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A Review of

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A Review of: Mlambo, Obert Bernard 2022. *Land Expropriation in Ancient Rome and Contemporary Zimbabwe: Veterans, Masculinity and War*. London: Bloomsbury

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Review

Ancient Roman and present-day Zimbabwe are very far from each other, both in time and space. However, the author, an expert on late Republican Roman history and a close and fine observer of the military and political developments of his own country nowadays, showcases astonishing similarities between them. One might again argue that human nature has remained unchanged throughout the history of mankind, as Thucydides emphasised during his own time, particularly during a civil war (stasis), such as that of Corcyra.¹ And the war, again, Thucydides taught us, is a “rough schoolmaster”.² David Konstan highlights in his *Foreword* of the book: “Mlambo combines an expert knowledge of both cases” and “the result is a moving and compelling analysis of veterans’ psychology, social conflict, political manipulation, and the need for land across two millennia”.³ The author himself clearly states that “the cross-cultural comparative analysis of the two cases serves to identify the cultural logic that connects masculinity, violence and expropriation beyond the particulars of each case”.⁴ The central concepts are therefore masculinity, violence, and expropriation, seen through the lens of practice theory, a key element of the human condition.

The book is practically constructed around the concept of *masculinity*,⁵ intrinsic part of soldier and veteran alike, the force that drives both of them. It is not at all astonishing that *masculinity* needs land as ultimate reward in unmodern societies (“patriarchal societies”, as described by the author⁶), as both ancient Rome and contemporary Zimbabwe seem to be. The land is seen as “a material base and

¹ Thuc. 3.82.2; 84.2; Reeve, 1999; Price, 2001: 6–78. For ὁ δὲ πόλεμος ... βίαιος διδάσκαλος, see also the translation of Price (2001: 9): “war is a teacher of violence”; see also *LSJ* s.v. “war teaches by violence”.

² Thuc. 3.82.2.

³ Mlambo, 2022: xiii.

⁴ Mlambo, 2022: xv.

⁵ Mlambo, 2022: 111–192.

⁶ Mlambo, 2022: 6; see also 79–90.

which, through hierarchical, established or created interdependence and solidarity among veterans and enabled them to dominate other men and women”.⁷ The concept of masculinity is thus the unit of comparison within the book, which follows an explicit comparative approach that “is intended to suggest that images of expropriation discernible in the ancient Roman sources can heuristically be analysed in comparison with an African context”.⁸ Perhaps, here P. Bourdieu’s *La domination masculine* could have been of some help: “*Manliness*, understood as sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as a capacity to fight and exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a *duty*”.⁹

In both cases, *manliness* is closely tied to land possession, as a guerrilla war veteran put it: “A landless man is a man-less man”.¹⁰ Although they were sometimes eventually proved unfit for farming, the acquired lands were given away, both in the late Republic and modern Zimbabwe.¹¹ Moving further, the author explores the connection between homosociality, land, and the army.¹² This is one of the best parts of the book, where one can see how the war veterans and their commanders created a *homosocial order*, in which “the relationship between veterans and their generals can also be understood in terms of vertical and lateral masculinities”.¹³ The bond was forged by promising land, as one of the most famous passages from Appian (*B Civ.* 4.1.3) transmits, when the triumviri promised to their legions lands especially in Campania: “To encourage the army with expectation of booty they promised them, beside other gifts, eighteen cities of Italy as colonies—cities which excelled in wealth, in the splendour of their estates and houses, and which were to be divided among them (land, buildings, and all), just as though they had been captured from an enemy in war. The most renowned among these were Capua, Rhegium, Venusia, Beneventum, Nuceria, Ariminum, and Vibo. Thus were the most beautiful parts of Italy marked out for the soldiers”.

The general view of the Roman Civil Wars is shaped by the author, drawing on the works of Lucan, Appian, and Cassius Dio, as well as scholars such as P. A. Brunt and E. Gabba, but filtered through the lens of masculinity.¹⁴ Such a perspective, along with *status* and *gender*, which I think are more than appropriate in that context, brings a fresh air to a long-standing and favourite topic of ancient historians. The rhetoric of masculinity and effeminacy through a luxurious life was a favourite way of mocking political and military opponents, as seen in the examples discussed by the author, drawing from Cassius Dio’s account (50.27.3–5; 50.27.8).¹⁵

For the case of Zimbabwe, the author rightly stresses that, although still largely traditional as a society, the country is deeply embedded in the capitalist world.¹⁶ Thus, outside pressure on the local traditional economy is tremendous and has no counterpart in the late Republican Roman period. Moreover, the war against foreign colonisation had an important ethnic aspect, a liberation from the white colonial elite. Nevertheless, the author points out that “the central quest in both societies by veterans was to gain land or other rewards for war by taking up and expressing peculiar masculinities”.¹⁷

⁷ Mlambo, 2022: 6–7.

