

## EDUCATION AND THE AGRARIAN QUESTION IN SOUTH AFRICA, c. 1900–40\*

Julia Tischler

University of Basel, Switzerland

### Abstract

During the first half of the twentieth century, deep structural changes occurred in the South African countryside. While farming became an important pillar of the national economy, more and more people left the land in search of better lives in towns and cities. This article examines agricultural education, an early avenue of state intervention in farming, to elucidate how officials and groups of farmers navigated the ‘agrarian question’ by trying to define the roles that men, women, blacks, and whites played in the sector’s restructuring. I argue that agricultural planning was inextricable from ideologies and politics of segregation, a factor that historiography has not systematically taken into account. By comparing interventions in the Transkei and Ciskei with those in the Orange Free State, this article illuminates the interrelations between rural planning and segregation, as well as how they were complicated by delineations of class and gender.

### Key Words

South Africa, rural history, agriculture, education, segregation, policy.

- And what is it you want, umfundisi?
- Inkosi, I have been to Johannesburg.
- Yes, that is known to me.
- Many of our people are there, inkosi.
- Yes.
- And I have thought, inkosi, that we should try to keep some of them in this valley.
- Ho! And how would we do it?
- By caring for our land before it is too late. By teaching them in the school how to care for the land. Then some at least would stay in Ndotsheni.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from Alan Paton’s famous *Cry, the Beloved Country*, protagonist Kumalo, an African priest, explains to a local chief his desire to save Ndotsheni, a beautiful but heavily eroded reserve in the southern Drakensberg region losing not only fertile soil, but also young men to the lures of urban centers. Thick with cultural pessimism,

---

\* I wish to thank the International Research Center ‘Work and Human Life-Cycle in Global History’ (re:work) at Humboldt University Berlin, particularly Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke, for making this research possible and providing a stimulating context to discuss my ideas. Special thanks for Corinna Unger for her feedback on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful for the insightful comments I received from the three anonymous reviewers. Author’s email: julia.tischler@unibas.ch

1 A. Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (London, 1966 [orig. pub. 1948]), 196.

Paton's novel nevertheless ends on an optimistic note, as a young demonstrator newly stationed in the area promises to 'uplift' the people by teaching them better methods of farming. This vision of a self-improving, prospering African peasantry had considerable appeal among liberals such as Paton, black elites, and administrators in the early decades of the twentieth century. At the novel's publication in 1948, however, it was losing ground to more drastic, intrusive policies for managing South Africa's rural reserves.

This article investigates how demonstration and other forms of agricultural education were used to socially engineer the countryside, a broad international concern that sharpened during the interwar period and still awaits comprehensive exploration.<sup>2</sup> In South Africa, the discovery of diamonds and gold in the second half of the nineteenth century triggered a process of rapid economic transformation, in which towns and cities sprung from nothing within mere decades.<sup>3</sup> In a prolonged state-driven process, agriculture gradually caught up with the dynamic mining sector, as privileged groups of farmers adopted new forms of labor organization and technologies, thereby contributing raw materials and foodstuffs to an increasingly integrated national economy.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the expansion of commercial farming amid the country's rapid industrialization drove people from the land in great numbers. Consequently, agricultural education came to mean more than training farmers to become commercial producers. It responded to the question of what to do with people who could not transform themselves into successful farmers yet were nonetheless supposedly better contained in rural areas: Africans and 'poor whites'. In a widely-debated rural exodus, the white rural proportion fell from 51.7 to 38.7 per cent between 1920 and 1931, while the portion of Africans registered as urban doubled, reaching 17 per cent in 1936.<sup>5</sup> According to widespread official and public anxieties, the cities were dangerous places of racial mixing and competition, thus making South Africa's 'agrarian question' at once a 'native question'. During this period of profound structural change, government officials, experts, and certain groups of farmers – 'progressive farmers', as these men, both black and white, called themselves – cast agricultural education as a way to scientifically mitigate both technical-agricultural and social problems.<sup>6</sup> This article examines the establishment of agricultural education in South Africa from the end of the Second South African War (1902) into the interwar period, arguing that segregation informed the social engineering of a modern countryside by facilitating yet also constraining agricultural planning.

---

2 For agricultural transitions as a global phenomenon, see H. Akram-Lodhi and C. Kay (eds.), *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question* (London, 2009).

3 In this article, 'South Africa' also refers to the period before the Union of South Africa was established in 1910.

4 B. Freund, 'South Africa: the Union years, 1910–1948 – political and economic foundations', in R. Ross, A. K. Mager, and B. Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, 1885–1994, Volume II* (Cambridge, 2011), 216–27; A. Jeeves and J. Crush, 'Introduction', in A. Jeeves and J. Crush (eds.), *White Farms, Black Labour: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910–50* (Portsmouth, 1997), 1–28.

5 P. Bonner, 'South African society and culture, 1919–1948', in Ross, Mager, and Nasson (eds.), *Cambridge History*, 286, 291.

6 Many English, Afrikaner, and African farmers who engaged in agricultural reform called themselves 'progressive', partly in reference to the progressive movement in the United States; see W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment 1770–1950* (Oxford, 2013), 19.

At its height in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the historiography of rural South Africa studied the effects of capital in the countryside. Seminal publications adopted a Marxist-structuralist perspective to analyze the fate of African cultivators and pastoralists during the rise of white-dominated agrarian capitalism: separation from the means of production, primarily the land, and proletarianization. Making use of oral histories, social historians increasingly turned to the lived experiences of historical protagonists, highlighting agency and resistance.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the present article does not employ the agrarian transition as an analytic framework, but as a debate among historical actors. Instead of analyzing trajectories of structural change under capitalism and struggles triggered, this article asks how South Africans constructed the ‘agrarian question’, how they proposed to respond to it, and what effects measures taken generated.

This article builds upon rich rural historiography and path-breaking research on agricultural policy, particularly regarding conservation.<sup>8</sup> Agricultural knowledge and education, however, have received little attention, despite being among the earliest avenues of state intervention in farming and not only in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, agricultural policy’s linkages with segregation have not yet been systematically explored, though agricultural production was crucial to territorial separation. Following Saul Dubow and William Beinart’s description of segregation as a ‘modernising ideology’ and response to industrialization, I argue that agricultural education was driven by a similar, reformist-preservationist impetus to ‘protect’ supposedly distinct cultures by keeping different groups of people, first, on the land and, second, separate.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, this motivation created ideological space for small-scale peasantries even as the sector was on track for commercialization.

This article charts different visions of rural civilization and the related professional roles – peasant, commercial farmer, demonstrator, farmer’s wife – imagined by agricultural education.<sup>11</sup> While technical knowledge has always been crucial in agricultural production, I bring to the foreground a particular phase during which the generation and communication of agricultural knowledge became embedded in wider networks, including expert and state agencies.<sup>12</sup> Since similar structures of agricultural education emerged in both black and white communities, this article compares policies, measures, and responses in the

7 For example, C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1988); T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914* (Basingstoke, 1987); W. Beinart and C. Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape 1890–1930* (London, 1987); C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1849–1985* (New York, 1996).

8 Beinart, *Rise of Conservation*; W. Beinart, ‘Soil erosion, conservationism and ideas about development: a Southern African exploration, 1900–1960’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11:1 (1984), 52–83; F. Khan, ‘Rewriting South Africa’s conservation history: the role of the Native Farmers Association’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20:4 (1994), 499–516.

9 Compare A. Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945–1965* (Kent, 2006), 65–9.

10 W. Beinart and S. Dubow, ‘Introduction: the historiography of segregation and apartheid’, in W. Beinart and S. Dubow (eds.), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (London, 1995), 11.

11 The knowledge itself, transmitted and integrated into existing practices, is beyond the scope of this article.

12 I refer to knowledge generated by institutionalized research. Drawing on Latour, Jacobs differentiates scientific knowledge from other forms by networks and social organization; see N. Jacobs, ‘The intimate politics of ornithology in Colonial Africa’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48:3 (2006), 566–7.

Transkei and Ciskei to those in the Orange Free State. At times strikingly similar, emerging contradictions often manifested in tensions between agriculture's lack of prestige and desires for social advancement, in clashes between reformers and the people they sought to educate, and in contested gender attributes.

