

Moral Arguments for Land Redistribution in Contemporary Zimbabwe and Gracchan Rome: A Comparative and Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This article is a comparative examination of the moral arguments for land redistribution mobilised and deployed by politicians in contemporary Zimbabwe and Gracchi Rome. The land reform movements of the two societies are based on different but related realities. The period of the Gracchi in ancient European classical history reveals some of the pitfalls and dangers of human action, even when the action is intended to correct gross injustices. Critics of Zimbabwe's land reform have pointed to issues of corruption, violence, cronyism and the creation of new injustices. This article is a critical analysis of Zimbabwe's land reform that will enable academics and policy makers to be aware of some mistakes, ambiguities and contradictions which could have been avoided and how these on hind sight could help improve the ongoing process of land redistribution and empowerment. Hence, in both cases the moral argument for land redistribution creates a very complicated moral zone, and thus, these land reforms began with, ostensibly, good intentions and had the potential to address socio-economic imbalances in both societies. The bi-polarity of these societies into pro and anti demonstrates a problematic situation, a position represented in Zimbabwe's land reform agenda.

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, attempts by Zimbabwe to solve the land question through agrarian reform, and its attendant economic decline, have attracted widespread academic interest (See Chitiyo 2000, Moyo 2000, Chaumba 2003, Moore 2001, Chitando 2005 and Sadomba 2011). We seek to contribute to this burgeoning interest in agrarian reform from a classical history perspective, and thus draw comparisons between the moral justifications for land reform brought forward by the Gracchi (Roman brothers who tried to reform Rome's social and political structure to help the lower classes, in the 2nd century B.C. Events surrounding the politics of the Gracchi led to the decline and eventual fall of the Roman Republic) in the Roman Republic and by the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (hereinafter ZANU-PF) in contemporary Zimbabwe. Indeed, in both cases scholarly attention has focussed on the existence and nature of alleged crises but the validity of the moral arguments mobilised by both regimes is subject to debate. This article is therefore sensitive to the ethical complexity in the events both in ancient Rome and modern Zimbabwe. Instead of right versus wrong, in a fairy-tale narrative, this article demonstrates how difficult it is to judge. It advances the argument that no one uniquely occupies the moral high ground, and even when a cause for land redistribution is just, one may not always be able to predict the consequences of one's actions (this is true when one considers methods used by veterans and also methods used by politicians to get the land).

Even when unspoken, the importance of land will dominate all major questions of power and economics, especially in agrarian societies. Accordingly, corruption and its problems (which are inherently about the wealth of the government) compel us to focus on land. In this respect, we need to examine the relationship between politics and economics: land reform driven by political or economic imperatives or both, with the problem of the former at times masquerading as the latter (Mlambo 2013: 9). This is essential to interpreting what is happening in contemporary Zimbabwe, and it is also essential to the late Roman republic and especially, the Gracchi in the 2nd century BC. The article thus seeks to distinguish between the real motives for reform and the objectives proclaimed by the reformers. This distinction may especially be significant if the proclaimed objectives are imposed upon the reformers by political circumstances. For example, reformers may proclaim certain objectives (without any intention of enforcing them) to appease peasants, to reward war veterans and sometimes to undermine the opposition such that it became difficult to isolate the real from the proclaimed purpose of land reform (Onoma 2011).

We argue that the different faces of the land reforms in both case studies do not fit seamlessly into the moral argument. In fact, even if one accepts a good-bad dichotomy on the fundamental questions, the claim to moral influence is unmasked as mere political rhetoric or cheap propaganda. Tiberius Gracchus, who was the tribune of the Roman people in 133 BC, introduced his agrarian law specifically to eradicate poverty and the shortage of potential recruits, which was a result of the misuse of public/state land in Rome's past, by putting a limit on holdings in order to distribute the surplus in small plots to the landless poor.

During the process of distributing the land, commissioners were denounced for failing to account for the records of land holdings professionally leading to malicious accusations and lawsuits (App. *BC* 1.18).

In Zimbabwe, there are conflicting views of what benefits Independence brought to the country, as land appears to be one of the promised gains that were not immediately actualized in the first two decades, directly following the ascent of the Black majority, a gain which was realized in the upheavals over land ownership, early in the 21st century. Therefore we argue that in both cases the moral good of the exercises of land reforms leads to a messier and murkier moral zone in which the means do not appear to be justified by the ends. A comparative examination of the Zimbabwean agrarian crisis with that of Gracchi Rome can contribute to our understanding of the pitfalls and complex problems of land reform and how they impact on the general economic, social and political wellbeing of society.

