

# Accidental Neoliberalism and the Performance of Management

Bolt, Maxim

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Maxim Bolt

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# Accidental Neoliberalism and the Performance of Management: Hierarchies in Export Agriculture on the Zimbabwean-South African Border

MAXIM BOLT\*·\*\*

\*Department of African Studies and Anthropology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK, \*\*Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

**ABSTRACT** *South Africa's export farms have shifted from racialised paternalism to corporate managerialism. But how have workforce dynamics changed? This article offers an ethnographic perspective on agriculture on the transient Zimbabwean border. An 'actor-centred' approach examines the causes and extent of transformation. Who furthers managerial logics? Why? With what effects? White farmers emphasise impersonal, rationalised business for diverse reasons. What looks like part of a single global process of neoliberalisation is an accidental result. At the same time, foreign supermarket-funded development projects become subjected to logics of workforce paternalism. Managerialism itself has limited effect on labour arrangements. Workers' hierarchies and cross-border networks are built on different principles from global supply chains. From within each network, it is as if the other were invisible.*

## Introduction

South Africa's settler agriculture, variously vilified or romanticised through its *boer*, colonial and apartheid histories, has seen important changes since apartheid began to crumble in the 1980s. Marketing boards intended to protect white farmer-landowners were largely dismantled, subsidies discontinued and commercial agriculture thrown onto the open market. Market liberalisation has pushed many growers into global supply chains, where profits are shored up by foreign exchange, but where supermarkets<sup>1</sup> have considerable power (see Mather & Greenberg, 2003). Farmers' khaki shirts are now emblazoned with the logos of export agents. Amidst a 'crisis of social reproduction' (for example von Holdt & Webster, 2005), a wave of casualisation has swept through the country's black farm workforces (Bernstein, 2013; Ewert & du Toit, 2005; Mather & Greenberg, 2003).

The wider context of change in agriculture is 'the current phase of neo-liberal restructuring' (Rutherford & Addison, 2007, p. 626). Market liberalisation has been accompanied by austere monetary policies (Bond, 2000), the outsourcing of state functions (for example Koelble & LiPuma, 2005), an emphasis on 'entrepreneurship' (Koelble, 2008), a 'rationality' of individual responsibility, and increasing financialisation of the economy (Marais, 2011). The transition from 'apartheid' to 'post-apartheid', from 'repression' to 'freedom', has been powerfully associated with those from

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*Correspondence Address:* Maxim Bolt, Department of African Studies and Anthropology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK. Email: [m.bolt@bham.ac.uk](mailto:m.bolt@bham.ac.uk)

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‘state’ to ‘market’, ‘racial Fordism’ to ‘non-racial post-Fordism’, and ‘rigidity’ to ‘flexibility’ (Hart, 2002, p. 25).

But what actually happens to labour arrangements on South African agricultural estates in the wake of globalising market liberalisation? There has been, broadly, a shift from ‘paternalism’ towards a corporate style of ‘management’, ‘the idea that what farmers must do is not to *farm* but to *manage* [...] farming is no longer a “way of life” but a “business”’ (du Toit, 1993, p. 325; italics original). The withdrawal of discretionary responsibilities not guaranteed by contracts or laws (Ewert & du Toit, 2005), and the shift to less socially embedded payment systems (Rutherford & Addison, 2007), appear to herald a whole new regime characterised by the abstraction and depersonalisation of employment obligations.

‘Paternalism’ appears a relatively coherent framework that can be replaced by or articulate with new labour regimes – even ‘neoliberalism’ (see for example Addison, 2006). But what this actually means is no simple matter. It is often difficult to distinguish paternalism from new regimes of management in practice. Farming areas have long been characterised by the fragmenting of black families in a mobile population (for example Waldman, 1996). Farmers’ abrogation of responsibilities can coexist with senior black workers’ continuing paternalist roles, belying any simple shift from paternalism to more atomised, depersonalised managerialism. In fact, recent changes in agriculture create *new* forms of authority within workforces. As farmers become more integrated into relations with ‘capital upstream and downstream of farming’ (Bernstein, 2007, p. 40), supermarkets establish development projects on farms for workers. These enable supermarkets to sell ‘ethical’ produce while tying farmers into supply chains. But such schemes also rely on senior-worker gatekeepers, for whom they become new potential sources of influence beyond working hours.

What all of this produces requires investigation. How, exactly, do recent changes shape employers’ plans? How are employers’ plans, in turn, realised in the everyday labour arrangements – the actual norms and relationships – into which workers are incorporated as a result of employment? This article presents the case study of Grootplaas,<sup>2</sup> a large citrus estate in a commercial farming area next to the Zimbabwean border, drawing on 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork (November 2006–April 2008) while resident in the workers’ compound. Not claiming to characterise agricultural estates across the region (they are extremely diverse), the article raises cautionary questions about transformation following liberalisation. Neoliberalism sets the terms for larger-scale analyses of South Africa. But does this story account sufficiently for changes *at the level of workforce relationships and dependencies*? Corporate-style management itself is performed to further particular agendas. How far do its principles shape workers’ networks and hierarchies?

### A Transient Setting

On the banks of the Limpopo River – the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe – the dynamics of globalised export agriculture intersect with the fall-out of the Zimbabwean crisis. Since Zimbabwe’s precipitous economic decline and political turbulence from 2000, countless people have climbed through the border fence in search of work. By 2009, Doctors Without Borders estimated that 3,000,000 had crossed (Doctors Without Borders, 2009), although large-scale undocumented migration means that assessments are open to question. Many were unemployed before they came, sometimes despite considerable education. Others left jobs whose remuneration was quickly eroded by one of the world’s highest ever levels of hyperinflation – around 150,000 per cent by 2008 (Shaw, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Others again have fled persecution as supporters of the political opposition. An extraordinarily diverse population – in terms of regional, ethnic and class-based origin – has sought unskilled farm employment in recent years, under conditions of extreme vulnerability (Rutherford & Addison, 2007; Rutherford, 2008). Gangs along the border known as *magumaguma* rob and rape those crossing the river, and some arrive on the farms relieved of essential belongings.

