

# “We Wanted Change Yesterday!” The Promise and Perils of *Poritikisi*: Zimbabwean Farm Workers, Party Politics and Critical Social Science

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**Abstract:** In this article, I examine the entanglement of an emergent political imagination of “democracy” with the forms and meanings of *poritikisi*, party politics, for a group of farm workers involved in labour and land struggles in Zimbabwe from 1999 to 2003. In so doing, I seek to provide more insight into the on-going political and economic crises in this southern African country, while putting forth an analytic to ethnographically examine the effects of party politics. I also raise questions about the use of politics in critical social science.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, politics, critique, farm workers, land struggles, political anthropology

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, j’analyse l’enchevêtrement d’une imagination politique émergente de la « démocratie » avec les formes et les sens de *poritikisi*, la politique de parti, pour des ouvriers agricoles impliqué dans une lutte des classes et une lutte foncière au Zimbabwe de 1999 à 2003. Ce faisant, je souhaite apporter un éclairage aux crises politiques et économiques incessantes de ce pays d’Afrique Austral et offrir une profondeur pour analyser se façon ethnographique les effets de la politique de parti. Aussi, je pose des questions sur l’utilisation de politiques en sciences sociales critiques.

**Mots-clés :** Zimbabwe, politique, critique, ouvriers agricoles, lutte foncière, anthropologie politique

## Introduction

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn’t really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn’t about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it’s about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing.

—Margaret Atwood 1985

“We wanted change yesterday! The government is no help to us in our struggle. They promised us milk and honey and we still live in squalor. For workers to get rights we need to struggle together to get what we wanted yesterday.”<sup>1</sup> So expressed Tapedza<sup>2</sup> to me and a handful of other men and women farm workers in September 1999, as we sat on the swept ground in front of a temporary shelter made of poles, grass and plastic bags set up near a gravel road leading into a farm. Tapedza, a man in his late 20s, was the chairman of the workers’ committee on a farm I call Upfumi in Mashonaland East province, Zimbabwe. He and about 30 other dismissed farm workers were living off and on in this *musososo* (temporary camp) as they were involved in a protracted dispute with Upfumi’s owners who had fired over 800 workers in October 1998. He was using a common phrasing I was hearing among workers involved in what was then nearly a year-long labour dispute with one of the largest Zimbabwean horticultural multinationals: “our demands today express what we wanted yesterday.” By 1999, such demands almost inevitably were aimed towards the ZANU (PF) (Zimbabwe African National Union [Patriotic Front]) government whose incessant electoral promises of bringing “milk and honey” to the country over the previous 19 years rang hollow to the majority of Zimbabweans. I also had heard other Zimbabweans deploy this expression of impatience, the need to fulfill what was

already needed for some time—as of “yesterday”—during the last half of 1999 as they were engaging in an exciting and tumultuous debate, mobilization and discussion of constitutional and political change. By then, I too was getting caught up in the excitement of a political imagination being promoted by those who were calling themselves and being identified by others as champions of “democracy.”

In this article, I examine how *poritikisi* (party politics in the ChiShona language) inflected the political imagination of democracy for these farm workers between 1999 and 2003. I make what may be a blindingly obvious<sup>3</sup> point that the meanings and practices involved in *poritikisi* entailed particular promises as well as dangers and fears for farm workers that were generally downplayed by many who had been celebrating only the democratic possibilities of party politics and the “opening up” in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s. In so doing, I draw attention to possible differences between analytical uses of politics by academics and those of their interlocutors during research. I contend that those of us who view their anthropological practice as critically engaged with social justice causes and addressing social inequalities (class, gender, indigenous peoples, etc.), those who may deem ourselves “progressive,” may elide these differences. Politically aligning one’s anthropological practice with a group of people as, for example, Charles Hale (2006) demands may miss out other connotations and effects of party politics for these very people. In some cases—Zimbabwe being one—party politics involves both the potential for dominating violence and, as Margaret Atwood puts it above, the potential “to be forgiven for it.”

Like many other Zimbabweans and observers of this southern African country, by the late 1990s, I saw spaces appearing for broadening civic debates and challenging entrenched truths, class relations and institutional arrangements in the country, including ZANU (PF) itself. ZANU (PF) has been the ruling party of Zimbabwe since it emerged as a postcolonial nation in 1980 out of a 1970s armed struggle pitting guerrilla groups against the white minority Rhodesian regime. By the late 1990s, ZANU (PF) increasingly appeared to be a ruling regime that enabled and profited from national and regional configurations of social and economic inequalities. A growing number of Zimbabweans strongly articulated this viewpoint through country-wide protests, strikes, a growing private press and emergent civic movements that had been mobilizing increasingly around labour, constitutional and livelihood issues in the 1990s (Bond and Manyanya 2002; Raftopoulos and Sachikonye 2001). From gay, lesbian and transgendered social activists confronting homopho-

bia (Epprecht 1999) to the labour movement confronting growing social exclusion thanks to the government’s structural adjustment policies (Saunders 2001; Sachikonye 2001), many activists sensed that the conditions of possibility for progressive changes in Zimbabwe appeared to be present.

For example, observing in late 1998 that Zimbabwe was not a totalitarian state though its leaders had an “authoritarian streak,” Epprecht (1999) enthusiastically saw great possibilities for historians to work for black empowerment and expanding human rights in Zimbabwe as exemplified by his participatory life history project with gays and lesbians of Zimbabwe. Research by historians (and other academics), he proclaimed, could productively contribute to human rights struggles in Zimbabwe: “Public debates in a context where demagoguery is rife will obviously benefit from disciplined historical argument” (Epprecht 1999:40). With such spaces for public confrontations and debates opening up, many Zimbabweans and observers (e.g., P. Alexander 2000), began putting their faith in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the political party that directly emerged from this tumult and was launched in September 1999 as the main champion of this political imagination of democratization.

