FOREWORD

A scholar in struggle

Writing a Foreword to this Special Issue honouring Lungisile Ntsebeza is exhilarating. There are two areas of scholarly and activist interest that I share with Lungi, as we friends fondly call him – the agrarian question and our admiration of Archie Mafeje. As I read more of Lungi’s vast scholarly work, I discovered a third area of mutual concern, the continued existence of so-called traditional authorities – or what in ordinary parlance we call chiefdoms – in several African countries, including South Africa. All these and many more have been admirably discussed by the contributors to this Special Issue. I need not belabour them. What I intend to do here is to bring a couple of perspectives which interest me to bear on the agrarian question, leaving discussions on Mafeje’s pan-Africanism and the role of traditional authorities for another occasion.

The agrarian question and its interrogators

Broadly speaking, the agrarian question is constituted by two components: the land question and the peasant question. The two are patently interrelated and in an African situation cannot be easily separated. Colonial heritage has ensured that post-colonial regimes are unavoidably confronted with the issue of land reform. This applies both to the former settler colonies where there was a large-scale land alienation and to peasant or peasant-cum-plantation colonies where land alienation was on a relatively small scale. In the former case, land reform presents itself as the question of land redistribution in the classical sense of the term, while in the latter it crystalises as the question of democratisation of the land tenure system. In either case the land question continues to haunt the post-colonial state.

Inextricably linked to the land question is the peasant question. Donning the veneer of development, the land question is more amenable to being presented as a technical issue of productivity, efficiency and, at best, egalitarianism than the peasant question. The peasant question is inherently a social and political one capable of arousing political emotions and polarised intellectual positions. Does the peasantry, in the sense of the smallholder agriculturalist who labours on land to survive, exist in Africa? If it does, is it a remnant from the past pre-colonial, pre-capitalist social formation destined to disappear with the
march of capital, or is it central to the production and reproduction of worldwide capitalism? A related question often posed in radical left discourse is whether the peasantry only exists on the margins of capitalism or is integrated in it. Variations of these issues continue to be debated among intellectuals, their angle and approach depending on the perspectives of the author – liberal, Marxist, feminist, Euro-centrist or Afro-centrist. For Lungi and his comrades, including this author, the question is whether the peasantry is part of the revolutionary agency in the fundamental transformation of the continent towards building a socialist Africa.

South Africa today is a crucible where all these questions exist in a single political and social space. Inevitably, therefore, the South African intellectual and activist landscape has been teeming with debates and discussions on these questions (see, for instance, Ntsebeza and Hall 2007). My observation is that the land question and land reform have been more prominent in the South African debates than the agrarian question generally and the peasant question particularly. The reasons for the focus on the land question are undoubtedly historical. I would argue though that while the mass alienation of land under apartheid producing inequities and racial inequality is true and redress for historical injustice understandable, the avoidance of the peasant question by both the political class and dominant intellectuals of both the right and the left may well be due to the perception of South African exceptionalism. South Africa is a developed economy where the peasantry has by and large been proletarianised; therefore, any land reform which emphasises redistribution resulting in re-peasantisation would be a step backward akin to the ‘nightmarish’ (according to the proponents of this argument) Zimbabwean syndrome. Could it be for this reason that it is land restitution rather than land redistribution that occupies the centre stage in policy debates, never mind the fact that restitution, even if it were feasible, would mean moving backwards in history, a move potentially fraught with reviving irresolvable conflicts and contradictions? May I dare ask: wouldn’t restitution be a kind of re-tribalisation giving further fillip to traditional authorities, the veritable bête noire of Lungi? (Ntsebeza 1999).

The African debate

There have been significant debates among African intellectuals on the agrarian question generally and the peasant question in particular, with discussions taking place at many pan-African fora, both continental and regional. Frustrated by the lack of attention and prominence given to them by Northern-based journals, 20 years ago the Agrarian South Network (ASN), brainchild of the late Sam Moyo, started Agrarian South, a journal that has given space to alternative and critical perspectives. Regrettably the journal has received scant attention in African universities, once again exemplifying the colonial veneration of the North by mainstream African intelligentsia. Instead of lamenting this, the committed intellectuals and activist-scholars behind the initiative have continued to develop and deepen ASN and Agrarian South with imagination and innovation, notwithstanding the contradictions inherent in painful dependence on funding from the global North.