Moreover, during the period of fieldwork, police deportation raids were frequent and aggressive. Seasonal workers would often avoid their rooms in the labour compounds, where they might be discovered, instead braving freezing winter nights in the bush. For farmers, this made for working populations that could be hired and fired with ease; that lacked freedom of movement beyond the

farms; and that could even be denounced to the police just before month-end to avoid payment (see Human Rights Watch, 2006). On the other hand, farmers saw the paperwork required to replace deported workers as a considerable inconvenience, especially since deportees generally returned to their jobs within days, after climbing back through the border fence.

This description of transience and vulnerability sounds exceptional. But farmers in northern South Africa have long relied on cross-border migrants who faced crisis at home (Bolt, 2015; Werbner, 1991) and coercive, highly exploitative conditions as they sought work (Bradford, 1993; Murray, 1995; van Onselen, 1976). Today, farmers across the country – and especially near borders – respond to market liberalisation by capitalising on a floating reserve of migrant labour (Johnston, 2007). The experiences of farm workers on the Limpopo River represent not so much an exception as an extreme case of a wider historical and contemporary trend.

But there is more to workers' experiences than these conditions of vulnerability, or than the short contracts that leave their futures uncertain. During the five-month harvest each year, 450-odd recruits are put to work as pickers in the orchards (mostly men) and graders and packers in the packshed (women). They join Grootplaas's 140-strong permanent workforce, and enter a social world built on established relationships and hierarchies. The permanently employed have work permits and stable incomes, and some even acquire South African identity cards. By constructing furniture, front steps and yards, they have transformed their bare cells in the compound into provisional homes. They establish live-in, domestic relationships with women who come to the farm to find work, and for whom such relationships represent a form of integration into the relative stability of farm life.

Wages are meagre, and remittance to kin in Zimbabwe competes with the costs of compound life. And yet, for migrants seeking work, incorporation into the border farms means that living from one day to the next (see Day, Papataxiarchis, & Stewart, 1998) is mitigated by possibilities for planning. Forms of camaraderie developed in work teams extend into the compound. Labour arrangements shape not only work time, but also life on the farm more broadly. The resulting hierarchies can themselves produce exploitation among workers. Yet, like in other residential labour forces in southern Africa (for example Moodie & Ndatshé, 1994), senior workers are assessed through shared notions of ethical responsibility.

In such a world, how should we understand corporate managerialism and its effects?

### Neoliberalism on the Ground?

Market liberalisation, and the wider transformations in South Africa noted earlier, make it tempting to regard recent changes on farms as part of neoliberalism's ascendance. Neoliberalism, as theory and class project, justifies the expansion of contractually defined market relations and free trade through a notion of individual entrepreneurial freedom (see Harvey, 2005). But it is not always clear what it means at the scale of everyday life. In South Africa (and elsewhere), it is held responsible for a wide range of phenomena (for example Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000; Oomen, 2005). Neoliberalism becomes 'a kind of global meta-culture, characteristic of our newly de-regulated, insecure, and speculative times' (Ferguson, 2010, p. 171).

One approach is to focus on the creation of dispositions well suited to liberalised markets. 'The "responsibilised" citizen comes to operate as a miniature firm, responding to incentives, rationally assessing risks, and prudently choosing from among different courses of action' (Ferguson, 2010, p. 172). Ferguson argues that such a focus on neoliberal 'rationalities' is misplaced in African contexts. Neoliberalism as 'art of government', transplanted from research on Europe, is merely confused with 'a crude battering open of Third World markets' (Ferguson, 2010, p. 173). Yet in southern African agriculture, where white farmers historically promoted a paternalist form of 'domestic government' (Rutherford, 2001), matters may be less clear-cut. It is indeed important to understand not only market liberalisation, but also the forms of sociality produced by a corresponding shift towards corporate managerialism.

This paper takes such forms of sociality as its focus. Nevertheless, it argues that doing so does not expose a monolithic neoliberal rationality. Understanding farmers' 'government' over land and labour today means more than exploring how neoliberal places, people and regimes are constituted, or specifying the articulation between paternalism and neoliberalism. After all, the extraction of value by employers in liberalised markets often relies on – or even encourages the resurgence of – older forms of exchange and dependency (see Cross, 2010; Mollona, 2005).

On South African farms, particular people promote principles often associated with neoliberalism, with particular agendas in mind, and with particular effects. 'The perceptions and interpretations of the actors concerned' (Arce & Long, 1993, p. 179) are paramount. Taking key individuals as the brokers of wider social processes enables a variegated picture, especially apposite in the racialised settings of southern African settler agriculture. On farms, like on the region's mines, senior black employees form the interface between white employers and black labour, in systems that extend into all aspects of life. As Epstein (1958) showed for the Zambian Copperbelt, such 'intercalary' figures negotiate their positions through idioms of authority that have more than one source, and which may conflict. This invites a focus on the idioms of labour relations that pertain on the ground – here, paternalism and corporate-style management. Such models are not simply imports from elsewhere. They become products of the labour setting itself, intertwined with the agendas of both employers and powerful workers.

What follows explores how and why farmers present themselves as corporate businessmen; who takes up corporatising measures in the workforce itself; and how these play into hierarchies and the ethics of authority among workers. The next section turns to the white farmer whose vision sets the parameters of life at Grootplaas.

