

In Defense of Intellectual Autonomy: A Response to Hendricks

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Sam Moyo
Praveen Jha
Paris Yeros

Abstract

This article is a response to Fred Hendricks' critique of our most recent statement on the classical and contemporary agrarian questions. The critique, we believe, is a gross misunderstanding of our position on a variety of issues, including populism, nationalism, the character of the peasantry and industrialization. In defence of our intellectual integrity and autonomy, we restate here our basic positions and outline the trajectory of our collective research projects, in the hope that our positions are put into better perspective.

Keywords

agrarian question, populism, nationalism, peasantry, industrialization

Sam Moyo is Executive Director of the African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS), Harare, Zimbabwe. Email: sam_moyo@yahoo.com

Praveen Jha is Chairperson of the Centre for Informal Sector and Labour Studies (CISLS) and faculty at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning (CESP), School of Social Sciences (SSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India. Email: praveenjha2005@gmail.com

Paris Yeros is Adjunct Professor of International Economics at the Federal University of ABC (UFABC), São Paulo, Brazil. Email: parisyeros@gmail.com

Introduction

Agrarian South is nearly three years old. It is the culmination of over a decade of intensive South–South collaboration, spearheaded by the African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS), which has taken us to a qualitatively new level of research, teaching and publication. To our knowledge, this is the only journal in existence whose entire Editorial Board is based in the South and spread across the three continents. It gives us great pride to know that ours is a vanguard journal in building tri-continental solidarity in the social sciences and defending the intellectual autonomy of the South, our most prized objective. The fact that a whole half-century after the onset of decolonization publishing in the social sciences remains highly concentrated in the North bestows upon us a special responsibility to defend the space conquered and remain vigilant.

Judging from the global readership attained, the journal has aroused significant interest in a short period of time, almost equally among academic institutions in the North and the South. We are pleased that the articles published in these pages are being read in large and increasing numbers everywhere. Beyond the raw numbers, we know first-hand, that the journal has stirred genuine enthusiasm among colleagues in the South, including young scholars who strive to publish for the first time, as well as veteran scholars who see in this a long overdue achievement.

We also know that enthusiasm is not the only sentiment. We have noted very little direct engagement by the metropolitan centres of research with what is being published in the journal, despite the fact that it is being read in significant numbers. Certainly, no one expected that breaking the publishing monopoly in the social sciences would be easy. Established norms continue to conform to the syndromes of ‘discovery’ and ‘abolition’ (Depelchin 2004). Nonetheless, we remain committed to honest intellectual engagement, independently of its source, and hope that such ‘interested dis-interest’ in the journal will eventually be overcome.

Between genuine enthusiasm and interested dis-interest there is a force field of indeterminacy, which combines elements of both. There is a type of schizophrenic ‘enthusiastic dis-interest’, which manifests itself in a variety of forms, from the more reticent to the more boisterous, from the polite to the aggressive. This state of mind is, on the

one hand, enthusiastic, because it knows the importance of intellectual autonomy in the South; but, on the other hand, it remains dis-interested in engaging, or in engaging on terms other than those imposed by the pro-imperialist tradition. The most convenient resolution of this contradiction would be for a journal such as *Agrarian South* to exist, but not to step too far out of line.

Without any prejudice to the overall work and scholarship of Fred Hendricks, which is indeed of great value, we surmise that his grossly unjust critique of our article published last year (Moyo et al. 2013), is a classic instance of having stepped into this force field. His critique is essentially an attempt to discredit our work and bring us into line. In this brief response, our objective is very simple: to defend honest debate in this journal, as well as our own intellectual integrity. Given that it is impossible, for reasons of space, and perhaps also unnecessary to respond point by point to a systematic misunderstanding of our work, we will simply indicate what we believe are some of the real issues and how our collective research projects have evolved. Readers are thus invited to consult our work and reach their own conclusions.

What are the Real Issues?