## PEASANTS AND DEMONSTRATORS: AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE TRANSKEI AND CISKEI

The fate of South Africa's black peasantry before and during the 'agricultural revolution' – a highly uneven process of commercialization – has been the subject of intense scholarly debate. State measures in terms of finance, marketing, transport, tariffs, and labor shaped the emergence of a European capitalist class and kept many struggling white farmers in business, while discriminating against African producers.<sup>13</sup> In his seminal *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, Colin Bundy argues that following 'a virtual "explosion" of peasant activity in the 1870s', when groups of wealthier farmers expanded and innovated in response to new urban markets, African producers became increasingly marginalized.<sup>14</sup> Bundy's narrative has since been critically reassessed from different angles. Among other topics, scholars have qualified the periodization and extent of the African peasantry's fall, arguing that only in the second half of the twentieth century did significant numbers of families in the Transkei become entirely dependent upon wage labor.<sup>15</sup> Recent revaluations of the infamous 1913 Land Act, which restricted African ownership to 7–8 per cent of the Union's land and prohibited sharecropping and cash-renting on white-owned farms, have pointed to the Transkei's resilience in subsistence production and to the legislation's regionally diverse, frequently prolonged impact.<sup>16</sup> Despite overcrowding, soil erosion, and discrimination, as Beinart argues, some families continued to 'maintain some smallholding agricultural production' and 'remained actors even when the way that they were acted upon severely constrained their economic and political options'.<sup>17</sup> Though data used for this study cannot yield any quantitative evidence supporting either direction, they do speak to the persistent visions of rural progress promoted by such actors, who constituted a minority significant enough to be of official and public concern. I show that agricultural education gained momentum, despite white farmers' protests, due to a partial convergence of interests between these better-off African agriculturists and

13 T. Keegan, 'Crisis and catharsis in the development of capitalism in South African Agriculture', *African Affairs*, 84:336 (1985); Jeeves and Crush, 'Introduction'.

14 Bundy, *Rise*, 67.

15 W. Beinart, 'Agrarian historiography and agrarian reconstruction', in J. Lonsdale (ed.), *South Africa in Question* (London, 1988), 141–2; C. Simkins, 'Agricultural production in the African reserves of South Africa, 1918–1969', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7:2 (1981), 262; W. Beinart, 'Transkeian smallholders and agrarian reform', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 11:2 (1992), 178–9; P. McAllister, 'Rural production, land use and development planning in Transkei: a critique of the Transkei Agricultural Development Study', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 11:2 (1992), 202–3. Data and research concerning the Ciskei are patchier.

16 W. Beinart and P. Delius, 'The historical context and legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40:4 (2014), 685.

17 Beinart, 'Agrarian historiography', 142–3.

government administrations.<sup>18</sup> Their ideas for reform, however, did not enjoy sustained appeal among the addressed – that is, young men in the reserves.

Though starting slowly under the auspices of the Transkeian General Council in the late 1900s, reform efforts gained momentum in subsequent decades.<sup>19</sup> Certain groups of agriculturists – chiefs, headmen, and progressive farmers – actively engaged with the idea of ‘scientific agriculture’, invested in machinery and better stock, and organized on a cooperative basis.<sup>20</sup> In 1905, the Council opened an apprenticeship farm at Tsolo that transformed into an agricultural school in 1913 and by 1930 was running two additional agricultural schools (Teko near Butterworth, Flagstaff in Pondoland), four experimental farms, a vernacular agricultural journal, and several cooperative societies.<sup>21</sup> Most centrally perhaps, the Transkeian Council instituted a demonstration program in 1911 that rapidly expanded and was eventually adopted in the Ciskei, Natal, and Basutoland.<sup>22</sup>

In the Ciskei, agricultural education was pushed by an African-American missionary from Alabama, Reverend James East. From his base near Middledrift, East toured the Ciskei to display the use of horses and ploughs, harrows, and other tools and in 1919 was hired by the South African Native College Fort Hare as a ‘travelling demonstrator’.<sup>23</sup> Another key protagonist was Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu, a prominent member of the Ciskei’s formally educated Christian elite who would become the first African professor at Fort Hare. In 1918, East and Jabavu founded the Keiskama Valley Native Farmers’ Association, a body whose members were primarily teachers, clergymen, chiefs, headmen, and more affluent farmers and that supported many agricultural initiatives in subsequent years, including the establishment of a ‘native agricultural school’ at Fort Cox in 1930.<sup>24</sup>

The two chief pillars of the agricultural education system were thus the demonstration service and the agricultural schools, later called colleges. Having completed a two-year diploma course and a period of practical training at one of these colleges, a demonstrator would be stationed at a specific location to work sections of resident farmers’ fields and let the results speak for themselves. He would moreover answer individual requests for

18 For example of protest, see Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (CUL) South African Institute of Race Relations records (AD) 843 B 10.12, John G. Gubbins to Rheinallt Jones, 20 Dec. 1928.

19 The council system was an institution of local government parallel to the superordinate magistrates. In 1931, the Transkei and Pondoland Councils were united to form the United Transkeian Territories General Council (UTTGC, ‘Bunga’), see I. Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa* (Berkeley, 1997), 184–6.

20 A. Charman, ‘Progressive élites in Bunga politics: African farmers in the Transkeian territories, 1904–1946 (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Cambridge, 1998), 5. These ‘progressive élites’ were usually mission-educated Africans upholding Victorian notions of social progress and assimilation (*ibid.* 1–2); regarding the ‘disproportionate voice of the rural elite within the council system’, see Evans, *Bureaucracy*, 186.

21 National Archives Repository, Pretoria (SAB) Native Affairs (NTS) 2417 74/287, ‘Report of the Ad Hoc Committee ... to Consider the Future of the General Council Schools of Agriculture’, 1947; Cape Town Archives Repository (KAB) Principal of Fort Cox Agricultural College (AFC) 2 N8/3/2, vol. III, Minutes of the Fifth Conference of the SA Native Farmers’ Congress, 18 Dec. 1930.

22 Beinart, *Conservation*, 258.

23 P. Germond, ‘Note on the development of the farm and agricultural courses at Fort Hare’, in A. Kerr (ed.), *Fort Hare 1915–48: The Evolution of an African College* (London, 1968), 265–6; Khan, ‘Rewriting’, 504–5.

24 C. Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D. D. T. Jabavu of South Africa, 1885–1959* (Athens, OH, 1997), 49–50; Khan, ‘Rewriting’, 506–9; SAB NTS 7292 18/327, Part II, D. D. T. Jabavu, Native Farmers’ Association, to Minister, Native Affairs, 3 Dec. 1919.

advice, deliver lectures, establish school gardens, and encourage cooperative ventures.<sup>25</sup> In turn, the agricultural colleges were organized along similar, albeit 'less elaborate', lines as their European counterparts.<sup>26</sup> A diploma course provided general training via both theoretical and practical instruction that supposedly aligned closely with the local system of farming, though seems to have often failed in this regard. The colleges sought to reach beyond the limited number of students by offering short courses for adult farmers, organizing agricultural shows, hosting meetings of farmers' associations, writing articles for the African press, and answering individual requests for advice.<sup>27</sup>

Sources suggest that these measures met with considerable response. Though starting slowly, the colleges attracted more and more applicants once the demonstration service, hence employment opportunities, for graduates expanded.<sup>28</sup> Local administrative records contain numerous requests from farmers' associations and individuals for demonstrators to be stationed in their areas, and document communities' keenness to cooperate with their demonstrators.<sup>29</sup> The 1930s Native Economic Commission even spoke of 'enthusiastic supporters'.<sup>30</sup> Such comments by officers reporting about the relevance of their own work should be read with great care and require differentiation, as these educational services benefitted mostly the more affluent.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is questionable whether communities used these services in ways intended, since local records contain several complaints that demonstrators were being viewed as a source of free labor while plot owners would pursue different affairs or even wander off 'to the mines'.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, demonstration and the agricultural colleges seem emblematic of a certain administrative style that gave some leeway to reserve farmers and accommodated their visions of social uplift and material betterment. In arranging the services, Council officials in charge envisaged demonstration to be a slow, long-term process. No more demonstrators than 'people actually want' were to be employed, the Council director of agriculture explained in 1931, since the population would only be 'led, not driven'.<sup>33</sup> Administrative records stressed proximity, 'knowledge of and sympathy with the peasantry' and for demonstrators to 'devote as much time as possible to moving about among the people'.<sup>34</sup> White officers were thus gradually replaced by Africans; by 1938, the Council employed 131 black demonstrators.<sup>35</sup> Judging from their monthly reports,

25 KAB Chief Magistrate Transkei (CMT) 3/998 2/G, J. W. D. Hughes, General Council Agricultural Director, to Chief Magistrate Transkeian Territories, 26 Jan. 1927.

