

“The Kingdom of Mealies”: Agrarian Progressivism in South Africa, c. 1900–1945

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My project deals with rural reform, particularly agricultural education, in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Examining the intricate links between environmental-agrarian development and social engineering, the study offers a fresh perspective on the history of segregation. The discovery of minerals in the late nineteenth century triggered a rapid process of industrialization and urbanization in South Africa. Partly in response, commercial farming expanded significantly, thanks to a largely state-driven “agricultural revolution.” These processes also raised alarmist discourses. Agricultural commercialization and population increase in the by now “settled” country, without further unexploited land resources, were seen to cause environmental harm—especially soil erosion. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of rural dwellers were driven into South Africa’s urban areas, which were seen as dangerous places of racial mixing and competition.

Officials, experts, and so-called “progressive” farmers cast agricultural education as a way to deal with the challenges of poverty, environmental stress, and “racial degradation.” The South African state and local administrations instituted various measures to educate farmers, primarily agricultural colleges and demonstration/extension services. My study enquires into the history of these services, the motives behind them, and the responses they triggered. Agricultural education was supposed to boost commercial production, but it also targeted the less fortunate, who were supposedly better contained in the rural areas: African smallholders and “poor whites.” Agricultural education thus constituted a mode of combined social-environmental engineering, an attempt to “rehabilitate” the countryside and spatially fix black people and lower-class whites on the land. By concentrating on the African reserves of the Ciskei and Transkei on the one hand and the Afrikaner-dominated Orange Free State on the other, I am able to highlight not only the vast discrepancies in how state agencies treated African and white farmers respectively, but also the similarities in the discourses about progressive farmers and poor rural “masses.”

I argue that rural-environmental and racial policy were inextricably intertwined. In the early twentieth century, rural progressivism seemed to open up avenues for aspiring black farmers. Over time, however, agricultural education came to service a hardening, discriminatory notion of segregation. At the same time, race was not the only determining factor, as agricultural education was strongly class driven—in ways that could be strikingly similar for black and white communities. It was a way for more prosperous farmers to distinguish themselves, while capturing the “dangerous classes” on the land.

These dynamics were furthermore informed by broader debates on rural reform, whiteness, and the “American Negro.” Tracing transatlantic exchanges with American philanthropies, the Tuskegee Institute, and the USDA, the study reflects how South Africans adapted models from the American South to their own situation. Ideas about environmental decline, rural progress, pedagogy, and agricultural techniques were frequently exchanged through direct contact between officials, experts, and black elites.