Capitalist development and land struggles in Africa: the role of engaged scholarship

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of capitalism into Africa induced significant transformations of African societies which have continued to influence what people on the continent do today. Africa’s encounter with capital, though still limited in scope, has always been ruthless, coercive and violent, as displayed in the slave trade, colonial occupation and current neocolonial incursions. Although some political economy analysts have suggested that capitalism in Africa has not exploited Africans enough, this article shows that the encounter with capitalism on the continent has been, and continues to be, vicious, with its brutality often obscured by its stunted nature. The article draws on Lungisile Ntsebeza’s work on land to show that engaged scholarship can play a critical role in unveiling the mechanisms and nature of capitalist exploitation and brutality in Africa, often masked by weak capitalist penetration. Using examples of current land struggles, it shows that capitalist exploitation in Africa is not only limited to those engaged in capitalist relations of production (wage labour) but extends to people outside these relations.

KEYWORDS

Capitalist development; Africa; exploitation; land struggles; violence; engaged scholarship

Introduction

This article focuses on the development of capitalism in Africa and the struggles this has induced around land. It argues that capitalist exploitation on the continent is obscured by the weak penetration of capitalist relations of production, manifested by the small proportion of Africans engaged in wage labour. In this context, Lungisile Ntsebeza’s work on land helps to bring out the important role engaged scholarship can play in the process of laying bare the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism on the continent and the violence capitalist forces unleash on many African people. The article shows that subtle capitalist forces engender conditions in which many ordinary Africans in rural and urban areas experience ruthless and sometimes violent encounters with capital. But the violence unleashed by capitalist forces is often hidden due to the indirect way in which people

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come into contact with capital. The brutal forms of capitalist exploitation on the continent are often masked by using the state and its institutions to promote the interests of capital. The paper uses examples of current struggles around land to illustrate that although most Africans are not engaged in capitalist relations of production, many face capitalist brutality and violence on a daily basis.

‘Engaged scholarship’ is used here to refer to scholarly activities which seek to challenge, ‘demystify and debunk hegemonic forms of knowledge and ideologies’ (Shivji 2019). This type of scholarship is not limited to the armchair debunking of hegemonic knowledge; it entails an active engagement with people’s struggles on the ground. In this sense, engaged scholarship is related to Gramsci’s idea of organic intellectuals. Ntsebeza’s work is a good example of engaged scholarship, committed to challenging hegemonic views and the subtle forms of power this breeds. In his work on the land question in South Africa, Ntsebeza explores critical questions around ‘whether it is possible to embark on a comprehensive land redistribution programme while recognising and entrenching land rights acquired through colonialism and apartheid, as does the property clause’ in the post-1994 South African Constitution (Ntsebeza 2007, 108). His work highlights the tension in the Constitution ‘which enshrines democratic principles in the Bill of Rights, whilst at the same time recognizing an unelected and unaccountable institution of traditional leaders’ (Ntsebeza 2005, 36). Raising these critical questions not only challenges hegemonic knowledge but also contributes to unmasking the exploitative nature of capitalist encounters which are often hidden by ambiguities in policies and legislation.

The role of engaged scholarship in Africa

Engaged scholarship can take different forms in different contexts. But its key defining feature is the ability of a scholar to put academic scholarship at the services of the daily struggles of people, especially in poor and marginalised communities (Shivji 2019). An engaged scholar uses their knowledge to bring to the surface some of the hidden dynamics in society which lead to oppression and marginalisation of certain groups of people. Scholarship is seen as a tool for advancing society in general and championing ordinary people’s struggles for justice. Issa Shivji (2019) has described the role of engaged scholarship as that of actively constructing counter-hegemonies with the aim of demystifying the exploitative ideologies that justify and hide the brutality and violence of capitalist exploitation. In peripheral societies where capitalist exploitation occurs indirectly, the brutal face of capital is often hidden by the fronting of the state and some of the local political elites who champion capitalist interests. It is here where the role of engaged scholarship becomes critical. Engaged scholarship can contribute to exposing the ‘hit-and-run’ nature of capital that flows into underdeveloped countries (Saul and Leys 1999).

