

**Rights beyond the urban-rural divide:
South Africa's Landless People's Movement and the creation of a landless subject**

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When a series of urban land occupations in South Africa garnered media attention around July 2001 – most notably at the Bredell farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg² -- President Thabo Mbeki was quick to deflect attention away from, not only his government's failure on land reform, but from the very issue of land maldistribution itself. Despite the fact that less than 3 per cent of land had changed hands from white to black since the end of apartheid in 1994 -- more than 80 per cent of South Africa's land is still owned by fewer than 60,000 white farmers -- he declared that 'the problem in South Africa is homelessness, not land'.³ Speculation over the possibility of Zimbabwe-style land expropriation in South Africa's future had government officials scrambling to dispel investor fears. The Bredell occupation and similar occupations near Cape Town and Port Elizabeth were thus construed as outcomes of failed housing and 'basic services' (water, electricity, etc.) delivery. The urban poor were portrayed as homeless, not landless, actors; they were acknowledged as having land needs insofar as they needed land for building homes, but not necessarily for other purposes. Their relationship with urban land was thus mediated through a right to housing, but did not consist of a direct right to land.

Yet people facing eviction from urban high-rises in Johannesburg's Hillbrow and Berea districts and others contemplating occupations of vacant state-owned land near shack settlements such as Protea South persisted in calling themselves 'landless' rather than homeless or poor. As members of the Landless People's Movement (LPM), these urban residents were articulating land rights claims rooted in historical land theft which do not fit easily within the government's rigid separation of urban *housing* policy and rural *land* policy. The creation of this 'landless subject', its explosive confrontations with state power, and its emancipatory potential lie at the heart of this study.

At the core of the LPM's definition of 'landless' lies a rejection of South Africa's 'rural-urban divide'. The country's urban and rural spaces – and the boundary between

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² Thousands of individuals moved onto the unoccupied Bredell farm in July 2001 when a local Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) ward councilor sold land illegally at R25 per lot. Over 100 people were arrested over the course of the occupation. An editorial in the *Sunday Independent* lamented an 'all-too-quick reversion to the *kragdadigheid* (oppressive power) of the past' (Schlemmer, 2001). Though some of the land was bought by entrepreneurs who wanted to start small businesses, the neediest were township tenants unable to pay rents of R200 to R300 per month for a small room (Schlemmer).

³ Patrick Laurence. 2002. 'Struggle for land, a crucial new chapter.' *Focus* (28). Johannesburg: Helen Suzman Foundation. December. 1.

them – have been constituted through centuries of power struggles, policies, and shifting theoretical justifications.⁴ Historically, these politicised urban-rural distinctions have alienated the poor and landless from power-holders and, more relevant to the arena of struggle, have divided landless actors among themselves. By defining ‘landless’ as a population which knows no rural and urban bounds, the Landless People’s Movement has challenged the constitution of the country’s urban-rural divide, opening up possibilities for linkages among seemingly disparate struggles for land, employment, housing, HIV treatment, basic services, and more. In so doing, the LPM has revealed the extent to which market-based approaches to land reform, particularly the ruling African National Congress (ANC)’s ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ approach, rely upon and perpetuate apartheid-era politics of division. By defining ‘landless’ in this manner, the LPM calls for fundamental change in society at large. Through their organising practices and demands, LPM members reveal that urban and rural spaces – and experiences of urban and rural poverty – are far more linked than a politicised dichotomy will allow.

The ANC government’s bolstering of urban-rural division helps it to avoid a fundamental shift in property relations and carries deep implications for rights and entitlement in post-apartheid South Africa. Through this move, the government is able to avoid the issue of land rights by denying the problem of landlessness itself. In fact, through a limitation within the country’s Constitution, it can deny any problems which cannot be solved by the market. As Michael Neocosmos observes, resources such as housing, land, water and electricity ‘are provided as ‘human rights’ in the South African constitution, although it is quickly added that such provision is contingent on the state having the financial and administrative capacity to do so. As a result, legal arguments revolve around the ‘reasonableness’ of such provision in specific circumstances. Political issues are in this manner turned into legal ones’.⁵

A contradiction thus emerges between the state’s conception of rights as ‘deliverables’ (along with the passive subjectivity this implies and entails for its citizens) and the LPM’s conception of rights as something to be defined and demanded through popular struggle and ultimately to be won, not given. The subjectivity associated with the latter conception of rights, that of the ‘landless’, is deeply politicized.⁶ The state’s

⁴ For more on the role of theoretical explanations and justifications for urban-rural division, see Amanda Alexander, ‘Not the democracy we struggled for’: The Landless People’s Movement and the Politicisation of Urban-Rural Division in South Africa’. Honors Thesis, Harvard College. Available at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs. See also Mahmood Mamdani 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton UP; Colin Bundy. 1972. ‘The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry’. *African Affairs*. October. 71(285); Levin, Richard and Daniel Weiner, eds. 1997. *No More Tears’: Struggles for Land in Mpumalanga, South Africa*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

⁵ Michael Neocosmos. 2006. ‘Development, social citizenship and human rights: Rethinking the political core of an emancipatory project in Africa’. March. Presented at Centre for Civil Society seminar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2 June 2006.

⁶ For more on institutionalized vs. politicized concepts of rights and the critiques of power which each entail, see Raj Patel. (forthcoming). ‘Transgressing rights: *Via Campesina*’s call for food sovereignty’. *Feminist Economics*; and Neocosmos (2006).

conception entails the death of the subject as constituted by popular anti-apartheid struggle documents such as the Freedom Charter (which held that the people shall govern, the land shall be shared by all who work it, etc.).⁷ Propping up the urban-rural divide means propping up a certain truncated conception of rights -- rights to houses which can be 'delivered' but not rights to land, which would require a complete restructuring of the distribution of wealth and privilege, a distribution which was left untouched during the transition to 'democracy'.

Thus the LPM's No Land! No Vote! campaign during the 2004 national elections was significant not least because the 'hard-won right to vote' had been integral to legitimating the transition from one conception of rights (and its accompanying subjectivity) to the other – from a struggle for liberation to a time of rights given from above. As I will explore, the LPM made it clear with this campaign that any democracy which grants the right to vote but denies rights to land (and the problem of landlessness itself) is a democracy at odds with their conception of themselves not as passive recipients of rights but as people still struggling to give weight to the demands of liberation struggle.

Defining the 'landless subject' in post-apartheid South Africa

Background on post-apartheid land reform and the LPM

The strength of the demands of landless people has led land researcher Wellington Thwala, among others, to predict that land distribution 'will either be resolved through a fundamental restructuring of the government's land reform program, or it will be resolved by a fundamental restructuring of property relations by the people themselves'.⁸ Throughout the 1990s, most were optimistic that land reform could be achieved through governmental policy. The role of land sector non-governmental organisations (NGOs) quickly shifted from supporting opposition struggle to carrying out the technical work of information dissemination, capacity-building, legal support, research, mediation, and other forms of intervention aimed at identifying and closing the legal and bureaucratic gaps in the new land reform programs.⁹ After 1994, the role of the landless was merely to complete the necessary organisational and bureaucratic requirements to 'place themselves in the relevant queue, and then wait for the promised land'.¹⁰ Landless communities filed restitution

⁷ For a brilliant critique of the Freedom Charter and its troubled role in popular struggle see Console Tleane. 2006. 'Is There Any Future in the Past? A Critique of the Freedom Charter in the Era of Neoliberalism'. In Amanda Alexander, ed. *Articulations: A Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Collection*. Durban/Trenton: Centre for Civil Society/Africa World Press.