The Roman Context

Debate on the crisis phenomenon of land redistribution in Rome during the Gracchi era has produced two schools of thought, the pro-Gracchan tradition and the anti-Gracchan tradition. The pro-Gracchan tradition is a version of interpretation that subscribes to the thesis of severe crisis in the second century BC Roman Italy, which the Gracchi attempted to alleviate through the *lex Sempronia agraria* (a law that would reorganize control of the *ager publicus* meaning land conquered in previous wars that was controlled by the state. Previous agrarian law specified that no citizen would be allowed to possess more than 500 jugera, approximately 125 hectares of the *ager publicus* (public land), and any land that they occupied above this limit would be confiscated by the state).

Appian and Plutarch mainly support this view. Appian presents the *lex Sempronia agraria* as the most appropriate response to the crisis (Gargola 2008:489, 490, 491, 492). In Appian, an extensive depiction of the use and abuse of public/state lands by the rich was evident (App. *BC* 1.9 35-11. 47, see also Plut. *Ti Gr* 8). Appian argues that the senatorial elite in Rome controlled the land from the time of the regal period, with power firmly entrenched in the hands of the oligarchy and that class struggles (the struggle of the orders, 494 BC–289 BC) over the status of the *ager publicus*/public land which led to the creation of the office of the Tribune of the Plebs.

Thus, the tribune was a direct response to the unequal political field that the plebeians had to negotiate to secure some form of parity in the political discourse at that time. Ownership of land was not merely a symbolic representation of power, but it meant possession of actual power, as agriculture was the mainstay of the Roman economy. On account of their ownership of the land, the *optimates* (loosely speaking, a political party of the aristocracy, who were thoroughly opposed to ideas of reform at the expense of conformism and the spirit and tradition of conservative politics) controlled the livelihoods of a large part of the population.

This control propelled the political ascendancy of the *optimates* (the nobility or aristocrats). Landowners were able to furnish their slaves with arms; they were able to use their land as security to finance their acquisition of more land from those without the means to fully utilise it.

The ownership of large tracts of land dictated that the *optimates* hire more labour in order to augment their wealth. Since Rome was frequently engaged in wars against the other Italian cities, native Roman labourers also doubled as Roman soldiers. During their absence, the landowners acquired great numbers of slaves to work the land. Consequently, whenever the legionnaires returned home, they found their presence as labourers' surplus to traditional requirements. With no work, no land, and thus, no power, the citizens resorted to the extraordinary measure of voting for whichever orator promised them what they wanted. The beginning of this practice is obscured within the promises of returning land to the peasant population that had been deprived of the resource through no fault of their own. Later on, with the advent of the years, and the dearth of plebeians willing to work the land, monetary recompense was the preferred *modus operandi* (method of operation).

Plebeian politicians and occasionally patrician demagogues mobilised support for their candidature by claiming to desire the restoration of the *ager publicus* (public land) to those who had lost out in the creation of the *latifundia* (large farms that were formed when landowners bought up smaller farms), as well as to those who were citizens, but did not own land. The plebeian candidates almost always got elected on the promise of land allotment to disenfranchised citizens. The division between the patricians and the plebeians became more marked as the plebeians found champions for their cause for seeking land distribution. The establishment of the magistracy of the tribune of the plebeians was created to aid them in addressing the inequality of the land allocations.

The above discussion opens up a vast array of questions and problems regarding the aims and methods of the Gracchi. It also opens up the question of how the achievements and fate of the Gracchi exposed the flaws of the senatorial government in Roman politics. The Gracchan era poses serious questions in so far as the motives of the reformers were concerned. Tiberius Gracchus' argument emphasises action, based on moral grounds. Indeed, what Tiberius demonstrates is a moral crisis. He invoked the moral question of social justice. His programme allegedly sought to help the landless poor who were suffering at the expense of the vested interests of the rich and the politically connected. Did Tiberius Gracchus conceal other motives? These questions call for an in-depth analysis of his moral argument and to examine the extent to which land functioned as the focal point for mobilization of political support.

While we do not deny that there was a crisis in Roman Italy, we want to investigate the extent to which the crisis might have been exaggerated by the Gracchi. We also advance the argument that the selfishness and vested interests of the rich in government exposed the Roman state to populist politics and worsened the crisis. After the Gracchi episode, there occurred in the Roman political landscape a growing self-consciousness on the part of the peasantry, about whose economic plight the state had demonstrated little concern. The said questions will help us gain some insight into contemporary Zimbabwe's situation.

Gracchan Altruism

From a reading of Plutarch, Tiberius Gracchus' reform aimed to tackle the plight of the soldiery in order to gain support from this section (Plut. *Ti Gr*, 9.5). Following Plutarch, Scullard argues that Tiberius Gracchus' land bill targeted war veterans as beneficiaries (Scullard 1960, 63; Plut. *Ti Gr* 9.5). Gaius Gracchus, Tiberius' younger brother in 123 BC, also exhibited a quest for the affection of the soldiery when he made provision of clothes and food for the same at a time when the Senate had turned its back on the army doing duty in Sardinia (Plut. *C Gracch* 2.1-20). The first, and most obvious, strand linking the Zimbabwean land reform and that of the Gracchi is the significance of war veterans, earmarked as the titular beneficiaries of the exercise. Let us find out how the situation panned out in Gracchan Rome. Contemporary sources Liv. Per.58, App. BC 1.11, Dio. 24.4-5, Plut. C. Gr 5.1-7, and Cic. Brut 103 all reveal that the Gracchi's land redistribution programme was designed to attain personal power or *regnum* (the inheritable power to govern).