This nation-wide ferment of demands for better livelihoods and democracy intersected with the unfolding labour struggle at Upfumi in 1999 as many farm workers saw its leaders as connected to the mobilization of the MDC, while the company owning Upfumi appeared to be getting support of some of the key ZANU (PF) leaders in the district, including the then Member of Parliament. *Poritikisi* in the form of the MDC seemed poised to assist this farm worker struggle and Zimbabweans more broadly. I definitely saw this as a possibility.

Yet, I also noticed that Tapedza was very cautious when discussing these proposed changes and politics with me. His hesitancy and, at times, nervousness were in stark contrast to Chenjerai, the vice-chairman of the workers’ committee, who the workers, including Tapedza, identified as the main mobilizer of the Upfumi farm workers in their labour dispute. Chenjerai, a man in his late 30s, clearly drew on ties to political parties in his mobilizing efforts during this dispute: from ZANU (PF) to ISO, the national branch of the International Socialists, and through them, to the MDC. While Chenjerai was very comfortable in talking and mobilizing for party politics, Tapedza was visibly nervous when *poritikisi* was discussed by anyone, including when I posed questions to him on the topic.

I recognized such trepidation and fear from my research on farm workers in the early 1990s when many

were very cautious about discussing politics in case they were accused by management of “bringing politics into the farm” or by ZANU (PF) leaders of going against the ruling party (Rutherford 2001c). Yet, I found 1999 to be quite different since more and more Zimbabweans, including farm workers, challenged such prohibitions on talking politics, and were expressing what they said were demands they always had but never voiced publicly, demands they wanted met “yesterday.” I took Tapedza’s reticence to be a remnant of the earlier caution, while his participation as chairman of the workers’ committee engaged in a labour dispute with increasing political overtones showed that his actions were definitely a sign of the times as he was pushing for “change”—the latter being the slogan of the MDC, *chinja maitiro!* (change your ways!).

Within a year, Tapedza’s nervousness was shown to be prescient. Violence erupted in the Upfumi area and throughout Zimbabwe as the growing popularity of the MDC led the ZANU (PF) government to condone and abet widespread attacks on Zimbabweans deemed to be opposition supporters or resisters of what became a widespread and chaotic land redistribution exercise. For the latter, the government took farms from white Zimbabwean commercial farmers, who had controlled most of the best agricultural land due to unequal, racialized land distribution and economic opportunities inherited from the colonial period, to distribute to black Zimbabwean settlers. But after the transfer, there have also been evictions of many of these initial black settlers by ZANU (PF) leaders and power-brokers (Rutherford 2008).

In this article I explore that which Tapedza feared and Chenjerai revelled in—party politics. The farm workers who led, supported, benefitted from or were harmed by these struggles all identified, some with great nervousness and trepidation and others with excited expectation, the unfolding events to be part of *poritikisi*. Both in articulating pent-up demands and in exercising terror, *poritikisi* has been a key vehicle for action in the Upfumi area and elsewhere in Zimbabwe. Whereas in 1999, I had some hope that my on-going research on trade unions and non-governmental organizations and farm workers would contribute in some modest way to the promise party politics seemed to hold for these Zimbabweans, if not on a wider scale, I soon recognized that I too was seduced by the political imagination of “democracy” and its presumed public sphere where “disciplined” arguments can hold sway, neglecting, unlike both Tapedza and Chenjerai, the particular thrust and meanings of *poritikisi*.

By employing “political imagination” to examine the allure and perils of “democracy” for these farm workers in 1999 and the resulting violence associated with it, I sug-

gest that one is able to get a better grasp of how *poritikisi* operated for them as a vehicle of meaning that enabled and constrained action in particular ways. Although analyzing politics as a particular imagination may enable one to better grasp the contingencies of mobilizations for change than, say, the more structural or programmatic heuristic of politics allows, it does not mean that all is contingent or that identifying the particular tropes, memories and sentiments informing public actions means the politically possible can be identified and promoted. At times, critical social scientists take such a stance, deploying “politics” as an analytic and ethical form for arriving at progressive change, however so defined. Yet, it is also important to recognize how such alignments and imaginations, including those of social scientists, are situated through “friction” (Tsing 2005) and “entanglements” (Moore 2005) in particular locations. These locations have inherited changing institutionalized forms of representation, interpellation and intersecting social projects, that do not necessarily mesh easily with the analysts’ terms or desires about their “disciplined” arguments. This is especially the case when one is talking about party politics, at least in Zimbabwe. To start, I briefly explore some of the theoretical discussions concerning political imagination to show why it is a heuristic analytic to understand *poritikisi* before turning to understanding the politics of place and the place of party politics for farm workers resident in and around Upfumi from 1999-2003.

## Politics and Ethnography

I am told that whether you are called an expatriate or a missionary depends on how and by whom you were recruited. Although the distinction was told to me by a reliable source, it does not stick in my mind since I have not observed it myself in my dealings with these people. I often ask myself why they come, giving up the comforts and security of their more advanced homes. Which brings us back to matters of brotherly love, contribution and lightening of diverse darknesses.

—Tsitsi Dangarembga 1988

Politics is everywhere in critical social sciences these days, including ethnographic variants such as: “the state” as politics and politics of the “state effect” (e.g., Das and Poole 2004; Donham 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 2005; Li 2005); cultural politics and the politics of culture (e.g., Apter 2005; Briggs 1996; Handler 1988; Roseberry 1991); and the politics of land and landscape politics (e.g., Fairhead and Leach 1996; Fontein 2006; Hughes 2006; McGregor 2005; Moore 2005). Such works are all fruitfully pushing analytical bound-

aries, denaturalizing everyday categories, practices and certitudes, while showing power as productive, coercive and mutable in its intertwining with institutions, forms of sociality and cultural logics at intersecting scales of action. Although many of these works are criticizing dominant analytical approaches for uncritically supporting particular arrangements of power through their conceptual apparatuses,<sup>4</sup> these critical analyses also tend to be predicated on an ethic of contingency and a hope of alterability. By indicating the ultimately political nature of reigning social hierarchies, they assume that change, political change, can critically amend these now denaturalized hierarchies, if not, for the more ambitious, transform them. Gibson-Graham (2006:xxxiii) capture this syllogism and sentiment when they advocate a “politics of possibility” by seeking “to question the claims of truth and universality that accompany any ontological rigidity and to render these claims projects for empirical investigation and theoretical re-visioning. Our practices of thinking widen the scope of possibility by opening up each observed relationship to examination for its contingencies and each theoretical analysis for its inherent vulnerability and act of commitment.” Charles Hale (2006) takes this one step further in calling for a politics of ethnographic practice rather than the more conventional call for the politics of representation.

