

## Towards a Politics for Soil Restitution

Lesley Green

Bio: Lesley Green is Professor of Anthropology and Deputy Director of Environmental Humanities South at the University of Cape Town. This article was presented at the Conference "[Agroecology for the 21st Century](https://www.agroecologyconference.co.za)" <https://www.agroecologyconference.co.za> held in Cape Town, on January 30 2019, and forms part of her forthcoming book *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonising South Africa* (Duke University Press).

In the 1840s a young journalist started work on the story of the closing of forests to peasants. Unable to collect fuel, or gather wildfoods in common lands, their household ecologies could no longer function, and most had no option but to move to towns in search of paid labour.

The journalist's story was titled "[Debates on law of fallen wood](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Rheinische_Zeitung.pdf)" [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx\\_Rheinische\\_Zeitung.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Rheinische_Zeitung.pdf) and published in 1842. In it, he compares the laws that had closed the commons in different countries of Europe. As factories and cities increased in size, so too did the need for commercial agriculture: on a scale that could feed many more than those who lived off it. But as more farming estates were driving more people off the land, the journalist observed, soils were depleting

That journalist's name was Karl Marx. His concern with the depletion of soils and labour threads throughout the three volumes that developed out of his story on fallen wood: "[Capital](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf)". <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>

Marx keenly observed the depletion of soils and labourers when large-scale agriculture stripped lands of their nutrient cycle: "All progress in capitalistic agriculture," [he wrote](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf> "is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility." (p.330) He argued that new ecologies of life under capital had broken the metabolic cycles that fed soils. This process is known as his theory of "[metabolic rift](https://monthlyreview.org/2013/12/01/marx-rift-universal-metabolism-nature/)". <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/12/01/marx-rift-universal-metabolism-nature/>

Metabolic rift expanded across oceans as soils were colonised for the ever-growing food demands of Europe's industrial economy. Without [resetting mouths and outsourcing for soil](#),

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-520-24870-0> Europe's industries would never have been built.

I want to ask here: what are the implications of Marx' observations about soil for land restitution in South Africa? Could we think about land restitution as not only about reclaiming Black access to land, but also about revolutionising the relationship of capitalism and coloniality, with food production and soils?

As the commons in Europe, and later Africa, India, the Pacific, China, Japan, Australia, the Middle East and North and South America came under coloniality, they came under a new knowledge regime that comprised mathematical measurement and land surveying, combined with the science of mapping, and the political belief system of individual property ownership, that would come to be written in stone in courts of law, and protected and implemented by soldiers like those based at the Castle in Cape Town.

If we understand land restitution now as only a question of territory and economic justice, we miss something important: that under capital, the form of relationships between people and soils began to change. Capitalism replaced the partnerships of people with ecology and soils, to mastery over soils.

Relationships are like fractals: they tend to repeat their form over and over. The relationship between capital and mastery reproduced itself with astonishing speed, not only in new colonies, but over women as patriarchal networks financialised a new turf-based masculinity. Mastery became entrenched as a form of relationships in households, changing the oikology (the original Greek word oikology meant *household*) into property-based, finance-based ownership of plants and animals and soils. Wildlands were torn up by ploughs for ever-longer chains of food supply. Over time the mastery of horse and oxen via the cart, was replaced by the mastery of gears and wheels and engines for ploughing and moving produce, and the mastery of chemistry to fuel and oil their movement. In order to produce those fuels, lands elsewhere were torn up.

Soils soon became exhausted. In the mid to late 1800s both Karl Marx and Charles Darwin focused on the grand challenge of their time: how could landowners add value to soil?

As a landowner, Darwin's fields had lain fallow while he had travelled the world to research earth history. When he came back, he found his fields fertile, and covered in earthworm "castings" – i.e. the soil they cast out of their little bodies as they burrowed through the soil. Was it earthworms that were making his soils so productive? The question became his final research project, and final book. [http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1881\\_Worms\\_F1357.pdf](http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1881_Worms_F1357.pdf)

Karl Marx, for his part, observed not the earthworms, but the bird guano that England was importing by the ship-load from Peru, knowing that that bird guano was adding value to the lands of those who could afford it, and that it had been extracted from Peruvian islands by Chinese labourers working in terrible conditions. The exhaustion of soils that were without leaf cover or burrowing animals or a wild mix of plants, was a wake-up moment for Marx who saw in capitalism an unsustainable ecology. Capitalism was breaking the metabolism of soils – or, more precisely, causing a rift in the metabolism between soil and people and animals and grasslands and forests. This "metabolic rift" was not sustainable, Marx argued. *He foresaw that by breaking the web of life, industrial agriculture would create ever-more need for labour and for resources that would artificially bridge the ecological gaps newly inserted in the web of life.* It was the beginning of what Jason Moore has called “Capitalism in the Web of Life”.

