

# CAPITALISM AND MORAL ECONOMY: LAND QUESTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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## 1. Moral economy

1.1 This paper comes from the thick of (theoretical) work in progress, hence does not present a finished set of findings and lacks that proper distance between the tasks of investigation and those of exposition, as Marx put it. As I pursued the notion of moral economy I found myself in a very deep conceptual pit and at key moments didn't know whether I was half-way down or half-way up: was it the bottom or the top that I thought I glimpsed? I suspect that is because notions of moral economy can be both all-encompassing, and at the same time imbued with various tensions, not least when applied to capitalism or used to demarcate the limits of capitalist social relations. As ever, so much hangs on what is meant by moral economy and what is meant by capitalism.

1.2 The proposal for this conference didn't help me. First, it says that 'This conference provides a critical opportunity to take stock of capitalism as the silent partner in development practice', the meaning of which eludes me even if I can guess at its intent (or think I can).

1.3 Second, I had the same reaction to the definition it gives of 'moral economics', one of the 'three main themes' of the conference, namely that it 'explores how commodification is appropriated by people in different places and the transformations in social relations which engagement with various capitalisms entail'. Eh?

1.4 Third, under the rubric 'Moral economics: commodification and capitalist development', there is a number of questions (sixteen or so), some of which I don't understand, nor the connections between them, although I suspect some of the issues they seek to articulate are these:

- How do processes of commodification work in transitions to capitalism and within established capitalism?
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- How might those processes generate, or be associated with, different types of capitalism with different forms (and degrees) of social inequality?
- Can poverty be ended in a capitalist world?
- To what extent does this involve a ‘politics of redistribution’ that at least modifies the effects of social inequality?
- And that might claim a particular morality, for example, one of social justice? Is it a (superior?) morality? If so, superior to what?

1.5 I shall stick to the term ‘moral economy’ rather than the eccentric ‘moral economics’, and think aloud what it means, or more precisely what it ‘does’, that is, the uses to which it is put.<sup>1</sup> One problem is how moral economy features as *both* the object *and* the purpose of study, and how these can become confused.

1.6 First, then, the analytical, by which I mean moral economy as object of study. Andrew Sayer (2004: 1) begins one of his recent series of essays on moral economy by observing that ‘It is now a commonplace to note the influence of rules, habits, norms, conventions and values on economic practices and institutions and to note how these vary across different societies’. This refers, broadly speaking, to the notion that economic institutions and practices are ‘socially embedded’, a constitutive idea of much current economic sociology and one also claimed, in its own fashion, by the ‘new institutionalist economics’.<sup>2</sup>

1.7 Sayer uses the term ‘economy to refer to all forms of provisioning, including those outside the cash economy’, that involve activities of production, distribution and consumption, and which he suggests are ‘*structured by moral-economic norms* about rights, entitlements, responsibilities and appropriate behaviour’, and permeated by ‘normative rationalities, which matter greatly to actors, as they are implicated in their commitments, identities and ways of life...They concern what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not. *The moral dimension is unavoidable.*’ (2004: 2-3, my emphases).

1.8 In effect, then, we two have notions that imply each other, two sides of the same coin: the social embeddedness of all economic institutions and practices and their moral or normative meanings to the social agents who inhabit those institutions and pursue those practices. Let’s call this ‘moral economy’.

1.9 Sayer’s observations concern the social conditions of human existence in general (at a ‘transhistorical’ level, in his term). They promise, or aspire, to connect the existential dimensions of experience, (moral) evaluation and activity with the structural and institutional relations, conditions and circumstances in which people make their lives and

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<sup>1</sup> The provenance of the term ‘moral economy’ is in eighteenth-century social theory, like that of ‘civil society’ which, interestingly, has also made a big comeback recently. I don’t know if anyone has explored why this may be.

<sup>2</sup> The extent to which I rely on Sayer as a foil for my reflections will become obvious.

their histories. Those are not circumstances of their own choosing (needless to say), nor which they necessarily comprehend, and can only be specified and investigated with due regard to historical specificity.

1.10 This implies two further steps. The first is to construct and develop an intellectual framework for 'doing' moral economy in this all-inclusive sense, to which end Sayer (2001) proposes a 'critical cultural political economy' as an alternative to both various forms of 'economism', including conventional economics and materialist political economy, and those culturalist approaches that dissolve the material bases of capitalism and of its class and other inequalities (see further notes 16, 29, below). In short, and so soon after setting out, we have arrived on the widest possible terrain of alternative and competing paradigms in the modern social sciences concerning what the object of study is, and the no less contentious matter of how it is constituted.

1.11 This connects closely with the second step, that of applying those paradigms (including the claims for 'critical cultural political economy') to particular objects of study in specific historical conditions, which give concrete notions of moral economy their content and that I shall come back to in considering land questions in modern African history. And specific historical conditions, however identified, are framed by the world-historical development of capitalism, in which and from which the modern social sciences were created around some central questions:

- What is capitalism? How is it different from other forms of economy and society?
- How does it emerge? How does it function?
- What are the implications for how capitalism might be improved or transcended?

Clearly, ideas of 'development' (and the invention of development studies) fit with this third kind of question and take on its normative charge. This, I think, is what the conference proposal/motivation means by 'moral economics' and aimed to articulate in relation to the question signalled earlier of whether, and how, poverty can be ended in a capitalist world.

1.12 The normative sense of moral economy, then, concerns the purpose of economic arrangements and activities, and their effects for the organisation of the good society: an ethics of 'what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not' (Sayer, above) as a central component of *not only the object of study but the reason for studying it*.

1.13 Thus:

(i) how do people live in different kinds of socioeconomic formations with distinctive social relations, institutions and practices? What values do they give those social arrangements and their effects? To what degrees, and in what ways, do those values help

explain the specific forms of those social arrangements? These are questions about moral economy as object of study.

(ii) what can we learn from such socioeconomic analysis that can inform our own views of what the good society should look like, that is, social arrangements that enable the realisation of values of, say, social justice, social equality, human dignity, and so on, as we understand and desire them? This is the question about the normative stance and purpose of studying moral economy.

1.14 The nature of the good society, and what makes it possible, is, of course, a classic preoccupation of moral philosophy. To give a standard example, Aristotle's ethics proposed an economy of use values that provides adequate, and adequately secure, means of subsistence to allow time and energy for the pursuit of sociability, political participation, and aesthetic creation and satisfaction. Karl Polanyi (1967: 53-4) was much attracted by this stance of Aristotle, to whom he attributed his notion of 'householding' (production organised for needs) - the third of his three principles of socially embedded economy, the others being reciprocity and redistribution.

1.15 On the other hand, as a modern social scientist - and one, moreover, engaged with what I suggested (above) are its central questions and themes<sup>3</sup> - Polanyi undertook research that would yield empirical 'proof' for his normative objectives, or at least persuasive support for them, thus combining moral economy as both object and purpose of study.

1.16 In this respect, he followed in a path of the normative concerns of moral economy established by the great thinkers of the Scottish enlightenment who sought to make sense of the rapid formation of 'commercial society' as they experienced (and described) it, on the cusp of the emergence of a fully-fledged industrial capitalism. Adam Smith, for example, was preoccupied with how the productive powers unleashed by capitalism and its divisions of labour, the foundation of 'the wealth of nations', could be combined with a social order built on positive 'moral sentiments' (respectively the 'positive' and normative aspects of Smith's purpose).<sup>4</sup> Polanyi claimed Smith, as well as Aristotle, as an ancestor of his own normative project of moral economy:

Adam Smith, it was true, treated material wealth as a separate field of study; to have done so with a great sense of realism made him the founder of a new science, economics. For all that, wealth was to him merely an aspect of the life of the community, to the purposes of which it remained subordinate...There is no intimation in his work that the economic interests of the capitalists laid down the law; no intimation that they were the secular spokesmen of the divine providence

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<sup>3</sup> What I have termed elsewhere the 'great tradition' of studying development (Bernstein 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Smith's favoured social order was a class society in which workers would enjoy humane employment and moderate prosperity and security, while owners of property would curb their tendencies to excessive accumulation and consumption - both of which might require appropriate forms of social regulation.

which governed the economic world as a separate entity. The economic sphere, with him, is not yet subject to laws of its own that provide us with a standard of good and evil. (1967:111-2)

1.17 The last was to follow shortly with the advent and application of the theory of the self-regulating market, the foundation of liberalism as both economic and moral ideology which Polanyi attacked so passionately in *The Great Transformation* (1967), an emblematic work of ‘moral economy as critique’ (Sayer 2007) although Polanyi did not use the term.<sup>5</sup> As is (now) well known, Polanyi provided a critique of both (i) ‘market society’ as it emerged from England’s industrial revolution to the crisis of the international system built on it and that led to the first world war (and its aftermath)<sup>6</sup> and (ii) the new theories of liberalism that championed (and indeed naturalised) the emergent civilisation of ‘market society’, for Polanyi a ‘stark utopia’. Linking these two aspects of his critique were arguments about the nature of land, labour and money as ‘fictitious commodities’<sup>7</sup>, and the ‘double movement’ of, on one hand, the drive to commodify everything in ways that undermine the moral qualities of social existence (sociability, security from extreme want) and, on the other hand, reactions (countermovement) against this dynamic from various sources: elements of the old agrarian order (landowners, the English squirearchy in the case of the Speenhamland system of poor relief), states in the form of market regulation and social legislation and protection, and trade unions and working-class political parties.

