

## “The Cultural Politics of Politics”

### Macro and Micro Entanglements in the Work of Blair Rutherford

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## Macro and Micro Entanglements in the Work of Blair Rutherford

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It has been almost twenty years since Blair Rutherford published his first book, *Working on the Margins* (2001), highly influential for anyone studying agrarian labour relations, not only in Zimbabwe but in southern Africa generally. Rutherford’s concept of “domestic government,” which he so skilfully outlined then, has provided scholars with a useful theoretical lens, especially for understanding gendered power relations on large-scale commercial farms, and the ways in which farm workers were placed within these relations, and negotiated life on the margins.

Over the ensuing decade and a half, Rutherford published a series of articles in which he built on and extended his ideas, outlining how white-owned commercial farms could be understood as “mini-colonies” (2008, 92–3) and introducing the notion of “modes of belonging”—“the routinized discourses, social practices and institutional arrangements through which people make claims for resources and rights, the ways through which they become ‘incorporated’ in particular places” (ibid., 79). Showing that domestic government was the prevailing conditional mode of belonging experienced by farm workers before the year 2000, he demonstrated how this mode was virtually destroyed by fast track land reform, and also how new territorialized modes of belonging were emerging on former commercial farms, providing a fresh “terrain of struggle” (Rutherford 2014) for former commercial farm workers to negotiate.

Rutherford has always been a pathbreaker, ahead of the curve in his analysis of labour, power relations and access to resources on Zimbabwean commercial farms. He wrote his nuanced insights at a time in which much popular discourse and scholarship about Zimbabwe's land reform tended to be highly polarized. The debate around land reform, entangled in the politics of the day, became binary, divided between those who took a productivist stance and defended private property and a strongly emerging group of scholars who set out to show how fast track land reform was leading to new livelihood opportunities for a wide number of beneficiaries.

In line with these two positions, Rutherford shows in his most recent book, *Farm Labour Struggles in Zimbabwe*, how understandings of politics in Zimbabwe after 2000 came to be dominated by two pervasive narratives: politics as liberatory (through ZANU-PF's celebrated programme to take back the land from white settlers) or politics as oppressive of the rights of citizens (through ZANU-PF's forced land takeovers, and the suppression of political opposition). As in his previous work, Rutherford seeks to go beyond these binaries, showing through his detailed case study of a labour dispute on a highveld commercial farm and its aftermath that on the ground, politics was not so black and white (253). He points out that power relations and electoral politics have often been elided in studies seeking "to provide empirical data on social dynamics in rural Zimbabwe" (261) and thus sets out to provide a vivid picture of "the cultural politics of politics" (91) in this particular time and place.

To understand the "ground of politics" for farm workers during the period in which the "mini-colonies" and their domestic government were challenged and fell (1998-2002), Rutherford builds on his notion of territorialized modes of belonging, adding insights on sovereignty from Donald Moore's (2005) influential work. Rutherford does not get bogged down in abstract theory, as Moore's book tends to do in places. Rutherford instead sketches in detail the idioms, discourses, and gendered understandings of his interlocutors' politics, rights, and livelihood struggles. While anthropologists are sometimes accused of focusing too closely on grounded perspectives and ignoring how these relate to broader political players and national-level processes, Rutherford shows how these localized dynamics, choices, and views were entangled in and with the more visible macro-scale processes, events, and actors. He weaves together the micro-level *poritikisi* with the national-level politics at a time of intense political struggle and change in Zimbabwe.

Indeed, Rutherford's case study provides a valuable insight into how localized rural labour and rights struggles fed into and influenced the origins and formation of the Movement for Democratic Change at a time of great hope in Zimbabwe. The book provides much-nuanced insight into how a group of Zimbabweans typically constructed as subalterns mobilized understandings of rights and made claims to these rights through tangible actions in a moment where success seemed possible. Such rights talk and rights claiming by ordinary Zimbabweans was apparent at yet another time of great hope in Zimbabwe after the 2008 elections (Morreira 2016). The 2017 "coup," which ended the long rule of Robert Mugabe, introduced another brief moment of rights-claiming and hope, followed by the almost inevitable closing of democratic space.

Yet as Rutherford warns, even now the temptation to focus solely on politics as oppression is unwise. The struggle for belonging by ordinary Zimbabweans is more complex, even if the ground of politics seems ever more treacherous.

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