

Original Research

The Peasantry as a Persistent Sociopolitical Force for Land Reform under Neoliberalism

Ashiraf Mugalula

- Research Fellow, Makerere University Al-Mustafa Islamic College

DOI: To be assigned**Article History**

Received: 20 Nov 2025

Accepted: 21 Dec 2025

Published: 23 Dec 2025

Correspondence Author:

Ashiraf Mugalula

***Related declarations are provided in the final section of this article.*

Abstract

In recent years, the resurgence of peasant-based and peasant-led rural struggles for redistributive land reform has drawn the attention of agrarian studies scholars worldwide. However, scholars are deeply divided on their nature and importance. The resurgence is driven, among other factors, by the failures of neoliberal structural adjustment and market liberalization policies to ensure a basic living standard for the semi-proletarian peasantry. Urban unemployment and agricultural stagnation caused by neoliberal economic and land policies have pushed peasants into intensified livelihood 'diversification' activities across rural and urban regions in the global south and, in a scissor-like manner, have compelled increased struggles and conflicts over access, control, and use of land for social reproduction. The return of militant semi proletarian peasant struggles has rekindled longstanding debates about the agency of the peasantry in land reform as a vital element in agrarian transitions (see Moyo and Yeros 2005; Moyo et al. 2013). According to Moyo et al. (2013), this debate focused on the "political subject of the agrarian question." It was radicalized with Lenin's adoption of the peasant question as a component of the proletarian revolution, and the anti-colonial revolution "as in Mao, Fanon, and Cabral... as the "natural political subject" of anti-colonial nationalism in the global south (Moyo et al. 2013, 105). The key issue is to what extent, then, are peasants still an active sociopolitical force for land reforms under neoliberalism? This paper argues that unfulfilled promises of state-led and market-led redistributive land reforms to deliver land to the land-hungry have provoked virulent peasant struggles and conflicts globally to reclaim the land as a basic resource for social reproduction, and as a continuation of the fight for social justice and equity, citizenship, and autonomy, through demands for redistributive land reform as a necessary condition for broad-based agrarian reform (see Veltmeyer 2003; Moyo 2003, 5).

Keywords: Peasantry; Land reform; Neoliberalism; Agrarian struggles; Land tenure; Rural social movements; Political economy of land

Introduction

In recent years, the resurgence of peasant-based and peasant-led rural struggles for redistributive land reform has attracted the attention of agrarian studies scholars worldwide. But scholars are deeply divided on their nature and significance. The resurgence is driven, *inter alia*, by the failures of neoliberal structural adjustment and market liberalization policies to guarantee a basic living standard for the semi-proletarian peasantries. Urban jobless growth and agricultural stagnation caused by neoliberal economic and land policies have pressed peasants into intensified livelihood 'diversification' activities across rural and urban areas in the global south, and, in a scissor-like fashion, have impelled intensified struggles and conflicts over access, control and use of land for social reproduction.

The return of militant semiproletarian peasant struggles has rekindled older debates about the agency of the peasantry in land reform as a necessary condition for agrarian transitions (see Moyo and Yeros 2005; Moyo et al. 2013). According to Moyo et al. (2013), this debate concerned the "political subject of the agrarian question," and was radicalized with Lenin's embrace of the peasant question as an element of the proletarian revolution, and the anticolonial revolution "as in Mao, Fanon, and Cabral... as the "natural political subject" of anticolonial nationalism in the global south (Moyo et al. 2013, 105). To what extent, then, are peasantries still an active sociopolitical force for land reforms under neoliberalism?

This essay argues that unfulfilled promises of state-led and market-led redistributive land reforms to deliver land to the land-hungry have provoked virulent peasant struggles and conflicts globally to reclaim the land as a basic resource for social reproduction, and as a continuation of the fight for social justice and equity, citizenship, and autonomy, through demands for redistributive land reform as a necessary condition for broad-based agrarian reform (see Veltmeyer 2003; Moyo 2003, 5).

Two perspectives have dominated the debate on the relevance of peasant land struggles for redistributive land reform. Structuralists (e.g. orthodox Marxism, etc.) claim that the peasantry is a "traditional social category" condemned to "disappear" with the advance of capitalist urban-centred development; peasants are increasingly a diminished and helpless conservative force in the course of the consolidation of capitalism (see Hobsbawmn 1973; Bryceson et al, 2000; Bernstein 2002, 2004; Kay 2000; Scott, 1985; Mkandawire, 2002; Sobhan, 1993).

