

REMAKING HISTORY: CITIZENSHIP, POWER, AND THE RECASTING OF HEROES AND VILLAINS

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2 October 2013

In a reworked narrative on nationalism, veterans were cast as the heroic liberators of the land from whites, seen as unreconstructed racists, and a former colonial power which was, twenty years after independence, portrayed more fervently than ever as the obstacle to 'real' decolonisation. ~ Jocelyn Alexander¹

Summary

Joseph Hanlon, Jeanette Manjengwa and Teresa Stewart's book, *Zimbabwe Takes Back the Land*,² gives fresh impetus to Scoones' narrative on land.³ Their blurb on the back cover recognises the deprecations of the Mugabe government, but assures readers that "ordinary" Zimbabwean settlers took charge of their destinies, are improving their lives, and are becoming increasingly productive. Like Scoones, it is fundamentally a plea to the international community to support new farmers on contested land. The main thrust of their argument is that Zimbabweans justifiably and successfully took back their land from white Rhodesian colonialist farmers. In this paper I challenge their remaking of history that casts war veterans as heroes and white farmers as villains. I focus primarily on identity, citizenship, and belonging: what it means to be Zimbabwean. Contrary to this reworking of the nationalist narrative, I argue that the land invasions were primarily used as a means to crush the opposition and as a tool of patronage ahead of crucial elections. But more than this, land seizures follow a well-practiced pattern of widespread and systematic violence against civilians – from Gukurahundi and Murambatsvina, to premeditated political violence. Robert Mugabe's single-minded purpose has been to maintain his imperious powers against the sovereign will of the people at any cost. The wounds of history run too deep to be sanitised by apologies for his authoritarian and bloody rule.

To be or not to be

How would *you* identify yourself? More to the point, how are you identified by others and by the state? Actually, every state has a simple way of identifying someone. It is whether a person – of whatever age, sex, race, colour or creed – is a citizen or not. A citizen is granted special

¹ Jocelyn Alexander (2006) *The Unsettled Land*. James Curry: Oxford (p.185)

² Published in paperback in 2013 by Jacana

³ Ian Scoones, et al. (2010) *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Realities*. Weaver Press

status and rights, but is also expected to shoulder certain responsibilities. Section 35(2) of our Constitution states that:

All Zimbabwean citizens are equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship and are equally subject to the duties and obligations of citizenship.

Citizens are not only entitled to the protection of the State and to a passport, but to fundamental human rights: to equality and non-discrimination; to join a political party of their choice and vote; to justice and access to independent and impartial courts; and to own property and have that property protected from unlawful deprivation. For their part, citizens are required to respect the Constitution and laws of the country and pay their taxes.

The idea of citizenship, identity and belonging goes to the heart of *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land*. The very title begs the question: from whom did Zimbabwe take back its land? The answer is found in the authors' diligently constructed narrative that compares Zimbabwe's war veterans with white farmers in Rhodesia. Their story of Rhodesia starts with the removal of black families from their ancestral land under the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and their resettlement in overcrowded communal areas in the 1940s. From there, the narrative moves to the settlement of ex-servicemen after the Second World War onto farms carved out of Southern Rhodesia. After carefully selected quotes from the 1960s about underutilised white farms and "week-end" farmers, the authors focus on the subsidies required to sustain supposedly inefficient white commercial farmers during the war years before Independence.

But the authors make the oddest comparison. Why did they choose to compare Zimbabwe's new black resettlement farmers to white farmers from the Rhodesia era? Why not make the more valid and obvious comparison with those whites who had farmed in Zimbabwe for 20 years. Well, because it did not serve their narrative. Instead, they set out to deliberately identify white farmers with the discredited minority Rhodesian regime. Their purpose was to associate white farmers in the minds of their readers with the forced removal of black families from their homes and land, destroying their crop, imposing collective fines on the black population and, they claim, by "bombing villages". They closely follow the nationalist narrative that links former white farmers to colonial usurpers by claiming that "Zimbabweans" have merely taken back land that was rightfully theirs. Indeed, it is written in the Constitution. Section 72(7) states that:

