The centrality of the land question to popular metrics about the fulfilment of promises – or the realisation of fears – regarding post-1994 South Africa is probably so familiar to readers of PositionIT that it approaches banality to point it out. The publication of an English version of Louis Changuion and Bertus Steenkamp’s 2011 “Omrrede Land” (as “Disputed Land”) however concerns the community of geographers through its recounting of the evolution of spatial segregation and considerations of land reform. The Afrikaans original was of course most visible as a prop in fights over the 2011 Green Paper on Land Reform, but if we take a more sober look the assets and liabilities of the work become clearer.

The book “Disputed Land” presents a narrative of racialised land division from 1652 up to 2011, in 21 generally chronological chapters with ample maps and appendices. The authors claim to offer an informed basis for considering claims for restitution or redistribution projects, in Changuion’s words, because “[e]verybody should realise that land reform has to take place, but also that all the citizens of the country, irrespective of race, are entitled to own land” (p. 308). Changuion and Steenkamp state that the book is written as an overview for the public at large and is not “an academic dissertation” or fully comprehensive (p. 7), but the caveat feels more like an inoculation. It is hard to believe that the HF Verwoerd Trust, which apparently commissioned and funded the book (p. 471), did not intend for it to be a major intervention in the debate over land policy.

Ultimately the book’s presentation of South African history turns upon a desire to show that the bulk of land currently titled to whites was acquired fairly and “legally” through discovery, purchase, or forfeiture, and by implication that they should be able to retain those rights. A defensive and adversarial tone pervades much of the book’s language from the very outset, and its agenda is hard to miss despite periodic paeans to the need for land reform and the fact of a plural South Africa. The recounting of racial territoriality itself bears a striking resemblance to Petrus van Biljon’s 1947 Grensbakens Tussen Blank en Swart in Suid-Africa, although Changuion and Steenkamp seem strangely to have been unaware of that important book’s existence.

The primary value of “Disputed Land” to historians and geographers alike lies in its role as a historical omnibus, and that achievement should not be undervalued. Collecting and distilling the various conflicts, legal measures, and proclamations across the various colonies of South Africa before Union alone would be a significant contribution. The annotated narrative of legal developments and commissions in the segregationist and apartheid eras (1910 – 1994) is also welcome, and the consideration of the challenges of tenure reform and restitution or redistribution in the years just after 1994 is cogent and covers the key points at issue in land reform.

In the process, the authors pull information and maps from a moderate range of publications that are otherwise hard to obtain even for researchers who can work in Afrikaans. Changuion and Steenkamp further provide nearly 150 pages of appendices, with a sampling of illuminating source documents and various statistics. The graphics, mostly in the form of maps, are clear and well made. There are some errors of fact and transcription, but most of these are minor. The text, however, becomes more subjectively fraught as the chapters progress towards the present day. Rhetorical posturing, unsourced statements, and quantitative sleight-of-hand too often stand in for measured analysis in those later chapters, and it is there where the reader feels the book’s paucity of original research most acutely.

While “Disputed Land” is useful as a reference work for the era before 1994, its later analytical interpretations must therefore be viewed sceptically. This necessity reaches its apex in the book’s final chapter (pp. 296 – 308). As elsewhere in the book, the authors do not actually engage with the enormous body of research concerning past and present land reform in South Africa or elsewhere beyond noting its existence. They are quick to assault one example of scholarship from 1996, which they ironically then proceed to employ as an authority on land reform elsewhere (pp. 301 – 5). Yet they entirely ignore the massive and ongoing output of the renowned Programme in Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, to name just one major organisation. Their work, together with the research of a new generation of young historians on land in South Africa, might have given Changuion and Steenkamp better insight into the contours of land reform on the ground than a
Clutch of newspaper articles and a few government publications or websites ever could.

Most bizarrely and egregiously, the authors deploy long-discredited ideas about “psychologies of race” to argue that segregation happens spontaneously, so governments before 1994 erred mainly in trying to legislate it (pp. 296 – 97, 300). They offer nothing to support these utterances beyond one South African journal’s 1979 summary of a 1977 US report about integration (p. 297 n1), and they contradict it a few pages later by saying segregation is simply impossible (p. 305). This, I suppose, is where the aforementioned inoculation from page 7 comes in.

The technical matters require a different kind of scrutiny, starting with law. The authors of “Disputed Land” presume the primacy of ownership through European-derived law and white adjudication, even in its application to separate black communities on a “tribal” basis. Indeed they admit that government and law comprise their major foci (p. 8). As a result, the writ of the colony or state becomes the normative and self-correcting arbiter of legitimate ownership throughout the book, which is a problem given the prohibitions built into it before the 1990s. The authors seem so concerned with elucidating this historical and legal basis for title that the remit of the 1994 Restitution of Land Rights Act and its amendments to include other forms of de facto tenure, intended in part to address such legal bars, seems to fall off their radar. The many land claims that rely on exactly such a basis also seem not to figure, given the authors’ focus on legal chains of ownership and title as the basis for legitimacy.

Geographical matters also come in for a light treatment. Although they note early confusion over the boundaries of “conquered” or “ceded” lands before the late 19th century, and acknowledge the irregularity and abuse of early land grants, Changuion and Steenkamp do not seem to realise just how chaotic geographical knowledge in much of South Africa remained until fairly recently. As just one example, when discussing the system of land grants in the Boer Republics, Changuion and Steenkamp simply summarise the description given by GR von Wielligh in his linguistic treatise “Ons Geselstaal” in 1925 (pp. 40 - 42). Beyond erroneously referring to inspection (inspeksie) as surveying (opmeet), an error the meticulous Von Wielligh does not make in the original, the authors appear to have no inkling of how prone that system was to abuse and omission.

The inspection system in fact enabled the titling of enormous swathes of land out from underneath the black homesteads that the book mentions on pages 64 and 65. Von Wielligh himself laid out the system’s shortcomings in excruciating detail during his first full month as Landmeter-Generaal of the South African Republic (see ZAR Green Book No. 1 of 1884), but the problem of multiple, overlapping, and downright impossible farm claims persisted into the twentieth century. While dispossessed white burghers could challenge the titling of their land to others in court, black households had no such legal options; the various Transvaal governments tended to designate “locations” only when they involved hundreds of people with an “independent” chief.

This is a book I had hoped to be able to recommend without caveats, because such a volume is needed in light of the charged political discourse around land. While “Disputed land” is indeed a valuable reference for broad chronological developments and legal history, its relatively shallow and narrow research limits its usefulness. Surveyors and cartographers will find the book interesting for the area maps, documents, and summaries it offers together in one place (and often in English) for the first time, but its ancillary details and analytical interpretations are less reliable. If interested readers can directly consult the secondary sources Changuion and Steenkamp use – particularly the superb historical research and writing of Johan Bergh and Anthony Christopher – I would strongly urge them to do so.