After these more detailed and regionally specific perspectives, the conclusion returns to a wider terrain. Perhaps ironically, it does so partly by stressing that parochial consciousness was the norm at a time when the rural poor had no shared conception of the South African political economy. The significance of village-pump politics was particularly evident in the various offshoots of the Union that survived for some thirty years, and in the relatively spontaneous conflicts that erupted under the auspices of these fragmented bodies. Possibly the most striking were the beer boycotts launched by traditionalists in Durban, and transformed by village and farm women in broader Natal. These stood in stark contrast to the Union’s generally dismal record amongst females. They also highlighted the fact that the migrant labor system, combined with the trend of moving from rural areas via peri-urban settlements to towns, prevented the maintenance of a rigid barrier between city and countryside.

But while this book sweeps across both urban areas and other periods—and provides a close-up view of certain local conflicts—it essential focus is the ICU’s relationship to struggles in the South African countryside in the 1920s. So it is a national vision that informs the delineation of general patterns of participation, protest and repression. And it is the rural dimension that is explored in depicting the various strengths, weaknesses and legacies of the Union. Indeed, there were persistent criticisms of organizing in this arena at all. ‘If only ... we could keep the ICU from touching the country districts,’ wrote Ethelreda Lewis despairingly in 1928 to Winifred Holtby, another prominent liberal attempting to transform the Union into a moderate trade union organizing urban labourers alone. Lewis’s motives were suspect, but she did at least stress to Kadzie that the price many farm tenants paid for joining the ICU was eviction.

This was only too true. Indeed, this book is also a part of history of an ill-fated rural movement which did not halt capitalization of the countryside, did not rid South Africa of its racist state, and invited retribution on the heads of those who supported it. But it is also an account which attempts to grant the experiences and aspirations of rural blacks validity within their own historical time, recognizes their determination to resist intolerable conditions, and stresses the strength of their desires for a new heaven and a new earth. If the ICU fell far short of this goal, it nonetheless represented a high-water mark in the long struggle against exploitation and oppression in the countryside.


In 1926, an Orange Free State ICU organizer met a shabby, twenty-year-old labour tenant from Vrede travelling by train to Durban. Horrified by his life history, the official wrote up the man’s responses to his questions for readers of the Union’s newspaper, The Workers’ Herald.

I don’t know what terms were made on the contract by my father. We make our livelihood from the yearly crops of a 4-acre plot of mealies and kaffir corn. On a bad year one bag of mealies is credited to us every time we have finished the one already given. We get meat only when a cow or sheep has died, and this does not often happen unless during great thunderstorms. We get no milk at all. We get only the watery part of the sour milk. We use this in eating our dry and half-cooked mealie-meal pap.

We have a very short time to do our pap-cooking. My parents and five of my sisters and seven of us are all farm hands and we all get no pay for services. We serve only to have a right of settling on the farm. We start work from early sunrise until sunset daily excepting Sundays when we have a whole day’s rest... My father receives a parsela (present) remuneration of three pounds after some years of real back-strained farm work, evidently on a good year when the baas realises that the yields of the crops have made for him big dividends.

It is a crime for any one of us to pick up and eat any of the fruit in the garden. He (the baas) buys no clothes for us. He allows us two months in the year to go and seek work for money, so that we can buy ourselves something to wear. He is totally against our attending any church services. We do so by sneaking away to some neighbouring farm where the farmer is not so much concerned whether natives hold services or not.