⁸ Wellington Thwala 2003. 'Land and Agrarian Reform in South Africa'. Johannesburg: National Land Committee. 1.

⁹ Ann Eveleth and Andile Mngxitama. 2003. 'The Struggles of South Africa's Landless.' *Development Update*. Interfund: September. <http://www.interfund.org.za/pdf/vol4_two/The%20struggle%20of%20South%20Africa%20landless%20Articles.pdf>, 18. See also Andile Mngxitama. 2006. 'The Taming of Land Resistance: Lessons from the National Land Committee'. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. April. 41 (1-2). 39-69.

¹⁰ Ibid.

claims with the Department of Land Affairs or made applications for land through new reform programs.

The impetus for the Landless People's Movement grew as the slow pace of land reform was combined with growing unemployment and rising food costs.¹¹ These factors worsened socio-economic conditions for urban and rural poor. However, as Ann Eveleth and Andile Mngxitama have observed, rural land restitution claimants and labor tenants on white-owned farms lost their patience most quickly; they were particularly frustrated by the worsening conditions on white commercial farms, ongoing evictions from farms (which the state declined to act upon), and continuing farm violence and human rights abuses by white farmers.¹² In the months before the 23-24 July 2001 national meeting of landless people that led to the birth of the LPM, such frustrations increasingly took the form of land occupations by landless groups in various stages of self-organisation. Disparate groups of labor tenants, loosely linked through the National Land Committee's national network, began to realise that they had common concerns.¹³ This led to a series of meetings in March and April 2001, and a realisation that landless people might be able to give force to their demands by uniting at a national level.¹⁴

Though the LPM began as a rural-based movement, it spread rapidly into the urban center of Johannesburg, and then throughout Gauteng province, during 2002. Informal settlements surrounding Johannesburg were suddenly facing a new wave of forced removals. As rent levels rose, people faced increasing numbers of evictions, carried out by government-contracted private security forces in red overalls dubbed 'red ants'. When asked to compare the situations faced by urban and rural landless, then LPM Gauteng regional chairperson Maureen Mnisi zeroed in on evictions: 'I think everywhere they are fighting for land. Some of the problems are the same. It differs, but the thing is that for the eviction, people are crying everywhere'.¹⁵ The LPM's daily efforts have thus been largely defensive, focused on preventing evictions from rural farms and urban settlements and apartment complexes. In 2004, the LPM counted roughly 90 per cent of its membership base in rural areas (with particular strongholds in the Wakkerstroom area of Mpumalanga, the Free State, and the Eastern Cape), though strong branches were also formed in 'informal settlement' areas of Johannesburg – including Orange Farm, Protea South, Eikenhof, Thembelihle and several others – and in the inner-city flats of Hillbrow and Berea. LPM leadership finds it difficult to draw distinct boundaries between urban and rural, since some rural land claimants are living in urban areas (often subsidised by the pension grants of relatives living in rural areas).

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ The National Land Committee (NLC) would continue to provide support in the form of informal use of office space, access to funders and the media, etc. Such involvement with the LPM was contentious, however, and ultimately fractured the network in 2004-05.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Maureen Mnisi. 2003. Personal interview. 8 August.

This organising across urban, rural and peri-urban areas is unique among post-apartheid South African social movements and rare in the country's history, as evidenced by the urban biases of anti-apartheid struggles such as the United Democratic Front (UDF).¹⁶ The lack of urban-rural linkages in struggle – and the lack of attention paid by academics and policymakers to the importance of creating such linkages – is far from natural or inevitable. It is instead indicative of more fundamental biases which had their roots under segregation and apartheid and continue today.

Urban economic bias and a market-based approach to land reform

Urban-rural division has historically been explained and justified by the 'dual economy' thesis, which has found new credence within the ANC government. From the 1960s, liberal historians began to address the issue of race and systematic segregation more directly, and emphasised the economic and social impetus for segregation and apartheid. The prevailing view became one of South Africa as a "dual economy" with two distinct societies: a white urban and capitalist agrarian system on the one hand and a rural impoverished and stagnating African sector on the other'.¹⁷ Interactions between the parallel economies were perceived to be minimal. The actual dependency of the 'white urban' sector upon the 'rural black' sector was largely ignored, as was the reality of intermixing between the two 'societies'. The dual economy thesis thus fell short when forced to confront the reality of the role of migrant labourers and the presence of blacks in urban areas.¹⁸

The dual economy thesis has reappeared in President Thabo Mbeki's rhetoric; in mid-2003, he began speaking of 'two economies' co-existing within South Africa's borders. Though some hailed this as a step forward, arguing that it indicated a renewed commitment to addressing the needs of the country's poor, it soon became evident that this constituted a way to leave 'natural' divisions unaltered and to justify a lack of fundamental change in wealth ownership within the 'first economy'. Rather than focusing attention and resources on the 'second economy' directly, Mbeki has argued that investments and gains in the 'first economy' would trickle down to the 'second economy'. As he stated in his February 2004 State of the Nation address:

We must continue to focus on the growth, development and modernisation of the First Economy, to generate the resources without which it will not be possible to confront the challenges of the Second Economy. This is going to require further and significant infrastructure investments, skills development, scientific and technological research,

¹⁶ Gillian Hart and Ari Sitas briefly touch on rural-urban connections within the labour movement between 1973 and the early 1990s and on the violence of the hostel system in Gauteng (associated with 'the presence of the rural in the urban'). 'Beyond the urban-rural' 2004. 'Beyond the urban-rural divide: Linking land, labour, and livelihoods'. *Transformation*. 56. 31-38. For more on the ANC's urban organisational bias and its effects on land reform strategy see Mamdani (1996).

¹⁷ Levin and Weiner (1997), 2.

¹⁸ For more on the rural reserve subsidy thesis, see Harold Wolpe's seminal 1972 work 'Capitalism and cheap labour power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid'. In William Beinart and Saul Dubow, eds. *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1995.

development and expansion of the knowledge economy, growth and modernisation of the manufacturing and service sectors, deeper penetration of the global markets by our products, increasing our savings levels, black economic empowerment and the further expansion of small and medium enterprises.¹⁹

As I will discuss later, such statements have further justified market-based economic approaches to land reform, doing so by drawing upon assumptions about urban-rural division, perpetuating and naturalising them along the way.

As researcher Cecilia Tacoli writes, 'The division between 'urban' and 'rural' policies is based on the assumption that the physical distinction between the two areas is self-explanatory and uncontroversial'.²⁰ These assumptions cannot accurately be made in any context, and become especially troublesome in the South African case where physical distinctions were politically re-engineered. Economics, modes of governance, and the urban-rural divide were so linked under apartheid that it is exceedingly difficult to tease them apart or make substantive change in one area alone. As economics and politics relied upon the subjugation of the rural to the urban, a shift that does not directly challenge urban-rural division will be hard-pressed to amount to a significant democratic shift. Patrick Bond and others have described the 'elite transition' which ensured that a market-led economic approach carried over from apartheid into the new democratic dispensation.²¹ Discussing South Africa's transition, E. Wood notes, 'The dominant fractions of capital were finally prepared to concede to majority rule if there was only limited economic redistribution, and if the political framework allowed for renewed accumulation'.²² The 'two economies' framework justifies this continued approach by drawing on implicit assumptions of 'natural' divisions between urban and rural, rich and poor, black and white.