1.18 The rediscovery and popularity of Polanyi in today’s conjuncture of apparently rampant neoliberal hegemony is not surprising. Among other things, his description of the liberal economic doctrine of the early nineteenth century could be applied, with alarming precision, to today’s dominant ideology<sup>8</sup>; his passionate emphasis on the human

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<sup>5</sup> Sayer (2007: 261) argues that ‘political-economic analysis may claim to be “critical” if, implicitly or explicitly, it shows that particular economic processes and forms of organisation are harmful to well-being or that actors’ understandings of them are inadequate. This involves relating morality to everyday life and the experience of well-being or ill-being without reducing it to a matter of individual subjectivity or social convention, as tend to happen in sociology and economics. It also implies a rejection of the reduction of critique to mere reflexivity or opposition to constraints, as in post-structuralism’. Elsewhere, he remarked that ‘What a new cultural political economy *could* do is challenge the divorce of the positive and the normative and the subjectivisation of values...’ (2001: 703).

<sup>6</sup> *The Great Transformation* was first published in 1944 as *The Origins of Our Time* (which survives in its subsequent subtitle). It is a wonderful book but in some respects also a weird one, a concoction or *mélange* of elements of historical narrative, social theory and moral positioning that is far from coherent, and that is now admired and cited more than its analytical tensions and ambiguities are probed. Some of those are intrinsic, including Polanyi’s relation with Marx and Marxism, both intellectually and politically; some are connected with the conditions in which Polanyi wrote it, including rushing to complete it for publication. See the informative essay by Block (2003).

<sup>7</sup> He also referred to ‘huge fictitious bodies called corporations’ (1967:130); see note 9 below for the passage in which this occurs.

<sup>8</sup> ‘A market economy is an economic system controlled, regulated and directed by markets alone; order in the production and distribution of goods is entrusted to this self-regulating mechanism. An economy of this kind derives from the expectation that human beings behave in such a way as to achieve maximum money

and social destructiveness of the pursuit of the ‘stark utopia’ of market society has powerful contemporary resonances (e.g., Harvey 2005) as does his vivid picture of the world at the apogee of the first ‘golden age of globalisation’ as it now often termed<sup>9</sup>; his rejection of (most) Marxist analysis and the political programmes associated with the communist parties of his time also extends an evident appeal to many on the left in a post-communist world (Burawoy 2003; and more generally Therborn 2007); and his notion of social embeddedness has been appropriated and adapted in various ways from academic economic sociology (Granovetter 1985) to imagining alternatives to (neoliberal) ‘market society’ (Sayer 2001, 2007). For these reasons, Polanyi stands as a notable godparent of much current reflection on moral economy and not least its deployment as critique of today’s capitalism.

1.19 At the same time, the notion of social embeddedness in *The Great Transformation* is tied together with that of a properly moral economy.<sup>10</sup> Polanyi sets up ‘market society’ (capitalism) as a radical and indeed ‘artificial’ break from all previous types of society in which ‘Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system’ (1967: 57 ).<sup>11</sup> In this formulation what characterises ‘market society’ (capitalism) is its social *disembeddedness*, in effect its drive for freedom from social and moral constraints on the accumulation of profit (and pursuit of economic power) that had always existed before.

1.20 In effect, then, it might seem that Polanyi wants to have his own cake and eat it: the social disembeddedness of capitalism, its ‘artificiality’, and the offence to fundamental human(e) values they represent, become synonymous. Polanyi is thus one source of

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gains. It assumes markets in which the supply of goods (including services) available at a definite price will equal the demand at that price. It assumes the presence of money, which functions as purchasing power in the hands of its owners. Production will then be controlled by prices, for the profits of those who direct production will depend upon them; the distribution of the goods will also depend upon prices, for prices form incomes, and it is with the help of these incomes that the goods produced are distributed among the members of society. Under these assumptions order in the production and distribution of good is ensured by prices alone.’ (1967: 68).

<sup>9</sup> The market ‘system developed in leaps and bounds; it engulfed space and time, and by creating bank money it created a dynamic hitherto unknown. By the time it reached its maximum extent, around 1914, every part of the globe, all its inhabitants and yet unborn generations, physical persons as well as huge fictitious bodies called corporations, were comprised in it. A new way of life spread over the planet with a claim to universality unparalleled since the age when Christianity started out on its career, only this time the movement was on a purely material level.’ (1967: 130).

<sup>10</sup> Some of the ambiguities of the notion of ‘social embeddedness’ in Polanyi, and of other aspects of his model, are discussed by Block (2004) and Sayer (2004). I would add the problem of how Polanyi stands ‘the stark utopia’ of liberal market ideology on its head. It is one thing to criticize its naturalisation of the market (and its ‘iron laws’ of wages and population); another to do so by describing it as ‘artificial’ in relation to all that went before, which seems to exemplify altogether more ‘natural’, ‘organic’, and socially embedded (hence superior) ways of life (properly *moral* economies).

<sup>11</sup> A formulation that owes a lot to Marx who, arguably, used it in a more precise analytical sense, concerning the mechanisms of appropriation of surplus labour in different precapitalist modes of production and in capitalism (where it takes the unique form of surplus value).

constructions of moral economy as a normative alternative to an essentially ‘immoral’ capitalism/‘market society’.<sup>12</sup> The problem here is that this neglects an analytical understanding of capitalism as requiring and generating its own forms of social embeddedness and moral economy, the latter manifested in what Sayer terms ‘lay normativity’ as well as in more explicit and /or formal articulations of moral value in bourgeois ideology, which is to say justifications of the arrangements of capitalist society and its inequalities. A remarkably apt example is provided, as so often, by Margaret Thatcher who said of her credo that ‘Economics are the method...but the object is to change the soul’ (quoted in Harvey 2005: 23).

1.21 Critiques of capitalism in normative terms as the antithesis of any (humane) morality - the drive to profit, greed, self-interest (at the expense of others), and so on - can neglect the analytical demands of exploring its claims as a moral order, and its forms of social embeddedness, *and* how both are vital to its reproduction.<sup>13</sup> From there it is an easy slide into celebrating any and all instances of disruption of that order as righteous ‘resistance’ to it.<sup>14</sup>

1.22 On the other hand, there can be a reverse effect when notions of ‘embeddedness’ are extended to capitalism as object of study, without the moral purpose and passion of Polanyi’s critique. For example, certain kinds of economic sociology and institutional economics focus on social embeddedness in the analysis of capitalist society, especially in relation to its key ‘institutions’ - markets, property rights, contracts, firms, networks, and so on. Indeed, they define capitalism in such institutional terms (rather than by its distinctive social relations of production and production) and investigate its functioning through exchanges between and within its key institutions and entities. The problem here is a mirror image of that just suggested, in which the social disembodiedness held to characterise capitalism is equivalent to its lack of any moral economy (its amorality or, more commonly, its immorality). In this instance, capitalism is, in principle, no less socially embedded than any other kind of economy, which is explored through themes of cooperation, reciprocity, shared (and intrinsically satisfying) norms, trust, social capital, and the like. Now, this intellectual manoeuvre of sociologising capitalist economic activity also tends to humanise it - not only in the analytical sense of recognising that its institutional structures and practices are staffed and conducted by human agents, but in a normative sense that reintroduces the sociability intrinsic to how embeddedness is understood.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A tendency in David Harvey’s useful account of neoliberalism (2005) which explicitly draws on Polanyi at a number of key points, not least in relation to the ‘double movement’ of commodification (including ‘accumulation by dispossession’) and resistance to it rooted in sociability and social solidarity.

<sup>13</sup> Which were central concerns of Gramsci’s explorations of civil society and hegemony, for example.

<sup>14</sup> See Davis (2004), also the conclusion to his wonderful *Planet of Slums*, in which he remarks that ‘resistance’ or ‘refusal’ ‘may take atavistic as well as avant-garde forms: the repeal of modernity as well as attempts to recover its repressed promises’ (2006: 202).