In much of Africa, foreign direct investment (FDI) is characterised by its strong hit-and-run features, which in the process often unleashes different forms of violence, especially through greenfield investments, mergers and acquisitions. Recent evidence from Djibouti, for example, shows that although the country has been a recipient of large amounts of FDI, its impact on economic growth has been insignificant (Hayel and Saiydy 2021). Much of the FDI into Djibouti was attracted to the country primarily because of huge tax concessions, but also the potentially higher returns because of its geographical
location. We have seen this in other African countries, where investments into extractive industries increase when the prices of commodities rise, but this flow is abruptly halted when commodity prices fall. When new capital flows in again ordinary people are crudely exploited in different but subtle ways. This thin penetration of capital makes it difficult to link people’s struggles directly to the intricate violence of capital (Shonhe 2018).

The major role of engaged scholarship in this context lies in challenging and demystifying the intricate operations and effects of capital on communities. Ntsebeza’s (2013) scholarship on farm workers and his work with local communities in the Eastern Cape in their struggles for democracy in the countryside are examples of how engaged scholarship can contribute to exposing the brutality and violent nature of capitalist encounters in Africa.¹ His work among farmworkers shows that such scholarship can provide insights into the nature of the struggles of local communities and how these connect to broader struggles elsewhere. As noted above, most of these encounters are masked by the indirect way in which people interact with capital in the periphery. While the daily struggles people mount may differ in their respective contexts, the common experience is that the way they encounter capitalism often leads to crude forms of exploitation, especially if they are not directly involved in capitalist relations of production.

**Capitalist development in Africa**

The now large literature on capitalist development in Africa has rightly highlighted the weakness of productive forces and the disarticulated nature of social formations (class structure) on the continent. In general terms, this highlights the weak penetration of capitalist relations of production. The main reason given for this is that most people on the continent have remained under pre-capitalist relations of production (Hyden 1983, 1986; Saul and Leys 1999; Cox and Negi 2010). Saul and Leys (1999, 5), for instance, have argued that while the African continent ‘exists in a capitalist world, which constrains the lives of its inhabitants at every turn, [it] is not of it’. This is sometimes interpreted to mean that since the majority of the continent’s labour has not been separated from the means of production – land – this has weakened ‘the desire to work for a wage’ and therefore shielded most Africans from capitalist exploitation through wage labour (Cox and Negi 2010, 72).

While different political economy traditions hold different views, the dominant view has been that capitalism in Africa has not fully developed.² For instance, Cox and Negi (2010, 76) have argued that ‘capitalism has assumed a stunted form over most of the continent.’ This is largely framed in terms of the limited penetration of capitalist relations of production, manifested in the predominance of small and subsistence producers who mostly have access to land. According to this view, this has meant that limited surplus value is generated and, as a result, capitalist productive forces are inhibited from unleashing their transformative power (Arrighi and Saul 1968; Hyden 1983; Boone 1994; Saul and Leys 1999; Cox and Negi 2010). For most of the continent, even the little surplus value generated leaks out through various means, including illegal capital flight, leading to weaker productive forces. While the weaker capitalist relations on the continent might be read to mean that there is less exploitation of most Africans (Kay 1975), it is the weakened nature of capital that tends to unleash more brutal and violent forms of exploitation.
Geoffrey Kay (1975) provocatively made this observation, arguing that ‘capital created underdevelopment not because it exploited the underdeveloped world, but because it did not exploit it enough.’ In other words, stronger capitalist penetration would transform the condition of underdevelopment by unleashing strong productive forces. Arrighi and Saul (1968) highlighted the weak nature of capitalist development in Africa, as manifested by weak local class structures as well as weak productive forces. This argument was advanced as a response to the orthodox development theory which argued that underdevelopment was a natural state which all countries or regions, including the now underdeveloped countries, have to go through before they can become developed. However, dependence theory, as well as the theory of unequal exchange (Frank 1972; Emmanuel 1972), made an important contribution to the debate by observing that development and underdevelopment exist side by side, with the gap between the two enlarging (not narrowing) as time goes by. There is no natural process of catching up between the two.