- (a) under colonial domination the *people of Zimbabwe* were unjustifiably dispossessed of their land and other resources without compensation;
- (b) the people consequently took up arms in order to regain their land and political sovereignty, and this ultimately resulted in the Independence of Zimbabwe in 1980;

- (c) the *people of Zimbabwe* must be enabled to re-assert their rights and regain ownership of their land.⁴ [Emphasis added]

So, just who are the “people of Zimbabwe”? In this narrative, it presumably includes all black citizens. However, it implicitly excludes those citizens of white descent. And this is precisely the way in which Hanlon differentiates his heroes from his villains. Zimbabweans are those resourceful but hard-done-by black citizens. White farmers are the cosseted and inefficient former Rhodesians and nominal citizens. Zimbabweans are the victims of colonialism who must reclaim their rights to their lost lands. White Rhodesian farmers were colonialist land-grabbers who must lose theirs. Zimbabweans, led by war veterans, only took back the land – in like manner – what was stolen from them in the first place. End of story.

This narrative’s compelling simplicity and its repetition, *ad nauseam*, is a gift for propaganda. But its logic is deeply flawed. White farmers are not Rhodesians, but Zimbabweans—in every sense of the word. Unlike many of their erstwhile Rhodesian compatriots who left Zimbabwe to settle in other countries, many whites chose to live and work with Zimbabwe’s nationalist government, took out Zimbabwean citizenship, and hold Zimbabwean IDs and passports. Many had opposed the Smith regime and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to building a progressive and non-racial society. Others took heart from the reconciliatory inaugural address given by a victorious Robert Mugabe. “I urge you,” he said:

whether you are black or white, to join me in a new pledge to forget our grim past, forgive and forget, join hands in a new amity, *and together as Zimbabweans*, trample upon racialism, tribalism and regionalism, and work to reconstruct and rehabilitate our society as we reinvigorate our economic machinery.⁵ [Emphasis added]

Like other loyal Zimbabwean citizens, white farmers contributed their experience and skills to agricultural production, obeyed the law, and paid their taxes. Imbued with a belief in the constitutional protections afforded to all citizens, the white farming community continued to invest with confidence in the agricultural sector. Hanlon and his co-authors quote Selby’s research of 70 farms in Concession where 74% of these farms had been sold at least once since Independence and 20% had been sold more than once.⁶ The vast majority of white farmers had therefore, like a growing number of their black compatriots, paid the full market value for their farms, including land, and were granted full legal title to it. They did not steal land from anyone. For the avoidance of doubt: white farmers were Zimbabwean citizens who bought land in terms of Zimbabwean law and whose title was recognised by the State of Zimbabwe, by Zimbabwe’s courts of law, and by international law.

⁴ It comes as no surprise that this excerpt is repeated in Zanu(PF)’s 2103 Election Manifesto that borrows its title, ‘Taking Back the Economy’, directly from Hanlon’s book.

⁵ Robert Mugabe, Transcript of *Address to the Nation by the Prime Minister Elect*. 4th March 1980. Ministry of Information. Immigration and Tourism, Zimbabwe (p.3)

⁶ Hanlon, et al. *ibid.* (p.57) quoting Angus Selby (2006) *Commercial Farmers and the State: Interest Group Politics and Land Reform in Zimbabwe*. D.Phil, University of Oxford

When a State turns on its Citizens

Herein lies the flaw – nay, the injustice – in the national narrative on land, the Constitution, and Hanlon’s argument. It is to demonise and discriminate against a class of Zimbabwe citizens – white farmers – not on the basis of any wrongdoing, but by associating them with deeds done by others of the same race, in another era, and by another government. It is to persecute a particular minority of citizens who had no control over the policies and events over a century ago, and who cannot possibly be held accountable for action taken by the Rhodesian authorities decades earlier. It is to punish the children and grandchildren for the deeds of their mothers, fathers and grandparents and forebears. In fact, it is worse, because “taking back the land” through intimidation and violence was based purely on race. Some white farmers came from other countries, and were neither British nor Rhodesian. They were discriminated against only because they were white. The SADC Tribunal, an international court, said as much.

