

WORKING ON LAND GRABBING, 1963-2013

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An introduction

Towards the end of a meeting in London last month organised by the IF campaign¹ on *The Global Land Rush: How to Ensure Greater Transparency in Land Deals*, I asked, 'two or three years ago there was almost a conspiracy of silence surrounding global land grabbing. Now we are hearing lots of noise – but is it having any impact?' I didn't get a clear answer and didn't really expect to – but I very much hope that this conference, with its emphasis on *Strategies of Resistance*, will help to answer that question and I look forward to learning more about this really critical issue.

Being asked to provide something as grand as a keynote address has prompted me to think back over my own various engagements with land grabbing over the past half century, first as an academic in Southern Africa, then as a development worker for Oxfam GB, and now largely in retirement with Mokoro Ltd. I shall focus largely on Africa, as it is the continent I know best.

Academic stuff

In late 1963, as I was about to graduate in history at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, my professor, Eric Stokes, asked if I had considered doing a Ph.D. I said I had not but, because I couldn't think of anything else I could usefully do, I thought why not? Our external examiner, Richard Gray, author of a mightily impressive 1960 book, *The Two Nations*,² suggested that I might care to look at land in Southern Rhodesia. So I did take a look and very soon decided that it was indeed extremely interesting and that I would attempt a Ph.D. on the subject.

Researching the politics of land in colonial Zimbabwe would have been sensitive at any time, but 'the times were a changing' pretty dramatically. In December 1962, the

¹ <http://enoughfoodif.org/> There is an interesting conflict of ideas between the IF campaign's pressure to urge the G8 to establish a new Land Transparency Initiative to support implementation of the famous Voluntary Guidelines and a statement from a group of 42 organizations, including La Via Campesina, which strongly condemns this because it 'will not stop land and resource grabbing, the G8 has no democratic legitimacy to make decisions about land, food and nutrition, and the G8 initiative on transparency bypasses and undermines the Committee on Food Security.' 'G8 should implement the CFS Tenure Guidelines rather than launch a new initiative aimed at transparency in land transactions', La Via Campesina and others, 15 May 2013. <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/print/22083>

² Richard Gray, *The Two Nations: Aspects of the Development of Race Relations in the Rhodesias and Nyasaland* (London: OUP, 1960).

highly conservative Rhodesian Front came to power in Southern Rhodesia, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland broke up at the end of 1963, Northern Rhodesia became Zambia and Nyasaland became Malawi in 1964, and then the Rhodesian Front made its Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain in November 1965. Three months later I was deported, for various reasons but almost certainly including the subject of my research. So I had to complete my Ph.D. in London, which I eventually did in 1968. I went off lecturing in Malawi and Zambia and wasn't able to turn my thesis into a book until 1977. The title was *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia*³ and, in essence, it examined pretty closely the huge amount of social and political engineering involved in making it possible for some white farmers to be relatively 'successful'. The point being that it certainly wasn't achieved through the magic of the free market or on a level playing field. Having researched and written this history makes me a trifle sceptical when I encounter biofuel promoters and others talking about how easy it will be to create new commercial plantations in Africa.

Also in 1977, when lecturing at the University of Zambia, I edited, with Neil Parsons, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*,⁴ in which, as the modest blurb on the cover explained, 'historians of a new generation look back and rediscover the history of peasant prosperity and subsequent impoverishment in the eleven states from Zaire to South Africa... Here is historical evidence that has too often been ignored and forgotten.' *Roots* told the stories of how African peasant farmers across the region had responded positively to new market opportunities brought by the late 19th century mining revolution before they were later undermined by political and social engineering. I often remind myself of that history when I hear people today say that there is now no place in the world for small-scale farmers.

My last academic post was in 1984-5 when I was Visiting Professor in History at the University of Malawi. Here I did some research on white 'planters', as they styled themselves in Nyasaland. By 1939 I wrote 'The attempt to establish settler family farms had proved an almost complete failure.' The 35 tea estates, employing 80 whites, survived because of the special protection of the International Tea Regulation Scheme while the few white tobacco growers moved into sharecropping in an attempt to offload the risks onto black tenants.⁵ Sharecropping is often discussed as an option in today's discourse on land grabbing.