For most of these ancient sources, the Gracchi aimed at grabbing power while hiding their intentions behind a benevolent land redistribution programme, a charge that has also been levelled against the prime orchestrators of the fast-track land reform programme in Zimbabwe. Florus argues thus:

The original cause of all the revolutions was the pretence of protecting the common people, for whose aid it was originally established, but in reality aiming at domination for itself, courted popular support and favour by legislation for the distribution of lands and corn and the disposal of judicial power (Flor. 2.1.13).

Modern historians (Earl 1970, Smith 1955 and Taylor Taylor 1962.) concur that the Gracchi brothers aimed at gaining political revenue rather than carrying out social reform. Earl's words regarding Tiberius are representative of this consensus among historians:

Regnum, in fact, was precisely what Ti. Gracchus and his faction aimed at and, as Cicero says, for a few months achieved....The tribune Ti. Gracchus began as merely another manoeuvre in the restless factional politics of the second century; it ended with the nobility fighting and murdering the political life and power. No less than Julius Caesar, Ti. Gracchus perished for his regnum (Earl 1970:64).

Revisionist scholars emphasize the severity of poverty of the Roman peasant. Rathbone posits that the Late Roman Republic peasant was miserably poor; deducing evidence from the archaeology of peasant farmstead, which to him was so poor that it left little archaeological trace (Rathbone 2008:328). He argues thus:

...the settlement schemes of the Gracchan and triumviral phases created massive new cohorts of smallholders with restricted means of livelihood evidenced by their revival of the rural market for ceramic fine wares. The interpretation of archaeological field survey data points to the fact that these peasants were poor hence the importance of the agrarian settlement schemes carried by the Gracchi and the triumvirs (ibid).

Rathbone points to the paucity of even the average black gloss sherds in the late Republic which to him reflects the economic instability of the settled peasantry (Rathbone 2008:328). He notes that the Greek and Hellenistic smallholdings and farmsteads were larger than Roman citizen allotments and farmhouses; hence he argues that Roman peasants were significantly poorer than their counterparts in the Greek and Hellenistic worlds (ibid). Rathbone, in the pro-Gracchan tradition, sees inequalities in land ownership and politics at hand in his explanation of the poverty of the Italian farmer (Rathbone 2008:307). Contrary to this, Rosenstein argues that there was a life-cycle balance built into the Roman system of warfare, with men serving in the army before marriage, then returning to their farms, hence there was no inherent conflict between long service overseas and the viability of the Italian economy (Rosenstein 2004).

Toynbee and Frank, like Rosenstein, argue that the situation was the same in the second century, despite the portrayal of conditions of grave economic inequality by Plutarch and Appian. They corroborate Rosenstein's argument of an exaggerated crisis as they argue that Roman land was still good and cereal cultivation was lucrative (See Toynbee 1965:228-235 and Frank 1993). Furthermore, Rosenstein argues that the main problem facing rural Italy was overpopulation not underpopulation, that is, farms were productive. One cannot, therefore, help but see an exaggerated crisis by politicians.

Rosenstein, therefore, downplays the significance of *latifundia*/large scale farms operated through slave labour as opposed to wage labour in the 2nd century and gives emphasis to changes in political culture in the second century, especially with Scipio Aemilianus (236–183 BC; renowned as one of the greatest generals of the Roman republic) and his use of the popular assemblies to subvert the authority of the Senate (for a detailed argument on this theme see Rosenstein 2012).

However, Rosenstein fails to analyse the impact of capital influx on land prices. Prices rise when there is too much money in the economy, leading ultimately to the property bubble scenario. Such a scenario may not be ruled out to have happened in Rome in the 2nd century with private wealth rising exponentially among the elite. One may, contrary to Appian's pro-Gracchan tradition, be sympathetic with Rosenstein's argument that peasants were forced off the land and the rich bought up estates on the cheap (App. *BC* 1.7). It is rather more tempting, unlike Rosenstein, to embrace a scenario where the rich having accumulated more money and thus having the economic power simply bought out smallholdings without the violence attested in the pro-Gracchan tradition. In this model, the small farmer is not entirely the loser, as he does receive a cash windfall in a rising property market in return for his farm.

The situation described above is quite reminiscent of what has happened in some parts of rural England where wealthy people from the cities buy weekend cottages. The locals are priced out of the housing market in their own villages, but since the locals already have property, they are often tempted to sell out for high profits. A similar situation might have obtained in Rome. So some small farmers in Middle/late republican Rome who left the land for the cities may perhaps have done so with large amounts of cash after selling their properties to the rich and not necessarily as lampenproletariats (working class people that are unlikely to achieve class consciousness and are therefore lost to socially useful production that is of no use in a revolutionary struggle, and perhaps may even be an impediment to the realization of a classless society).

