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Journal

The Journal of Peasant Studies, 45(5-6)

ISSN

0306-6150

Author

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Publication Date

2018-09-19

DOI

10.1080/03066150.2017.1312354

Peer reviewed



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To cite this article: Ricardo Jacobs (2018) An urban proletariat with peasant characteristics: land occupations and livestock raising in South Africa, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45:5-6, 884-903, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2017.1312354](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1312354)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1312354>



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An urban proletariat with peasant characteristics: land occupations and livestock raising in South Africa

Ricardo Jacobs

ABSTRACT

Many scholars in South Africa associate urbanization with an ideal typical proletariat whose primary demands revolve around access to land for housing, wage labor and basic services. However, in Cape Town long-term urban residents are occupying land for raising livestock – a quintessential peasant activity. Drawing on research conducted over the course of six years at land occupation sites in Cape Town, this contribution argues that capitalist development has led to the emergence of an ‘urban proletariat with peasant characteristics’ and to a strong latent demand for urban land for agricultural pursuits. These land occupations are reconceptualized as an important part of the current wave of urban struggles dubbed the ‘rebellion of the poor’. The land and agrarian question is, accordingly, acquiring an urban dimension that needs to be brought to the center of our research and debates.

KEYWORDS

land occupations;
urbanization; agrarian
change; proletarianization;
peasant character; class
formation

Introduction

In the City of Cape Town long-term urban residents are engaged in land occupations for raising livestock – a typical peasant activity in rural South Africa. This contribution is a case study of one such land occupation – that of the Zabalaza¹ farmers – a group of 185 households who are occupying land in the City of Cape Town to raise livestock and engage in crop production on small plots.

Land occupations of this variant present us with a puzzle. The scholarly consensus is that South Africa’s peasantry has been fully proletarianized since the 1970s, and, moreover, that urban (and even most rural) proletarians have neither the capacity, the skills, nor the aspirations to engage in agricultural activities (Wolpe 1972; Burawoy 1976; Bundy 1972; Morris 1976; Beinart and Delius 2014; Cousins 2013). For the vast majority of scholars working on South Africa, the main agent of social struggles today is presumed to be an urban proletariat that has ruptured ties with rural areas and agrarian activities. To the extent that this urban proletariat engages in land struggles, they are justice-based struggles aimed at redressing historical land dispossessions and/or struggles to access urban land for housing (Hendricks 2014; du Toit and Neves 2014; Lahiff 2014). But land occupations for raising livestock and other agricultural pursuits – like Zabalaza – are unexpected and do not fit into the dominant conception of capitalist development and urban class formation.

¹The names of the occupation site and occupiers are pseudonyms.

Urban land occupations for raising livestock are especially puzzling in Cape Town, the biggest city in the Western Cape Province. For one thing, the Western Cape is the province that has experienced the longest and most extreme history of land dispossession in South Africa (dating back to the mid-seventeenth century with the arrival of the Dutch and the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie), Dutch East-India Company) as well as the most complete process of proletarianization/destruction of the peasantry. Moreover, livestock raising clashes with efforts of the city's political and business elite to model Cape Town as a 'world city' with a high tech 'service oriented' urban core (McDonald 2008, 63–67, Lowy 2010, 147).² While Cape Town's political and business elite are seeking to build a world-class city, sections of the urban proletariat – by raising livestock – are involved in what might be termed the agrarianization of urban space. Zabalaza and similar land occupations thus present us with a case of contemporary class formation that appears anomalous for a neoliberal 'world city' in a fully proletarianized capitalist country.

How then can we make sense of the Zabalaza case and other contemporary urban land occupations for agricultural production? Based on fieldwork conducted over the course of six years, this paper argues that the Zabalaza farmers are a contemporary incarnation of the long-term tendency of capital accumulation in South Africa to reproduce a laboring class with dual characteristics. Following in the footsteps of I.B. Tabata (1954 in Taylor 2014) and Archie Mafeje (1978, 1981), I argue that capitalist development in South Africa – by both undermining the conditions for successful peasant accumulation and failing to provide the wage-levels and other conditions necessary for the emergence of a stable proletariat – has resulted in the formation of a class of direct producers that combine social characteristics from two 'extremely different classes, the peasantry and the proletariat' (Mafeje 1978). Tabata and Mafeje analyzed this process for the twentieth century, especially with regard to the 'dual [peasant/proletarian] nature' of migrant laborers forced to shuttle between the countryside and the city to work in mining and manufacturing. Although South Africa became a highly industrialized country in the course of the twentieth century, it curtailed the development of a stable urban proletariat, causing people to cling more tenaciously to a piece of land and particularly to grazing rights for their livestock (Mafeje 1981).³

In the early twenty-first century, I will argue, the fundamental nature of capitalist accumulation in South Africa has not changed, notwithstanding the further massive proletarianization and urbanization that has taken place in South Africa in the decades since Tabata and Mafeje were writing. The system of accumulation that Ben Fine and Zavareh Rustomjee characterized as the 'Minerals–Energy Complex', combined with the process of financialization, continues to shape the South African economy, leading to deindustrialization, jobless growth, the massive expansion of a relative surplus population and slums, and mass poverty for the majority (Ashman, Fine, and Newman 2011, 178; Cousins 2015, 260–261). Seen from this perspective, the Zabalaza land occupation is an outcome of the long-term tendency of capital accumulation in South Africa to produce proletarianization (and urbanization) without producing the conditions for the emergence of a working class that can survive primarily through reliance on wage labor. While the dualism in Tabata's and Mafeje's time primarily took the form of the movement of migrants between urban

²Albeit one building on the 'spatial legacies of apartheid' and drawing on 'a sprawling low income periphery' providing low wages and increasing informal labour (McDonald 2008, 31).

