

Bernstein's Puzzle: Peasants, Accumulation and Class Alliances in Africa

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To establish the significance of Henry Bernstein's theoretical work on the dynamics of agrarian class struggles in Africa, this paper discusses two important political debates in which he has been both observer and participant, and that have oriented much of the subsequent Marxist work done in Africa on agrarian change. The first was the heated discussion begun over 40 years ago around Nyerere's 'African socialism' and the failures of the ujamaa policy of villagization. The second is the still unsettled debate around programmes of redistributive land reform in South Africa. Bernstein's distinction between the peasantry and petty commodity production allowed him to apply Lenin's theory of peasant differentiation to new contexts, and to locate African class struggles within the contradictions between capital and labour. He thus disposed of two competing visions: the harmonic peasant community and the maximizing entrepreneurial peasant hindered by the absence of markets. Yet, this paper argues, his focus on class formation within the peasantry can also limit our understanding of class alliances in the politics of anti-capitalist struggles in Africa.

Keywords: Agrarian class struggle, African peasantries, class politics, Tanzania, South Africa, Marxism

INTRODUCTION: ACCUMULATION, CLASS AND THE AGRARIAN QUESTION IN AFRICA

Henry Bernstein once referred to a theoretical puzzle with which he had been obsessed for many years: 'how to understand the conditions of existence of those people termed "peasants" or collectively "the peasantry", within the world of mature capitalism' (Bernstein 2003a, 1). He located this concern within the framework of the agrarian question. Following Byres, Bernstein (2003b, 203) distinguished three aspects of the classic agrarian question: politics, production and accumulation.¹ He has eventually come, however, to reject the historical appropriateness of 'the peasantry' and the classic agrarian question for analysis of the current conjuncture, including in Africa, not so much because of shifting patterns of agrarian change but, rather, because of changes in the global capitalist system. Bernstein has concluded that the classic agrarian question that framed his work for so many years was really the agrarian question of capital. In this era of global mobility of capital and jobless growth, the agrarian question is no longer an issue for capital but for the fragmented classes of labour (Bernstein 1996a, 2004a, 2004b, 2006).

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¹ *Aide-mémoire*: AQ1 concerns the role of agrarian classes (different peasant classes, agricultural workers) in struggles for democracy and socialism. AQ2 concerns the transformation of the social relations of production and development of the productive forces in agriculture in transitions to capitalism. AQ3 addresses how such transformations contribute, or otherwise, to the accumulation necessary for industrialization.

The political meaning of this proposition is, of course, puzzling in any context, but it poses particular issues for those concerned with agrarian change in Africa. The distinctiveness of agrarian class structure under capitalism has been a long-term concern of political economists (captured in different versions of 'The Agrarian Question'), in part because of the non-fungibility of landed property. But in Africa, outside northern Africa and the Ethiopian highlands, the relevance of the Marxist 'classic' agrarian question has long been debated for two reasons: in the precolonial period, land was not treated as property even when small producers were engaged in commodity production; and direct penetration of capital in the organization of production took place only with formal colonial occupation, mainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when industrial capitalism was well established in a capitalist world system (cf. Bernstein 2014, S102). Obviously then, any agrarian question in Africa will have specific forms. The question is not whether the 'classic' agrarian question fits contemporary Africa but whether the Marxist analytical framework underlying Bernstein's work on the agrarian question still provides us with conceptual handles with which to understand the class dynamics of agrarian change in Africa today. I think it does, but it must be taken as an open, evolving and debatable framework that retains Marx's focus on the politics of changing the world not through moral appeals to justice but by collectively confronting the historically grounded class contradictions of capitalism.

In search of a response to Bernstein's puzzle, I begin with Bernstein's own theoretical work, which in both its creativity and its rigour has been central in clarifying debates around the agrarian question in Africa. In so doing, he has helped to maintain Marxist class analysis as a working theoretical tradition and socialism as a continuing referent in emancipatory struggles in Africa. If we are today capable of recognizing the recurrence of populist positions and their limitations in discussions of agrarian processes in Africa, then this is in large measure due to Henry Bernstein. This paper looks in particular at his contributions to the debates around 'African socialism' in Tanzania in the 1970s, and to the contemporary debate around the meaning of land reform in South Africa.

In tracing Bernstein's contributions to these debates, I find three unsettled theoretical issues, all of which reflect the uncertainties of the Marxist Left in critically assessing our approaches to the politics of agrarian change in Africa. The first is how to locate agrarian processes within capitalism as a whole. We have had a tendency to lapse into analytical dualism, focusing narrowly on the agrarian and rural. We have had, for example, an exaggerated preoccupation with class differentiation between peasants (or petty commodity agricultural producers) even though we know that such processes are often shaped by the dynamics of off-farm employment or the functioning of commercial and financial capital across rural and urban areas.

Second is how we connect analytically the three facets of the Byres/Bernstein agrarian question – politics, production and accumulation – to each other. Historicizing the agrarian question is appropriate; in different periods and contexts, both theorists and political movements have emphasized one or another face of the agrarian question and defined them in different ways.² But in reality these three faces reflect different ways of looking at the same processes. Attempts to treat the transfer of surplus from agriculture to industry, of which there have been many in African economic history, for example, have repeatedly confronted the shifting politics of class and gender contradictions that vary contextually with the ways in which production and distribution are organized.

² Preobrazhensky, for example, reduced the accumulation aspect question to the investment of agricultural surpluses in industry. In their recent review of the agrarian question, Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010a, 2010b) counted seven different versions. This introduction includes mine.

Third, we have found it difficult to reconcile our concern with collective class processes with individual experiences of everyday life without falling back into the analytical opposition between structure and agency. We occasionally drift towards an almost neoclassical vision of agrarian classes as collections of subjects with certain measurable assets and desires. This can reduce the analytical meaning of resistance and agency to individual action while construing capital as a hegemonic collective force. Marx’s message is perhaps a painful one – that people make history, though generally not as they choose – but that does not make it false. His proposition applies, by the way, to capitalists as well as labouring classes. A rich peasant may be accumulating land so that each of his children will have something to farm when he dies, but that does not mean that his action does not fuel the development of land markets that make it impossible for someone’s children not to farm at all. Without understanding of the dynamics of the whole, it is only by chance that collective action results even roughly in what individuals wish the outcomes to be.