Rosenstein subscribes to the thesis of a crisis caused by over population as opposed to under population; a crisis nevertheless, exploited by the new breed of demagogues, that is, the Gracchi. Although Gruen believes, contrary to Rosenstein, that there was a decrease in rural population (Gruen 1968:48). He argues that there was an increased rate of rural immigration to the city of Rome thereby increasing the urban population. This urban population, which comprised men who had done military service, according to Gruen (1968:47), '...did not fancy returning to the Italian countryside even if they did not feel an economic pinch.'

This casts a shadow of doubt on Tiberius' gloomy portrayal of the plight of the ex-fighters in his speech: "...the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children" (Plut. *Ti Gr* 9.5).

There is also another problem with the argument of the Gracchi. The Gracchi identified a general lack of access to land as the main problem that triggered the crisis (Roselaar 2008:218). A passage below demonstrates this:

...for the rich getting possession of the greater part of the undistributed lands, and being emboldened by the lapse of time to believe that they would never be dispossessed, absorbing any adjacent strips and their poor neighbours' allotments, partly by purchase...and partly by force, came to cultivate vast tracts instead of single estates (App. *BC* 1.7).

Nonetheless, any deeper analysis that dwells on what modern scholars have expressed will not bear much fruit, as it will mostly amount to conjecture from limited available data. The Zimbabwean scenario discussed below further helps us to appreciate the problems of the moral argument for land reform.

The Zimbabwean Context

In this section we show how the search for an alternative explanation to the Roman problem through the lens of contemporary Zimbabwe can offer intriguing insights into the politics of land reform, both past and present. We demonstrate how the Zimbabwean experience provides a more modern example we can relate and identify with. It offers primary evidence for the motives of the beneficiaries of land reform. Indeed, our examination of the facets of the land reform in contemporary Zimbabwe avails an opportunity to assess the extent to which public officials are motivated by the moral argument or are able to walk into their political claims. Thus, ultimately we hope that through this analysis, we can contribute to solving not only the Gracchan debate, but also the general problem with land redistribution that has affected Zimbabwe in recent decades. Like the Gracchan reforms, Mugabe's motives in carrying out the land reform programme have been similarly criticized as a self-serving political exercise. His critics argue that he aimed at bolstering declining ZANU (PF) support in the rural constituencies, and harnessing the paramilitary group of war veterans.

As we have already demonstrated, the moral verdict of the land reform agenda as expressed by the argument of the Gracchi is problematic. Similarly, the moral argument expressed by President Robert Mugabe in the contemporary Zimbabwean scenario also gets excessively complicated, even if we were to accept a good-bad dichotomy on the fundamental questions. President Mugabe's moral argument is captured in the following speech where he argued thus:

We have repeatedly told the world that the on-going land reform programme seeks to redress land imbalances deriving from the history of colonialism in this country. It is also meant to transform the agricultural set-up, which we inherited from colonial governments. The set-up is not just: it is not fair, it is not productive (Mugabe 2001:141).

Mugabe explained:

It is my hope that if we put our heads together and believe in the efficacy of this process (of land distribution), we shall see it go a long way towards addressing the twin evils of poverty and overcrowding in most rural areas...We are indeed called upon to deliver once and for all (Mugabe 2001:106).

Indeed apocalyptic language such as the one mobilised by Mugabe is commonplace in political history as politicians often justify themselves. And as Daniel Gargola noted, with regards to the evils depicted by Appian for the Gracchan period, 'Whether or not there actually was such a crisis ...is a far more complicated matter (Gargola 2008:500, note 28).'

This poses a challenge of shedding light on the other motives of the 'crisis' metaphor often mobilised by politicians. Thus, it is paramount to examine whether President Mugabe's 'altruistic' reform agenda can help us expose flaws in the Gracchan moral argument. We appropriate Mugabe's 'altruistic' reform agenda to clarify the Gracchi's moral standpoint by examining the situation of the 'conservative' peasants. Conservative peasants in the Gracchan era were those peasants whose plight was relatively not bad and who believed in a rational and methodical approach to land reform. In Zimbabwe, these elements did not play a leading role in the land invasions (Moore 2001, 258). The results of a doctoral fieldwork carried out in 2010 in various provinces in Zimbabwe speak to this effect. For instance, in Masvingo province, especially in Bikita and Zaka rural communities, most peasant families indicated that their unwillingness to leave the graves of their ancestors played a role in their not participating in land occupations, and that they had supplementary sources of livelihood such as gardening, and also buying and selling. Some families in the Zimunya area in Manicaland and some peasant families in the Chipinge, and Chirinda area were content with their crop yields, and indicated that they depended on their sons and daughters who worked in South Africa for supplementary food supplies. This is not to say others did not happily welcome an allocation of land. Hence, the above information is fairly representative of rural lifestyles in other provinces with better climatic conditions. Roselaar, who comments on similar survival strategies but in a different geographical context, argues:

Even if the accumulation of public land by the elite was not dangerous for most small farmers (in Roman Italy), they still had to cope with serious problems. Population growth and the accumulation of (private) land led to a shortage of land for many farmers in central Italy. Under such conditions small farmers could employ various other strategies to ensure a sufficient income (Roselaar 2008:205).