Mangulama and Wu (2022) have captured this uneven capitalist dynamic by arguing that capitalism leads to accumulation in one region and impoverishment in another. Underdevelopment is then a direct product of capitalism’s uneven transformation (Phillips 1977). The co-existence of developed and underdeveloped countries is not a natural process whereby underdeveloped countries are expected to catch up with developed countries; it is the nature of capitalist development – unevenness in terms of capitalist relations that develop in different regions. As argued in this paper, even if most Africans are not directly engaged in capitalist relations of production, they are subjected to cruder and more violent forms of capitalist exploitation. It is precisely this weaker penetration of capitalist relations of production on the continent which accounts for the more violent nature of capitalist encounters, akin to primitive accumulation.

**Land and capitalist development in Africa**

Land is an important entry point in the analysis of capitalist development in Africa and the role engaged scholarship can play in illuminating capitalist exploitation, given that agrarian capitalist dynamics (i.e. the transformation of property relations in land) shape the development of other types of capitalism – industrial, colonial and finance capital (Wood 2002). In this regard, one of the unique features of land relations in Africa is that capitalism has largely maintained social and property relations around land, contrary to Sender and Smith’s (1986) view that massive tenurial transformation occurred following the colonisation of the continent. Even today, the majority of land in Africa has remained outside of capitalist social and production relations. This is sometimes attributed to the resilience of indigenous land tenure systems. Several early anthropologists who worked on land tenure in Africa were fascinated by the flexibility of the indigenous land tenure system (Richards 1939; Gluckman 1941, 1944; Meek 1946). In their study of land relations in several African countries, Migot-Adholla et al. (1991) concluded that customary land tenure on the continent is not only adaptable to changing conditions but is also resilient amid the various strong winds of change.

However, what appears to be the resilience of customary land tenure is, in fact, a product of the inherent feature of capitalist development in the periphery, which is
characterised by ‘insufficient dynamism’ (Rodriguez 1981). The weak development of productive forces has led to a situation where the majority of direct producers, outside of former settler colonies, have not been separated from the means of production. Cox and Negi (2010) have used the extent to which land was expropriated from direct producers to explain not only higher levels of development in South Africa compared to other countries such as Zambia, but also, in their view, the development of a strong and ‘democratic’ state. For some analysts the failure to transform social and property relations in land in Africa is the main factor that accounts for the weak economic development on the continent, with the blame sometimes squarely placed on ‘African peasants’ for avoiding being ‘captured’ or ‘subordinated’ to capitalist relations (Hyden 1983). As Nelson Kasfir (1986) observed, in this view of capitalist development in Africa, the ‘peasants’ are not only victims of limited capitalist penetration, they are also seen as responsible for the slow pace of development.

Fundamentally, the weak growth of capitalist relations of production in Africa should be understood as part of the capitalist development dynamic, where some regions (metropoles) develop stronger productive forces while in other regions (periphery) weaker productive forces develop. This is the basic logic of capitalist uneven development. To expect the opposite or to blame the development of weak productive forces on the African peasantry or weak African states is to completely mischaracterise capitalist development in the periphery (see Phillips 1977). The concept of uneven development is perhaps one of the important insights of the dependence, underdevelopment and structuralist theories which highlighted the regional differences in the nature of capitalist development. As Anne Phillips argues, underdevelopment and dependency theories:

played a critical role in this transformation of the Marxist analysis of capitalism. By posing a contradiction between capitalism and development it opened up a whole new area of the critique of capital and helped to fill the lacuna created by the reconciliation between capital and labour in the advanced economies. (Phillips 1977, 9)

In the context of this article, understanding capitalist development dynamics can shed light on the differences in the level and type of capitalist exploitation and the struggles which ensue. While capitalist exploitation and struggles occur everywhere, the nature of exploitation differs significantly in advanced economies compared to periphery countries. Capitalist encounters are more crude, ruthless, brutal (hidden) and sometimes violent (not physically) in developing countries.

