

Review: Malte Thran, *“Rassengerechtigkeit” und Fetischisierung von Land. Kritik der Landreform in Namibia*, Marburg, Tectum, 2014.

A quarter of a century after the first National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question the land issue remains unresolved and contentious. A second land conference is planned for September 2017, the perceived consensus of the first conference having gradually been eroded against the backdrop of a programme that has been variously criticised for being too slow or simply a complete failure. What has not changed is the general discourse about the need for land reform in Namibia. Its focus continues to be on justice, economic growth, reduction of the unequal distribution of wealth and the reduction of poverty. Access to land continues to be regarded as a panacea for Namibia’s high poverty levels and unacceptable distribution of wealth. Questioning the necessity of redistributing land in the name of poverty alleviation is tantamount to an act of sacrilege. In this context, Malte Thran’s book is a welcome breath of fresh, critical air into the debate. It should be stated at the outset that its impact unfortunately remains limited, as it is accessible only to German readers.

As the sub-title of the book suggests, it presents a critique of land reform in Namibia. However, the aim of the book is not to provide – yet another - overview of the historical and political processes that have shaped land reform in Namibia. The author also does not provide an assessment of whether it has

failed or not. Instead, he goes beyond the objectives, implementation and results of land reform, to question its ideological underpinnings.

Thran sets out to investigate the role and meaning ascribed to land in Namibia, which, he argues, cannot be reduced to its socio-economic role in uplifting the poor. If the latter was the main development objective, the question must be raised why it is only land that is redistributed under the umbrella of poverty alleviation and not other economic resources? He suggests that land appears to be bestowed with mythical powers to reduce poverty.

He argues that in the discourse on land reform in Namibia, land functions not only as a factor of production despite public rhetoric to the contrary, but as a political instrument. Land has a special political role in the larger project of constructing a Namibian nation. The land question has its own internal dynamic, which he distinguishes from the social question which revolves around more justice, improved livelihoods and economic growth. He points out that the politically recognised and articulated issue regarding land reform is the redistribution of land and not wealth.

Thran’s critical observations about the consensus resolutions taken at the National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question deserve to be debated more widely, particularly since these resolutions are currently being reappraised in preparation for the impending land conference.

For Thran, the Land Conference in 1991 served as an important instrument in

obtaining agreement on an interpretation of history that expressed the post-colonial national interest of building one nation. He argues that by making colonial land dispossession the focus of land reform, the nature of colonial exploitation and the forceful introduction of private property are excluded from land reform discourse. Consequently, the focus of land reform is not on the transformation of these structures, but rather on the distribution of private property to individuals. At issue is not that ownership of land is concentrated in the hands of a few as a result of a specific property rights system, but rather that whites own the land (p. 151). The discourse on land reform, therefore, is not about how inherited colonial structures can be transformed, but about the racial identity of land owners and how a change can be brought about.

The selective interpretation of colonial history also defines who the aggrieved subjects are. All previously disadvantaged Namibians are constituted as victims of colonial land dispossession, disregarding the fact that different communities were affected differently. This helps to explain why the Conference passed a resolution that effectively ruled out the restitution of ancestral rights, while confirming that large-scale land dispossession was a historical injustice that needed to be addressed. This disjuncture suggests that land dispossession served as proof of colonial injustice in order to justify and legitimise a land reform programme that benefited all previously disadvantaged Namibians (p. 125).

Ruling out restitution also served another political project, namely national reconciliation. The aim of this policy is to unite communities that were spatially divided by pre-Independence racist policies and mould them into a new nation. This required a reinterpretation of the original ownership of land to construct a Namibian nation that preceded colonialism and independence. Clearly, particularistic claims for land restoration would have undermined the reconciliation policy.

The selective interpretation of history posited a homogenous pre-colonial society that was devoid of any power inequalities and class relationships. This made it possible to argue that all land in white hands was acquired illegally, ignoring the historical fact that pre-colonial traditional leaders traded in land. The definition of poverty in the land reform discourse equally ignores class differences. Poverty, according to Thran, is conflated with landlessness, which is essential for the legitimisation of land reform. Amongst other consequences, this particular discourse opened the door for elite capture.

Following the provisions of the Constitution, the Land Conference affirmed the principle of affirmative action in bringing about racial justice and equality in land ownership.

Chapter five provides a critical analysis of affirmative action and racial justice. Thran argues that affirmative action in Namibia amounts essentially to institutional racism, albeit unintentionally, rather than to a political instrument to achieve greater material equality. This is because the fundamental principle of

affirmative action is exclusion. It divides the Namibian population into previously disadvantaged and advantaged sections, euphemisms for pre-independence racial categories. Affirmative action, according to Thran, is not aimed at reversing *currently* existing racist and exploitative practices, but instead seeks to legitimise the advancement of certain Namibians by reference to what had happened to them under colonial rule.

Race as a political and historical construct is not integrated into land reform discourse. Instead, racism is reified, in the sense that it becomes a constitutive element of land. The result of reification is that racist practices will remain associated with land, regardless of policies. One consequence of placing racial categories at the centre of land reform debates is that the structural causes of land concentration are not addressed. Land concentration is explained in racial terms, and these racial categories will only be neutralised if a just racial balance is demanded (p. 168).