However, some peasants doubted the sincerity of the reform process – itself a by-product of previous disappointments with what they thought was the government’s inconsistent land policy. The following quote trenchantly captures this concern:

In 1981 and 1982 we occupied Bhiri farm (Bill’s farm) but we were kicked out by armed police. Seventeen years later, that is, in 2000, the same politicians encouraged farm occupations. We doubt if this land revolution would not have the same results as the last one. We will farm these allotments left for us by our ancestors. In fact this year we had a fairly good harvest (Interview with the elders of a certain clan in Murinye communal areas, Masvingo central, 1 June 2013).

This paradox finds parallels with the plight of the Italian peasant – the alleged targets of Tiberius’ agrarian reform (App. BC 1.11). In 91 BC, M. Livius Drusus, a tribune of the plebs proposed to give all Italians Roman citizenship but the Italians were against it as Appian notes:

Even the Italians, in whose special interest Drusus was devising these plans, were apprehensive about the law providing for the colonies, because they thought that the Roman public land (which was still undivided, and which they were cultivating, some by force and others clandestinely) would at once be taken away from them, and that in many cases they might even be disturbed in their private holdings (App. BC 1.36).

Peasants evidently doubted the sincerity of politicians and were suspicious that the reformers could have been motivated by politics more than any moral arguments they advanced. This attitude is reminiscent with Gaius’ peasants who were so critical of the reformer’s proposals, choosing, instead, to take sides with the Senate (App. BC 1.23; 1.24). The plebeians actually scoffed at the laws proposed by Gaius, an indication that he had lost the favour of the common people (App. BC 1.23). Appian also records that a certain plebeian named Antyllus was critical of Gaius Gracchus’ actions and even pleaded Gaius “...to spare his country.” (App. BC 1.25).

What this means is that the plebeians, seized with emotions pertaining to the crisis and turmoil about to be caused, then distanced themselves from riotous and treasonous actions, whose end result they must have known was worse off than their present circumstances. This reluctance is also reflected in Zimbabwe where mostly urbanites feared the economic backlash of the exercise more than they approved of getting the land promised with the advent of Independence in 1980.

Also, the scenario in which the erstwhile beneficiaries of the land reform programme, the impoverished black population of Zimbabwe, acquire the land of the white population, but have neither the means, nor the expertise required to make a successful endeavour of the agricultural experience, serves as a counterpoint in the morality of land reform as a boon to a nation. This is just to reflect on the fact that what might seem to some to be an unequivocal moral right can actually be more complicated.

As mentioned, before, this disaffectedness appears within the urban psyche of black Zimbabwean citizens at the outbreak of the fast-track element of land redistribution. The ZANU (PF) altruistic claim that all Zimbabweans needed the land for their livelihood was to some extent contradictory as their language reveal some frustration at these 'unpatriotic' citizens whom they accused of not supporting their inalienable 'birth right' to land (Machingura 2012: 267). It is also necessary to note that most beneficiaries and current residents of the confiscated land were formerly domiciled in the communal areas, but some were to some extent forced onto their new plots (ibid). In some cases, there was neither infrastructure nor agricultural services. The new farmers have no title deeds for the land, apart from the promises that they will get them, and the insecurity of the 99-year leases. The irony, then, of the exercise, is that the land was given to those who arguably could not utilize it, while those who could, had no desire to be involved or were blocked from taking part in the programme.

Furthermore, former farm workers' needs were not taken care of. Moyana (2002:189) argues, 'But as things were, the masses of landless Africans could not reconcile their condition with a situation in which African political leaders had replaced the white farmers on the land for which they had fought for ...'

Thus, the contemporary Zimbabwean peasant reaction to land reform provides some insights in our appreciation of the responses of the Roman peasantry.

'Ancestral' Lands Motif

Interviews conducted with peasant families reveal the fluidity of the idea of 'ancestral lands'. Paradoxically, their conceptualisation of 'ancestral' land is where the family had been in recent generations, while land in white commercial farms is not usually viewed as theirs (in contrast with the narrative of the Independence movement).

