INSIGHTS INTO INDEPENDENT ZIMBABWE: SOME HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS[1)]

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Abstract

This article offers some historiographical reflections on independent Zimbabwe. While much has been written on the post-colonial period, some works were strongly informed by scholarly paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s, especially regarding the colonial legacy and inherited political structures, the land issue and the contentious and enduring debate on neocolonialism, although there were some post-modern shifts in the 1990s. Using some of the topical scholarship on the country, I trace the paradigmatic developments and narratives of the trajectory of the country's political, economic and social record. While there is a deliberate focus on three broad aspects of 'nationalist' history and its counter-narratives, the historiography of the land as well as accounts of the crisis, I suggest that these have arguably constituted topical issues in scholarship. Although there are important areas on Zimbabwe's academic landscape focusing on labour, gender, health, migration and environmental studies, among others warranting special attention, this article is restricted to insights on the areas identified. It is hoped that such bibliographical reflections can inform some interested students and scholars in sketching out some of the scholarship on Zimbabwe in the areas picked out.

1.   Introduction

This article reviews some shifting historical paradigms on Zimbabwe's experiences after independence, focusing on three topical issues rather

than a singular historiography (Ranger 1968; Isaacman 1990). It deliberately looks at issues of nationalist/patriotic narratives and their counter-narratives, the historiography of the land as well as accounts of the crisis in Zimbabwe. It is based on a talk given during the PhD round table session at the Africa Day colloquium hosted by the Centre for Africa Studies of the University of the Free State on 22 May 2013.[2] While there are works focusing exclusively on patriotic history debates or other issues such as land, for example, this article summarises the broad historiographical landscape. Arguably, the narratives of independent Zimbabwe are informed by issues that were shaped by topical subjects of politics, the land issue and the unfolding crisis. Of late, issues relating to the environment, gender and migration have also become important. Earlier historiography in the 1970s, for instance, was marked by path breaking political economy studies or economic and social history (Phimister 1979) that demolished the writings of such scholars as William Barber (1961), Lewis H Gann (1965) and others, informed by modernisation theory, and who viewed colonial capitalism from W Arthur Lewis' development economics paradigm as progressive, even for Africans. Most of this critical new literature was spurred by Giovanni Arrighi's 1970 seminal paper (1970) which was subsequently appraised and advanced by such scholars as Duncan Clarke (1975), Charles van Onselen (1976), and Ian Phimister (1988). The political economy paradigm became increasingly influential in the 1970s.

Nationalist history also emerged, and was propelled by Terence Ranger's book *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-97* (1967). This was followed up by numerous other accounts which were then adopted as official historical narratives in the independent Zimbabwean state spurring the emergence of a narrower version of nationalist history, patriotic history through the works, for example, of David Martin and Phylis Johnson (1981), Aeneas Chigwedere,[3] among others. Both Nationalist and patriotic history, however, came under attack in the course of the 1980s. However, the post-colonial state confronted challenges of nation-building, addressing the colonial legacy and attempting to create its own political, economic and social record. This came under the scrutiny of historians who have evaluated the trajectory of these developments. Some versions have celebrated the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) record as the sole ruling authority since independence as one of liberation, empowering and transformation while others have argued that instead, its legacy is one authoritarian-

ism, division and ultimately political and economic crisis. This article presents an overview mapping the contours of the works on independent Zimbabwean history.

2.   The State, Nationalist historiography and its counter narratives

The production and reproduction of official historical narratives has its origins in the late colonial period in Zimbabwe and it became important with its adoption and deployment by the ZANU-PF state. Nationalist history originated with the earlier works of Terence Ranger (1967) which spawned numerous others, including patriotic history (Martin and Johnson 1981; Lan 1985; Frederickse 1983). The works largely portrayed the two *chimurenga* wars as consisting of a patriotic and heroic union of nationalists, guerrillas, peasants and religious/spiritual leaders leading to independence but was largely silent about the "struggles within the struggle" (Sithole 1979). Such histories were a product of the liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s reflecting a strong element of scholar-activism, but that brand of history persisted beyond the attainment of the country's political independence. Patriotic narratives became official history in Mugabe's Zimbabwe (Tendi 2012). These tended to be based on ZANU-PF's exclusive construction of nationalism.