26 SAB NTS 7317 81/327, 'Recommendations for Reorganisation of the System of Training at Fort Cox', E. Wyatt Sampson, 8 Apr. 1937.

27 See SAB NTS 7514 662/327, 'Review of Services and Activities of Fort Cox Agricultural School, 1939-40'; SAB NTS 9588 399/400, Newsletters Fort Cox, 1930s.

28 SAB NTS 2417 74/287, 'Report of the Ad Hoc Committee Appointed ... to Consider the Future of the General Council Schools of Agriculture'.

29 See examples in KAB CMT 3/848 593.I.1 and KAB CMT 3/848 593.I.2.

30 J. D. Rheinallt Jones and A. L. Saffery, *Social and Economic Conditions of Native Life in the Union of South Africa: Findings of the Native Economic Commission, 1930-1932* (Johannesburg, 1935), 245.

31 See below.

32 SAB NTS 7340 133/327, Memo by [illegible] to Director, Native Agriculture, 'Demonstration Plots', 8 Apr. 1941; KAB AFC 5 N8/19/2, vol. I, Principal Fort Cox to Director, Native Agriculture, 9 July 1936.

33 SAB NTS 7334 123/327, R. W. D. Hughes, Director of Agriculture to Chief Magistrate, Umtata, 12 June 1931.

34 KAB CMT 3/849 593.5, Stanford, Chief Magistrate, memo/circular, 15 Dec. 1911.

35 Mthatha Provincial Archives (MTH), 'Report on Agriculture and Stock, Director of Agriculture', in *UTTGC, Annual Reports*, 1937.

demonstrators indeed spent most of their time working closely with individual farmers – plowing and harrowing fields, planting crops, erecting fences, and castrating livestock.<sup>36</sup>

This consultative approach seems in line with scholars' descriptions of the Native Affairs Department's (NAD) administrative style before and during the interwar years. Echoing the paternalistic British colonial service tradition, officers were reluctant to use overt repression, emphasizing instead personal contact, persuasion, and the idea of a 'civilized' black elite.<sup>37</sup> Official documents described agricultural education as a form of social progress – yet one that would proceed along separate lines. Graduates of the diploma courses were expected to remain within the reserves, put their knowledge into practise, and thereby effect broader rural uplift by their positive example – a notion that found support among liberal intellectuals such as Howard Pim or J. D. Rheinallt Jones.<sup>38</sup> The emerging system thus reflected early liberal segregationist thought and its ambivalences as a flexible, collaborative approach that accommodated notions of progress, yet rested upon an understanding of differentiation and white superiority. Rural romanticism, as Dubow and others have shown, was integral to this variant of segregationism.<sup>39</sup> In this light, agricultural enlightenment provided Africans with an opportunity to reform their 'distinct' culture from within and shield it from the dangers of a supposedly alien, urban industrial world.

Africans promoting agricultural education framed their aims differently. Farmers' associations occasionally protested state discrimination, particularly the lack of access to land, and expressed commercial ambitions that exceeded the confines of the reserves, even envisaging 'oversea markets' and 'export in bulk'.<sup>40</sup> Yet, there was also common ground upon which they and NAD officers could collaborate. Jabavu and other African farmers described a vision of social uplift based upon agriculture and manual labor that resonated with the paternalist, anti-urban rhetoric of administrators: 'The true mine of our wealth was not the Rand but the soil on which we live at home.'<sup>41</sup> By keeping particularly young men on the land and rebuilding local communities, agricultural progress supposedly constituted a refuge from white society and the foundation of a distinctly African civilization. A former student of Fort Cox Agricultural School summarized this connection, stating that graduates of the agricultural colleges would be 'the leaders of ... their race thus blowing the blast of liberty and independence amongst their own people by way of showing them the modern methods of agriculture – the only industry that can make us hold our own'.<sup>42</sup>

36 Demonstration reports for instance in KAB CMT 3/847–50, KAB 1/KHK 6/12 K2/8(j), vols. 1–3; MTH 29/8/8; 29/8/8, Part II.

37 S. Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919–39* (London, 1989), 11, 15; Evans, *Bureaucracy*, 164.

38 SAB NTS 2417 73/287, *UTTGC, Annual Reports 1946*, 'Future of Council Schools of Agriculture'; CUL A881 Cc, H. Pim to Dr Keppel, 'Transkei Economic Enquiry', 29 May 1933; CUL AD 843 B 10.12, Rheinallt Jones to H. Mary White, 4 May 1944.

39 Dubow, *Segregation*, 6–8; Beinart and Dubow, 'Introduction', 11. For the 'liberal flirtation with segregation', see Dubow, *Segregation*, 8–9.

40 Khan, 'Rewriting', 507–8; KAB AFC 2 N8/3/2, Constitution of Native Farmers' Association of the Keiskama Valley, c. 1935; NTS 7292 18/327, Part II, 'The native and agriculture', *The Star*, 29 Dec. 1919.

41 KAB Chief Commissioner, Eastern Cape (CCK) 106 N8/1/4, Minutes of the third conference of the S. A. Native Farmers' Congress, 27 Dec. 1928.

42 KAB AFC 6 N8/19/4/8, vol. 2, E. S. Mohapeloa to Principal, Fort Cox, 31 May 1935.

African agricultural modernizers thus advocated a material concept of emancipation, an independence to be gained by seeking first ‘the kingdom of mealies’.<sup>43</sup> For this, Jabavu and other progressives drew inspiration from the southern United States, notably the Tuskegee Institute and philosophy of African-American educator Booker T. Washington. Having visited Tuskegee in 1913, Jabavu promoted the former slave and social reformer’s gospel that ‘blacks everywhere must keep in touch with the soil, however small the land’.<sup>44</sup> Jabavu’s investment in rural reform reflects how members of the African elite also saw opportunities in separate development. As Beinart and Dubow argue, Africans’ attempts to preserve rural lifestyles ‘were not segregationist in the sense that whites understood the term’, but could be ‘compatible with elements of segregation in certain respects’.<sup>45</sup>

Tuskegeeism however did not convince graduates of the agricultural schools. Over time, it became evident that the majority would not return home to foster broader rural uplift. Instead, agricultural leaders in the Ciskei regularly chastised Fort Cox graduates for their ambition to gain employment in the mines and towns instead of taking to local farming and serving their communities. Speaking at the 1933 graduation ceremony, Mr Peteni of the Keiskama Farmers’ Association scolded ‘one boy who had passed through Fort Cox and who was now walking about the streets of King William’s Town, looking for high-class employment ... That boy’s place was assisting his father in the location.’<sup>46</sup>

It was the prospect of becoming demonstrators, not peasant farmers, that increasingly attracted young men to the agricultural colleges in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>47</sup> However, when most positions in the demonstration service were filled by the early 1940s and graduates failed to obtain such employment, the rate of applications plummeted. In 1948 – a time when the white Glen College in the Free State was turning down ‘hundreds of applicants’ every year – two Transkeian colleges even closed.<sup>48</sup> According to statistics, only 1 per cent of the c. 400 graduates who had left Fort Cox by 1941 had become farmers. While a higher number had found employment as demonstrators, the majority was engaged in non-agricultural employment or else unemployed.<sup>49</sup>

Given the scarcity of land and capital, obvious material reasons justified students’ reluctance to seek their fortune in farming. Even the Director of Native Agriculture admitted that returning to the locations ‘to eke out a mere pittance under very adverse conditions’ was hardly attractive for someone with two or more years of higher education.<sup>50</sup> Only students who were sons of chiefs or headmen could expect to make a ‘decent living by

43 SAB NTS 7345 152/327, ‘Fort Cox Native Agricultural School: annual prize distribution’, *Cape Mercury*, 8 June 1933.

44 SAB NTS 7345 152/327, ‘Fort Cox’s Record Season’, *IMVO*, quoting Jabavu, 19 June 1934; also see D. D. T. Jabavu, *The Black Problem* (New York, 1920); Higgs, *Equality*, 23–8.