A second perspective is framed by agency-centered explanations. They argue that the peasantry, historically and in the contemporary world, is still an active force to reckon with in the struggle for redistributive land reform (see Wolf 1971, 1969; Veltmeyer 1997; Petras 1997a, 1997b; Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Moyo 2003, 6; 2008; Moyo and Yeros 2005; McMichael 2008). Theorizations of the peasantry consequently transformed, "among both bourgeois and Marxist theorists" following a changing context and forms of struggle (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 36). In this essay, my position is framed by the latter perspective. But first, I begin with the exposition of the thesis that peasantries are a "disempowered" social force.

The Peasantry as "Disempowered" Social Force

Existing conceptual debates contest the significance of peasant struggles and conflicts concerning land reform (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 35-36; Moyo 2008, 12). At one end of the spectrum of this debate is the view that "peasants [are] an entirely passive lot, the disempowered object of various kinds of state agency including legislation, taxation, agricultural production regimes, systems of regulation and, macroeconomic planning" (Moyo 2008, 12; Yeros 2002a; Veltmeyer 2003; Scott 1985). Orthodox/Western Marxists and modernization theorists with a structuralist orientation hold to this "inevitable epochal transformation" view of capitalism as it has historically occurred in Western Europe and has been forcefully argued by Hobsbawm who shares the view of "the peasantry as a category of declining numerical and political significance, defeated by the processes of modernization and change" (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 293; cf. Bryceson et al. 2000).

This "epochal" view stems from Marx's political analysis of the French peasantry. His analysis led him to the 'historic' conclusion that "the peasantry was a 'sack of potatoes,' by which he meant that it was "exploited by the system but still conservative, superstitious and reactionary" (Moyo et al. 2013, 106). Marx equally dismissed "the associated 'lumpenproletariat' [as] a hopeless tool of reaction; and the indigenous peoples and slaves of the old and new colonies [as] either without much history of their own, or subject to more backward modes of production, to which European capitalism was an advance," (Moyo et al. 2013, 106). These views were later consolidated in orthodox Marxism and the modernization school's unilinear vision of the development of capitalism in agriculture.

Facing the prospects of "urban isolation" after the fall of the Paris Commune and hence political defeat, Engels drew out the implications of "the advance of universal male suffrage and the political organization of the working class" (Moyo et al. 2013, 106). While recognizing the potential electoral heft of the peasantry vis-à-vis the urban working class, Engels nonetheless refused to concede to their demands for land but instead inserted into the socialist party programme the offer of "socialist cooperatives and economies of scale" (Ibid.).

In the analysis of Moyo, "This marked the birth of the AQ [agrarian question] as a 'peasant question', however, in Engels mind the peasantry was still regarded as 'apathetic', and the colonies outside history (Moyo et al. 2013, 106).

Kautsky came to more or less the same verdict as Marx and Engels. The peasantry had no political future in the advance of capitalist development despite the functional relationship between big capitalist farms and resilient peasantries (Moyo et al. 2013, 107). According to Bryceson, Kautsky found out that "the dissolution of peasant production is a slow process whereby peasant petty commodity producers co-exist with agrarian and urban industrial capitalism, gradually shrinking over time under the force of urban migration" (Bryceson 2000, 11).

The aforementioned analyses by Marx, Engels and Kautsky exerted a profound influence on subsequent analyses of the peasantry around the world. The reason for their gloomy proposals in that historical conjuncture suggests "the factual absence of political alternatives

in the face of globalizing capital, but also the arrogance of bourgeois, industrial European society, with an evolving race consciousness" (Moyo et al. 2013, 106). This view was applied in analyses of African peasantries regarded as an inert mass incapable of shaping historical change (see Mafeje 1995; Bernstein 2003). More specifically, the claim was that the era of redistributive land reforms was over given the retreat of the state under neoliberalism and the attendant effects of neoliberal economic and land policies which have accelerated "the socio-economic destruction of its peasantries" and hamstrung their potential to lead struggles for land reforms (Moyo 2008, 5; Bryceson et al. 2000).