... it is clear to us that those effects [of Constitutional provisions on land] have had an unjustifiable and disproportionate impact upon a group of individuals distinguished by race such as the Applicants [white farmers]. We consider that the differentiation of treatment meted out to the Applicants also constitutes discrimination, as the criteria for such differentiation are not reasonable and objective, but arbitrary and are based primarily on considerations of race.⁷

It matters not one iota what crimes or wrongdoing were committed by others of the same race, it is a travesty of justice to hold the innocent to account for the guilty. By intentionally recasting and vilifying law-abiding Zimbabwean citizens as conniving, indolent, and unreconstructed old white Rhodesian farmers, Hanlon and his co-authors legitimise and venerate the brutal, widespread and systematic attacks by war veterans and the state security machinery against its own defenceless citizens. But it was not just white commercial farmers who had to flee their farms: thousands upon thousands of black farm workers and their families were driven from the homes, their sources of livelihood, and their access to health care and schools.

The author’s eye-for-an-eye invective spares no room for bourgeois niceties. For them, as in all revolutions like the *Third Chimurenga*, casualties – even on a large scale – are inevitable consequences to achieve the desired result. But, as I try to show, they confuse means and ends, and objectives and justifications. Taking back the land became a convenient justification driven by the do-or-die determination to maintain the regimes’ deadly grip on political power. To give legitimacy to the savagery of the land invasions and blunt any criticism, the authors airbrush out the gory details, revise down the numbers of victims, use anecdotal evidence, and apply the

⁷ *Campbell and Others vs Republic of Zimbabwe* SADC (T) Case No. 2/2007.

technique of equivalence where none exists. They studiously ignore the evidence from the very sources they quote.

Myth and Reality

As evidence of exaggerated and unwarranted criticism of the Mugabe regime, they quote a Zimbabwean contestant in Britain who faced deportation. She had said that she faced a “firing squad” if she returned to Zimbabwe. What they chose not to quote was another Zimbabwean in Britain who was denied refugee status by the Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber): a ruling that was upheld by the Lord Justices of the England and Wales Court of Appeal. The Tribunal rejected her application because, as a member of a group that had invaded farms – presumably led by war veterans – she inflicted brutal injuries on farm workers.⁸ These, the Court found, were such grave and inhuman acts that they constituted a crime against humanity. The Tribunal also had found that there were compelling reasons to believe that “Zanu(PF) policies, as executed by the Zanu(PF) youth militia or youth brigade, amounted to crimes against humanity because they were directed predominately against civilians and were widespread and systematic.” The authors, in their remaking of history, ignore these gross human rights violations which were committed by the very war veterans and the party’s youth militia they so admire. With a callousness that is hard to comprehend, they equate the violent eviction of farm workers and their families to nothing more than job losses caused by the government’s structural adjustment policies in the 1990s.

So how do they reinvent history in order to dissociate their heroes from the worst excesses of organised state and party-sponsored political violence that accompanied the land invasions? First, they conjure up an image of battle-hardened veterans of the war of liberation, who not only led a just social movement, but who had the motivation and military skills to singlehandedly take back the land without the backing of the Zanu(PF)-controlled state security machinery. And, second, they dissociate the entire process of land invasions from the political imperatives of Mugabe and ZANU(PF). According to their version of events, the land invasions which followed the defeat of the draft constitution in February 2000 referendum “was not a Zanu(PF) initiative – it was the war veterans in *opposition* of Zanu(PF).”⁹ They go on to suggest that the notion that Mugabe was responsible for the land occupations is a “myth”.¹⁰

Contrary to this so-called myth, however, England’s Immigration Tribunal not only saw the Mugabe regime as directly responsible for the land invasions, but also saw the invasions for what they really were:

⁸ *SK (Zimbabwe) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2012] EWCA Civ 807 (19 June 2012)

⁹ Hanlon, et, al, *ibid.*(p.76)

¹⁰ *Ibid*, (p.212)

... farm invasions were part of widespread systematic attacks against the civilian population of farmers and farm workers, carried out not just with the full knowledge of the regime but as a deliberate act of policy by it, with the intention of advancing its grip on power, suppressing opposition, and helping its supporters.

