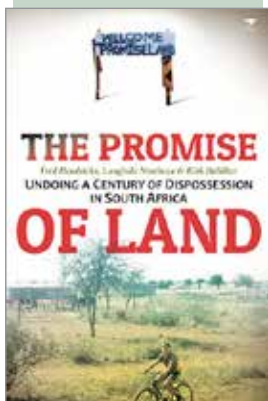


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**THE PROMISE OF LAND:
UNDOING A CENTURY
OF DISPOSSESSION IN
SOUTH AFRICA**
Edited by Fred Hendricks,
Lungisile Ntsbeza and
Kirk Helliker
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BOOK REVIEW

The Promise of Land: Undoing a Century of Dispossession in South Africa edited by Fred Hendricks, Lungisile Ntsbeza and Kirk Helliker

“The promise of land” argues that land redistribution in South Africa has failed. The book opens with and closes with outrage, arguing that the plight of the landless should be heard more loudly. A collection of essays is used to widen the context of the land-question: There is a clear attempt to differentiate types of land, i.e. “white” commercial rural areas, former reserves, and urban areas, and to show how these types of land interrelate; Rural development, smallholder agriculture and food security are discussed; Land policy in Zimbabwe, India, and the Netherlands are included to provide a comparative perspective. But, ultimately, the book takes a narrow view of what needs to happen in South Africa: immediate restorative justice.

The opening argument (constituted by Fred Hendricks, Lungisile Ntsbeza and Kirk Helliker’s arguments), states a simple and accurate premise: land dispossession is wrong. It was wrong during colonialism, and during Apartheid. The result of land dispossession was racialised inequality across a number of areas, but, more immediately, in the distribution of-, access to-, and ownership of land.

According to the authors, very little has changed. The book rejects government’s land reform attempts as “inappropriate and inadequate”. They argue that a strong bias exists to preserve the current situation – a bias that perpetuates and entrenches the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, and even reproduces it.

Government’s failure to meet their own targets with regard to land reform underlies the book’s view that “a fundamental change in approach is necessary”. The argument holds that this change must take the form of ‘social movement politics’ – social movements that have the potential to ignite “latent tensions”, and to bring about change. These social movements are, according to the book, exemplified by the Marikana miners and the Western Cape farmworker strikes that took place last year.

The land question in South Africa is fraught with many difficulties. These difficulties include the challenge of establishing what land belongs to whom, land administration, urban development, and agricultural transformation. Moreover, the Constitution protects existing rights to land and authorises the promotion of land reform within the framework of Section 25. The interpretation of Section 25 is characterized by a tension between protecting existing property rights, and achieving justice in access to land.

Our Constitution, in the view of the authors, is an obstacle to achieving restorative justice – if it does not go hand-in-hand with the proper political and moral will. Social movement politics, from this perspective, can be seen as a way to force radical action. On one reading, the book is a curious mix of ‘analysis’, and moral prescription. The analysis seems to play out within a bigger narrative of radical and just redistribution, driven by ‘the people’. This type of reasoning portrays the rights of ‘the people’ as paramount. But does it not do so at the cost of disregarding those of the individual? Is this not a dangerous view?

But the challenge in the new South Africa – and this is not properly acknowledged in the text – is to address the wrongs of the past within a framework that includes all citizens, and protects the rights of all citizens.

‘The promise of land’ does well to confront the reader with the urgency of land reform, and the injustice of dispossession. But the challenge in the new South Africa – and this is not properly acknowledged in the text – is to address the wrongs of the past within a framework that includes all citizens, and protects the rights of all citizens. When the suggestion is made that Zimbabwe’s fast-track land reform policy was a good thing, one cannot help but raise an eyebrow. The book makes a comparison between Zimbabwe and South African, 19 years into democracy, in the context of massive unemployment and failure of market-based land reform and argues that South Africa finds itself in the same position Zimbabwe was in, 20 years after liberation. The authors, in drawing this comparison, blatantly disregard the political factors underlying the Zimbabwe land grabs, the abolishment of the rule of law, and human rights violations – factors that cannot be reconciled with the founding values of the South African Constitution.