³This alternative perspective emphasizing the dual nature of the working class emerged out of political writings by intellectuals (including Tabata and Mafeje) associated with the Unity Movement of South Africa beginning in the 1930s.

and rural areas, in the early twenty-first century, we see *long-term year-round urban residents* who are the bearers of this dual nature – what I call ‘urban proletarians with peasant characteristics’. A significant part of the contemporary urban working class in South Africa continues to combine ‘peasant’ and proletarian characteristics, and it is in this light that we should understand urban land occupations for livestock raising such as Zabalaza.

Urban land occupations for livestock raising and broader agricultural livelihoods are not unique to South Africa. In many African cities urban livestock raising forms an integral part of the process of urbanization (Owens 2016; Guendel 2002; Waters-Bayer 1996). Similarly across cities in North America urban households are engaging in farming and livestock keeping that takes on multiple forms (Clendenning, Dressler and Richards 2016; McClintock and Simpson 2014). While the historical specificity of the dynamics of class formation and capitalist development has taken diverse paths there appears to be an evolving convergence in the agrarianization of urban space. Thus, the Zabalaza land occupation should be situated within a broader emerging urban agriculture and accompanying movements – a process which, as Jun Borrás argues, requires closer ‘scholarly and political scrutiny’ (Borrás, 2016, 19–20).

While the Zabalaza occupation involves just 185 households, I argue that it is a sign of a much deeper demand for urban land for agricultural pursuits in South Africa. This demand is visible in other organized land occupations in Cape Town including the Penhill Small Scale Farmers, who have occupied 200 hectares, and the Mfuleni Small Scale Farmers, who have occupied land for livestock raising since 1994. This demand also showed up in the results of a 2005/2006 survey which found that nearly 33 percent of black South Africans want land for agricultural production, and about one third of this demand is from urban areas (Hall and Dubb 2013). Moreover, to the extent that the Zabalaza farmers are demographically and sociologically similar to a large percentage of the Cape Town (and South African) population – as I argue below – then the land occupations that are observable today may be just the tip of the iceberg in terms of potential demand for land for agriculture by urban residents. To put it differently (paraphrasing Karl Marx 1976), such a finding would suggest that there is a ‘latent reserve army of peasants’ in urban South Africa today. Just as the latent reserve army of labor in the countryside flowed to the cities and urban industrial activities when the conditions were ripe, these urban residents would flow into peasant activities in the city under the right conditions. Thus, instead of viewing the Zabalaza land occupation as something anomalous or some hangover from the past, we see in this case study an instance of what sociologists have long argued about the non-linear relationship between proletarianization and working-class formation (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986). This allows us to move away from positivist approaches that cede overwhelming power to the structures of capitalism in determining working-class daily life and working-class politics, and that neglect the capacity of social classes to ‘transform and transcend these structures’ (Akram Lodhi and Kay 2016; Akram Lodhi 2016).

Debating proletarianization, urbanization and land occupations

The South African literature is overwhelmingly dominated by a perspective that I call the ‘linear proletarianization thesis’, a thesis that cannot easily account for Zabalaza and similar

land occupations. While there are multiple versions of the 'linear proletarianization' approach, they share the presumption that the extreme form of dispossession that characterized South African development in the twentieth century led to the full proletarianization of the peasantry (Wolpe 1972; Burawoy 1976; Bundy 1972; Morris 1976). The main subaltern class in South Africa today, they argue, is an urban proletariat (employed and unemployed) that has ruptured ties with rural areas and agrarian activities, and whose demands revolve around land for housing, access to basic services, and jobs, rather than land for agricultural pursuits (Hendricks 2014; du Toit and Neves 2014; Lahiff 2014; Bernstein 2006; Marais 2011; Cousins 2013; Beinart and Delius 2014; Davis 2004).

This paper does not dispute the contention that an urban proletariat with relatively weak economic ties to rural areas has emerged in South Africa today. However, it does dispute the contention that urbanization/proletarianization has dissolved their 'peasant outlook' or eliminated their underlying demand for land for agricultural pursuits.

A second perspective in the literature has been dubbed the 'repeasantization thesis'. In contrast to the linear proletarianization thesis, 're-peasantization' scholars maintain that the uneven nature of capitalist development in the periphery results in a contradictory process of proletarianization that only partially transforms 'pre-existing production relations' and does not result in the complete disappearance of the peasantry (Moyo and Yeros 2005). Moreover, they argue that the demand for land for agricultural pursuits remains central in contemporary subaltern struggles. Neoliberal agrarian restructuring has generalized impoverishment, which, in turn, is leading to proliferating struggles for access to land (Akram-Lhodi, Kay, and Borrás 2009; Moyo and Chambati 2013; Van der Ploeg 2009; Akram-Lodhi 2007; Moyo and Yeros 2005; Vergara-Camus 2014).

The Zabalaza and similar land occupations resonate more closely with the repeasantization thesis. However, 'repeasantization' scholars have focused on land struggles that take place in rural areas or in which unemployed or underemployed urban residents abandon efforts to find wage labor and occupy land in the countryside to pursue agricultural livelihoods (see Moyo and Yeros 2013 for Zimbabwe, and Vergara-Camus 2014 for Brazil). In contrast, the Zabalaza farmers are long-term urban residents who combine proletarian and peasant forms of livelihood in the city and who have no intention or desire to return to the countryside.

The two approaches that dominate the literature in some ways force us into a choice between polar opposites – full proletarianization or full peasantization – as the characterization of the main thrust of capitalist development, and between peasants or proletarians as the main agents of anti-capitalist struggles. For Moyo and Yeros (2005, 8–9) the 'nucleus of anti imperialist struggles' is to be found in the countryside, particularly of the periphery. For repeasantization scholars, the 'peasant path' is not only the central arc of struggle but also the bearer of the solution to contemporary economic, ecological and food crises (Moyo and Yeros 2005; McMichael 2013). Proponents of the linear proletarianization thesis dismiss this view as 'agrarian populism', arguing that 'peasants are aspirant capitalists' and that the peasant path can only lead to a new round of social differentiation (Hendricks 2014, 286; see also Bernstein 2015). For the 'linear proletarianization' scholars, the proletarian character of both the urban and rural populations is clearly visible, and the main agents of anti-capitalist struggles today are workers (Hendricks 2014; Bernstein 2015; Bernstein 2009). However, as will be argued below, the Zabalaza occupiers are not easily categorized as either peasant or proletarian, nor is it certain that they are moving toward becoming fully one or the other.