Working for Oxfam

In February 1987 I joined Oxfam GB and worked there, on and off but mostly on, for 20 years. Initially I worked on its Southern Africa Desk and my only direct involvement on land was to research and write a paper 'Land Reform in Zimbabwe,

³ Robin Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977).

⁴ Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (Eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977).

⁵ Robin Palmer, 'White Farmers in Malawi: Before and After the Depression', *African Affairs*, **84**, 335, 1985, 244-5.

1980-1990', which was published in *African Affairs*.⁶ This was in effect commissioned by Oxfam's Zimbabwe office and involved my interviewing some Zimbabwean officials about their concerns over British Government reactions when the Lancaster House Constitution, with its famous 'willing seller, willing buyer' clause, came to an end in April 1990. I was later told by a British official that it was required reading for successive British High Commissioners being posted to Zimbabwe!

In 1997 Oxfam created the post of Land Policy Adviser, Africa, and I was appointed to it. The job involved many things including giving practical support to Oxfam offices and local partners engaged in land struggles, helping develop and support a wide range of networks, such as the Uganda and Kenya Land Alliances, creating the *Land Rights in Africa* website, trying to persuade African governments and civil society to engage seriously with each other, lobbying DFID and the World Bank on pro-poor land policies, and critiquing some of the new land policies and laws being proposed in the somewhat triumphalist post-Cold War era. In 2003 my post was globalised and I became Global Land Adviser, a title which I always felt was somewhat pretentious. But I did get to study land issues in places like the Philippines, Cambodia, post-Tsunami Aceh, Honduras and Guatemala, which was of course highly instructive. I worked increasingly on women's land rights and in 2003 set up a list server on the subject which survives to this day. (The recent literature on global land grabbing I find almost silent on gender, with the notable exception of my colleague Liz Daley).⁷

Also from 2003 I was deployed by Oxfam International to act as a go between / academic adviser to a Zimbabwean research group which was looking at what was happening in some of the former white-owned commercial farms. This involved some really interesting exchanges, including with the research group led by Ian Scoones. I was struck by the commitment of these young scholars to undertake good, old-fashioned serious, rigorous research in the most challenging environment imaginable post-2000.⁸ Anyone opening their mouth to say anything about Fast Track land reform in Zimbabwe is immediately cast into one side or the other; there is very little ground for nuance. Much of course depends on where you start your story, what you include and what you leave out. Joseph Hanlon and colleagues begin their new book with war veterans given land as a reward for their services and driving those farming the land off into the bush and burning their homes. The year was 1945!⁹

⁶ Robin Palmer, 'Land Reform in Zimbabwe, 1980-90', *African Affairs*, **89**, 1990, 163-81.

⁷ Elizabeth Daley, 'Strategies to get gender onto the agenda of the "Land Grab" debate', International Land Coalition Policy Brief, March 2011. http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/1010/6_PBs_mokoro.pdf

Elizabeth Daley, *Gendered Impacts of Commercial Pressures on Land*, International Land Coalition, 2011. http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/896/WEB_MOKORO_Gender_final_layout.pdf

⁸ This work was published in Prosper B. Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

⁹ Joseph Hanlon, Jeanette Manjengwa and Teresa Smart, *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land* (Sterling, Virginia: Kumarian Press, 2013).

What I was trying to do overall as Oxfam's land adviser is perhaps captured in the rather pretentious title of an article I wrote in 2003, 'Struggling to secure and defend the Land Rights of the Poor in Africa'.¹⁰ Recently I was struck by the contemporary relevance of an article I wrote back in 1998 for a famous conference at SOAS on *Land Reform in Zimbabwe – the way forward* (which became a book in 2000) in which I noted that:

The context behind all this conflict over land is complex. At the risk of huge oversimplification it is the impact which current economic orthodoxy – and the emphasis on privatisation and market forces in particular – has on access to land which is causing so many problems, especially coming as it does after half a century and more of state interventions in the economy. Governments in Africa now find themselves under great pressures – and competing with each other – to open up to foreign investors in what, in an era of globalisation, is very much an investor's market. This can involve 'selling off the family silver', as Harold Macmillan so memorably characterised Margaret Thatcher's privatisation programme in Britain. In Africa, the family silver has come to mean minerals, land, and even water.