In this light, Veltmeyer (2003) argues that structuralists regard "the peasantry [as] an economic and political category that corresponds to a transitional organisational form, destined to disappear into the dustbin of history" (quoted in Moyo 2008, 13). In this transitional stage, the peasantry is said to exist in numerous forms in rural and urban areas either as "a rural proletariat", or an "urban lumpen proletariat" or even as "wage-labour equivalents" but who are fighting a losing battle in the face of the juggernaut of agrarian capitalist development (see also Bryceson et al. 2000). The historical outcome of the destruction of peasantries is an insignificant peasant sector, unable to contribute meaningfully to overall economic output and generally politically apathetic.

These analyses reflect the "wider context of the fall of the Berlin wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union" [when] neo-Marxism and other related analyses were put on the defensive" (Buijtenhuijs 2000, 118). Buijtenhuijs tells us that in this conjuncture "Class analysis generally, and 'peasant wars' more specifically, ceased to be fashionable topics in academic circles" (Buijtenhuijs 2000, 118). Indeed, the arguments for the end of land reform under neoliberalism mirror the views about the insignificance of the peasantry. But "This does not mean that peasant wars, or peasant conflict, disappeared entirely from African reality, but that scholars interpreted them in other terms (Buijtenhuijs 2000, 118)."

Two strands of research echo views about a disempowered peasantry. One strand bases its argument on the concept of "deagrarianization" and "depeasantization" (Bryceson et al., 2000). It is argued that under the weight of neoliberal structural adjustment, rural-urban migration is leading to the "shrinkage" of the peasantry as a result of the "convergence of de-peasantization and de-agrarianization" (Bryceson 2000, 5). Bryceson conceptualizes depeasantization as "historically contingent organizational change within agriculture, [which] combines with de-agrarianization, which over the past two centuries has gained the status of epochal change by virtue of its sustained duration and unmistakable direction" (Bryceson 2000, 5). Hence the rapid socio-demographic changes underway in the countryside of the global south.

The other strand of research focuses on the "agrarian question of labour" (Bernstein 2004, 2002). Here the issue is whether radical land reform is relevant under neoliberalism. In Bernstein (2002, 221) words, "whether, in the conditions of contemporary 'globalization' and its tendency to the 'fragmentation' of labour, there might be a new agrarian question of labour, now detached from that of capital, and which generates a new politics of struggles over land (and its distribution)." By expressing doubts about the possibility and relevance of

land reform today, Bernstein aligns himself with those who argue for the peasants' passivity in the face of capitalist development, as noted above. Rehman Sohban's (1993) examination of postwar land reforms around the world also concluded that 'radical and 'non-egalitarian' reforms to 'eliminate class differentiation and modes of domination in Africa, Asia and Latin America remained "elusive" (quoted in Helliker 2005).

But downplaying the systemic impact of postwar land reforms does not justify a retreat into what Byres (2016, 437), in response to Bernstein thesis above, terms 'analytical closure', a resort to 'world-system determinism' which privileges a priori conclusions derived from theory at the expense of empirical investigation of land reform processes. Although it is arguable whether land struggles still retain the systemic impact they have had historically, contradictory postwar land reform experiences alert us to the fact that "The direction of change has not admitted of historical determinism (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 26)" and that the problem of landlessness has never been resolved, at least in terms of creating "decent" on-farm and off-farm employment. Where reforms were driven by Cold War considerations as in East Asia, land reform led to industrial transformation; in other cases (e.g. South Asia, Latin America, Africa) land reforms led to newer bases of inequality and social tensions. In Kenya, land reforms strengthened monopoly capital control of large tracts of land and thus deepened the extroverted character of the economy based on expanded export of cash crops.

Nonetheless, Bernstein has noted trends in recent years toward attempts to further disempower the peasantry. This entails moves by Western aid agencies to give a "radical edge to notions of 'civil society' (e.g. in the 'new wave' land tenure reform studies) by elevating 'community' and 'community action' to the status of the new agents of land reform under neoliberalism. The objective is to downplay the role of more radical 'peasant movements' which have hitherto been the leading social forces for radical redistributive land reforms (Bernstein 2002, 450)." By establishing the fiction of 'community' as the new agency for neoliberal land tenure reform, its effect is to limit social demands to those germane to the narrow horizons of particular tribal formations rather than those that make demands for land reforms on a national scale. This is also taking place at a time when civil society organizations disavow radical demands for land reform in line with neoliberal rule of law tenets. This has created a huge "political and social vacuum in the leadership of the land reform agenda" (Moyo 2008, 115).