Aiming at the heart of urban-biased economic policy and analysis, Gillian Hart argues forcefully that we must 'call into question the widespread presumption of the 'natural' status of dispossession from the land' as a historical precursor to capitalist development.²³ As Gillian Hart and Ari Sitas argue:

Pervasive urban-rural dichotomies derive from understandings of the development of capitalism as a linear process. For many on the left as well as the liberal right, dispossession from the land is an inevitable part of the creation of an urban, industrial working class.²⁴

¹⁹ In Stephen Greenberg. 2004. 'Post-apartheid Development, Landlessness and the Reproduction of Exclusion in South Africa'. Centre for Civil Society Research Report No. 17. May. Available at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs.

²⁰ Cecilia Tacoli. 1998. 'Bridging the divide: Rural-urban interactions and livelihood strategies'. Gatekeeper Series (SA77). London: International Institute for Environment and Development. 4.

²¹ See Patrick Bond *Elite Transition From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*. London/Pietermaritzburg: Pluto/University of Natal Press, 2000.

²² In Greenberg (2004).

²³ Gillian Hart. 2002. 'Linking land, labour, and livelihood struggles'. *South African Labour Bulletin*. December.

²⁴ Gillian Hart and Ari Sitas. 2004. 'Beyond the urban-rural divide: Linking land, labour, and livelihoods'. *Transformation*. 56. 31-38.

According to Hart, this understanding of dispossession carries grave implications for understanding not only the relationship between urban and rural spaces but also for conceiving of the continued reproduction of economic relationships and political power:

In short, dispossession from the land (or what Marx dubbed 'so-called primitive accumulation') is not an automatic precondition for a unilinear trajectory of capitalist development. Nor is it a 'natural' one-off event that can be consigned to some distant pre-capitalist past. Instead dispossession – and, conversely, the retention of access to land and other resources that provide social security – need to be understood as *ongoing processes* that continue to shape the conditions of reproduction of labour. Infused with power and meaning, these processes are closely tied in with people's everyday lives, and with their potentials and understandings of themselves as political actors.²⁵

As Hart and Sitas argue, most researchers have pursued 'the land question', 'the labour question', and 'the question of livelihoods' (or 'non-formal employment') in isolation. Post-1994 labour studies became heavily focused on metropolitan areas, ignoring the persistence of migrancy and instead focusing on black workers 'as a class of brand new wage-earners and stake-holders. In other words, as a collective *tabula rasa* without a history rooted in prior struggles and negotiations across different socio-spatial arenas of practice. As a consequent of such representations, this research lost track of enduring and changing urban-rural interconnections'.²⁶

Rights along the urban-rural divide: Housing and land

The urban-rural dichotomy has similarly carried over into a sharp distinction between urban *housing* and rural *land* rights, with an accompanying division at the level of policy. This division was highlighted by the replacement of the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act 52 of 1951 by the Prevention of Illegal Evictions and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act (PIE) in 1998. Under the former act, blacks in urban areas had no formal housing or land rights, and the government was allowed to evict them arbitrarily from urban (and rural) areas to settler camps. Though the act was applied infrequently in the years immediately following the democratic transition, it was not repealed and replaced with PIE until 1998. Rather than focusing solely on 'illegal squatting', the new act sought to protect the property of landowners and protect illegal occupants from eviction without due notice and a court order. However, the slow repeal of the 1951 act indicates, as Andre van der Walt writes, that:

the legal system's largely negative attitude towards informal housing rights has not changed yet: informal housing is still regarded as something extraordinary and unnatural, which is at most tolerated temporarily, without creating real rights to land. Even though the moral and social justification of informal housing rights has become an important topic of

²⁵ Hart (2002).

²⁶ Hart and Sitas (2004).

juristic discourse these rights are not allowed to actually compete with the inviolable right of a landowner. This attitude illustrates the supremacy of landownership vis-à-vis informal housing rights in terms of the dominant theory of land rights.²⁷

Even when housing is provided in urban areas today, the rights and privileges are not congruent with those of owning land. Land rights carry with them a certain inviolability that housing, much less the shacks of township areas and informal settlements where millions of South Africans live today, does not.

As Enoch Zulu, a 63-year-old LPM member living in Orange Farm, Johannesburg states, 'Now if I say that I'm staying here, they can just say 'no.' That's not good. You cannot call this your own. It was always just like that, even until today. I haven't got nothing. No permit, no title deed, I haven't got my own place. What I mean—my own yard. Where I can say, 'it is my yard.' Where I can say it is my *land*'.²⁸ The critical distinction between having a house and possessing rights to land was also emphasised by Buti Ngonelo, an LPM member living on occupied land in Orange Farm. He had moved to Orange Farm from Everton, a township about a kilometer away, and gave the following explanation for the move: 'Actually, what made us to move from Everton to here is that at Everton you don't own a piece of land. We had to pay the rent for the landlords, so we didn't have money since we're unemployed. So my mom decided that we would come over [to Orange Farm] whereby we can have our own piece of land, even if it's not enough land so that you can grow things'.²⁹

Besides reinforcing the distinction between urban and rural rights to land, PIE has also created 'a framework for evictions rather than an end to evictions'.³⁰ If the state considers it necessary in some way for the public good, then those living in informal settlements can be evicted through a legal process. In January 2002, thousands of residents had their shacks demolished during their removal from Mandelaville in Diepkloof, Soweto. They were moved to the Roodepoort Durban Deep hostel to make way for a multimillion-rand development plan.³¹ Other communities have been evicted to make way for new cultural districts, such as Newtown in Johannesburg, to promote new tourist areas, or to push shacks further from major highways and thus out of sight. Residents are often moved from informal settlements or townships onto state-owned land left over from apartheid zoning. These sites are usually remote areas, further from health facilities, jobs, schools, and transport. As Stephen Greenberg writes, 'The implementation of housing policy... is precisely where the ghost of apartheid returns to haunt spatial planning, since existing land ownership by the state makes it much easier and cheaper to simply continue with the process of resettling people in areas that were

²⁷ Andre van der Walt. 1992. 'Informal Housing and the Environment: Land Rights in Transition'. *South Africa in Transition: Urban and Rural Perspectives on Squatting and Informal Settlement in Environmental Context*. Pretoria: UNISA. 68.

²⁸ Enoch Zulu. Personal interview. Orange Farm. 14 Aug 2003.

²⁹ Buti Ngonelo. Personal interview. Orange Farm. 14 Aug 2003.

³⁰ Greenberg (2004).