<sup>15</sup> As Sayer (once more) points out, this can ‘produce an overly benign view of economic relations and processes...embedding is often strongly adapted to the system pressure of market forces...(and often) involves relations of domination, some of them based on gender, class or race. The metaphor of

1.23 Such problems can be avoided by more sophisticated notions of the nature of critique in social science, and the quality of the intellectual means they bring to its demands. For example, Sayer (2003) shows how a commitment to social equality can inform and extend analytical understandings, hence deepen the critique, of (neglected) sources of inequality - including how they are expressed, reproduced and contested in the 'lay normativity(ies)' of those who experience them in different ways. The demands and disciplines of such normative inquiry in social science (rather than speculative moral philosophy) include the basic rules of how empirical evidence is used.

1.24 Altogether more difficult are issues of the conceptual 'location' and explanatory weight of 'moral-economic norms about rights, entitlements, responsibilities and appropriate behaviour' as the substance of ideas of moral economy or the province of a different kind of (critical) cultural political economy and its claims. This was signalled above (1.13) by the question: to what degrees, and in what ways, do the values - or, most inclusively, 'culture' - of social agents help explain the specific forms of the social arrangements through which they live? If economic activity is '*structured* by moral-economic norms about rights, entitlements, responsibilities and appropriate behaviour' (Sayer, above), what does 'structured' mean exactly? How does it connect with structures of 'objective' relations of production and reproduction, property and power, manifested in the inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity and 'nation'? Does it imply dissolving any notion(s) of the objective? In which case any political economy of capitalism as mode of production and world-historical force would lose its (unique) explanatory power.<sup>16</sup> The question here then is the intractable one that permeates and preoccupies the (more reflexive) activities of social science, formulated variously as the material and the cultural, the objective and the subjective, structure and agency, and so on.

1.25 There is a further key question left unremarked so far, if lurking throughout: 'moral economy' of what or who? While many discussions of moral economy (now) bear the marks of Polanyi's influence, the term itself was popularised by E.P Thompson's celebrated essay on 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth

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*embeddedness* sounds soft and comforting, and possibly sends our critical faculties to sleep, but what it describes can be harsh and oppressive' (2001: 698, and for similar observations on concepts of networks, 699). There is a nice analogue in Elizabeth Wily's excellent study of the long history of land in a Tanzanian village (1988), where she points out the similarly seductive illusion lurking in Hyden's notion of the quintessentially African 'economy of affection' ((1983; see further note 24 below ); the economy of affection, she says, appears as an evident, and appealing, existential fact - in the village everyone know everyone else and such recognition within the routines of daily life seems to imply affective ties.

<sup>16</sup> The framework of 'critical cultural political economy' as Sayer (2001) formulates it - and which is informed by his longstanding commitment to critical realist epistemology and method - contains various analytical elements: lifeworld and 'system', the cultural and the economic, the politics of recognition and the politics of (re)distribution, which (i) are not dichotomies or oppositions, hence (ii) do not align as, or reduce to, parallel dimensions of social existence (lifeworld-culture-recognition vs system-economy-distribution), and (iii) whose relative explanatory weight, and combinations, can not be established deductively, as they vary in ways that can only be identified through empirical research. On the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition, see the remarkable essay by Nancy Fraser (1995).

Century' (1971). Subsequently James Scott published another seminal work, influenced by Thompson, on *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), and, in surely the most powerful exploration of moral economy in the historiography of modern Africa, John Lonsdale investigated 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau' (1992). It is striking that each of these instances takes as its object of study the moral economy of - and the moral economy of a particular collective subject, albeit of rather different social types and locations, and as manifested in episodes of less and more violent political action, to which I return in a moment. A more recent, and illuminating, book by my colleague Charles Tripp explores a different 'moral economy of...', namely *The Moral Economy of Islam* (2006). This analyses the ideas of various professional intellectuals who confronted the effects of capitalism and imperialism on their societies in North Africa, Western Asia and South Asia by trying to construct a modern, indeed modernist, Islamic moral economy as an alternative path of development. The relations of those intellectuals with various social forces and institutions, both religious and secular, is one source of tension they experienced that Tripp comments on so instructively.<sup>17</sup> What links his book with the other examples of 'the moral economy of...' (above) is indicated by its subtitle, namely 'The Challenge of Capitalism', with its world-historical resonance.

1.26 Thus Thompson examined riots and other disturbances over the price of grain as England's pioneering capitalist agrarian transition increasingly moved into its emergent industrial revolution. He suggested that the entitlement to affordable bread (the food staple in this case) was established in both a patrician paternalism and popular ideas of social justice.<sup>18</sup> However

if the rioting or price-setting crowd acted according to any consistent theoretical model, then this model was a selective reconstruction of the paternalist one, taking from it all those features which most favoured the poor and which offered a prospect of cheap corn...the moral economy of the crowd broke decisively with that of the paternalists: for the popular ethic sanctioned direct action by the crowd, whereas the values of order underpinning the paternalist model emphatically did not. (1971: 98)

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<sup>17</sup> Their project is also subject to its own distinctive intrinsic source of tensions, in that attempts to construct modern(ist) versions of Islamic moral economy typically proceed by (selective) reference to, (re)interpretation of, and justification by traditions of philosophy and jurisprudence established in very different (pre-modern) historical conditions, hence centred on very different issues (and based in a different epistemology). This meant that modernising Islamic intellectuals had to invent a suitable notion of 'society', for which they borrowed heavily from classical positivist sociology; to demarcate 'society' and 'economy' and the distinction between them (a central Polanyian motif once more); to consider relations between 'society' and 'individual'; to explore ways in which property rights could be both efficient and fair (moral), and so on - and all in ways that appeared congruent with sacred truth and its exegesis.

<sup>18</sup> A patrician paternalism that coincides exactly with the first period of Polanyi's historical framework in *The Great Transformation* (that of Speenhamland) and exemplifies Polanyi's view of the role of landed property of precapitalist origin more broadly in the countermovement against unrestricted commodification.

James Scott applied the notion of moral economy to the political sociology of a very different context, namely peasant rebellion in Southeast Asia during the global depression of the 1930s, also generalising a 'subsistence ethic' or precept of the 'right to subsistence' to all peasant societies. He rightly observed that peasants in Asia, as throughout the colonial world, experienced the impact of capitalism in a much more compressed fashion - temporally as well as in terms of its force - than Thompson's eighteenth-century English labourers and artisans. Nonetheless, like Thompson's (urban) food riots, Scott's peasant rebellions were 'essentially the revolts of consumers rather than producers' (1976: 11). By this he meant that their demands were for the reduction of rents and taxes in order to secure a subsistence minimum at times of food shortages and hunger, rather than for any radical redistribution of property rights, that is, land reform.

1.27 In Lonsdale's remarkable essay on Mau Mau, rights to land are central.<sup>19</sup> This contrasts with England's plebeian version of moral economy in the transition to industrial capitalism, and Scott's 'subsistence ethic' premised on a pre-capitalist agrarian structure of peasants and landed property and how its 'politics of distribution' was subverted by colonial capitalism. Lonsdale first constructs a 'Kikuyu political theory' on the eve of British colonialism, generated by a fluid frontier of settlement and which recognized *and* sanctioned social inequality in terms of 'moral equations of wealth and virtue, poverty and idleness' (1992: 316). He then explores how, in the conditions of settler colonialism in Kenya that generated Mau Mau, Kikuyu 'had to wrestle with their parochial political culture of wealthy self-mastery, linked to land, and their pressing need for a wider power to shepherd the poor against the threefold slavery of the highlands, the shanties of Nairobi and an arbitrary state' (425). The 'moral challenge of class formation was faced and in part declined, with former civic virtues continuing to flourish amid unfinished constructions of new ones' associated with anti-colonial nationalism (302). Mau Mau took on the character of 'civil war within the tribe', to apply the term of Mamdani (1996), that is, one shaped by class relations but also by the 'linked arenas' of tribe, gender and state (Lonsdale 1992: 292) and their contributions to complex structures and experiences of social inequality.