This socio-political vacuum accounts for conclusions some scholars have reached to the effect that agrarian crises do not seem to account for urban youth insurrections in Africa (see Mkandawire 2002). "Roving rebel" violence against the peasantry is proof that the issue of land reform and agrarian crisis in Africa is marginal to the legitimacy crises facing the African state manifested in youth-based, urban-focused rebellions. However, organic rural-urban linkages suggest that the rapid urbanization problem in Africa attests to the intensified = struggle for land and livelihoods among the semiproletarianized peasants and that this suggests an active search by semi-proletarianized peasants for alternatives to market based land tenure reforms that portend rural land dispossessions.

Furthermore, Bernstein (2005) argues that peasant passivity is due to the absence of significant landlord-tenant relationships in Africa. That land struggles in Africa have not appeared anywhere in a significant scale because most peasants enjoy relatively "free" access to land for subsistence based on customary tenure principles (Bernstein 2005, 87; Mafeje 2003). Another reason that explains peasant passivity is the conflation of "tribe, territory and traditional political leadership" (see Mamdani 1996; Bernstein 2005, 88) under indirect rule colonialism, and which has survived the postcolonial period to confound and limit class struggles within a tribe as a "civil war within the tribe," (Mamdani 1996; Bernstein 2005, 88) thus restricting the potential of social demands from escalating into wider class struggles on a national scale, and thus their transformative impact. Therefore, as a result of the two reasons above, land struggles in Africa take the form of clashes "between generations and genders, or between groups labelled by region, ethnicity or religion" rather than "pure" class struggles (Bernstein 2005, 87-88). However, some scholars insist that the peasantry remains an active class-based, sociopolitical force for land reform even today.

The Peasantry as an Active Social Force

On this other end of the spectrum of the debate is the view of "peasants as an active and empowered force that continues to contest the terrain of struggle over land" (Petras 1997a and 1997b quoted in Moyo 2008, 12; 2003, 6). In this tradition, Lenin exerted a formative influence on research on peasant agency in anticolonial struggles and social revolutions around the world. Touted as a "transitional figure in the political theory of the AQ" [Agrarian Question], under revolutionary conditions in Russia, he was to presciently single out "the poor peasantry to be the basis of the strategic alliance with the proletariat" in 'the struggle for land' (Moyo et al 2013, 107). According to Moyo et al. (2013), radical land reform had finally found a militant agency in his "tolerance of the peasantry" and in "his defence of the New Economic Programme based on peasant production in the post-revolutionary state" (Moyo et al. 2013, 107).

If Lenin was the first to recognize the potential revolutionary role of the peasantry, Mao-Tse Tung would be the first to deploy it in the course of practical political struggles for national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles. The countryside assumed historic significance in the Chinese communists national liberation struggle. Thus when "threatened [with] the urban isolation and defeat of the CCP" Mao would justify "the violent tactics employed by the peasantry" (Moyo et al. 2013, 109). Mao thus upset the traditional Marxist-Leninist line and, in so doing, consolidated a "worker-peasant alliance" which was to lead the struggle for "land reform and collectivization based on the initiatives of the peasantry" (Moyo et al. 2013, 109).

This tradition was consolidated in Africa in the course of decolonization struggles. Against Eurocentric discourses, the revolutionary potential of the peasantry in Africa was first recognized in the course of decolonization struggles by Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral (Moyo et al. 2013, 110). Various reasons were proffered for supporting peasant-based insurgency. One, "the peasantry is the most destitute class" whose potential, despite its internal contradictions, of "overcoming its vices to channel its energies towards the national

revolution" was clearly understood; second, its ability to wage the "ideological struggle" through the deployment of "tactical or strategic violence" made it the only agent capable of realizing "universality" (Moyo et al. 2013, 110). The peasantries' decisive involvement in national liberation struggles in which the land issue was a key rallying point finally came to

pass. Its revolutionary potential motivated subsequent studies that recognized the peasantries involvement in global anti-imperialist struggles.