Reconstructing Tabata and Mafeje

The advantage of the theoretical frameworks put forward by Tabata (1954 in Taylor 2014) and Mafeje (1978, 1981) is that they emphasize the dual (peasant/proletarian) nature of the working class and therefore do not force us into an artificial choice between peasant and worker paths. Tabata correctly recognized that even migrant workers who were fully proletarianized (obtaining their livelihood as wage workers in the gold mines and commercial farms) retained a peasant consciousness. For this reason, he used the concept ‘landless peasantry’ to describe this group (Tabata 1954 in Taylor 2014; Gool 1970, see also Drew 1997; Drew 1996; Kayser 2002, 15–16). Moreover, for Tabata, the ‘greatest revolutionary potential’ was to be found with the ‘landless peasantry’ – a potential that was demonstrated in the peasant revolts in the 1950s and 1960s in the countryside,^e and the labor and community struggles by migrant workers in urban areas in the 1960s and 1970s (Tabata 1954 quoted in Taylor 2014; Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012; Mamdani 1996; Martin 2013).

However, even Mafeje expected the peasant outlook of the South African working class to decline over time, arguing that the main trend was toward full proletarianization, and pointing to the ongoing depopulation of the reserves and de-agrarianization (Mafeje 1985, 36–37). Nonetheless, I will argue that even today there is still no clear long-term tendency toward full proletarianization. The South African development path, now taking the form of rapid urbanization and ‘jobless deagrarianization’ (du Toit and Neves 2014; Bryceson 2009), continues to preclude the establishment of a stable proletariat. While Tabata and Mafeje focused on circular rural–urban migrants in identifying the bearers of the dual character of labor, I will argue that today we also see this dual character among long-time urban residents such as the Zabalaza farmers. The Zabalaza occupiers struggle as ‘urban proletarians’ (long-term urban residents who fulfill the criteria for the proletarian condition) (cf. Arrighi 1970; Arrighi, Aschoff, and Scully 2010), while retaining a peasant consciousness.⁴

Karl Kautsky, in his seminal work on the Agrarian Question, characterized the contradictory political subjectivity of peasants as ‘two souls [that] inhabit the breast of the dwarf-holder: a peasant and proletarian’ (Kautsky 1988, 324). For Kautsky, elevating the ‘peasant soul’ – fostering ‘the illusion of the future of the small peasant farm’ – would ‘strike a death blow at the proletarian soul in the dwarf-holders’. Instead, for Kautsky, the future of progressive politics depends on elevating the ‘proletarian soul’. In contrast, as will be argued further below, the Zabalaza case suggests that the future of progressive politics depends on both souls inhabiting the urban proletariat, as well as on the bonds between struggles across urban and rural areas.

Fieldwork

As Mafeje (1981, 130) forewarned, the above debates cannot be resolved a priori on theoretical grounds as ‘class formation is not only an object in theory but also an object of empirical investigation’. This paper is drawn from fieldwork I conducted at Zabalaza between 2009 and 2014. My interaction with the Zabalaza land occupation began when I was working in the Research Information and Advocacy Unit of the

⁴This dynamic is similar to what Bryan Roberts (1990, 367) observed about urban households in preindustrial Europe and the ‘self employed of the urban informal economy in developing countries’ – that is, that their income-generating and consumption strategies were similar to those of their contemporary peasant counterparts.

Surplus People's Project, an agrarian reform non governmental organization (NGO) based in Cape Town. From 2009 to 2011, I engaged in various rounds of participant observation including attending meetings at Zabalaza (executive, sub-committee and general meetings), assisting the farmers with access to legal and other support to help them resist the state's efforts to evict them, and participation in the negotiations with various government departments. I also participated in different forms of protest at Zabalaza and public protest marches to the provincial and national government. In July–August 2012 I held focus group discussions with (1) members of the executive committee, (2) farmers who work on the farms themselves or rely on family labor, (3) farmers who employ workers, and (4) workers employed by Zabalaza farmers. In 2012, I also conducted select individual interviews with four key informants who played central roles in the land occupation from the beginning. In the fall of 2014, I conducted additional fieldwork at Zabalaza, including 20 life histories, which provide the empirical heart of this study.

Brief history of the Zabalaza occupation

In its beginning the Zabalaza land occupation, situated on the urban edge of the City of Cape Town, started out as unstructured and low profile.⁵ The occupation began with just one household in the mid-1980s – that of Tata Bongani – who occupied approximately three hectares of grazing land for his cattle after being displaced from a nearby farm (Tata Bongani, interview, 2014). Over the next decade, one by one, other households began to farm on the land.

In 1996, with a critical mass of approximately 26 households, the Zabalaza occupiers established the Greater Blue Downs Farmers Association (GBDFA) on the advice of the National African Farmers Union (NAFU), a union aligned to the state and the ruling African National Congress. By 2003 the GBDFA had folded and the Zabalaza Farmers Association (ZFA) was formed with 35 members. Although the ZFA did not actively promote the Association, more and more people became aware of the land occupation, through word of mouth. From 2003 to 2009 the number of farmers occupying the land increased quickly to 180 households, with 150 households on a waiting list.

Politically the farmers are highly organized and fairly democratic in the way they allocate land regardless of status, gender, ethnicity or class position. The earlier occupants have slightly bigger plots (between one and three hectares) than those who came after 1999. With the growing demand for plots the executive committee of the ZFA decided to reduce the size of new plots to 30 meters by 60 meters in order to accommodate more farmers.