1.28 These three historical works all focus on particular episodes in specific contexts of social dislocation and change. Second, they all explore and use notions of moral economy as specific *ideologies* of right or entitlement to provision of the necessities of life, and of the social arrangements held to secure or deny such rights (also at the heart of Polanyi's concerns, of course). Third, they show how such ideas are intimately bound up with notions of dignity and social justice in societies *both* marked by prior forms of social division, inequality and exclusion and subject to new ones. This leads to a fourth common element: those ideologies of entitlement and their claims were crystallised in historical circumstances of 'the challenge of capitalism', with all the variations in how it was experienced in processes of transition in its original heartlands (Polanyi, Thompson)

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<sup>19</sup> The essay is, in effect, a monograph, being the last part of Lonsdale's joint work with Bruce Berman on colonial Kenya, *Unhappy Valley* (1992: 265-504).

and in the vast colonial and imperial domains it soon encompassed (Scott, Lonsdale).<sup>20</sup> Fifth, the ideas of moral economy at work in these particular moments of collective action - by the English crowd, the Southeast Asian peasantry, the Kikuyu dispossessed - have to be inferred and constructed as 'folk ideology' or 'lay normativity' rather than from their systematic and explicit articulation by professional intellectuals (British political economists in Polanyi, Islamic scholars in Tripp's study).<sup>21</sup>

1.29 I draw on Lonsdale in particular, not in support of any notionally general (or 'essential') African 'political theory', which he would reject, but with three points about indigenous discourses of moral economy that his study of Mau Mau established with such clarity. First, that they help shape the claims and practices, strategies and tactics, of struggles over land and the political authority with which it is strongly associated in Africa. Second, that their normative content or 'morality' can not be assumed to rest on any necessary egalitarianism (or Polanyian reciprocities and redistributionism) of a prior social order.<sup>22</sup> And third, as Lonsdale demonstrates with such finesse, indigenous political theory/moral economy is not static but it is constantly challenged and strained, adapted and recreated, in the circumstances of pervasive social dislocations and responses to them in modern African history.

## 2. Africa, poverty, capital

2.1 Sub-Saharan Africa has lots of poverty and not much 'capital', whether 'capital' is taken to mean investible funds or accumulations of productive assets or - in a key and challenging analytical sense - 'missing' or 'incomplete' capitalist social relations. For materialist political economy, those social relations, most fundamentally between capital and wage labour, underlie and permeate the institutions held to characterise capitalism, above all the market(s) highlighted in the proposal for this conference.

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<sup>20</sup> Also observed by Polanyi in 'the sphere of culture contacts between peoples of various races' (1967: 157), with reference to colonialism in Africa and India. In his view, the commodification of land and labour in colonial regimes is more fundamental in terms of 'cultural degeneration', i.e. the destruction of indigenous ways of life (moral economies), than of economic exploitation - another motif that resonates with today's anti-modernist and anti-development currents? The emphasis on exploitation in formulating 'the colonial problem' represents 'the economic prejudice' to Polanyi - presumably another swipe at materialism and the stance of the communist and socialist parties of his time on the colonial question (ibid: 159).

<sup>21</sup> Although Thompson could also draw on the ('formal') evidence provided by commentaries in political economy, and in the press and official sources, as can those who investigate movements of resistance in colonial situations for the 'official' view and its propaganda. Constructing the meanings of moral economy for the participants in such resistance, who may have left little in the way of written testimony, is more elusive and presents its own methodological challenges. Lonsdale's construction of the moral economy of the Kikuyu and the contradictions it manifested in the Mau Mau rebellion involved painstaking investigation of a wide range of sources, including the linguistic.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed I suspect that Lonsdale is intrigued by how much the ideal of 'wealthy self-mastery' and 'moral equations of wealth and virtue, poverty and idleness' in Kikuyu thought provided a pre-bourgeois equivalent of elements of bourgeois ideology.

2.2 Does this correlation between an abundance of poverty and a shortage of 'capital' in sub-Saharan Africa translate into a causal proposition: that Africa's plight, with all its human costs, is the effect of the lack of 'enough', 'full' or 'proper' capitalist development ('market economy')? Many think so, and across a range of analytical and ideological positions. Of course, a key marker of differences between those positions lies in types of explanations for this syndrome.<sup>23</sup> Here, very schematically, are three illustrations.

2.3 The first is what that I term the 'primordial' thesis: that the social relations and cultural values of kin and ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa remain inimical to those impersonal instrumental practices, and their institutional bases - the Weberian qualities of rational markets and states - that characterise capitalist modernity and its successful development. Rather the social dynamics of kin and ethnicity generate forms of 'political' accumulation, for which economic resources, activity and income are appropriated to build patronage networks and mobilise followers at the expense of productive investment and accumulation. Here the specificities of Africa are constructed as its *exceptionalism*: the root problem of African development remains its African-ness - in effect a particular kind of 'internal' explanation.<sup>24</sup>

2.4 The second example is those approaches that attribute the lack of (greater) capitalist development to the modes and (successive) moments of Africa's integration in a capitalist world economy and state system. The key historical reference point is the period of colonialism in Africa and its legacies for social processes and contradictions since political independence.<sup>25</sup> This approach has different currents. One is predominantly 'external' - famously expressed by Walter Rodney (1972) as *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* - and comprises varieties of dependency theory, typically fuelled by nationalism and populism. Another current centres on how external and internal determinations are combined, from the articulation of modes of production advanced by French anthropologists (e.g. Meillassoux 1975; Rey 1976) to Cowen and Shenton's conception of 'Fabian colonialism' (1991a) and Mamdani's argument (1996) that indirect rule created and consolidated ethnicity as the basis of political identity, governing African countrysides through a 'decentralised despotism'. The purpose of the colonial project (or projects) was not to transform African societies but rather to introduce commodity relations gradually in forms and ways shaped by the interests of imperial capital and/or contained (and constrained) by the imperative of social stability and political order (see also Phillips 1989, Kelemen 2007). In either case colonialism constructed obstacles to the (fuller) development of capitalism. Cowen and Shenton

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<sup>23</sup> While cutting across them is a dialectic of continuity and change that underlies much discussion of moral economy.

<sup>24</sup> This approach has resonances of colonial discourses which continue to be reinvented, restated, and recycled. It is curious, or maybe not, that this approach is strongly associated with political scientists, for example, Hyden (1983), Bayart (1999) and Chabal and Deloz (1999), although note also Stiglitz's view in his 1998 Prebisch Lecture that one of the problems of development in Africa is that 'people are wedded to traditional ways of thinking' (quoted by Sender 2002: 193 n11).

<sup>25</sup> Without neglecting the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades that preceded formal colonial rule, and their effects.

(1991a), for example, suggest that colonial rule in Africa sought to achieve a trusteeship that could deliver economic progress without social and political disruption, that could gradually introduce Africans to the production and consumption of commodities as the material foundation of civilisation while maintaining or adapting 'customary' bases of order (rural 'community', 'tribal' identity and cohesion, patriarchal and chiefly authority; see also Grischow 2006). Africans were not, therefore, to be allowed any immediate and unbridled enjoyment of such bourgeois rights as private title in land and access to bank credit (Cowen and Shenton 1991b), which could stimulate a dangerous individualism on one hand, and on the other hand collective action by colonial subjects on the basis of emerging class interests.

2.5 A third approach proposes that while Africa experienced pervasive commoditisation as a result of colonialism and international market integration, this was, and continues to be, shaped *and limited* by how claims to land are negotiated and exercised through 'networks' of indigenous or 'customary' social relations and cultural practices in ways that (i) are 'fluid, dynamic and ambiguous', and (ii) mediate (and can deflect) the allocative effects of market processes and state actions. These qualities, and the inherent uncertainties of negotiation, mean that 'no condition is permanent', the title of an influential work by the *doyenne* of African agrarian studies Sara Berry (1993). In her view, social differentiation that may be generated by commodification in Africa primarily disadvantages women and 'strangers' (migrants) as social categories within the functioning of networks, rather than generating class formation which she interprets as, and restricts to, the 'Lenin model' of concentration/dispossession of the means of production and formation of an agrarian bourgeoisie and proletariat.

2.6 In short, Berry presents an argument about (continuing) obstacles to the commodification of land in Africa (and hence agrarian class formation and the development of agrarian capitalism), grounded in a dialectic of continuity and change during the colonial period and since, including a long sequence of 'inconclusive encounters' between farmers and states bent on modernisation.<sup>26</sup> Her argument connects with, and has contributed to, wide and diverse debates about the moral economy of land that encompass issues of multiple and competing claims to authority over its allocation and uses, the enduring importance of (rural) place of origin to identity and the 'politics of belonging', and, not least, the effects of these social and cultural dynamics for (private) property rights in land as a condition of agricultural development.

### 3. Africa: land questions<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Berry (2002: 640-653) is a magisterial summary of her historical framework. She was once prepared to give more attention to class dynamics, e.g. Berry (1980).