So in Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia there has been, and continues to be, great pressure to 'open up' and pass legislation to make land easily available to new investors, whether local, foreign, or a combination of the two... Opening up applies especially to tourist ventures, in which most countries in east and southern Africa find themselves competing with each other. Game parks, theme parks and private lodges for the seriously rich have sprung up all over the place, with adverse effects on pastoralist communities in particular, as huge areas of once common grazing land have been fenced off. Increasing mining activities in east Africa are also directly threatening land rights in places like Karamoja, northern Uganda. Internally there are strong pressures from those who wield political or economic power to turn this situation to their advantage... More generally, deals are usually struck in an atmosphere of corruption and secrecy, so that local communities are often the last to know that their land has been signed away – as was the case of course in the days of Rhodes and Lobengula.¹¹

15 years later this all sounds pretty familiar. Land grabbing is of course not new; Liz Alden Wily began her paper 'The Global Land Grab: The New Enclosures' in Ireland in the year 1607!¹² But I have to admit that when Oxfam finally retired me in February 2007 and (rather more foolishly) abolished my post, I had absolutely no inkling of the scale of the global land grab that was to explode just a few months later, even though I was supposed to be a Global Land Adviser! I'm pretty sure that I was not alone in this.

¹⁰ Robin Palmer, 'Struggling to secure and defend the Land Rights of the Poor in Africa', *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*, 19, 2003, 6-21.

¹¹ Robin Palmer, 'Mugabe's "Land Grab" in Regional Perspective', in T.A.S. Bowyer-Bower and Colin Stoneman (Eds), *Land Reform in Zimbabwe: Constraints and Prospects* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 17-19.

¹² <http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/global-land-grab-new-enclosures>

In retirement with Mokoro

When I was asked to write a 'proper academic paper' for the first time in many years for the 2010 African Studies Association of the UK biennial conference, I found myself drawn irresistibly to my historical work on Cecil Rhodes and his merry men. I wrote:

An early chapter in my 1977 book *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* is called 'the Age of the Fortune Hunters'. It describes how, in late Victorian times, the British Government granted a Royal Charter to the millionaire imperialist Cecil Rhodes, which gave him carte blanche to exploit for 35 years the territories we now know as Zimbabwe and Zambia. That Charter was based on highly dubious land and mineral concessions signed with local chiefs spuriously claiming to rule all of those lands. After Zimbabweans rose up against the misrule of Rhodes' British South Africa Company in 1896, a new administrator ruefully observed that his predecessor had 'given nearly the whole country away' to speculators who 'promise any amount of things, but the execution thereof is delayed till the Greek Kalends' (i.e. forever). A decade of reckless speculation, extensive land grabbing, corruption and maladministration bequeathed a bitter legacy.

An early administrator, Archibald Colquhoun, 'felt an utter distaste for the atmosphere of mining speculation and company promoting which pervaded the country.' Very little of this land was occupied at the time, but the longer term legacy was immense, as 'Vested interests were established which proved impossible to undo.'

A charter generally gave governing and monopoly rights and did imply some sort of 'code of conduct', but this was generally totally ignored by the companies and very rarely enforced by the home Imperial governments. Today, when African governments offer extensive land concessions to foreign companies wanting to grow food for home consumption, or gain better access to protected European markets, or produce biofuels in response to EU targets, at least they do not offer them governing rights, but there are still some disturbing similarities. Now, 120 years later, new concession hunters are on the march, seeking control over African land and water to augment food security back home, principally in the Persian Gulf and East Asia. They are finding willing local accomplices, only too eager to lease out vast tracts of land in return for derisory payments and illusory promises. As in colonial times, local people are almost never consulted.¹³