**Structural variances**

If one takes a broader approach to understanding capitalism in Africa by locating this in the global context, it becomes apparent that the nature and type of capitalist development in Africa and the larger global South is not accidental; it is part of the internal capitalist dynamic. Uneven development, as Samir Amin pointed out, has led to accumulation and development in capitalist centres, and produced sustained underdevelopment in developing regions of the world (Amin 1974). In their discussion of economic development in Africa, Cramer, Sender and Oqubay (2020) have also highlighted this with examples from English capitalist development, arguing that uneven development, contradictions and brutality are associated with capitalist development everywhere, but more pronounced in the poorer communities even in the same country or region.
The temptation even among radical political economists has been to think of capitalist development in the global South as imperfect copies of capitalist societies in the global North. Hamza Alavi (1982) elaborates on this point, arguing that while the internal logic of capitalism is the same, its structure differs depending on the prevailing historical and material conditions. He highlights two structural differences in capitalist development between the periphery and the metropolitan centre:

The main structural differences between capitalism in colonial societies and in non-colonized societies are to be found in … 1) generalized commodity production, and 2) extended reproduction of capital. In noncolonized, metropolitan countries generalized commodity production was an integrated process of development, in industry as well as in agriculture … The production of capital goods as well as consumer goods. That was not the case in peripheral capitalism which brought about a disarticulated form of generalized commodity production. (Alavi 1982, 181)

The structural differences which Alavi outlines are important examples of the unevenness of capitalist development and can help shed light on the differing nature of capitalist exploitation in different regions. A different type of capitalism has developed across Africa due to unique historical and material conditions ‘shaped by the development of capitalism on a world scale’ (Bernstein 2003). It is the weak development of capitalism in Africa that makes the process of exploitation cruder and more brutal compared to places where capitalist penetration has been stronger. The main difference, as the examples discussed below show, is that in developed countries exploitation occurs through economic means, while in the periphery there is a combination of economic and extra-economic means.

For example, weak productive forces in Africa can be linked to the fact that commodity production has not been integrated into the domestic development process of most countries. In spite of potentially strong backward, forward and fiscal linkages in African economies (Sender and Smith 1986), one key feature of the colonial economy in Africa is the lack of integration of key sectors and activities in the economy, manifested by enclavity and fragmentation of economic activities (Ake 1981; Chitonge 2021).

Generalised commodity production is an important mechanism in the process of separating direct producers from the means of production. When commodity production is disconnected from other activities, there is no mechanism to generate sufficient dynamism to support the transformation of property relations in land that can lead to the separation of independent producers from the means of production. Similarly, in former colonised societies, the expanded reproduction of capital is weak, primarily because of the expatriation of surplus value to the metropolitan countries through various means, including profit taking, capital flight, transfer pricing and tax evasion (Arrighi and Saul 1968). There is now abundant evidence of massive capital outflow from the African continent (AU/ECA 2015) which breaks the process of expanded reproduction of capital, leaving the continent always capital scarce, with African governments stepping on each other in the effort to attract outside capital investment (Chitonge 2017). Saul and Leys (1999, 24) make a similar point when they argue that Africa has been dominated by what they call ‘hit and run’ investments from both local bourgeoisie and international capital. This situation has meant that African countries do not have the capacity to transform their economies, because expanded reproduction of capital is disrupted by two important processes.
The first is that much of the value of commodities produced on the continent is realised outside of Africa. The cocoa value chain is one example: while Africa accounts for 75% of global cocoa production, it only captures 2% of the value generated in the cocoa value chain (see Chitonge 2021). The second is that a large portion of the little value that is realised within the continent is externalised through the various means noted above. This is why it is important to situate the development of capitalism in Africa in the global context, to better understand the unique features of its development on the continent. Giovanni Arrighi (2002) makes this point more poignantly when he argues that while local factors contribute to shaping the development of capitalism in Africa, it is its integration into the ‘global circuits of capital’ which help explain the capitalist dynamic on the continent. Arrighi emphasises the post-World War II global capitalist crisis, which induced capital flows from countries of the global South into the USA, as an important background to understanding capitalist development and transition in Africa today. This is not meant to divert the responsibility of underdevelopment in Africa from Africans to impersonal global forces as some suggest (e.g. Sender and Smith 1986), but to get a holistic view of the dynamic that creates the conditions we observe and experience on the continent.

Property relations in Africa: land

One of the defining features of capitalism in Marxist traditions is the transformation of property relations and the attendant relations of production, starting with land relations. In the African context, while there has been some transformation of property relations since colonial rule (Sender and Smith 1986), land has predominantly remained under customary tenure, even after the surge of interest from global corporates in Africa’s land immediately after the 2008/2009 global financial crisis. The exception remains a few former settler colonies, such as South Africa, Namibia, Eswatini and Zimbabwe, where a significant portion of land was expropriated from local communities (Hall 2004). In other countries such as Niger, Burundi, Zambia, Somalia, Chad, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, customary land still accounts for up to 95% of total land holdings (Mafeje 2003; Bruce 2014).