These three problems come together particularly sharply in a certain ambiguity around the meaning of accumulation in Marxist agrarian studies in Africa, including in Bernstein’s work. In neoclassical economic theory, accumulation of capital is simply the summation of individual accumulating, but in Marxist political economy the relation of the first to the second is contingent. Marx shared with Smith an emphasis on the storing up or hoarding of capital in money form as one of the conditions of *primitive accumulation* in the origins of capitalism (Christian 1990). He added another essential condition, however, the separation of workers from their means of production such that they are obliged to sell their labour power and to purchase commodities to secure their subsistence. Once capitalism is established as a mode of production, accumulation of capital does not depend on either thrift or theft but, to the contrary, on continually putting capital back into processes of exploitation of labour to produce new value. Thus the existence of rich peasants who have accumulated wealth does not necessarily signal that, collectively speaking, there is a process of accumulation of agrarian capital taking place. Nor is established capital obliged to abstain from using non-free labour. It has defied liberal norms with impunity, wielding political power to drive down wages in functioning labour markets through diverse non-market mechanisms, including slavery, forced labour and debt bondage.

Accumulation of capital is not necessarily an orderly inevitable process; it is ridden by contradiction and crisis. The struggles of workers for better wages and working conditions and of market competition between capitals may undercut the production and realization of surplus value. Nor does accumulation of capital necessarily reproduce its own conditions of production, either in terms of the subsistence of workers and their families or in terms of the natural resources it consumes. Political challenges to the appropriation of non-marketed labour or pollution of water, soil and air can threaten profitability and shift patterns of accumulation of capital.

Thus conflict and crisis are necessary parts of capitalism. Moments of crisis lead to the concentration of capital, but they may also lead to the resurgence of petty commodity production, the emergence of entrepreneurial capital in new spheres of accumulation and even the recommodification of things that have been de commodified. Capitalism thus does not simply self-destruct; it reconstructs itself in recurring moments of crisis.

Yet I am not as convinced as Bernstein is that neoliberal globalization and jobless growth are irreversible trends in global capitalism. Competition between capitals can be anarchic as well as orderly. Class struggle can be purposive as well as anarchic. What is certain, however, is that socialism can only be the outcome of sustained organized processes of class struggle, many of which will have to be won on the basis of class alliances, on the construction of fronts around specific and often transient issues. When these concern agrarian or rural processes, then, asking historically appropriate agrarian questions about the relation between labour and capital is politically necessary.

SOCIALISM IN AFRICA? THE GROUNDS FOR CLASS ALLIANCE

Bernstein – as participant, teacher and commentator – has addressed two influential but widely separated agrarian debates in Africa, both of which hinge on the grounds for class alliance between small commodity producers and the working class. The first was the heated discussion that began over 40 years ago around the class dynamics of Nyerere's 'African socialism' and the failures of the *ujamaa* policy of villagization. The second is the still unsettled debate around redistributive land reform in South Africa, taking place in a country governed since 1994 by an alliance of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and COSATU, the most important confederation of South African trade unions. The Soviet Union has long ceased to exist, its resolution of the agrarian question widely seen as both politically brutal and economically unsuccessful, and its version of socialism denounced as totalitarian. African governments as well as the former social democratic states of Europe now embrace neoliberalism as a common-sense political ideology. Eyes roll today if one ventures even to suggest that Lenin was an astute Marxist analyst of his own historical reality. Yet Lenin figured strongly in Bernstein's work on *ujamaa* and does so in South Africa today.

It can be tempting to reduce the history of socialism and the appeal of Marxist theory in Africa to clientage, an opportunistic façade constructed to respond to Soviet and Chinese willingness to provide selective support to national liberation movements during the Cold War (Copans 1985; Cahen 1993). Certainly books such as Kwame Nkrumah's (1965) *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, or the South African Communist Party's formulation of 'internal colonialism', illustrated the intrusion of Soviet dogma and perhaps even clientage in African political debates. Nonetheless, the search for Marxist theoretical formulations that would provide guidance for ongoing political struggles in Africa was very real in the 1960s and 1970s, and not confined to Western academia or to established communist parties – the SACP being the most important one at the time.

Political intellectuals such as Amílcar Cabral, Eduardo Mondlane, Patrice Lumumba, Frantz Fanon, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Mario d'Andrade and, yes, Leopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, Robert Mugabe and Julius Nyerere debated Marxist theory. Questions of class figure in the early films of Ousmane Sembene and permeate the writing of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nuruddin Farah. African political intellectuals have been cosmopolitan if not always internationalist or communist. They saw the most powerful capitalist country in the world of that time supporting oppressive, racist and colonial regimes, sometimes with direct military support. They were concerned with pan-Africanism and internationalism as responses to colonialism, but also to imperialism as an inequitable economic system. They witnessed socialist revolution in China, Vietnam and Cuba – not advanced industrial countries.

The appeal of Marxism was not so much in the alternatives it provided but in the questions it asked. It directly addressed the problem of the relation between race, class and global inequality. It provided a language and an historical perspective with which to describe the economic exploitation observed in everyday life as well as the indignities of colonial oppressions. Marxist theories of imperialism also described the inequality of patterns of economic development in ways that did not reduce causes and hence alternatives to the backwardness of African mentalities – either as individual or collective bearer of 'traditional' culture. It suggested (as did dependency theory) that economic inequality was a historical outcome of the global functioning of capitalism.

To understand the appeal and distinctiveness of the questions that Marxism asked, one must return to the lacunae of conventional scholarship on Africa in the post-Second World War period. There is now a nuanced historical literature on this period that rightfully calls attention to the ambiguities of the colonial encounter (Cooper 2008). Yet collections such as that of Talal Asad (1973) remain classics because they documented how difficult it was to capture the realities of class, race and colonial rule within the dominant paradigms of the time.

Take, for instance, the Ethnographic Survey of Africa, a massive venture of the International Africa Institute, funded in 1945 under the Colonial Welfare and Development Act. It mapped Africa as a space occupied by different cultural groups or tribes, from which Europeans were excluded. The difficulties here were circumspectly flagged by Lucy Mair (1954), a scholar from the Caribbean, in her comments on John Middleton's section on the Kikuyu. She asked what it could contribute to understanding the then ongoing rebellion in Kenya. Her answer:

The presence of Europeans as a permanent element in the population of Kenya, whether one accepts their own evaluation of the consequences or that of the Kikuyu, is the result of action by the European government and is therefore a factor extraneous to the social structure of the people, the subject of the book. What can we [sic] learn from it is something about the type of society that characterises the Kikuyu people. (Mair 1954, 74)

There was no theoretical imperative to explore the consequences of the appropriation of Kikuyu land for settler estates, the conditions of employment and housing on the estates, the forced resettlements during the rebellion and the conditions of detention that are now a subject of legal review.

The Rhodes–Livingston Institute, particularly under Max Gluckman's directorship, did important research on the impact of colonial policies in rural areas, but critique had to be very cautiously advanced and was couched in functionalist terms. Audrey Richards (2004 [1932]) wrote a careful and revealing study of the relation between changing Bemba livelihoods and labour migration to the Zambian mines, but its title became *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A Functional Study of Nutrition among the Southern Bantu*.