Hale recently differentiated two forms of political practice within critical anthropology, whereby anthropologists affirm “political alignment with an organized group of people” either through participating in their “struggle and allow[ing] dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process” or “through the content of the knowledge produced” (2006:97,98). In so doing, he raises what he calls a methodological question in anthropological “politics” through the distinction between what he calls “activist research” and “cultural critique,” arguing persuasively that the latter is hegemonic within cultural anthropology today. While noting the influence of the cultural critique approach on his own analytical strategy, Hale strongly calls for going beyond it when organized groups in struggles for social justice also require analytical assistance. In such cases, Hale argues, anthropologists need to be fully committed to working with those in progressive struggles and prepared to subsume their theoretical and epistemological imperatives to the particular political tasks at hand. Accordingly, the requirements for anthropological knowledge will be shaped, in part, by these pragmatic and strategic contingencies and not simply the demands of reigning theory and academic conventions. Thus, he contrasts a different methodological and political focus: “Cultural critique strives for intellec-

tual production uncompromised by the inevitable negotiations and contradictions that these broader political struggles entail. Activist research is compromised—but also enriched—by opting to position itself squarely amid the tension between utopian ideals and practical politics” (2006:100).

Although I agree that “critical politics” does not necessarily emerge from cultural critique, I do not think this is simply due to the method, or one could read politics from the methodology deployed. What Hale downplays is the issue of audience and the particular interpellation of subjects through, in this case, social science research. He notes this by saying, for example, that a critique of hegemony may be intellectually justifiable but it “may also be utterly irrelevant (or even counterproductive) to the immediate struggle at hand” (2006:113). Nonetheless, he presumes a particular audience in his celebration of method and, to go back to Zimbabwe, of politics itself. It is important to recognize how particular struggles and politics configure audiences and public responses in particular and potentially limiting ways. For the mobilizing and immobilizing effects of politics and “activist research” depend on how particular publics and dispositions are hailed by these activities; forms of interpellation that need to be analytically understood, not assumed, for audiences only become so “through the circulation of discourse as people hear, see, or read it and then engage it in some sort of way” (Briggs 2004:177).

Yet, despite this “politics of” spreading throughout social science analytics of the everyday, I find little similar critical engagement with the effects of politics *qua* party politics. In Paley’s (2002) insightful overview of the anthropology of democracy, for instance, there are only a few passing references to the study of political parties. Nor is there a chapter on this in the excellent collection on the anthropology of politics (Nugent and Vincent 2004). There has been insightful attention to localized idioms shaping struggles grounded in particular places (e.g., Moore 2005) and on localized uses of party politics to meet varied agendas at different historical conjunctures (e.g., Gupta 1998; Nugent 1994). Yet, there seems to be little sustained ethnographic focus on Africa, at least at the power-laced receptions of politics *qua* party politics in particular places and for particular represented communities such as farm workers. Such ethnographic engagement could examine the assumptions politics invokes, the ways in which it situates audiences in particular ways, the power dynamics involved, and their intersection with other social practices and agendas through struggles and forms of contestations, inclusions and exclusions. When particular political imaginations involve party politics, how do

the cultural forms and differentiated memories associated with the latter influence responses to the former? How does politics involve national institutions and considerations in varied locales, constituting or unsettling spatial boundaries and differentiated senses of belonging and routes of social agency? In other words, what are the cultural politics of politics?

I suggest here that an ethnographic examination of party politics could view it as a scale-making project that traffics in signs of routinized and novel represented communities intersecting with the political economy of place and the social and cultural dynamics of those implicated as its bearers or its targets at particular historical conjunctures. As in all political imaginations, party politics is engaged with constituting scales, of locating the boundaries of actions and issues, be they, for example, local, national or global (Tsing 2005:58-60). Party politics is also a vehicle of “represented communities”—“communities’ renewed in their existence not only by representations in the semiotic sense, but also by representations in the political, institutional sense” (Kelly and Kaplan 2001:22). Party politics can deploy pre-existing represented communities, groups whose semantic entailments are already resonant through institutional arrangements in a location and thereby reinforce their meaning in people’s lives and understandings. Or, party politics can seek to forge new meanings for represented communities, or help new ones gain support in a locality. Such actions take traction and are entangled differently in particular places, depending on political economy, particular social projects and forms of mobilization and immobilization operating in such locations (Li 2002; Moore 2005). In short, party politics is part of the social landscape of the state and its constituted subjects. Its resonance depends on the particular receptivity of the discursively constituted semantic domain of politics with its possible visceral social memories and their articulations with localized social projects, meaningful practices and struggles at that historical moment.