Isu takati hatina kwatinoenda tichisiya makuva emadzitateguru edu. Tiningoitawo zvamasunda chando gore rakunenge kusina kunyatsonaya. Hongu, ivhu redu rinoratidzawo kuti raneta asi mazuvano zvoda kuruka mazano emari kuti urarame. Ukagara wakatarisa denga kuti kuchanaya unofa nezvara. Tinoitawo mimwe mibato yamaoko kuti tirarame. (We decided against leaving our ancestral tombs. We just try to make ends meet in case of a drought. These days you cannot rely on the climate. It is no longer reliable. We do other money generating projects to survive (Interview with Mr XX of Mudzami village, Bikita, 15 June 2013).

Sense of belonging to a particular piece of land seems to be shaped by recent memory rather than a remembrance of how the land was originally taken. As such, the following statement is representative of this situation:

Ndimu matakazvarirwa, ndimu matakakurira. Tajaira nzvimbo yedu. Anochengeta munhu ndiMwari” We were born and we grew up in this area. We are used to this place. We will survive by God’s grace (Interview with Mr TK of Mapurisa village, Bikita).

The ‘ancestral’ motif also features in ancient Rome. For example, in the idea of soldiers abroad fighting for Italy with the home front defined as ancestral tombs (subverted by the Gracchi into class interpretation of ancestral tombs not defining the collective view of ‘home’ but exclusively the family histories of the aristocracy and the better off). The following quotation demonstrates this point:

The wild beasts that roam over Italy have every one of them a cave or a lair to lurk in; but the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wonder about with their wives and children. And it is with lying lips that their imperators exhort the soldiers in their battles to defend sepulchres and shrines from the enemy; for not a man of them has an hereditary altar, not one of all these many Romans an ancestral tomb, but they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and though they are styled masters of the world, they have not a single clod of earth that is their own (Plutarch, *Ti Gr* 9.5).

There were also the complaints of the Italians forced off the land by the Gracchan commission.

Others said that the graves of their ancestors were in the ground, which had been allotted to them in the division of their father's estates. Others said that their wives' dowries had been expended on the estates or that the land had been given to their own daughters as dowry (App. BC 1.10).

This motif reveals the ambiguities and the interesting continuity over time with land reform. It can therefore be said that the moral argument of land reform while applicable to some instances, cannot be generalised to have appealed to all peasants. We can give an example of land reforms initiated for infrastructural development (the construction of Kariba dam, for example) and the risk of flooding to those staying too close to Lake Kariba in the Tonga communal areas. The people resisted to be moved from those areas as they argued that they did not want to leave their ancestral tombs. The end result is, although some thought was given to these socio-cultural niceties, the overriding theme of appropriating land in the hands of the white minority for black resettlement led to the ignoring of these issues for the people who would be the titular beneficiaries of land reform.

Methodology

The contemporary Zimbabwean scenario depicts more organised mob protest actions in the city. This performative element, which comes out very clearly in Zimbabwe in the television footages of armed and angry mobs is something which viewers from outside Zimbabwe recoil from, but which speaks differently to those participating (Mlambo 2015). The problem with the urban crisis, capitalised upon by ZANU (PF), was that rural to urban migration created an urban population that had abandoned rural life to seek employment in the cities, thereby creating an urban crisis, and was less concerned with land. Thus, looking at contemporary Zimbabwe, it is difficult to ascertain the motives of a million people who marched in the city of Harare in support of both President Mugabe's candidature and for his calls for land redistribution in the run up to the 2002 presidential elections. Veterans, peasants, the unemployed youths, the urban mob and hooligans, all marched in Harare, but it is difficult to say that they all marched because they all were in support of the land reform programme. Some youths were lured by the promised free alcohol to join the march. One Miss B, claimed to have joined the march because "*Vakauya kuzotikokorodza kuDZ nemota tikatanga tadhakiswa. Kuregerei kunwa hwahwa hwemahara.*" ("They mobilised us from DZ (Dzivaresekwa residential suburb) and drove us to town. They gave us free beer. Tell me, who would not drink free beer"?) (Interview with Miss B at Da Eros restaurant in Harare, 8th April 2013)

The *Populares* in Roman politics prevailed through the use of violence and money. The lynch mobs, for example, were mobilized using money to perform acts of violence for the furtherance of Marius' political struggles (Gabba 1976:46). The issue of immediate rewards such as beer and money motivated most youths, and perhaps not that they were consciously rallying behind President Mugabe's land reform programme. However, in marching they were following the script of the programme of land redistribution thereby giving political *gravitas* to President Mugabe, as the voice and hand of the disenfranchised, while most people who marched were actually not peasants.

There is also the question of lawlessness as war veterans took the law into their own hands. The Zimbabwe War Veterans Liberation Association was the institution ostensibly at the head of the 'land' army but it must be noted that some of its leaders have dubious war histories and, therefore, not in line with the image of peasant revolutionaries. The rise of Joseph Chinotimba and Jabulani Sibanda is a good example. This casts doubt to the sincerity of the moral argument of land redistribution as beneficiaries turned out to be imposters of the narrative they supported thereby rendering what looked like genuine moral protestation against inequalities in land ownership into something morally more ambiguous.