³¹ Baldwin Ndaba. 2002. 'Residents cheer squatters' eviction'. *The Star*. 8 January.

already designated for resettlement under apartheid, where land is already owned by the local state'.³²

The government is further permitted to demolish shacks without upgrading their former residents to housing. The justification is that shack residents are not losing anything because their housing situation is the same as it was before, and yet their removal from existing community, school, family and employment networks is often devastating. Sisi Zulu, an LPM organiser from Orange Farm observes the impact of evictions on settlement communities and underscores the importance of tenure security and a sense of permanence:

It's a problem for the eviction because if maybe you are staying in the street, and the evictions come to your area, you'll be evicted and be moved 15 kilometers from here to that place. You are going to start to try to introduce yourself to your neighbor, and you don't know your neighbor. You don't know her attitude. How is she going to assist you with sugar, or if maybe you are having a problem? So it's like you are where you know people, and then you'll be moved to another place. And after that you try to reconcile with those people or maybe try to do some house-warming to know those people more. [Then] you are being evicted again to go to another place and by that time you are unemployed. It's a play-game because it's like we are fools. We are being moved from place to place and we don't want the government to say 'you are going to move from here and go to stay at this place for now, for time being'. We don't want time-being places, we want permanent places where we know there will be title deeds.... We know that we are entitled to electricity, water, and the title deeds to have your own place.³³

Long-awaited tenure security legislation for rural areas was only passed in February 2004, and the Communal Land Rights Bill was criticized by many in the land sector as being antithetical to rural democratization.³⁴ The legislation gave chiefs in former apartheid 'homelands' the responsibility of administering land communally, with the intended result of extending tenure security to a third of South Africans. (The ANC and other urban-based parties have long been loath to challenge rural hierarchies, as traditional authorities are often relied upon to deliver rural votes). Critics argue that it is undemocratic to give such power to un-elected chiefs, since rural communities and individuals will have no choice over their land rights or land administration arrangements. Stark gender inequalities are likely to be exacerbated; the land rights of rural women are likely to be undermined by placing their administration in the hands of mostly male chiefs. The bill states that 30 per cent of elected traditional councilors must be women, but there are no sanctions described for enforcing this percentage.

³² Greenberg (2004).

³³ Sisi Zulu. Personal interview. Orange Farm. 14 Aug 2003.

³⁴ See Ben Cousins "Reforming communal land tenure in South Africa – Why the draft Communal Land Rights Bill is not the answer." *ESR Review* 3 (3), Nov 2002 or "South Africa: Land rights bill 'deeply flawed.'" *Mail & Guardian*, 11 Nov 2003. The CLRB is available on the Department of Land Affairs' website: <www.land.pwv.gov.za>.

Post-apartheid policies around rural farm dwellers have been characterized by neglect. Conditions have not changed for South Africa's seven million farm dwellers, or 15 per cent of the population, many of whom continue to work as semi-slaves on white-owned farms. They continue to face arbitrary eviction, brutal assault, murder, and denial of burial rights.³⁵ In the first ten years of democratic rule, nearly 950,000 farm workers and dependants were evicted from white-owned farms – 200,000 more than were evicted during the previous decade of apartheid rule. 77 per cent of the evictees were women and children related to deceased or retired farm labourers.³⁶ In areas such as Wakkerstroom, Mpumalanga and Ingogo, KwaZulu-Natal, LPM members are fighting for the release of impounded cattle, setting fires and destroying fences to undermine white authority and profit, performing illegal burials (farmers refuse interment rights because these allow families the right to subsequently return or remain on familial land³⁷), fending off eviction, pursuing land restitution claims, and much more.³⁸

The 'landless subject'

The dichotomous conceptions of urban and rural which have characterised academic analysis and policy have not been overtly challenged by the broad range of post-apartheid social movements. The apparent lack of urban-rural linkages in movements such as the Anti-Eviction Campaign, Treatment Action Campaign, Anti-Privatisation Forum, Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and others may be a partial result of the urban bias of social movement researchers. No doubt many movement members based in urban areas have strong rural connections – which likely have profound effects on how they conceive of their struggles -- but such connections rarely form the subject of research inquiry. Nonetheless, these struggles have been overwhelmingly urban-focused in their membership and demands. As many analysts have pointed out, these movements have also tended to be narrowly issue-based and focused on seemingly passive calls for government 'service delivery'.³⁹ Thus far, such movements have failed to unite demands for anti-retroviral treatment with those for clean water, for example, even though patients need regular access to clean drinking water (and adequate nutrition) in order for the drugs to be effective. Furthermore, such

³⁵Mngxitama (2006); and personal interviews with farm dwellers near Ingogo, KwaZulu-Natal (August 2003).

³⁶ 'Victims of illegal evictions forced to squeeze into shanty towns in South Africa'. 2006. IRIN Africa. 13 January. http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=51104&SelectRegion=Southern_Africa.

³⁷ See Colette Braeckman. 2003. "South Africa: Whose Land?" *Le Monde Diplomatique*. September. <<http://www.globalpolicy.org/soecon/inequal/2003/09southafricafarm.htm>>.

³⁸ For more discussion of the LPM's rural organising see Alexander (2004), chapter four.

³⁹ See, for example, Patrick Bond. 2006. 'Ten years of democracy: A review'. In Amanda Alexander, ed. *Articulations: A Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Collection*. Durban/Trenton: Centre for Civil Society/Africa World Press; Hart (2002); Mark Hunter. 2006. 'Informal settlements as spaces of health inequality: The changing economic and spatial roots of the AIDS pandemic, from apartheid to neoliberalism'. Centre for Civil Society Research Report No. 44. June. Available at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/; Michael Neocosmos (2006).

movements have tended to focus on the 'broken promises' apparently ushered in by the ANC government's adoption of the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR) in 1996, rather than on broader historical arguments about the need to redress the inequalities originated by the dispossession of colonialism, segregation and apartheid.

Commenting on the 'basic services' struggles, Neocosmos writes: 'For the most part, these movements seem to be concerned above all to protest the slow pace of state 'delivery' of housing, land, water, electricity, etc., along with the commercialisation of these resources, rather than with providing an alternative vision of society. ... The argument of these movements therefore seems to be one which stresses the lack of integration of communities into the capitalist system rather than an alternative to that system'.⁴⁰

Given all of this, the LPM's definition of landlessness and its ability to organise (however unevenly) across urban and rural areas constitutes a significant turn. The position is eloquently captured by Andile Mngxitama, former land rights coordinator of the National Land Committee and activist with the LPM:

We define landless as all people with land needs, and we do not make a distinction of whether people need land for housing or farming. However, it is clear to us that the majority of landless are people who want land for building livelihoods. What we have also discovered is that the 'rural-urban divide' is actually false. Many workers in the urban centers can no longer hope to find work in industry, so to feed themselves and their families are increasingly looking to produce on land. So you will find in our definition of 'landless' people who have made land claims, and those who have made requests for land through government processes. The concept 'landless' is also about what kind of society we desire. We understand that on land rest many processes that go deep in understanding how people live and relate to each other and to nature. So defining oneself as landless implies that you are calling for fundamental change in relations in the broader society.⁴¹

By declaring the rural-urban divide 'false', the LPM also discards the range of dichotomies and substitutions which have immiserated the majority of South Africans under apartheid and democracy alike. Rather than seeking incorporation into the ANC's capitalist project, landless activists recognise the roots of that project in the geography of apartheid and its accompanying modes of wealth production and identity creation. As the LPM charter states:

We fought for the end of colonialism and apartheid, and welcomed the birth of a new South Africa. But for us there is nothing new because there is still no land, no services and no growth in our areas. We will no longer sit back and watch as the wealth builds up in the

⁴⁰ Neocosmos (2006).