45 Beinart and Dubow, ‘Introduction’, 10.

46 SAB NTS 7345 152/327, ‘Fort Cox Native Agricultural School: annual prize distribution’, *Cape Mercury*, 8 June 1933.

47 By 1932, agricultural colleges reported receiving too many applications; see CUL A881 Hb 8, ‘A Transkei Enquiry’, H. Pim, 1933.

48 CUL AD 1947 25.4, ‘Is native agriculture doomed’, speech by Principal, Fort Cox, c. late 1940s.

49 CUL AD 1715 1.2, ‘Land and Agriculture’, Chapter for Hellmann’s *Race Relations Handbook*, c. 1948.

50 SAB NTS 7317 81/327, memorandum by Director, Native Agriculture, 26 Aug. 1937. Students at the colleges had to have at least Standard VI.



farming'.<sup>51</sup> In addition, most graduates were young, unmarried, and thus ineligible to apply for land, dooming them to return to their fathers' fields.<sup>52</sup> Calls for students to 'start out in life from the very bottom' and "make a living out of small 6-acre and 10-acre plots" clashed with their expectations of upward social mobility.<sup>53</sup> Administrative records from the 1930s resound with officials' disappointment that the education provided did not benefit the people 'most in need of agricultural training' – the so-called 'red natives' – but rather attracted the sons of teachers and other employees who used their degrees merely as stepping stones.<sup>54</sup> The attempt to engender agricultural enlightenment for the masses hence clashed with a key division among rural society – one by which the formally educated and Christianized distinguished themselves from the 'red' traditionalists – that had emerged under colonial influence and become part of local self-categorizations.<sup>55</sup>

In effect, while strands of early segregationist thought had promoted the idea of African agricultural progress, the realities of segregation – foremost limited access to land and capital to make farming a career – rendered agricultural education unattractive to young men in the reserves. Furthermore, the case offers insights into how shifts in administrative ideology played out on the ground. Evans and Dubow have analyzed how the NAD was reorganized and centralized in the 1920s to emphasize 'efficiency' and comprehensive planning.<sup>56</sup> The resulting tensions manifested in an administrative debate in the early 1930s, when R. W. Thornton, recently appointed National Director of Native Agriculture, lambasted the colleges and demonstration services as being largely ineffective.<sup>57</sup> While several Transkeian officers defended the current system and its incremental approach, others agreed with Thornton that 'only drastic action can save things from becoming appalling in a few years [*sic*] time.'<sup>58</sup> Such 'drastic action' ultimately came from the state, not via the collaboration of educated farmers.

Changes also appeared in the aims that officials attached to agricultural education. Whereas cotton production received some attention before and after the First World War, there were few other efforts toward cash-crop production for export.<sup>59</sup> Instead, food shortages and starvation amid ever-growing anxieties about soil erosion took center stage in agricultural policy, initially during the First World War and throughout the 1920s

51 SAB NTS 10134 1/419, Report on Tour of Orange Free State and Ciskeian Districts, Director, Native Agriculture, 1935.

52 MTH UTTGC, Proceedings and Reports of Select Committees at the Session of 1948.

53 SAB NTS 7345 152/327, Report, 'Annual prize giving', 18 June 1941, Fort Cox. See also 'Fort Cox Agricultural School: a glorious day in grand surroundings', *Cape Mercury*, 6 June 1935.

54 KAB 3/KAB 4/1/284 ZS/3/12, W. R. Norton, Principal, to Town Clerk, Kingwilliamstown, 12 Dec. 1938; see also SAB NTS 7317 81/327, Memorandum, 'Report Fort Cox Curriculum', Deputy Director, Native Agriculture, 13 July 1937.

55 Compare Bonner, 'Society', 278.

56 Dubow, *Segregation*, 13, 15; see also Evans, *Bureaucracy*, 167–76.

57 Beinart, *Conservation*, 339.

58 SAB NTS 7334 123/327, Native Commissioner, Lady Frere, to Apthorp, 11 June 1931; see also Beinart, *Conservation*, 340–4.

59 Compare KAB CMT 3/849 593.4, A. H. Stanford, Chief Magistrate Transkei, Umtata, to Resident Magistrate Butterworth, 27 July 1913; KAB CMT 3/848 593.I.2, Chief Demonstrator to Chief Magistrate, 10 Aug. 1922.

and (post-)Depression period.<sup>60</sup> The overriding concern with food production and the new preoccupation with nutrition – a discourse that linked agricultural production with bodily health – exemplifies what other scholars have established more generally: that policy in South African’s reserves was much less an ‘attempt to “civilize” Africans by boosting agricultural production and commercial exchange’ for an integrated market than in other British colonies.<sup>61</sup> Instead, increased official attention with preserving a healthy migrant labor force speaks to how reserve development became entrenched in the ‘narrowly exclusionist’ take on segregation characterizing the Hertzogite period.<sup>62</sup> In a 1929 conference paper, Thornton clarified the link between this restrictive vision and agricultural policy, explaining that segregation meant that ‘[a]griculturally . . . , the native must develop within his own reserves.’ That is, to avoid hunger and unrest, African peasants had to be taught to produce more within set confines.<sup>63</sup> Officers in the Transkei and Ciskei thus faced the task of cultivating a separate, reproductive agricultural economy that could feed the reserve population and ensure labor for white industry and farms.

At the same time, labor migration itself – the fact that a significant part of the male population oscillated between mining or other forms of employment and their rural homes – frustrated agricultural development, as it was ‘very difficult to make a progressive peasant out of a man who is away from his land the best part of the year’.<sup>64</sup> Despite men’s long spells of absence, agricultural education was gender exclusive and premised on a model of the nuclear, monogamous household that scholars have linked with the increasing influence of Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Only men could attend diploma courses and seek employment as demonstrators. The few services available to women, including short courses at the colleges or special sections during agricultural shows, typically targeted the domestic sphere, encompassing subjects such as food preparation, nutrition and health, ‘home beautification’, and childcare.<sup>66</sup>

In his study of a cotton education scheme in colonial Togo, Zimmerman has drawn similarly gendered ascriptions, showing how German administrators and teachers from Tuskegee promoted a model of the ‘patriarchal monogamous household’ that overrode existing labor divisions and compromised the relative economic power of local

60 Compare KAB CMT 3/919 774.3, Acting as Chief Magistrate to Native Affairs Department (NAD), Pretoria, 10 Dec. 1919; KAB 3/KAB 4/1/284 ZS/3/12, W. R. Norton, Principal, to Town Clerk, Kingwilliamstown, 12 Dec. 1938. Beinart shows how official discourse about the state of the reserves became increasingly alarmist in the 1930s and 1940s; Beinart, ‘Soil erosion’, 61–3, 73.

61 Evans, *Bureaucracy*, 175–6. A different case was cotton production in German Togo, see A. Zimmerman, ‘A German Alabama in Africa: the Tuskegee expedition to German Togo and the transnational origins of West African cotton growers’, *American Historical Review*, 110 (2005), 1362–98.

62 Dubow, 1989, 15. A prominent link between reserve agriculture and labor supply was the Fox and Back report of 1938 commissioned by the Chamber of Mines (Beinart, *Conservation*, 355–6).

63 SAB NTS 7313 75/237, ‘The Agricultural Policy for Natives in the Union of South Africa’, Director of Native Agriculture, c. June 1929.

64 By the late 1930s, about 50 per cent of Transkeian men between the ages of 15 to 44 were away for migrant labor; in the Ciskei, the equivalent was even 70 per cent. See C. Walker, ‘Gender and the development of the migrant labour system c. 1850–1930: an overview’, in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990), 176. For quotation, see CUL AD 1715 1.2., Chapter for Hellman’s Race Relations Handbook, 1949.

