The Land Question in South Africa is an excellent collection of insightful papers that focuses on the problems, challenges and possibilities for land reform in contemporary South Africa. Besides the introductory chapter written by the editors, the volume consists of eight chapters. Two chapters, written by Henry Bernstein and Sam Moyo, set the global and regional context for the six chapters on South Africa that follow. These latter chapters effectively entail, to use specific phrases from chapter titles, ‘taking stock’ of land reform (Ruth Hall) during the first post-apartheid decade and charting the way ‘towards accelerated implementation’ of reform (Rogier van den Brink et al.) over the next decade and beyond.

All chapters clearly indicate that the land reform programme has demonstrated only limited progress. From the evidence presented by the various contributors, the failure of the programme is particularly stark with reference to land redistribution and land tenure changes, and is less marked in the case of land restitution. Yet, according to Ntsebeza (p. 107), there seems to be ‘no agreement on the reasons’. The causes underlying the truncated character of the programme – as propounded in the chapters – indeed represent a diverse mix, but it is questionable whether they are inherently incompatible with each other. The reasons include policy inconsistencies, fiscal and budgetary limitations, insufficient institutional capacity, lack of political will, resistance from white commercial farmers and, last but not least, the fact that ‘the rural poor are weak and fragmented at this stage’ (Andrews p. 216).

Ntsebeza’s chapter is concerned in particular with a ‘debate’ about the significance of the South African constitution in inhibiting reform. He notes an inconsistency within the constitution between clauses that protect property rights and clauses that allow for expropriation under certain conditions. On this basis, he argues that the constitution acts as a brake on land acquisition for redistribution purposes. His main protagonist in this ‘debate’ appears to be his co-editor, who claims in her own chapter (and elsewhere) that ‘the most immediate constraints … appear to be more political than legal’ (Hall p. 99). In other words, the constitution does not simply set limits but also affords possibilities for acquisition, and the problem lies squarely and fairly at the feet of the sitting ANC government. It seems though that this ‘debate’, as currently
constructed, has the danger of degenerating into static conceptions of social possibilities; it downplays how this contradictory moment in the land reform initiative (which both writers capture) is played out in a contingent manner according to the shifting balance of political forces in South Africa. In this regard, the editors seem to patch things up in their introduction by agreeing that land reform is ‘a fundamentally political project’ (Hall and Ntsebeza p.20), and hence is an indeterminate project.

Hall’s chapter though does not focus specifically on the ‘debate’, but involves a much broader review of the progress and challenges in the land reform process. Like other contributors, she emphasises the persistence of ‘deeply etched racial and class divides in the countryside’ (p. 103) and argues that the government’s adherence to the willing seller-willing buyer principle serves only to entrench those divides by stymieing land acquisition. She implies that this persistence is consistent with the predominant neo-liberal thrust in South Africa. In this context, she makes the critical point that even if more far-reaching redistribution was to take place, ‘the prospects of a successful smallholder farming sector’ in post-resettlement areas would likely ‘recede’ (p. 100) due to insufficient state support arising from the liberalisation of the agricultural regime under the impact of the neo-liberal trajectory. Yet, underlying her analysis, and influencing much of the volume, is a linear model of policy formation and implementation which appears to measure reform progress ‘against policy frameworks and targets’ (p. 87). Problematically, this kind of analysis implies that policy simply exists to guide practices, and it fails to consider how policy models often arise to rationalise and legitimise existing practices. This means that ‘progress’ cannot be properly measured in terms of the distance between policy goals and policy effects. Insofar as policy goals form part of a broadly accepted and coherent land programme, and insofar as this programme is repeatedly confirmed through even non-transformative practices, then ‘success’ has been ‘achieved’.

In her thoughtful chapter, Cheryl Walker seeks to transcend idealised notions of land reform, including ‘nostalgia and romantic identity politics’ (p. 146) and the ‘inflated expectations’ (p. 134) that ‘redistributive’ programmes (including restitution and tenure changes) may have on rural livelihoods. Her long involvement in the land ‘sector’ (pre-dating the post-apartheid period) may in part explain her pragmatic realism that suggests that in ‘insisting on all possible targets, we advance none’ (p. 132). She argues that the demands for historical redress may not necessarily translate into best development practices for the future, and she goes on discuss priorities for the state that are – relatively speaking – achievable and worth pursuing. These include the finalisation of the restitution process, and targeted acquisition (if necessary, by expropriation) of land for development projects for the landless and land-short. Although her chapter is not ‘an academic exercise’ (p. 133), it nevertheless has analytical undertones. In this respect, one concern is her ongoing reference to the burden
of ‘constraints’ on land reform (pp. 133, 146), whether programmatic or non-programmatic in form. In political terms, just as an unbridled populist romanticism may lead to championing the cause of radical restructuring ‘from below’ at all costs, the over-privileging of constraints to land reform may lead to political conservatism. Intellectually, pragmatism is not far off from pessimism, and this may impact on the conceptual framework employed when analysing land reform; in particular, it downplays how constraints are in fact socially produced, reproduced and transformed.