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that processes and forms of the commodification of land - encapsulated as enclosure of the commons (arable land, pastures, forests, sources of water, previously governed by various types of common property regimes) - have a central and emblematic place in histories of capitalist development and their contested moral economies. In the heartlands of the original transitions to capitalism, such enclosure was a key aspect of primitive accumulation for Marx and exemplified the altogether 'artificial' commodification of nature for Polanyi. Colonial and capitalist settlement in 'empty' or otherwise 'under-populated' or 'under-used' lands generated its own moral economies. Their lineages extend from John

3.1 This is the point at which the manuscript almost broke off, as I attempted to provide a framework for modern African history within which to consider its land questions. This proved to be not only extremely, indeed alarmingly, schematic but was also getting out of hand.<sup>28</sup> What I try to do instead is to note a number of issues, make some empirical generalisations, and advance a series of (hypo)theses - or maybe just assertions - concerning processes of commodification and their 'logic', illustrated selectively by some African specificities. In debates over the social nature of land in Africa (as elsewhere) there are two central areas of contention: (i) whether commodification of farming necessarily entails the commodification of land in the form of bourgeois private property rights and markets in land, and (ii) whether, and how, the commodification of farming entails a dynamic of class (and other social) differentiation without necessarily generating evident classes of landed property and agrarian labour (Berry's 'Lenin model', 2.5 above). Put somewhat differently: is it possible, and useful, to talk about class dynamics *without* the formation of observable sociological classes and, by extension, recognisable forms of class identity, 'consciousness' and action?<sup>29</sup> And if so,

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Locke's particular justification of colonial settlement, at his time registered in British incursions in North America and dispossession of native peoples (Byres 1996: Ch 5) through European land alienation in southern Africa (and its racialised justifications), to the formation of capitalist landed property of more recent provenance in Brazil's southern state of Santa Catarina (Wolford 2005) and how it is justified and contested. It continues to resonate, for example, in David Harvey's notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' in the conditions of (neoliberal) global capitalism (2005:159-165) and the 'countermovement' celebrated by an agrarian populism centred on 'people of the land' and that claims a 'transnational' character (Desmarais 2002; McMichael 2006; see also Edelman 2005).

<sup>28</sup> I pursued this ambition in another recent paper (Bernstein 2007b) which was, however, written for a different purpose (a workshop) and a different audience (at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala), some of whom - rest assured - really didn't like it.

<sup>29</sup> This paper is already overburdened without exploring the complexities and challenges of class analysis. My own position, to paraphrase Balibar (as quoted by Therborn 2007: 88) is that in a capitalist world class relations 'can and should be thought of as *one determining* structure, covering *all* social practices, without being the *only* one' (emphasis in original). However, if commodification is a general ('world-historical') process that entails both class and other social relations, the latter can *not* be theorised through the same procedure of abstraction as the class relation of wage labour and capital (exemplified in Marx's *Capital*) even though they are ubiquitous in shaping specific and concrete forms of class relations in 'actually existing capitalisms' (and transitions to capitalism). Social subjects necessarily experience the effects not only of class relations but also of a series of (relational) differences/divisions - of gender, of generation, of place (town and countryside), and indeed of ethnicity and nationality. This is demonstrated concretely in Barbara Harriss-White's remarkable series of studies on India, (e.g. 2003) which treats 'identities' as markers of objective social relations of inequality (gender, caste, religion) in how labour regimes and enterprises function and accumulation occurs. In more abstract fashion, Gibbon and Neocosmos (1985: 190) provide a lucid theoretical gloss on 'social entities and differences' thus:

...capitalism reproduces class spaces or places on the one hand and actual phenomenal forms of a unitary and distinctive kind not corresponding to the spaces or places on the other (e.g. urban/rural dwellers, industrial workers/agricultural labourers, urban craftsmen and women peasants, men/women, mental/manual labour, young/old, black/white, regional, national and ethnic differences, and so on)...(As) classes are produced phenomenally as groups of owners (and hence as buyers and sellers) of specific conditions of production ('capital', 'land', 'labour')...class relations are not simply evident at the phenomenal level.

how might notions of moral economy enter this approach - and indeed enrich it, which means avoiding any *a priori* assumption that (African) moral economies and the 'logic' of commodification are mutually antagonistic forces? I think that it is possible and useful, and provide some reasons.

3.2 The commodification of 'peasant' farming in colonial Africa included food production for new types of domestic markets (with larger concentrations of non-farming populations in towns, new transport centres and mines, for example) and, of course, export production for international markets. The production of cash crops was enforced by colonial governments in some cases; in other cases farmers took the initiative in response to new opportunities, often through clearing/expanding new frontiers of cultivation, and negotiating access to land and mobilising labour to work it through the idioms of 'custom'. Polly Hill's *The Migrant Cocoa Farmers of Southern Ghana* (1963) was a landmark study which illuminated these processes. Among the most interesting, and linked, issues it raised - and issues of continuing salience - are the sources of investment in agricultural commodity production, how it is combined with food farming for own consumption, and, not least, how labour is secured and organised.

3.3 Commodification was also manifested in various combinations of 'hoe and wage' that became widespread, if unevenly so, across much of Africa. Labour migration generated combinations of farming with non-agricultural activities and sources of income more generally, which were often key to investment in farming (as well as household or generational reproduction), to creating dense linkages of countryside and town, and which have led some to propose models of 'semi-proletarianisation' as the common dynamic of colonial capitalism and its legacies in sub-Saharan Africa.

3.4 Commodification of farming and of labour power was not matched, to the same degree, by the evident commodification of land. Dispossession and land alienation, of course, were the key to the economies of colonies of European settlement (South Africa, the Rhodesias, Kenya) in which it was inextricably bound up with the formation of labour reserves to supply mines and settler farms and plantations. It could also be significant in other kinds of colonies through concessions for mining and timber extraction, and land alienated for government purposes including infrastructure (dams, ports, railways, official buildings) and indeed 'protected' (conservation) areas.

3.5 However, dispossession was the exception rather than the norm. More typical was the administration of 'customary law', including 'communal land tenure', placed in the hands of chiefs and headmen under indirect rule. While this was justified as respecting African 'tradition', in practice it departed radically from African experience as it was inevitably 'territorialised': colonial officials, steeped in European conceptions of jurisdiction, sought to fix the boundaries of 'tribal' areas and 'communal land', to measure and map the spaces they enclosed, and to regulate the uses to which they were put. This process was widely contested and frustrated and often remained incomplete. It provided one important arena of the operation of 'multiple regimes of authority' and its ambiguities, giving rise to more and less overt and vigorous clashes between 'native authorities' and colonial states; between rival claimants to 'traditional authority' (and

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their followers); between those claiming rights to land as members of ‘communities of descent’ and ‘strangers’; and sometimes along lines of gender division. At the same time there is also evidence of the emergence of ‘vernacular land markets’ (Chimhowu and Woodhouse 2006), that is, commodity transactions concerning land sale and rental without formal title or legal recognition - often conducted through, and perhaps ‘disguised’ by, idioms of ‘customary’ authority over land allocation.

3.6 The impact of ‘the dull compulsion of economic forces’ (Marx), in the sense of subjecting reproduction to the circuits and disciplines of commodity relations, was, of course, typically (if not invariably) initiated - and could continue to be shaped by - political compulsion (the ‘extra-economic coercion’ of all primitive accumulation), and was highly uneven. In very broad terms, the dynamic of commodification in colonial Africa - with all its unevenness and diversity - centred on crops, labour power, and land: an ordering that corresponds, roughly speaking, to both historical sequence and the relative extent of commodification.<sup>30</sup> Ideas of the extent of commodification imply its incompleteness, and in some sense or other the articulation of capitalist with pre- or non-capitalist social relations and practices, signalled earlier as central to various kinds of explanations of African ‘underdevelopment’ (2.2 above).

3.7 Unevenness is commonly charted in regional differentiation, in this context notably regions of relatively specialised cash crop farming, especially for export, and regions that became ‘labour reserves’. In the latter, in the absence of opportunities for agricultural commodity production, the subjection of reproduction to the logic of commodity relations was manifested in labour migration to mines, plantations and settler farms, railways and docks, in construction and the limited manufacturing that existed - *and* to the more dynamic zones of ‘peasant’ commodity production. To the extent that such labour migration was cyclical, it generated combinations of ‘hoe an wage’ (so-called ‘semi-proletarianisation’; 3.4 above): the formation of a class of labour that is neither dispossessed of *all* other means of reproducing itself nor in possession of *sufficient* means to reproduce itself.<sup>31</sup> This is not exceptional; it was remarked by Lenin in late nineteenth-century Russia, for example. Lenin’s study of the development of capitalism in Russia also, more famously (or infamously), introduced an argument about the transition to agrarian capitalism through the class differentiation of peasant farmers. Necessary attention to the regional differentiation of rural Africa through specific processes of commodification should not ignore or underestimate social (class)

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<sup>30</sup> Sequences of commodification have been theorised in the different colonial contexts of Africa and India by Rey (1976) and Bharadwaj (1985) respectively. Bharadwaj was also a seminal contribution to the notion of interlocking markets for land, labour power, crops and credit in Indian peasant farming, and its subsequent debates.