65 Compare McAllister, ‘Rural production’, 203–4.

66 See, for example, KAB CCK 114 N8/19/2, Women’s short courses at Fort Cox, syllabus, 21–4 June 1937; KAB CCK 107 N8/3/2, vol. 1, Principal, Fort Hare, to T. W. C. Norton, 20 June 1927.

women.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the Transkeian and Ciskeian schemes that were premised on peasant households headed by men and a clear separation of the field and the feminine home contradicted realities in South Africa. While men had become somewhat more involved in cultivation in the nineteenth century, their increasing labor migration later meant that women became re-entrenched in their traditional role as subsistence providers.<sup>68</sup> Administrators were not blind to women's central role in food production.<sup>69</sup> On the contrary, they explicitly described progressive farming as an attempt to offset the trend. Agricultural officials, all men, styled themselves as protectors of African women, whose overly heavy workload they could help to redistribute more evenly. By introducing new techniques and by increasing prospects of material success, agricultural education sought to attract men and 'break down the prejudice to the effect that the production of food is the women's province or that the educated man need not soil his hands'.<sup>70</sup>

The attempted remolding of gendered labor divisions did not go unquestioned. A delegation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) visiting the Transkei and Ciskei in 1938, for instance, queried whether administrators were targeting the right people: '[S]hould it not be the Native women who are trained in new agricultural methods?'<sup>71</sup> Indeed, women's responses to the few educational services available to them seem to justify this question, as administrative records resound with comments on women's eager participation in agricultural shows, short courses, and women's organizations.<sup>72</sup> In 1939, the principal of Fort Cox even suggested that 'the training of women would probably yield greater results in the development of the locations than the training of men'. His proposed agricultural school for women, however, never materialized.<sup>73</sup>

## PROGRESSIVES AND POOR WHITES: AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE ORANGE FREE STATE

Historians' assessments of white agriculture have been marked by ambiguity. On the one hand, studies refer to the period discussed here as South Africa's 'agricultural revolution', when the total value of output of white farms rose from £29 million in 1911–12 to nearly £200 million in 1948. A net importer of food, South Africa developed into an increasingly important exporter.<sup>74</sup> The 'revolution' particularly impacted the Highveld. In the decades following unification, the Free State, though a latecomer next to the early enclaves of

67 Zimmerman, 'Alabama', 1380–3, 1383.

68 Compare A. Drew, 'Theory and practice of the agrarian question in South African socialism, 1928–60', in H. Bernstein (ed.), *The Agrarian Question in South Africa* (London, 1996), 56; B. Bozzoli, 'Marxism, feminism and South African studies', in Beinart and Dubow (eds.), *Segregation and Apartheid*, 122–3.

69 In the late 1930s, roughly 70 per cent of Ciskeian and 50 per cent of Transkeian men aged between 15 and 44 years were migrant laborers; see A. Drew, 'Theory', 57.

70 SAB NTS 7304 59/327, Notes for Secretary for Native Affairs' Address to students, Fort Cox, c. Dec. 1938.

71 Rhodes House Library, Oxford (RHL) Anti-Slavery Society papers (MSS) Brit Emp S 22, G 597, ILO Governing Body, 'Delegation to Union of South Africa, 1938–9', confidential draft report, c. 10 May 1939.

72 For instance, see NTS 7539 742/327, Correspondence on women's short courses, 1940s; and KAB CCK 106 N8/3/2, Reports on agricultural shows, 1930s.

73 KAB N8/19/2, Principal, Fort Cox, to Chief Native Commissioner, 23 Aug. 1939.

74 Jeeves and Crush, 'Introduction', 5.

export-oriented production in the southwestern Cape, the Eastern Cape, and in Natal, developed into the ‘agricultural heartland of twentieth-century South Africa’.<sup>75</sup>

On the other hand, research has emphasized the ‘incompleteness’ of the agricultural revolution, which was prolonged, highly differentiating, and possible thanks only to massive government support.<sup>76</sup> Though in place before 1924, state measures assisting white farmers with finances, marketing, transport, tariffs, and labor intensified under Hertzog’s Pact government and its receptiveness to white populism.<sup>77</sup> Despite controlled markets and subsidies, however, many white farmers continued to struggle. A key theme in the literature is how commercialization pressured whites unable to turn themselves into successful capitalist producers – mostly Afrikaans-speaking smallholders and landless *bywoners* – and drove them from the countryside in large numbers.<sup>78</sup> The case of agricultural education, however, instead speaks to the inclusiveness of agricultural policy and its attempts to bridge social and cultural-linguistic divisions. Well into the late 1930s, keeping people on the land was a priority in related administrative discourse, along with making farming a profitable pillar of the national economy. The following section shows how the project of white nation-building allowed this version of agricultural policy-*cum*-rural welfare to continue, even against contrary experience and expert advice.

When agricultural planning resumed in the Free State after the South African War (1899–1902), the newly instituted provincial Department of Agriculture faced a highly differentiated rural community. Timothy Keegan has depicted how Afrikaner and African subsistence and pastoral communities on the Highveld were radically transformed by the emergence of new internal markets from late nineteenth century onward. Early commercial production, largely based on sharecropping and black peasant production, was in the hands of a landowning, English- and partly Afrikaans-speaking elite.<sup>79</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, scores of Afrikaner families struggled with labor and capital shortages, periodic depressions, land divisions, and shrinking fields. In time, the South African War and the destruction caused by the British scorched-earth policy left many completely destitute.<sup>80</sup> Agricultural education reflected these socioeconomic divisions, as argued in the following, as well as an attempt to bridge them.

The Free State’s new agriculture department targeted a profit-oriented type of farming able to supply the colony’s needs, while also taking advantage of the ‘very profitable overseas market’.<sup>81</sup> From the start, systematic research and training were integral to its approach. The different divisions of the rapidly expanding department established two experimental farms and used lectures, bulletins, and correspondence to teach farmers how to improve their stock and crops, implement new methods of cultivation and

75 T. Keegan, ‘The dynamics of rural accumulation in South Africa: comparative and historical perspectives’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28:4 (1986), 63.

76 Beinart, ‘Agrarian historiography’, 140.

77 Keegan, ‘Crisis and catharsis’, 395; Jeeves and Crush, ‘Introduction’, 9.

78 Jeeves and Crush, ‘Introduction’, 2.

79 Keegan, ‘Rural accumulation’, 631–2, 637.

80 This is an abridged account of a more complex process; see Keegan, ‘Crisis’; Keegan, *Rural Transformations*.

81 Free State Archives Repository, Bloemfontein (VAB) Orange River Colony (ORC) 147, OFS Director of Agriculture, First Annual Report, 1904–5, VAB ORC 147.

harvesting, and organize into associations.<sup>82</sup> Only in 1919, however, did the department open its own agricultural college.<sup>83</sup> Glen Agricultural College near the provincial capital of Bloemfontein then made rapid headway in educating young men who wanted to farm professionally and in becoming a center of locally generated knowledge. Like its sister institutions in Natal, the Cape, and the Transvaal, Glen College had fields of specialization adapted to the types of agriculture practised in its region, an area of about 100,000 square miles in the Free State and part of the Cape Province.<sup>84</sup> Its diploma course for ‘the prospective land-owner-farmer’ encompassed what were considered to be the most important local branches, including irrigation and dry-land farming, along with dairy, poultry, sheep, and wool production. Similar to those at African colleges discussed above, the course was not specialized but general and aimed at combining theoretical instruction and practical work.<sup>85</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, it gained a good reputation and attracted far more applications than it could accept.<sup>86</sup> Unlike in the declining African colleges, there were outlets for the ambitions of young men who graduated from the college. Though the majority returned to their parents’ farms, students without that option seem to have found attractive employment easily, typically in higher positions on commercial farms, as experts in government departments, or as instructors at agricultural institutions.<sup>87</sup>

Glen College furthermore extended to the agricultural community more broadly. By way of research and experimentation, staff members generated knowledge attuned to local environmental conditions that they communicated through both writing and personal contact. In the academic year of 1931–2 alone, Glen staff conducted nearly 2,000 farm visits and exchanged almost 5,500 letters with individual farmers. Agricultural shows, farmers’ days, and competitions attracted increasing numbers of people, as did short courses for practicing farmers. Moreover, a one-year teachers’ course ensured close contact between the college and rural schools.<sup>88</sup> As in the Transkei and Ciskei, another major component of agricultural instruction was on-the-spot demonstration. Glen’s so-called ‘extension service’ became organized and further developed when the Union government established the Division of Agricultural Education and Extension in 1924.<sup>89</sup> Its ambitious

82 VAB ORC 147, OFS Director of Agriculture, First Annual Report, 1904–5.

83 Glen’s opening was delayed due to financial stringency during the First World War; other colleges already existed at Elsenburg (1898), Grootfontein (1911), Potchefstroom (1909), and Cedara (1906); Dubow, *Knowledge*, 180.