Hendricks' critique begins with an appreciation of our collective initiatives and accomplishments in South–South collaboration, before unleashing a bombastic critique whose opening shot is none other than the disparaging charge of 'populism'. This is followed by claims that we do not provide a class analysis of the peasantry and capitalism generally; that we do not offer an alternative path to industrialization and social transformation; and that we do not reflect critically on notions of nationalism and, particularly, on the importance of land struggles in nationalist politics.

There is also an attempt to deploy against us the work of eminent scholars in the South, namely Utsa Patnaik, Samir Amin and Archie Mafeje, on whom we have drawn inspiration and support over many years and with whom we have no substantive differences. Indeed, if substantive differences were to arise, there would be unmediated communication and honest debate amongst us—now without Mafeje, lamentably.

It is pointless to sustain illusions that we are to be saved from deviating from the path set out by our seniors.

If the issue is our 'populism', or our 'one-sided' nationalism, one is invited to consult the debates in the edited book, *Reclaiming the Nation* (Moyo and Yeros 2011a), where the relevant conceptual challenges have been taken up. The view stated there, in the introduction (Moyo and Yeros 2011b), is that both nationalism and populism are modern forces linked to the emergence of capitalism and the capitalist state but are not reducible to capitalism and the state. We make the case that nationalism is the most potent force against imperialism, even though it has never, in itself, been sufficient to the task. Populism, as an outgrowth of nationalism, is the necessary factor in class articulation in modern class societies and, as such, necessary to any class alliances, or their fragments, including in the progressive advance against imperialism. Yet, we also defend that populism is also insufficient in itself.

Populism is, in any case, quite independent of what one makes of the peasantry; certainly, it is not reducible to what one makes of the peasantry. As far as we are concerned, it would be very useful if the issues of nationalism and populism continued to be debated rigorously and their political character assessed in concrete situations. This requires, above all, courage to interrogate the concepts historically imposed onto the debate. What we cannot afford here is oblique and obscure critique whose purpose is unclear.

If a second issue is our understanding of the peasantry and the struggle for land, we have always been open to debate. In fact, we have done our part in taking this debate forward, where others have sought to foreclose it. One is invited to consult our prior book, *Reclaiming the Land* (Moyo and Yeros 2005a), which was a landmark in South–South research collaboration. The view stated there, in the introduction (*ibid.*), is that it is not possible to speak of the peasantry as a homogeneous category, and that the 'poor peasant' path is, in fact, the path that has prevailed generally in the country sides of the South, irrespective of the precise form of capitalist transition. This is the path of mass semi-proletarianization and mass super-exploitation, of the formation of a surplus population which is not absorbed by capitalism, and will never be, but which nonetheless continues to subsidize capital accumulation by its self-employed and unremunerated labour, not least reproductive labour undertaken mainly by women.

Reclaiming the Land went a long way to explore collectively the politics of rural movements, and especially land occupations, across the South. Prior to this, there was an edited book focused on rural movements in Africa, entitled *Peasant Organisations and Democratization in Africa* (Moyo and Romadhane 2002), dedicated to contemporary rural politics in Africa, followed later by *Land and Sustainable Development in Africa* (Amanor and Moyo 2008) and *African Land Questions, Agrarian Transitions and the State* (Moyo 2008), both dedicated to African land questions under neo-liberalism. More recently, in the current upswing of land grabs, there has been a co-authored book focused on conceptual issues and the trajectories of primitive accumulation, entitled *The Agrarian Question in the Neoliberal Era: Primitive Accumulation and the Peasantry* (Patnaik and Moyo 2011). Additionally, there is a collective tri-continental book project in progress dedicated to the new land grabs, which we intend to publish very soon (Moyo et al. forthcoming).