My ethnographic examination of party politics does not focus on how they are vehicles for particular interests or political functions, though such analyses in Zimbabwe have provided great insight into national-scale economic conditions and political stakes leading to militarized responses by the ZANU (PF) regime and the expanding economic and political crisis in the country (e.g., Bond and Manyanya 2002; Dorman 2003; Moore 2004; Raftopoulos 2001, 2003, 2006). Rather, the focus here is on how poritikisi informs a particular political imagination that motivated struggles and mobilization as well as forms of immobilization on commercial farms around Upfumi. This does not necessarily ascribe my particular political alignment

with any group or agenda through my actions, including my research methods, or through the content of my writings. Instead, I examine what it meant to align politically on the farms<sup>5</sup>; what actions, in other words, did poritikisi enable and disable for different Upfumi farm workers from 1999 to 2003? How did poritikisi make the different responses of Tapedza and Chenjerai make sense to many of their interlocutors, even when, as I will note below, political party affiliations could change? We critical social scientists and historians may see politics everywhere in the constitution of social life, but others can reserve the term for very particular sets of actions, with very different expectations and responses to it.

## Politics and Farm Workers in Zimbabwe

Relations are a bit better since independence, though they’re not all that good. Nowadays there are fewer white farmers beating [farm workers] than before.... That’s the only difference. But workers don’t have a better working relationship with the employer. He can just say what he wants: “You’re goats,” or he swears at you. You’re forced to work with a little bit of scaring, so you don’t have your security there. Only the farm owner has security. Workers don’t have anything that can say this is their’s, or this is their security.

—Farm worker quoted in Dede Amanor-Wilks 1995

I seek to make two points in my discussions of poritikisi and farm workers in Zimbabwe. My general point concerns how scale-making projects of party politics have intertwined with the positioning of farm workers within dominant forms of governmentality of development and citizenship, giving poritikisi an ambivalence connected to the hopes of social justice and the danger of uncontrollable violence. The second is the more specific point of how poritikisi conjoined with the social dynamics of labour strife and subsequent territorializing practices in Upfumi in view of national events reverberating through the body politic.

Racialized categories deeply etched colonial rule in Southern Rhodesia. Colonial discourses generally classified “natives” as lacking the prerequisite attributes that would make them inherently productive citizens. Accordingly, a whole range of laws, government policies, political possibilities, living arrangements and spatial practices actively discriminated against Africans (Worby 2000). At the same time, colonial officials and others largely assumed that “civilized” behaviour and “modern” values could be taught to Africans, particularly by the 1930s through development, the main mechanism of colonial trusteeship in the 20th century (Cowen and Shenton 1996).

This dovetailed with projects of cosmopolitan nationalism intertwined with respectability that inflamed African political movements from the 1950s to the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

But the interventions of planned change and advocacy that animated colonial officials, missionaries and African organizations, differentiated their audiences, identifying particular “communities” as more appropriate agents and targets than others. Colonial administrative interventions excluded farm workers from laid-out pathways for transformation of their conduct for a variety of reasons. Since many farm workers came through recruitment agencies or on their own from neighbouring colonies in the 1940s to 1960s, they were foreigners. Moreover, their presence on European farms made their agency subordinate to that of European “masters” who were not only legally given the best agricultural land (while those classified as “native Africans” were placed on native reserves) but also given great administrative, if not moral, duties over “their” farm workers under the administration of the Masters and Servants Act (that governed farm workers until 1979). I use the term “domestic government” to describe this territorialized mode of governance through which farmers sought to control farm workers’ labour and lives through their control over landed property (Rutherford 2001a, 2008). Legislation, policies, administrative arrangements and routinized practices helped to inculcate the assumption that as foreigners, as subordinate to white farmers, and as engaged in a low status form of labour, farm workers’ capacity to become virtuous citizens of the colony—productive “natives” contributing to the national economy—was not considered. Instead, they belonged to white farmers and their domestic government (Rutherford 2007).

African politics in colonial Zimbabwe was a largely middle-class reformist movement predicated on combinations of gendered and racialized notions of democracy, Afrocentricism, and socialist ideals operating at the scales of Western civilization, the colony, the nation and the globe. The emergent African nationalist leaders of the 1950s and early 1960s subscribed to what Thomas Turino (2000:16) called “modernist reformism,” or “projects based on the idea that ‘a new culture,’ or new genres, styles, and practices, should be forged as a synthesis of the ‘best’ or ‘most valuable’ aspects of local ‘traditional’ culture and ‘the best’ of foreign ‘modern’ lifeways and technologies.” Their politics, in part, was a vehicle of respectable cosmopolitanism, laced with the potential for masculinist youth violence initially against rival African groups starting in the 1950s. African nationalists increasingly viewed party politics as a vehicle for social justice. As the white regimes increasingly used colonial state forces to try to control and cor-

ral African politics in this period, African politics increasingly mingled with guerrilla operations starting in the mid-1960s and breaking out in widespread war in the 1970s (see for example, Alexander et al. 2000; Barnes 1999; Kriger 1992; Scarnecchia 2008; Turino 2000; West 2002).

During the colonial and UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence, 1965-79) periods, party politicians less frequently engaged with farm workers on the European farms compared to those living on native reserves, African purchase areas or urban townships (Rutherford 2001b). Since 1980, legislation, media, government and non-governmental policies and practices continued to publicly characterize farm workers as less virtuous citizens, as foreigners<sup>7</sup> and as uneducated, lazy people engaged in irresponsible labour on the landscape of the nation. The latter comes from the assumption that working on a farm indicates a lack of moral predisposition towards working for oneself as a peasant farmer or in a more remunerative job. I met many Zimbabweans holding such a perspective, arguing that farm workers are lazy, accustomed to working only for harsh white bosses (Rutherford 2001b, 2007). These depictions continued to inform policies, practices and institutional arrangements concerning farm workers. They justified minimal state resources directed towards farm workers and their marginalization in development programs such as land resettlement. At other times, farm workers come across as the super-exploited at the hands of whites who need to be liberated in one way or another. Such a representation was the promise which *poritikisi* held out for many farm workers I knew. It was a way to tap into national-scale power to challenge the state-sanctioned sovereignty of farmers who, until 2000, were still predominantly of European descent.