84 SAB Head, Division Agricultural Education and Research (LON) 10 A27/2, Glen College prospectus, c. 1937. The first Faculties of Agriculture were established in 1917, at the later Universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria respectively. Unlike the agricultural colleges, the faculties focused on basic research and operated autonomously, before they also came under the Department of Agriculture in 1940. See D. Joubert, ‘Agricultural research in South Africa: an historical overview’, in A. Brown (ed.), *Scientific Endeavour in South Africa* (Wynberg, 1977), 267–8.

85 SAB LON 10 A27/2, Glen College prospectus, c. 1937; SAB LDB 3514, R 4165, Glen College prospectus, 1939.

86 SAB LON 6 A16/1, ‘Vooruitgang van Glen. 2332 al daar Opgelei’, *Volksblad*, c. 11 Dec. 1947.

87 SAB LON 10 A27/1, *Glen News*, Oct. 1941.

88 VAB Regional Director Glen Complex (SLT) 1/19 A44/4, vol. I, Glen College, Annual Reports from 1928–32; J. A. Dreyer, ‘Fifty years of agriculture extension’, *Golden Jubilee Glen College of Agriculture, special edition Farming in South Africa*, 45:8 (1969), 77–82.

89 The Agricultural Colleges’ partial incorporation in the new division caused administrative quarrels; see Beinart, *Conservation*, 258–60.

head, Col. Heinrich du Toit, aimed to reach out to the rural ‘masses’ and convert each farmer to scientific agriculture.<sup>90</sup> Traveling lecturers and extension agents visited farms and provided public demonstrations on a range of topics, including fertilizers, improved seeds, and stock management. Glen’s staff also worked with the Agriculture Department’s ‘demonstration train’, an “agricultural school on wheels” equipped with pamphlets and exhibits.<sup>91</sup> Using rhetoric not dissimilar to Transkeian and Ciskeian authorities, agricultural bureaucrats stressed the importance of face-to-face contact and empathy with the allegedly conservative population. Field officers were expected to develop a deep understanding of the difficulties farmers confronted in their respective regions and communicate these back to the Agriculture Department.<sup>92</sup>

Albeit impossible to measure the degree to which such activities enhanced commercial success, the outreach and training activities organized through Glen College clearly helped to connect Free State farmers with each other and the national Department of Agriculture. Themselves members of important associations, officers assisted producers in organizing, while shows and competitions became social events that brought people into contact.<sup>93</sup> Traveling staff facilitated flows of information throughout the rural Free State, while extension officers were, according to an official memorandum, the Department of Agriculture’s “eyes and ears”.<sup>94</sup> Education and collaboration, as Beinart has shown, remained central to the latter’s method. Well into the 1960s, officials were reluctant to adopt a more compulsory approach toward farmers, though expert discourse became increasingly urgent in calls for greater state involvement in curbing soil erosion and the perceived over-exploitation of the country’s natural resources.<sup>95</sup>

The Free State’s education and extension activities moreover speak to the larger context of state-sponsored scientization, which, as Dubow points out, was part and parcel of Anglo-Boer reconciliation and white nation-building politics after the South African War and formation of the Union in 1910.<sup>96</sup> Besides infrastructural and technical investments, including windmills, dams and railways,<sup>97</sup> official attention focused on knowledge as a factor to enhance productivity, with research and education constituting two of the Union Agriculture Department’s main functions.<sup>98</sup> Next to the agricultural colleges with their generalist diploma courses, their services to practicing farmers and research activities, the government operated experiment stations and collaborated with individual farmers for instance in testing new seeds or analyzing soil types.<sup>99</sup> Agricultural research and

90 SAB Agricultural Technical Services (LTD) 240 R 2278/1, Education and Extension Division, ‘Die Doel van Uitbreidingswerk’, c. 1928.

91 Dreyer, ‘Fifty years; Beinart, *Conservation*, 259.

92 SAB LTD 240 R 2278/1, Education and Extension Division, ‘Die Doel van Uitbreidingswerk’, c. 1928; SAB LON 6 A16/1, Reinecke, Principal, Glen College, to du Toit, 31 Mar. 1931.

93 Compare SAB LON 6 A16/1, Reinecke, Native Affairs, to Prof. Bosman, 13 Oct. 1934.

94 VAB SLT 1/1 – A13, Memorandum, Department of Agriculture, 24 Apr. 1930.

95 Beinart, ‘Soil erosion’, 59–61. Beinart sees a shift with the 1946 Soil Conservation Act that gave state actors greater power to intervene (*ibid.*).

96 S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820–2000* (Oxford, 2006), 8, 212.

97 Compare Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 96–120.

98 Union Department of Agriculture, *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa* (Pretoria, 1929), 31.

99 Union Department of Agriculture, ‘Agricultural Education in South Africa’, *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 13:51 (1914), 289–90.

training at university level started in 1917, with the establishment of a faculty of agriculture at the Transvaal University College in Pretoria.<sup>100</sup> Contributing to a ‘South Africanization of science’, these institutions generated knowledge locally and provided the young nation with a class of homegrown agricultural experts.<sup>101</sup>

Agricultural scientization was exclusive on the basis of skin color, but became more inclusive within the category of whiteness. Glen College admitted only whites, while employing Africans as laborers, and even declined colored and black farmers’ requests for scientific advice.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, according to the account of a former instructor, the institution ‘Afrikanerized’, especially after Gen. Hertzog sent his son there in 1924.<sup>103</sup> By the 1930s, the training, once conducted in English, was bilingual, and most students hailed from the Free State.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, the social composition of the rural community and administration changed more generally. Though commercial farming had first been driven by a primarily English-speaking group including absentee landowners and recent settlers of British or other colonial origin, the expanding grain and maize production increasingly involved Afrikaans speakers.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, the agricultural bureaucracy incorporated more young Afrikaner men.<sup>106</sup>

While agricultural education clearly helped to ‘whiten’ commercial production and make it more inclusive on the basis of skin color, sources indicate that it nevertheless missed government expectations. By the mid-1930s, all of the Union’s agricultural colleges turned out only 200 young farmers annually, thus falling far short of the 4,000 that the Department of Agriculture deemed necessary.<sup>107</sup> The institution expressed concerns that Glen’s fees were ‘excessive’ and ‘beyond the means of the average farmer’ and that it encouraged a farming system that was too capital-intensive for the majority of the population.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, the college experimented with several programs for the sons of poorer parents, albeit to limited success.<sup>109</sup> The situation mirrored the experiences of du Toit and other officials of the Extension Division, who tried to address the white rural majority but always found it easier to work with the more affluent sections.<sup>110</sup>

100 H. Moran, ‘An historical critical survey of agricultural education in the Transvaal (unpublished MA thesis, University of Pretoria, 1935), 1–4.

101 Dubow, *Commonwealth*, 8, 212. Relying on foreign expertise, the Free State had been issuing scholarships to Canada and the United States. See VAB DA 2 2026, Director of Agriculture, Bloemfontein, to Assistant Director, 25 Mar. 1908.

102 Correspondence between Principal, Glen College, and Agriculture Department in SAB LON 10 A28/1, 1939–45.

103 J. van Zyl, ‘A History of the Glen College of Agriculture and Institute’, private memoir of former Glen College professor, 2005, author’s private copy.