Exceptionalism was rampant in scholarship on rural Africa, exemplified by Fallers' (1961) famous question 'Are African cultivators to be called "peasants"?' Fallers concluded that African cultivators were economically peasants because they produced commodities for the market and were politically peasants because their communities were subordinated to chiefs or appointed officials, but culturally they were not peasants because there was not a sharp difference between folk and high culture based on literary and religious traditions. This conclusion was rather ironic, given the cultural as well as legal dualism of colonial systems of governance and the colonial introduction of class-based land tenure and labour recruitment in places such as Buganda. He thought it was perhaps best to see 'him' as a proto-peasant or incipient peasant, located somewhere on the path to modernization (Fallers 1961, 110). Similarly, the dualism critiqued by Mayer (1962) in his rejection of the question asked about migrant workers in South Africa – are they townsmen or tribesmen? – reflected the linear expectations of modernization theory.

Though Marxist analysis of imperialism placed Africa inside contemporary world history, the texts distributed by Progress Publishers across the developing world embraced an evolutionary view based on nineteenth-century theories of universal stages not so different to that of Rostow (1990): societies passed on their way from primitive communism through feudalism, capitalism and socialism, with Africa caught somewhere between stage one and stage two. There was, however, within the Marxism of the late 1960s, a widespread discontent with such theories of unilinear progressive stages of change. These seemed to have been discredited by the course of history itself. On the one hand, the long-standing Trotskyist critique of Stalinism was reinforced by both historical studies of the Soviet revolution and journalistic and literary accounts of everyday life in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, more relevant for African nationalist movements, was that the Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions seemed not to correspond to the normative view that revolution was made only by the proletariat or that the peasantry were inherently conservative bags of potatoes.

One alternative was based in Althusser's structuralist conceptualization of modes of production. It looked at capitalism as a dynamic system that displaced and destroyed, but also integrated and conserved, diverse modes of pre-capitalist production. It attracted anthropologists and had greater exposure among French academics. Its most detailed elaboration was in the work of Meillassoux (1973), Terray (1972) and Dupré and Rey (1973), and focused principally on West and Central Africa, but it also influenced the work of Legassick (1974), Wolpe (1972) and Bundy (1972) on South Africa. It captured well the moments of violence that marked the colonial encounter, but easily fell into the dualism of older modernization approaches when dealing with the longer-term dynamics of change. It is quite difficult to distinguish analytically, for example, between the analysis of migration within an articulation framework and Lewis' (1954) dual-sector model of the shifting relations between traditional and modern.

The second approach, exemplified by the Cambridge Marxists (e.g. Rowthorn and Harris 1985) and the Capital-Logic Group (Holloway and Picciotto 1979), conceptualized capitalism as a mode of production that, despite its tendencies towards concentration and centralization, constantly gave rise to new circuits of petty commodity production and integrated non-capitalist forms of production within the circuit of value. This approach had the advantage of elegance but could fall into functionalism and reductionism, making accumulation of capital appear inevitable. It sometimes abstracted so much from the diversity of different historical experiences that in explaining everything it explained nothing and could thus be politically disabling. Every apparent crisis gave way to restructuring and renewal of capital accumulation, with capital calling into existence the kind of state it needed.³

TANZANIAN DEBATES

Perhaps nowhere in Africa was the debate around Marxist theories on the class structure of capitalism in Africa of greater energy and quality than it was in Tanzania in the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly on the campus of the University of Dar es Salaam, where Henry Bernstein taught in the Department of Sociology from 1974 to 1978.⁴ Under the British colonial scheme for the division of labour in East Africa in the post-Second World War era, Kenya would become a centre of import-substituting industrialization, while the associated areas of Uganda and Tanzania would specialize in agricultural commodity production both for export and domestic consumption. Efforts to attract investment of private capital for Tanzanian industry faltered and international commodity prices for Tanzanian exports were falling. In 1967, the Tanzania African National Union (TANU) party under Julius Nyerere took a turn to the Left.

In the Arusha Declaration, TANU set forth a radically different economic policy based in socialism and self-reliance. The new policy was said to be based on an alliance between the state, urban workers and the peasantry. It included a rapid expansion of parastatals, state intervention in markets and the resettlement of rural people in nucleated communities that could move rapidly towards collective forms of production that would allow for economies of scale and specialized production. Tanzania provided support to national liberation movements. FRELIMO had its headquarters in Dar es Salaam and schools and training camps in southern Tanzania. Dar was a reception and transit point for the ANC as well.

³ Perry Anderson's (1976) critique of Western Marxism for its modernist idealism, rooted in earlier European philosophical traditions and concepts, prefigured subsequent postmodernist critiques.

⁴ There has been a recent round of more critical discussion of the politics of scholarship on the Tanzanian debates of the Nyerere period. See, *inter alia*, Chachage and Cassam (2010), Saul (2012), Schneider (2004) and Bernstein himself (2015).

The new strategy included investment in a rapid expansion of university education. Young progressive lecturers from many disciplines flocked into the University of Dar es Salaam, attracted not just by jobs but also by the chance to work in a country where the structures of the past were being directly challenged. Work on gender and class was being discussed in Dar at a time when it was being taught in few universities anywhere. If there were space to cite all the now-familiar names, it would seem impossible that so many committed academics should have clustered together in a single university during those years. But, of course, it was in great part their experience working together in Dar that made them so special. The students were bright, hard-working and ready to discuss and challenge. Lecturers and students did detailed field research relating history, anthropology and economics that reworked the way in which Tanzania was understood.⁵ Large audiences of students and lecturers sharply challenged presentations on both theory and research in the Sunday morning political economy seminar at the university. Young Tanzanian lecturers such as Issa Shivji (*Class Struggles in Tanzania*, 1976) and Justinian Rweyemamu (*Underdevelopment and Industrialization in Tanzania*, 1973) were writing important books that addressed issues resonating throughout Africa. Shivji and Henry Mapolu set up an independent radical weekly, *Maji-Maji*, publishing on labour unrest, government abuses and socialist revolution (cf. Saul 1974).

No topics were more hotly debated in Dar than the class basis of the Tanzanian state and particularly the correct class analysis of the Tanzanian peasantry. This was in contrast to the parallel 'Kenya debate', in which the class analysis of the peasantry was embedded in a more general discussion of the character of the Kenyan national bourgeoisie (Swainson 1977; Leys 1978; Kitching 1980).⁶ This divergent focus in class analysis reflected the distinct but interdependent positions of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda within processes of accumulation in colonial East Africa.