Thus according to Buijtenhuijs (2000, 12), "From the 1960s until the mid-1980s peasant wars were a topic of deep interest to social scientists" and "[Hamza] Alavi's (1965) seminal article on *'Peasants and Revolution'*, which identified the 'revolutionary potential' of different categories of peasants, was soon to be followed by [Eric] Wolf's seminal work, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969). Wolf's text was influenced by the Vietnam war which was buttressed by active 'middle' peasant involvement in liberation struggles against US imperialism. According to Byres (2001, 351), Wolf's book redefined the terms of the debate on peasant agency. The middle peasants, or as US military officers derisively referred to them, 'raggedy little bastards', engaged "the mightiest military machine in history" as they "constituted a likely revolutionary force," historically confirmed the revolutionary potential of the peasantry as social force in struggles against imperialism in the global south.

Contra those who see the peasantry only in numerical terms, the significance of the peasantry in land reform struggles cannot be reduced to their numerical preponderance (Petras 1997 quoted in Moyo 2003, 7). According to Petras (1997), their "significance is out of proportion to their number" (Ibid.). Recognition of this fact suggests that under neoliberalism the "peasantry constitutes the most dynamic force for antisystemic change, found on the crest of a new wave of class struggle—and of indigenous people—for, land reform, local autonomy, social justice, and democracy (quoted in Moyo 2008, 7). This verdict recognizes that "the local and global context confronting peasant families in rural Africa is increasingly converging in both character and physical connection," in turn, this "explains why and how it is that relatively similar peasant organizational forms are emerging" in response to state "repression" and "two decades of economic decline across the African continent. This peasant response has also evoked common rural welfarist support systems, in the name of poverty reduction strategies, new wave rural development programmes and empowerment projects, sponsored by governments, NGOs and donors" (Moyo 2003, 7; 2008).

A novel terrain of struggle created by neoliberal globalization is crystallizing across the global south to the extent that over the past three decades, according to Petras (1997a, 1997b) and Veltmeyer 1997 quoted in Moyo 2008, 13) in recent years "a new wave of peasant-based

and -led movements that push for demands that go beyond land reforms towards more revolutionary or radical changes in government policy as well as the neoliberal model behind it and the entire 'system' created by this model" have emerged. The African

landscape is awash with numerous and variegated land struggles from the most informal to formal groups acting 'spontaneously' or instigated from above to demand land for social reproduction given the exclusionary logic of agrarian capitalist development" (Moyo and Yeros 2007).

Like the postwar period, the convergence of similar structural conditions under neoliberalism has pushed the semiproletarian peasantry towards militant action against primitive accumulation across the rural-urban divide despite their diverse forms as ethnic, racial, feminist and environmental movements (Moyo and Yeros 2011, 101-11). Women have participated in this new round of rural struggles in large numbers given the centrality of land to their social reproduction needs, and their expulsion from the circuits of capital at the same time that their "free" labour, including that of children, is ever more exploited by capital as a subsidy in processes of global accumulation based on the land and its natural resources (Moyo and Yeros 2011, 101-11).

Outright rural violence and land occupations have emerged as the choice revolutionary tactic deployed to force land reforms onto the land reform policy agenda. The social demand for land is potentially explosive due to accelerating re-peasantization processes. Hence, land struggles are central to efforts to regain access and autonomous control over land. These struggles over land "can best be understood in political terms—that is, in terms of a protracted struggle of peasant, poor urban workers and other rural groups for access to land, and in terms of the reaction of the dominant landholding class to this struggle, as well as the responses of the state" (Moyo 2008, 115). This is despite the fact that land occupations have often suffered a mixture of outright repression and/or rural 'welfarist' projects by the state or NGOs rural projects (Moyo et al, 2015, 23).

The salience of land occupations suggests the acceleration of re-peasantization processes as opposed to the "disintegration" of the peasantry into proletariat and capitalist farmer in the conventional scheme of the agrarian transformation process. It has been argued that "re-peasantization" occurs in "diverse" forms through the super-exploitation of the peasantry by "reducing the income of the peasant to the minimum necessary for his/her physical reproduction" (Moyo 2008, 114-15). As the most brutalized segment of the population, peasant land occupations have in some cases mutated into full scale armed liberation struggles. Armed struggles were key to anticolonial nationalist struggles for independence as in struggles against Portuguese colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s, in Kenya in the 1950s and Rhodesia in the 1970s.