Over the course of the 1990s, patriotic historical narratives were strongly challenged by different scholars who were increasingly critical of the post-independence ruling nationalist party dispensation. Ranger's work on the first *chimurenga* (war of resistance against settler colonialism), for example, had already been challenged by David Beach who demonstrated that in the case of the 1896-1897 uprisings, there were a series of sometimes uncoordinated or related *zvimurengas* (Beach 1979, 1986; Dawson 2011) rather than a well-organised and plotted national *chimurenga* as Ranger had claimed in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*. Other scholars included Norma Kriger who argued in the case of the second *chimurenga* (liberation war), for instance, that "the category of 'peasant' had been overly homogenized and that the efficacy of the ideological bond between peasants and guerrillas had been over-estimated" (Alexander 1007: 185). Ian Phimister succinctly noted that, "(t)o all intents and purposes, Zimbabwean history is reduced

to a succession of chimurengas … in which the present ruling dispensation is the only heir to the Nehanda and Kaguvi spirit mediums" (Phimister 2012: 28; see also Kriger 1992; Sithole 1979). As such, the patriotic paradigm had erroneously evoked "something similar to what Francis Fukuyama dubbed the end of history" (Melber 2011: 23), a perspective assuming that national liberation movements "are progressive and their coming to power marks the end of a process" (Phimister 2012: 27). In this regard, "(t)he social transformation of Southern African societies [in this case, Zimbabwe] shaped by a settler colonial brand can at best be described as a transition from controlled change to changed control" (Melber 2011: 91).

Demolishing the notion that ZANU-PF had liberated the country from colonial exploitation, Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 156) characterised the incumbent post-colonial state processes involving the moulding of history, through patriotic narratives, along the ZANU-PF's interests as transforming from the 'coloniality' to the 'nationality of power' in which the matrices and tools of subjectivation of the country's inhabitants were systematically and sometimes violently deployed. As such, far from redressing inequality and promoting economic growth and inclusion, ZANU-PF nationalism was "about armed men, liberating the land from white settlers: it was reconstituted as authoritarian anti-colonialism, not modernising developmentalism" (Phimister 2005: 120). Buttressed by some enduring patriotic scholarship, some of which was embodied in television intellectuals/ZANU-PF apologists such as Claude Mararike and colleagues in his programme "*Zvavanhu*" (for the people), for instance, Mugabe and ZANU-PF claimed that the crisis escalating after 2000 was a result of the land question and the enduring 'life and death' struggle against Western imperialist forces. But, as Phimister (2005: 120) has noted, "the Zimbabwe crisis is by no means simply a land crisis. It is best understood as 'a complex set of historically specific, inter-related and mutually reinforcing crises that need to be unpacked and analysed in relation to one another'".

Reducing history to the party's agenda resulted in "the flattening of difference; the privileging of certain voices over others; and the identification of hegemonic nationalism as the bearer of improvement and progress" (Phimister 2012: 28). In this context, patriotic history, although strongly discredited by the turn of the millennium, had become the basis upon which ZANU-PF derived its legitimacy. In this context, anyone not seen as conforming to the 'liberating' party's stance was

viewed as the other. Othering had various categories that included the sell-out, the white foreigner (former settler farmers), the non-citizen as in the case of descendants of people who originally migrated from Nyasaland, Mozambique or elsewhere in the region. The rhetoric became that of Zimbabwe for Zimbabweans not others, but becoming Zimbabwean, not least a patriotic one was hinged upon one's political persuasion. Being *the* citizen increasingly became synonymous with being ZANU-PF, and when others migrated elsewhere and were seen as anti-government, they earned themselves the label of diasporans without any voting privileges and therefore were not patriotic enough and had no right to vote for whoever they felt had the correct attributes to govern the country. It was these contesting perspectives that shaped the contours of the patriotic historiographical debates.