Below, I sum up three sets of arguments that one comes across often in the African discourse on the agrarian question: two classical, one contemporary.
Proletarianising the peasant

The argument on the eventual disappearance of the peasantry with the march of capital is derived in its various incarnations from the classical debates of early twentieth-century Marxists, beginning prominently with Kautsky through Lenin and vulgarised by Stalin in the form of successive modes of production (Banaji 1976; Lenin 1899). Undoubtedly, Marx’s Capital, based on a self-contained model of the development of the capitalist system, underlay this argument (Marx 1887). The Communist Manifesto, that fantastic document of all times, struck a death knell to the peasantry, mired in ‘rural idiocy’, by identifying it with reactionary classes who fight to conserve their old modes of production, resisting the development of ‘modern industry’ (Marx and Engels 1848).

To be sure, the Manifesto clearly recognised that the development of capitalism was inextricably linked to the development of markets and extraction of raw materials from the ‘barbarian nations’, as it called them, while at the same time bourgeoisifying their elites and proletarianising their masses (Marx and Engels 1848). Germs of the model of linear development presumably based on European history already existed in the Manifesto and other writings of Marx and Engels, but in a more nuanced form than in the later writings of some vulgar Marxists brought up on the post-Leninist literature of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, many communist parties around the world, including the South African Communist Party, adopted this model as a truism. Echoes of the arguments of the eventual proletarianising of the peasantry as a progressive move can be heard even in the current debates on the agrarian question in South Africa.

Contemporary writers have resurrected this line of argument by dividing the agrarian question into the agrarian question of capital and the agrarian question of labour (Bernstein 2015). Simplified somewhat, Bernstein’s argument holds that the agrarian question of capital has been resolved both in the global North and the South and what remains is the agrarian question of labour in the South. I must confess I find it very difficult to follow this position. First, it is elementary that in the process of capitalist production and relations one cannot separate capital from labour in that way, even in the abstract. Second, for Bernstein labour is presented in the abstract. What is the character of labour here, proletarian, peasant or some other form? In the absence of such a characterisation the discussion of the agrarian question is left hanging. In his writings, Bernstein does characterise labour and actually talks about classes. Nonetheless, to pose at the outset that the agrarian question has been resolved prevents any worthwhile debate. Third, one can split capital and labour in this way only if the process of capitalist accumulation is confined as a kind of closed process in the centre of capital.

More than echoes of this argument exist in contemporary African discourse on the agrarian question. The position that the peasant is destined to die as a social category ironically has found a new version in the arguments from the right which I address next.

Capturing the peasant

The term ‘capture’ comes from Goran Hyden (1980). His argument is that the African peasant is sunk deep in the ‘economy of affection’ in which peasants relate to one another
as kin, clansmen or relatives. They are not economic subjects whose nexus is the rationally organised market. In short, they operate outside the modern economy, meaning the capitalist economy. The peasant thus has yet to be captured by capital. Hyden’s main thesis is in effect a variation on those who argue that the African peasantry by and large exists on the periphery of the capitalist system.

The Hyden-type position fits into the modernisation theories which were rampant in the immediate post-colonial period (see Shivji 2016). Modernisation pundits saw the African economy as divided into two sectors, traditional and modern, which also coincided with the rural and the urban. The prescription for development was to modernise the traditional which gave rise to, for example in Tanzania, village settlement schemes and large-scale ranches organised from above where ‘progressive’ farmers and pastoralists would be settled to spearhead development. These schemes proved to be disastrous (Shivji, Yahya-Othman and Kamata 2020). Despite such failures, modernisation in various forms keeps rearing its head, the current form being the individualisation, titling and registration (ITR) of peasant lands favoured by the World Bank and many African governments. We need not be detained by this set of arguments, which have been extensively contested and critiqued.