War veterans were certainly marching (during the 1 million man march) in order not only to campaign but also to intimidate the electorate. Addressing supporters at the Forty-Fifth Ordinary Session of ZANU-PF Central Committee on the 13th of December 2001, President Mugabe acknowledged the role played by veterans in campaigning for the party (Mlambo 2015: 179):

I want to thank all those of you who were involved in campaign work in the last by-elections, and specifically the war veterans who have now come back into the Party structures in such a massive, resounding and re-invigorating way. We need to harness the same energy to win the forthcoming local government and mayoral elections...Looking ahead, we should remain principally focused on the forthcoming Presidential elections scheduled for sometime in 2002... Our wish is that land resettlement should have been completed by the end of the year so that in 2002, we would only have the worry to make the newly resettled farmers more productive (Mugabe 2001:128).

This presence of the war veterans within the ruling party echelons was a reactive measure as they were criticized when the farm invasions began in 2000, before their usefulness as cadres in the election strategy was utilized, in a manner reminiscent of the veterans of the late republic. In the process of taking over the white-owned land, war veterans ended up committing atrocities in the countryside and on farms. To some extent, actions exhibited by the angry mobs of veterans did not follow the script of the reformer's proclaimed altruistic agenda.

Equally so, the Gracchi attempts mirror the human capacity for action and the broader social and political consequences which such actions have on the political landscapes marred by challenges of land redistribution. Hannah Arendt's theory of beginnings states that one side of the unpredictability of action is lack of control over its effects (see Arendt 1998). Arendt aptly argues thus:

Action sets things in motion, and one cannot foresee even the effects of one's own initiatives, let alone control what happens when they are entangled with other people's initiatives in the public arena. Action is therefore deeply frustrating, for its results can turn out to be quite different from what the actor intended (Canovan 1998, XVIII).

It is therefore necessary to note that a politician's claims of an altruistic moral good can never be reconciled with the social and political actions they undertook. Livy articulated the threat posed by the Gracchi's agrarian law and the mob that participated in the political process. Cicero's views on Tiberius' motives also represent the voice of a lawyer and custodian of principles of the rule of law hence, politicians and their supporters who called for land redistribution are vilified and depicted as enemies of the state, peace and order.

There is a degree to which the actions of the Gracchi when compared with the actions of President Mugabe, slowly and eventually caused a culture of political violence. Such actions when critically examined can reveal some concealed political motives. This observation provokes the following fundamental question: In what ways was land functional as the categorical focal point for political control, mobilisation and resistance? In this case 'resistance' refers to the political actions of protest staged in Rome by the plebeians (both rural and urban) under the leadership of the Gracchi. This did not only mark the beginning of a radical revolutionary challenge to systems of inequality and domination in the social and political landscape of Rome but it also opened the big question of the plight and reward of the soldiery in Roman politics and the political *gravitas* which could benefit politicians who attracted their support by promising a distribution of land. The origins of the veteran phenomenon (which became a *leitmotif* throughout the first century BC) can be related to politics with Tiberius Gracchus' *lex agraria* because the soldiery in the pre-Gracchan era had already started to demand some measure of reform (Scullard 1960:63).

One can be sympathetic to the general principle of land reform after reading the speeches of President Mugabe but the rhetoric of a moral good might conceal darker motives. One cannot help to think that President Mugabe was surely thinking about his political career. The same can be said about Tiberius Gracchus. The problem of the Gracchi in Rome had more to do with the political culture than it had to do with the economic crisis. In contemporary Zimbabwe, land was clearly turned to by politicians as a political market to win the support of the peasantry during elections, having been largely ignored until the vibrancy of the invading citizens presented itself as a clear force that could be harnessed to overwhelm opposition politicians. It was during the run up to the 2002 Presidential elections when President Mugabe addressed his party supporters thus:

The thrust of our programme emphasizes the small-holder peasant farmer first, because it is he or she who badly needs land for a living (Mugabe 2001:131).

Clearly Mugabe's stance was a major deviation from his party's land policy since the 1980s. The government's initial commitment to the willing buyer willing seller principle was occasionally tested by hordes of land hungry black Africans. For instance, in 1980, some former ZANLA war veterans in Masvingo who felt that nationalist leaders had betrayed the armed struggle by not taking land from the white elite settlers attacked white commercial farmers (Sadomba 2011:78). They were arrested and handed long prison sentences, averaging 15 years by the state (ibid). Furthermore, it was reported in 1984 that 'squatters' were posing severe encroachment problems in Karoi, Tengwe and Chinyoyi areas to which the politicians responded by siding with the large scale commercial farmers. Speaking at a Commercial Farmers Union Conference, the then Minister of Agriculture Mahachi declared

'Let me assure you, the elections are over . . . the honeymoon is over, we don't want anyone twisting the arm of government and we will be acting vigorously against squatting.' (Financial Gazette, 19 July 1985, 17).