Nyerere's (1975 [1967]) version of African socialism was a normative populist political programme.⁷ It stressed that socialism did not require a major rupture with the harmonious ways of living of rural people in Africa. Nyerere was himself aware of and concerned with rural differentiation, particularly in relation to control over land (Nyerere 1975, 7), but argued that it was limited by the fact that most still had access to some kind of land and that their rights were a form of African socialism implicit in largely still functioning precolonial modes of production. Communal tenure meant that land was freely available to those who worked it while work and consumption were collectively organized within large households and communities. Nyerere thought it would be relatively easy to bring people together in larger-scale forms of residence and collective production. Rural research brought back information on widespread opposition to *ujamaa* and criticism of state policies in the countryside, but the reasons for this and their implications were disputed.

The classic 1975 collection on rural cooperation in Tanzania (Cliffe et al. 1975) included new material on the agrarian political economy of Tanzania, the history of the marketing cooperatives and the conflicts of *ujamaa* policy. It also exposed different Marxist understandings about the meaning of class relations in the Tanzanian context, particularly around the question of whether the peasantry was a class or a fluid social group differentiated by class. New research, framed in terms of political economy, was done by university lecturers and students and actively debated in classes and seminars. It creatively reoriented and expanded knowledge of rural life in Tanzania.

There were three different conceptions of the peasantry in the Dar debates. Each hinged on a different conceptualization of the place of commodification in the organization of peasant production, had correspondingly different understandings of the agrarian question and drew different

⁵ See, for example, the collection of research edited by Cliffe et al. (1975) on agrarian production.

⁶ For a non-Marxist review of the Marxist debate on the nature of capitalism in Kenya and its relation to the powerful corpus of historical work produced on Kenyan political economy at that time, see Hetherington (1993).

⁷ Nyerere was a master of populist symbology: he wore austere Chinese clothes and drove a Volkswagen Beetle through the streets of Dar-es-Salaam.

conclusions on the class character of the state. These already bore a close resemblance to the three different versions of Africa's agrarian question that Bernstein (2004b) discussed three decades later: blocked commodification, commodification without class and petty commodity production functioning within generalized commodity production (world capitalism).

The first position was Göran Hydén's (1980) vision of an African 'uncaptured peasantry', rooted in a distinct mode of production based on a logic of subsistence and patronage rather than market rationality, which began with his work in Tanzania. Hydén saw both the academic Left and the government vainly trying to impose their notions of modern capitalism and modern socialism as 'social-science fiction' on the Tanzanian peasantry (Hydén 1980, 5). Hydén is a populist, but not necessarily a romantic one. He saw the main structural constraints to development not in Tanzania's position within the world division of labour, but in the subsistence orientation of the peasant economy (Hydén 1980, 6). Conflict between the peasantry and a developmental state was thus inevitable.

The second position rejected the idea that the peasantry was functioning outside the market. The peasantry was, rather, a relatively homogeneous group of small farmers and pastoralists producing both for their own consumption and for the market on the basis of family labour. It was a class distinct from urban wage-workers, but there were no significant class divisions within it. This position was shared by people of quite different theoretical orientations. Nelson Kasfir (1986), one of Hydén's most scathing critics, saw African peasants from a neoclassical point of view as micro-entrepreneurs, held back by inappropriate state policies. He thus shared the urban-bias perspective more famously developed by Lipton and Bates. Others had a Chayanovian version of Nyerere's harmonic vision of rural social society. Given that land was still freely available under regimes of communal tenure, differentiation between households was transient, mainly reflecting differences in availability of family labour across the life cycle.

A third position, Marxist in orientation, saw the Tanzanian peasantry as embedded in the class relations of capitalism but included varied analyses of what exactly those relations were. Some saw the divisive impact of commodification on the peasantry as being held back by the availability of land, but thought that their relation to international capital was inherently conflictual. In class terms, workers and peasants were thus allies; their main class enemy was the bureaucratic state, which provided space for the development of a comprador capitalist class that consolidated its position with nationalization of key sectors of the economy and linked its fortunes to the neocolonial institutions of international capital. Another group drew attention to what many had noticed in their rural fieldwork: the divergence of wealth and interest among different strata of landholding peasants. They observed, for example, that there was class-based resistance to *ujamaa* and cooperativization within the peasantry, particularly by a small but influential layer of rich small farmers (Awiti 1975 [1972]). There were also those who thought that there was differentiation within the Tanzanian peasantry, but noted that wealth was often based in connection with off-farm income and doubted that the opposition of such a small group was an adequate explanation of the failures of Tanzania's socialist experiment.

In 1974, John Saul published his classic doubting but still hopeful paper on African peasants and revolution. He thought that peasant discontent needed to be mobilized by an external spark to become revolutionary. Political leadership and organization had not been sufficient to do so in Tanzania, but he thought the experience of organizing a people's war in Mozambique provided a stronger base. By the late 1970s, the Sunday morning debates within the university on agrarian questions, dominated by issues of theory, were turning increasingly acrimonious, occasionally becoming exercises in dogmatic exegesis of what Marx really meant or said. Reflecting on the theoretical questions raised by the flood of new rural research in Tanzania and the university debates, Bernstein published several papers in Tanzania on capitalism, the peasantry and the state that drew on the Tanzanian rural research and his own voluminous reading on peasantries in other historical

periods and places (cf. Bernstein 1977, 1978). He subsequently published two synthetic papers, one setting out a theoretical framework for analysis of African peasantries and the other an analysis of the relation between state and peasantry in Tanzania (Bernstein 1979, 1981). These greatly influenced the scholarly literature on the politics of agrarian change in Africa in the 1980s.

First, Bernstein dismissed the attempt to provide a general theory of the contradictions of peasant modes of production. Hence Lenin's core political question, 'What is to be done' cannot be answered deductively:

Conceptualising the contradictions of peasant production does not mean that these contradictions apply in any blanket fashion to all peasantries, which have to be investigated concretely in terms of a number of (variously combined) differentiations: the persistence of different pre-capitalist relations and practices; regional and ecological variations in their conditions of existence; the effects of an extremely uneven history of commoditisation; the forms and extent of social differentiation (class formation); the range of variation in the circumstances of individual households within each regional 'type' or stratum of the peasantry. (Bernstein 1981, 50)

This proposition does not imply that pre-capitalist African modes of production have no historical relevance. Bernstein recognized that the colonial and postcolonial states in Africa did not have the characteristics associated with the agrarian question elsewhere: large-scale landed property, the political power of landlords and the formation of an agrarian bourgeoisie (Bernstein 1979, 421). Rather, he undercut what one might expect to gain from the formalization of an 'articulation' approach in sorting out political questions.