### **Accidental Neoliberalism: The View from the Office**

Talking to Willem, who runs Grootplaas Estates, one certainly has the impression of a corporatising shift in the everyday reality of South African agriculture. The 40-something son-in-law of Grootplaas's founder, Willem is one member of a four-man family partnership. Unlike some older farmers, he draws a sharp separation between work and home life. He speaks of restricting his responsibilities as employer to the office. Claiming that he has only a limited grasp of dynamics within the workforce and the 'cultural' bases of disputes among workers, he underscores his reluctance to intervene in non-work matters. His concern is that he could be held accountable for decisions he might make without a full appreciation of their implications. Willem casts himself in contrast to an established ideal of paternalism, to which his father-in-law and other older whites on the estates aspire. According to this model, white farmers rule over their black 'people'. Relying on their cultural understanding, they intervene in non-work matters, and provide for workers and dependents through discretionary gifts and favours.

Willem is keen to present his farm in the idiom of corporate management, in which his limited responsibility for workers' welfare combines with a downplaying of racial distinction. During a meeting in his office (older farmers would meet at their houses), he set out the Grootplaas labour hierarchy. The idioms he employed were revealing. He first described the company's four 'shareholders' – Willem himself, his father-in-law Koos, and two of Koos' sons. He then moved on to senior employees: there is the (white) workshop foreman and mechanic, and Andre, the production manager, who handles everything to do with growing the fruit. Also part of 'management' are Michael, the black personnel manager; Marula, the black general manager; and the black packshed manager. These three sit on 'the management side of the table' in discussions with workers, and are salaried. The roles of the black 'managers' he listed would more usually be described on farms as clerk, senior foreman and packshed foreman. In this depiction, South African farm hierarchies are built around an opposition between management and labour, not white and black.

The reasons for this presentation are complex. For many South Africans after apartheid's demise in 1994, white landowners became an unwanted vestige of the old era. The racialised paternalism that



had framed many farmers' aspirations meant that they had enormous personal power and responsibility over black workers in the total worlds of their 'little republics' (as farms have often been labelled in South Africa). Indeed, contrary to the ideal of fatherly protection, actual arrangements were often far from benign, and deeply coercive (see van Onselen, 1992) – one reason why farmers long relied on vulnerable migrant labour. State institutions and foreign supermarkets now speak the language of Black Economic Empowerment, pushing farmers to reform. In response, many have attempted to present themselves as the executives of deracialised businesses, subject to the same economic pressures as other enterprises. Here, as elsewhere (for example Vialles, 1994), a 'modern', sanitised, technologised depiction effaces the distinctiveness of a long-demonised form of production, creating generic industry. The context is ever-greater integration into international markets. Farmers' lives appear similar to the past: khaki outfits, weekend hunting, and lush-gardened farmhouses that emphasise a rural idyll. Yet their enterprises take them and their produce as far as the consumer marketplaces of Europe, the Middle East, China and Japan, as they extend their distribution networks. Willem went further and dispatched his son to Belgium to gain experience among international export agents.

Alongside the concern to establish distance from the past through corporate performance is the concern to remain flexible in the face of an uncertain future. Farmers such as those at Grootplaas participate in a buyer's market, but they have done well out of South Africa's agricultural liberalisation. The aeroplanes that they use to fly between estates testify to their success, under conditions that proved destructive for others along the Zimbabwean border. Some border farmers seek to expand further. A more acute concern is South African land reform (see also Hall, Wisborg, Shirinda, & Zamchiya, 2013) – a long, drawn out process that offers restitution for black South Africans who can demonstrate that their land was expropriated since 1913.<sup>4</sup> The whole border region is under claim, and the outcome is uncertain. Farmers strategise to ensure that they hold portfolios of estates and businesses – security in diversity – and increasingly talk of their farms in terms of pragmatic business calculations (Bolt, 2013). All of this encourages them to downplay established obligations.

Meanwhile, a leaner, more individualised form of agriculture is a response to legal changes. Post-apartheid legislation offered farm workers protections they had historically been denied. They, like domestic workers, were exempt from standard labour law. The new measures include minimum wages and working standards, and in theory increase transparency in how workers are paid. A common complaint by farmers is that they interfere with the mutual understanding between employers and workers, reducing relationships to bare wage-employment (see also Ewert & du Toit, 2005). Some consequently declare themselves unable or unwilling to continue as their workers' fatherly protectors. Before my arrival at Grootplaas, workers had demanded itemised pay sheets, listing money docked for housing and electricity. This was to replace a generic 'costs' deduction that assumed the legitimacy of payment 'in kind'. Willem had informed his employees that they would lose out from such a change. He would now be confined, he warned, to offering only the kind of assistance to his workers that could be articulated on a pay sheet. The implication was that what he did for his workers amounted to far more than what was deducted for 'costs'.

Agriculture-specific changes intersect with shifts in South Africa's political economy more generally. In the years before the fieldwork on which this paper draws, between 2000 and 2007, the labour market participation rate hovered between 55 per cent and 60 per cent.<sup>5</sup> South Africa, like many other countries, has seen a visible shift since the 1970s from a 'labour-scarce' society to a 'labour-surplus' one, itself the result of economic restructuring and consequent reduced demand for unskilled labour. Ties of paternalistic dependence between employers and workforces, forged under conditions of labour scarcity, are now being decisively broken (Ferguson, 2013).

The picture here is far more complicated than a story of neoliberalisation would suggest. While the results of farmers' strategies look neoliberal, the causes are diverse. Farmers attempt to efface a vilified past, address the vagaries of post-apartheid land reform, and respond to the South African government's enforcement of rights. As they face manifold pressures, they respond by means of a repertoire of corporate styles (including new terminology) and practices (including strategic, even short-term,

business investments). As shown below, the promotion of non-manual, managerial black workers is central. Hart (2008) argues that particular historical processes always exceed their neoliberal characteristics – there are always other causes. But the point here is further reaching. What looks like neoliberalism at Grootplaas, and on other similar South African farms, is in large part an effect of non-neoliberal processes. It is accidental neoliberalism.<sup>6</sup>