My father has only two lean horses. All his stock of cattle have dwindled away. They did not graze on the same pasture lands with
those of the baas. They were fenced round a very small lot of very
barren ground, there to expect maana from heaven or die of
hunger . . . We are allowed to possess not more than four oxen.
And even if we may be in a position to possess some, they plough
the farmers’ fields, and when they are outspanned they are
separated from those of the baas and driven to their barren pasture
ground. My father does not buy any more oxen for the reason
already stated. We are not allowed to possess any sheep at all. The
horses are so lean that they are useless as beasts of burden. We only
expect to see them die at any moment.¹

In a microcosm, the unknown labour tenant and his baas of
the occasional big dividends represented those in the vanguard of
rural support and opposition to the ICU in the period 1926–29.
Underlying this pattern of participation were the twin trends of
African proletarianization and white capitalization. Yet it is clear
from the above account that the tenant did not relate to his
landlord as worker to capitalist. It was equally clear to contem-
porary white farmers that although the world was being turned
into a ‘ghastly machine which works for profit’, they themselves
were ‘gropping about rather aimlessly in a miserable backwater of
transition’.²

In the 1920s, an outstanding feature of South African agriculture
was the stunted nature of its emergent relations and forces of
production. Although blacks living on farms were being
proletarianized, their struggles often still centred around their status
as tenants rather than labourers. It was for this reason that rural ICU
branches were frequently ‘permeated with a sort of insurgent peasant
spirit; and the leading problem in the view of thoughtful natives is
not wages – but land’.³ Similarly, accumulation in the countryside
was a grinding, precarious and extraordinarily uneven process,
dependent in the main on non-capitalist relations of exploitation. So
while nascent capital was evident, it was largely capital which, unable to
purchase the worker’s labour-power at a price covering costs of subsistence, ‘ennmeshes him in a veritable net of usurious extor-
tion, binds him to itself by kulak methods, and as a result robs
him not only of the surplus-value, but of an enormous part of his
wages too’.⁴ It was precisely because surplus labour was primarily
extorted through robbery rather than created through the wage-
form that the ICU could not operate as an economistic trade union in
the countryside. It was precisely, too, because it was organizing in
areas ravaged by primitive accumulation rather than reshaped by
capitalism, that the Union inspired rural struggles sufficiently radical
to be termed peasants’ revolts.⁵

Commercial Agriculture: The ‘Squeezing’ of Farmers

In the words of Free State ex-labour tenant Mothubelwe Moloko,
‘it was our land from time immemorial, we were the indigenous
people of the land . . . we stayed there until the ratlahoboros took our
land’. Absolutely central to rural class differentiation along racially
defined lines was this land seizure by conquering white ratlahoboros.
Dispossession was legalized by what Africans termed ‘looting law’,
the most notorious of which was the 1913 Natives Land Act. This
almost entirely prohibited Africans from buying ground outside the
7 per cent of South Africa set aside as reserves; it outlawed black
‘squating’ and sharecropping on Free State farms; and it banned
Africans from entering into new cash or kind tenancies elsewhere in
the country.⁶

Over the following years, the process of separating blacks from the
land accelerated, largely because a good 40 per cent of the
growing white populace tried to avoid sliding into the under-classes
by acquiring farms. Ongoing injections of state aid into white land
settlement, combined with developments in disease control and
water supply, helped to appease their hunger for ground. After the
First World War, even land companies began to reflect the shift in
balance from rentier to productive landlords, and sold millions of
morgens to farmers. And by the later 1920s, so much Crown land had
been allotted to ‘poor white’ settlement that very little suitable for
agriculture was left. In all, between 1918 and 1928, the number of
white-occupied farms rose by 23 per cent to reach some 94,000
holdings.⁷

Actual ownership rather than mere possession of land was also
becoming ever more crucial for whites. As capitalizing landlords
continued to evict from their holdings poorer white tenants with no
legal title, so the number of owner-occupied farms rose steadily to
reach about 67 per cent of the total in 1930. The exorbitant cost of
these purchases was exacerbated by the fact that land prices far
exceeded productive values. While this disparity originated during
the nineteenth century, when ground was acquired for its mineral or
speculative value, it continued in the twentieth century as demand
for this finite resource soared. During the two decades after 1910,
the price of grazing land increased at about 10 per cent a year, while
that of good arable soil rose even more quickly at some 16-22 per
cent per annum. Thus prime land costing thirty shillings per
morgen in 1908 was selling for ten pounds per morgen twenty years
later, while a ranch bought for four hundred pounds in 1910 was
sold with few improvements for five thousand pounds in 1928. By
this time, the average value of land of a northern Free State maize
farm was £7,854, representing fully two-thirds of the total investment in the holding.8