Moreover, affirmative action is characterised by an inherent contradiction: it seeks to reverse racist practices by employing racist concepts. On the one hand white farmers are identified as the problem, while on the other hand the state acknowledges their interests. A resolution taken at the Land Conference affirms that land reform should not undermine commercial agriculture (p. 137f.).

Is affirmative action the only way to redress past injustices? Thran's clear answer is no. Instead of elevating previous disadvantages to the defining

moment of land reform, its point of departure could be to address *current* discrimination and injustices. This approach, however, would exclude the elite, by focusing on poverty and material inequalities instead of racial land ownership and might require structural transformation.

Chapter six discusses Thran's notion of the fetishisation of land. It is based on the observation that a dominant element of political discourse is that every Namibian must have a piece of land. This notion is closely tied to the perception that Namibia's sovereignty will not be complete, as long as the ownership structure of freehold land is not more representative of the racial composition of the country. Thran argues that white land owners are regarded as 'foreigners' within Namibian society, who, by dint of being land owners, compromise the sovereignty of the state by holding power over the state. He argues that to the extent that white land owners do have power, this is not the result of history, but the result of private property which is guaranteed by the Constitution (p. 210). Redistribution of land will reduce the perceived power of white land owners. Land becomes fetishised in so far as it assumes value that transcends its economic usefulness. It embodies Namibian sovereignty, the inherent power of which is regarded as a natural quality of land.

A problem arises when sovereignty as embodied in land is owned by the colonial race. The ideology of racial justice personifies colonial influence in so far as colonial evil continues to exist in whites, while black people by

definition demonstrate a will towards a post-colonial society (p. 194). Both the fetishisation of land and racial justice define the subject and object of land reform, those that are to benefit from it and that which needs to be redistributed.

In chapter seven the author takes a closer look at the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme and the National Resettlement Programme, which have been realised within a private property regime and, consequently, a market-based approach to land acquisition, through the lens of racial justice and the fetishisation of land. Thran argues that the redistribution of land held under freehold essentially conserves and reproduces the colonial land distribution by accepting the institution of private property.

He provides a broad description of both programmes, using data that, naturally, has since become dated. However, this does not detract from some of the critical points he makes about both programmes. With regard to AALS, redistributing land is subject to the demands of private enterprise, by dint of the fact that beneficiaries have to be able to repay loans, which are extended by Agribank for the purchase of freehold farms. As far as the resettlement programme is concerned, the state acts as a buyer. Acquired farms are sub-divided into smaller parcels and allocated to individual beneficiaries. Being a supply driven approach, the state is to a large extent dependent on the land offered by land owners as far as its selection, size and contiguity of different parcels is concerned. The emphasis on accommodating as many beneficiaries as

possible on freehold land puts the viability of small-scale farms at risk. According to Thran, this is a direct consequence of the fetishisation of land, as the welfare of beneficiaries is subordinated to the objective of replacing a few large landowners by a large number of previously disadvantaged Namibians in the interest of greater sovereignty.

Regrettably, Thran cannot resist portraying in particular the beneficiaries of national resettlement in a clichéd manner. We are led to believe that many beneficiaries farm communally, that fences are broken and modern range management unheard of. The reality, of course, is much more nuanced and complicated, something that more extensive fieldwork might have shown.

The problem of selecting beneficiaries of the resettlement programme continues to be contentious. Thran argues that the NRP does not differentiate between poor and landless people. Even though the National Resettlement Policy defines target groups, these have not been prioritised, giving rise to elite capture, which is the subject of chapter eight.

Elite capture or neo-patrimonialism, is the result of the legally accepted principle of affirmative action, which facilitates the unrestricted demands of the elite to be resettled. This refers to the practice by which land is allocated to individuals with the means to purchase land under the AALS, such as civil servants and business people, provided that they were previously disadvantaged. This is possible by equating landlessness and poverty. He points out that that neo-patrimonialism or elite capture is perfectly legal and open in Namibia's

land reform programme, and hence must be distinguished from corruption.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, Thran provides brief reviews of some key documents on land reform and presents his own fieldwork in the form of eight case studies. These trajectories of resettlement provide an interesting, albeit, limited portrait of a complex reality. He concludes that resettlement reproduces exploitative colonial relationships by creating new landowners who are able to exploit workers for their own benefit.

Thran's book is a welcome contribution to the debate of Namibia's land reform programme in that it transcends the 'obvious' characteristics of land reform. It opens the debate on the political and ideological aspects of land reform within the wider project of constructing a Namibian nation. While the author deliberately shies away from making recommendations on how the implementation of land reform should be improved, he concludes that the thrust of land reform needs to be changed for it to be able to attain its stated objectives. Instead of reproducing racial categories and investing land with some kind of mythical powers to reduce poverty – the fetishisation of land – political action should take the poverty of farm workers and rural and urban communities as its point of departure.

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