Today, the total land occupied is 70 hectares and it is primarily used for livestock farming (pigs, goats, cattle and poultry) and some limited crop production. The land was in private hands in the 1980s and 1990s when the initial occupations began, but it now belongs to the Western Cape Provincial Department of Human Settlement (DHS),

⁵The initial unstructured and low-profile nature of the Zabalaza occupation is similar to that of the land occupations in Zimbabwe from the late 1980s to late 1990s, *prior* to the mass-based fast-track land reform (Moyo and Chambati 2013; Sadomba 2011). In this process of 'land reform from below', unlike state-driven land reform, land occupiers 'self select as beneficiaries, they select the land, they acquire it de facto, and then await their legal formalization by the state' (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 53).

which purchased it in 2001 as part of the department's strategy to acquire land to transfer to a 'land bank' for the future expansion of low-income housing in the city.⁶ Since 2009 the DHS has been attempting to evict the Zabalaza farmers from the land.

This type of urban land occupation has received little attention in the academic literature. In the South African literature, the emphasis has been on urban land occupations for housing, particularly the establishment of informal settlements (shantytowns). Yet Zabalaza is not an isolated case. As stated earlier in Cape Town alone, I know of approximately 300 households who have been occupying land for livestock raising in the township of Mfuleni for more than 20 years (Mfuleni Small Scale Farmers Association); the Penhill Farmers Association (269 members) has occupied 200 hectares of land since 1994; and in Green Point and Makhaza in the township of Khayelitsha, residents are engaged in livestock farming (Lugogo n.d.).⁷ In many black townships within the City of Cape Town, livestock freely roam in the streets. The large number of animals impounded by the City's Animal Impound Unit corroborates this observation. For example, from February to July 2011 the Animal Control Unit impounded approximately 321 livestock animals (Wentzel 2011). Urban livestock raising in South Africa is not limited to Cape Town. For example, there have been news reports of livestock farming in Johannesburg, including reports of the threatened impounding of 220 cattle, 115 goats, 46 sheep and some horses and pigs in Orlando East, Soweto (Khupiso 2004).

The Zabalaza case has many similarities to these other land occupations and therefore should provide insights that are more broadly applicable. However, Zabalaza is particularly interesting for at least three reasons. First, there is a high level of ethnic diversity, which is surprising given the spatial legacies of apartheid. Zabalaza today consists of (what in apartheid terms were called) both coloreds and Africans.⁸ Socio-linguistically, the majority are Afrikaans- and Xhosa-speaking black people. There is also a minority of Sotho speakers from the Free State that came in the 1980s, and one farmer who is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The majority of the farmers live in the Eastern Suburbs (Blue Downs, Eersterivier, Kleinvlei, Kraaifontein) and parts of the Cape Flats (Khayelitsha, Crossroads). There are both male and female farmers, who range in age from 27 to 76.

Zabalaza is also an interesting case because access to housing is not a motivation behind the land occupation. While access to housing in the City of Cape Town remains an intractable problem, the majority of occupiers at Zabalaza have adequate housing elsewhere. According to a survey conducted by the Zabalaza farmers and the Department of Human Settlement, 125 of the 185 households have adequate housing elsewhere (Department of Human Settlement, 2011). The percentage of Zabalaza farmers without adequate housing – that is, living in informal housing such as shacks or backyards – is approximately the same as the percentage of the population of Cape Town as a whole (20.5 percent) living in informal housing (Housing Development Agency 2013).

⁶Prior to its purchase by the DHS, Nu Way Housing (PTY) limited, a real estate speculator and developer, owned the land.

⁷Besides organized groups there are also media reports of individual livestock farmers in the city that farm with goats and sheep in their backyards as a means of survival. (GroundUp 2015).

⁸During apartheid, under the Population Registration Act, people were classified according to 'race' with four categories designated: colored, African, Indian and White. The term 'colored' referred to people of mixed descent. Since the end of apartheid, Black is officially used to refer to Africans, coloreds and Indians.

Third, the Zabalaza case is particularly interesting because there has been an intense level of mobilization to resist eviction, opening a window onto questions of class consciousness and collective action.

Urban proletarians with peasant characteristics

This section lays out evidence for why it makes sense to conceptualize the Zabalaza farmers as an urban proletariat with peasant characteristics, discussing in turn their historical connection to the land and history of land dispossession, their long-term urban residence and their varied experiences with urban waged labor (formal and informal). While the diverse ties to land reflect the *peasant character* of the urban proletariat, their diverse ties to wage labor are indicative of their *proletarian character*.

Connections to land

Most of the Zabalaza occupiers are long-term urban residents who were either born in the city or migrated to the city as early as the 1960s and no longer retain strong economic ties to rural areas. The vast majority were part of the pre-1994 wave of rural–urban migration, although a few arrived with the most recent post-apartheid mass rural–urban influx. While the farmers of Zabalaza have diverse histories, they virtually all have a *historical connection to land* as farmers and farm workers (or as the children/grandchildren of farmers/farm workers). Moreover, they are unified by their connection to the history of land dispossession in South Africa.

One of the farmers I interviewed, who has been at Zabalaza for seven years, explains his family's long ties to the land and how his own history is intimately tied to the history of land dispossession in the area. Chris was born in 1962 in Oubos on Cape Town's urban edge, a settlement that consisted of farms owned by different colored families. His mother was a domestic worker and his father was a farm worker who also had access to land owned by the Anglican Mission Station in Faure. When the church wanted to expand its infrastructure his parents moved to Oubos where they leased land, continuing to combine wage labor and non-wage labor. As Chris recalls, during his childhood:

People were farming with sheep, poultry, goats and pigs. Farmers also had vegetable plots and sold their produce at the Parade [Central Business District] in Cape Town. There were approximately 500 families residing in Oubos and it was very integrated, coloreds and Africans ... were living together. *In 1975 Oubos was declared a whites-only area, and Africans and coloreds were forcefully removed; the coloreds were moved to Kleinvele and the Africans to Mfuleni.* The government took all the livestock and sold it for very cheap. During the 1980s Oubos, now called Stratford, was again declared a colored residential area. (Chris, interview 2012)