Taking a more specific focus on a managerial style of labour relations foregrounds further complexity. Farmers' self-presentations – here exemplified by Willem – do not capture the messy reality of running an estate. This is for two reasons. Firstly, a rhetoric of pastoral concern continues, albeit more quietly. Willem claims that he has been unable to sustain his threats of more limited services to his workforce. He stills sees himself as protector of his 'people' when it comes to negotiating with police deportation raids. Farmers continue to provide transport. Their cast-offs and the carcasses from hunting expeditions end up in labour compounds as gifts for workers. Employees are given leave to return to Zimbabwe at a moment's notice if the occasion demands, and they are rewarded for good service by employment into old age. And Willem does occasionally resolve serious disputes among workers, as well as hold tribunals when employees are to be disciplined. To a large degree, measures to corporatise have people *off* the farm – South African officials, British supermarkets, or EUREPGAP<sup>7</sup> inspectors – as their audience. Secondly, where farmers do attempt to create added distance between themselves and their workforces, the effect is that hierarchies among workers are left unaltered, or are even reinforced. Farmers have national and international business networks; workers, meanwhile, have cross-border networks, described below. These are mutually dependent, but they operate according to completely different logics. From within each network, it is as if the other were invisible.

Examining how corporate principles are carried into the workforce itself, the following section shifts the focus to the centre of the labour compound. It begins with a meeting about supermarket-funded development, one dimension of the global value chains that now shape South African agriculture.

### Debating Development in the Compound

The meeting was to be on a Saturday afternoon, at the end of the five-and-a-half day working week, and few were enthusiastic. Coming out of his house, Michael, Grootplaas's black personnel manager, stopped a worker who was walking past with his family and sent him to gather an audience. Slowly, residents made their way to the compound's central hall – a concrete-floored area with a corrugated metal roof, two open sides, a hatch to the compound shop and, opposite, the wire cage in which the new, supermarket foundation-funded 'games room' was located.

The agenda was a review of projects undertaken at the farm by the foundation.<sup>8</sup> Paid for not only by the supermarket that initiated it, but also producers, exporters and importers, the foundation is intended to address a history of extreme inequality experienced by farm labourers in South Africa. Its crèches, literacy centres, games rooms and football equipment represent attempts to engage holistically in workers' lives, in similar vein to paternalist ideals. But, focusing on the farms from which the supermarket buys fruit, this intervention places a new emphasis on 'empowerment' and the development of 'skills'.

Michael, as personnel manager, had recently been selected by Grootplaas's white farmers to represent the farm, and had subsequently been chosen by the foundation as a 'beneficiary' member of its Board of Directors. This meant attending meetings across South Africa. As a beneficiary director, Michael also assessed applications for project funds from other farms selling their produce to the supermarket. His education and administrative occupation at the farm made Michael an obvious gatekeeper with the British supermarket fund. He represented less the vision of the stereotyped, downtrodden farm worker than that of what farm workers could become. As he made his way to the hall to address his co-residents, Michael clutched a wad of applications that he had recently assessed. But, far from showing his co-workers their own future, these files stood as a symbol of his



*difference* – of the administrative responsibility that made him Grootplaas's only black non-manual worker, and of his status well beyond the remoteness of the farm.

Thirty-five men took their places on benches in a rough semi-circle, and a group of eight women sat together on the floor by the shop. Michael took his place on another bench, facing the crowd. He was flanked by people who, in different ways, reinforced his role. On one side sat the member of the Workers' Committee who had officially called the meeting at Michael's behest. On the other, two employees took notes: Benjamin, the A-level-educated storeman and sometime clerk, and Ruth, a former teacher who ran the foundation-funded crèche. Like Michael, both derived status from their non-agricultural backgrounds.

Michael stood and, wielding the application forms that he had approved, chronicled the foundation's progress. The games room was coming along, and Willem had supported a plan to set aside a piece of land for workers to farm together, keeping the proceeds. Despite the apparently good news, this prompted heated objections from the audience about the implications of such a project. What about irrigation and transport costs? This came from Marula, the farm's black foreman, who had driven up in his *bakkie*<sup>9</sup> after the start of the meeting and asserted his own authority by seating himself on Michael's bench. Would such costs be born by the farmer or the foundation? Michael could only point to a similar scheme that had been successful in the Eastern Cape, hundreds of miles away. The farm's senior driver, preoccupied by his infant son, demanded: what if someone were to be fired – what would happen to his or her share? Was the scheme just to be a way to secure free labour? More protestations flew across the hall: no one had asked for this scheme; Michael should have consulted workers before going to Willem. No one had requested a games room either; what had been demanded were uniforms and equipment for football and netball. And would it cost money to use the new pool table, football tables and juke box? Michael hesitated, before shifting the conversation to the foundation-funded Adult Literacy Centre. He exhorted the audience to attend more diligently, but the response was further objection: it was those running the centre who were to blame for its gradual decline. Soon Marula left, shaking his head. Others followed, and the meeting petered out.

Why, given the long history of farmers' broad intervention into workers' lives – including education, games rooms and livelihood opportunities beyond the wage – were these schemes marginalised or rejected? The answer does not lie in their associations with global value chains or liberalised markets per se. Rather, such intervention reinforced the rise of a newly influential worker, and thereby came to embody a new model of authority in the workforce. Michael is well suited as a representative of the farm, fitting both the farmer's performance of progress and the supermarket foundation's stated goal of development. But this leaves Michael at odds with established forms of sociality and hierarchy. In unpicking why the meeting disintegrated, it is therefore worth starting with Michael himself.