3.   The shifting historiographical landscape: The land question and fast track land reform

Zimbabwean historiographies expanded into confronting the unfolding political and economic crisis following the 'fast track' land reform as from 2000 onward, generating a lot of interest from local and international scholars. The emerging focus on The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) coincided with the rise of crisis literature. Reviewing the emerging historiography of the land, Jocelyn Alexander examined such dimensions as tenure, environment, state authority, landscapes, structural adjustment, farm invasions, the crisis and the silences and questions surrounding the land issue in Zimbabwe (Alexander 2007). The focus of this section is not so much on these broader aspects but on locating the land issue within the realm of Zimbabwe's historiographies. While there are varying positions, much of the historiography recognises the study by Robin Palmer (1977) as a path-breaking book, focusing on "settler land alienation, eviction, and racial discrimination" (Alexander 2007: 183). Land in post-independence Zimbabwe became "the centrally contested asset and the key symbol in ZANU-PF's narrative of national liberation" (Alexander 2007: 184). While enduringly contentious, the land question did not attract as much attention as it did after 2000.[4]

        Following the FTLRP, "the debate on land reform", became

"polarized between a minority position that argues that the radical restructuring of agrarian capital has served as a progressive tendency that has opened up opportunities for black small scale farmers" versus "a majority position that insists that land redistribution has dramatically undercut agricultural production, thereby severely undermining food security for most Zimbabweans" (Southall 2011: 83-84). On the one hand, triumphalist literature celebrated land reform and was largely uncritical of its process and outcome. Some scholars such as Sam Moyo (1986, 2000, 2010, 2011) and Mandivamba Rukuni (Rukuni, Tawonezvi and Eicher 2006) had reiterated the necessity of land reform from the 1980s and 1990s onward, but there was a resurgence in interest on land in the wake of the FTLRP. The works of Ian Scoones *et al* (Chaumba, Scoones and Wolmer 2003, Scoones 2010), Joseph Hanlon *et al* (2012) and Prosper Matondi (2011) shed a positive light on developments in resettlement areas, developments which Mahmood Mamdani argued to be a very positive though belated, comparing it to the expulsion of Asians by Idi Amin in Uganda in 1972. While Matondi's work was very informative in the case study it focused on and the methodology applied, most of the pro-land reform literature tended to overstate its position. Some of the works on land reform towed the patriotic history paradigm. In this context, "(t)he studies of settler appropriation, of nationalist resistance and guerrilla struggle (including land repossession under the third chimurenga-own emphasis) have in fact to be streamlined and simplified considerably to fit the needs of ZANU-PF's patriotic history" (Alexander 2007: 92, see also Pilossof 2012, 2014). In responding to such works, but packaged in the form of a review article of Joseph Hanlon *et al* as well as Prosper Matondi's book on fast track land reform in Zimbabwe, Rory Pilossof challenges the celebratory and approving stance of such works as misleading (Pilossof 2014).

On the other hand are narratives that are critical of land reform. On the basis of Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis following 2000, they portray the FTLRP as a disaster which destroyed the very foundations of Zimbabwe's economy.[5] Most of this literature coincides with crisis literature. Some of it utilises the political economy paradigm, such as Pilossof (2012) who locates the fortunes and distress of whiteness within the context of land reform. While this approach is critical of the process and impact of land reform it is equally critical of white farmers' attitudes and claims to land from the early 1980s utilising