Parentetically,⁸ Bernstein argued that the most pervasive and important category of persistent pre-capitalist relations and practices was gender differences, by which he understood sexual divisions in the agricultural and pastoral labour processes, in household reproduction and the distribution of income (both use values and cash) within households. He did not approach one of the irritating puzzles of the time – the question of how class and gender relate to each other, or discuss whether the sexual division of labour within the household is a functional one. More importantly, by classing gender relations as pre-capitalist, he would appear to suggest that the kind of gender-based hierarchies and division of labour that characterized Tanzania would not occur in a fully capitalist society, a proposition challenged by feminists.

Second, Bernstein argued that in a world dominated by generalized commodity production – that is, capitalism – those who must participate in commodity markets to survive are part of the class structures of capitalism; thus he dismissed analytically the autonomy of peasant production, whether based on articulation of pre-capitalist modes of production with capitalism or, alternatively, on any intrinsically egalitarian quality attributed to a 'peasant mode of production' of the Chayanovian or moral economy type. This latter position prefigures Bernstein's subsequent critiques of Michael Lipton and his contemporary scepticism on alliances built around the notion of a class of peasant producers functioning outside the logic of the market, whether a Hydén's uncaptured Tanzanian peasantry or a 'peasant way' (Bernstein 2004b).

Third, Bernstein also dismissed general theories of class dynamics based either on the necessary transition from petty commodity production to capitalist production or on inherent resistance to inequality among the peasantry. Wage-labour and petty commodity production were wage-labour equivalents – what he came later to call 'classes of labour' – but the forms they assumed and their relation to each other were historically and spatially variable.

Finally, Bernstein asserted that the colonial state was an administrative state, neither a functional representative of capital nor the product of transitions in what was essentially a pre-national civil

⁸ And propelled by the work of Marjorie Mbilinyi and her students (cf. Mbilinyi 1972).

society. Accordingly, 'The "governing class" that coalesced through the nationalist movement and the subsequent history of the post-colonial state has no base in civil society in terms of classes whose interests it can articulate or appeal to, and whose support it can mobilise' (Bernstein 1981, 53–4). Though recognizing the importance of Shivji's (1976) work on nationalization of core sectors of the Tanzanian economy, Bernstein does not see the struggles around *ujamaa* as reflecting a contradiction between either a dependent comprador or an aspiring national bourgeoisie located in the state and an exploited peasantry. Bernstein saw the Tanzanian state as both less coherent and less powerful than did Shivji.

Criticism of Bernstein's first synthesis of Marxist approaches to African peasantries came both from outside and within the Marxist paradigm. Possibly the external critic who contributed the most to sharpening Bernstein's thought was Sara Berry. Berry (1984) held Bernstein accountable for a number of the weaknesses she found in Marxist analysis of agrarian change in Africa. Berry's first problem with Marxist work was its historical generality, its inability to describe the complex but constantly shifting realities of agrarian change. Bernstein's (1979) argument that petty commodity producers are wage-labour equivalents avoids the question of what distinguishes the conditions of agricultural production in Tanzania from those of a capitalist economy (Berry 1984, 74–5).

Berry's second problem was that the structuralist abstractions of Marxist theory hamper understanding of how people's struggles affect their conditions of production. She noted that migrant labour was not always so immiserating as the Marxist literature might indicate. In fact, migrants may be investing, not necessarily to acquire fixed property rights in land or to hire cheap labour from the reserve army of the unemployed, but to maintain their flexible negotiating positions by reproducing their patronage relations and group-based modes of access to productive resources. Berry is not a populist; she did not suggest that the outcomes of struggles are necessarily improvements in ways of living. She also saw that such patterns of investment sometimes constrained the growth of productivity, but she did not argue that they led to an egalitarian distribution of income, nor that they provide security in inherently risky forms of commercial production.

An uncompromising challenge to both to Bernstein and to Berry was later provided by Gibbon and Neocosmos' (1985) discussion of Bernstein's concept of peasants as wage-labour equivalents in their critical discussion of 'African socialism'. They argued that apparently pre-capitalist forms so common in poor countries are in reality an integral part of the capitalist mode of production; that is, Tanzania is a capitalist country. Further, they went on to argue that the conditions of capitalist development continually create anew distinctively petty bourgeois (including peasant) forms of enterprise.

In the wake of the discussions about the Gibbon and Neocosmos paper, and continuing (not unwarranted) indictments of the ahistorical character of much Marxist work on agrarian change in Africa by Berry and other more sympathetic critics (cf. Cooper 1981), Bernstein began to rethink his first synthesis of the Tanzanian experience. Friedmann's work with McMichael on the evolution of food regimes and Byres' work on India also gave Bernstein some handles for defining global periodizations. Out of his reflection came a decisive critique of the way in which petty commodity production was discussed in the African literature, including a revision of his own concept of the equivalence of wage-labour and peasant commodity production in Africa (Bernstein 1986, 1988).

What emerged was a more theoretically nuanced understanding of petty commodity production that also gave much more attention to contextual variation. Bernstein (1988, 259 ff.) named and dismissed a series of assumptions prevalent in the Marxist literature on African peasantries. He argued that petty commodity production is not necessarily a transitional phenomenon within capitalism; that it is not necessarily associated with subsistence production and cannot be assimilated into a general category of non-wage labour under capitalism (thus clearing away the proposition that gender relations can be reduced to relations of class); that petty commodity production is not equivalent

to wage-labour (thus shifting his earlier position of the wage-labour equivalent); and that it is not a form of exploitation and does not subsidise cheap labour power, though it can be squeezed and politically oppressed by different kinds of capital.

What is petty commodity production under capitalism then? It is an unstable category based on the fact that producers are at the same time both like capitalists and like workers. Returning to Lenin's analysis of the Russian peasantry after land reform, he laid out the ways in which participation in commodity production implies enduring centripetal tendencies in the course of which the middle divides into a rich peasantry that employs wage-workers and a poor peasantry that must do wage-work. What may appear on the surface of things to be simply a creeping process of commodification actually results from the reorganization of production and reproduction such that the poorest repeatedly confront a 'reproductive squeeze'. Bernstein recognized the distinctiveness of petty commodity production, but observed that those who cannot reproduce themselves through their own farming have a similar position *vis-à-vis* capital as that of wage-workers. Thus he grouped the two together as 'classes of labour' (Bernstein 2009), leaving aside the political question of how they related to each other in struggles against capital.

There are some significant silences in this resolution of the debate on the dynamics of class formation within the peasantry. Though Bernstein's resolution of the puzzle emerged from his reflection on questions raised in a volume edited by Bernstein and Campbell (1985), entitled *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa*, he abstracted from other ongoing Tanzanian debates on the class dynamics of accumulation.⁹ The industrialization debate related import substitution strategies to the commodity terms of trade confronting the peasantry.¹⁰ Workers in parastatals in Dar were striking in 1972 and 1973 (Saul 2012); clearly the Nyerere version of the worker-peasant-state alliance was not working, but what did it mean for rural classes of labour? Pan-territorial pricing (Bryceson 1982) had the unintended effect of fostering accumulation of private capital. The consumption patterns, educational priorities and political power of a rapidly growing and relatively well-paid urban middle class described by Fair (2013) dampened the politics of class alliance in ways not well captured by the teleological description of the modernizing 'nizers' as an incipient bourgeoisie.