The continuing high percentage share of customary land in Africa may be surprising to many observers given the efforts by African governments, urged on by donors and development agencies, to privatise customary land and subject it to capitalist logic and interests (Takeuchi 2022). Although the increased interest in land in Africa since the 2008/2009 financial crisis has largely been directed towards customary land, the dominant form of land tenure has remained outside of capitalist property relations, even though huge areas of many countries have been subject to corporate land grabs (Hall 2004). While it is difficult to ascertain, some estimates suggest that about 90% of land is under customary tenure (Wily 2011; Boone 2017; Takeuchi 2022). Given this, the penetration of capitalist relations of production in Africa has been limited, with most direct producers still able to access and use land individually, collectively, or both. In theory, the persistence of these conditions is evidence of the weak penetration of capitalist relations of production, but this does not mean that these people experience mild forms of exploitation. As illustrated below, most people experience the worst forms of violence unleashed by capitalist interests.
Is the African peasant the problem?

In African development debates, Cliffe (1987) and Kasfir (1986) were both critical of the view that capitalism in Africa has left peasants largely uncaptured and unsubordinated to a dominant class. While many analysts would agree that productive forces on the continent have remained weak and thin, this does not insulate the African peasantry from capitalist exploitation. As shown below, the weak penetration of capital leads to crude, brutal and violent (extra-economic) forms of exploitation, especially for people not directly engaged in capitalist relations of production. As Sender and Smith (1986) have noted, in the development of capitalism, it is often the poorest who bear the brunt of coercion and violence, even if they are not directly participating in capitalist production.

In Africa, the victims of capitalist exploitation are often blamed as the cause of under-development (Kasfir 1986). For instance, the development of weak productive forces on the continent is sometimes attributed to peasants ‘evading’ capture (Hyden 1983):

There cannot be capitalism unless immediate producers are separated from the means of production and forced to sell their labour power for a wage to those who have the money to reunite them with the means of production. It is this process that necessarily entails accumulation, the development of worker productivity … Given the fact that over most of Africa immediate producers still enjoy right of possession in the land, i.e. rights to the use of the land but not sell it out … we should not be surprised at the difficulties that the accumulation process has faced. (Cox and Negi 2010, 76–77)

Clearly, direct producers anywhere do not separate themselves from the means of production in the process of capitalist development. When analysis of capitalist development stops at describing the appearances of capitalism in a particular locality, and not its internal dynamic, it is possible to conclude that African societies are not capitalist; that they are ‘quasi-capitalist economies’ (Saul and Leys 1999, 24). Stating that African direct producers are not captured is only describing what is observed; what is important is to explain why they are not captured. Without analysing the nature and mechanism of capitalist development, it is difficult to unmask capitalist exploitation.

Capitalist exploitation in Africa: land struggles

In the African context, it is precisely the underdeveloped nature of capitalism which helps explain the crude forms of exploitation, often exhibiting features of primitive accumulation. As Sender and Smith (1986) have observed, the material conditions determine the nature of capitalist exploitation. It is therefore unsurprising that many capitalist encounters in Africa have been cruder and more ruthless through slavery and neocolonialism. For instance, it is still common in Africa for sovereign wealth and asset management funds to negotiate for huge pieces of land with African governments, resulting in the displacement of local communities (Rutherford 2019). However, there is a material difference in the type and depth of exploitation between the economies of the global North and South. One of the most obvious differences is that capitalist exploitation in advanced economies occurs largely by means of relative surplus value extraction (for example, increased productivity not matching wage increases), as opposed to absolute surplus value extraction (increased working hours for the same wage), as well as direct and open process of accumulation by dispossession in the global South. Here, capitalist exploitation takes cruder
and more hidden forms, such as displacement of local communities to make way for a mining concession or nature tourism venture.

