

Civil Society in Zimbabwe: Strategies for Emancipation

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The paper is about civil society and emancipation in contemporary Zimbabwe, with specific relation to the land movement that arose in the year 2000. I divide the paper into two sections. First of all, I identify three current understandings of civil society and by necessity raise the vexed question of the state. Two understandings (one Liberal, one Radical) are state-centric and exist within the logic of state discourses. A third understanding, also Radical, is society-centric and speaks about politics unbound from the state. The second section looks at Zimbabwe, detailing civil society as contested terrain (from the early 1990s) in the context of an emerging scholarly debate about agrarian reform and social change. This debate, which reproduces (in theory) the key political party fault-lines within Zimbabwean society, has mainly taken place within the narrow confines of state-centred discourses. As a result, controversies around Zimbabwe are in large part disengaged from the society-centred conception of civil society. However, this conception – and the politics that underpins it – is critical for thinking and doing emancipation. The state-centred discourses and practices entail a politics of exclusion that undercut popular initiatives.

The relationship between state and society in Zimbabwe has shifted since independence in 1980. In the early years, the ruling ZANU-PF party inhibited the emergence of autonomous trade unions and social movements, and took them under its institutional wings. Independent trade unions and urban civic groups arose in the 1990s, but they were met with coercion by the state. The relationship between ZANU-PF and the land movement remains contested. Urban civil society critics of the state's Fast Track land reform programme (initiated in 2001) claim that the land movement was simply an electoral ploy of ZANU-PF – from this perspective, the land movement was illegitimate. Other scholars argue that the land movement cannot be reduced neatly to the party and that the movement had (at least originally) a degree of autonomy from the party – though these scholars speak about the co-option of the movement by the state, they highlight the centrality of the 'radicalised' Zimbabwean state in agrarian transformation. Overall, the land movement (as a source of emancipatory politics) is discursively and materially thwarted.