¹³ Robin Palmer, 'Would Cecil Rhodes have signed a Code of Conduct? Reflections on Global Land Grabbing and Land Right, in Africa, Past and Present', African Studies Association of the UK, Biennial conference, Oxford, 16-19 September 2010, citing Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination*, 35, 75 n41, 13, 34, 46.

http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/would_cecil_rhodes_have_signed_a_code_of_conduct.pdf

Select bibliographies

In April 2008, a year after I left Oxfam, I went to a meeting of 50 or so land experts in Southern Africa and asked if anyone in the audience had heard of biofuels. Nobody had (I was fully 3 months ahead of them!) – so I offered them a brief introduction and told them that they would certainly hear about them very soon. This experience alerted me to the fact that the ‘land world’ I had known was becoming increasingly complex, with many new actors engaging, a fact nicely encapsulated in the question ‘Is your retirement fund a land-grabber?’¹⁴ So I thought that I might usefully spend some of my time in retirement trying to read up on global land grabbing and so help to raise awareness of some of the issues involved.

As a result I began compiling select bibliographies on *Biofuels, Global Land Grabbing and Land Rights in Africa*. The first came out in August 2008, the most recent in October 2012. This comprises (1) reports, (2) books, journal articles and TV, video & radio clips, (3) press cuttings. In all they cover over 200 pages! Successive versions have been posted on the *Land Rights in Africa* website which I have run since 2000, originally hosted by Oxfam, now by Mokoro¹⁵ at <http://www.mokoro.co.uk/land-rights-in-africa>

The sheer volume of material has grown exponentially over the past four years, which is clearly a sign of increasing engagement by a wide range of people and organizations – academics, journalists, pressure groups, international NGOs and many others. The conspiracy of silence which I had noticed two years ago is now clearly at an end, so I shall probably compile just one more bibliography before retiring for good!

I feel there is no need for me to continue because by far and away the best single resource is the daily updated website <http://farmlandgrab.org/> where readers can subscribe to a weekly update. This is run and managed by GRAIN, the hugely impressive small non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements.

You might be interested, and perhaps relieved, to learn that <http://farmlandgrab.org/> has only two entries on Ireland! One suggested that ‘Ireland has expertise in the food and agriculture sector and is ready to offer Saudi Arabia technical know-how and skills required for engaging in agricultural farming in third countries such as Sudan, South Africa, Brazil and Argentina’,¹⁶ while the other mentioned foreign investors wanting ‘to get involved in dairy farms and own land [in Ireland]. They know nothing about farming and they don’t want to manage the farm. They want to partner with good dairy farmers who can manage the business well for them.’¹⁷ An arresting idea.

¹⁴ ‘Is your retirement fund a land-grabber?’, *Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy*, 17 May 2012. <http://www.iatp.org/blog/201205/is-your-retirement-fund-a-land-grabber>

¹⁵ Mokoro Ltd is an Oxford-based consultancy group founded in 1982. A number of us work on land rights, including Martin Adams and Elizabeth Daley.

¹⁶ ‘Saudi Arabia keen to address food security issue: Irish official’, *The Saudi Gazette*, 31 October 2010. <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/16876>

¹⁷ ‘Foreign investors to put €50m into Irish dairying’, *Independent*, 15 May 2012. <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/20495>

It was good to be reminded recently by TNI (the Transnational Institute) that land grabbing (and concentration of land) affect Europe as well:

The report, involving 25 authors from 11 countries, reveals the hidden scandal of how a few big private business entities have gained control of ever-greater areas of European land. It exposes how these land elites have been actively supported by a huge injection of public funds – at a time when all other public funding is being subjected to massive cuts. While some of these processes – in particular ever-increasing land concentration – are not new, they have accelerated in recent decades in particular in eastern Europe. They have also paved the way for a new sector of foreign and domestic actors to emerge on the European stage, many tied into increasingly global commodity chains, and all looking to profit from the increasingly speculative commodity of land.¹⁸

Among the obstacles to be overcome in confronting the global land grab

This conference will be focussing on strategies of resistance. In such a context I thought it might be helpful to list a few of the obstacles with which resisters will be confronted – arrogance, the issue of farm size, the veil of silence, the numbers game, and no level legal playing field.