### **The Performance of Corporate Management**

Michael came to the farm in 1997, when Zimbabwe's economy was beginning to suffer but before the exponential increase in emigration. Like many more recent Zimbabweans, he lacks a lifelong farm background and is keen to avoid having people draw the conclusion that he has sunk to the level of farm labourer, an occupation so demonised in Zimbabwe that many farms there historically employed Malawians or Mozambicans (Rutherford, 2001). He characterises his past in terms of an education-centred narrative, marked by the accumulation of formal qualifications: O-levels, and diploma courses in Personnel Management, Office Management and Admin, Computers, and Modern Management. His parents hailed from a town in southern Zimbabwe. But he was sent to a rural, church-run primary school to avoid distractions, before attending an urban secondary school. At 18 he entered the army for 15 years, finishing as an administrator/supervisor. After a brief stint driving a taxi he had bought, he visited his now-deceased brother at Grootplaas and found employment. As he recounts his arrival, he had to hide his true, highly skilled nature from workers to avoid hostile attention. Only when he was told there was no permanent labouring job available did he reveal his qualifications and secure himself a 'management' position.

Each work day just before seven o'clock in the morning, Michael cycles into the office at the farm's workshop. He wears a collared shirt, often white, tucked into a belted pair of dark trousers, and is armed with his 3G Technology mobile phone despite the lack of reception across much of the farm. His office is dominated by a collection of grey, chest-high filing cabinets containing records of present and recent workers. On the opposite side of the room is a door leading to where whites work: Willem, his wife, brother-in-law and the secretary (the daughter of a neighbouring farmer). Michael and Benjamin (the workshop storeman who helps him with paperwork) rarely go through the door, especially uninvited. They work in close proximity to farmers and administrators. But they are overwhelmingly confined to responding to rather than initiating interactions. Nevertheless, such proximity ensures their easy access to the farmers in the eyes of other workers.

Michael's primary responsibility for much of the year is renewing permits. He maintains the paperwork and occasionally travels to Beitbridge border post to negotiate with both the Zimbabwean and South African sides. Doing so requires not only knowledge of the various documents, but also the relationships and expertise to negotiate the bureaucracies at Beitbridge. This is of vital importance in a heavily policed border area, where Zimbabweans without papers risk deportation. Further enhancing Michael's reputation, the job involves a high degree of literacy. This both resonates with a widespread valorisation of formal school education – itself the result of Zimbabwe's colonial and postcolonial class history – and harks back to some workers' happier days in higher-status work than agricultural labour.

Michael sits at a particular interface between white and black, especially during the harvest. Enlisting the help of other workers, he moves the filing cabinets to the packshed and takes on a greater range of responsibilities. He assembles a small team of workers who tend also to have non-farm backgrounds. Gerald, for example, is a general worker for much of the time but, like Benjamin, his A-levels mean that he is useful for any administration that needs doing. Relying on his team to look after matters in the office, Michael takes new recruits to Beitbridge to arrange their visas. Throughout the harvest he handles paperwork for fruit-buyers, and prints destination labels for the fruit pallets, work he refers to as 'data input'. The computer and buyer paperwork are in Willem's own office at the packshed. So what other workers see is Michael, dressed in an official-looking white coat and wielding a clipboard, spending hours each day in a room with their distant employer.

The figure of the corporate-style, non-manual black worker is replicated on other farms. On the estate next to Grootplaas, for example, a black employee who handles paperwork also acts as receptionist, attired in a shirt, tie and pressed trousers. On each farm, such a figure is an intermediary between white farmers and black workers – but an unusual one. More typical are the farm's foremen, with the senior foreman at their head. At Grootplaas, this is Marula.

Effectively a supervisor of supervisors, Marula spends his days touring around in his *bakkie*, keeping an eye on the various work teams around the estate. Like his counterparts on other estates, his role is to extend the labour hierarchy – and, by implication, the farmers' gaze – over a wide area, as he moves about the farm. His job is to have a broad understanding of the whole estate. By doing favours along the way – giving a lift, sharing a cigarette – he maintains both a superior and sympathetic position, a fatherly figure in the workforce. Meanwhile, as the radio on his *bakkie* crackles constantly with communication between the farm's vehicles and the office, he brings with him the institutional weight of the white employers.

Marula's role as lynchpin, necessary because of a rigid black/white separation, is intrinsic to the racial micropolitics of farms. Whites on the farm rarely enter the compound; it is Marula who usually gathers workers, including for emergency jobs in the evenings, at night or over weekends. Generally, supervisory employees direct the wider labour force. These are Marula himself; two more junior, specialised foremen; and Andre, the white production manager. Willem, the white farmer, who spends much of his time around the offices, represents a distant authority. He is more a last resort for complaints or appeals for leave than a direct overseer of labour.

Michael shares Marula's proximity to the white bosses, but this closeness is of a different kind. Michael is not a lynchpin in the hierarchy in the sense of a daily avenue of communication between bosses and workers. His position confines him to narrower spaces of work-related responsibility.

Consequently, he relies on formal channels to emphasise his seniority. One is his ability to hire and fire through explicit, private appeal to Willem. Another lies in the paperwork itself. Faced with large numbers of workers who need permits, he can exercise a degree of choice in whose he processes, and when. Especially during the harvest, when there are hundreds of recruits and many never receive legal documents, handling paperwork confers a great deal of power, at least over those who lack connections, influence or authority of their own.

Compound residents see Michael as an influential, high-status figure, whose pay overtook even Marula's. Since Michael's work is highly unusual in the black workforce, it is known that Willem sees him as indispensable and hears his complaints. Marula is more central to the day-to-day labour process involving most workers. Meanwhile Michael's authority comes from his responsibility for records to which others lack access, through interactions with a powerful boss that, behind the doors of offices, others are unable to observe.

It is not only because of his skills in administration that Michael is indispensable. He also enables a particular presentation of export-oriented agriculture in the twenty-first century: a production-oriented business, not the oft romanticised or vilified popular image of farming. Within this understanding, Michael is key. For, as previously noted, he is the one black employee who is not a manual labourer. Willem is keen to promote him as evidence of Grootplaas's managerial outlook. In conversations with me, he was careful to underline Michael's organisational importance, something he did not do in the case of Marula or other senior supervisory figures. Michael's directorship at the British supermarket development foundation lent Willem's assertions greater plausibility, giving a new reality to the figure of black manager, and underlining Grootplaas's willingness to adapt. This, of course, is the context in which Michael came to be convening the meeting described earlier.

