

## Power/Knowledge/Land: Contested Ontologies of Land and Its Governance in Africa

by Laura German Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. xiii + 331, ISBN: 9780472075331.  
doi: 10.3998/mpub.12071412

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Laura German explores the shift in African land politics from the highly politicised moment, some 15 years ago, when transnational NGOs were able to use powerful and polarising accusations of ‘land grabbing’ to question the large-scale acquisition of land by corporate and state players to the present much more anodyne consensus around the need for ‘land governance’. She argues that land governance discourse installs a regime of truth and knowledge that frames land solely as a factor of production and mobilises narratives that require the conversion of customary relationships to land into clearly stipulated, geographically demarcated, transparently recorded, and *alienable* land rights. Far from promoting tenure security and supporting livelihoods this regime works to facilitate the transfer of customary land into the hands of private corporations, resulting in the immiseration and marginalisation of its inhabitants.

It is hard to disagree with German’s argument that the World Bank’s upbeat discourse ignores what is really at stake in the transformation of African landscapes by processes of capitalist incorporation. She is at her strongest when she uses wide-ranging surveys of anthropological literature and NGO research to eviscerate donor agencies’ messaging, showing how far reality falls short of the promises in policy documents.

But none of this is new. The notion that land is not a commodity like a pair of socks or a woven mat has been a staple of anticapitalist critique for 80 years already, as is the argument that the large scale enclosure of land has gone hand in hand not with a take-off into self-sustained growth but with the production of poverty. What, then, does German claim to contribute to the debate? She argues that these changes can only be grasped if we realise that what is at stake is a clash between two deeply different ‘ontologies’ of land: the World Bank’s, which sees it as an alienable productive asset, and that of indigenous people themselves, for whom it is an inextricable part of a broader network of relationships that include spiritual, communal and ecological dimensions.

I am not sure this is very helpful. Part of the problem is that it is not clear what ‘ontology’ means in German’s hands. She repeatedly defines ontologies as being theories of ‘what things are’ which is, of course entirely wrong: ontologies are theories of what **existence** is, which is an entirely different matter. As far as I can make out, she uses the term to support a fairly straightforward common-or-garden social constructionism: throughout, one can replace the

term 'ontology' simply with the word 'conception' without making any difference to the force of the argument.

A more serious problem is that this appeal to 'ontology' is part of a broader tendency towards a totalising and functionalist analysis. Although she often acknowledges that the truth regimes she describes are contested, her analysis leaves little real space for social agency and comes very close, time and time again, to suggesting that the discourse of land governance is *inherently* geared towards the interests of corporates and big capital; that the language of 'rights' and of good governance is characterised by an ineluctable internal neoliberal rationality, a 'logic' that *inevitably* imposes certain political agendas or outcomes. The sweeping generalisations of World Bank discourse are replaced with an equally sweeping narrative: a static confrontation between two completely distinct and incommensurable ontologies.

This does not help us to get a grip on the considerable empirical complexity of the contests around land as they unfold in particular historically and socially delimited contexts. Clearly, changing land governance produces winners and losers. But how this happens is not the simple outcome of an underlying 'logic.' Rather, political analysis requires a concrete investigation that explores the specificity of gendered realities of power and vulnerability, advantage and disadvantage, as emergent and located realities in a complex field of play. That this field of play is tilted, is self-evident. But the sources of that imbalance of power do not lie in ontology, however conceptualised. German's analysis ignores the contingency of the ways in which specific shifts and changes are achieved in actual struggles. Instead of focusing on historically located social agents and their particular agendas (which are never those of 'capital' in the abstract, but always specific and local) she produces a reading in which corporate interests and neoliberal agendas are always-already successful. And the people they impact are understood in essentialist terms, as 'communities' destined at best to 'prosper in place,' outside of history and time.

doi:10.1017/S0022278X24000284

## **Mugabe's Legacy: coups, conspiracies, and the conceits of power in Zimbabwe**

**by David B. Moore London: Hurst, 2023. Pp. 304. £22 (pb). ISBN: 9781787387713.**

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When General Constantino Chiwenga announced the reason for the November 2017 coup in Zimbabwe, he defined the role of the military as 'in defense of the