Arrogance

One of the most serious obstacles to be overcome, and one which I think attracts relatively little attention, is the attitude of many of those in authority in Africa. In a nutshell all too frequently they simply despise peasant farmers and pastoralists. These rural folk are seen by their urban rulers as backward, primitive, ignorant, uneducated – and, significantly, no political threat. This arrogance makes it easy for them to believe that the way forward lies in ‘modern’ large-scale, plantation agriculture with ‘proper’ farmers imported from elsewhere. That this enables some to line their own pockets is of course an added incentive, but I believe that many are genuinely captured by this modernist vision in its own right. Which is a little strange.

‘Does anyone remember the Tanganyika Groundnuts Scheme?’, Lionel Cliffe asked at a session of the 2010 ASUK conference. For those who don’t, here are some details:

The East African groundnuts scheme was postwar Britain’s equivalent of the Millennium Dome. In pursuit of a laudable objective, millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money was poured diligently into a sump of official incompetence. Started in 1947 by the Labour government, to grow peanuts (groundnuts) in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) as a contribution to both the African and the British economies and to alleviate a world shortage of fats, the scheme was ill planned, failed to allow for the area’s soil and rainfall, and employed unsuitable agricultural methods, including the wrong kind of machinery for the terrain. Nor had local traditions and attitudes been taken into account.

¹⁸ *Land concentration, land grabbing and people’s struggles in Europe*, TNI, April 2013. www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/files/download/land_in_europe.pdf

The plan called for the clearing of five million acres of land in the first five years and the creation of a new deep-water port and railway in Tanganyika, and was expected to create 32,000 jobs for African workers. The project was suggested originally by the United Africa Company, a subsidiary of Unilever, but was soon handed over to the government's Overseas Food Corporation. The prime mover was the Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech Jones, but the principal responsibility rested with the Minister of Food, the Old Etonian ex-Communist John Strachey. Both men's reputations were ruined.

By 1949 it was clear that things were going badly wrong. In the House of Commons in July 1950, Maurice Webb, now Minister of Food, admitted that the scheme had been pushed forward at breakneck speed and the methods used had not been adequately tested. The accounts were in chaos, too, though he did not put it quite like that, but he said it would be wrong to abandon the scheme or 'retreat in any fundamental way'.

The Overseas Food Corporation appointed a working party, which reported at the end of September that the scheme was costing six times as much to produce the crops as the crops were worth and that the administration in Tanganyika needed to be 'much smaller and more flexible' and released from 'the burden of preconceived objectives and targets', as well as 'undue or premature publicity'.

The writing was on the wall and the effective abandonment of the groundnuts scheme was announced in the following January. The debts were written off to the tune of £36.5 million. No one seemed eager to acknowledge responsibility.¹⁹

In similar vein, does anyone ever reflect on the reasonably extensive literature demonstrating that where *some* white farmers had been relatively 'successful' in colonial times, this was invariably the result of a process of huge social engineering? As Fred Cooper observed, 'Despite much forced labour and the elimination of alternatives, white farmers in French West Africa, the Belgian Congo, Portuguese West and East Africa and British East and Central Africa struggled, usually in vain, to effect a similar transformation' [to that in South Africa].²⁰

Given this history, I find current presumptions about the ease of installing large-scale plantations in upcountry Africa quite breath-taking. Then of course we have all those bizarre notions, peddled by so many African politicians, of vast amounts of vacant, unused land just waiting to be taken up by outsiders. Sometimes I wonder if the time is ripe for another Congress of Berlin.

¹⁹ Richard Cavendish, 'Britain Abandons the Groundnuts Scheme', *History Today*, **51**, 1, 2001.

²⁰ Palmer, 'White Farmers', 213, citing Frederick Cooper, 'Africa and the World Economy', *African Studies Review*, **24**, 1981, 33.