For others at Zabalaza, their ties to the land stem from communal access to land in the former Bantustans in the Eastern Cape. Many Zabalaza farmers had migrated to the city in search of wage employment, but they also sought out land for agricultural activities in the city. Tata Bongani, the first person to occupy a farm at Zabalaza, had worked for wages at a quarry in a rural town in the Western Cape and then moved to Cape Town in 1968 to work in a poultry factory, but he also continued to seek out land in the city to raise livestock. Tata Bongani described his lifelong links to the land as follows:

I was born in 1940 in the Eastern Cape in a village in Lady Frere. My father was farming with cattle, sheep and goats. I attended school in Transkei and used to look after the cattle when I was a young boy. [In Cape Town] I started farming in Makhaza in Khayelitsha where I had access to a huge tract of grazing land. At the time I had 50 goats and 60 milk cows. I had to move from Makhaza since they were going to start a housing development. From Makhaza I moved to Eersterivier where I leased land from a Muslim farm owner for three years. While I was leasing land for my cattle I was already grazing at Zabalaza. I have been doing farming [at Zabalaza] for more than 28 years now. (Tata Bongani, interview 2014)

Petula, born in 1951, was originally from a small rural town in the Western Cape where her grandmother was a pig farmer. Petula came to Cape Town at the age of 15, where she worked in textile factories and other wage work for several decades before starting to raise pigs on land she leased from a white farmer on the urban edge of Cape Town. She has been raising pigs and poultry at Zabalaza since 2008, where she is also a member of the Executive Committee.

Likewise, Simphiwe's family had access to land in a communal area in Transkei. He and his father exemplify the intergenerational continuity of ties to land through migrant peasant labor. His father was a migrant peasant worker, and Simphiwe (born in Transkei in 1949) also became a migrant worker for 10 years before settling permanently in Crossroads (Cape Town) in 1979 at the age of 30. The migrant labor system impeded full proletarianization, through influx control. As Simphiwe explains:

My father was a worker at Baumans Quarry in Woodstock in Cape Town. He was staying in the single-sex hostels in Langa. My father had sheep and cattle in the communal areas allocated by the chief. My father worked for six months in Cape Town and returned to the Transkei again. My mother was a housewife. After school I followed my father to Cape Town to work at the railway (Spoornet). (Simphiwe, interview 2014)

Others at Zabalaza come from fully proletarianized (landless) farmworker households in the commercial farming districts in the Western Cape. Basil, born in Cape Town in 1975, lived on a commercial farm on the West Coast of the Western Cape with his grandparents (who were farm workers) before moving back to Cape Town when he was in Grade 7. At the age of 17, he began working for a Zabalaza farmer on a part-time basis and subsequently took over the plot of the farmer for whom he worked.

While some people at Zabalaza came from the African reserves in the Eastern Cape, a small number came from the Colored rural reserves in the Northern Cape. Despite being a migrant worker in many parts of the Northern and Western Cape, and as far afield as Walvis Bay in Namibia, Donald (born in 1941) has maintained his links to the land for almost 50 years. Donald's father was a carpenter in the copper mines and a livestock farmer on communal land in Concordia, a practice he also continued:

I was born in Concordia in Namaqualand. I started as a helper to the carpenters at the OCC [Okiep Copper Company]. In 1960 I went to Walvis Bay when they were building the docks. In 1962 I came to Cape Town to work as a ship builder. Basically I started farming [in Concordia] in the middle of 1965 ... with sheep and cattle. I had about 600 sheep ... [and] Saailande [wheat fields] that were mostly for household consumption ... until 2002. In 1982 I moved to Cape Town, but I always had herders looking after my livestock. I moved to Zabalaza in 1996, where I am farming with pigs. (Donald, interview 2014)

While most of the Zabalaza farmers had ties to land in rural areas, for some like Malcolm (born in 1978 in Cape Town), the link is firmly to land in the city. Malcolm's father was a

principal at a reform school for boys, 300 meters from Zabalaza, where he farmed with livestock and poultry on the school's land (Malcolm, interview, 2014). Likewise, Zanele (born in Cape Town in 1957 to parents who had migrated from the Eastern Cape) had raised chickens in her backyard in Khayelitsha before coming to Zabalaza. As Zanele explains:

I wanted to farm for a long time but there was no chance for us . . . I had almost 100 chickens, which I sold in the community . . . My backyard [in Khayelitsha] was not big enough and I was looking for a place to farm. Currently at Zabalaza I have 17 goats and 17 small pigs and five big ones and a garden plot. Last year I had 70 pigs. (Zanele, interview 2014)

These vignettes illustrate both the unity and the diversity of the people at Zabalaza in terms of their historical connection to the land. It also illustrates how their 'peasant' aspirations and dispositions have not disappeared with urbanization. While it is true that many of the Zabalaza farmers were either unemployed or underemployed, and turned to farming as a survival strategy, it is also essential to point out that the survival strategy they chose to pursue is rooted in their long-term ties to land and their historical consciousness about land rights. In other words, the essence of this particular form of survival is the struggle for land for agriculture.

Connections to wage labor

These vignettes also illustrate the Zabalaza farmers' long-term family histories of combining wage labor, migration and agricultural productive activities for the social reproduction of their households. This section focuses more specifically on the long history of wage labor among the occupiers at Zabalaza.

There are a variety of ties to the labor market among the Zabalaza farmers (joblessness, part-time workers, full-time workers and self-employment). A survey conducted in 2009 by the Surplus Peoples Project (SPP), an agrarian reform NGO, found that only 24 percent of Zabalaza farmers mentioned having full-time employment, with the remainder being unemployed, casually employed or writing self-employed through farming (Hope 2010).