Older workers often characterized the years shortly after Independence in 1980 as a source of *poritikisi* on many farms in which political activists and party cadres worked to try to exert control over or influence on white farmers in terms of labour relations and the living conditions of the workers who lived on the farms. For them, *poritikisi* had *simba* (strength) as they were connected to the new ruling party with its history of guerrilla warfare and Marxist-Leninist claims. Threats of and actual violence were often the means of transacting *poritikisi* by its promoters. This was recounted to me by farm workers with some ambivalence. Given the recent guerrilla war of the 1970s, with the white farms being on the front line in many parts of the country and the use of terror by all sides, it is not a surprise that violence was intertwined with politics on the farms. Indeed, the metaphor farm workers have used to explain party politics to me has been

*poritikisi ihondo*, “politics is war.” ZANU (PF) cadres commonly told farm workers that since they won power through the “barrel of the gun” they would be willing to return to that route if need be. Many took this threat seriously not only because of their guerrilla past but also because of the *gukurahundi*: the name given to the terror unleashed in southern and western Zimbabwe as the ZANU (PF) government sent soldiers, police and secret police to arrest, terrorize and kill the population of predominantly minority Sindebele speakers starting in 1982, on the grounds that they were supporting apartheid-backed “dissidents,” who were disaffected former guerrilla soldiers of the rival ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union) political party (which also had guerrillas fighting the Rhodesian regime). The ZANU (PF) government killed an estimated 20,000 people (CCJPZ and LRF 1997; Werbner 1991). This ended when ZAPU was absorbed into ZANU (PF) after the “Unity agreement” in 1987 (Alexander et al. 2000:229-230).

By the mid-1980s, more bureaucratic labour relations emerged on paper and ZANU (PF) seemed more interested in leaving most white commercial farmers on the land as long as some Africans were put on resettlement farms made out of former white-owned farms bought by the government and some Africans became commercial farmers themselves. *Poritikisi* on farms of the early 1980s subsided, save during national elections. Many commercial farmers also began to recognize at this time that ZANU (PF) seemed to be no longer interested in making drastic interventions to improve the situation of farm workers (Mtisi 2003; Rutherford 2001c). Meanwhile commercial agriculture became a very profitable sector as the government, national and international financial institutions and marketing networks established by farmers’ groups, made export agriculture, particularly flue-cured tobacco and horticulture, the dominant foreign exchange earner in the national economy in the 1990s when the government adopted a structural adjustment policies (Moyo 2000).

On the farms where I did my original research in 1992-93, not many farm workers talked about *poritikisi*, out of nervousness and fear—*poritikisi ihondo*—and out of the general neglect of farm worker issues by politicians and ruling party cadres at that time. I was thus very surprised to discover how pervasive the talk of *poritikisi* on Upfumi and surrounding farms was in 1999. This was a direct result of gains made by what analysts call “civic forces” in the 1990s that “introduced a more expansive and inclusive language of human and civic rights into the national political discourse—a language that had been marginalized in the dominant discursive practices of nationalist

politics...[and which] ha[d] been critical to the process of expanding the political imaginaries of Zimbabwean politics” (Raftopoulos and Alexander 2006:4). These civic forces included trade unions, war veterans, students and those advocating constitutional change mobilized and agitated against varied government policies through strikes, stay-aways and marches, many ending in confrontation with the police or army (Raftopolous and Sachikonye 2001). In 1999, the ZANU (PF) government tried a non-violent tactic, seeking to co-opt the movement for a new constitution by creating its own Constitutional Commission to seek out opinions of Zimbabweans across the country to draft a new constitution. Although many civic groups criticized what they saw as a flawed process, the Constitutional Commission contributed to the growing demand for “democracy” and seemed to reduce the violent responses of the government that year. And, in September of 1999 the MDC was launched.

There were two significant events in helping to make this political imagination of democracy become a potential structure of feeling for many farm workers, though specific circumstances of individual farms and social projects by different individuals and groups played a role in determining where it actually emerged. In 1996, farm workers finally received the franchise for local government elections, enabling them to cast votes in the Rural-District Council elections that had previously been reserved only for property owners and lessees in the commercial farming wards. Up to this point, white farmers typically represented commercial farming wards in the Rural District Councils. After the 1998 local government elections, most Councillors for these wards were black Zimbabweans who commonly had ties to ZANU (PF). Farm workers thus became a significant voting constituency in these wards, particularly given the generally low voter turnout in local government elections.

Moreover, the protests and strikes that were key vehicles for the emergence of this movement for democracy in the urban areas also erupted on many commercial farms. Starting in September 1997, there was a massive farm worker protest that lasted several weeks in a number of commercial farming areas across Zimbabwe, starting in Mashonaland East province. The impetus was the deadlock in national level collective bargaining negotiations between the main farm worker union, GAPWUZ (General Agricultural and Plantation Workers’ Union of Zimbabwe) and the employers’ representative in the agricultural sector. Thousands of farm workers downed their tools, with some barricading stretches of highways and a few destroying farm property and looting farmers’ homes. As a farm worker told me in 1998, “we showed that farm

workers also can act on the national stage like the war vets and the city people” (see also Mtisi 2003:145-146; Rutherford 2001c). The nervous excitement associated with the apparent gains made by those advocating “democracy” was palpable throughout Zimbabwe in 1999, including on Upfumi.

## The Promises and Dangers of Poritikisi on Upfumi

If I were to see the president, I would ask him a simple question: Does he still like the ex-farm workers? Because it seems the government doesn't want the farm workers any more.

—Displaced farm worker quoted in Irene Staunton (N.d.)