Rocketing land values had two major consequences. First, operating in tandem with the subdivision of holdings amongst families, they contributed to the rapid decline in the sizes of farms. Average areas fell by some 66 per cent over the first thirty years of the twentieth century, by which time over 80 per cent of holdings were less than one thousand morgen. In Natal the mean was 574, while even smaller estates were the norm in some intensively worked arable districts. Secondly, rising values were both cause and effect of the backwardness of much of South African agriculture. On the one hand, since land prices were increasing at a rate which vastly exceeded that of farming profits, many wealthier agriculturists fuelled inflation by investing receipts in land speculation rather than farm improvements. On the other hand, neither option was available to many poorer whites. Indeed, the draining away of funds into ground meant that

Many a farmer is crippled at the very commencement of his activities... All his available capital, and perhaps all he could borrow, is locked up in land, so that fencing, dam-making, boring for water and improvement of stock becomes impossible. In a frantic endeavour to keep his head above water he allows his farm to become overstocked... and ends up frequently in the bankruptcy court.9

Seemingly endless natural disasters reinforced the threat of insolvency and dispossession. Drought, disease and a myriad pests periodically walloped out landlords who had already survived poor soils and a fickle climate. 'Every year large quantities of grain are sown, and every seven years or so large crops are reaped', wrote farmer Leonard Flemming. Amongst the evils he dwelt on were hail, late or early frosts, potclay, woolly aphis, borers, cut-worms, lice, locusts, and weeds. Heading his list of scourges, however, was drought, of which he satirically remarked that farmers' dams were impaired when rain occasionally fell and wet them inside.10

Shortage and unreliability of rainfall were indeed the primary ecological constraints. In the mid-1920s, a mere 15 per cent of the country's largely arid or semi-arid surface was considered potentially arable, while only about 5 per cent of white farm land was actually cultivated. Moreover, while drought was the norm not the exception, between 1925 and 1928 the rainfall over large parts of the country was less than for any previously recorded four-year period. During these years, entire regions experienced one of the worst droughts in living memory. Stock worth tens of millions of pounds was destroyed, and huge tracts of productive land were transformed into barren wastes.11

Drought losses were perhaps worst in the central Cape. Entire districts were abandoned to the heat and the dust, as despairing farmers sold their holdings for a song, or simply quit after chalking on the door: 'There is no longer a God. God has forgotten us.' Although the first victims were poorer pastoralists, even wealthy men slid into penury: one estate worth thirty-two thousand pounds produced the paltry income of twenty-three pounds in 1927. Simultaneously, thousands of 'coloured' and African herdsmen were rendered superfluous as land-owners tried to minimize drought losses by fencing their farms. Some of the blacks who subsequently poured into towns were inspired by militant ICU speeches. In Graaff-Reinet in 1927, hundreds of destitute Africans refused to pay poll tax, at least one on the grounds that he had been so advised by Kadalie. But in the main, neither these depressed village communities nor farm workers clinging to employment seem to have been particularly enthusiastic about the Union's rhetoric or its prayer meetings for rain.12

Social as well as natural tribulations afflicted farmers, situated as they were in a peripheral country where the uneven development of capitalism heavily weighted the terms of exchange against them. Apart from the fact that South Africans were paying some three times as much for implements as their competitors on the world market, from the mid-1920s agricultural prices were falling faster than those for industrial commodities. Furthermore, the very trajectory of capitalist development drastically limited the home market. 'All my early years of farming, whatever you produced, it was a surplus', recalled a Natal landlord. 'We had surpluses of everything: there was too much mear, too much milk, too much butter...'. All too often, mercantile capital aggravated the problem of realizing profits from produce, by acting as a leech draining away farmers' life-blood. Country traders in particular batten on smaller agriculturists who, by pledging their produce in return for credit, were easy victims of numberless abuses. In the early 1920s, a good one-third of the difference between producers' and retail prices was siphoned into the pockets of middlemen, who understandably found unequal exchange in the countryside to be a profitable sphere of activity.13