However, Michael's privileged treatment by Willem has stark limitations. A non-racial, managerial version of farming barely extends beyond the office. Despite Willem's rhetoric, Grootplaas is run according to highly racialised conceptions of proper pay, accommodation and modes of interaction. Revealingly, when Willem described the farm's labour hierarchy, he listed white before black managers. With Michael, Willem adopts a commanding tone he would not use with whites: words slowly articulated and a hard, monotonous edge to his voice. Whereas with Andre, the white production manager, he discusses progress in the orchards over an afternoon cup of tea in the tearoom, with Michael his interaction is kept strictly to the office. In this regard, Michael remains unambiguously a black worker, separated by the racial divide that has him live in the compound, not a security fence-encircled farmhouse. When he stood before other workers in the compound hall, as representative of a distant supermarket foundation, this tension – non-manual, managerial figure versus worker in the compound – was underscoring.

Michael's role reveals the limitations of non-racial corporatisation at Grootplaas. But what of the other side of the managerial model – the narrowing of obligations and dependences to the language of contracts and the market? Michael asserts a distinctly corporate position among other employees – one that rejects established forms of hierarchy. Turning to his place on the farm beyond work time illuminates the place of such managerial norms amidst established structures of authority and responsibility.

### **Managerialism Marginalised: Elders, Networks and Workforce Hierarchy**

To understand Grootplaas's workforce hierarchy, and how it extends beyond wage work, it is useful to begin at the court (TshiVenda: *khoro*) where disputes are heard. The elders who pass judgment are among the oldest of the senior workers – most in their late 40s – and many are those who become picking supervisors during the harvest. Two high-ranking workers, although considered good candidates, are excluded because of their youth (one is in his 20s; the other is 44). Yet age alone does not determine membership. The *khoro* is dominated by Venda from the border area. The one exception is a well-established Shona worker, included because he 'speaks well' (assesses situations fairly and expresses his opinions convincingly, albeit in ChiShona).

Marula acts as *musanda* (headman). The *khoro* is located in the yard of his dwelling, itself a focal point of the compound. As the longest serving and most established black worker, he has adapted two two-room senior workers' houses into his own chiefly enclosure. Underneath a tree, Marula has built a seating area for the *khoro* and for drinking by nailing together several benches, with a second row of lower benches for busier occasions.

When there are disputes, compound residents approach an elder, who convenes the *khoro*. An example will elucidate how the tribunals work. On one occasion, a mother approached a long-standing senior worker because a man had insulted her after seducing her daughter. The elder led the hearing. As the accused sat in the middle of a tight semi-circle, the mother positioned herself at the end and, standing, recounted the events. She had found the young man in bed with her daughter in a compound room. Rather than respectfully acknowledging her, the man had simply attempted to hide under the sheet. When she drew back (having seen him), and waited outside, he had simply walked off. He had done something similar on a second occasion. Speaking at length, slowly and with a sense of drama, her narrative culminated with the man's final insult. Drunk one night, he had broken into her room, assuming her to have locked her daughter in to protect her chastity. Throwing a broken padlock on the ground in front of her as evidence, she screamed a threat to call the police. The elder who had convened the meeting interjected and quickly promised to resolve the situation at the *khoro*.

Each weighing in with a short speech, the six elders present discussed what to do about this case of unfulfilled responsibility tempered by insubordination. The mood shifted rapidly back and forth between relaxed joking and dramatic anger. Marula sat back, checking his phone and even leaving to take a call. But this only served to add gravitas to his words when he did intercede, late in the proceedings: a man should be able to bear the consequences of his actions. The culprit and the daughter remained quiet, the former attempting nervously to read the situation. Eventually, he was threatened with the prospect of marriage, although it was clear that he could not afford to look after either the daughter or the child she already had. He was ordered simply to stay away from her.

This description of a hearing at the *khoro* conveys the nature of authority in the compound. Here is a court with circumscribed power. The man's sister, who had publicly insulted the woman's mother, refused to turn up to the *khoro* at all. Enforcement is far from straightforward. The elder who convened the meeting threatened to take the case to a village council in Zimbabwe – there at least, he said, a court would beat the culprit with *sjamboks*.<sup>10</sup> But Grootplaas's *khoro* had never turned to the greater power of headmen across the border. Like the mother's threat to call the police over the broken lock, this possibility remained conjectural.

And yet, despite its clear limitations, such keeping of the peace is an important part of farm life. Grootplaas's seasonal workers, especially, are often far from the mundane regulation of home, subject to the indignities of overcrowding and police deportation raids. Actually achieving a degree of stability on the border means establishing connections to senior figures – connections that are often fragile. It is important not to paint core workers simply as benign figures. The compound's rules are overwhelmingly established and enforced by permanently employed men. While elders stake their claims to seniority and respect on notions of proper authority, there is little redress beyond them. This is especially the case for women. Cases of sexual violence may simply be argued between aggrieved men: the accused and the boyfriend.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for men who have experienced middle-class decline in the Zimbabwean crisis, the rough camaraderie involved in building relationships means compromising norms of behaviour that connect them to their past lives – actual or imagined (Bolt, 2010). Nevertheless, such ties bring recruits under the protection of influential figures. They increase the likelihood of receiving a work permit, and offer the stable residential base – at least for a while – to establish informal businesses, such as selling cigarettes, snacks or marijuana to other workers (Bolt, 2012).