The three chapters by Moyo, Mercia Andrews and Ben Cousins raise diverse points, but they are in agreement on a range of issues – some of which are shared by other contributors. More specifically, these three writers directly challenge the ‘large farm’ model of land efficiency propagated by commercial farmer organisations in South Africa (and more widely in the sub-region) and seemingly accepted (if only passively) by the ANC government. They thus emphasise the need for large-scale land redistribution and the importance of the ‘small farmer development trajectory’ (Moyo p. 61). In Cousins’ words, this entails a ‘new’ class of emergent petty commodity producers’ emerging ‘from within ranks of the desperately poor’ (p. 232). Although not a central point in his chapter, Bernstein (p. 48) makes the telling point that, in any analysis, ‘scale in agriculture’ must be seen as embedded in ‘specific, and variant, forms of social relations’. In line with this argument, converting large farms into small farms may simply replace racial forms of agrarian injustice with the pronounced patriarchal biases that exist in small-scale farming throughout the sub-region. The ‘new’ class of petty commodity producers may be riddled with ‘old’ gender inequalities.

In arguing for the small farm option, Moyo, Andrews and Cousins are seriously concerned about the non-equity (racial) implications of converting customary land regimes into private freehold tenure as propagated by multilateral donor institutions. More generally, they argue against market-led land reform, in large part because it undermines the quest for ‘redistributive justice’ (Andrews p. 205). And they suggest that an interventionist state, or what Cousins (p. 233) calls a ‘proactive state’, is critical for ensuring significant land reforms. For Moyo, in particular, this would entail forcefully engaging with the national question as the ‘racial foundations’ of land reform strongly ‘resonates’ (p. 65) throughout southern Africa. Finally, all three chapters bring to the fore the significance of ‘an organised movement that can drive policy reformulation’ (Andrews p. 218). In the end, these writers still cling (some might say romantically) to the prospect of popular-driven state-facilitated land reform leading to successful small-scale farming, or what Bernstein disparagingly refers to as ‘agrarian populism’ (p. 43). Their arguments raise complex questions about the nation-state which are often left unaddressed in the literature on land reform. In the case of contemporary Zimbabwe – a society which seems fertile ground for some sort of theorising about the state – there is a
striking lacuna in this respect in the land reform literature and beyond. Certainly, claims about a more activist state need to be underpinned by nuanced conceptual and theoretical work.

A similar point pertains to the relation between state and society, and (in particular) the notion of ‘transformation’ that appears in the subtitle to the volume and in two of the chapter headings. There is considerable lack of clarity in the volume about what the term entails or what is to be transformed. This may be intentional, considering that transformation is an open-ended and contingent process. In this respect, the editors simply speak about a ‘transformative vision’ (p. 10). Transformation refers to social change, and underlying the various renditions of ‘transformation’ contained in the book are commitments regarding the form and content of change. The subtitle of the book links transformation to ‘redistribution’. Clearly, for most of the contributors, transformation is a process that goes beyond redistribution and de-racialisation, and entails far-reaching change to the agrarian political economy (Walker pp. 142, 143). Moyo (p. 61) though expresses doubts about a ‘gradualistic approach’ to radical land reform. Likewise, van den Brink et al., note that significant land redistributions are ‘most often done in periods of upheaval and political violence’ (p. 162) yet they remain (romantically?) optimistic about the prospects for peaceful reform (p. 194) in South Africa. Like the ‘state’, the notion of societal ‘transformation’ requires serious methodological reflections.

I end this review with comments on what could likely be the two most controversial chapters in the book: by van den Brink et al., and Bernstein. The chapter by van den Brink et al., is controversial not only because of the message but also because of the messengers. The authors include Glen Sonwabo Thomas (Director-General of the Department of Land Affairs in the South African government) and Rogier van den Brink (Senior Economist in the World Bank). The chapter by van den Brink et al., is pushing a World Bank perspective, although not explicitly so. They perceive private property as the most modern form of landholding; the exception to the rule seems to prove that private property makes ‘economic sense’ (p. 161). Like other contributors to the book, they argue for the efficiencies of small-scale farming, or what they call ‘family-sized’ farms (p. 155).