mostly Commercial Farmers Union data among others. His approach is largely balanced in its examination of the various dimensions of land reform and is a good academic account of the process. Land became the centre of patronage politics (Alexander and McGregor 2001; Hammar 2008; Nyamunda and Mukwambo 2012), but the definition of land needs to be expanded beyond agrarian land only to encompass mining land areas (Saunders 2008; Nyamunda, Mukwambo and Nyandoro 2012) (formal or artisanal), including the allocation of residential stands and the politics of urban displacements (Vambe 2008), dams and environmental issues (Hughes 2010) as well. Most literature limits itself to farm invasions, yet spaces of contention go beyond that and are monopolised by the state in as much as it did with the official historiography of the country. Other texts on land reform tend to be fatalistic, even overstated, depicting an apocalyptic disaster within land reform propagated by some former white farmer accounts (JAG 2012), among the most influential of which includes Benjamin Freeth's narrative of the occupation of his father-in-law's farm, Mount Carmel in Chegutu (Freeth 2012). Others see land reform as a desperate political alternative alongside political polarisation to a clearly exhausted nationalism by 2000, only meant for political survival rather than any progressive redistribution of the country's resources (Bond and Manyanya 2002: 74-75). What must also be emphasised of the country's political economic landscape is that the land issue was also influenced by broader regional and global opinion and actions which crucially influenced the country's political and economic trajectory since the fast track policy was introduced. With regards to the contesting triumphalist versus fatalist literature's claims and contentions on the fast track strategy, Southall succinctly concluded that "despite the potentially progressive nature of ZANU-PF's highly contentious land reform, it is still far too early to tell what its long term implications will be" (Southall 2011: 96).

4. Towards a historiography of the crisis in Zimbabwe, post-2000

The works on the crisis in Zimbabwe are located within two paradigms, those that blame the country's misfortunes on European Union (EU) and United States (US) sanctions, and those that put the blame

squarely on ZANU-PF dictatorship. Both were fatalist narratives, with very few being optimistic of the country's experiences in the 2000s. This historiography can be divided into early crisis literature, some of which wrongly predicted the imminent fall of the ZANU-PF dispensation in the mid-2000s and later works that have tried to understand the internal interests and global forces propelling the enduring crisis. Ian Phimister's article on "Zimbabwe's unending crisis" (2005) identified some of the emerging crisis literature before 2005, but much more has since been produced, requiring a brief updating of a historiography of the crisis in Zimbabwe (Raftopoulos 2009), at least until 2013. Some of the mid-2000s literature was activist in nature, for example the inaccurate prediction of the imminent fall of the Mugabe regime in the elections of 2005 (Hill 2003). The literature covered different parameters from an overview of Zimbabwe's post-independence history 'from liberation to authoritarianism' (Darnolf and Laakso 2003), the nationalist state's exhausted nationalism (Bond and Manyanya 2002), to the exhaustion of the patriarchal mode of liberation (Campbell 2003) and providing hope as 'a memoir for Zimbabwe' (Meldrum 2004). Most of the literature at this point viewed the crisis essentially as a political crisis rooted in the contentious land issue whose effects triggered the plunge in the economy. The patriotic narratives, most of which were propagated by television historians pointed to the work of Western detractors and their local surrogates and working towards the suspension of Zimbabwe from the World Bank, EU sanctions and the US' Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) of 2001 as the primary cause of Zimbabwe's misfortunes in the process of trying to implement 'regime change' and 'subvert the will of the people'. This for them provoked the third *chimurenga* which aimed to consolidating land reform, frustrating the regime change agenda and furthering the economic empowerment of black people. Of course, the grand pronouncements aside, the result was the further division of the country along many fractures, race, ethnic, political and the debate surrounding autochthons *versus* 'outsiders' or foreigners as well as diasporans. Various categories of otherings thus emerged prompting a deepening political, economic, social, health, emigration and other levels of crisis.

Being highly protestant and activist, much of the literature tended to essentialise *Zimbabweaness*, homogenising and reducing the agencies of different categories of people to mere victim status. This is

a tendency Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) labelled as subjectification of citizens by the state using its security apparatus as tools of subjectification and deploying the inherited colonial matrices of power. Raftopoulos (2009) warns us not to view the crisis as having a uniform impact in the country or reducing it to the land/race issue[6)] or a series of unrelated multiple crises. Instead it was multi-layered, involving many aspects of Zimbabwe's political economy.