⁴¹ Andile Mngxitama. 2003. Interview with Sean Jacobs. *Brasil de Fato*. 1 December. <<http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?2,40,5,281>>.

hands of a tiny urban elite, while on the edges of the cities, in the small towns and in the countryside, we continue to suffer and starve.⁴²

The contrasts with the demands of Durban's young *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (shackdwellers) movement are striking. Though *Abahlali baseMjondolo* began as a movement limited to informal settlements about a year ago, in recent months it has begun forging strong coalitions with flatdwellers who have been fighting evictions for years in places such as Chatsworth and Wentworth. Forging rural links remains a challenge to the movement; otherwise, it risks limiting itself at demands for 'inclusion' in urban areas rather than for a re-envisioning of the landscape where jobs and fulfilling livelihoods can be found. As Richard Pithouse writes:

Shack dwellers desperately wish to avoid forced removals to housing developments on the rural periphery of the city because they need to be close to economic opportunities. Indeed for many people the shack settlement is the only potential ladder into or out of the second economy because it allows close access to economic opportunities at low cost'.⁴³

Fears of life in a rural wasteland seem to partially motivate demands for urban housing:

This movement [Abahlali baseMjondolo in Kennedy Road] is driven by grievances – with years of promises unfulfilled, with the material deprivation of life in the settlement, and by the indignity of being relocated to a rural periphery away from all the things that they need and want.⁴⁴

As Michael Neocosmos reminds us, drawing on Badiou, 'political subjects are not given by history or anything else, they must be produced'.⁴⁵ Not all – or even most – of South Africa's dispossessed readily declare themselves 'landless'. In a country where the entire black population was dispossessed of land, where forced removals and evictions re-engineered the economic, social and political landscape throughout the 20th century, and where such evictions and removals persist, choosing to define oneself as landless rather than homeless, unemployed or poor, is an expression of broader emancipatory aspirations. With this definition, the LPM identifies persistent poverty as a result of both the economic policies of the current ANC-led government and apartheid-era inequalities and historical dispossession. According to Gillian Hart: 'What makes this redefinition of the land question potentially very powerful is its grounding in pervasive histories and memories of racialised dispossession. This in turn makes it possible to frame demands for redistributive social and economic justice in terms of

⁴² Landless People's Movement. 2003. 'Charter'. 30 October. <www.nlc.co.za>.

⁴³ Richard Pithouse. 2006. 'A Second Democracy for the Second Economy?' *Business Day*, weekend edition. 11 March.

⁴⁴ Jacob Bryant. 2006. 'Towards delivery and dignity: Community struggle from Kennedy Road'. Centre for Civil Society Research Report No. 41. June. Available at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs.

⁴⁵ Neocosmos (2006).

citizenship rights rather than welfare handouts'.⁴⁶ Struggles waged on the basis of landlessness may be much harder to co-opt or quell. The LPM has tended to focus less on individual ANC councilors or city managers and more on the national government and the interests it represents. As one LPM leader from the Thembelihle settlement told a meeting in July 2002, 'When it comes to development, the government only consults amabourgeois. If you don't have work, you are an eyesore to them. The whole system is stinking – it's about the oppression of the majority by a minority'.⁴⁷

We won't buy our land back: The landless confront the market

The ANC government has adopted a market-based approach to land redistribution, largely based on the 'willing buyer-willing seller' principle. This approach has been rationalised on the basis of maintaining efficiency in the agricultural sector and retaining investor confidence. Critics argue that efficiency and equity are not – and cannot be – achieved simultaneously when it comes to land redistribution, and thus maintain that the landless poor are not finding redress through the market.⁴⁸

The fundamental weakness of this reliance on markets – even when assisted by the state – lies in the fact that markets only respond to 'effective demand', i.e. the ability to pay for commodities at prevailing prices. That means that markets are skewed towards meeting the desires of those with resources, able to pay for commodities. The result is an ever-greater concentration of resources in the hands of a few. Even where the state assists, this is no guarantee that 'effective demand' will be stimulated beyond the point at which state assistance is no longer available. For example, the state may assist to buy land and even to provide initial start-up support for agricultural production. But in a context of intense competition with large-scale landowners and producers these resources are likely to be depleted for most beneficiaries of assistance long before they are independently regenerated through the market.⁴⁹

Crucially, the market-based approach also ignores the history of land theft, flattening questions of justice and redress. The descendants of coloniser and colonised are portrayed as two equal players confronting each other before the market.

As former LPM Gauteng regional chair Maureen Mnisi has stated: 'The government in 1994, it promised people about land reform and land redistribution. But in his constitution, he put the Property Act in which there's a 'willing buyer-willing seller' clause. And he made the people to lose their rights because they can't pay. Most of the people they are unemployed... instead of making a land reform they say you must buy. So you can even see the Freedom Charter when they say the land shall belong to those people who work it, but now it's not that. The land shall belong to the people who buy it. And because we don't have the money to buy the land, we are

⁴⁶ Hart (2002).

⁴⁷ Landless People's Movement. 2002. Press Statement. 4 July. <www.nlc.co.za>.

⁴⁸ Thwala (2003), 13.

⁴⁹Greenberg (2004).

getting more suffering about that'.⁵⁰ The market-based approach has not fundamentally shifted the economic order, and leaves the redress of historical dispossession out of the equation.

After four years of LPM demands for a national land summit, the government convened such a summit in July 2005.⁵¹ The summit was touted as a platform for a large variety of land reform 'stakeholders' – here, the Landless People's Movement was one among many called upon for input. These included seven political parties (ranging from the Azanian People's Organisation, the Inkhata Freedom Party, and the ANC to the New National Party), academics, Latin American and African country representatives, the World Bank, a range of land NGOs, the Department of Land Affairs, and white agri-business. White farmers were assured that their views would be taken into consideration; 'We can assure them', said Director General of Agriculture Masiphula Mbongwa. 'They must be frank, fearless and open about their views'.⁵² Despite having the situation stacked against them, the LPM's demands came through clearly; at one point, they managed to prevent the World Bank representative from making his speech.

The LPM took aim at the market-led approach to land reform in its memorandum of demands to the summit:

The 28-million poor & landless black majority of South Africa are poor and landless today mainly because of our land was stolen from us through centuries of brutal and violent wars and laws of dispossession that began in 1652 and continued throughout colonialism and apartheid. Our ancestors fought valiantly against this theft and we fought to end apartheid so that this land would be returned to us. **We are not willing to buy back our stolen land! We are not willing buyers!** Today, more than 80% of the land of our ancestors remains in the hands of less than 60,000 white farmers who inherited the land from this colonial and apartheid theft. **We do not care whether they are willing to sell it back to us or not – we demand that our land be returned to us! The market-led land reform model that the post-apartheid government copied from the World Bank has not worked anywhere in the world!** In South Africa, it is an insult to our ancestors that we must buy back our stolen land! The entire South Africa 'land market' on which our stolen land is bought and sold at price determined by the beneficiaries of apartheid is nothing but a continuation of apartheid. We demand that the state and the landless organise to **'take back the land'** that was stolen from us!⁵³

⁵⁰ Maureen Mnisi. 2003. Personal interview. Braamfontein, Johannesburg. 8 August .

⁵¹ South African Community Party (SACP), part of the tri-partite alliance with the ANC and Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), held Red October campaign, in partnership with the LPM, in 2004, and demanded a land summit. There was vigorous debate within the LPM about whether to partner on the Red October campaign, but many saw it as a way to get higher profile for their demands. The convening of the land summit several months later may be evidence of this.

⁵² Musgrave, Amy. 2005. 'White farmers must be 'fearless' about views'. *Mail & Guardian*. 29 July.