<sup>31</sup> There is an extremely important disagreement underlying this observation. On one side are those who argue that the involvement of African farmers in markets (including for the commodity labour power) is discretionary, at least above a certain threshold, manifested in notions of the ‘target’ wage or income, and associated with the backward sloping supply curve of labour or commodities (the Aristotlean ideal ?), which is central to the argument of Hyden (note 24 above). On the other side are those who argue that the spaces, forms, and extent of ‘subsistence’ in the sense of production for own consumption are an effect of patterns of insertion in commodity relations and the logic of the ‘dull compulsions’ they exert.

differentiation *within* its different zones of cash crop farming and migrant labour supply. Arguments about different types of social differentiation and power relations, and their effects for forms of inclusion/exclusion, are central to debates about access to land in Africa today as well as historically, which I come back to shortly.

3.8 The 1950s and 1960s - spanning the last years of colonial rule and the first years of independence - saw the largest rate of growth of African agricultural exports since the 1920s, at a time of the long postwar boom of the international economy, relatively favourable world market prices, good weather conditions, and the additional public investment in economic and social infrastructure in the countryside initiated by late colonial 'developmentalism' and greatly extended with independence. State interventions to 'modernise' farming after independence often involved growing appropriations of land by the state, within a wider constitutional assertion of state land ownership/trusteeship which took over or extended the provisions of colonial governments. Otherwise land tenure remained largely unchanged from the late colonial period: where (exceptionally) colonial government had initiated land titling to establish freehold tenure (e.g. Kenya in the aftermath of Mau Mau), and where customary tenure was recognized under colonial rule, explicitly or by default, both tended to continue albeit inflected with social tensions that have increased with time, and especially since the 1970s.

3.9 From the 1970s the African version of a fiscal crisis of the state started to gather, experienced with increasing intensity as worldwide recession dealt a series of 'external shocks' to African economies, followed by those of the restructuring of international capital ('globalisation') and of neoliberal aid policies with their adverse effect on the livelihood bases of a majority of Africans, including the 'new' professional middle class of state employees that had expanded greatly following independence as had public sector manual workers. In short, Africa has been characterised by deteriorating macroeconomic conditions including those of labour markets, and by mounting pressures on social reproduction combined with probably growing social inequality. These conditions serve to highlight aspects of the logic of commodification, and how it works through in specific historical and social conditions, including the current and protracted crisis of 'development'.

3.10 Most Africans today are part of what I term 'classes of labour': 'the growing numbers...who now depend - directly *and indirectly* - on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction' (Panitch and Leys 2001: ix; my emphasis).<sup>32</sup> Classes of labour in Africa, as elsewhere in the 'South', have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive - and typically increasingly scarce - wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure 'informal sector' ('survival') activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex *combinations* of employment and self-employment. Many people do this across different sites of the social division of

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<sup>32</sup> I prefer the term 'classes of labour' to the inherited vocabulary of proletarianisation/proletariat (and semi-proletarianisation/semi-proletariat), as it is less encumbered with problematic assumptions and associations in both political economy (e.g. functionalist readings of Marx's concept of the reserve army of labour) and political theory and ideology (e.g. constructions of an idealised [Hegelian] collective class subject).

labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, as well as wage employment and self-employment.

3.11 This defies inherited assumptions of fixed, let alone uniform, notions (and 'identities') of 'worker', 'peasant', 'trader', 'urban', 'rural', 'employed' and 'self-employed', and also contributes to the fragmentation of classes of labour in various ways, two of which are of special salience here. The first is how social differences of a typically hierarchical, oppressive and exclusionary nature, of which gender is the most ubiquitous and which often also include race and ethnicity, religion and caste, fragment classes of labour. Thus the 'structural' sources of exploitation and inequality inherent in all capitalist production (petty and grand, informal and formal) combine with other forms of social inequality and oppression to create divisions within classes of labour.<sup>33</sup> The second is that relative success or failure in labour markets and salaried employment is typically key to the viability (reproduction) of petty commodity production in farming - this has long been the case in many farming zones in Africa but is intensified in current conditions for reasons indicated in some further empirical generalisations that I sketch next. Intrinsic to these generalisations, as ever, are complex variations in how they are experienced and in the forms of social struggle that individual and collective responses to them generate.

3.12 First, as indicated, increased poverty and insecurity are the effect of deteriorating conditions of reproduction through both (own) farming and wage employment (by others), and the many ways they are combined, as well as widespread decline in the provision of such public goods as health care and education, however inadequate it was previously, especially in rural areas.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Such divisions are often indicators of the boundaries between the active and reserve armies of labour, and of the distribution of social categories of labour between formal and informal employment and between relatively better and worse prospects within each (Bernstein 2007a).

<sup>34</sup> At least half of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa recorded lower volumes of agricultural exports in the late 1990s than they had in the 1970s (Sender 2002: 191). The pressures on export crop production, and income from it, include in varying measure: (i) aspects of change in world market conditions and prices (including systemic overproduction of many tropical export crops); (ii) the reorganisation of global commodity chains and a general, if not uniform, shift from 'seller-' to 'buyer-driven' chains in processes of globalisation - from deregulated capital markets to new processing and transport technologies, from food standard regulation to the sourcing and branding strategies of increasingly concentrated food industry corporations (Gibbon and Ponte 2005); (iii) the effects of privatisation and liberalisation for the conditions of agricultural production (for example, the significant drop in fertiliser use by small farmers) and trade (deterioration of rural transport infrastructure), hence on the quantities and qualities of crops delivered for export - which are also affected, of course, by fluctuating and generally declining terms of trade in international markets. By contrast, (aggregate) food production seems to have done better. Although food production data for sub-Saharan Africa are notoriously unreliable, they are more likely to be under- than over-estimated for various reasons both technical and political (Berry 1984; Raikes 1988; Wiggins 2000; Sender 2002), including their gender biases (Guyer 1983). Many rural areas close(r) to centres of (growing) urban demand have seen shifts from export crops - with their typically annual one-off payments after harvest, and declining returns - to food crop production, stimulated also by the attractions of what Ponte terms 'fast crops' that help meet 'the increasing need for larger amounts and more regular supplies of cash' (2002: 122). He also shows how shifts to 'fast crops' can lead to new forms of labour hiring contracts and arrangements (ibid: Ch 7).

3.13 Second is the thesis of Deborah Bryceson concerning 'deagrarianization' (Bryceson 1996) or 'depeasantization' (Bryceson 1999), manifested in the growing proportion of rural incomes 'derived from non-farm sources' (Bryceson 1999: 172), and which she explains by the 'fundamental problem' - exacerbated, if not solely caused, by structural adjustment and since - of 'African peasant agriculture's inability to compete in today's global market' (1999: 185). This can also be linked to survey findings of a trend of diminishing farm size, or area cultivated, and with fewer 'inputs' (other than labour), especially by poorer farmers (Ellis 2006).

3.14 At the same time - and a third generalization with its attendant variations - there is a kind of scissors effect at work for those in rural Africa (the great majority) whose reproduction is secured from combinations of own farming and off-farm wage and self-employment, including the many whose off-farm income has been essential, historically, to meeting the entry and reproduction costs of their farming enterprises (3.3 above). There is also growing evidence of shortages of arable land, and often grazing land, especially in areas of better soils, wetlands, and/or transport links to urban markets, due to various combinations of intensified pressures on reproduction (with effects for patterns of commodification) and demographic concentration, including from in-migration to more favoured farming areas (Woodhouse *et al* 2000; Peters 2004).

3.15 In effect, 'the shrinkage of the peasant sector', as Bryceson calls it, occurs alongside the collapse of real wages, and employment opportunities, in the formal sector.<sup>35</sup> The latter, then, exerts additional pressure on the reproduction of farming (and through farming), hence intensifies the pursuit of means of livelihood both on and off the land. Bryceson suggests that one manifestation of this generalised 'scramble for cash', also noted by Ponte (2002), is new localised markets for goods and services. Moreover, she suggests that these new branches of rural economic activity entail changes in the gender, generational, and (other) familial relations through which household farming was organised, for example, towards greater individualisation of economic activity as well as towards class differentiation see also 3.21 below).

3.16 A fourth empirical generalisation is that Africa's economic crisis is so encompassing that it includes many of the professional petty bourgeoisie which proliferated after independence, and especially those in state employment. This intensifies their interest in land, which links to an associated general theme (again with many complex variations in practice): that when commodity relations and dynamics are internalised in the social functioning of even the most remote countrysides, as in contemporary Africa, economic

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<sup>35</sup> Bryceson also refers to 'the meaninglessness of an informal sector without a formal sector contrast' (1999: 186). It is certainly the case that to the extent the 'informal sector' has a part to play in processes of accumulation and economic growth, this is through its symbiotic links with the development of large-scale industry via subcontracting, service and repair, reducing the cost of wage goods, and so on, which has featured much less in sub-Saharan Africa's economic history, even before the current crisis, than in Latin America or much of Asia (Meagher 1995).

and social crisis generates opportunities of expanded reproduction or accumulation for some, as well as new pressures on simple reproduction for many (or most).<sup>36</sup>

3.17 This points to the terrain of social - class, gender and other - inequality which, in the conditions of rural Africa today as elsewhere, requires attention to the dynamics and tendencies of class (and other) differentiation between farmers/‘peasants’ (Bernstein 2000) but also between ‘worker-peasants’ (‘semi-proletarians’) among classes of labour (Bernstein 2003) and large sections of the petty bourgeoisie indicated, including how their various individual and collective struggles for both ‘survival’ and advantage intersect in particular instances and with what effects.

