

The Paradoxes of Class: Displacement and Repositioning in Zimbabwe's Crisis

Amanda Hammar¹

¹Copenhagen University, CAS, Denmark

aha@teol.ku.dk

Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 introduced important if limited openings for racial repositioning and class restructuring. However, increasing austerity in the 1990s following the introduction of structural adjustment, generated new dynamics of exclusion and narrowed access to social, economic, political and symbolic resources in both rural and urban areas. Since 2000, deepening political and economic crises marked by violence, targeted mass displacement as well as the broader dislocating effects of impoverishment, 'the economy' – formal and informal, licit and illicit, on national, local and individual levels – has altered dramatically. This has had profoundly disorienting and often paradoxical effects on social relations and economic practices across the board. Among other things, 'class' itself, in the more classic sense, has been remade. With unemployment at over 90% in 2009, the formal 'working class' has almost vanished. At the same time, the former social value and financial advantages associated with formal sector jobs, have been superseded by the growing status of successful 'wheeler-dealers' working the shift-shaping spaces of an ever-widening shadow economy. In turn, the middle class has been reduced to a mere shadow of its former self with professionals such as teachers and civil servants now forced to become cross-border traders at best, sex workers at worst, merely to keep families fed. On the other end of the scale, in the increasing absence of enforceable regulations, illegal gold panners, diamond miners and foreign currency dealers have turned into multiple car and home owners, while party loyalists have joined a small, wealthy elite. All this spotlights new alignments of class with politics. Simultaneously, most former white commercial farmers, many of whom previously occupied the upper echelons of the financial bracket, have been forcibly evicted and have had to remake themselves in countless new guises and localities, often starting again from scratch. This paper will draw on a growing body of empirically grounded research to reflect on the ways in which 'class' – in articulation with race, gender and generation – is being reshaped inside and outside Zimbabwe in the context of sustained crisis and displacement, and what this means for old and new forms of livelihood, accumulation and exchange.