

CONFERENCE ON

***LAND, RACE AND NATION IN SOUTH AFRICA
A CENTURY OF DISPOSSESSION
1913 – 2013***

VENUE: CAPE TOWN

DATE: 19 – 21 June 2013

Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth. Sol Plaatje (Native Life in South Africa, 1916)

1. BACKGROUND

The notorious Natives Land Act of 1913 confirmed in law, the spoils of the wars of colonial dispossession in South Africa. It ushered in a system of territorial racial segregation in the country with white settlers claiming, owning and occupying the overwhelming bulk of the country. The Act demarcated 7,13%¹ of the land surface as African reserve territory and strictly prohibited the purchase of land by Africans outside these areas². Thus, the indigenous population was effectively dispossessed of more than 90% of the land. Accompanying this segregation was a colonial conception of property as an exclusive domain. All South Africans will be familiar with the sign, “Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted!”. Having dispossessed the population, they could not very well permit them access to the land.

The consequences of this law are still felt today, a century later. The constitution of democratic South Africa takes this dispossession at face value, safeguarding the existing property holders in their land rights and excluding the majority from ownership. In the process it provides a legal sanction for colonial land alienation. Within this legislative context, the land reform programme of a democratic South Africa is severely circumscribed. The division in access to land remains utterly racialised, fracturing the nation into opposing identities of white ownership and black dispossession. Imagining a unitary South African nation in the face of these ongoing colonial land divisions is extraordinarily difficult. Thus, resolving the land question is crucial to resolving the national question in South Africa.

This issue is neither a historical remnant nor unique to South Africa. In many ways colonial practices in South Africa provided the model for a much wider and more recent, racialized dispossession of land and labour throughout the region and, many argue, the continent. Analyses in the Americas, Asia, and even Europe suggest, moreover, both comparative historical lessons and contemporary alternatives. Indeed the blossoming of a new wave of land dispossession and land struggles—often highly fractured and racialized along colonial lines—mirrors and can inform the challenges South Africa faces. Similarly, the conference

¹ This increased to 13% after the 1936 Native’s Trust and Land Act.

²While this prohibition was largely successful it did not eliminate land purchases and ownership by Africans outside the reserves.

will benefit from debates and discussions on the manner in which other countries have dealt with the land question through policies and practices.

It is agreed by all that South Africa's Land Reform programme, comprising Land Tenure Reform, Land Restitution and Land Redistribution, has failed. The country has reached an impasse and this conference is designed to discuss ways out of it.

2. CONFERENCE THEMES

- (i) Historiography of Land in South Africa
- (ii) Land Policy in South Africa
- (iii) Urban Land Questions
- (iv) Land and Labour in South Africa
- (v) Land Struggles in South Africa
- (vi) Comparative Analyses

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

This is not an academic conference. It is envisaged that the conference would bring together rural and other land movements in civil society, farmers' associations, various organs of the state, as well as scholars working in this area to grapple with the seemingly intractable land question in South Africa. The conference is designed to use the opportunity of the centenary of the 1913 Land Act to reflect on and deal with the living issue of land as one of ongoing significance in South Africa.

4. DURATION OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference will last two and a half days from Wednesday 19th June to Friday 21st June 2013.

5. EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference will be used to launch a book on Land Questions and Rural Development in South Africa – the outcome of a SANPAD funded research project. It is also envisaged that there will be a Joint Memorandum of Proposed Action.

6. REFERENCE GROUP

The reference group consists of both national and international experts in the field, viz. Sam Moyo and Tendai Murisa (Zimbabwe), Praveen Jha and Surinder Jodhka (India), Dzodzi Tsikata (Ghana), Bill Martin (USA), Yongjun Zhao (China) and Harry Wels and Marja Spierenburg (Netherlands).

7. ORGANISING COMMITTEE

The Conference will be principally organised by the leaders of the SANPAD Research Team, namely, Fred Hendricks (Dean of Humanities at Rhodes University, f.hendricks@ru.ac.za) and Lungisile Ntsebeza (NRF Chair in Land Reform and Democracy in South Africa at the University of Cape Town, ntsebeza@gmail.com), with support from Kirk Helliker (HOD, Sociology, Rhodes University, k.helliker@ru.ac.za). Please contact any of the above for further information.