BERNSTEIN'S RESPONSE TO THE POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF THE AGRARIAN QUESTION IN AFRICA

One after the other, the socialist inspired regimes of the post-independence years, mired in civil wars, harassed by external sabotage and military assault, or burdened by debt and discontent, made explicit turns away from socialist programmes. The Berg Report (World Bank 1981) signalled the onset of structural adjustment programmes. It emphasized the failures of urban-biased state intervention in agriculture and industrial policies focused on import substitution and development of the home market. As Sender and Smith (1985) noted at the time, not all criticisms in the report were misplaced.¹¹

Yet in the face of withering confidence in African socialism, Bernstein's framing of the agrarian question has nonetheless managed to contribute to a tradition of open creative class analysis in rural research on Africa, not least because of the platform provided by Byres and Bernstein's journal editing.¹² This body of work constituted an important alternative to the almost hegemonic

⁹ Bernstein took no nudging from the Marxist literature on the Kenyan debate, which had emphasized the interdependence of agrarian, industrial and commercial accumulation in the rise of the Kenyan petty bourgeoisie. Kitching (1985), in a useful intervention on the importance of questions in sorting out the relevance of concepts, concluded that questions of socialism were not relevant outside of fully developed capitalism.

¹⁰ Nzau's (2010) overview of Africa's industrialization debates covers Tanzania and the related discussion in Kenya.

¹¹ Bernstein himself wrote a synthetic critical essay on structural adjustment policies in Africa (Bernstein 1990).

¹² For a good review of the early part of this work, see Bernstein's (2004b) paper on African agrarian questions.

neoliberal account that explains rural poverty in Africa as the result of the imperfection or absence of markets, the absence of secure property rights, and state policies that impede market adjustment and the functioning of comparative advantage.

Bernstein himself learned from this broad body of research (too plentiful to document here). Mamdani (1987), for example, applied the distinction between accumulation from below and from above in rural Uganda, showing how political office and connections were used by accumulators from above to appropriate commercial land and credit. He observed, however, that politically the divergence between the two different groups of accumulators faded in their alliance against the poorer peasantry and workers. He argued that the contradictory class character of the peasantry means that it cannot on its own organize a popular democratic struggle: that it is always led either by the bourgeoisie or the working class (Mamdani 1987, 223). This argument infuses Bernstein's distrust of populist politics in 'peasant' movements.

Carney (1988), Mackintosh (1989) and Whitehead (1991) showed how gender inequality cross-cut households, the projects of investors and donors, and the organization of government. They also showed how women's organized resistance blocked accumulation in commercial agriculture schemes. Bernstein ceased to refer to gender relations in Africa as pre-capitalist and began to consider the relation between class dynamics, gender and other social divisions. Little and Watts (1994) exposed the varying class dynamics of different kinds of contract farming, substantiating Bernstein's work on differentiation within petty commodity production.

Bernstein has also had critical exchanges with those working within the Marxist tradition who have argued that the agrarian question in Africa is still dominated by the unsettled colonial question, and, by extension in areas of colonial settlement, by the question of land (e.g. Moyo 2003; Bernstein 2004a). These discussions have been particularly important in the unresolved debates around the significance of the expulsion of white commercial farmers and redistribution of their land in Zimbabwe (Moyo and Yeros 2004; Alexander 2007; Scoones et al. 2010; Rutherford 2012).

The creativity and openness of Bernstein's theoretical work is evident in his ability to learn from alternative positions and research. Confronting James Scott's work on the weapons of the weak and the moral economy tightened Bernstein's arguments on populism (Bernstein 2009), as did Berry's (1993) argument on the distinctiveness and flexibility of African patterns of agricultural investment (Bernstein 2004a). Moore and Vaughan's (1987) restudy of the Bemba agrarian response to unemployment after the closure of the Zambian mines helped him rethink the unidirectionality of the proletarianization process. Peters' (2004) work on growing conflicts over land in Africa has focused his attention on the integration of customary tenure within processes of land commodification.

It is no small feat to have contributed to a living tradition of Marxist analysis of agrarian change in Africa after the political marginalization, or illegitimation, of Marxist thought after the crumbling of so many regimes that claimed to have socialist programmes within Africa, the turn towards private capital accumulation in China and Vietnam, and the implosion of the Soviet Union under the force of its own contradictions. We have not done so well, however, in countering the tide of individualization in the analysis of agrarian issues. Diversification of livelihoods is treated as an expression of individual creativity rather than structural dislocations that cut across rural/urban boundaries. Accumulation is taken to be the same thing as individuals amassing assets and collective action is understood as the summation of individual acts of resistance (including signing Internet petitions). In these terms, it is very difficult to devise and assess collective forms of action based in class alliances.

The opportunity for Bernstein to go beyond the guerrilla of critique, to meld theory with practice, emerged suddenly with the abrupt end of the apartheid regime. It became clear that that there would be some kind of democratic transition in South Africa and that in that process Marxist analysis would have renewed political legitimacy.

LAND REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Much earlier than expected by the anti-apartheid alliance, the meaning of the Freedom Charter’s call ‘The land shall be shared among those who work it’ had to be worked out in practice. It was reasonable to expect that Marxists concerned with the dynamics of agrarian change in South Africa would have something to say about the land question. Henry Bernstein had many friends and comrades among ANC and CPSA exiles. In 1991, in the period of transition after Mandela’s release from prison, Bernstein became a visiting fellow at the Centre for Social and Development Studies at the University of Natal; he began to research changes in large-scale commercial agriculture in South Africa, and to think and talk about land reform.

The political conditions for doing research in both rural areas and urban settlements had been challenging; there was a dearth of research explicitly focused on all three facets of the agrarian question: politics, production and accumulation. It became clear almost immediately, however, that the working theory of the Left – the homelands as reserves of cheap labour and farm tenancy as a way of binding workers to the land – did not hold. Unemployment was high, agricultural production was falling in the homelands and informal shack settlements were growing in both town and countryside.