The labour hierarchy here offers some sense of order, however provisional. And this order, in turn, depends on the place of senior workers in networks along and across the border. In the *khoro* case just described – a minor offence – threats to take matters across the border appear far-fetched. But they served to remind the culprit that he and his sister, the mother and daughter, and many of the elders all hail from the same group of villages. In fact, these threats were quietly followed by another, made

plausible by precisely these informal but apparent connections: to summon the young woman's brothers from towns to the south, and leave matters to them. Shared origins among the core of the workforce countermand the transience of a migrant-labour setting. The most established permanent workers have several kin in the compound, and on other farms along the Limpopo. Marula himself was born on a nearby estate, his father and brothers also foremen in their time, and he has a number of children and other dependents on the border estates. The authority of the *khoro* draws on idioms shared with Zimbabwean villages, as well as on webs of kinship that span the border. Networks among workers underpin labour force cohesion, and therefore buttress the networks of global distribution in which the white farmers are implicated. But, in everyday terms, they have minimal impact on each other.

The *khoro* is where a model of compound authority is most explicitly performed. In this model, senior workers are not merely workers, but rather wise, older men with experience and responsibility. Beyond the *khoro*, the elders fulfil similar roles: taking in newcomers who require shelter; speaking for them in disputes; reprimanding residents for misdeeds. Marula himself regularly patrols the compound, on foot or in his *bakkie*, keeping an eye on things. At other times, he waits in his yard, as workers bring him beer and news. Senior workers establish themselves by building up retinues of dependents. New recruits quickly learn the relationships and the forms of self-presentation that constitute the farm hierarchy.

How, then, does Michael's notion of corporate, managerial authority fit into all this? Around the same age as Marula, he is old enough to sit on the *khoro*, and his TshiVenda is good enough, despite his Ndebele origins. But he is not invited to join, and he gives the institution a wide berth. This is because of the elders' opinions of his role as personnel manager, and his self-understanding as a corporate figure. Michael is seen to be too interested in his own meetings, where he is able to address people alone. Moreover, he is always 'waya-waya' – rushing around on his own business in an apparently secretive manner. The papers under his arm are for his eyes only. They enable him to deliver news, not debate it, as at the supermarket development meeting. This runs against the grain of the publicly deliberative authority of the *khoro*. Just as significantly, the kind of managerial authority that Michael embodies calls into question the image of senior workers as wise elders. Through the lens of managerialism, Marula and his circle are simply lifelong farm workers, lacking education or access to a wider world beyond agriculture. No wonder then that, as Michael recounted the supermarket foundation's latest successes, Marula positioned himself next to his rival, pushed the meeting into critical debate, and shifted the focus of discussion from project goals and accomplishments to the specifics of farm life.

Unsurprisingly, Michael rejects the prerogative of the *khoro* to pass judgment. He has, in fact, approached the elders for help in the past (even reportedly appearing before the *khoro*). On one occasion, police at a roadblock found him to be in possession of a fraudulent South African passport and arrested him. Marula and another senior worker found Willem, who successfully intervened on his behalf. Yet Michael maintains that farm workers, lacking qualifications or official sanction, have no place making or enforcing laws. Real authority comes from outside, and it is the police and the army who should keep the peace.

Michael's life in the compound reflects his attitude towards the elders and their *khoro*. Whereas the status of Marula and his supervisors is buttressed by appeals for assistance and judgement, Michael sees his responsibilities rather differently. He is known in the compound to tell others to look after themselves: 'you've got your job, I've got mine'. Matters are of course more complicated. Michael does form personal relations with and helps particular people. When impressed by a newcomer's education, he may act to ensure that they are offered employment in the packshed, amounting to indoor work with higher pay. But, reflecting a more sharply bounded notion of occupational authority, Michael's assistance to others in the compound is confined to dispensing highly individualised favours.

While Marula's well-visited house suggests an extension of family life into the compound, the appearance of Michael's senior-worker house underlines his privacy. The outside is strikingly unadorned: a bare yard marked by a high hedge, containing only a low table for washing up, a disused

vegetable garden, and a crumbling mud-and-pole shed built by a previous occupant. Even in comparison to most other senior workers, Michael's yard looks basic, even neglected. This is not the case inside the house. Unlike other residents, he has bought a double bed and sprung mattress, and owns not only a large television but also hi-fi separates and floor-standing speakers.<sup>12</sup> With these he entertains guests, either watching the television or listening to music through the door, or (unusual in the compound) sitting inside. Michael's privacy limits discussion of his non-work past. Keen to highlight his professional success, he keeps details about the rest of his life to himself. For example, though he has several adult and school-going children, I was long into fieldwork before I even heard mention of them.

Michael speaks proudly of his position as 'manager of this organisation', employing distinctly corporate language. But he is also aware that his job can be framed as little more than that of a farm labourer – in the eyes of some, he is simply a clerk. This is a feeling augmented by the contrast between his own fate and that of his younger brother, a registered tour guide living in Midrand outside Johannesburg. For those, like Michael, who are disappointed with their fates but have attained a senior post on the border farms, a managerial idiom can serve to maintain a sense of self-respect. Benjamin, the storeman/clerk with whom Michael works, feels a similar ambiguity.

This is one way of dealing with a problem faced by an increasing number of Zimbabweans: how to assert their histories of education and class aspiration, now lost due to economic collapse at home and consequent geographical dislocation. Seasonal workers with higher status backgrounds and non-Venda origins assert their difference in ways that mirror Michael's. They refer to management books to criticise work dynamics and the dominant notions of authority and responsibility in the workforce. They characterise themselves through education and etiquette. And they tell stories of home that emphasise access to commodities like cars. The few couples granted their own accommodation invite guests inside their rooms rather than socialise in public. No doubt Michael feels all the more acutely the need to be not 'just' a farm labourer as he seeks out and engages the best educated of the new arrivals. His style is impressive to some with middle-class aspirations. But they are seasonal recruits who move on. And in any case, Michael remains too much of a permanent fixture at the farm for the most elite of seasonal workers to identify with him.