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53c91652e4b09f1cf07c75bc/t/57286b5f9f72666b6cec29d7/1462266731162/Moore%3B+Capitalism+in+the+Web+of+Life+%5BIntroduction%5D\(1\).pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53c91652e4b09f1cf07c75bc/t/57286b5f9f72666b6cec29d7/1462266731162/Moore%3B+Capitalism+in+the+Web+of+Life+%5BIntroduction%5D(1).pdf) And it was brutal. Nothing was off limits to feed the new behemoth.

That brutality was so extreme, and the costs of Peruvian bird guano so high, that the new class of European capitalists sought the bones of soldiers <https://medium.com/study-of-history/the-bones-of-waterloo-a3beb35254a3> from the battle fields of Waterloo, to grind up into fertiliser. Who were coloniality’s cannibals?

In the USA, the ecocide of the herds of millions of bison <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/bison-skulls-pile-used-fertilizer-1870/> provided bones for fertiliser. Who were coloniality’s poachers?

In the early 1900s, the discovery that gunpowder encouraged plant growth, meant that the huge stockpiles of gunpowder left over after World War I, could supply what industrial agriculture had been looking for. And World War I chlorine gas was the precursor to pesticides.

In South Africa, Mastery took several forms, each linked to new technologies for taking ownership of various parts of the ecological metabolism.

In the 1600s and 1700s, the Dutch achieved land mastery via land surveying and law to establish as scientific fact the new belief system in *baasskap*-based land ownership, as rolled out by the Dutch Heeren XVII back in Amsterdam who funded the castle and its soldiers to claim land and start a farm in what is now central Cape Town.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, the windmill and the train and the airplane and the steamboat and the refrigerator and the use of pesticides made possible British mastery of ever greater swathes of land.

After 1948, the apartheid state used the distribution of fertilisers and fish-detecting sonar [https://www.academia.edu/25182226/The\\_Fire\\_and\\_the\\_Eye\\_Fishers\\_Knowledge\\_Echo-sounding\\_and\\_the\\_Invention\\_of\\_the\\_Skipper\\_in\\_the\\_St\\_Helena\\_Bay\\_Pelagic\\_Fishery\\_c.1930-1960](https://www.academia.edu/25182226/The_Fire_and_the_Eye_Fishers_Knowledge_Echo-sounding_and_the_Invention_of_the_Skipper_in_the_St_Helena_Bay_Pelagic_Fishery_c.1930-1960) (straight from submarine warfare) to strengthen its capacity to generate white wealth through agriculture & fisheries. The large cement grain silo was born: because the growing chemical industry was generating stronger forms of cement to stop flows of wind and water onto grain, and move grain via railways: this was the mastery of agriculture in space. The use of pesticides and rodenticides and dessicants and preservatives and refrigeration was the mastery of industrial agriculture over time: controlling the timescale of rotting, and controlling the new pests that were thriving in relation to the new industrial ecology of food.

The control of food in space and time meant that food could become a financial commodity that would bolster national economies over and above household ecologies. The shift from household ecology to a global financialised economy of food, was supported by a whole new financial industry for food production, including mastery of the future through the introduction of commodity pricing of food on global stock markets via “Futures” that could be sold and traded. Stock market speculation on food prices at the end of a growing season, brings not only farm land into capital, but farm futures. "Futures" owners enables capital to own not only land, but the growing seasons. The system allows farmers to own land, but indentures farmers to bets on end-of-season prices. The system moves full circle: property owners become indentured labourers, and this situation is sold as freedom.

This kind of farming completes the split of ecology from a financialised economy based on future extraction. All of which makes it ever harder for farmers in the informal economy to find a place in it, and succeed as farmers of tomatoes, grains, or apples. Because success in producing for the global food system requires costly inputs to make every connection, in a capitalist web of life: farmers need to buy pesticides and herbicides and soil minerals and patented seeds. Managing financial relationships with seed companies; stock markets; chemical companies; banks; distribution agencies requires of agro-industry farmers to become masters over life and servants of capital, not partners with either.