104 SAB LON 10 A27/2, Glen College prospectus, c. 1937.

105 Keegan, ‘Rural accumulation’, 634.

106 Compare to Beinart, *Conservation*, 265.

107 SAB Secretary of Agriculture (LDB) 2079 R 2930, Department of Agriculture, ‘Memorandum vir die Interdepartementele Konferensies oor Landbou–Onderwys’, 1–2 Feb. 1934. In its first 29 years, Glen College trained 2,332 diploma students. See SAB LON 6 A16/1, ‘Vooruitgang van Glen. 2332 al daar Opgelei’, *Volksblad*, c. 11 Dec. 1947.

108 VAB SLT 1/19 A44/4, vol. I, Principal to Chief, Education and Extension Division, 21 Oct. 1932.

109 A trainee course in the 1930s for sons of poor parents, for instance, collapsed after two years, having attracted criticism that it exploited students’ labor instead of educating them; see VAB SLT 1/2 A14 3, Notule van Konferensie van Prinsipale van Landboukolleges, 20–2 Feb. 1940.

110 Beinart, *Conservation*, 257.

Behind these concerns was a long tradition of conceiving agricultural progress and rural welfare in conjunction. As in other national contexts, structural change in South Africa was accompanied by experiences of loss and upheaval that found an outlet in anti-urbanist sentiments, cultural pessimism, and agrarian romanticism.<sup>111</sup> A hotly debated crisis phenomenon was the exodus of economically deprived groups of *bywoners* and smallholders to the nation's cities. The 'poor white problem', a way of conceptualizing poverty in terms of a racial collective and as a question of public concern, emerged in the late nineteenth century and became highly politicized in the early decades of the twentieth.<sup>112</sup> Echoing arguments advanced by liberal intellectuals and administrators regarding the value of rural life for Africans, the natural place for poor Afrikaners was seen to be the countryside. In intellectual and newspaper discourse, the city was where both groups confronted each other in a downward spiral of competition for low-skilled work, racial 'mixing', and 'deterioration'.<sup>113</sup> Education played a central role in both explaining poor whiteism and proposing solutions. A 1908 commission of the Orange River Colony reasoned that the low standard of education and its lack of adjustment to rural conditions were pushing young men and women to towns. Education that would teach whites 'to help themselves' and relinquish their snobbery toward manual labor, by contrast, would prevent them from 'sink[ing] below the level of natives'.<sup>114</sup> Two decades later, an influential report of the US Carnegie Corporation echoed the earlier study's logic, judging that the low level of education – 60 per cent of poor farmers' sons who entered agriculture each year had not finished primary school – and 'maladjustment' to rural life were major components of the poor white problem.<sup>115</sup>

The Carnegie study, a document central to the consolidation of segregation and 'state racism',<sup>116</sup> became a point of reference throughout the 1930s, as severe droughts and the Great Depression precipitated 'a widespread feeling of social and moral crisis'.<sup>117</sup> The destitution of many rural Afrikaans-speaking families challenged the self-definition of Boer (farmer) society and raised the specter of 'degeneration' and racial mixing.<sup>118</sup> Couched in eugenics-oriented language of 'intelligence' and heredity, scientific, official, and newspaper debates projected anxieties about lower-class rural others who at once

111 On a 'romantic anti-capitalist vision of natural rural order' of segregation discourse, see S. Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge 1995), 170.

112 G. Davie, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855–2005* (Cambridge, 2015), 40–1. On the influence of poor whites in Free State politics, see T. Keegan, 'The restructuring of agrarian class relations in a colonial economy: the Orange River Colony, 1902–1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5:2 (1979), 250.

113 Davie, *Poverty Knowledge*, 21.

114 VAB ORC 53, Report of the ORC poor whites commission, 1908.

115 E. G. Malherbe, *Education and the Poor White: Report of the Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa, Volume III* (Stellenbosch, 1932). However, the Carnegie report also identified opportunities in cities for poor whites; see J. Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge, 1987), 119.

116 A. L. Stoler, 'Tense and tender ties: the politics of comparison in North American history and (post) colonial studies', *Journal of American History*, 88:3 (2001), 857–9.

117 C. Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the 'Ossebrandwag'* (Berlin, 2008), 14.

118 S. Swart, 'The "Five Shilling Rebellion": rural white male anxiety and the 1914 Boer Rebellion', *South African Historical Journal*, 56 (2011), 88–102.



belonged to the shared category of whiteness.<sup>119</sup> In response to the rural exodus, officials and intellectuals, including influential educator and Carnegie report author E. G. Malherbe, celebrated farmers as the ‘back-bone of the South African nation’ and connected agrarian romanticism to pleas for educational reform.<sup>120</sup> Drawing upon earlier ideas, experts proposed a ‘differentiated’ curriculum for the *platteland*. During a ‘Rural Education’ conference in Cape Town and Johannesburg in 1934, a major gathering of prolific national and international experts, South African educators campaigned for ‘less academic’ approaches adapted to farm life.<sup>121</sup> The idea of an agricultural bias for country schools also ranked high on the agenda of agricultural bureaucrats, including Glen College’s principal.<sup>122</sup>

Attempts to protect white supremacy by tying ‘endangered’ classes to the land, however, did not resound with their target audiences. Numerous sources reveal parents’ objections to differentiated curricula that seemed to predetermine their children’s careers and prepare them for a future of manual labor. Judging from agricultural modernizers’ complaints, many rural parents expressed higher ambitions, desiring a full ‘academic education’ for their children.<sup>123</sup> In the late 1940s, the Free State’s director of education reported about people’s fierce resistance against the government’s plans to establish agricultural instruction in rural primary schools.<sup>124</sup> In the question of an agricultural bias in country schools, class and racial delineations intersected. While a so-called adapted curriculum stressing practical over intellectual instruction sought to uplift poor whites from their unsettling economic proximity to Africans, agricultural instruction was at the same time associated with ‘labor education’ and ‘Kaffir work’.<sup>125</sup>

Protest also came from expert circles. Rheinallt Jones criticized the government’s attempts to ‘make our “poor whites” into independent farmers’ when modern agriculture required a small group of skilled, capitalized specialists.<sup>126</sup> In a similar vein, W. H. Hutt, Chair of Commerce at the University of Cape Town, argued at the abovementioned conference that the drift toward towns was a natural phenomenon in any country experiencing economic growth. Agricultural education could even accelerate urbanization, since more efficient techniques meant that fewer people would be required to meet the country’s agricultural needs.<sup>127</sup>

119 Stoler, ‘Tender ties’, 857–61.

120 ‘City-made education ruin of rural population’, 28 Apr. 1939, *Rand Daily Mail*, SAB LON 234 A 138/1 (vol. II).

121 SAB LDB 2079 R 2930, vol. I, ‘Rural education’, *Daily Dispatch*, 11 June 1934; E. G. Malherbe (ed.), *Educational Adaptations in a Changing Society: Report of the South African Education Conference* (Cape Town, 1937).

122 SAB LON 6 A16/1, Secretary, Landbou-onderwysvereniging OFS, to Col. du Toit, 2 Sept. 1931.

123 SAB LDB 2079 R 2930, ‘Rural education’, *The Star*, 13 Feb. 1934.

124 VAB Education Branch of the Free State Provincial Administration (PAE) 181–Z 322, ‘Agricultural education: association to be formed in the Free State’, c. late 1940s, newspaper title not shown.

125 Compare SAB LDB 2375 R 3547, correspondence on the ‘poor white question’ in 1928.

126 CUL A881 Fa 14/1, ‘The land question in South Africa’, J. D. Rheinallt Jones, speech at European–Bantu Conference, 31 Jan.–1 Feb. 1929.

127 W. H. Hutt, ‘The social and economic significance of the rural exodus’, in Malherbe (ed.), *Educational Adaptations*, 350–7.