This simply confirmed what Zimbabwe's own Supreme Court had found as early as December 2000:

A network of organisations, operating with complete disregard for the law, has been allowed to take over from government. War veterans, villagers, and unemployed townspeople have simply moved onto farms. They have been supported, encouraged, transported and financed by party officials, public servants, the CIO, and the army.¹¹

The authors, under the illusion of their own imaginings, even turn a blind eye to evidence from the very source material they quote. Lloyd Sachikonye, in his book, *When a State turns on its Citizens*, observes that the defeat in the 2000 referendum instilled a genuine fear that ZANU(PF) could lose the forthcoming elections. The party therefore organised the invasion of white farms with two strategic objectives in mind: to destroy the political base of the MDC amongst farm-workers, and to parcel out seized land to buy voter support ahead of elections.¹² This was why Nelson Marongwe said the occupations were politically motivated, rather than by social or moral considerations.¹³ Militant war veterans had taken the lead in ZANU(PF)'s official campaign strategy of farm occupations, but only, in Marongwe words, *with direct state support*.¹⁴ As for the myth of Mugabe's responsibility for the land invasions, Sachikonye identified two key players: "Mugabe himself, representing his party and state, and Chenjerai Hunzvi, leading war veterans to share in the spoils."¹⁵

A History of Violence

But why did Mugabe suddenly embark on such a reckless course of action: riding roughshod over the rule of law by invading farms and putting the economy at risk – and risking international censure? Why was he prepared to use such coercion and violence to seize farms when he had all the executive powers, a parliamentary supermajority, and the legal means necessary to carry out a perfectly fair and orderly land reform programme to correct the historical imbalances in land? Why did he wait 20 years before turning on white Zimbabwean citizens, who had owned farms legally and, contrary to Hanlon's ascertains, contributed so much to the economy? And what did Roy Bennett, a senior member of the opposition, mean

¹¹ Supreme Court ruling in December 2000 quoted by Zimbabwe's former Chief Justice Anthony R. Gubbay (2009) *The Progressive Erosion of the Rule of Law in Independent Zimbabwe*. Third International Rule of Law Lecture, Bar of England and Wales: London (p.15)

¹² Sachikonye, L. (2011) *When the State turns on its Citizens: Institutionalized Violence and Political Culture*. Jacana. (p.33)

¹³ Marongwe, N. (2003) Farm occupation and occupiers in the new politics of land in Zimbabwe. In A. Hammer, B. Raftopoulos and S. Jensen. *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business*. Weaver Press. Harare

¹⁴ Marongwe, *ibid*.

¹⁵ Sachikonye, *ibid*. (p.34)

when he said that the “rhetoric of land reform and the constant harping about race and inequality was another smokescreen”?¹⁶ He meant that Mugabe cynically resurrected a nationalist narrative on land to justify his ruthless and unlawful invasions to achieve his political ends. He declared war against white farmers, the *Third Chimurenga*, not so much because his enemies were white, nor because they broke the law, but because he believed that they threatened his hold on power.

This is part of the bigger picture, the untold story that Hanlon, Manjengwa and Stewart choose to sanitise. By creating the fiction that the seizure of white farms was divorced from Mugabe’s wider political objectives, they would have us believe that the invasions were a justifiable end in itself. Rather than seeing the pattern of Mugabe’s self-evident history of violence, they accept his self-serving explanations – his smokescreens – at face value. Just as they refuse to see the Fast Track occupations as a pretext to dismantle a key opposition constituency ahead of the June 2000 elections, they are drawn into defending Mugabe’s other justifications for violence, including Gukurahundi and Murambatsvina. And, by employing spurious arguments based on equivalence, they implicitly condone Mugabe’s violent and politically-charged campaigns to maintain his unfettered grip on power.

Consider, first, Gukurahundi. Hanlon calls this a ‘war’, justifying the killings as an ‘overreaction’ to South Africa’s policy of destabilisation. But the extent of repression far exceeded the threat posed by the relatively small number of armed dissidents, which never exceeded 400.¹⁷ And, as Alexander makes clear, it extended well beyond the government’s own assessment of the end to South African intervention.¹⁸ *Breaking the Silence*, which the authors quote, tells a very different story. Start with motive. When Mugabe formed the North Korean-trained 5 Brigade in 1981, whose commanders were answerable only to him, ZAPU opposition leader Joshua Nkomo feared that 5 Brigade was formed “for the possible imposition of a one-party state in our country.”¹⁹ Next, Mugabe and other ruling party leaders began to ratchet up the invective against ZAPU and its followers. This culminated in the “discovery” of large arms caches on ZAPU-owned farms, providing Mugabe with the pretext to dismiss Nkomo and other ZAPU cabinet ministers; arrest the top ZIPRA commanders (Dabengwa, Masuku, and four others) on treason charges; and – notably – seize all ZAPU-owned farms and property. Then, in January 1983, Mugabe unleashed his murderous 5 Brigade against the civilian population in Matabeleland North.