Five land-related factors account for the emergence of struggles for land and natural resources in Africa. One factor is that the "general scarcity of land" usually impels peasants to invade contiguous lands which are perceived as vacant or unused (Moyo 2008, 117). The other factor is the exploitation of land grievances in the context of electoral competition whereby 'illegal settlements' are often mobilized by opportunist politicians locked in power struggles (Ibid.). Another factor is the thorny issue of boundaries and boundary staking often in the context of demarcating administrative divisions and tribal territories (Ibid.). A fourth factor is the marginalization of 'minority' social groups who often defy repressive land use

regulations to engage in opportunistic resource grabbing and tend to mutate into wider land struggles" and occupations (Ibid.). In general, it has been established that land struggles are often spurred on by the "anti-individualistic" orientation of African modes of social organization because of the effects of state and elite land expropriations of lands which are perceived by peasants as key to their daily subsistence needs (Mafeje 1999 quoted in Moyo 2003, 6).

In this regard, peasant struggles against state-led land policies that promote land expropriations take the form of "resource poaching," to avoid state reprisals, as exemplified by the "night harvesters" of oil palm plantations in Ghana (see Amanor 2005). These silent struggles, among others of a similar genre, can be termed "weapons of the weak" (see Scott 1985). Although seemingly ineffective, their cumulative actions have had far-reaching impacts on land policy as to lead policy-makers to face up to the social reproduction needs of rural dwellers. Whether overt or covert, however, peasant-state struggles "represents a clear class dimension of the land question in Africa, whereby rural peasantries sometimes in alliance with the urban poor, mobilise against the land policies of the ruling classes" (Yeros 2000 quoted in Moyo 2003, 6), often deploying violent tactics.

Other land struggles cut across the settler/non-settler categorization of African regions such as those in regions with institutionalized systems of migrant labour, particularly where migrants have acquired land rights to cultivate cash crops as in West Africa (Moyo et al. 2015, 22). In Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, for example, state land expropriation and their allocation to migrants and 'settlers' has touched off struggles to reclaim land regarded by autochthons as customary land at a time when the urban economy has collapsed and youth have returned to their rural 'homelands' (see Chauveau and Richards 2008). These struggles often take the form of ethnic and religious forms whereby foreigners and strangers are pitted against indigenes and natives. Where the state has intervened to mediate these conflicts, they have often degenerated into internecine violence and wider political conflicts imbricated into national electoral contests. The state has therefore been a target of localized land struggles from below.

Elitist agrarian reforms under the aegis of the state and international capital has generally eschewed land reforms that benefit the peasantry. Unequal land distribution is the fulcrum around which resource allocation biases are skewed towards consolidating large-scale capitalist farming. Indeed, it is well-known that land reform for the peasantry is a priority given the urgency for finding sustenance in the land where state economic and land policies incentivize land use towards export markets at the expense of internal food and industrial needs (Moyo 2003, 9). The phenomenon of expanded squatting conditions is also ample evidence of the struggle for land reform. This dimension foregrounds the role of state power in peasant struggles for land reform.

The outcomes of these struggles by worker-peasants against the state and capital point to "three divergent paths towards land reform, each characterized by a distinct overall strategy and a mixed bag of tactics: (i) state-led land reform (expropriation with compensation, land redistribution, rural development); (ii) market-assisted land reform (land titling, land

commoditization and land banks); and (iii) grassroots land reform processes including land occupations, negotiation and struggle (Moyo 2008; 2003, 7). The market-based approach is the dominant form of struggle under neoliberalism.

In contrast to Latin America, the land occupation tactic has not been sufficiently widespread in Africa given the weak rural-urban linkages and the lack of institutional links with other social movements clamouring for land reform. Thus in some regions e.g. West Africa, according to Amanor, it appears land struggles have been hemmed in by state initiatives to establish the framework for rural mobilization based on 'tribal' structures of representation.

These have been effectively coopted to the extent that mobilization cannot raise issues that go beyond the tribal horizon. Traditional leaders are in this case reduced to demanding localized land issues that do not threaten elites at the national level (Moyo 2003, 26). Instead, 'informal' movements have been the main vehicle for relaying demands for land redistribution, primarily through "land occupations, resource poaching and other forms of 'sabotage' (see Petras and Veltmeyer 2001). In extreme cases of racialized land inequities such as Zimbabwe, "The 2000-2001 land occupations marked the climax of a longer, less public and more dispersed struggle over land, which intensified under adverse economic conditions and the emergence of a strong political opposition" (Moyo et al. 2015, 24).