In 1999, Chenjerai and Tapedza were leading a somewhat successful struggle against the mass dismissal of nearly 800 field and pack-house workers in October 1998 on Upfumi. The longevity of this protest signalled the involvement of poritikisi as a means of outside support to help sustain the farm workers. In early 1999, Chenjerai's politics was identified with ZANU (PF) as he held a position in their local structure and had greatly helped the ZANU (PF) Councillor, Banda, win the seat in Rural-District Council elections of 1998 by mobilizing farm workers on Upfumi and surrounding farms. However, there was ambiguity about Chenjerai's political loyalties even then. Banda defeated a candidate formally selected by the district ZANU (PF) structures—Banda at the time called himself an “independent ZANU (PF)” candidate. Chenjerai's loyalties to the ruling party were made even more ambivalent by the time I first met him in July 1999, as he was becoming more involved with the activities of ISO as GAPWUZ arranged for one of their key members to provide legal advice for the fired Upfumi workers. By then, both GAPWUZ and ISO were becoming active in mobilizing for the upcoming September launch of the MDC. Many Zimbabweans initially characterized the MDC as the “workers's party” since it emerged in large part from the trade union movement and its leader was the former general-secretary of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (P. Alexander 2000).

Chenjerai mobilized the fired workers and acquired outside supporters in part through the rallying cry *Shinga Vashandi Shinga* (Be Brave, Workers, Be Brave) evoking the workerist discourse associated with ISO and the MDC at that time. As ISO became clearly identified with the MDC in 1999 as it mobilized workers for the 2000 parliamentary elections held in June, farm workers and others within the local ZANU (PF) structures viewed Chenjerai

as a MDC mobilizer. Many Upfumi workers were receptive to this new party in part because many of the leading local ZANU (PF) leaders, particularly those who were rivals of Councillor Banda, had visibly sided with the Upfumi management in the labour dispute, as Chenjerai constantly reminded everyone.

After the defeat of the ZANU (PF) government in a national referendum on its draft constitution in February 2000, a series of land occupations occurred on many commercial farms, particularly those owned and operated by white Zimbabweans who, at that time, formed the majority of the 4,500 or so commercial farmers. Veterans of the guerrilla forces of the 1970s war frequently led these occupations, while various branches of the Zimbabwean state, particularly the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), the Zimbabwe National Army and ZANU (PF) structures, actively aided the land occupations. Commercial farms became a key site of this violence not only because of the demand for land redistribution but also, and more importantly during this time, because many in ZANU (PF) viewed both white farmers and farm workers as pro-MDC. In the lexicon of ruling party leaders and cadres, white farmers and farm workers were *vatengesesi* (sell-outs) to the nation: the former because they were closely associated with the colonial order, the latter because they were closely associated with the former. Both groups were also viewed as “foreigners”—respectively MaBhunu (Boers, a derogatory name for white Zimbabweans) or MaBhurandaya (people from Blantyre, the city in Malawi where migrant labourers were recruited during the colonial period, and a derogatory name for farm workers whose ancestors were foreign-born) (see Rutherford 2001b, 2004, 2007). By April 2000, many of the ex-combatants, youth and others stationed on what they called “base camps” on occupied farms started to “re-educate” farm workers and their families (and, on occasion, white farmers and anyone else they found living in the area) to turn against the MDC and support ZANU (PF). Their means included intimidation, beatings and other forms of violence, burning MDC paraphernalia, and forced all-night singing and dancing events called *pungwe*, a performative mobilizing genre used by guerrillas in the 1970s and by Zimbabwean forces during the *gukurahundi* (Werbner 1991:169-170). ZANU (PF) activists and leaders told people in rural areas that they could identify who voted for whom during the parliamentary elections through “secret ink,” hidden cameras and other putative technological devices, threatening to terrorize anyone who had the audacity to vote for the MDC.

By June 2000, Tapedza became even more cautious and followed strategies of dissembling in regards to any



public inquiry on his thoughts about the political activities going on and their role in terms of the final settlement between farm workers and the company. This settlement led to a pay-out of wages owed to the dismissed workers a few days before the parliamentary election in late June 2000.

When I saw Tapedza during the first pay-out that occurred at the musososo (temporary camp) on 20 June, he told me that he had seen me talk to some of the workers in the dispute near Upfumi a few days earlier while he was in a car waiting for a ride to Harare. A fellow passenger saw me and said to Tapedza “look at the *murungu* [white person] sitting amongst the poor black people; he must be the one who is writing all those lies to the BBC!” Tapedza confided to me that he remained quiet in the face of this statement as it echoed a common, publicized ZANU (PF) claim that Western condemnation of government violence was due to racist and malicious rumour-mongering (Willems 2005). Tapedza was worried about possible violence befalling him if he said he actually knew me.

On voting day on 22 June, when a group of men asked Tapedza if he had voted he replied that his name was not on the voters’ list and thus, he could not vote; a claim he later told me was a “dodge,” as he did not want Councillor Banda to find out that he had actually cast his ballot in case he demanded to know for what party he voted. In contrast, Chenjerai had a very different attitude, even though ZANU (PF) cadres had threatened him due to his support of ISO and his presumed support of the MDC. When I walked with Chenjerai outside the nearby polling station, he gleefully pointed out the half-concealed open-palms of many of the voters, another symbol of the MDC; albeit he did so somewhat surreptitiously given the presence of ZANU (PF) Youth lurking nearby, a group readily used by ruling party officials to intimidate and to hurt (Scarnecchia 2006:224-226). Later, among friends, Chenjerai flashed me a “red card” he had in his pocket—another symbol of the MDC whose supporters often gave the ZANU (PF) government a “red card” during rallies and other public events to signify that the government needed to be evicted, as when a referee shows such a card to a player who commits an egregious foul in soccer matches.

Despite the danger and hostility towards anything associated with the MDC in many farming areas like those around Upfumi, the farm workers I knew were largely positive about their achievements in 2000. Many of the fired workers saw their receipt of compensation from Upfumi in June as a victory since they endured for 20 months of a labour struggle. The MDC won its only seat in Mashonaland East province in the riding where Upfumi

is located, even though ZANU (PF) ended up with most seats in an electoral process most observers condemned it for fraudulent activities and ruling party intimidation and violence (e.g., Amnesty International 2002; Kriger 2005). In July 2000, many of the workers near Upfumi and many Zimbabweans I knew seemed confident that change “for the better” would be coming soon.