The crisis should also be contextualised within spatial, regional and other variations especially within political, economic and social encounters which disrupt the convenient timeline of it emerging around 2000. One could argue that while the general political and economic polarisation, exclusion and violence invariably engulfed Zimbabwe after 2000, other regions such as Matabeleland had experienced this since the 1980s (Phimister 2008). Moreover, different layers and forms of the crisis included among others the political legitimacy for ZANU-PF, the polarisation of politics against the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), mass exodus (Crush and Tevera 2010; McGregor and Primorac 2010), hyperinflation (Mawowa and Matongo 2010), informalisation (Jones 2010), clean-up operation (Vambe 2008). Other scholars have tried to unpack it by addressing the question of what crisis, whose crisis (Chiumbu and Musemwa 2012), engaging with the complexity of the country's political economy. As an example, a citizenship crisis began with the passing of the Citizenship Act of 2001 which was rushed through parliament. This Act, which was a product of the defeat of ZANU-PF in the constitutional referendum of 2000, effectively rendered many people of Malawian, Mozambique and Zambian origin stateless as it technically stripped them of their citizenship in the manner in which it was applied (Dorman 2003). This essentially speaks to the politics of belonging, in which ZANU-PF constructed these groups as outsiders, effectively othering them on the grounds of descent. While many people affected were excluded as foreigners, some of them no longer had ties with those countries and had no legal entitlement. In as much as they were not Zimbabweans by ZANU-PF definitions, their category simply becomes that of the undesirable others, yet in their countries of origin, they were now seen as the others as well, complicating their notions of belonging. If they were not Zimbabweans, what were they? Rendered stateless, to where would they be entitled rights of belonging? As the essentialised politicised 'other', they could not obtain identity

and other travel documents, limiting their ability to travel, vote, and excluding them from other citizenship benefits and rights.

In the second half of the 2000s more crisis literature emerged, mostly provoked by ZANU-PF's ability to manipulate the political landscape. Instead of predicting imminent catastrophe for the party, scholars were more cautious, instead focusing on trying to appreciate the various dimensions of Zimbabwe's multilayered crisis. The most influential texts to emerge where those by, among others, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Raftopoulos and Mlambo, Crush and Tevera, McGregor and Primorac, and many special issues of journals such as the 2010 *Journal of Southern African Studies* second volume, as well as numerous individual journal articles. In the latter case, the analyses began focusing on specific aspects of the multi-layered crisis. The crisis literature that continues to be produced since 2000 to date has placed it among Zimbabwe's dominant historiographies along those of the patriotic history debate and the land issue. More crisis literature is emerging and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, especially after another controversial re-election of ZANU-PF in 2013, to some extent validating the perception of an enduring and unending crisis.

5.   Other emerging literature of independent Zimbabwe

Various historiographies have been shaped by topical issues in Zimbabwe. 1970s historiography popularised the political economy paradigm whereas Arrighi's path breaking seminal paper and subsequent advances influenced the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) and, at the very least, the curriculum of the Department of Economic History from 1986. The department is reputed with the continual production of informed, competitive and vibrant post-graduate students, some of whom have established successful academic careers around the world. However, this coincided with the post-colonial state advancement of patriotic history, but by the late 1990s, Zimbabwean politics transcended to a stage of exhausted nationalism, ushering a shift towards explicit authoritarianism as from 2000. It was from the crisis of legitimacy and political survival that the third *chimurenga* kindled in a third and fourth dimension of Zimbabwean topical subjects, the historiographies of land and of the crisis which then became

dominant. However, in the late 1990s, with the turn towards post-modernism, many scholarly works were no longer confined to specific historiographies but were informed by different relevant paradigms, such as political economy, gender history, social movements, youth studies, and financial and investment history, to mention a few. While some of these works have remained the preserve of dissertations, others have been published in top journal and books that continue to cover Zimbabwe's dynamic post-colonial history. Moreover, while university departments have preserved dissertations, for instance, re-sources and other logistical challenges in cases such as the University of Zimbabwe have stifled even the process of availing such works through an online system to increase access for a wider and more international audience. Recognising the value and potential student dissertation at Honours, Masters and PhD level, Alois Mlambo included them in a comprehensive index of works.[7] Such efforts need to be replicated in an effort to make some of these works more accessible to a wider academic audience in an effort to expand and enrich the country's historiographical dimensions.