De-peasantisation and re-peasantisation

Reduced to its essentials, the previous two sets of arguments are premised on a linear reading of the process of capitalist development in Europe, specifically Britain. This linear reading is located in the transition from feudalism to capitalism passing through the path of manufactories in towns and small commodity producers or peasants in the countryside. The peasant was a transitional category as some landlords took to capitalist farming, resulting in the enclosure movement expelling small producers who then became proletarians in the developing factories. All in all the process of capitalist development was essentially one of de-peasantisation.

With variations and nuances, writers on Africa, including some on the left and even orthodox Marxist commentators, saw a similar process unfolding in Africa with the march of capital. The theoretical model that developed from this reading of history, including that of Marx, saw capitalism as a closed and self-contained process. No doubt Marx acknowledged the role of plundering of the treasures of foreign lands, including what he called ‘the commercial hunting of black skins’, meaning the triangular slave trade (Marx 1887, 703), in the process of capitalist accumulation. Yet he presented this as original accumulation of capital or ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’, reducing it to ‘the chief momenta of primitive accumulation’ (Marx 1887, 703) rather than integral to capitalist accumulation. Marxist formulae of the capitalist process of production and accumulation did not consider the continued role of the surplus extracted and appropriated by the metropolitan capital of the centre from the periphery.

Rosa Luxemburg was the first to argue that capital continuously needs a non-capitalist periphery to reproduce itself (Luxemburg 1913). While Luxemburg’s argument opened up a new dimension to understand the capitalist process of production and reproduction, it fell short of arguing that the periphery did not remain non-capitalist but was transformed to become the integral and necessary component of the worldwide process of accumulation. Samir Amin extended Luxemburg’s thesis to show that capital accumulation was
and continues to be a worldwide process in which the accumulation in the periphery is dominated by primitive accumulation, while in the centre it is accumulation by expanded reproduction (Amin 1974; Shivji 2009).

Taking Amin as a point of departure, Marxist political economists from the South have analysed further the role of the periphery in the process of accumulation historically not only in the genesis of capital, but also in the contemporary reproduction of capital in the centre (Patnaik and Moyo 2011; Patnaik 2012). I extended the concept of primitive accumulation to include expropriation of surplus from peasant labour by cutting into its necessary consumption, thus shifting the burden of social reproduction onto the shoulders of the peasants, specifically women (Shivji 1987). Subsequent contributions have shown how primitive accumulation assumes different forms, especially in the financialised state of capitalism or neoliberalisation (Harvey 2005).

Over the last two decades or so, Marxist scholars within ASN have questioned de-peasantisation theses positing the proletarianised peasantry as the agency of the African revolution (see, for instance, Moyo, Jha and Yeros 2019). I see de-peasantisation theses as subtly predicated on the linear path discussed above which first sees the peasantry proletarianised by being swallowed into capitalist modernity and then as de-peasantised proletarians spearheading the struggle for socialism. This comes close to the two-stage theory of what is called the national democratic revolution, though the latter is formulated differently.

Contrary to this position, and perhaps still dominant among some Marxist circles, some scholars within ASN do not consider the peasantry as the relic of the past destined to die but rather as the harbingers of the future where small production, organised in some collective form such as cooperatives, forms vital schools of revolution both to resist the onslaught of ruthless neoliberal capital while at the same time preparing it for the struggle for socialism. These scholars are not necessarily horrified by re-peasantisation resulting from land redistribution, provided of course that the ‘new’ peasants, so to speak, are not thrown to the vultures of neoliberal agribusiness as seems to have happened in Zimbabwe but organised in some collective form (Shivji 2019). It is for these and other reasons I have suggested that the peasant forms part of the working people which I have characterised as an agency of transformation (Shivji 2017).

In concluding, I want to reiterate that engaged and committed African scholars like Lungi and others need to revisit the dominant African and Africanist discourses on the agrarian question and, if need be, discard some of the so-called orthodox Marxist positions, Stalinist or Trotskyite, received from the European left. This is part of the long process of liberation (I hate to call it decolonisation) and emancipation from the imperialist-compradorial yoke.

References


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