The other reason why capital in the global South exhibits more brutal forms of exploitation is because most governments in the global South have reified foreign capital, both offering very generous incentives and pledging to protect foreign capital interests even if this means disregarding the rights and interests of their own citizens (Mazwi, Mudimu, and Helliker 2022). Weak capitalist formation in Africa has also failed to generate strong public institutions which can adequately regulate capitalist activities. Cox and Negi (2010, 76) observe that weak capital accumulation has prevented the ‘emergence of a labour movement pressing for the extension of democratic rights that would allow some mitigation of the social risks its members face’. The lack of strong institutions creates conditions where local elites make alliances with international capital, a situation that exposes workers and peasants to brutal and violent forms of exploitation, often re-enforced by conditions of state capture. Some examples of capitalist encounters around land are given below which illustrate the violent nature of capitalist exploitation in Africa.

**Large-scale land investments**

The most obvious and brutal form of capitalist encounter in Africa in recent years has been in the form of land grabs. Since the 2008/2009 global financial crisis, there has been a rapid increase in investments in land, mainly customary land (Cotula et al. 2009; Deininger et al. 2011; Mazwi, Mudimu, and Helliker 2022), but also in various agribusiness value chains (Anseeuw, Ducastel, and Gabas 2011). Although the rate of large-scale land acquisitions has slowed down in the last decade, foreign and local investments in land have continued as capitalist penetration progresses (Mazwi, Mudimu, and Helliker 2022). In most cases, land acquisitions have resulted in many local communities either being completely displaced or having their access to natural resources and source of livelihood severely curtailed (Hall 2021; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2021). This has generated struggles between local communities and investors or the government, as local people seek to protect their interests in land. In Malawi, for instance, the Peoples Land Organisation has been mobilising local communities to defend their right to land against tea estates (Mangulama and Wau 2022). In some instances, the struggle develops into open conflicts which sometimes turn violent, while in other cases there are silent struggles of resistance as people fight to secure their livelihoods. In southwest Cameroon, a local community is opposing an American multinational company (Herakle Farms, owned by SG-SOCS) which acquired 73,086 hectares of land to establish palm oil plantations and refineries (Ndi 2017). The community has challenged this land concession granted by the Cameroonian government, arguing that it endangers the community’s ecological, cultural and economic stability. Community members maintain that while they are not opposed to investments, they want to ensure that these investments bring benefits to local people (Ndi 2017).

Most people in local communities where land deals are located encounter capital in a way that often leads to communities losing or compromising their only source of livelihood. Most rural communities do not encounter capital as wage labourers. There are many similar stories in different countries where local communities struggle to secure their livelihoods because a foreign investor has taken their land, water, forest or marine resources. In recent times the struggle has not just been against foreign investors; local
investors have been taking large pieces of land for various business activities, mostly on customary land, leading to evictions, forced resettlement and marginalisation (Ndi 2017; Rutherford 2019).

**Alienation of customary land**

Another example in which local communities encounter and struggle against capitalist exploitation is when land is alienated by traditional leaders. In this case, leaders often allocate customary land used by local community members to investors who allegedly offer large sums of money in exchange. In Zambia, for example, government officials complain that some local chiefs have been alienating customary land to investors at the expense of local community members (Chitonge et al. 2017). In some cases, traditional leaders exploit weak land governance systems to enrich themselves. Muhire (2021) has observed that tensions and struggles over land are often created by local chiefs who take advantage of administrative gaps to claim ownership of the land, which they then alienate to people outside the community to enrich themselves.

Here we see a subtle form of local people’s encounters with capital even if they are not directly involved in capitalist relations of production. In these kinds of encounters, the exploitation is more severe as there is less regard for the interests and plight of the people whose land is being grabbed. Where local people try to resist this alienation, violence is used through state agencies, including the police, to enforce the alienation of land. There are several examples where local chiefs, in collusion with state officials, have alienated large tracts of customary land to large investors such as mining, agricultural or agro-industrial companies (Cotula et al. 2009). In Ethiopia, Teshome Soboka (2022) has shown that, since the early 2000s, the federal government has embarked on reforms such as rural land registration, the establishment of a land bank, and the extension of loans to farmers, all aimed at concentrating power and control over land in order to promote its commoditisation. This has resulted in massive and rapid land transfer to large-scale private agricultural investment firms, rising from about 0.5 million hectares in 2011 to 2.8 million in 2013, and to 3.3 million in 2015 (Soboka 2022, 163). Most of this land was occupied by local communities.