But deteriorating terms of trade must also be situated in the context of the capitalist world market. From 1925-6, falling farm-product prices contributed to world-wide agricultural depression, as farmers were subordinated to metropolitan industrialists demanding cheaper raw materials, and to huge mercantile concerns engaged in cut-throat competition to supply them. In South Africa, the problem
was exacerbated because it coincided with the country's transition from net importer to net exporter of farm products. Representing almost half the total value produced, these agricultural exports ineluctably betrayed their origins in an extremely backward agrarian economy. Reflecting the fact that this was a phase of primitive accumulation, South African farming techniques were generally so predatory and antiquated that they caused staggering declines in soil fertility. The land was often so poor that it would have been left virgin elsewhere, while levels of mechanization were so low that in 1926 only 1 per cent of farms possessed a tractor. Finally, work was extorted primarily from an unwilling labour-force deeming itself to be under duress. Consequently, both labour productivity and crop yields per morgen were usually amongst the lowest in the world. Since these were key determinants of costs of production, it was frequently impossible to sell South African produce at a profit in the international market.14

Maize, for example, was far and away the most important cash crop in South Africa, and according to state officials its average yield per morgen was the worst in the world in the mid-1920s. The international price was determined largely by Argentinian production, and when this country produced bumper crops (as in 1927), South African mealies could be sold at less than their cost of production. Since by this time the export price was an important influence on that reigning locally, South African maize in fact yielded little or no profit in the latter 1920s. But this was characteristic of a period when capitalist farmers described themselves as manufacturers selling under cost. Only in woolled sheep — which required about one tenth of the labour needed in maize and offered biannual returns — could pastoralists obtain profit rates of some 5 per cent. The key cattle industry was on the verge of collapse, while 'progressive' agriculturists calculated their rates of profit in almost all other sectors as usually less than 3 per cent. In 1926-7, farmers averaged a meagre annual income of one hundred and sixty pounds, which was not only abysmally low compared to the earnings of urban capitalists, but also considerably less than the pay of many white wage earners. As capitalizing landlords continually waited, better livings were afforded by gambling on horses.15

Low incomes and low profit margins; high land prices and high rates of crop and stock failure; falling prices and slow turnovers: this is the context in which farmers' chronic indebtedness must be situated. According to the Governor of the Reserve Bank in 1926, merchants' provision of short-term loans left landlords 'manacled hand and foot by the chains of debt'.16 More significantly, mortgaging of holdings affected even those who had inherited their land, or who were wealthier men with access to banks. For tens of thousands of farmers, this was the only way to buy out co-heirs, to recover from disastrous seasons, or to ward off creditors clamouring for payment. As a country banker expressed it, Several bills are lying past due in the bank, and further renewal has been refused; or unsecured overdraft facilities, granted temporarily, have been abused and are now withdrawn; vendue accounts with different auctioneers are long overdue; the year's credit with two or three storekeepers has been exceeded; and from every side legal proceedings . . . are being threatened. The only way of escape from the pending catastrophe is by means of consolidating all the debts.17

Especially in the years of generalized capitalist prosperity from 1924 to 1929, obtaining loans by mortgaging land was usually extraordinarily easy. By 1930, registered bonds on farms had escalated to a total of ninety-one million pounds, representing fully 36 per cent of total farm values and an average indebtedness of nearly one thousand pounds per holding. The great bulk of these loans were granted by private bodies and individuals, with the latter sometimes lending on fourth, fifth or even sixth bonds on the same property. The vast majority too were seen as lucrative investments rather than as loans to be redeemed by amortization. But if mortgagees were well-satisfied with rates of interest ranging from 6 per cent to the usurious double figures of many individuals, it was common knowledge that amongst many struggling farmers, 'die "intest" vree soms vuur' (the 'interest' consumes like fire).18