Equally important are those NGO-led peasant movements which have germinated in recent years espousing various land causes but with very different values from peasant struggles. NGOs are dominated by middle class elements who have no interests in redistributive land reform and long-term change. Instead they often operate as adjuncts of donor agendas with the consequence that their focus on upward accountability to donors has left rural 'social and political' forces without a committed leadership that can work to overcome the rural-urban divide at the center of obstacles to nation-wide mobilization (Moyo 2003, 27-8; Mamdani 1996). This has been the case with struggles for women's land rights.

The struggles for women's land rights has also largely been led by NGOs and local and international women's lobbies in general in the context of concerns that neoliberal land tenure reforms present both opportunities and challenges to women's land rights. In this regard, Whitehead and Tsikata (2003) have noted that "general processes of privatization and concentration affect women's land and property rights negatively" (79). These process have sparked various demands by women rights activists and by women themselves "for joint land title registration for spouses and the representation of women in local and national level land adjudication bodies" (Moyo et al. 2015, 25). Often the result is that a clash of interests emerges between "women's rights activists against others struggling for class and race-based land rights in ways that suggest the failure of the different forces struggling for the democratisation of land tenure to find common cause" (Moyo et al. 2015, 25).

Overall, therefore, it has been observed that "land movements have not been amenable to championing the cause of securing women's land rights" (Moyo et al. 2015, 24). This is particularly the case where violent tactics have been used on a large scale, and "women have been marginalized and, in certain situations, have found themselves facing insecurity, and

revived 'traditional' values have reinforced male dominance in land reform processes (Mbilinyi 1999 quoted in Moyo et al. 2015, 24). But while NGOs are organized on the basis of neoliberal tenets and the "rule of law", peasant mobilizations are primarily inspired by "values of social movements organized on a wider basis of class struggles" (Moyo 2003, 6).

As is well-known, national liberation movements were instrumental in the struggles for land as a core issue in the decolonization process. Where these posed a radical stance towards redistribution, primarily the deconcentrating of white settler enclaves, significant numbers of the peasantry obtained land, and their cultivation of cash crops accounted for the spectacular economic growth rates in post-independence Africa (see Moyo and Yeros 2005). In particular deracialization was the form redistributive land reforms assumed in settler Africa as in Kenya in the 1960s, Zimbabwe in the 2000s, and in more localized redistribution of agricultural estate enclaves in Tanzania and Mozambique. But it is in settler Africa that "Organised demands for redistributive agrarian reform strike at the heart of the dominant national and cultural identities through which the conditions of super-exploitation are reproduced" (Moyo et al. 2015, 21-22).

But with recent waves of externally-driven 'land grabs', the decolonization narratives of 'deracialization' and 'land nationalization' have been submerged by the clarification of the class struggle for land whereby domestic capitalists and the foreign backers have confronted the radicalizing demands of an expanding semi-proletarian peasantry seeking to reclaim lands alienated by the colonial state, the postcolonial state's developmentalist projects and more recent allocations of large tracts of land for new land uses driven by growth of global markets in tourism, biofuels, food, oil and mineral prospecting, and even speculative ventures (Moyo 2003, 9).

Although scattered and incipient, struggles to defend peasant lands against the new scramble for land in Africa are ongoing, and in some cases have forced the state to cancel land deals. Such defensive struggles involving peasant mobilization "have been most pronounced in Southern Africa, instigated by the re-radicalization of nationalism in Zimbabwe (Moyo et al. 2019, 26). In Zimbabwe, peasant "radicalization has led to the implementation of a fast-track land reform programme, which has rowed against the tide of land grabs, and has been reinforced by the policy of 'indigenisation' of mineral resources and a 'Look East' foreign policy, within a new Positive Non-Alignment strategy" (Ibid.). The peasant-based and peasant-led struggles for land are staging a major comeback to reclaim land as a basic resource to improve their material lives, and it is only a matter of time before vast swathes of the African continent are engulfed in Zimbabwe-style land occupations.