The issue of farm size

Towards the end of the brilliant conference on global land grabbing at IDS Sussex in May 2011, Ben White noted that, having carefully studied all the 400 papers submitted to the conference, he could not find a single case of any large-scale corporate land acquisition which had fulfilled its claimed developmental role of increasing food security, or providing jobs or other benefits for rural people. So, he suggested, the burden of proof is surely now on those who favour corporate land acquisition and corporate industrial farming. This was a good rhetorical point, but I don't think that much has altered in the subsequent two years. Paul Collier and his 'peasants must inevitably disappear' rhetoric remain in the ascendancy in the corridors of power, if not in academia.

I was however somewhat cheered, during the course of writing this paper, to come across a new ODI report by Steve Wiggins and Sharada Keats called *Smallholder agriculture's contribution to better nutrition*. For the authors, in their study of Ghana, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Zambia and Kerala, four main points stood out for policy conclusions:

Smallholder agricultural development can be an excellent way to reduce poverty and tackle hunger in low income countries.

Patterns of agricultural development need steering towards more diversified food production.

Back up smallholder agricultural programmes with complementary actions in primary health care, clean water and sanitation, other direct interventions for nutrition, and female empowerment.

Greater political support for improving food security and nutrition is needed.²¹

The veil of silence

Another critical factor is of course the veil of silence and secrecy which prevails over so many land deals. As has frequently been observed, often the first time local people know that a deal has been struck is when the bulldozers move in. This silence and secrecy make it extremely difficult for local farmers and those who wish to support them to take effective action. There are of course many attempts to do so and to push governments to reveal more information (as is well illustrated in my bibliographies). There are even some governments, Tanzania springs to mind, which are genuinely trying to be more transparent, but sadly they are certainly in a minority.

The numbers game

And then there are the numbers, or rather the lack of numbers. In its *Land and Power* briefing, citing the ILC's famous Land Matrix Partnership, Oxfam boldly announced that '227 million hectares – an area the size of Western Europe – has

²¹ *Smallholder agriculture's contribution to better nutrition*, ODI, Steve Wiggins and Sharada Keats, 20 March 2013, xi-xiv.

<http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/7317-smallholder-agriculture-nutrition-food-security#downloads>

been sold or leased since 2001, mostly to international investors. The bulk of these acquisitions has taken place over the past two years.²² We all like to cite numbers of course, international NGOs more than anyone, but in this context they are invariably spurious and provoke strong attacks.²³ I favour the more measured approach of Lorenzo Cotula in his *The knowns and unknowns of the global land rush*²⁴ and many other publications. Interestingly, when I looked up the land matrix, I found this announcement:

Re-launch of Land Matrix Global Observatory - postponed to June 10 2013. We have decided to postpone our launch of the next version of the Land Matrix to June 10 2013. In the meantime, we will undergo closed peer reviews with experts in the field of research, policy, advocacy and open data to help us improve the platform. We apologize for the delay. Until the re-launch, please note that the current data should be regarded as provisional, and will be revised significantly with the new version.²⁵

No level legal playing field

One of the most serious concerns is the lack of a level legal playing field. Here the power imbalances are extreme; small farmers generally have little practical legal recourse, even in countries with relatively progressive local laws, while investors have over 3,000 bilateral investment treaties to fall back on – which they frequently do. As Lorenzo Cotula argues in his outstanding forthcoming book, *The Great African Land Grab? Agricultural Investments and the Global Food System*:

In the global rush for Africa's land, prevailing legal frameworks make local rights vulnerable to dispossession, and provide only limited hooks for villagers to defend their rights. Once a piece of land becomes of outside interest, legal options for local people to defend their rights, negotiate a fair deal and hold governments and companies to account are severely constrained by the weak rights that villagers have under both national and international law.²⁶

²² *Land and Power. The growing scandal surrounding the new wave of investment in land*, Oxfam Briefing Paper **151**, 22 September 2011, 2.
<http://www.oxfam.org/en/grow/policy/land-and-power>

²³ 'To be expected: Faulty land matrix database goes academic...', *Oil for Food*, 11 February 2013.
<http://farmlandgrab.org/post/print/21636>
For an interesting study on 'flaws in the use of data' in Tanzania, see Martina Locher & Emmanuel Sulle, *Foreign land deals in Tanzania. An update and a critical view on the challenges of data (re)production*, LDPI Working Paper **31**, May 2013
<http://www.plaas.org.za/sites/default/files/publications-landpdf/LDPI31Locher%26Sulle.pdf>

²⁴ *The knowns and unknowns of the global land rush*, IIED, Lorenzo Cotula, 24 October 2012.
<http://www.iied.org/knowns-unknowns-global-land-rush>

²⁵ <http://landportal.info/landmatrix>

²⁶ Lorenzo Cotula, *The Great African Land Grab? Agricultural Investments and the Global Food System* (London: Zed Books) in press.

