

LAND-GRABBERS
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Yes, says Robin Cook, there is a land problem in Zimbabwe - but the rule of law must be respected, and any exchange of land must involve willing sellers who must be paid a proper price for the land. The United States withdraws a million dollars' aid for land reform, James Rubin calling for 'rational sustainable and equitable land reform in Zimbabwe'.

Illegal occupation, takeover of white land, squatters, infringements of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, racism, violence.

It is a great pity that it should take an ageing Mugabe fearful of losing power to articulate an issue which might have been more properly settled at the time of Independence. But this does not invalidate the fact that the seizure of land by those with no legal title to it is neither more nor less than what was done a thousand times over by heroic pioneers, intrepid colonists and builders of empire. The fact that the present generation of whites did not actually steal the land is unfortunate; but it is difficult to believe in all the solemn, high-minded denunciations of land-grabbers by the representatives of the United States and Britain, those inheritors of so much annexed, alienated and appropriated land of other people.

To articulate the social injustice of Zimbabwe is not necessarily to support Mugabe or the murder of political activists and white farmers. Nor is it necessarily to agree with *The Economist*, which compared Zimbabwe favourably with 'the bloodstained basket-cases that have done so much to tarnish Africa's name'. At least *The Economist* was candid - it admitted that Mugabe's 'conduct'(sic) threatens not only Zimbabwe, but also South Africa and the rest of the continent.

There is nothing new in the transformation of pirates into legitimate landholders, invoking the rule of law once they have established themselves in possession of whatever they have stolen. It all depends upon when history started, which such usurpers usually declare to be at a time that coincides with their taking of land that did not belong to them. The real crime of the rural poor in Zimbabwe - no matter how venal, dishonest or self-seeking their leaders - is that they are calling into question issues that are believed to have been settled once and for all, like the rules of a global game to which all alternatives have been nullified.

Well, here is an alternative. And this act of occupation by the poor bears a strong resemblance to the ways in which the powerful have always taken what did not belong to them. Can we believe with *The Guardian* (11.04.00) that 'almost everyone involved knows that is not the real issue'? Whatever the motives of Mugabe, to those occupying the white-owned farms, isn't it conceivable that landlessness and destitution are more important even than politics?

A deeper question seriously agitates world leaders. After all the trouble they have taken to write out of the great drama of Globalisation not only redistribution but also equity and social justice, having disgraced and finally overcome the godless creed of Communism, a group of people behave as though they did not know that such actions have been prohibited. Anyone would think that the sacred laws of political economy had never been revealed to us.

The poor majority strikes back. Pity about its leaders and their motives, but beggars, you see, cannot be choosers. Nor, apparently, can the mighty. Apparently, the Zimbabwean police could not remove 60,000 squatters. The resources did not exist. They were overwhelmed by the force of numbers, and not in the approved democratic counting-system.

Think what a precedent it might have set - to the *sem terra* of Brazil, to the Zapatistas of Mexico, to the landless of India and Bangladesh, to all those deprived of their ancestral lands, whether for white farmers, for 'development' projects, for speculative construction, to grow cash-crops, for luxury apartments - why, worldwide, this represents hundreds of millions of people. Indeed, if you count all the Adivasis, indigenous peoples, tribals and autochthons, all subsistence farmers, self-reliant householders, the evictees of homesteads, forests, fishing grounds, riverine environments, it probably constitutes a majority of humankind.

Could it be that everything has not been settled, that everything on earth is not yet occupying its last-but-one resting place in the sagacious dispensation of legitimised rapacity and sanctioned greed that is known as the new world order? How disturbing it is that a bunch of semi-literate rural squatters should have called into question the end of history, and should seek to disturb the version of justice and truth enshrined in the growing impoverishment of the mass of people on the planet, while a handful of individuals manipulate budgets which exceed those of dozens of apparent nation-states.

The powerful reach not only for threats - sanctions or more - but also for all the moral imagery they can find: this is ethnic cleansing, it is racism, it is against humanity, it represents an infringement of democracy (that curiously double-edged weapon that is now universally employed to dispossess majorities everywhere); yet how empty is their huffing and puffing in the face of the dereliction of the most wretched people on earth and any effort they may make to provide a remedy for monstrous social injustice - in default, it has to be said, of any of the existing channels of improvement devised by the weighty economic institutions of their betters.

All such upheavals are supposed to have been laid to rest; and after all, if South Africa could be persuaded to insert itself into the new world order with the blessing of Nelson Mandela without any radical redistribution of land or resources (in the six years since the end of apartheid, only 1% of land in South Africa has been redistributed), then why should a homophobic authoritarian like Mugabe be allowed to get away with it?

The very fact that many thousands of farmers prudently retained UK passports suggests that, somewhere in the outback of their mind, they know they are not at home in Zimbabwe, that the day might come when they would no longer be permitted to enjoy the fruits of (usually) someone else's long-forgotten injustice. The trouble with injustice is that it is only forgotten by those who perpetrate it; those to whom it is done never forget, since insufficiency and impoverishment stare

them in the face at every turn. What epic forgettings are covered by the self-righteousness, the parade of big words, the high-minded moralising!

Land-grabbing - what the powerful have always done and continue to do - whether they want your house for a motorway, your earth-walled house and garden for agribusiness, your slum shacks for high-rise apartments, your croplands and villages for a dam, your land for a tourist reserve, well, they do it with impunity. But let the poor grab land, and all hell breaks loose. It is a shame it had to be Mugabe at bay, but we cannot always choose the agents who bring to our attention global injustices, social evils and ancient wrongs; and now, even Robin Cook is insisting upon the priority of land redistribution, an issue of which he has never yet been a conspicuous champion. Those who act for the poor do not always, or even often, come on white horses, nor are they invariably clad in shining armour; sometimes, dogged tyrants, prejudiced old men (occasionally originally placed in their positions of power by collusive Western interests - Bokassa, Marcos, Suharto, for instance) may be the instruments through which shameful ills are illuminated.

E P Thompson observed the astonishing capacity of injustice and misery to go 'unknown' until the victims of misery and injustice themselves rebel. Maybe this is just such another example; although Thompson might have added, in a less optimistic age than that in which he wrote, that once Mugabe has gone, and the natural order has been restored, whereby the rich continue undisturbed in their confiscation of the land of the poor, the media will forget it, and the injustice at the root of the violence will be restored to its former 'unknown' state.