Conclusion

Whether peasant-based land struggles have the potential to initiate a new round of redistributive land reforms in today's globalized world is the stuff of heated debates among land and agrarian studies scholars. The colonial and postcolonial legacies of land alienations and contemporary contradictions of neoliberal land tenure reforms continue to be the focus

of social demands for land reform as basic social reproduction resource. Peasant land struggles are central to understanding the agency of the peasantry in their struggles for and over land in the past and in today's neoliberalized rural world in Africa. These struggles raise issues of social justice, equity, democratic citizenship and livelihoods. These conditions have been exacerbated by tenure reforms within a neo-liberal paradigm. Women have been part of these struggles because land use is central to their roles in the social reproduction process. Land struggles of all sorts abound in Africa and across the global south. Only rigorous empirical research can unearth the nature and relevance of these variegated struggles for they reflect emerging land and agrarian questions in Africa.

Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **OpenMind Journal of Humanities, Arts & Creative Studies**, ISSN XXXX-XXXX (Online). In Volume 1 (2025), Issue 1 (November - December) - 2025
The journal is published and managed by **OMR PUBLICATION** .

Copyright © 2025, Authors retain copyright. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> (CC BY 4.0 deed)

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

The author (s) declares that no funding was received for this work.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The author (s) declares that not applicable.

Consent for publication

The author (s) declares that not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

1. Bryceson, D., Kay, C., & Mooij, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Disappearing peasantries? Rural labour in Africa, Asia, and Latin America*. ITDG Publishing.
2. Buijtenhuijs, R. (2000). Peasant wars in Africa: Gone with the wind? In D. Bryceson, C. Kay, & J. Mooij (Eds.), *Disappearing peasantries? Rural labour in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (pp. 112–122). ITDG Publishing.
3. Byres, T. J. (2001). The peasants seminar of the University of London, 1972–1989: A memoir. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1(3), 343–388.
4. Byres, T. J. (2016). In pursuit of capitalist agrarian transition. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 16(3), 432–451.
5. Cliffe, L. (2001). The struggle for land in Africa. *African Studies Bulletin*, 64, 9–44.
<https://lucas.leeds.ac.uk/article/the-struggle-for-land-in-africa-lionel-cliffe/>
6. Helliker, K. D. (2005). Review essay: Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros (Eds.), *Reclaiming the land: The resurgence of rural movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. *African Sociological Review*, 9(2), 207–242.
7. Hobsbawm, E. J. (1973). Peasants and politics. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1(1), 3–22.
8. Mamdani, M. (1986). Peasants and democracy in Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 13(36), 1–15. (Verify issue/pages if needed.)
9. Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizens and subjects: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
10. Mkandawire, T. (2002). The terrible toll of post-colonial rebel movements in Africa: Towards an explanation of the violence against the peasantry. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40(2), 181–215.
11. Moyo, S. (2003, October–December). *The land question: Research perspectives and questions* [Conference paper]. CODESRIA Conferences on Land Reform, the Agrarian Question and Nationalism, Gaborone, Botswana & Dakar, Senegal.
12. Moyo, S. (2004). *African land questions, the state and agrarian transition: Contradictions of neoliberal land reforms*. CODESRIA.
13. Moyo, S., & Yeros, P. (Eds.). (2005). *Reclaiming the land: The resurgence of rural movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Zed Books.
14. Moyo, S., Tsikata, D., & Diop, Y. (2015). *Land in the struggles for citizenship in Africa*. CODESRIA.
15. Peters, P. A. (2004). Inequality and social conflict over land in Africa. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4(3), 269–314.

16. Peters, P. A. (2013). Conflicts over land and threats to customary tenure in Africa. *African Affairs*, 112(449), 543–562.
17. Petras, J., & Veltmeyer, H. (2001). Are Latin American peasant movements still a force for change? Some new paradigms revisited. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 28(2), 83–118.
18. Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
19. Veltmeyer, H. (1997). New social movements in Latin America: The dynamics of class and identity. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 25(1). (Add page numbers if available.)
20. Wolf, E. R. (1971). On peasant rebellions. In T. Shanin (Ed.), *Peasants and peasant societies*. Penguin.
21. Yeros, P. (2002). Zimbabwe and the dilemmas of the left. *Historical Materialism*, 10(2), 3–15.

Publisher's Note

OMR PUBLICATION remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations. The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of OMR PUBLICATION and/or the editor(s). OMR PUBLICATION disclaims responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.