⁵³ Landless People's Movement. 2005. Memorandum of demands to the National Land Summit held in Johannesburg on 27-31 July, 2005. http://land.pwv.gov.za/Land_Summit/Position_Conference_Papers/Conference_Papers/LPM.doc.

The summit was the first time when the 'willing buyer-willing seller' programme was openly called into question by the ANC government. Commentators were quick to highlight the ANC's promises to revisit the policy; Patrick Bond declared that the summit 'was, at least rhetorically, the death knell for the commodification strategy of willing seller-willing buyer.'⁵⁴

Yet, in the months to follow, LPM activists recognised that this 'promise to revisit' did not signal a break in the prevailing approach to land reform. Paul Tikoane, an LPM activist based in Gauteng and the Free State, pointed to President Mbeki's speech before Parliament in February 2006:

The president said actually they have to review the willing seller-willing buyer. But now, I still have a concern about that: 'to review it in the international norms'. ... He doesn't say the government must review the willing seller-willing buyer. He says within international norms. So it looks like we must review it in relation to the situation happening internationally. To me that is a problem. ... In some areas it's okay to work with international people and so forth. And there are some other areas where you don't want to hear what some other people are saying about. When you talk about the land, this land belongs to *us*. It's our land. So we must not ask somebody from somewhere, 'must I divide this kitchen of mine?'. That's where my problem is.⁵⁵

Indeed, international interests seem never to have been far from sight. Patrick Bond observed that the 'Zimbabwe' factor may have come into play in the government's decision to revisit the policy, though not in terms of quelling investor fears of Zimbabwe-style land takeovers. Now the 'instability' caused by a lack of redistribution seemed more immediate.⁵⁶

It became clear that 'reviewing' the market-led approach would not actually mean departing from that approach anytime soon, or alienating foreign investors and speculators. There have been quieter signs, however, that the LPM's demands strike a chord with some within the ruling ANC. According to Tikoane:

Even at the end [of the summit] the [land] minister, Thoko Didiza, came to us again, just outside there discussing and feeling very free about the LPM now. And saying, exactly, I think the LPM is really the right movement in this country because of the history that the ANC was involved in. It was a problem what happened in CODESA.⁵⁷ In CODESA it was actually three things which the ANC didn't agree with the National Party there. It was the land issue, it was education, and the third one was labour. It was those three issues where they did not agree. The ANC didn't agree with the National Party when they were in discussions in CODESA at Kempton Park. ... It was just a compromise there. So, now Thoko

⁵⁴ Patrick Bond. 2005. 'Dragging SA's land debate from the neoliberal quicksand'. *ZNet*. 29 August.

⁵⁵ Paul Tikoane. 2006. Personal interview. 25 May.

⁵⁶ Patrick Bond. 2005.

⁵⁷ Convention for a Democratic South Africa, the forum for negotiating the transition from apartheid, began in December 1991.

is saying exactly that – that it was this thing, the property clause, that was a problem, and they [the ANC] see it afterwards.⁵⁸

Stephen Greenberg has recounted similar interactions:

At a meeting between Gauteng’s agriculture MEC and the LPM, the SACP, the Homeless People’s Federation and other organisations in October 2004, the MEC said ‘the people must rewrite the laws with their feet’, suggesting that small-scale occupations of unused land for agriculture purposes would change the dynamic of landowning and assist the government to restructure laws.⁵⁹

Due to the presence of the LPM, there is a growing sense that South Africa’s problems stem from mass dispossession and the on-going effects of land maldistribution. Any ‘promises to re-visit’ which do not fundamentally re-orient approaches to land reform remain problematic in the eyes of those who have declared themselves landless. Similarly, any democratic project in South Africa which asks for votes but which has not proven itself to be a legitimate break from its predecessor is one that the landless refuse.

No Land! No Vote!: The ‘landless subject’ confronts ballot box democracy

The state systematically transforms a pre-existing emancipatory politics into a technical process to be run by professionals (planners, economists, lawyers, judges, administrators, etc.) under its ambit within bureaucratic structures and subjectivities. This amounts to a process of de-politicisation of say a popular nationalist or revolutionary politics. In sum, the state systematically evacuates politics from state life in favour of technique. In addition, under liberal democratic systems, politics is reduced to voting which itself becomes simply a question of numbers to be predicted, counted and analysed by professionals.⁶⁰

- Michael Neocosmos, 2006

Calls for ‘No Land, No House, No Vote’ caused a stir in wards around the country before the March 2006 municipal elections, with ANC councilors promising to deliver houses as long as movement members did not withhold their votes. There was relative space within the media, movement meetings and academic circles to discuss the pros and cons and potential effects of not voting. Thus it may be difficult to recall the negative outcry with which the LPM’s ‘No Land! No Vote!’ campaign was confronted in 2003-2004. It was, after all, only the second national election after the democratic transition. Most adults had clear memories of casting a vote for the first time in the election that would bring Nelson Mandela to power only ten years before. The LPM’s calls to boycott the elections and instead to occupy land were deeply controversial.

⁵⁸ Tikoane interview (2006).

⁵⁹ Stephen Greenberg. 2006. ‘Urban food politics, welfare and resistance: A case study of the southern Johannesburg metro’. A grant report for the Centre for Civil Society. May. Available at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs.

⁶⁰ Neocosmos (2006).

The LPM argued that South Africa had achieved only a 'ballot box' democracy with the shift from apartheid. Under this system, the poor and landless are called 'citizens' but do not own land; the landless are instructed to 'register where you live', but literally cannot do so when facing evictions. The LPM issued demands which it argued would give teeth to the democratic project: a moratorium on all evictions and immediate delivery of land to the landless.

Maureen Mnisi of the Protea South settlement wrote a letter to the editor of the *Mail & Guardian* in response to the editorial page's criticism of the No Land! No Vote! campaign in early November 2003. Her letter, which the paper declined to print, summarises the LPM's conception of the campaign, underscoring the sentiment that democracy under the ANC does not constitute the political change struggled for under apartheid:

The impression given [by your editorial] is that the LPM is irresponsible to a point of disenfranchising the landless majority. We need not be reminded that we struggled for the vote during apartheid. It was us who bore the brunt of the apartheid repression here in South Africa. But we did not struggle for the vote so that we may be treated worse than dogs. It is the landless who voted for our government since 1994 in every election, but we have to ask this, why are we still landless and homeless ten years into our democracy? Is this the democracy we suffered so many years for? As if that is not enough, we are being told to 'register where we live,' but we are facing forced removals.... We demand respect and our full citizenship rights.⁶¹

The No Land! No Vote! campaign constituted the LPM's most pro-active strategy to date. With the No Land! No Vote! campaign, LPM members took matters of land reform into their own hands, in a very public show of force. Prior to this campaign, the proactive strategies carried out by some landless on a local level had not been recognised by the general public as a coherent line of attack. LPM members in parts of Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and elsewhere had been carrying out burials against the will of farm owners, while others were re-opening closed access roads.⁶² Still, the No Land! No Vote! campaign was widely criticised by the media as a reactionary strategy which crudely neglected the hard-won right to vote. Most critics focused their attentions on the LPM's boycott of the vote, rather than on the actions the movement intended to carry out in lieu of voting. Land occupations were a significant worry to many, but this threat was not new; the LPM had been threatening a wave of land occupations around the 2004 elections for some time. Pairing land occupations with a boycott of the vote was a new element of the campaign – and a sharper critique of South Africa's new democracy.