Meanwhile, a reaction to this same influx of relatively well-educated Zimbabweans buttresses Marula's position within the more influential permanent workforce. He has accrued widespread respect and status among permanent workers, especially TshiVenda speakers like him, after long years working his way up from shepherd to foreman. Marula and his elders are increasingly faced with recruits who draw on alternative bases of status to which they lack access: education, urban sophistication, even non-Venda-ness. But this makes their centrality and superiority within the world of the farm all the more important. Farm hierarchy is given new meaning as it confronts assertions of superiority based on personal histories far from the farming area.

While Marula's lifestyle is intended to place him at the centre of residents' existence, Michael's marks his managerial seclusion and sophistication – his difference from mere farm workers. Idioms of management and paternalism are played out even in workers' living spaces. But the managerial model is valued only by Michael and a few other residents. And the mode of sociality it promotes – with its sharp distinctions between manager and rank-and-file and between work and leisure-time responsibilities – leaves him isolated. Michael's situation is all the more difficult because he has incompatible goals. He presents himself in terms of managerial distance but, immersed in a world of paternalist hierarchy, he is nevertheless keen to assert his importance in farm dwellers' non-work lives. This is the contradiction of a managerial model in a residential farm workforce like Grootplaas's. Drawing a sharp distinction between work and leisure time, Michael turns to alternative pastoral roles, consistent with his self-understanding, which he has accrued through the interventions of the supermarket development foundation.

The supermarket foundation-funded Adult Literacy Centre – 'the School' – has offered one possibility. Certificates, accredited by a well-known South African educational institution, were issued on completion of computer-based courses in English reading and writing. Appointed senior facilitator, Michael provided guidance, oversaw work sessions, marked homework and chased up course



participants, enabling him to extend an educated style of authority into the compound. He even provoked Marula, by offering to teach him English. However, attendance wavered, no one completed a course, and the programme was eventually discontinued – a decline evident in Michael’s meeting and its accusatory references to the School. With few ways out of farm employment, workers see such qualifications as pointless. Michael’s teaching responsibility appeared similarly peripheral.

The supermarket foundation, and the role of beneficiary director, has appeared to offer Michael fresh possibilities as quasi-paternal dispenser of wealth. But these efforts have met with limited success. As in his work for the School, workers have seen Michael as too keen to underline his difference and distance from others. His model of authority is seen as incommensurable with the established, generalised responsibilities that come with seniority in the workforce. He is regarded as secretive with important information, making decisions about workers’ welfare without consulting them. It is in part because of his failure to find a central position in compound life that Michael asserts his status through stark seclusion – a bounded sense of responsibility, consonant with neoliberal ideals of individual independence.

## Conclusion

Starting from actors’ projects, perspectives and motivations, this paper has examined exactly what happens to corporate managerial norms in a workforce, and how they intersect with other models of hierarchy. It has traced the plans of the Grootplaas farmer, the tensions built into these plans, and their limited realisation through the key figure in the workforce who actually stands for managerialism. This approach has highlighted two points: the limits of neoliberal transformation as an analytical lens, and the limits to change in labour arrangements more generally.

Firstly, farmers like Willem emphasise depersonalised ‘business’ and individual responsibility in their language and behaviour. But in fact, a repertoire of corporate idioms serves to address various perceived ills. What looks like neoliberalism is often accidental – the product of unintended consequences. Secondly, corporate ‘management’ is actually performed in limited, partial ways. Willem’s performance is really to an audience off the farm, whereas he is unable to live up to these norms as employer. Instead, he places much of the onus on his ‘personnel manager’, who is caught between the status and imagined possibilities of corporatised agriculture and the everyday centrality of paternalist hierarchies and kinship networks in the workforce. In the coming years, the fragility and changeability of this strategy will be underlined. Long after my departure from the farm, Michael will be found to have used his role as work-permit broker to embezzle funds. Marginalised, with reduced pay and responsibilities, his status through the supermarket foundation will also disappear, along with Grootplaas’s contract with the supermarket itself.

A single case study cannot generalise about change on South African farms. This article’s aim has rather been to question any simple narrative. Change in labour regimes does not land in workforces from above. In a period of uncertainty in agriculture, different visions of farming – an established paternalist model and a corporate managerial one – are taken seriously for different reasons. Two visions of agriculture not only coexist, but also actively constitute each other. By illustrating the complexities of dynamics within one workforce, the article cautions against extrapolations from macro- to micro-level analysis, and against the postulation of far-reaching logics of neoliberalism or transformation. It is imperative to investigate how norms that develop in global supply chains intersect with those that govern networks of workers, and understand how key actors mediate between them.

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### Notes

1. As well as EUREPGAP, a European regulatory scheme for retailers.
2. All names are pseudonyms. The present tense, intended to capture immediacy not stasis, refers to the period of fieldwork.
3. Zimbabwe's hyperinflation ended in 2009 with the official adoption of the US Dollar, South African Rand and Botswana Pula, altering the significance of cross-border migration, although not its overall importance.
4. The year of South Africa's defining Natives Land Act, which allocated 8 per cent of land to black South Africans.
5. Stats SA estimates for adults aged 15–64. <[http://www.statssa.gov.za/PublicationsHTML/P0210September2000,2001,2002,2003,2004,2005,2006,2007.html](http://www.statssa.gov.za/PublicationsHTML/P0210September2000,2001,2002,2003,2004,2005,2006,2007/html/P0210September2000,2001,2002,2003,2004,2005,2006,2007.html)> (accessed 2 Dec. 2009).
6. Thanks to Keith Breckenridge for suggesting this term.
7. See endnote 1.
8. The name of the supermarket and foundation are omitted to maintain anonymity.
9. Pick-up truck.
10. Whips.
11. Reportedly, this is also often the case in rural Zimbabwe.
12. Unlike Marula's investments, most of Michael's are potentially mobile. In the last few years, Michael began buying building materials, to establish a (now-complete) home next to his brother's (mother's sister's son's) house in Beitbridge District in Zimbabwe. Marula, unlike the majority of workers, has nowhere else to go except his mother's house in Musina town 60 km away.

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