⁸ Mlambo, 2022: 25.

⁹ Bourdieu, 2002: 50–51.

¹⁰ Mlambo, 2022: 79.

¹¹ Mlambo, 2022: 82.

¹² Mlambo, 2022: 111–132.

¹³ Mlambo, 2022: 132.

¹⁴ Mlambo, 2022: 12–13, more or less taking from Connell, 1995.

¹⁵ Mlambo, 2022: 14 and 117, respectively.

¹⁶ Mlambo, 2022: 34.

¹⁷ Mlambo, 2022: 35.

However, elements of civil war still existed in Zimbabwe, since the farms owned by black people were also seized and looted by the war veterans.¹⁸

More caution should be exercised, in my opinion, when comparing the Roman policies towards North Africa with the British colonial actions. Obviously, the classical civilisation played a role in the colonial rhetoric, but also in Mugabe's speeches, as he studied Latin in his youth, part of the University of Zimbabwe's curriculum, as the author also underlined.¹⁹ However, no similarities between ancient and modern colonisations are present.

Violence is another common feature of the behaviour of the veterans in both historical contexts; violence against anyone who seems to stand in their way of pursuing lands and rewards.²⁰ Sometimes the trigger of violent behaviour is collective madness, which led almost in every case to murder – see also the sedition of the Pannonian legions at the beginning of Tiberius' reign, as a handbook example (Tac. *Ann.* 1.16.1: *cum Pannonicas legiones seditio incessit, nullis novis causis, nisi quod mutatus princeps licentiam turbarum et ex civili bello spem praemiorum ostendebat*).²¹ In such chaotic and dangerous circumstances (“in a volatile civil war context, there is strong emphasis on the legitimacy of violence”),²² even their commanders dare not mess with them.²³ Spending many years in violent environments as soldiers shaped their behaviour, which was often characterised as mad (*legiones turbatae* – Tac. *Ann.* 1.31.1, referring to the army in Germania) and unrestrained, both during the Roman Civil Wars and the unrest in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s.²⁴ In this context, I find the author's analysis of Lucan's (5.245) *frigidus ensis* (I add also *frigidus gladius* referring to Pompey, Luc. 7.502–503) excellent: “the sexual overtones imply a view of war as masculine, and of refraining from war as feminine or effeminate”.²⁵

The body of the veteran incorporates all these attributes: masculinity, disorder, and violent expropriation. The author, following explicitly M. Foucault,²⁶ deals with those aspects in an entire chapter, starting with the very “making of a veteran's body”.²⁷ The body takes the route from physical appearance to public symbol through practice and performance, carrying the signs of war and battles.²⁸ Thus, the concepts of *masculinity* and *veteran* “bear witness to an intense investment in the body”.²⁹

The book indeed concludes that “the Roman and African veteran's means to reach his goal of attaining land were very similar, particularly an emphasis on hyper-masculinity”,³⁰ being a manifesto of “an African approach to Classics”, which in my view is more than welcome. As the author himself stresses, “juxtaposing ancient Rome and Africa allows veteran masculinities to be explored in ways that deepen our understanding of societies from far-off times”.

To sum up, the study is well-conducted and valuable for both scholars and students of ancient Rome and those from the broader field of social sciences, as it is, in fact, an essay on masculinity, violence,

¹⁸ Mlambo, 2022: 43–44.

¹⁹ Mlambo, 2022: 38–43.

²⁰ Mlambo, 2022: 93–110.

²¹ Trans. “When a mutiny arose suddenly among the Pannonian legions, there were no new causes, except that the change of emperor offered them the freedom for disturbances and from civil war the hope of rewards.”

²² Mlambo, 2022: 167.

²³ Mlambo, 2022: 95 and 115–117; see App. *B Civ.* 5.2.17; 5.13.128–129.

²⁴ Mlambo, 2022: 101–109.

²⁵ Mlambo, 2022: 106.

²⁶ Mlambo, 2022: 140.

²⁷ Mlambo, 2022: 133–160.

²⁸ Mlambo, 2022: 143–145; and again Tac. *Ann.* 1.17.2: *plerique truncato ex vulneribus corpore tolerant*; during the sedition in Pannonia, the legionnaires showed their bodies full of scars.

²⁹ Mlambo, 2022: 160.

³⁰ Mlambo, 2022: 193.

and their roles in the social and political milieus. After years of civil wars, Rome was not the same anymore, since, as Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.3.7) wrote, there were not many that had seen the Republic: *quotus quisque reliquus, qui rem publicam vidisset?* The role played by the armies and veterans in that change was very important. Obviously, the facts were known and tackled at large in previous scholarship, but the author brought some new insights, drawing from his African contemporary experience, which I find very useful.

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