "native reserves", chiefs controlled the allocation of land to members of their communities. Africans were neither to own nor to rent land in white areas, though small pieces of land might be provided legally to a designated number of households of labour tenants on white farms. These principles were embodied in numerous laws, notably the Native Land Act of 1913 and the Natives Trust and Land Act of 1936. They confirmed the principles of segregation of rights to land and secured the foundations for divisions of labour markets and of political representation which continue to the present. Implementation of these laws has been a slow process, extending over many decades. Similarly, many of the consequences for agricultural producers in the reserves of these and other acts only became fully manifest over subsequent decades.

In the 1920s, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) articulated tenant resistance to their loss of access to land on white farms. Mining capitalists came into conflict with white farmers over the disposition of African labour, and thus of land. Districts which sought to replace tenants with wage workers after the passing of the 1936 Act found that their labour had migrated to more favourable places. Only thirty years later did it prove possible to replace labour tenancy with wage contracts. African freeholders lacked access to the land and state support necessary for them to maintain and expand their farms in competition with whites. Where Africans owned land, they usually let much of their land to African tenants wanting land for farming and for residential use. From 1964 the state carried through a concerted and continuing assault against African freehold land rights, renting of land and labour tenancy, part of the massive relocations of black peoples carried out over the next two decades.

Farmers in the reserves were increasingly constrained by lack of sufficient land for cultivation and grazing, poor access to transport and markets and loss of males to migrant labour. Government sought to protect the soil and to raise agricultural productivity by "betterment" planning, by which land would be allocated to woodland, arable, grazing and residential areas, and people relocated into concentrated villages. The 1955 Tomlinson Commission sought to solve the problems of reserve agriculture without altering the division of the land between whites and blacks. The Commission proposed to settle full-time African farmers on "economic farm units" or, since land in the reserves was so scarce, "half-sized farm units", in planned areas; the rest of the population would have to find wage employment. The government continued to impose "betterment" but rejected Tomlinson's unrealistic plan to make most of the people in the reserves landless. "Betterment" has disrupted people's lives and reduced the land available to them for farming. It has been a source and focus of local resistance to the chiefs through whom it has been imposed.

"Betterment", as a strategy of protecting soil, improving agricultural production, and relocating people into planned village settlements, was exported northwards. Elsewhere in Africa it also did little for agricultural production and rural incomes and provoked widespread resistance. In recent years, the language and institutional forms of "rural development", as practised under the direction of international agencies, have been imported into South Africa's homelands where their main result has been to enrich favoured beneficiaries at the expense of the public purse.

Peasant producers were able to increase agricultural production and maintain livestock numbers, in total if not always per head of population, in at least some of the native reserves during the first half of the century. Over the last three decades stagnating or even declining production has been accompanied by rapidly increasing population and the massive movement of people into the impoverished Bantustans. Many people are concentrated in rural slums, termed "closer settlements", with little or no land to cultivate. Commodity production has declined, or become a privilege open to the few beneficiaries of the allocation of land and money by the governments of the Bantustans.

The development of South African agriculture appears as a story of the development of capitalist farming and the elimination or marginalization of peasant farming. Rural Africans are steadily transformed into proletarians, working for wages on farms, mines, and in towns, when they are not left destitute. Peasant production appears to have a past, but neither much of a present nor any sort of future. However, the capitalist transformation of agriculture in South Africa has been more complex, varied and incomplete than the image of "white farms" suggests. Whether the dispossession of Africans peasants is irreversible and the future for South African agriculture must rest with large-scale farming of a capitalist, or possibly a cooperative or collective, variety is an issue which remains to be settled.

Comparative Perspectives

Marx concerned himself with the conditions which had allowed capitalism to develop in England, though he recognised the possibility of a different pattern in Russia. In 1908, Lenin identified two possible forms of transition to capitalism in the Russian countryside, the democratic "American" or peasant path, whereby capitalist farmers and rural proletarians emerge from the differentiation of the peasantry into classes, and the conservative "Prussian" or "Junker" case in which landlords turn themselves into capitalists and secure the support of a class of rich peasants while converting their serfs into wage workers.

Barrington Moore Jr similarly distinguished between the transitions effected by the revolutions which gave rise to democratic governments in Britain, France, and the USA, and the conservative "evolutions from above" in Germany and Japan. He added a third route to the "modern world", via peasant rebellions and state socialism, exemplified by the Russian and Chinese cases. In Moore's view, a modern society is one without peasants. Whatever their contributions to the revolutions which shattered the bonds of the old regime, the peasants were bound to be the victims of the revolutions. The domination of the Indian countryside by an unreconstructed peasantry was, for Moore, both evidence of and reason for the failure, in his view, of the Indian state to transform the peasantry and create a modern society.

Stanley Trapido referred to the compromise between mining and farming interests over land and labour policies at the end of the period of reconstruction following the South African War of 1899-1902 as "the marriage of maize and gold", by analogy with Prussia's "marriage of iron and rye". As in the Prussian case, the "marriage" proved to be unstable, riven by conflicts of interests but kept together by successive compromises, thanks to the dependence of the partners on one another. Thus, South Africa might be taken as an example of the imposition of a form of agricultural capitalism and dispossession of the peasantry. Morris identified it as an instance of Lenin's "Junker path" to agrarian capitalism.

Tenancy and labour contracts which are not based solely on cash payments may be interpreted as aspects of a process of transition towards, or possibly away from, capitalism. But they can only be identified as such after the event, or by first assuming a prior theory of historical change. These contracts may be interpreted differently according to our historical vantage-point. They also look quite different to the various participants, depending on where they stand in these relationships. Conflicts between landowners and labour tenants have proved to be extremely bitter because they go beyond the negotiation of terms - how many days labour is to be provided, how much arable or grazing land is to be available, how much cash is to be paid - to the nature of the relationship itself. People challenge one another's claims to the rights to use and to dispose over "their" land and "their" time and seek to enforce these claims through the courts or, more often, by the direct deployment, or the threat, of private and public violence.

The future of agricultural production has yet to be determined. Capitalist agriculture has been constructed and maintained by a combination of labour coercion, state subsidy and rising debts. In Algeria, the transition from settler to "self-managed" farms led to a combination of authoritarian and hierarchical management, low productivity and state subsidy. The "transition to capitalism" in South African agriculture offers an example neither of historical progress nor of the progress of history.

This paper is an excerpt from the draft of a comparative and historical study of the development of the agrarian social structures of South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania which will be published, one day, by Routledge as *Land and Freedom*. A Personal Research Grant from the Economic and Social Research Council enabled me to prepare this study. It is parasitical on the work of numerous colleagues, cited in the following bibliography.

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