**Urban land struggles**

For most people, capitalist encounters around land are associated with land in rural areas. But with growing urbanisation on the continent, we are now witnessing increasing struggles over land in urban areas, mostly for housing. Although these struggles come in different forms, they all point to the brutal nature of the encounter with capital. In some instances, local people’s access to land is threatened by capitalist development through gentrification or urban redevelopment projects, while in others the land is bought by property developers. When land is sold for redevelopment the poorer residents, who are often tenants, are left without access to land where they can build their own houses (Chitonge 2021). In Morocco, Balgley and Rignall (2021) report that in the coastal town of Mehdia (40 kilometres from the capital Rabat), the government, in partnership with private developers, persuaded a local community to sell the land they owned collectively and built luxury residences, which most of the local people could not afford. Sango and Doumbia (2021) also report on land struggles between airport administrative authorities in Cote
d’Ivoire (Bouake Airport) and Senegal (Blaise Diagne International Airport) and the local communities living in the vicinity of these airports. Houses have been forcibly demolished and families evicted several times to make way for airport facilities and associated businesses, including warehouses. It is in these encounters that the brutality of capital becomes plain. The active role played by the state points to the emergence of a state captured by corporate entities.

The brutal nature of capitalist encounters with poor urban communities is more graphic in the case of the Hangberg community in Hout Bay, Cape Town. This community of largely Khoi and San people was forcibly removed from their homes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the apartheid government reclassified where they lived as a white-only area. Community members were compulsorily moved to the slopes of Sentinel Mountain, overlooking Hout Bay harbour. For five decades after the local people moved to this place, they lived peacefully with their own local chief. But in 2010, the City of Cape Town earmarked the area for commercial property and upmarket housing development as it is a waterfront. Twenty years ago, this area was seen as wasteland occupied by indigenous people. But now, because those with money and power want to make more money, they have declared the community an illegal settlement, and since 2010, houses in the community have been demolished, several times in some cases, as one resident explains:

When your house is destroyed over and over again, you feel powerless. People have to express their power somehow and so they pick on the weakest because it is the only thing they have. This is the systematic violence that people don’t speak about. Our community is traumatized. (Worth 2020)

At first glance, this might appear as though it is a clash of the police and City of Cape Town versus the Hangberg community, but the real battle is with capital advancing to displace residents of this local community. The violence and brutality become apparent when one considers that the people whose houses are being demolished are only seeking a place to live, while the main motive for demolishing houses is to allow the property developer to accumulate more money and power. In the process, many people are criminalised and rendered homeless. As one of the activists points out, ‘During apartheid, being coloured was a crime but that has changed. Now building a house for your family is considered a crime. But isn’t it more of a crime to destroy someone’s house?’ (Worth 2020).

Engaged scholarship can play the important role of unmasking the violent nature of capital mediated through the state. There are many examples in South Africa and other countries where engaged scholarship has played a key role in local people’s struggles over land. On urban land issues, civil society organisations such as the Ndifuna Ukwazi, Land Accountability Research Centre (LARC), and Reclaiming the City and the Legal Resource Centre (LRC) have used their research findings to not only educate local communities about their rights, but also to advocate for social justice through litigation and social mobilisation. Ntsebeza’s work has also been critical in highlighting the misuse of power by traditional authorities. In a case heard in the High Court involving the appointment of a village headman in Cala Reserve in the Eastern Cape, the judges relied entirely on Ntsebeza’s evidence about the traditional procedure for electing village heads (see SAFLII 2015). The community used Ntsebeza’s research to expose undemocratic practices adopted by local traditional leaders.
Contract farming

Contract farming is another example of exploitative capitalist encounters, mostly common in the global South. In contract farming, although the direct producer still has access to and control over land, the unequal power relations between the contracting firm and small growers often result in the exploitation of the latter by offloading the hidden costs of production and the risks involved onto the small farmer. Lloyd Sachikonye (2016, 89), for instance, argues that contract farming ‘is a crucial mechanism in the subsumption of growers to agribusiness capital that largely profits from avoiding having to meet the former’s reproduction cost’. Although the arrangements between an agribusiness firm and the small-scale farmer in most instances seem voluntary, it is often the desperate need for inputs and access to markets which lead small farmers into contract farming. Toendepi Shonhe (2018) shows that, in Zimbabwe after the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), the decline of public funding to the agriculture sector, coupled with massive capital flight from the country, left many small growers with no source of funding to acquire inputs. This situation contributed to an increase in the number of tobacco and cotton farmers opting to enter into contract farming arrangements.