Within weeks, its troops had murdered more than *two thousand civilians*, beaten thousands more, and destroyed hundreds of homesteads. Most of the dead were shot in

¹⁶ Roy Bennett *Smoke and mirrors: another look at politics and ethnicity in Zimbabwe* Address at Rhodes House, Oxford, 29 May 2012

¹⁷ Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice (1997) *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands (1980 to 1988)*. CCPJ and Legal Resources Foundation

¹⁸ *Ibid*, (p.129)

¹⁹ *Breaking the Silence*, (p.45) Ref: *The Chronicle*, 25 August, 1981

public executions, often after being forced to dig their own graves in front of family and fellow villagers.²⁰

This was not war, as Mugabe recently suggested, but massacres on the scale of Srebrenica for which General Ratko Mladić is on trial for genocide at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Mugabe's attempt to deflect responsibility for the *Gukurahundi* massacres onto delinquent soldiers²¹ is contradicted by what the Catholic Commission's report called the "double-edged conflict":

On the one hand, the Government continued to target genuine dissidents with the help of 4 Brigade, 6 Brigade, the Paratroopers, the Police Support Unit and the CIO. On the other hand, they deliberately targeted civilians through the use mainly of 5 Brigade, but also through CIO and, in 1985, Zanu(PF) Youth Brigades.²²

Hanlon's reference to *Gukurahundi* as a war is particularly repugnant because he equates the deliberate mass murder of Zimbabwean civilians to the unintentional civilian casualties in the United States' war against terror and the Taliban. He then adds insult to injury by equating President Obama to President Mugabe by suggesting that "both the United States and Zimbabwe have created leaders who find this acceptable."²³

A crushed and humiliated Joshua Nkomo and his party were eventually incorporated into Zanu(PF) by the signing of the Unity Accord in December 1987. Mugabe's steely-eyed focus and ruthless persecution had achieved his objective. He had not only established a *de facto* one-party state, but stood at its pinnacle. By combining the posts of President and Prime Minister he enjoyed sweeping powers of appointment, controlling both the state media and the entire security apparatus, including the CIO, which – like 5 Brigade – reported directly to him.

War and Peace

The point is that Mugabe deployed the same methods and tactics – plunging the country into organised chaos and violence after 2000 – to once again maintain his stranglehold on power. It did not matter that the MDC was a peaceful, legitimate and social democratic party, or that whites were loyal and diligent citizens. Once they had coalesced into an opposition that threatened Mugabe's hegemonic hold on power, they had committed an unpardonable offence. They had not only exercised their democratic right to form a party and vote for a candidate of their choice, but they had the temerity to encourage others to vote for them. As Mugabe put it after the 2000 referendum:

²⁰ Ibid. (p.48)

²¹ See, for example, *Daily News*, '5th Brigade did not follow instructions', 4 June 2013; and *SW Radio Africa*

'Mugabe missed chance to redeem himself over Gukurahundi', 5 June 2013

²² Breaking the Silence, <http://www.sokwanele.com/pdfs/BTS.pdf> p.13

²³ Hanlon, et al. *ibid.* (p.24)

For [white farmers] to have banded together in opposition to government, and for that matter to have gone much further in mobilising – actually coercing their labour forces on the farms to support the opposition to government – has exposed them, as not our friends, but enemies.²⁴