The Surplus People’s Project (SPP) had done much to document the ways in which homelands served as dumping grounds for people removed from prime commercial areas – whether agricultural or urban residential land (Walker and Platsky 1985). Researchers linked to SALDRU (the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit) at the University of Cape Town had undertaken comparative studies in various rural locations in the 1980s. The range of variation was great, even given the paucity of research. There were areas of black smallholder farming, particularly in rain-fed areas, but many rural residents had access only to a small food garden. In some rural areas, there were vast residential agglomerations of people without infrastructure or arable land and households dependent on wage-labour for food. Spiegel (1987) found households constantly shifting in composition and circulating between rural and urban areas. Researchers working on migrant mine-labour from Mozambique (Davies and Head 1995) already knew that the recruitment agency of the South African Chamber of Mines was recruiting many fewer miners, and favouring recruits from South Africa and Lesotho. Some urban hostels were being turned into informal housing for permanent workers and their families. Research post-apartheid confirmed these patterns. With the lifting of domestic influx controls, post-apartheid informal settlements grew rapidly and women, men and children organized lives that could be both urban and rural (Hunter 2010).

Although it was, and continues to be, clear that racial inequality in ownership of land in the broad sense (including control of water and mineral resources) was a major political issue, it is not surprising that there should be very different attitudes towards how it should be addressed. South African corporate capital argued that continuing deregulation and market liberalization would subject white farming to the pressures of competition and lead to a deracialized and more efficient agriculture (Bernstein 1996c, 32).

In 1993, the Macroeconomic Research Group (MERG), the unofficial macro-economic advice group to the ANC, calculated that the scale of demand for redistribution of land was enormous if one took account of the landless agricultural workers on commercial farms, that part of the population in the homelands that had insufficient or unusable land, and the fact that some small black capitalist farmers were eager to expand their areas. They also emphasized the dependence of the rural poor on agricultural labour and were concerned about the impact of a rapid redistribution of commercial farmland on rural incomes. They concluded that there would have to be two phases: the first would be rapid limited redistribution of land benefiting adult female members of landless households in the homelands, accompanied by major improvements in rural infrastructures.

The MERG group thought that white commercial agriculture could be wooed into adopting more labour-intensive practices by a combination of carrot and sticks. As Bernstein's (1996b) research showed, however, white commercial farming had already begun restructuring before the end of apartheid, and not in the labour-intensive direction envisioned by MERG. Most of its most important government supports had already been dismantled. The process of concentration and labour-shedding has continued across different agricultural sectors: large agricultural companies have diversified into related industrial sectors, some farms have been converted to game-farming and South African farming interests are expanding northwards. Bernstein (1996b, 1998) thought that both the MERG report and the ANC/CP/Cosatu alliance for whom it was written were overly convinced of the importance of large-scale agriculture as a source of growth and employment. Sender and Johnston (2004) have emphasized the importance of organizing agricultural workers, perhaps underestimating the difficulties in doing this under current systems of labour-contracting. They also doubt whether small black commercial farmers treat their workers better than do large-scale white commercial farmers.

The MERG report had the advantage of a holistic approach to the restructuring of the South African economy, but the agrarian question enters only residually through the problem of poverty; in a report of 282 pages, agrarian transformation is addressed in one section of the chapter on rural development and food policy. The welfare aspects of their proposal for a rapid redistribution of small amounts of land to adult female members of landless households have largely been pre-empted by the extension of social grants upon which rural households are heavily dependent (Neves and du Toit 2013).

Bernstein's (1996c) paper on exceptionalism of the agrarian question in South Africa¹³ cautiously laid out an alternative, making the case for a more robust and ambitious programme of land reform based on the Leninist conception of accumulation from below; that is, smallholder property something like the American small family farm model. He argued that although the links of the rural population with land and farming had been significantly ruptured, this had many in many instances occurred more recently than was appreciated. Hence it was neither intrinsically anachronistic nor populist to call for 'Land to the (former) tiller'. The central question was how to assure the democratic content of the process.

This question was addressed by Levin and Neocosmos (1989; see also Neocosmos 1993). They gave particular importance to documenting class formation both before and after any process of land redistribution – in their words, 'developing an understanding of incipient social classes in the countryside, not as a prelude to sectarianism, but as a necessary prerequisite for a principled alliance' (Levin and Neocosmos 1989, 255). Neocosmos made an argument later developed by Mamdani (1996) in *Citizen and Subject* that *politically* South Africa's agrarian question was not so different to that elsewhere in Africa – it was concerned with the direct oppressive relation between the state and the peasantry (Neocosmos 1993, 24). The Left had erred in its political practices by identifying itself too closely with the ruling class and its state in post-independence Africa, distancing itself from the masses of the oppressed (Neocosmos 1993, 5).¹⁴

The most serious attempts to research the processes of accumulation from below in rural South Africa and to lobby for land reform policies based on it have been carried out by PLAAS (the Programme in Land and Agrarian Studies¹⁵ at the University of the Western Cape). Ben Cousins in particular (2007, 2010, 2013) has called for policies that would foster both agricultural and non-agricultural forms of petty commodity production and expanded opportunities for multiple-

¹³ Its title was a play on Mamdani's paper on the extreme but not exceptional agrarian question in Uganda.

¹⁴ On this point, Neocosmos cited a talk by Issa Shivji, significant because the latter is such a major figure in the Tanzanian Left.

¹⁵ Now the Institute for Land, Poverty and Agrarian Studies.

livelihood strategies. His research focuses on analysing processes of individual accumulation from below by decomposing petty commodity production into different groups according to what he calls a class-analytic perspective. He thinks that an increase in the number of small black capitalist farmers would help to reconfigure the dualism of the past agrarian structure (in contrast to Levin and Neocosmos' wariness about incipient class formation).

Cousins' difficulty is that after 20 years, there is so little evidence to show that such a major restructuring is possible. In 2007, Cousins (2007, 238) found various reasons for the marginality of the land question: the emphasis on mobilization of urban areas by the liberation movement, the property guarantees given in the transition process,¹⁶ the hegemony of the large-commercial-farm narrative, and the dominance of neoliberal economic policies. He also invoked Bernstein on the disinterest of capital in the agrarian question once industrialization is secured. The key weakness he identified in South Africa was the political face of the agrarian question: 'the lack of an organised political constituency in rural society articulating a powerful voice able to counter the persistent urban bias in the country's politics and economics' (Cousins 2007, 237). At this point, Cousins nonetheless found some basis for optimism on the renewal of the land question: there was a landless people's movement, the SACP and Cosatu were showing revived interest, and above all the rapid redistribution of white-owned commercial farms in Zimbabwe made South Africa's slow market-based gradualist strategy appear problematic (Cousins 2007, 238–9).