⁶¹ Maureen Mnisi. Unpublished letter to the editor of the *Mail & Guardian*. Oct 2003.

⁶² Landless People's Movement. 2003. 'Submission to the Portfolio Committee for Agriculture and Land Affairs on the Communal Land Rights Bill.' November. 2.

From rural to urban and back

The progression of the No Land! No Vote! campaign between urban and rural areas followed the trend of the LPM as a whole as the impetus was found in rural areas but only transformed into a national campaign through the actions of urban areas (with more media exposure and ease of communication). The No Land! No Vote! campaign was pursued most strongly by LPM members facing direct attacks either on farms (in Mpumalanga, North-West, and, to a lesser extent, KwaZulu-Natal) or from government-led removals (as in Johannesburg). The earliest sentiment around the No Land! No Vote! Campaign began among rural farm workers in Mpumalanga province, but urban LPM membership – specifically in Johannesburg – brought visibility to the campaign. Gauteng province was the first to officially launch the campaign, with a march to the Union Building in Pretoria in November 2003. After the march, the campaign against voter registration intensified and found a large following in urban townships, including Protea South, Thembelihle, Orange Farm, and Eikenhof. Voter registration was particularly low in the LPM strongholds of Eikenhof, where just three individuals registered, and Thembelihle, where only 70 registered.⁶³

Johannesburg LPM members found politicians unresponsive to the needs of communities facing eviction, and were not willing to lend their vote to a government which was forcibly removing them from their homes. As Sisi Zulu of Orange Farm states:

For us, it's like we've been applying and applying, begging, having meetings and meetings, spending a lot of money to say, 'Government, we do want to speak to you.' But it's like there's no action. We don't get any answers. We fax them, even march to our councilors. We didn't even get any response. So that's why we are telling ourselves that during the elections, LPM is going to take back their land. We are saying, 'no land, no vote' because where people will be voting is a land that is being rented by somebody, so that building is being rented, even the land on it is being rented. So we don't see any necessity to vote if you don't have a place to stay. Because it's like you are chaining yourself again to another government that is going to promise and do nothing. We say: no land, no vote.⁶⁴

Maureen Mnisi of Protea South described the government as not only unresponsive, but violently antagonistic:

We've been writing those letters to the government and we're marching, trying to show them that is what we want. The only thing: there's no results that we're getting. You get guns and laws, is what we get. So is that an answer from our government? It's guns and laws, just putting to the poor people. When you fight, they resist instead of replying. And then they put those forces to shoot you and they put the bulldozer to destroy your shack and you don't have any say, but you have to listen to what they think because there's a gun. They fight, you know.⁶⁵

⁶³ Andile Mngxitama. 2003. E-mail correspondence. National Land Committee. 4 November.

⁶⁴ Sisi Zulu. 2003. Personal interview. Braamfontein, Johannesburg. 24 August.

⁶⁵ Maureen Mnisi. 2003. Personal interview. Braamfontein, Johannesburg. 8 August.

The evolution of the LPM's increasingly radical tactics is evident, as both women describe attempts to work first through governmental channels by requesting meetings with councilors, sending letters and faxes, and marching to politicians' offices. However, LPM members have engaged the government on the land issue more often through eviction processes than through discussion meetings in government offices – which gives the impression that the government is more an adversary than an ally.

The No Land! No Vote! campaign took hold unevenly across rural constituencies. Still, there were several rural actions around the campaign. The North-West province branch had at least four actions. The Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga branches (also composed of mostly rural membership) had their first actions in February 2004, including a continuous sit-in at the Umtata offices of the Department of Land Affairs.⁶⁶ On 4 March, one month before the elections, more than 300 members of the LPM marched to their premier's office in the Eastern Cape provincial capital of Bisho. Upon arrival, they declared that the government had seven days to respond to their ultimatum: 'give us land, or we will take over farms forcefully on April 14'.⁶⁷ LPM members traveled to Bisho from across the province, gathering from Umtata, Uitenhage, Port Elizabeth, Bizana and Grahamstown.

The common complaint of LPM members, urban and rural alike, was that this was 'not the democracy we struggled for.'⁶⁸ As Sylvia Matshoba of Protea South explains:

Mbeki said to us on TV, I still remember, said 'I am going to make your lives better'. Electricity. Even water. Nothing of that sort is happening. It seems maybe he was speaking to someone else. We used to fight with them, for this ANC to be in government today. But all the grassroots, left with nothing. We lost our children here fighting for this democratic government. We lost our daughters. We lost our sons. We lost our children for this democracy. They fought for this democracy, this democracy to be today. But what did we get: nothing. Just left with tears. Because our children, we used to tell them 'The boers are going to shoot you!'. They said 'All the children that are being shot, mamma, they are also human beings. Their mothers and fathers loved them like you love me. So if I die there, I will die like a soldier. I'll be fighting for my country because this is our country. We must fight for it'. They fought for it, but they got nothing. Other people that fight for this land, they didn't get anything.⁶⁹

Matshoba and others express a dual sentiment of dashed expectations. They refer to specific promises made by the ANC – land, housing, electricity, water – which have not been followed through upon during the last decade. But they also describe a more profound expectation of what 'democracy' itself might bring.

⁶⁶ Andile Mngxitama. 2004. E-mail correspondence. National Land Committee. 14 March.

⁶⁷ 'South Africa: Threats of election day land occupation.' South African Press Association. *Afrika.no*. 4 Mar 2004. <<http://www.afrika.no/Detailed/4976.html>>.

⁶⁸ Personal interviews. August 2003.

⁶⁹ Sylvia Matshoba. 2003. Personal interview. Protea South, Johannesburg. 10 August.

The ANC's response to the No Land! No Vote! campaign evolved dramatically over the course of several months from a position of disregard to one of strict denunciation. Upon the LPM's national launch of the No Land! No Vote! campaign in November 2003, officials in the ANC government discounted the LPM as a 'fringe' group which could not seriously affect voter turn-out, the electability of the ANC, or the overall integrity of the elections.⁷⁰ The ANC never expressed any worry in these respects, but it began to react very sharply to the LPM's threats of land occupations. The party also denied the LPM's charges that they had failed in the land reform process.

In a press statement released just six weeks before the election and in response to the No Land! No Vote! campaign the ANC maintained that it had not strayed from its land reform commitments as adopted in 1994.⁷¹ The party stated that it 'has made significant progress over the last ten years in ensuring the progressive redistribution and restitution of land'. The ANC further expressed its intolerance of the LPM's plans to occupy land and the movement's characterisation of official land reform policy:

South Africans will not tolerate hooliganism that is only aimed at misleading people and creating chaos and discord. Those with designs to deliberately flout the law and occupy land illegally will be met with the full might of the law. South Africa is a constitutional democracy that enshrines the right to demonstrate and freedom of expression, but such rights do not include a right to perpetuate lies, violate the law and act in a manner calculated to polarise society.... The ANC indeed respects the right of the Landless People's Movement to choose to forgo their right to vote, but will not tolerate any act calculated at intimidating people and stopping them from exercising their right to vote.... If the LPM has legitimate concerns regarding the land restitution process, these can and should be dealt with through the appropriate government departments.⁷²

The government cracked down harshly on No Land! No Vote! campaign protests. On election day, 57 LPM members were arrested in the settlement of Thembelihle for attempting to hold a protest. Activists intended to observe regulations which only allow protests to be held at least 200 meters from any polling station, but they were arrested as they disembarked from their transport in Thembelihle. They were charged in terms of the Electoral Code of Conduct and the 1993 Prohibition of Illegal Gathering Act.⁷³ Activists were held in jail over night and four of them were subjected to physical and psychological abuse by members of the police's Crime Intelligence Unit.⁷⁴ Over two years later, the case is still dragging on in court.