So long as payments were regular and land prices continued to rise, mortgagees were fairly secure. But in times of countrywide economic slumps, many mortgagees would abruptly give three to six month's notice for repayment of the entire loan, and seize possession of the farms of defaulters. Landlords ruined in this way were often forced to flee to the towns, where they formed a large proportion of the 'poor white' population. In the decade after 1922, this rose by 150 per cent to reach about one-sixth of the entire white populace.19

Thus, by partially separating farmers from ownership of their primary means of production, mortgage debt had a considerable impact on the process of class formation in South Africa. Furthermore, the threat of foreclosure was a central factor in the commercialization of the countryside. By the later 1920s, there were probably few regions where the majority of farms were not bonded, and there were certainly districts where this applied to 90 per cent of all estates. Precisely because most farmers did not have unqualified
access to their major means of production, they were forced to produce commodities, forced to try to cover interest payments, and forced to invest money in production with the aim of increasing it.20

This did not, however, signify their development into full-blown capitalists. Apart from the continued existence of a significant though diminishing sector oriented solely towards subsistence, most farmers in the 1920s were driven by the need to maximize cash, not profits. Indeed, the great majority kept almost no records at all, and were utterly unable to calculate net returns from their enterprises. For them, the limit of exploitation was set not by agricultural rates of profit – let alone average rates ruling in the economy as a whole – but by the far lower costs of simple reproduction.21

Thus it was as capitalizing landlords stalked by the spectre of dispossession that many farmers struggled on through yearly rounds of overwork and underconsumption, bought ground priced way above its productive value, and sold produce at the prohibitively low prices set by mercantile capital. Indeed, since landlords were desperate to recoup losses suffered during the post-war years of drought and depression, many also displayed non-capitalist responses to falling prices. In order to try to maintain income levels, they reacted by expanding rather than contracting production. Thus despite falling agricultural prices between 1925 and 1930, land under cultivation increased both per farm, and also by a total of nearly 20 per cent in the three northern provinces. Similarly, although wool prices were in the main tending downwards over the same period, the attraction of this sector in a generally depressed economy was manifested in a massive 38 per cent increase in the number of white-owned woolled sheep.22

Partly because wildly fluctuating yields characterized rural production in this era, prices were not of course always declining. Farmers certainly reacted feverishly to any slight increases in cash returns from a particular product. The key price rises here were of sugar from 1926, maize in 1926–7, wattle bark in 1927, and wool in 1927–8, although there were also occasional. when the open sesame was apparently provided by crops ranging from cotton to peanuts. But all too often the improved returns were ephemeral, largely because farmers rushed into the sector, glutted the market, and helped precipitate plummeting prices.23

There was, however, a small minority who appeared to have discovered the correct password. In the later 1920s, ‘successful’ farmers constituted perhaps 10 per cent of the total number.24 They were concentrated in the Transvaal highveld, the Midlands and coastal belt of Natal, the eastern Orange Free State, and the south-western and eastern Cape. Agribusiness had a small but
significant presence, often in the form of vast multifaceted companies running plantations. So too did 'cheque book' farmers, whose estates were primarily items of conspicuous consumption. But numerically and socially most important were the 'progressive' landlords. Many were previously or simultaneously lawyers, merchants or businessmen who, in taking up agriculture (often on land acquired through the calling up of mortgages), were encouraging the seepage into the countryside of capitalist modes of operation. These were the men who dominated farmers' associations, to the point where muttered complaints were heard about the 'farmer-commercialists' heading the Cape Agricultural Union. These too were the men who frequently locked into positions of power in villages, as leading lights on school committees, shooting associations, church bodies and political parties. Thus mayors and town councillors could be key figures in agricultural associations, lending a personal touch to the structural dependency of small municipalities on the well-being of their rural hinterlands, and to the urban origins of much of the wealth of 'progressive' farmers.  

Such men had usually escaped the clutches of village traders and usurers. They sometimes rented rather than bought land in order to leave funds free for productive investment, and generally kept meticulous records detailing profits. It was from within this grouping that was drawn the bulk of those committed to revolutionizing agrarian relations and forces of production. It was also this constituency that tended to support ideological organs crystallizing out a capitalist ethos, as well as the political representative of larger capital, the South African Party. Even after the ousting of this government, the state, as an institution which condensed within itself broader social contradictions, continued to reflect the presence of 'progressive' farmers within the body politic. Indeed, rural capitalization was actively promoted by some of its branches, notably the Department of Agriculture.