6. Conclusion

The article has reviewed early historiographies and other paradigms on post-colonial Zimbabwe, specifically nationalist and then patriotic history which was adopted by the post-colonial state in its effort to use it to construct an exclusive national identity configured against ZANU-PF's interests. This spurred many debates surrounding issues of identity and belonging and a revisiting of the liberation war history in an attempt to interrogate these notions which had a divisive influence on the crafting of the new nation. By the dawn of the new millennium, other problems emerged in the wake of economic contraction forcing the state to implement the controversial fast track land reform trigger-ing an unprecedented political and economic crisis which scholarship largely continues to examine, captured in here as the historiographies of land and of the crisis in Zimbabwe. This has triggered a rethinking of the country's colonial history in the search for, in some cases, struc-turalist explanations of the contemporary conditions through examining the legacies that have been carried over. In the end, the literature of independent Zimbabwe has followed the trajectory of Zimbabwe's dynamic post-independence developments.

The implications of these historical works have bordered on the making or disruptions in the moulding of the nation. Among the most influential texts to examine the country's broad history in the contemporary period has been *Becoming Zimbabwe* (2009) which traces its history from pre-colonial times to 2008. What this and other texts demonstrate is that the post-colonial history of the country has been contentious, the struggle being influenced by the nature of the state and its politics. Consequently, my conclusions are drawn from insights into the country's literature which generally demonstrate that as a nation, because of the tumultuous experience, Zimbabwe is still in the process of becoming. Indeed, also informed by some works on independent Zimbabwe in one of his essays, Mlambo engages with a notion raised by one of Ndlovu-Gatsheni's books aptly titled, *Do Zimbabweans exist?* (2009), to which he responds, "Not yet" (Mlambo 2013: 63). As such, what the various writings illuminate is that as a country, Zimbabwe must reflect on its record as an independent territory and rethink its political, economic and social experiences. In this context then, Mlambo imaginatively concluded, "Zimbabwe still has to transform itself from the geographical expression established arbitrarily by British colonialism in 1890 and enthusiastically imagined by the anticolonial nationalists of the 1960s into a true nation with a common identity, common values and vision for the future" (Mlambo 2013: 63). As the historiographies of independent Zimbabwe demonstrate, this is yet to be achieved.

Endnotes

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2. "Researching Africa across the disciplines", theme for the Centre for Africa Studies Africa Day Colloquium, 22 May 2013.

3. For a summary and critique of Chigwedere's works see Beach (1988).

4. Early post-independence works include among others Cliffe (1988); Moyana (1984); Cheater (1984). There had also been some academic works during

the colonial period focusing on land for instance, Palmer (1977); Palmer and Parsons (1977); Floyd (1959). Some of the work was conducted in fellowship with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute; see also Malcom (1968).

5.   See among others Sachikonye (2004); Rutherford (2001); Hammar, Raftopoulos and Jensen (2003); Hammar (2008); Justice for Agriculture (2002); Alexander and McGregor (2001); Pilossof (2012).

6.   See the fatalistic description, for instance, of some former Rhodesians who migrated in the 1980s or some former white displaced farmers whom Kate Law described as the "when we's" because of their romantic description of Zimbabwe's economy when they were resident in Zimbabwe. Among other fatalistic descriptions, this category of people can be reductionist of the crisis engulfing Zimbabwe, reducing it to a race or land issue. Law, K, "Destabilised elites: White Zimbabweans, power and the past", paper presented at a Colloquium of power and coercion in colonial and postcolonial Africa held at the University of the Free State, 11-12 November 2013.

7.   Mlambo, A, *Research Directory of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Zimbabwe to 2001*, (unpublished) This index is very useful for students and other interested scholars as it captures the broad and various research works which is an important point of reference, but this has not been updated since then. Moreover, it accessible only to those who have access to copies of this unpublished directory which serves a useful purpose, and it should either have been published through the university or elsewhere or also made available online for other international scholars interested in Zimbabwe or seeking comparative studies. The biggest advantage of a lot of the specialist papers is the rich empirical base and ethnographic data which informs many of them.

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