In Kenya, Peter Narh (2022) argues that small sugarcane growers who are beneficiaries of land reform have weak control over their land because of contract farming arrangements, such that even the fertiliser, herbicide, pesticide and ploughing practices are controlled by the sugar company. Here, exploitative capitalist relations may be hidden by the fact that the direct producers still control land and they engage voluntarily in this arrangement. It is even argued that the contractor is advancing the farmer’s welfare by making production possible through the supply of inputs which the farmer could not have accessed. It is only when the relationship between the contracting parties is critically analysed that the exploitation of the small farmer becomes more apparent. It becomes clear that while the contractor does not, de jure, control the land and labour, they, de facto, control labour, land and the product (Sachikonye 2016).

Tourism and conservation

The advance of tourism and conservation in Africa has led to the unleashing of violence in many local communities and was articulated in a recent book which highlighted the inherent contradictions in the current pursuit of the ‘global green agenda’. Conservation ventures in the global South seek to protect the future of the planet by denying basic elements of humanity to many local communities (Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2021). A good example is the Messok Dja Protected Area which covers part of the Republic of the Congo and Cameroon, where the local people, the Baka, have been subjected to violence sponsored by the state through the use of ‘ecoguards’ (Schiffman 2020).

In Tanzania, the government has been threatening to displace the Maasai people who have been living in what is today called the Ngorongoro Conservation Area for centuries, in order to ‘make way for tourism and conservancies’. What seems to be a genuine attempt by the state to promote conservation and sustainability turns out to be a ploy to attract foreign capital investment through the granting of exclusive hunting rights on a large portion of this reserve (Manji 2022). In the process of doing this, the interests and plight of the Maasai people are completely overlooked; the Maasai are not only banned from grazing cattle and growing crops, they have been threatened with violence by the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority (NCAA), which has threatened to demolish their homes,
schools and health centres. It is becoming apparent that the creation of protected areas and conservancies is another subtle way of promoting capitalist interests. Matose et al. (2021) have pointed out that protected areas in Africa have now become enclaves through which capitalist penetration is promoted, spurred on by African states.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed capitalist development in Africa in relation to the land question and the role of engaged scholarship in the struggles which ensue from this. It has argued that while capitalist development in Africa has been weak, with many people on the continent not directly participating in capitalist relations of production (wage labour remains only a small proportion on average even today), many people encounter capitalist exploitation in more crude and sometimes violent forms. Using examples of capitalist encounters around land in Africa, the article has shown that it is precisely the weak capitalist development on the continent that helps to explain why poor people experience the most brutal and violent capitalist exploitation. In most advanced economies where capitalism has fully developed, capitalist exploitation is less brutal, largely taking the form of relative surplus value extraction (by economic means), as opposed to forms of primitive accumulation (extra-economic means) which are still prevalent on the continent.

In the case of land, the paper has discussed five examples of crude and brutal encounter with capitalism which many ordinary people on the continent, in both rural and urban areas, face. This often comes in the form of being displaced from land, homes, or both. Although, in the past, capitalist exploitation on the continent was largely associated with foreign capital in partnership with local elites, we are beginning to see the emergence of domestic capital supported by the state, flowing particularly into customary land. Regardless of whether investors are local, foreign or some partnership between the two, the effects on local communities are largely indistinguishable. However, the exploitative nature of capital is often obscured. In this context, engaged scholarship can play a critical role in illuminating the inner workings of capital to support and anchor community struggles against oppression and marginalisation.

**Notes**

1. Cape and Others vs Penrose Ntamo and Others: No. 169/14, 2015, SA (HC) (SAFLII 2015). In this case, the Eastern Cape High Court relied on Ntsebeza’s research to decide whether headmen should be democratically elected or appointed by the chief.
2. Some have argued that capitalism cannot fully develop in the periphery; it will always be more developed in advanced economies and underdeveloped (stunted) in the periphery (see Phillips 1977).
3. Because of this, socialism is suggested as a more viable alternative (Arrighi and Saul 1968).
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