This is a substantial body of work on contemporary agrarian transitions and land struggles. Beyond this, there is also extensive work undertaken by AIAS on the vanguard experience of mass land occupations and land reform in Zimbabwe. This, in fact, has been the experience which has energized a large part of our initiatives, by virtue of the pressing need to understand and explain its dynamics and relate it to other contemporary experiences of mass mobilization and nationalist radicalization. The main research project on the land reform in Zimbabwe is the national baseline survey conducted by AIAS and published in *Fast Track Land Reform Baseline Survey in Zimbabwe* (Moyo et al. 2009), as well as two associated publications, *Contested Terrain: Land Reform and Civil Society in Contemporary Zimbabwe* (Moyo et al. 2008) and *Land and Agrarian reform in Zimbabwe: Beyond White-settler Capitalism* (Moyo and Chambati 2013). This has, indeed, been a most important experience of advance of the national question against imperialism, above and beyond other contemporary experiences, including those of South America. And as expected, this experience has elicited yet another imperialist campaign of destabilization and propaganda. Our own work has not been spared of this propaganda; the many opportunistic or ill-conceived critiques of our work that already exist (Hendricks' is not the first), are typically in reaction of the positions we have sustained on the Zimbabwe question.

There is an overall issue with which we have been preoccupied, as Hendricks points out, which is what we (and others) have come to call 're-peasantization'. By this we mean essentially the search for a new balance between town and country and for a holistic development project which will obtain such balance in the twenty-first century. It is our view that the multiple crises of our time—spanning those of climate change, energy and food, in synergy with the global economic crisis and the growing surplus population—require fundamental change, which cannot otherwise be attained. Such a new balance is impossible under capitalism, but is also impossible under notions of socialism which are indebted to a pro-imperialist Marxism. This explains our insistence that if Marxism is to rise to the occasion, it has to be freed from the stranglehold of Eurocentrism and economism.

The issue of re-peasantization has consistently been revisited since *Reclaiming the Land*. Our most recent debate has, in fact, occurred in these pages, in the first Special Issue organized by *Agrarian South*, entitled 'Crisis and global transformation: What role for re-peasantization?' (Vol. 2[3], 2013). That special issue sought to bring to light the various ongoing experiences of re-peasantization across the South, including their contradictions and limitations. The question of re-peasantization raises a host of fundamental questions. These include, for example, the capacity of social movements in the South to rise to the challenge; the need for a convergence of rural and urban politics and land struggles; the advance of gender relations in relation to land, work and social reproduction; and the dynamics of the agrarian question in the contemporary North. The first two issues are the subject of book projects which have been proposed within the Agrarian South Network, but which have not, as yet, taken off. The third and fourth will appear as special issues in *Agrarian South*.

Re-peasantization raises two further questions that we intend to take up systematically. The first refers to the character of the new peasantry that will be required in the twenty-first century, including the new forms of cooperativism and the new gender relations. Our Sixth Annual Summer School, to be held in January 2015, will be devoted precisely to this issue, and we are certain that we will make significant headway collectively. It would be fair to add that Hendricks' critique has hastened the inclusion of this item on the agenda of the Network. The related issue, which deserves attention in its own right, is that of industrialization,

a project which we resolutely believe to be fundamental to the South in the twenty-first century. We are, generally, very sceptical, if not dissatisfied, with current thought on industrialization, which shows little awareness of the magnitude of the challenge that is posed. Certainly, industrialization today has to be reinvented, for it must be different from that of the nineteenth century, based on slavery, colonialism and genocide, as well as that of the twentieth century, dependent on monopoly capitalism and new rounds of militarism. As noted before, we draw inspiration from the Maoist experience in China and elsewhere, specifically its search for autonomy and rural–urban balance, but we are aware that there are new parameters today which must determine the nature of industrialization, namely the existence of a mass surplus population which needs to be absorbed, as well as the limitations of energy and ecology. We invite Fred Hendricks to think with us.

Concluding Remarks

Such a broad and collective intellectual project is surely difficult to obtain and sustain. It has been built on solidarity and dedicated work, with only sporadic funding and much apprehension with donor agendas. We have no illusion that it will remain a challenge, and we sincerely hope that it will serve to inspire and reinforce other similar initiatives in South–South collaboration—and, yes, North–South collaboration, as long as it is on the right terms.

Whatever the case, this response is simply to assert that we remain vigilant against attempts to disqualify our dedicated work, to distort it and reduce it to caricature. The invitation for honest intellectual engagement remains open to all.

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