Yet the Minister of Agriculture – unlike the Administrator of the Transvaal, who carped about 'a hothouse growth of industries' at the expense of farming – heartily endorsed the Pact government's primary commitment to the development of a sturdy manufacturing base. Perhaps recalling how he had led 'poor whites' and struggling farmers into rebellion against South African support of Britain in the First World War, General Kemp spoke in 1929 to a Transvaal gathering in Bethal, where some of the most developed capitalist in the country farmed. Here he lauded the achievement of establishing secondary industries in a country where imperialists siphoned out profits from primary sectors. 'It would be foolish', he argued, 'to say that the Afrikander should remain on the farm, while the wealth
of the country falls into the hands of people who have previously monopolized the commerce of the country. It would be equally foolish, he might have added, to expect import-substitution industrialization to occur in the absence of an expansion of exports. Not surprisingly, much of the increased state aid for agriculture in this period was directed into enhancing export potential. As the body responsible for regulating both the rising national debt and the balance of payments in a time of rapidly increasing imports, the state understandably attempted to make South African produce more competitive internationally.

While 'progressive' farmers were undoubtedly assisted by such aid, under the Pact regime they largely considered themselves as victims not victors. Aside from the fact that the political party with which they had closest ties was out of power, their organizational linkages with state apparatuses were extremely weak. In the context of sharp reminders from officialdom that farmers' associations were extremely unrepresentative, those bodies found their requests to comment on draft legislation affecting agriculture repeatedly ignored. So too were their more generalized recommendations. In 1927 the Transvaal Agricultural Union (TAU) had twenty-seven of its thirty-two resolutions rejected, while the Natal Agricultural Union (NAU) had seven of its thirty-three resolutions thrown out with a score of forty-one. Antagonism out of fifty-three. Various advisory committees and produce boards were state-rather than farmer-controlled, which resulted in leading capitalists either resigning in frustration or terming them a farce. The resignation of the Farmers' Party in the later 1920s was but the organized expression of complaints by 'progressives' that Parliament ignored agriculturists and gave them inadequate aid; that almost all state bodies were party-politicized and with government being nothing more nor less than the farmers' enemy.

The material basis for these grievances lay in the numerous instances when the interests of capitalist agriculturists were blatantly overridden in favour of broader Pact policy. Organized farming displayed considerable unease over the widening of the industrial-agricultural price gap implicit in the 1925 Wage Act, and outright opposition when the ICU won from the state the right to have the Act applied to Africans. Furthermore, while support for industrial protection had been given in the hope that this would increase the home market, disillusion could rapidly set in when sectional interests were threatened. Thus, extraordinarily heavy rail and customs duties on power paraffin until the end of the decade severely hampered the use of tractors, and were perceived as hamstrunging better-off agriculturists in order to foster potential industries. Antagonism was also aroused by the subordination of wealthier to poorer farmers.

Capitalist agriculturists, who often already had direct links to wholesalers and the mines, frequently opposed marketing schemes forcing them to sell to a state-controlled monopoly. Moreover, intense dissatisfaction was expressed over the paltriness of the maximum loan (two thousand pounds) set by the Land Bank. This institution was in fact starved of funds at a time when state revenues were steadily rising, and its average loan in 1927 was the meagre sum of three thousand pounds. At least one contemporary economist confirmed that the Pact government's agrarian policies were directed less at nurturing capitalists than at saving small struggled. The latter did not in fact fare much better at the hands of the Land Bank: since credit was extended only if wealthier landlords stood security, new or intensified aid available through loan or drought relief schemes did little to relieve the plight of the poor. Furthermore, in the face of concerted opposition from a broad spectrum of capitalists and white wage-earning elements, the state rapidly backed off from its commitment to curtail middleman profits by enforcing the marketing of all maize through co-operatives. Nonetheless, numerous state projects were initiated to stem the flow of fully proletarianized whites off farms. Since the haemorrhage of 'poor whites' into towns was regarded as a serious threat to social stability, this policy had widespread support amongst the dominant classes. In the telling words of mine magnate Sir Abe Bailey addressing a Cape agricultural show in 1927, a stable populace wedged to the land was the 'best antidote to Bolshevist poison'. The success of agriculture, he argued, was not a farmers' question but a national question. The Government must assist those farmers who have been knocked out... Better assist them, and not create a permanent unemployable and unemployables known as 'the poor whites'.