Yet this *jambanja*—violence associated with the politicized post-2000 land occupations, typically coming from ZANU (PF) supporters against perceived MDC supporters—continued after the June 2000 parliamentary election as ZANU (PF) prepared for the 2002 presidential and Rural-District Council elections. *Jambanja* also occurred as part of on-going struggles over the control of land and people during what the government called the fast track land resettlement exercise carried out by various businessmen, politicians, war veterans and others, often within various hierarchies of the ruling party. By 2002, *jambanja* was part of the expansive yet chaotic land redistribution nominally sponsored by the state, which saw the vast majority of commercial farms taken from their previous owners. By then, there was great uncertainty over who had the right and ability to actually use the land, as further evictions and negotiations between claimants became the norm in many of these farming areas (Fontein 2006; Sachikonye 2003a; Scoones et al. 2003).

Violence was also widely linked with party politics more broadly. As with the *gukurahundi* and violence around previous elections, President Mugabe pardoned any perpetrators of political violence between January and July 2000 with the Clemency Order of 2000. Police officers explicitly excused themselves from becoming involved in situations when ruling party cadres carried out violence, let alone arresting anyone, on the grounds that this was a matter of party politics and not law enforcement.

Such actions helped to ensure that ZANU (PF) was the only party being promoted in the Upfumi area as the vehicle for social justice in 2002. Social justice no longer meant workers’ rights but was narrowly conceived as “returning land to indigenous peoples.” The latter category increasingly began to define citizenship for ZANU (PF) leaders in legislation and enunciations by its leaders and supporters (Muzondidya 2007; Ranger 2004; White 2003:103ff.). It commonly excluded farm workers. As they have been represented in the nation as a community not really belonging to Zimbabwe given their putative foreign origins, questionable moral attributes<sup>8</sup> and uncertain loyalty to ZANU (PF), farm workers have been actively discriminated against in terms of receiving land (Sachikonye 2003b; Rutherford 2001b, 2004).

By 2002 when I returned to Upfumi, politicized violence was continuing and economic activities became even more fragile and un-remunerative. The last time I saw Tapedza was in July 2002. He was back in the Upfumi area briefly, visiting his wife and daughter living there while he did timber contracts on a farm over 100 kilometres away. We talked about a range of topics, but he explicitly stayed clear of talking about politics, even in the privacy of his room. In contrast, Chenjerai was still very comfortable talking about politics, though by this time, he was now strongly supporting ZANU (PF) and not MDC.

By then, Chenjerai was leading ZANU (PF) youth in a variety of activities which farm workers associated with *poritikisi*: beating up workers who were said to be “MDC” or those who were said to be part of another ZANU (PF) faction from that of Councillor Banda with whom he was explicitly aligned; invading farms for potential land redistribution; and collecting protection money from a few remaining white farmers in the Upfumi area in payment for trying to stop their farms from being occupied by other leaders or businessmen associated with rival factions of the ruling party. By 2003, it was very difficult to find anyone publicly or privately declaring themselves to be an MDC supporter in and around Upfumi, though “outing” others as “MDC” and thus *vatengesesi* (“sell-outs”), including those within ZANU (PF) political structures, was quite common. As during the *hondo* (war) of the 1970s, loyalties to a political movement had been collapsed into testimonials over loyalties to the nation. Being labelled as “MDC” could lead to violence directed towards the person, eviction from their dwelling, loss of whatever type of remunerative activity they engaged in, and prevention from receiving government subsidized maize meal that was being distributed by Councillor Banda.<sup>9</sup> For Chenjerai, Banda, Tapedza and the other farm workers at Upfumi I knew, the metaphor *poritikisi ihondo*, politics is war, had become actualized.

In postcolonial Zimbabwe, *poritikisi* has been a key pathway used by people seeking to stand up for social justice against entrenched forces, as it can provide *simba* (strength) through the invocation of the state and its associated violence. The ability of Chenjerai to continue the labour struggle against the owners of Upfumi for a year and a half rested largely on his ties to political parties, initially ZANU (PF) and then ISO and through them the MDC. Ties to these national organizations provided needed leverage to stand against the agrobusiness company. They also enabled sympathetic national media coverage and helped to forge a sensibility of wider connections that buoyed some of the farm workers who were

enduring the loss of regular income, small as it was, during their long labour struggle. It also meant Chenjerai, like Councillor Banda, was willing to use violence. Regardless of the disavowal of violence and the promotion of “democratic values” and debate by MDC leaders at that time,<sup>10</sup> Chenjerai threatened and occasionally carried out violence against his own supporters in the name of the politicized labour struggle in 1999 and 2000. Social memories of *poritikisi* as violence—the 1970s war, the *gukurahundi*, and the constant violence surrounding all post-colonial elections (Kriger 2005)—both mobilized and immobilized Upfumi farm workers.

Despite it helping them challenge their mass dismissal by the Upfumi management, many farm workers there viewed *poritikisi* as potentially oppressive, as a force that compelled them to obey its wielder. It entailed a logic of trying to force demonstrative signs of fealty while simultaneously inculcating a doubt about people’s “true” party sympathies, especially during the ZANU (PF) mobilizations and *jambanja*: how could one trust the loyalties of those who had to be compelled to demonstrate their allegiance to ZANU (PF)? Many ZANU (PF) activists with whom I talked saw farm workers as masters of dissimulation since they had to operate through the hierarchical and, in some cases, violent rule of white farmers to acquire farm resources. Those who trafficked in *poritikisi*, thus, were very suspicious about the political loyalties of farm workers, as illustrated by the widely documented violence directed against farm workers during the *jambanja* (e.g., Sachikonye 2003b; Rutherford 2007, 2008). Whereas Chenjerai initially drew on a dominant public representation of farm workers as super-exploited by white farmers through his *poritikisi* mobilization in the struggle against the Upfumi management, during the later *jambanja poritikisi* in 2002 and 2003, he represented them as people who could not be trusted, whose political loyalties could be connected to their (previous) white bosses and therefore against ZANU (PF). In terms of the changing loyalties of Chenjerai himself, going from ZANU (PF) to ISO and MDC and back to ZANU (PF), Chenjerai reasoned to me in 2003 that the MDC became “sell-outs” against the workers and land distribution and the Zimbabwe *povo* (“masses”) needed a strong leader like President Mugabe to improve their lives. When I asked other workers about Chenjerai’s change of political parties, after furtively glancing around to make sure no one was around listening to us, they sighed, saying “this is *poritikisi*.”