Some final reflections

I would say this of course, but I believe strongly that history and historical contexts really do matter, as Rebecca Smalley has recently acknowledged.²⁷ I find this neatly encapsulated in this quotation:

While it was inconceivable that land could be redistributed through a willing buyer – willing seller approach at the beginning of the Cold War, by the Cold War's end it was inconceivable that it could be done in any other way.²⁸

This illustrates the ironies of how the economic power of the old landlords was broken in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan after 1945, but how this did not happen in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, or in Zimbabwe in 1980 or South Africa in 1994. In the latter cases, the 'willing seller, willing buyer' formula imposed by donors in effect legalised and froze a century and more of colonial land grabbing and protected those who had benefitted from it.

During my work with Oxfam, I was frequently appalled, especially in Southern Africa, by the almost complete lack of historical awareness of many of those working in donor agencies. Knowing little of the past, they could not begin to understand why Africans were passionately concerned about land rights and, dangerously, they quite literally did not understand where Robert Mugabe was coming from. At the launch of a DFID land policy paper in July 2007, I made a gentle plea for a little humility and historical memory. I said:

It's absolutely right that you now stress that 'good governance is a vital ingredient in land reform.' But you did not always emphasise that. If I were a veteran African civil society activist, I would ask you 'where was all that governance rhetoric in the time of Moi's Kenya, Banda's Malawi, or Mobutu's Zaire?' With the Cold War safely won, 'we' can all now preach good governance, but let us do so acknowledging our past sins!²⁹

²⁷ *What can we learn from history about large-scale commercial farming developments?*, Future Agricultures Consortium, Rebecca Smalley, 13 May 2013.

<http://www.future-agricultures.org/blog/entry/what-can-we-learn-from-history-about-large-scale-commercial-farming-developments>

Plantations, Contract Farming and Commercial Farming Areas in Africa: A Comparative Review, Future Agricultures Consortium, Rebecca Smalley, Working Paper **055**, April 2013.

http://www.future-agricultures.org/publications/research-and-analysis/working-papers/doc_download/1710-plantations-contract-farming-and-commercial-farming-areas-in-africa-a-comparative-review

²⁸ Michael Courville and Raj Patel, 'Introduction and Overview: The Resurgence of Agrarian Reform in the Twenty-first Century', in Peter Rosset, Raj Patel and Michael Courville (Eds), *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* (Oakland, California: Food First Books, 2006), 18.

²⁹ Robin Palmer, 'Donor and NGO Involvement in Land Issues – Some Further Reflections', International Conference on *Legalization of Land Tenure for Development*, University of Leiden, 26-29 September 2007, 6.

http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/donor_and_ngo_involvement_in_land_issues_leiden.pdf

On a personal note, in March this year I had the honour of being invited to speak at the launch in Oxford of Terry Ranger's latest, and almost certainly last, book, called *Writing Revolt. An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957-67*.³⁰

I paid tribute to his inspirational teaching at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. I acknowledged that 'I owe absolutely everything to the education I received, both on and off the campus, in colonial Zimbabwe.' I went on to say that 'I've always stressed to young Zimbabwean scholars my huge debt to the university in Harare and stressed to myself the desire to try to pay something back for the wonderful and privileged education that I received there half a century ago.'

I recognize that I have been very fortunate in my working life in that I've almost always had jobs that were extremely enjoyable and in which it was pretty easy to persuade myself that I was doing something vaguely useful. It has been a great journey.

³⁰ Terence Ranger, *Writing Revolt. An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957-67* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2013).