In stark contrast to their struggling compatriots, 'progressive' farmers rarely succeeded in having their particular interests accepted as a 'national question'. Far from being a powerful social force able to convert other sectors of the dominant classes to general political principles, agricultural capitalists were but an emergent and still tiny minority in a backward countryside. Moreover, landlords' political and economic weakness had considerable impact on the course of ICU-inspired rural conflicts. At a time when most farmers were battling for survival, and were utterly dependent on unfree labour locked into a coercive system of controls, they perceived themselves as having insufficient purchase on public authorities to secure the enforcement or extension of state-imposed restraints. Claiming that it was useless to expect a weak government to deal adequately with the ICU challenge, landlords therefore tended to develop their own
solutions, which rapidly extended to taking the law into their own hands. Undeniably, the success of their strategy was influenced by long experience of doing precisely that on their own holdings.

The 'Squeezing' of Blacks on Farms

"The African question is the land question," this 1923 declaration by a white liberal neatly captures the major reason for black tenants' presence on white farms. The only ground to which Africans had relatively assured claims was located in the reserves, the vast majority of which were overstocked, overpopulated, and sometimes well on their way to being transformed into rural slums. Furthermore, where conditions were less desperate, tenure was less secure. Thus as farms spread over the surface of South Africa during the early twentieth century, so choice sections of the reserves were expropriated for white agri-culturists. In addition, when the 1926 Native Land Amendment Bill was introduced to fulfill the overdue promise of enlarging areas open to African occupation, it lopped off some 2.5 million morgen from estimates made a decade earlier, because this was now considered land suitable for white occupation.

When the Native Affairs Commission toured the country that same year to ascertain African views on the Bill, it discovered that demands for more ground were nationwide. Land hunger was an absolutely central feature of black rural consciousness in this period. The material base of precolonial polities had after all lain in access to ground; moreover, South African capitalism rested on a wage system which did not cover familial subsistence. Small wonder that many Africans rejected the Bill's solution of buying farms, and wanted no less than the return of ground originally expropriated. Thus the summarized representations of blacks in Esquieu were: 'Great question is land, as Natives have to roam from farm to farm... Natives don't understand buying land, consider country theirs.' Indeed they did. As an ex-Free State labour tenant expressed it, 'A black man's roots go very deep into the soil of his own land.' Or, in the words of Natal Congressman John Dube, Africans' greatest grievance was their landlessness, and the black ox has nowhere to feed, and the white ox seems to have all the pasture.

Such feeling ran especially high in Natal. Here African population densities were far greater than anywhere else in the country except the Transkeian Territories, and even the passage of the Land Bill would have provided on average only minute sub-subsistence plots far smaller than those promised in the Cape and Transvaal. Land hunger here had long acquired cultural expression, in forms such as songs bewailing the fate of those forced to leave ancestral homes where their forefathers lay buried. One such Zulu-composed lament was:Land Act:

We are children of Africa
We cry for our land
Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho
Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho unite
We are mad over the Land Act
A terrible law that allows strangers
To deny us our land
Crying that we the people
Should pay to get our land back
We cry for the children of our fathers
Who roam around the world without a home
Even in the land of their forefathers.

