

POLITICS, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND GLOBALIZATION

J. L. Gibson. *Overcoming Historical Injustices: Land Reconciliation in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xx + 310 pp. Figures. Tables. Appendixes. References. Index. \$85.00. Cloth.

The last few years have seen a wealth of publications on land reform in South Africa. James Gibson takes an uncommon approach here, examining land reform by means of a large-scale survey conducted in 2004 with four thousand “ordinary” (xv) South Africans stratified according to apartheid-era racial categories (African, White, Coloured, Asian). The survey included a range of opinion questions and two experimental sections in which respondents were asked for their judgments about vignettes with systematically varied content (e.g., in one version a farmer evicts a squatter by hiring a private security company; in another the farmer gets a court order for the eviction). The author aimed to examine the salience of the land issue, its relationship to group identity, and different conceptualizations of justice (distributive, procedural, restorative, and retributive).

To a reader acquainted with the broader social scientific and historical literature on South Africa, most of the book’s findings are not surprising, although they provide a quantitative confirmation of familiar aspects of South African public opinion: for example, that white South Africans have different views on land from black South Africans, that blacks give greater weight to historical injustice in how they think about land, and that the race of the protagonists affects how South Africans evaluate land conflicts. The theoretical observations—that a narrowly instrumentalist economic model is inadequate because culture, group identification, and symbolic meaning affect how people think about justice—are welcome if they can contribute to a reconceptualization of these issues among political scientists and social psychologists.

The book includes the text of the survey, allowing some assessment of the research methodology. (Unfortunately, the references in the text do not indicate the relevant question numbers from the survey, leaving reader to hunt them down.) The conceptualization of several questions and variables struck me as problematic. For example, “class” is operationalized through consumption levels, not in terms of production. It is measured through interviewers’ assessments of living standards and social class, and respondents’ ownership of consumer goods. While this approach may be acceptable for evaluation of many public opinion issues, it seems misguided in this context: land can be a factor of production, and as such it is a component of many South Africans’ livelihoods, but the survey did not ask respondents about land ownership or the place of land in their own livelihoods. “Instrumental” attachment to land is thus conceptualized only in relation to past experiences of dispossession, not in relation to the contemporary value of land in terms of one’s livelihood.

Likewise, the text operates with an opposition of “communal” versus “individual,” a notion that has long been rejected in the study of African land tenure. This results in contradictory findings which are presented separately and left unexplained: 64 percent of African respondents agreed that “community land rights [are] more important than individual rights” (43), but 67 percent favored “forcing tribal leaders to give each member individual legal ownership of specific plots of land” (67). One is left with the impression that the questions have been framed in ways that cannot capture how African landholding is embedded in social groups that correspond to neither individual nor community.

Finally, the book persistently frames South African land issues in comparison with Zimbabwe, raising the specter of an elite-driven populist campaign and land as “a [potential] major destabilizing force in South African politics” (83). The comparison is a superficial one, based on overarching historical similarities rather than the current political economic contexts; as Alison Goebel has argued compellingly, differences in the place of agriculture in the nations’ economies, in the ruling parties’ commitments to neoliberal policies, and in the ruling parties’ relative electoral (in)security make Zimbabwe’s path unlikely for South Africa (*Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23 [3]). This difference, in fact, raises questions about why in South Africa existing populist attempts at political mobilization around land reform have been mostly unsuccessful, questions that are largely unanswerable in the decontextualized terms of Gibson’s argument.

The book is aimed primarily at political scientists and social psychologists, not at a more interdisciplinary Africanist scholarly community or a broader audience. Chapter 4, probably the best in the volume, has already been published in article form, and given the price of the hardcover text, the book’s market is probably limited to scholars and libraries at institutions where people directly share Gibson’s theoretical interests. In the longer term, though, this study will form a valuable baseline from which to assess the causes of change (or stasis) in public opinion around land in South Africa in decades to come.

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Joel Barkan, ed. *Legislative Power in Emerging African Democracies*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2009. ix + 277 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$55.95. Hardcover.

As Joel Barkan maintains in the introduction to this fine volume, while scholars working on legislative politics have tended to overlook the African context, so too have those investigating the continent’s politics left leg-