Joseph, for example, had a long family history with wage labor. He was born in a small rural town in the Eastern Cape in 1968. His mother worked as a domestic worker and his father as a construction worker. During school holidays Joseph and his friend worked on white commercial farms. After completing Grade 11, he migrated to Cape Town, where he worked at irregular intervals as a construction worker, until he was finally laid off in 2008. Joseph lives with his wife and three children in the backyard of his sister's house. His wife is employed as a cleaner at a guesthouse in a nearby area but her wages are not sufficient for them to survive on. As Joseph states:

The need in cities is of such a nature that you cannot live or survive on wages alone. Food prices are very high. I began farming in Zabalaza in 2008. I was unemployed and needed a way out to survive. (Joseph, interview 2012)

While some Zabalaza farmers, like Joseph, are unemployed, others have stable formal wage employment and pursue farming activities as a supplement. Gonjeman has stable employment as a manager for a private security company; Mokete is a teacher at a local high school; Mohapi works as a cook in a well-known restaurant catering to tourists. George, born in 1959, has been working for 36 years at the state enterprise Transnet – a

large port, rail and pipeline company – maintaining and repairing freight train carriages. He began farming at Zabalaza in 2008, while continuing to work at Transnet.

After buying a house for my family in Eersterivier I started farming at Zabalaza with goats, pigs, chickens and a garden plot. I have continued working while farming. After working all day I come to the farm to work on my agricultural activities. I sell pigs and also slaughter for the household. (George, interview, 2014)

During the fieldwork it became clear that a number of the women farmers at Zabalaza had been employed as low-wage workers in the clothing industry in the Western Cape and were now unemployed. Trade liberalization adversely affected the competitiveness of the clothing industry, with many companies unable to compete with low-wage countries like China. This resulted in job losses and many households in which women were the sole breadwinners being pushed into poverty (Van der Westerhuizen 2006).

For example, Dulcie, who is originally from Cape Town, worked as a machinist for the clothing company Radco, which was liquidated in 1997. She continued to work for various clothing companies until 2006 when her husband passed away. She began living in different shelters with her children. As a family they have been on the housing waiting list for almost 17 years. In 2006, Dulcie sought employment with a Zabalaza farmer in order to survive. She has an arrangement with the farmer that for every birth she will receive one or two of the piglets. Currently she has two piglets.

Likewise, Martha was employed in a clothing factory as a machinist in Cape Town. She suffers from diabetes and found it difficult to continue working. But she does not qualify for the state's disability grant because the medical doctor's report states that she is still fit to work. Martha convinced her husband that if they engage in farming they could improve their living standards. She approached the Zabalaza farmers for land and began farming there in 2009 (Martha, interview 2012).

While Dulcie and Martha were employed for many decades in the textile industry before losing their jobs, others at Zabalaza have never had stable employment. Some, like Dawn, are the recipient of social grants for households with children. A single mother, and one of the female farmers who first started as a worker at Zabalaza before making the transition to becoming a farmer, Dawn found that the grant was insufficient to meet the needs of her family:

The reason why I am farming for myself now is that I am unemployed and have children who are in high school and if they need something I can sell a pig to provide for their needs. I receive a state child support grant of R560 (USD 56) per month. This is not enough; it is basically finished in half a day, because the children need food, toiletries and other stuff. (Dawn, interview 2012)

For some at Zabalaza, the decision to start farming was not driven by unemployment but rather by below-subsistence wages. Some left wage labor and pursued different forms of self-employment before coming to Zabalaza. For example, Malcolm resigned from a relatively secure job that he had held for two years to become a self-employed fishmonger. Tata Bongani also moved from wage employment to self-employment before beginning to farm at Zabalaza. In both cases their income from self-employment was considerably higher than from wage employment. As Tata Bongani explains, 'I worked at a poultry factory for one year [in 1968] ... selling chickens. After that I became self-employed. I

realized that when I sell for myself I was tripling the money from selling chickens' (Interview, 2014).

The Zabalaza case shows that land provides a buffer against the vagaries of the labor market. But wage labor also provides resources that facilitate farming activities at Zabalaza. For example, Basil's agricultural activities relied on his access to wage employment. When he lost his job and his pigs died because of disease, it was difficult for him to restart his pig farming activities. At the same time, however, because he still had access to land at Zabalaza, he was able to switch to collecting and selling wood to households in the area.

The Zabalaza land occupation undermines arguments put forward by some commentators (Walker and Cousins 2015; Cousins 2013; du Toit and Neves 2014) that reduce the demand for land redistribution to a symbolic or emotive struggle. For the Zabalaza occupiers, land is a very concrete means to reproduce their families in the context of precarious labor and insufficient welfare. As James Ferguson points out, land is both a productive and redistributive resource (Ferguson 2013).

Two souls of the urban proletariat: politics, struggles and differentiation

The two souls of the Zabalaza farmers – proletariat and peasant – can also be seen from the way in which they are organized and have engaged in struggles against the state and private capital. In this section I focus on how their struggles have shaped and been shaped by this dual nature. As Daniel Bensaid observes (2009, 119), drawing on E.P. Thompson, class is constituted both out of struggle and as a 'result of a politics of formation'.

The Zabalaza occupiers are stable urban residents who want to remain in the city. Therefore, when the state attempted to evict them by offering them alternative land in rural areas, they rejected this offer, refusing to be relocated farther than 20 km from the City of Cape Town (field notes 2010).

They are also firmly embedded in the local urban working-class areas, where most of them live, and sell a part of their output in the informal food market. They sell livestock to butchers and petty traders in surrounding townships like Mfuleni, Khayelitsha and Nyanga, and in nearby rural towns. Pumla – a female farmer who has been at Zabalaza since 2011 – is both a pig farmer and a street vendor. She explains:

Every day I sell my meat in the main road in Mfuleni. In the morning I sell in the street opposite [the retail chain] Shoprite from 6 in the morning, frying my pig meat selling to workers on their way to work – Monday to Saturday. (Pumla, interview 2012)

Some of the Zabalaza output is sold in the surrounding townships to meet the demand for livestock and poultry for African traditional practices and ceremonies that have been incorporated and reshaped as part of life in the city (cf. Mafeje 1981). As one of the farmers explains:

My market is my people, African people ... we normally do our custom things in June and December, when young boys are going to the mountain. I also raise goats knowing we use them a lot ... Xhosa people use it for going to the mountain and also for the sangoma ceremonies. I slaughtered four goats when my brother's children went to the mountain and one of my biggest cows for my wife's ceremony to become a sangoma. (Sakumzi, interview, 2014)

Notwithstanding the fact that the Zabalaza farmers are deeply entrenched in the City of Cape Town, they frame their demand for land in ways that are similar to those of the landless in rural areas. Invocations such as 'we want what was taken from us' during colonialism and apartheid have become central in their defense of the land occupation.