## Conclusion

“What is one plus one?” Youth groups affiliated with ZANU (PF) posed this question to people they met in and beyond the Upfumi area in late 2001 and early 2002, before the presidential election in March 2002. If the respondent did not answer “one,” their interlocutors could beat them for giving the “wrong” (read politically suspect) answer for there is only “one president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe,” not “two.”

To conclude, I have aimed to show how party politics has interpellated farm workers in general and on Upfumi in particular by showing how poritikisi has forged certain pathways for particular forms of social agency while entailing certain dangers and ambiguities concerning bodily security, the Zimbabwean state and social justice. This was especially so in the era of jambanja, an era that undermined the territorialized practices of white farmers and ushered in competing territorializing projects and practices. I have been less interested here in issues of how party politics played out in terms of, say, legitimation, elite formation, democracy, regime composition, social justice and so forth. Rather I have aimed to give a sense of how party politics played out in this location with regard to labour and land struggles, through reliance on different metaphorical entailments of “farm workers” as a represented community on the scale of the Zimbabwean nation and the social memories and channels of poritikisi.

But what has been the role, the political impact, of critical social scientists in this struggle, as someone like Hale would demand? One could deploy his dichotomy and find evidence of excellent examples of “cultural critique” in Zimbabwe (e.g., Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003; Moore 2005; Ranger 2004; Worby 2001) and could examine “activist researchers” who worked on either side of the polarized divide between ZANU (PF) and the MDC.<sup>11</sup> Although this contrast between what Hale identifies as “activist research” and “cultural critique” may speak to particular audiences in Latin America with which he is engaging,<sup>12</sup> it is less helpful for critically engaging with the struggles of Zimbabwean farm workers, including the ones pursued by those who had been working and living in the Upfumi area. Invoking “politics” in academic writings can provide analytic insight and speak to particular debates and positioning, but it is helpful to remember the very different locations of most academic research from those one is researching—and pinning one’s hope of alterability onto a push for political change can run aground on very different localized semantics and practices of party

politics. As I have argued, politics as poritikisi has a much more specific set of meanings, traction and very different sets of stakes and dangers for the Zimbabwean farm workers like those who were nervously excited about its promises and perils on Upfumi in 1999 and who were forced to live through its consequences from 2000 on. The demands for improved lives they wanted met “yesterday,” are still there for many, but it is extremely unclear when—or whether—they will mobilize again through poritikisi to try to achieve them.

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## Notes

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- 2 All names of people and farms are pseudonyms.
- 3 This phrase comes from one of the *Anthropologica* reviewers.
- 4 See for example, Kelly and Kaplan (2001) for anthropology and the state.
- 5 This is in contrast to my earlier invocation of politics as a form of critical inquiry and engagement with the people I was studying (see Rutherford 2001a:12-13).
- 6 Turino (2000:161ff.) nicely outlines how class-based notions of respectability intersected with the idea of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the mobilization of African political organizations in the 1950s and 1960s.
- 7 There were questions concerning whether people born in Zimbabwe of non-Zimbabwean parents were Zimbabwean or not (see Cheater 1998) until recent amendments to the Citizenship Act before the 2002 presidential elections intentionally sought to disenfranchise many farm workers, and others, who are descended from non-Zimbabweans (Rutherford 2007).
- 8 This refers not only to the assumptions that they are lazy, as discussed above, but can also include concerns that as uneducated “foreigners,” farm workers are likely to engage in witchcraft (e.g., Marimira and Odero 2003:316-317).
- 9 This food distribution was an important source of nutrition given the evaporation of most formal sector jobs by that time and a resulting decline in food production, made worse by drought conditions in certain parts of the country. As critics of the ZANU (PF) regime like to point out, since 2000 Zimbabwe has had the fastest shrinking economy of any country that was not at war and the highest inflation in the world (official inflation figures were over 66,000 per cent in January 2008). See for example, ICG 2006.

- 10 The issue of intra-party violence emerged as an issue that caused the party to split in late 2005 (see Raftopoulos 2006).
- 11 Two well-known Zimbabwean intellectuals, Sam Moyo and Jonathan Moyo (who are unrelated), are good examples of academics who have had alignments with ZANU (PF). The former has been an advisor to the government on land reform since the late 1990s while carrying out academic research on land politics (e.g., Moyo 2001; Moyo and Yeros 2005). But he has had his work critically challenged by other critical social scientists (e.g., Alexander 2004; Cousins 2006; Moore 2004; Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004). The latter went from being a key critic of ZANU (PF) in the early 1990s (e.g., Moyo 1992) to being their chief propagandist when he became the information minister in 2000 until he was forced out of government due to intra-ZANU (PF) leadership succession conflicts in early 2005. He was elected as an independent MP in the March 2005 parliamentary elections and has once again become a vocal critic of ZANU (PF). See Moore (2007) for more details. Those who have been assisting the MDC have not always found their work welcomed as they got caught up in the conflicts and suspicions of the political party (see Raftopoulos 2006): The MDC is an organization, it is important to note, that has been under constant attack by a range of state agencies, laws and paramilitary groups since 2000 (Raftopoulos and Alexander 2006).
- 12 I thank Donald Moore for this observation.

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