Another decade on, however, the ANC government seems unlikely to endorse accumulation from below or quicken the pace of land redistribution. The economic results of land reform thus far have not been very good, except for some white commercial farmers who have become service providers to large-scale restitution schemes (O'Laughlin et al. 2013). Cousins' (2013) own research shows some of the reasons why accumulation from below is difficult in contemporary South African agriculture. He looked at an irrigation scheme operating since the early twentieth century in the Kwa-Zulu homeland. It shows little evidence of either individual enrichment or capital accumulation; just holding on to the land is dependent on off-farm income, itself increasingly dependent on social grants given deepening unemployment. His study reflects similar research showing the stagnation of smallholder production in areas where people have land but not enough resources to farm it or improve it. Research in some areas of Zimbabwe shows better results from land reform from black small-scale farming (Scoones et al. 2010), but observing the large numbers of Zimbabweans migrating to South Africa in search of work raises questions about its place in overall patterns of accumulation. Land reform is signalled as an important unsettled colonial issue in the manifesto of the radical black oppositional group Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), but their concern is with the racialized distribution of property in a much broader sense (EFF 2013).

What, then, about Cousins' (2007) concern with the lack of an organized political constituency in rural society to counter urban bias in the country's politics and economics? Any lack is almost always the outcome of the presence of something else. Beinart (2012) has disputed the vision of the homelands as depoliticized. He suggests that homeland politics were, rather, those of a diffuse grassroots style of insurrection, including youth rebellions, residents' associations and land invasions. He notes that with the exception of KwaZulu, the homelands provided the ANC's most solid voting block after 1994. The question is therefore not so much lack of a rural voice, but the plurality of voices and how they come to say what they do. What they say is shaped by relations of power that are historically well established and oppressive. Beinart (2012) notes that homelands politicians were well schooled under apartheid in translating power into money. Ntsebeza (2004) warned from early on about the power given to chiefs in land restitution and redistribution schemes, and Claassens

¹⁶ Ntsebeza (2007) gives particular importance to the restrictions of the property clause.

(2013) showed recently how ANC-sponsored legislation bolstering the powers of chiefs has been used to undercut the informal land rights that women had gained in communal areas.

Here we come to the limitations of a class-analytic approach that focuses narrowly on differences between farmers and looks at accumulation as differential acquisition of agricultural assets by petty commodity producers. Rather, if we locate agrarian processes and the varying situations of rural people within accumulation as a whole, the political focus must include both off-farm sources of accumulation and class alliances that cross rural boundaries. This means identifying ways of overcoming social divisions of gender and ethnicity across the rural-urban divide by linking common struggles within class groups, between 'classes of labour' and sometimes in populist alliances that cross class lines. The problem is finding conceptual tools that locate the contradictions of rural production and reproduction in South Africa within a broader historically shaped system of accumulation, production and politics. Lenin's schematic vision of inevitable differentiation in petty commodity production sets theoretical boundaries that are not historically appropriate in contemporary South Africa.¹⁷ The framework limits the way in which we understand the class dynamics of agrarian change.

Studies done since the 1994 elections, for example, confirm the importance of off-farm income in the organization of petty commodity production in South Africa, while estimates of unemployment have increased. Furthermore, within the South African economy, the restructuring of accumulation has been based on continuing casualization of employment in agriculture, mining, manufacturing and services, and hence decreasing cash flows to rural households (Kenny and Bezuidenhout 1999; Pons-Vignon and Anseeuw 2009; Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2011; Di Paola and Pons-Vignon 2013). A 'reproductive squeeze' or crisis of petty commodity production reflected in falling land use is predictable in such a context. Although casualization and unemployment are sometimes taken to be the inevitable result of global competition, the way in which Cosatu limited its forms of class struggle to protection of permanent skilled jobs could have been politically opposed by a more aggressive alliance between 'classes of labour' across rural/urban boundaries. Naidoo (2011) provides a particularly instructive account of how traditional approaches to trade union organizing in the Eastern Cape worked in mobilizing support for the minimum wage, but not for the securing the residential rights of commercial farm dwellers, particularly those of women who were not permanent farm workers.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

I belong to a generation of social scientists influenced by Kuhn's (1975) work on the philosophy of science. He stressed the importance of communities of scholars working on the same puzzles, developing concepts and confronting anomalies in the development of scientific paradigms. There is no single paradigmatic approach to agrarian change in Africa, not even a Marxist one. There is, however, a community of scholars and scholar/activists working on similar problems and using common concepts. The impact of Bernstein's work in this community has been based in his capacity to bring Marxist theory to bear on understanding important and complex political processes such as the two discussed here, popular opposition to the *ujamaa* project in Tanzania and, 20 years later, the snail-like progress of redistributive land reform in post-apartheid South Africa. Both projects were part of the agenda of socialist movements; neither has received the kind of popular support expected and both have been justifiably the object of critical debate.

Bernstein strives for consistency in his use of concepts and locates them clearly in relation to the premises of Marxist theory: agrarian change in Africa takes place within a common history of global

¹⁷ Arguably not enough for understanding agrarian accumulation processes in Greater Russia either, but that is a different discussion.

capitalism and within the contradictory relations of labour and capital. One cannot escape this through populist re-creation of an imagined communal history or the reconstruction of a homogeneous peasant way of life. Yet Bernstein has never deployed Marxism as a deductive theory within the terms of which rural African realities must be crammed. Treating Marxism as a creative open system, he seems to have read everything written on agrarian change in Africa, engaged with his critics both sympathetic and hostile, and addressed the anomalies thrown up when theory confronts real histories.

This essay asks scholars of Africa to consider Bernstein’s puzzle – how should we understand the conditions of existence of those people termed ‘peasants’ within the world of mature capitalism? Reflecting on Bernstein’s work on the politics of agrarian change in both Tanzania and South Africa, I have suggested that in both debates, following Lenin, there has been too much attention paid to class formation *within* the peasantry. Despite the rigour of Bernstein’s analysis, this reflects three areas of theoretical ambiguity that have been insufficiently discussed: how to focus on agrarian issues without falling into analytical dualism; how to understand the relation between class formation and accumulation; and how to understand collective agency without abstracting from the realities of everyday struggle. Each of these is central in building and reworking the class alliances needed for long-term anti-capitalist struggles and, yes, this means the struggle for socialist alternatives. In doing so, it is important to recognize that all the aspects of the agrarian question – production, accumulation and politics – are relational. They are not about the autonomy of agricultural production or rural life or rural classes *per se*, but about where these fit in a political and economic strategy that goes beyond reform of agrarian capitalism to broader socialist alternatives.

Bernstein himself recently came up with a partial answer, at least on how not to understand the politics of agrarian change in Africa. In a gentle but contentious commentary on John Saul’s (2012) recent reflection on Tanzanian socialism and his paper on peasants and revolution in Africa written 40 years ago (Saul 1974), Bernstein (2014) suggested that the period of peasant revolutions is over, and that it did not anyway ever hold in Africa given its distinctive (non-feudal) precolonial social formations and its late colonization. I do not expect this will be Bernstein’s final answer, since we are still left with another of Lenin’s questions: “Then “what is to be done?””

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