3.18 In short, the ‘crisis of African agriculture’ - in terms of production (and productivity), income, contributions to reproduction, and any possibility of profit - is not distributed equally across the social categories that farm or otherwise have an interest in farming and access to land. Some of those with recognised claims on land are otherwise too poor to farm: they lack capital to secure inputs, command over labour through the social relations of kinship - typically mediated by patriarchal relations of gender and generation - or market, and/or access to credit that is affordable and timely. On the other hand, those able to reproduce relatively robust agricultural petty commodity enterprises, and *a fortiori* to expand the scale of their farming, typically do so with reproduction/investment funds derived from wage employment (and also from trade and transport).<sup>37</sup>

3.19 We thus approach a paradox: that in the midst of such widespread crises of reproduction, partly manifested in ‘the shrinkage of the peasant sector’ combined with increasing differentiation between those able and unable to farm as a significant basis of reproduction, there seems to be mounting tension over land in many places. A wide range of recent evidence concerning competition for land, and the conflicts it generates, is presented by Pauline Peters (2004) who distinguishes various types of agents and strands of this process as follows (i) ‘growing populations and movements of people looking for better/more land or fleeing civil disturbances’; (ii) ‘rural groups seek to intensify commodity production and food production while retrenched members of a downsized salariat look for land to improve food and income options’; (iii) ‘states demarcate forestry and other reserves, and identify areas worthy of conservation (often under pressure from donors and international lobbying groups)’; (iv) ‘representatives of the state and political

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<sup>36</sup> A local (village) capitalist in northern Uganda in the early 1980s told Mahmood Mamdani that ‘what helped us [to accumulate] was the famine of 1980. People were hungry and they sold us things cheaply [including land and cattle]. That is when we really started buying’ (Mamdani 1987: 208).

<sup>37</sup> More sophisticated analyses of ‘worker-peasant’ trajectories in Southern Africa by, among others, First (1983) on Mozambique, Bush and Cliffe (1984) and Cousins *et al* (1992) on Zimbabwe, and Levin and Neocosmos (1989) on South Africa, suggest that differential labour market conditions and earnings from wage employment at different times can feed the class differentiation of ‘peasant’ farming - accumulation in petty commodity and petty capitalist production - in the rural areas to which labour migrants return. In a very different context, that of agrarian accumulation in Senegal, see the analytically and methodologically nuanced studies by Carlos Oya (2004, 2007).

elites appropriate land through means ranging from the questionable to the illegal'; and (v) 'valuable resources both on and under the land (timber, oil, gold, other minerals) attract intensifying exploitation by agents from the most local (unemployed youth or erstwhile farmers seeking ways to obtain cash) to transnational networks (of multinational corporations, foreign governments and representatives of African states)...'.(2004: 291)

### 3.20 Peters concludes that a wide range of studies

reveal not only intensifying competition over land but deepening social differentiation and, though this differentiation takes many forms - including youth against elders, men against women, ethnic and religious confrontations - these also reveal new social divisions that, in sum, can be seen as class formation...The proliferating tensions and struggles between generations and genders, or between groups labelled by region, ethnicity or religion, are intimately tied up with the dynamics of division and exclusion, alliance and inclusion that constitute class formation. (ibid: 279, 305)

### 3.21 Finally, she links this, in effect, to arguments from, and about, moral economy:

A key socio-cultural dynamic of differentiation...turns on divisions within significant social units - family, lineage, village, 'tribe' or ethnically defined group...a process of *narrowing in the definition of belonging*...relations around land are socially 'embedded'...in unequal social relationships...increasing competition and conflict around land and landed resources across Africa belies the assumption that socially embedded systems of landholding and land use guarantee access, let alone equal access. (ibid: 302, 304; emphasis in original)

3.22 In sum, there is a strong argument that a capitalist class dynamic is at work in Africa today, as it has been since the end of the colonial period. Peters marshals ample evidence of the *effects* of that class dynamic, and of some of the specific social forms it takes in relation to land and farming. There is a further line of theoretical reasoning about the logic of commodification that includes the theorisation of petty commodity production, its class dynamic, and the social differentiation associated with it, which I shall not rehearse here (yet again; see e.g. Bernstein 2000), although let me make explicit what was implied above (3.7): that the formation and functioning of relatively robust, stable and prosperous small-scale farming as a primary source of livelihood - the inspiration and desire of both neo-populist agricultural economics and of the 'middle peasant' model - is itself the effect of processes of social differentiation. Its conditions of entry and reproduction, which tend to rise over time with intensified commodification, exclude many, perhaps, most in the countryside of Africa (as elsewhere). Meeting those entry and reproduction costs typically entails sources of investment derived from integration in the wider circuits of commodity economy - various combinations of 'hoe and wage' (or salary). Finally, such robust petty commodity production typically depends on hiring wage workers.

3.23 The other side of this coin is the growing numbers of those who are too poor to farm, even if they are able to exert claims to land. This undermines the assumption linking the two parts of Sara Berry's observation that 'most people in rural areas have access to land, and are *therefore able to cultivate on their own account*' (1993: 135; my emphasis). Indeed, in an important sense that bears on empirical fieldwork and its findings, those too poor to cultivate on their own account often tend to go 'missing', even when they supply rural labour markets which, as just noted, are typically a condition of small-scale, as well as larger-scale, agrarian petty commodity production.<sup>38</sup> The situation, then, is one of growing numbers in the countryside, or spanning rural areas (and different rural areas) and towns, who 'now depend - directly *and indirectly* - on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction' (3.10 above). Moreover, this is an effect of class differentiation in the countryside, even when it is not matched by the formation of large-scale landed property/agrarian capital at the other end of the class spectrum.<sup>39</sup>

3.24 This, then, illustrates the argument for class dynamics *without* the formation of observable sociological classes and, by extension, recognisable forms of class identity, 'consciousness' and action, formulated earlier (3.1). Here are some (hypo)theses about why this is so, drawing on some of the specificities of modern African history, and indeed its moral economies. First, most farmers in most parts of Africa were not dispossessed by colonial rule even as it subjected them to the logic of commodification. Second is the absence in most of Africa of landed property on a scale, and of an historical and social depth, that is familiar from much Latin American and Asian history (and that of Southern Africa). Third is the continuing prevalence, if not universality, of some degree of farming to the reproduction of labour in the absence of generalised dispossession of land (central to 'classic' primitive accumulation).

3.25 Thus the dynamics of generalised commodity production, including their internalisation in a wide range of forms of agricultural petty commodity production, generate tensions and struggles in African countrysides experienced and fought over, not as 'pure' class divisions but 'between generations and genders, or between groups labelled by region, ethnicity or religion' (Peters, above). It is striking that there are so few instances in modern African history of popular rural political *organisation* on a broader scale centred on agrarian and land issues, again by contrast with Latin America and Asia with their histories (subject to their own complex variations) of rural social movements and peasant leagues, unions and other forms of organisation, *and* agricultural workers' associations and struggles, both those that are (relatively) autonomous and those allied with, or organised by, political parties.

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<sup>38</sup> Those who do not farm, or only in the most marginal ways, even if they have claims to land, are effectively landless and may well disappear from surveys of farming populations. There is a nice expression of this in the Maasai notion that 'the poor are not us', that is, those without cattle in a pastoralist society become by definition non-pastoralists (Anderson and Broch-Due 1999). This is a discursive manoeuvre with a heavy normative charge and serious implications for such key aspects of moral economy as identity, inclusion, and the 'politics of belonging' (Kuba and Lentz 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Which Berry's restriction of agrarian class formation' to the 'Lenin model' is unable to recognise.

3.26 This is, in important part, a legacy of the colonial construction, and connection, of 'tribal' identity, 'customary' land tenure and (patriarchal) political authority, which serve as the idioms through which class tensions may be played out as 'civil war within the tribe' (Mamdani 1996), as well as in struggles between (cross-class) corporate entities - ethnic group, clan, rural 'community' - over resources of arable and grazing land, water, and forest. Moreover, such struggles are typically articulated by those claiming the political legitimacy of 'tradition' to represent the interests of their clan or 'community', and who themselves may be drawn from, or form alliances with, elements of urban based or displaced classes: retrenched workers; the petty bourgeoisie, whose interest in rural land has been intensified by their own crises of reproduction, as noted earlier; and, of course, 'big men' located in the apparatuses of the state and its networks of political patronage.