The particular emphasis by van den Brink et al., is on the importance of land market forces and the need to unleash them more fully. For instance, in the case of land acquisition, they claim that land markets are distorted and ‘need help’ from the state (p. 167). This help would entail the removal of restrictions on land subdivisions and the raising of land taxes on unutilised commercial land, thereby facilitating access by the poor to small portions of land via the market if necessary financial assistance from the state is also forthcoming. The white commercial farming community¹ has recently expressed deep concern about such suggestions from what they (and probably others) perceive to be an unholy World Bank-government alliance. However, van den Brink et al., anticipated
such a reaction (pp. 185-186) and, in the end, they call for a ‘policy framework which allows a menu of options to be pursued’ (p. 193). On the other hand, the chapter appears far less sensitive to the kind of response that rural inhabitants might give to a market-led privatised land reform programme that may only further undermine and marginalise their livelihoods. One wonders whether land occupations and other forms of ‘uncivil’ action have a place in their broad ‘policy framework’.

For some years now, Bernstein has been proposing a reformulated agrarian question. He refers to the classic agrarian question as the ‘agrarian question of capital’ (specifically, of industrial capital) and he claims that, because the transition to capitalism has occurred globally, the ‘question of capital’ has been resolved at this level. Stalled capitalist industrialisation in the ‘peripheries’ has left the classic question unresolved in these regions but now largely redundant given the existence of industrial capitalism as an all-pervasive world-system. He claims that the agrarian question needs to be significantly re-conceptualised as an ‘agrarian question of labour’ in the light of the subordinated integration of the South and East in international commodity chains and markets under the neo-liberal regime. His revised analysis brings to the fore the ‘fragmentation (or fracturing) of labour’ in the ‘peripheries’, with ‘ever more disparate combinations of wage- and self-employment (agricultural and non-agricultural petty commodity production)’ as reproduction strategies (Bernstein 2003).

In the volume under review, Bernstein continues to pursue this argument, and it is also taken up by Cousins under the notion of the ‘agrarian question of the dispossessed’. He applies Bernstein’s classic and reformulated questions to within South Africa and specifically to the position of agricultural and not industrial capital. According to Cousins, the ‘scale’ and ‘productive capacity’ of capitalist agriculture in South Africa means that the question of capital has been resolved by ‘accumulation from above’ (p. 227) but the question of dispossession can only be resolved by ‘accumulation from below’ through the emergence of the ‘new’ petty commodity producers. In turn, and quite confusingly, the second resolution seems to undermine the first resolution as the small-scale producers invariably contest ‘the monopolistic privileges of white/corporate farming’ (p. 227). These arguments do not seem consistent with Bernstein’s position – Bernstein seeks to transcend the ‘internalist’ (single social formation) problematic (p. 32) in his global analysis and, further, his prime focus is on the transition to industrial capitalism and not on the emergence and consolidation of capitalist agriculture.

Cousins’s discussion though leads us to consider whether there may be blatant confusions or at least unclear formulations within Bernstein’s own argument. In the past, insofar as capitalist agriculture facilitated industrialisation within a particular social formation, Bernstein argues that the agrarian question of capital ‘subsumes that of labour’ (p.32). And he claims that, currently, the agrarian question of labour is not subordinated ‘to that of capital’,
and this is ‘manifested in struggles for land against “actually existing” forms of capitalist landed property’ (p. 41). The exact status of ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ remains obscure. In speaking about the subordination or otherwise of the ‘labour question’, is Bernstein making a statement about the prevailing balance of class forces or about the class category to be privileged epistemologically when making sense of agrarian change? Given that ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ are relational terms and are constitutive of each other, is Bernstein not separating them out and reformulating the agrarian question un-dialectically? Does an emphasis on the global resolution of the classic agrarian question betray an insensitivity to the idea that all ‘resolutions’ have a variable local content? Most critically, Bernstein needs to justify why the agrarian question needs to be reformulated at all rather than abandoned altogether.

Despite the criticisms noted above, there is little doubt that this volume is an essential contribution to the debate about land reform in contemporary South Africa. The marked emphasis on the practicalities of advancing the land reform process in creative and fluid ways is likely the single most important contribution of this publication.