Our struggle is for land. The struggle for land is central to our vision. The government does not have the political will to take land from [white] commercial farmers; that is why we are suffering. There is no land for us; this is what we are fighting for. (Zabalaza Executive, focus group, 2012)

In sum, the Zabalaza land occupation can be understood as being part of the current wave of urban struggles in South Africa that Alexander (2010) has dubbed the 'rebellion of the poor'. However, when it came time to make political alliances to defend the land occupation, the Zabalaza farmers gravitated toward rural movements. Instead of seeking durable alliances with urban-based movements, the Zabalaza occupiers veered toward agrarian social movements that shared a similar outlook and faced similar land struggles. In 2009 the SPP linked the Zabalaza occupiers with the Food Sovereignty Campaign (FSC) – an agrarian social movement composed of small-scale farmers, landless peasants, farm workers, forestry communities and rural dwellers based in the Western and Northern Cape Provinces. The FSC emphasizes the key role of direct action. This relationship quickly transformed from alliance building toward membership in the FSC, in turn radicalizing the politics of Zabalaza, shifting them from court proceeding to resist eviction to direct action.

The radicalization of the Zabalaza farmers became clear in 2009 when a sand mining company that had been issued a permit by the state started mining a dune at Zabalaza and threatened to evict the farmers in order to be able to mine the entire site. In response, the FSC task team members decided to engage in direct action with rural farmers (who were in Cape Town for World Food Day) taking the lead, mobilizing members of the Zabalaza executive committee and a few of the general members with a long history of struggle in the city to take control of the farm. Women leaders at Zabalaza swiftly organized a few workers employed by Zabalaza farmers and some of the poorer farmers to set alight old tires and to block the entrance to the farm, only allowing vehicles to exit. The director of the sand mining company was summoned to the site, and under police presence, an agreement was brokered that all mining activities had to stop until a greater understanding of the nature of the mining was achieved, and that none of the livelihoods of the farmers would be disrupted (participant observation field notes, 2009).

Most agrarian scholars argue that differentiation of the peasantry is inevitable and assume that the peasantry are therefore the bearers of a regressive politics (Hendricks 2014; Bernstein 2015). While Zabalaza is not immune to the tendency toward differentiation, there is also a strong egalitarian counter-tendency, and the balance between the two is a terrain of struggle. This struggle reflects the 'two souls' of the Zabalaza farmers. To be sure, the better-off farmers aspire to accumulate, and would favor a system allowing them to acquire, more land, but so far the policy on equal plot sizes has been upheld. The differentiation that does exist occurred *prior* to the point of entry into Zabalaza and is due to the non-farm income earned by some members. Differentiation after the point of entry is constrained by the allocation of equal plot sizes. Likewise, the workers employed by farmers at Zabalaza live and work under precarious conditions. However, several workers have made the transition to farmer, in most cases when the

Executive Committee intervened in disputes between the worker and farmer, granting the worker their own plot. The rules and practices limiting differentiation are themselves the outcome of class struggle, which is a constant feature of the internal social relations at Zabalaza.

A fuller analysis of how class differentiation and class struggle play out in relation to socio-linguistic/ethnic differences and gender would require more space. However a few points are in order. Gender, socio-linguistic differences and class do not neatly overlap with one another at Zabalaza. How gender and socio-linguistic differences map onto class differentiation is much more complex than what surface appearances or invocations by Zabalaza occupiers would lead us to believe. Although ethnic discourse is often invoked during periods of internal social conflict and struggles for hegemony, my fieldwork has revealed that political alliances at Zabalaza transcend socio-linguistic differences and are more often rooted in the class orientation of the actors.

In sum, in the Zabalaza occupation, we see a convergence in struggle of different layers of the urban proletariat, including the employed, unemployed and underemployed, as well as a convergence between urban-based and rural-based movements. The next section points to the strong similarities between the Zabalaza farmers and large segments of the urban population in Cape Town, in turn pointing to the broader potential for such political convergences.

A latent reserve army of peasants?

Zabalaza farmers share key characteristics with a large percentage of Cape Town's population as well as the urban population in South Africa more broadly, and thus it is reasonable to conclude that the land occupations for raising livestock that we can observe today are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of *latent demand for land for agriculture by urban residents*.

Indeed, as stated earlier, a survey conducted in 2005/2006 about land demand in South Africa found that nearly 33 percent of black South Africans want land for agricultural production and 12 percent want access to land for other reasons. While 66 percent of the demand is from rural areas, 34 percent is from urban areas. A striking feature of the survey is that nearly half of the urban demand for land is from people living in formal housing structures (Aliber, Reitzes, and Roefs 2006; Hall and Dubb 2013). This is consistent with our findings for Zabalaza where most of the farmers already have access to adequate housing.

In another telling survey, political scientist James Gibson found that 85 percent of black respondents in both urban and rural areas believed that 'Most land in South Africa was taken unfairly by white settlers ... and land must be returned to blacks in South Africa, no matter what the consequences are for the current owners and for political stability in the country' (Gibson quoted in Atuahene 2011, 122).

This demand for land is not necessarily for a return to the rural or an essential peasant state. As was emphasized earlier, the Zabalaza farmers are long-term urban residents, with no strong economic ties to the rural areas, and a clear desire to remain in the city. This is a characteristic that they share with a majority of the population living in the Eastern Suburbs and the Cape Flats in the city of Cape Town. The Zabalaza farmers, and the majority of people residing in these areas, trace their family's arrival in Cape Town to

the apartheid-era wave of migration, particularly from the former homelands in the Eastern Cape and rural commercial farming districts of the Western and Northern Cape (Bekker and Cramer 2003; Geyer et al. 2011).