It took the government a long time to fully confront the fact there was not much space for its poor white constituency in the commercializing countryside and that it had better chances in the expanding industrial sector.<sup>128</sup> However, in a 1947 letter to *Farmer's Weekly*, a leading agricultural journal, the director of Agricultural Education and Extension made explicit that he would concentrate on a small group of specialists:

It is stated, without fear of contradiction . . . , that modern agriculture, conservation farming and stability in the farming industry demand a high level of intelligence and ability . . . The ideal, therefore, which the Department feels must be set . . . is a body of farmers, drawn from the higher intelligence groups of our population, with a fundamental training in the vocation they have chosen . . . [T]here is little or no place in South Africa for peasant farmers.<sup>129</sup>

This educated 'body of farmers' consisted of men and rested on the ideal of a patriarchal nuclear family. Compared with the Transkei and Ciskei, however, the gendering of agricultural work in the Free State seems to have been somewhat more aligned with Afrikaner families' actual social organization. As Belinda Bozzoli has shown, Afrikaner households centered on the *paterfamilias* whose subordinate wife's role in food production was generally less dominant than that of African women.<sup>130</sup> State efforts to extend rural education to girls and women – few in the first place – again targeted the farmer's wife instead of the woman farmer. In 1920, Glen College appointed two 'home instructresses', who traveled through the region teaching women about family health care, thriftiness, and cultural esthetic tasks such as interior decoration.<sup>131</sup> Similar issues of general housewifery were at the heart of Glen's Home Industries Branch established in 1932, as well as of special women's sections in agricultural shows and magazines.<sup>132</sup>

Such training of women for the social and cultural reproduction of the rural family must be seen alongside the fact that particularly young, single Afrikaner women were leaving for cities and towns at the time. Scholarship has elaborated anxieties about women's migration and the Afrikaner *volksmoeder* (mother of the people) idea – a notion of rural domesticity and motherhood that extended beyond the family and was framed in nationalist terms.<sup>133</sup> Similar notions of an extended domesticity into the national family also reverberated in discourse about rural education for women. In fact, the Free State Women's Agricultural Union argued in 1938 that domestic science should become an obligatory school subject for girls in order to foster 'a healthy family life for our volk'.<sup>134</sup>

128 On how this view emerged during the Pact period, see Freund, 'South Africa', 228.

129 SAB LON 234 A 138/2, 'The Department of Agriculture and Agricultural Education', letter to *Farmers' Weekly*, 25 June 1947, Director, Agricultural Education.

130 Bozzoli, 'Marxism', 130–1.

131 A. E. Kok, 'The home economist in the OFS region', Golden Jubilee Glen College of Agriculture, *special edition Farming in South Africa*, 45:8 (1969), 71–5.

132 SAB LON 10 A27/2, Glen College prospectus, c. 1937; SAB LON 234 A 138/1 (vol. II).

133 S. Marks, 'War and Union, 1899–1910', in Ross, Mager, and Nasson (eds.), *Cambridge History*, 183–4, 187. Du Toit has shown how female Afrikaner nationalists extended the boundaries of the domestic in the 1920s to encompass a 'redefined public arena'; see M. du Toit, 'The domesticity of Afrikaner nationalism: volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904–1929', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29:1 (2003), 175.

134 VAB PAE 167 Z231 Part I, Secretary, Free State Women's Agricultural Union, to Director, Education, Boemfontein, 5 May 1938, author's translation.

Some Free State women pushed the sphere of women still further. In the mid- and late 1920s, teacher Esther Bell Robinson and her followers successfully campaigned for women's admission to Glen College's full diploma course, reminding the government that women with inherited or shared farms should be helped toward becoming successful producers.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, Boschetto Agricultural College in Harrismith, the only agricultural college for women in the entire Southern Hemisphere, trained young women in the core subjects of agriculture, thereby preparing them to become independent farmers or assume positions of higher management.<sup>136</sup> For white Free State women, the separate rural domestic sphere seems to have been slightly more permeable than for their Transkeian and Ciskeian counterparts.

## CONCLUSION

In the first decades of the twentieth century, agriculture became a concern for the South African state, which in turn played a key role in boosting the sector's productivity. As in other national contexts, knowledge and education were among the first avenues through which the state shifted agriculture into public terrain, attempting to coopt rural dwellers into playing predefined roles in the national economy. In South Africa's agrarian historiography, education and rural social engineering have not been systematically examined. This article applied agricultural education as a lens to capture how officials, experts, intellectuals, and groups of farmers navigated the perceived transition from a pastoral trekker society to a modern nation by reforming and hence preserving the countryside in the face of rapid urbanization. Related programs were both inextricably intertwined with the emerging policy of segregation and intersected by delineations of class and gender.

The ideological construction of distinct racial communities both enabled and restricted agricultural development. African leaders in the Transkei and Ciskei situated rural improvement within a racially-defined collective and projected visions of black small-scale farming as a path to material progress and self-determination. The model of the 'American Negro' was a point of convergence between government officials and African progressives, exemplifying more broadly shared ideological terrain of African elites and liberal segregationists in the early decades of the twentieth century. Agricultural education was a manifestation of a cooperative administrative style emphasizing self-help. However, faced with land scarcity, a lack of capital, and labor migration, graduates of South Africa's agricultural schools found few possibilities for social advancement outside the demonstration service. Chaffing against actual consequences of segregation policy and failing to get the necessary collaboration on the ground, the earlier approach eventually yielded to more top-down, drastic interventions, most extremely under the banner of

---

135 SAB LON 6 A16/1, Private Secretary to Free State Agricultural Union, 29 Nov. 1928; E. B. Robinson to Col. du Toit, 19 Apr. 1924; SAB LON 10 A27/1.

136 See correspondence, 1929–35, SAB LDB 2418 R3681, vol. 1. After years of financial stringency, the small institution seems to have closed down in the early 1960s, see correspondence in SAB LDB 2419 R3681, Part III.

'betterment'.<sup>137</sup> The case of declining agricultural colleges in the Ciskei and Transkei exemplify how the 'suffocation of African rural capitalism' not only played out at the level of hard economic history, but also pertained to professional identities, social aspirations, and the prestige – or lack thereof – attributed to specific occupations.<sup>138</sup>

By contrast, the ambitions of graduates from Glen Agricultural College found an outlet in the expanding commercial sector. In the Free State, agrarian reform bolstered economic reconstruction and helped to accommodate Afrikaans-speaking farmers, at least sections of them, in the larger framework of a white nation. At the same time, agricultural policy for whites struggled to reconcile the parallel desires to increase output and keep as many people on the land as possible. The construction of a white collective partly accounted for these welfarist aspects of agricultural policy. By the 1940s, however, the Agriculture Department explicitly endorsed a more exclusive stance, acknowledging the scarcity of space for poor whites on the commercializing *platteland*.

In both areas, agricultural reform was pushed by elites, but it could appeal more broadly depending on a family's social and educational background. Bureaucrats' and leading farmers' frustrations with 'red natives' and 'poor whites', however, indicate that the poorer strata of rural society fell from the framework of agricultural progressivism. The idea of a differentiated curriculum for rural children particularly aroused suspicions among parents who did not associate agricultural work with social progress. In both cases, progressive farming addressed men, rested on the nuclear family as an economic unit, and implied a separation of the field and home, with women's work being relegated to the latter. At a time when especially young Afrikaner women were streaming into the cities, romanticizing discourse cast rural women as guardians of white civilization. The projected sharp division of labor contradicted reality in the Free State and even more so in the Ciskei and Transkei, where agricultural modernizers wrestled with the fact that a large proportion of its male population was engaged in migrant labor.

South Africa's agrarian history is one of economic and social exclusions that has resulted in today's split sector, with commercial and subsistence farming existing side by side and with 80 per cent of households classified as 'non-agricultural'.<sup>139</sup> That we know the end of the story, however, should not prevent us from inquiring into rural alternatives that South Africans imagined, engaged with, and rejected along the way.

137 Beinart describes the late 1930s as the beginning of 'a new phase of intervention'; Beinart, *Conservation*, 353 (quotation), 332, 339–41. Betterment, implemented mainly after the Second World War, entailed a fundamental reorganization of land use patterns and massive resettlements; see McAllister, 'Rural production', 207; Beinart, 'Soil erosion', 74–8.

138 For quotation, see Beinart and Delius, 'Natives Land Act', 685.

139 Statistics South Africa, *Agricultural Statistics*, ([http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=735&cid=4](http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=735&cid=4)), 2015.