Clearly, at the time the land hungry did not have state support hence culprits were brought to book. Sometimes, politicians exposed the lack of a clear ideology regarding land redistribution. For instance, Prime Minister Mugabe, speaking at a meeting of the Commercial Farmers Union in 1985, urged farmers to feel 'rooted' as they had an important role to play within the agricultural sector.

'We are unable to say when we will be able to say that socialism has been implemented in full. It will take a long time to do so. In the meantime, there are non-socialist modalities that must be promoted' (Mugabe quoted in Weiner 1989:408-9)

But after telling farmers to 'stay where you are', he warned that 'if you have land to spare, we will want that land for resettlement' (ibid). During the 1990s the key trend appeared to be a gradual revision of the strategy of compulsorily acquiring underused land with partial compensation for land improvements, towards a policy of using donor funds to buy willingly offered land. Notable in the government's revised policy proposals of 1996 was the continuation of a bifurcated approach of transferring land to 'better off' black farmers, including medium-scale producers, and to the landless or 'poor but capable' farmers in overcrowded communal areas (Moyo 2000:12). By the late 1990s, ZANU PF had managed to make land a key political issue. In fact, Zanu PF rewrote the liberation war narrative to pin it on the land question as it averred that that black ownership of land was consistent with the divine order of things as reflected in the Christian declaration 'As it was in the beginning, so shall it always be.' (Chitando 2005:224).

The initial promise of altruistic reform, for both the Gracchi and President Mugabe leads to more complex micro-narratives which offer a very different perspective from the macro-view of the rich versus the poor, the enfranchised versus the disenfranchised. Looking to modern thought on situations of crisis of land redistribution, Marx observed that in the social production of their life; men are bound to enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces (Konstan 1990:83-94). This observation helps us to grasp the mechanics of mass mobilization and how the masses fell prey to some political machinations of reformers who used land redistribution as bait to acquire power (in the case of the Gracchi), and to maintain it (in the case of Zimbabwe). At this stage in Roman politics, the only thing in the absence of land to farm on or jobs to feed their families is that the poor became an alternative source of power whose *gravitas* was easily appropriated by populist politicians to gain or retain power as the landless poor were more than ready to rally behind such individuals.

Plutarch, who saw Tiberius Gracchus as a populist, shows how the question of land ownership started violence in Roman politics (Plut. *Ti Gr* 14.1-2). The Gracchan reform movement demonstrates how the Gracchi manufactured discord by their methods which exposed the ruling class to the masses and portrayed the government as an encumbrance to social equality. Speaking for the landless poor and the ex-soldiers, Tiberius addressing the people crowding the rostra remarked:

And it is with lying lips that their imperators exhort the soldiers in their battles to defend sepulchers and shrines from the enemy; for not a man of them has an hereditary altar, not one of all these many Romans an ancestral tomb, but they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and though they are styled masters of the world, they have not a single clod of earth that is their own (Plut. *Ti Gr* 9.1-5).

Octavius' opposition to Tiberius' laws also illustrates this point. No crime known to the law had been charged against Octavius but Tiberius pitted the masses against his fellow tribune. Octavius exercised his sacred duty as a tribune of the people but he was presented by Tiberius as having offended the will of the majority (Greenidge 1970:21). Members of the tumultuous popular assembly that deposed Octavius to a certain degree were incited by Tiberius Gracchus. This resulted in the production of negative energy which threatened the Roman body politic and the *status quo* (See Plut. *Ti Gr* 8.3). Resultantly, the 'Law was overwhelmed by force and greater respect was accorded to greater power, and civil strife which in the past had been resolved by agreement was settled by the sword.' (Vell. *Pat.* 3.3, see also Vell. *Pat.* 2.2-3)

Conclusion

In conclusion, we quote Marx's time tested observations about peasants as a social class. This will help to put into perspective contemporary Zimbabwean politicians and the Gracchi's use and manipulation of the peasantry for ascending to greater political heights. He argues thus:

... [Peasants] do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name ... they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself...(As quoted in Moore 2001:257)

The rhetoric of the Gracchan 'revolution' was about "land to the tillers" and it was, like in contemporary Zimbabwe, structured by violence. Such structural and processual imperatives gave birth to a situation whereby the politicians ended up subordinating society to their will. Thus, the Gracchi was seeking an unlimited *regnum* which thrived on blaming the Senate for the non-implementation of land reform and that they should give up the excess *ager publicus* (public land) they confiscated for redistribution to the landless poor, in much the same way President Mugabe was blaming the white commercial farmers for owning more than what was necessary at the expense of the poor peasants. During the Gracchi era, Rome was at the most critical point of its history, struggling to chart a peaceful path beyond its devastating political and economic conditions. Such a scenario is mirrored in the political landscape of Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2008. This calls for serious questions to be asked about contemporary Zimbabwe in order to chart a meaningful road for the future of the country.

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