The majority of those arrested came from the LPM strongholds of Thembelihle and Protea South. The wearying court battle has taken its toll on the movement's

⁷⁰ 'Movements Split on Vote.' AllAfrica.com. 31 Oct 2003. <<http://allafrica.com/stories/200310310803.html>>.

⁷¹ African National Congress. 2004. 'ANC Keeps to Land Reform Commitments.' Press statement. 4 March.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ See Landless People's Movement. 2004. 'LPM members arrested on election day'. Press Release. 17 April. <http://www.landaction.org/display.php?article=209>.

⁷⁴ See Anti-Privatisation Forum. 2004. 'LPM activists tortured and detained'. Press Release. 29 April. <http://www.landaction.org/display.php?article=213>.

Johannesburg leadership. As Bongani Xezwi of Protea South observed, the LPM has become equated with arrests and court battles in Thembelihle and Protea South. In Protea South, the ANC councilor has stated that anyone who obstructs the housing plan for the area will be arrested. (The current plan consists of moving residents to a camp while houses are built, but residents argue that they must be allowed to stay while houses are built). These threats of arrest seem very real to those who have witnessed the movement's history and have succeeded in significantly de-mobilising the movement.⁷⁵

And yet the No Land! No Vote! campaign remains as evidence of how much the LPM's radical position owes to its bridging of the rural-urban divide. In its early months as an exclusively rural initiative, the LPM was limited by its dependency upon the National Land Committee and its affiliated NGOs. The careful positioning of these NGOs as mediators between the government and the rural landless and their role as service providers hindered the development of a more radical ideology. In addition, since the NGOs work in cooperation with all aspects of rural societies, including traditional leadership, the democratisation of rural authority had not been a central concern. The links between land distribution and the poverty and mass unemployment perpetuated by the ANC's macro-economic policies were amplified by joining forces with urban landless. From this mix came a searing critique of South African democracy which drew its fire from urban and rural experiences alike. In lifting cries of 'No Land! No Vote!' the LPM criticised the government in radical terms that would not have been foreseen without the process of invalidating the urban-rural divide.

Moving forward

It's become unpopular to write about the Landless People's Movement in the present tense. Over the last couple years, commentators have taken to writing about its implosion, 'collapse' and 'decline'.⁷⁶ However, by focusing on turmoil in the national executive committee, fraught relationships with donors, and a sharp decrease in media presence, observers have overlooked persisting local-level activity. By looking for a movement with certain characteristics, commentators risk re-inscribing urban biases and selling short the impact that the landless subject continues to have on South African society.

In an interview in May 2006, Paul Tikoane described his plans for future LPM action. Based in Welkom in the Free State, Tikoane has been a member of the LPM since the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002. Tikoane was once a miner in Anglo's Free State mines, and speaks with devastating insight about the impact of the mining system, particularly in terms of the spread of HIV. Before joining the LPM, Tikoane was an ANC councilor from 1995-2000. He was elected into the national leadership of the LPM, and moved into the Brixton, Johannesburg office, doing construction work by day (when jobs were available) and meeting with LPM comrades

⁷⁵ Bongani Xezwi. 2006. Personal interview. Johannesburg. 28 May.

⁷⁶ Greenberg (2006).

in the evenings. His ties to Welkom remain strong. There, he has been working with others to coordinate a joint campaign between the LPM and the mineworkers' union to confront Anglo (whose labour practices have only worsened with the sub-contracting of management in some smaller mines in recent years). Tikoane would like to research and write the history of the Free State, to tell the story of unabating colonialism. Tikoane speaks of the need to urgently re-launch the urban branches of the LPM, and speaks with just as much force about his family's claim to the Tikoane River, which is now the property of Anglo. He is insistent that Anglo must be taken to court and forced to return land, and that it will take a coalition between the landless and (landless) mineworkers to do so.⁷⁷

Along with Tikoane's plans for a partnership between landless and unionised mineworkers, other LPM members in Gauteng have contemplated more pro-active strategies around HIV and treatment access. The LPM's Hillbrow branch fell apart after its key leader died of AIDS in 2004, and many other comrades have fallen sick or are otherwise affected by HIV and AIDS. LPM members have considered making hospitals targets of occupation, descending in numbers and refusing to leave until anti-retroviral medicines or treatment for opportunistic infections are administered.

LPM activist Bongani Xezwi, in his early-20s, concedes that the LPM is at a weak point, but likens the LPM's problems to those of other South African social movements overwhelmed by donor funding and demands and by overly-bureaucratic national structures which have not always maintained strong ties to the grassroots.⁷⁸ LPM activists in Gauteng (the area hardest hit by in-fighting associated with the demise of the NLC, donor-movement tensions, arrests, etc.) are attempting new ways to become independent of donor funding. Members who have the means are now asked to make monthly donations to a transportation fund. Though it will mean much less funding in the short term, it is recognised as a sustainable way of generating funds.

Local actions in urban and rural areas give lie to claims about the movement's demise. This is fortunate, as the LPM's form of praxis is particularly needed now when new movements are emerging and trying to work out their own position vis à vis the state. The LPM's conception of the present situation as fundamentally linked to colonialism and racism as enacted through apartheid, the property clause, the negotiated settlement, market-based land reform strategies, and a national trajectory that seeks to be in line with international interests would likely help shake up newer movements' perceptions that the national government and the ANC are doing fine, and that the problem is a few corrupt local councilors and city managers.

Finally, those of us who narrate struggles must be aware and cautious of how our accounts constrain certain potential. The urban-based struggles around evictions, electricity, housing, water and other 'basic services' may very well owe much of their strength to strong personal connections to family, friends and livelihoods in rural areas.

⁷⁷ Paul Tikoane. 2006. Personal interview. Brixton, Johannesburg. 25 May.

⁷⁸ The LPM has been funded by Oxfam-Belgium and War on Want. Activists complain of signs of the movement 'being run from Europe' when, for example, the LPM was forced to hold national elections following funders' demands (rather than at a time chosen by the movement).

Our urban biases may prevent us from asking or writing about such connections across the 'urban-rural divide' and how they fuel people's struggles. Urban shackdwellers and flatdwellers may very well conceive of themselves as being engaged in struggles for land, but commentators may unwittingly fall into the same trap as policymakers who consider these to be 'housing' struggles or 'service delivery' protests. To write that the LPM Gauteng 'rose and fell on the basis of being an anti-evictions movement'⁷⁹ reveals such biases and, in this case, threatens to dampen the impact of the LPM's interventions.

Still, there is reason to be optimistic that the 'landless', no matter where they are found, will continue to demand a deepening of South African democracy based on liberation from the effects of historical dispossession and market-based macro-economic policy alike. No doubt academics and policymakers will continue to re-inscribe urban-rural division, defining differential access to rights, citizenship and 'the good life' based on naturalised dichotomies. The prospects for South African society therefore rest on the landless's continued refusal to be divided among themselves.

⁷⁹ Greenberg (2006).

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