Grounding the *Ground of Politics*

Lincoln Addison
Memorial University

On **Rutherford, Blair**. *Farm Labor Struggles in Zimbabwe: The Ground of Politics.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017, 294 pages.

Rutherford's book is a tour de force that offers a fresh perspective on Zimbabwean politics. He rejects the binary through which Zimbabwe is often interpreted—as either a struggle for social justice ("politics of liberation") or human rights and liberal democracy ("politics of oppression"). Instead, through the case of the labour dispute at Upfumi farm, Rutherford demonstrates how politics is cross-cut by different matrices of power and frequently contested. It is worth reflecting on the significance of the book's subtitle—the "ground of politics"—to appreciate Rutherford's contribution. David Moore mentions how the subtitle signals Rutherford's privileging of a subaltern perspective, a view of Zimbabwean politics from the "ground up." There are three additional meanings that I draw out below.

First, the "ground of politics" signals how Rutherford frames commercial farms in Zimbabwe as spaces where diverse forces and histories intersect and work to condition political possibilities. He emphasizes how labour relations at Upfumi farm are constituted not only through employers' localized authority but also by multiple influences operating at various scales. Discourses of human rights and democracy, increasingly prevalent in Zimbabwe by the late 1990s, inspire workers at Upfumi to challenge exploitative conditions. Chenjerai, one of the workers who emerges as the main leader during the strike, is motivated by his own "social project" of cultivating political consciousness among other farm workers. His ability to mobilize support from external organizations during the dispute—including labour unions, NGOs and politicians—is pivotal to the workers' victory in the labour tribunal. Rutherford further demonstrates that these actions are situated by earlier histories of intervention by outside groups on Upfumi, including by former liberation war combatants who in the early

1980s frequently asserted their authority on the farm. Overall, this approach takes us beyond the typical portrayal of farms and plantations as relatively sealed off spaces that can be understood independently of wider processes.

Another meaning of the subtitle is that livelihoods and processes of identification for rural Zimbabweans are grounded in territorialized modes of belonging. Here, Rutherford examines both the sense of excitement and possibility that arises when modes of belonging are challenged and the uncertainty and vulnerability this entails. An excellent symbol of this ambiguity is the *musososo* itself—the camp established by workers during the labour dispute at Upfumi. The camp was set up just outside the official farm boundary near a major highway, signalling how the workers "ungrounded" themselves from the employer's domestic government. Yet, the *musososo* remained close enough to the farm to signal that this "ungrounding" was never total and implicitly hailed the employer to resolve it. Rutherford's overall message about social change is one of caution. In the conclusion, he emphasizes how efforts to promote social justice and human rights in contemporary Zimbabwe need to appreciate how people are grounded in hierarchical relations of dependency and belonging and work through—not against—these relations.

A final interpretation of the "ground of politics" is that it nicely conveys Rutherford's theoretical framework. His analysis is "grounded" in that it emerges from the existing power relations, aspirations and dependencies he learns about in the field site(s). He explicitly rejects a top-down or straightforward application of governmentality favouring a more flexible "Foucaultian sensibility" (18). David Moore wonders if the central theoretical concept—mode of belonging—can be related to earlier "articulation of modes of production" debates. Rutherford's approach reminds me more of E.P. Thompson's (1963) analysis of the English working class, where there is a similar rejection of rigid analytical concepts and insistence that subalterns are active agents in the shaping of history. One concept I think could use further explanation is "interpellation" (77). It seems to imply how subjectivity is constituted through dominant discourses, but this may go against the book's emphasis on politics as cross-cut by different and often competing power relations.

One larger question I am left with is how do we characterize the mode of belonging for agricultural labour in Zimbabwe today? The agrarian structure in the aftermath of fast track land reform has become more complex. Instead of white-owned commercial farms characterized by domestic government and communal areas reliant on family labour, the proliferation of A1 and A2 farms

entail different labour forms. In general, hired farm labour is more insecure and paid less than it was prior to 2000. This may be offset to some extent by new forms of reciprocity between resettled farmers and workers. Following Rutherford, however, the right question is not whether farm labour is better or worse off in the aftermath of land reform—a question that reproduces the reductionist binary of liberation versus oppression in Zimbabwe. Rather, one should attend to how localized labour forms are inflected with multi-scalar influences—not only markets and state policies, but also discourses, histories, claims of authority, social projects and diverse livelihood strategies.

Lincoln Addison,
Memorial University,
laddison@mun.ca

Reference

Thompson, E.P. 1963. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondswoth: Penguin.