Even worse, the soils that are to be inherited by land restitution farmers, are exhausted and damaged – by plastics, fertilisers, pesticides, climate change, and ground water extraction – so much so that achieving yields is ever harder, and requiring ever more finance to connect the gaps in the web of soil life. The creation of new debt for emerging Black farmers may look like investment in justice -- but it requires unmanageable risk -- sometimes all the way to bankruptcy. Permanent indebtedness to seed companies like Monsanto and Denel means that even when the

wind blows or a bird flies, a farmer can be criminalised because pollens fly in the wind, or birds poop a trademarked seed on their fields. Surely the mass suicides of farmers in India is a warning sign for SA that debt-based farming is a system that eats people.

The call for land restitution finds itself in this minefield. How will small-scale farmers avoid getting locked into a system that depends on producing indebtedness?

At this moment, in Xolobeni in Mpondoland at the edge of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, the struggle of farmers, households and villages is the struggle to hold onto land where people still live in relationship with soil and water. In Xolobeni three weeks ago, at Nonhle Mbuthuma's homestead, I shared in an 11-dish meal one night, almost all from the fields and the kraal. In Xolobeni, you can drink from the streams. But government wants the people of Xolobeni to trade homesteads and fields for cash, in order to allow mining. And then what? Some might find work at petrol stations and supermarkets, in order to buy tired vegetables in plastic bags. What about the others? Is this what government wants in a time of climate change, looming drought, mass hunger nationally, and in a time when it wants to promote land restitution?

In the struggle over the Phillippi Horticultural Area (PHA) in Cape Town, the situation is similar. The attempt to protect farmland from development is being opposed in court by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, and the City of Cape Town.

How it is that these contradictions come to appear rational, logical and reasonable?

In both the PHA and Xolobeni, communities are wanting to live with and from the soil and the water. In both situations, people are linking ecology and economy. The household, the rivers and aquifers and fields, health and wellbeing are understood as a single whole.

But for the government officials who oppose PHA and Xolobeni struggles in court and in the cabinet, the struggle for land is still being understood as hectares and acres: as space, and as the basis of a financial economy in which wealth is created via developers or miners.

Economy, in that view, is the opposite of ecology. Indeed, in much government thinking, the political choice for post-Apartheid South Africa has always been a choice between economic development, and environmentalism. That binary arises because Apartheid is understood primarily as an economic crime, and the environment is understood as a place that the wealthy go to on their holidays. "Green", in other words, is "white".

Those who profit from this worldview, that separates ecology from economy, tend to argue land is something that can kick-start the economy -- as if land is a motorbike. We know the motorbike, kick-start model of economy by many names: "trickle down" is one; BEE is another. But the problem with trickle-down is that it is generally more a situation of gush-up

<https://www.ft.com/content/925376ca-3d1d-11e1-8129-00144feabdc0> (to quote Arundhati Roy). And the problem of BEE, as so many South Africans know, is that it has overwhelmingly benefitted an economic elite, many of whom are now facing state capture inquiries.

Current government thinking about land restitution has not yet begun to recognise that the idea of splitting ecology from economy is an invention of capital and coloniality. It is difficult to understand why even officials with a background in the Communist Party, close their eyes to this.

A politics of land restitution can be about more than restoring ownership of territory – including about restoring the breaks imposed in soil ecology under industrial agriculture. Economic justice in land restitution requires an ecological approach to land, in which an equitable partnership of farmers with soil and with its diverse creatures is able to undo debt-based exploitation of farmers. Farmers need to be supported to work with the partnerships that make healthy soils for free: partnerships with plants, soil microbes, insects, cows, earthworms, burrowing animals -- and time![https://www.academia.edu/16045002/Making\\_time\\_for\\_soil\\_Technoscientific\\_futurity\\_and\\_the\\_pace\\_of\\_care](https://www.academia.edu/16045002/Making_time_for_soil_Technoscientific_futurity_and_the_pace_of_care) Because these partnerships take time to make soil.

Relationships of partnership, not relationships of mastery, will nurture the country's soils and people. Understanding and promoting the free processes of soil creation and nourishment must be as much of a central concern for the Department of Agriculture, as is the principle of land restitution.

Relations of mastery over soil -- industrial ecology -- has put this planet at risk. Dust storms, and loss of soil, and loss of the life in soil, make it a necessity to restore the kinds of partnerships that heal soil.

In sum: When land restitution is being thought of as handing over baasskap -- the relationship of being a master of land -- it perpetuates the problem, because it is a system that places into the hands of capital, the processes that make life. That handover puts farmers at the mercy of the wolf at the door. Let us move to build a soil politics with and for small scale farmers, and reclaim the web of life from capital.