Galvanised by a palpable sense of purpose, he condemned the MDC as stooges of the white man and puppets of the West. He raged that the MDC were conniving with foreign powers, especially the British. Their aim, he averred, was to impose illegal sanctions, and bring about regime change through violence in order to reverse the gains of the land reform programme. The MDC was accused of “waging a war ... against the Government of Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF.”²⁵ White farmers were denounced as being in an “evil alliance” with the MDC and, according to Mugabe, “declared war against the people of Zimbabwe”²⁶ But Mugabe gave this firm assurance: “We will see to it that peace is there.”²⁷ How? “Our party”, Mugabe thundered to wild applause from his supporters, “must continue to strike fear in the heart of the white man, our real enemy, and make them tremble.”²⁸ Here, then, was the pretext to use all means necessary – fair or foul – to protect peace-loving citizens and defend the sovereignty of a nation at war. Here, also, we see the parallels and hear the echoes of *Gukurahundi*.

Just as Mugabe unleashed an indiscriminate orgy of violence against the people of Matabeleland, so he beat and forced as estimated 200,000 workers from their homes and livelihoods – about 1.4 million people – on the assumption that they supported the opposition MDC.²⁹ After the election campaigns of 2000, 2002 and 2008, hundreds of civilians lay dead. Whereas the storm-troopers in Matabeleland were the 5 Brigade, during the *Third Chimurenga* they were the war veterans glorified by Hanlon.

Just as Mugabe demanded that the people of Matabeleland had to be “reoriented” in the 1980s, so whites after 2000 had to “transform positively and really show that they are allies.” Otherwise, he said, “we will consider them as enemies.”³⁰ The subtext, as Marongwe notes, is that white farmers who contributed towards Zanu(PF) campaigns, and assisted its leaders and supporters, were considered loyal neighbours and had their farms spared.³¹ Those who defied the President by exercising their fundamental right to be heard in a court of law sparked outrage. “Nonsense!” Mugabe fulminated, “Our land issues are not subject to the SADC tribunal. ... The few remaining white farmers should quickly vacate their farms, as they have no place there.”³²

²⁴ Martin Merideth (2008) *Mugabe: Power Plunder, and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (p.175)

²⁵ Information Minister Chen Chimutengwende quoted in *The Guardian*, *Hopes Fade as Mugabe Backs Squatters*, April 15, 2000.

²⁶ *The Daily News*, 14 December 2000.

²⁷ Merideth, *ibid.* (p.180)

²⁸ ZANU PF Party Congress: 14 December 2000.

²⁹ Sachikonye, L (2003) *The Situation of Commercial Farm-workers after Land Reform*. Report: Harare.

³⁰ *The Chronicle*, 19 April 2000

³¹ Hanlon, et al., *ibid.* (p.151)

³² *The Cape Argus*, *Defiant Mugabe: I'm still the boss*, 1 March 2009

Just as ZAPU eventually succumbed, so the MDC buckled under the sheer force of terror and intimidation. In June 2008 Tsvangirai withdrew from the Presidential race and, like ZAPU, entered into an agreement with Mugabe, the so-called Global Political Agreement (GPA). Whereas ZAPU was subsumed into Mugabe's party, the MDC formed a Government of National Unity with Zanu(PF). In both cases, however, Mugabe was happily left with his undiminished autocratic powers. All went his way. Lacking the confidence in its own principles and beliefs, the MDC gave into Mugabe's nationalist narrative on land. It expediently dumped its erstwhile allies (the denigrated and forlorn minority of white farmers) to agree that the ill-gotten gains of Mugabe's supporters were 'irreversible'. Even as the invasion against white farmers continued and international courts ruled in their favour, the MDC maintained its shameful silence.

The Swing of the Pendulum

The authors quote Godfrey Huggins, a Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, who said that, "The ultimate possessors of the land will be the people who can make the best use of it."³³ They believe this has now come to pass. But they are mistaken. Huggins' adage will only come about when the pendulum, which has swung from one injustice to another, comes to rest. And where is that resting place? It is where the meaning of being "Zimbabwean" applies equally to citizens of every race and ethnic group, and to every person of colour or creed. It is where Zimbabwean citizens are cast neither as heroes or villains, but enjoy the same property rights to earn an honest living through the vocation of their choice, including farming. It is where the sovereign will of the people is eventually respected and expressed peacefully through free and fair electoral processes and democratic institutions.

Sadly, that day has not yet come.

³³ Hanlon, et al., *ibid.* (p.216)