Moreover, a significant number of the Zabalaza farmers – and the Cape Town population more broadly – are part of what Marx 1976 describes in *Capital* as the reserve army of labor or relative surplus population – that is, workers who are either superfluous to the needs of capital or who are the precariously employed. The City of Cape Town reflects the broader South African reality of high unemployment levels and a high percentage of jobs that do not pay a living wage (Ashman, Fine, and Newman 2011; O’Laughlin et al. 2013, 6). Unemployment in the city is around 25 percent, while average household income has steadily declined since 1996, with 34.1 percent having a monthly income of less than R3500 (USD 350 in 2014) and 13.7 percent of households receiving no income (Provincial Treasury 2014). The ‘severity of food insecurity in poor areas of Cape Town is greater than in rural areas’ (Battersby 2011, 549). The official estimate is that 20 percent of the population lives in poverty, while inequality is massive as indicated by the city’s Gini coefficient of 0.57. Household indebtedness has increased dramatically since the democratic transition and the neoliberal turn. The South African National Credit Regulation reported in 2009 that 17 million people, nearly 40 percent of the population, were indebted (James 2015; Jacobs and Smit 2010).

Today a large number of South African households are reliant on state social transfers and remittances as sources of income (Van der Berg and Moses 2012). Social grants in South Africa have been touted as highly effective in reducing household poverty, with approximately 40 percent of the unemployed living in households where the main source of income is social grants (Ferguson 2015; Van der Berg and Moses 2012, 133; Marais 2011, 246). However, these social grants are not reducing the latent demand for land. As Dawn’s case illustrates, the social grant by itself does not provide an adequate income for the reproduction of poor households. Approximately 40 percent of households reliant on social grants have difficulties meeting their food needs consistently, and the same goes for 10 percent of households reliant on wage incomes (Marais 2011, 246; Fakier and Cock 2009, 358). The rising cost of food ‘more than outweighs the monetary value of grant increments, bringing little relief for grant dependent families, consisting of approximately 14 million individuals’ (Jacobs 2012).

In sum, there is a significant land hunger among urban residents in South Africa today. Seen through the lens of the Zabalaza case, we might very well conclude that there is a ‘latent reserve army of peasants’ who would seize the opportunity to engage in agricultural activities in the city under the right conditions. In this case, struggles for urban land for agricultural livelihoods such as the Zabalaza occupation – which have been largely ignored by scholars and social movements – should be considered more centrally today by those interested in the broader anti-capitalist struggles and the development of alternatives to/beyond capitalism.

Conclusion: the urban end of the continuum of the contemporary land and agrarian question

The Tabata/Mafeje thesis has furnished us with a productive theoretical lens through which to view land occupations for raising livestock in the city. Seen from this perspective,

the Zabalaza farmers (and the protagonists of other, similar urban land occupations) are the latest incarnation of a laboring class with dual characteristics. Tabata, in particular, always accentuated the revolutionary potential of the laboring class with dual characteristics in both labor and community struggles in the cities and in land struggles in rural areas. While migrant workers continue to play a militant role in labor struggles (such as in the Marikana strike), an 'urban proletariat with peasant characteristics' has also emerged, revealing the existence of a strong latent demand for land for agricultural livelihood in the city. In this vein, the Zabalaza case has important implications for debates on the agrarian question, on urbanization and on land struggles.

First, the Zabalaza case suggests that the *agrarian question* is acquiring an important *urban* dimension in South Africa. Instead of the peasantry disappearing completely, as linear proletarianization scholars predict, or repeasantization being only a rural phenomenon, as the repeasantization scholars suggest, this class has been relocated and reconstituted as an urban proletariat with peasant characteristics within the cities of neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa. As such, the agrarian question cannot be reduced to a question about the transition to capitalism or about the countryside.

While capitalist agriculture continues to displace people from the countryside, the urban centers are unable to absorb them into wage employment, leading to the formation of an urban proletariat with peasant characteristics. Thus, *instead of being resolved, the land and agrarian question is in part being shifted spatially to the urban areas*. Rather than being dismissed as agrarian populism, the self-activity of the urban proletariat with peasant characteristics should be understood as a central component of both contemporary agrarian and urban struggles. Just as the agrarian question never became a central focus in the broader South African liberation struggle, with the notable exception of the Unity Movement of South Africa, today, urban bias and a linear reading of history continue to obscure the relevance of the agrarian question.

Second, the Zabalaza case suggests that *urbanization* does not proceed in a linear fashion resulting in a homogenous urban proletariat detached from any demand for agricultural land or practices. Urban residence is often equated with an ideal typical urban proletariat, 'conflating spatial divisions/locations (urban-rural) with class' (Neocosmos 1990). The linear proletarianization and repeasantization approaches both prevent us from identifying the significance of cases like Zabalaza and, more pertinently, from appreciating their political implications.

Third, the absence of a nationwide land movement in South Africa should not be interpreted as the absence of *land struggles*. Instead there have been many localized struggles for land that have proven to be resilient over time, as exemplified by the Zabalaza land occupation. I call these localized struggles *land reform from below*. It is to these urban land occupations that we should 'give a greater analytical and political place', to use Ferguson (2015) in a different context. How these struggles are carried out does not neatly fit into either proletarian or peasant struggles but is best understood as *the newest manifestation of the struggles of the bearers of the dual character of labor in South Africa*.

In conclusion, the 'urban land question is a central factor driving both popular protest and repressive state action and any emancipatory politics needs to take it seriously' (Hendricks and Pithouse 2013, 107). Zabalaza is one illustration of a new politics of an urban proletariat with peasant characteristics demanding access to land for agricultural livelihoods. As such it opens up further questions about what is the space for mobilization

around the agrarian question in the struggle within and beyond capitalism. The land and agrarian question is acquiring an urban dimension that needs to be brought to the center of our research and debates.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank, for their generous comments, criticism and advice, Beverly Silver, Michael Levien, Sara Berry, Bill Martin and Peter Jacobs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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