3.27 A particular aspect of this can be illustrated briefly in relation to 'community' and 'traditional authority'. 'Community' - at different scales from village to 'tribe'<sup>40</sup> - is a kind of corporate status based on lineage and ethnicity that may have once been defined, and indeed imposed, by colonial authority, but then serves as a collective claim to specific land on the basis of shared identity and inheritance. Such claims to ancestral land are often articulated through chiefs as bearers of the 'community' inheritance, even when the rights of chiefs or other 'traditional authorities' to allocate land within the 'community' are contested. Concerning such discourses of 'community' it is evident, first, that the social composition and character of rural communities is now very different from that of their historic and 'imagined' origins. Second, 'community' does not preclude hierarchy and inequality and indeed may justify them as part of the moral order, as Lonsdale (above) argued for Kikuyu political theory. Third, tensions and conflicts over land at a local level often connect with various levels of the politics of bureaucracy and patronage, from district and provincial government to the central state.

3.28 An ideal construction of chieftancy and other offices of 'traditional leadership' is that they manifest authority prescribed by political hierarchy (rather than the stratification of socioeconomic/class difference). Such authority is exercised on behalf of the 'community' (or 'tribe'), and its legitimacy may be conditional on proper performance of this pastoral function, thus central to a given moral economy. It is clear from many instances, however, that the authority of 'traditional leaders' is reshaped, and contested, by long and complex histories of commodification and how they intersect with similarly complex political histories. Chiefs may be perceived by some subject to their authority as part of the problem of access to land, and processes of land allocation, rather than as part of the solution.<sup>41</sup> This can happen, for example, when in practice and however masked in discursive ambiguity, the authority of chiefs has shifted from claims over (and responsibilities to) 'their' people to jurisdiction over particular areas of land and their

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<sup>40</sup> And the constituent entities of larger 'tribal' formations - sub-'tribes' - and the factional tensions they often manifest, including over competing claims to land.

<sup>41</sup> For example, on Ghana Amanor (2005), on Sahelian West Africa Ribot (2000; an account influenced by Mamdani 1996), on Botswana Peters (1994), on South Africa the debate generated by the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004 (Cousins 2007).

allocation.<sup>42</sup> This now includes the sale or leasing of land (Chimhowu and Woodhouse 2007) *and* to a far wider range of ‘strangers’ than in the past, when the construction of ‘stranger’ was someone of different place of origin, hence identity, but similar social character and purpose who was looking for land to clear and cultivate and/or to graze their livestock. Now ‘strangers’ include accumulators/investors of diverse provenance, scale and purpose from commercial farming to logging to eco-tourism.

#### 4. Conclusions

4.1 In short, social arrangements, cultural beliefs and values, and identities encapsulated in notions of ‘community’, ‘tribe’, ‘communal’ land tenure, and ‘traditional leadership’ are central to discourses of moral economy applied - and contested - in tensions over land in rural sub-Saharan Africa today; that is to say, over rights to, and struggles for, ‘subsistence’ in conditions of widespread immiseration and increasing inequality, and their escalating pressures on reproduction. Such notions, it can be further proposed, retain their salience because most rural Africans have little reason to put their expectations and trust in state recognition of any right to subsistence and state provision of means to help satisfy their reproduction needs, nor do they have experience, other than on a localised

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<sup>42</sup> The shift of the authority of chiefs from claims over ‘their’ people to claims over land can be considered as part of a fundamental social change in modern African history proposed one of its outstanding scholars John Iliffe (1987). The ‘Iliffe thesis’ (McCann 1999) may be summarised thus: much of Africa is a tough environment for settled agriculture due to irregular patterns of rainfall, fragile soils, and hazards to human health. Historically it was mostly sparsely populated and labour was the scarce resource in farming rather than land. Control over people was thus key to social organisation. Access to land was guaranteed to adult men by membership of kin and political formations (‘communities of descent’ and affiliation). Within patriarchal households, older men sought to control the labour of women, and to augment it through polygyny (accumulating wives, hence children), as well as the labour of young men and ‘clients’ (unable to sustain households of their own). Where states, or proto-state formations, existed, they appropriated part of the social product for redistribution as ‘insurance’ (grain reserves) or collective ceremonial consumption, and/or might appropriate part for political/diplomatic and military purposes - an ‘investment’ whose returns were the spoils of alliances and warfare: client groups, control of trade routes, captives, cattle. In the conditions sketched, the purpose of warfare was to acquire people rather than territory, and polities grew by accumulating subject populations from whom tribute was exacted. There were continuous migrations as warrior polities sought to expand, and various groups ‘broke away’ to cultivate and graze their herds on new frontiers of settlement. One source of the value of Iliffe’s argument is its *comparative* dimension, which helps to identify specificities rather than imply, by default, African exceptionalism. The relationships he posits between ecology and farming, land and people, help explain why there were few African ‘peasant societies’ in the same sense as the territorially based and populous kingdoms and empires of Asia and Europe, with their ramified social hierarchies based on peasant labour (notions of African ‘feudalism’ have been entertained and debated in relation to some of the precolonial polities of the West African savanna, intralacustrine East Africa, and Ethiopia). In the twentieth century, class formation (including the emergence of a class of effectively landless labour; Iliffe 1987: 162-3), changes in political structures and processes, and demographic growth (from the 1920s), led to the implicit commodification of control over land, even in the absence of formal private property rights and the persistent and pervasive idioms of the ‘customary’ deployed by all those seeking to control, claim and obtain access to land from positions of relative strength and weakness. Whitehead and Tsikata (2003) consider the ‘implications of the re-turn to the customary’ for women’s rights to land, as does Aninka Claassens, a leading critic of South Africa’s Communal Land Rights Act, who also argues that ‘Traditional leaders will derive their power not from the freely given support of their people, but from their control over people’s land.’ (*Cape Times* 10.02.2004)

terrain, of the kinds of historic 'peasant' movements, or contemporary rural 'social movements', familiar in much of Latin America and much of Asia, and which often incorporate elements of class ideology in their programmes and practices.

4.2 The social dislocations and intensifying pressures of reproduction registered in the ongoing crisis of development in Africa incorporate and intensify a dynamic of class relations, sometimes in 'invisible and unarticulated ways' (Peters 1994: 210), sometimes articulated and struggled over through moral economies of 'belonging', inclusion and entitlement, and their complex disputes in practice. The material inequalities of power generated by relations of class and gender present marked, often increasing, 'limits to negotiability' (Peters 2002) of the spaces of moral economy, of statuses within 'community' and the claims they carry.

4.3 With reference to the ideas sketched in the first two parts of this paper, we can distinguish various aspects of debates about capitalism and moral economy in relation to land in sub-Saharan Africa. My discussion has focused largely on moral economy as object of study, which encompasses the following questions among others:

- (i) what are the moral economies of access to land and the claims and types of authority over land allocation and use they sanction?
- (ii) How have those moral economies changed, in both ideology and practice, as a result of commodification and its class dynamic, and their specific forms and trajectories, in modern African history during the colonial period and since?
- (iii) How does moral economy affect who gets which land, how much, and what they are able to do with it?
- (iv) Do moral economies obstruct or deflect the commodification of land, and if so is this an obstacle to agrarian development (growth of production and productivity)?

4.4 I conclude by noting briefly examples of how moral economy as object of study can be linked to normative purpose. One instance is populist, including eco-populist, aspirations and advocacy to re-establish righteous ways of farming, deploying indigenous science within 'communal' forms of property and regulation - an endeavour in which the invocation of the 'indigenous' (and 'local') serves as a code for virtue (Bernstein and Woodhouse 2006). Another instance is a debate conducted largely within agricultural and development economics concerning property regimes in land and their incentive effects as a condition of productivity growth in farming (e.g. Bruce and Mighot-Adholla 1994; Platteau 1996; Smith 2003 is a useful review). A third and final instance, and one that embraces more deeply the analytical and normative - and political - challenges of moral economy, is my comrade Ben Cousins' valiant attempt to identify five 'underlying principles' of African land tenure regimes He argues that those principles have survived the onslaughts of colonialism and commodification, and that they represent a way forward for (rural) classes of labour, an alternative to both tenure reform as individual property rights and versions of the 'communal' which 'privilege both traditional and non-traditional "big men" (and men in general)' (2007: 310). Ben knows that he has yet to convince me but the title of his article is an apt one with which to finish: 'more than

socially embedded' by which he signals the political struggles necessary to any hope of realising the promise of a progressive moral economy.

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