In regions where elements of precocious social relations had been conserved, lamentations about landlessness had particularly great popular resonance. In Natal, due both to settler manipulation and to African defence of indigenous institutions, particularist identities, bearing strong traces of the past, were given powerful support in economic, civil and political society. These identities were integrally connected to land, as was signified most crudely by the fact that only the subjects of chiefs could live in reserves, while only those with access to ground could easily maintain customs such as the giving of cattle in bridewealth. Here, then, the struggle for land was much more than a struggle against proletarianization. It was also an attempt to maintain an entire complex of social relationships which provided continuity with the mighty Zulu kingdom. Indeed, the extent to which the burden of the past was still felt in the present was manifested in early 1927, when a deputation of chiefs and headmen pleaded for the return of the 'lost lands' of northern Natal, seized by the Boers from Cetshwayo in 1884-5.

Thus, for multifarious reasons, gaining access to relatively fertile farm ground was the alpha and the omega, the prime and often the sole reason for black tenants' submission to white landlords. They did so in a variety of guises. Since Parliamentary edicts did not necessarily change patterns of appropriation, hundreds of thousands of blacks paying cash rent were alive, well, and occasionally thriving in the 1920s. They were concentrated in the Transvaal and Natal, and situated primarily on the property of land companies. Other options also existed: in Natal in 1927, there were some 95,000 Africans hiring
ground from absentee white landowners, an estimated 90,000 'squatters' on white-occupied farms, and about 46,000 rent-paying tenants on Crown land. The profoundly unprofitable nature of South African agriculture, combined with the resistance of blacks to proletarianization, therefore meant that tenants paying cash rent still composed a hefty one-fifth of Natal's rural population, and probably at least as high a proportion in the Transvaal.\(^{40}\)

Sharecroppers, too, continued to put a plough to the ground in many arable districts in all provinces. Landlords involved in this system were mainly struggling farmers absolutely dependent on their tenants' means of production, or wealthy (often absentee) landowners for whom sharecropping offered better returns than taking full control of productive processes. In 1927, a prominent agriculturist claimed that 80 per cent of farming in the northern Free State, and 90 per cent in the western Transvaal, was performed on a sharecropping basis.\(^{41}\) Although this was probably an exaggeration, there were almost certainly entire districts where some 75 per cent of maize was produced by black tenants.\(^{42}\) For them, ploughing on the halves offered unparalleled opportunities for accumulation, and they fought desperately to retain their relatively privileged niches. But by the 1920s, half-shares had often been replaced by denie deel, despite the fact that 'people protested. They protested because the spans of oxen were theirs, labour was also theirs, but a white farmer got two bags and they only got one bag each.'\(^{43}\)

But if the balance of power was swinging against sharecroppers, it had already decisively swung against other Africans who worked on farms. These included wage-labourers, found amongst some landlords all the time and most landlords some of the time. By 1925, larger capitalist agriculturists were being serviced by nearly three hundred labour recruiters, many of whom concentrated on signing up 'nine rejects' and adolescents on six- to twelve-month contracts. For those unable to afford the higher wage bills and capititation fees associated with recruited workers, an alternative was available. This was to rely entirely on labourers hired from reserves, neighbouring states, African-owned farms, adjacent towns, or nearby holdings where tenants were currently unemployed. These were precisely the sources whence derived seasonal labourers, who washed like spring tides through farms for harvesting or shearing.\(^{44}\)

Unfortunately, such workers were extremely unreliable and much more expensive in cash terms than resident blacks. Moreover, casual wage-labourers tended to avoid farms without tenants, whose absence deprived them of congenial sleeping accommodation and suggested that the landlord was overly harsh. So for the great majority of farmers in the region east of the central Cape, labour tenants were a necessary evil. Although their contracts with landlords were subject to infinite variations, the common denominator lay in the fact that black families, in return for the work of at least one member of the homestead, resided on the farm, cultivated a patch of ground and obtained grazing for stock. These relationships that revolved primarily around use-not exchange-values: as an authoritative government commission expressed it in 1925, agriculture was 'not yet generally on a cash basis, or even on a wage basis.\(^{45}\)

This was partly due to the resistance of labour tenants. To the chagrin of 'progressive' farmers, many stubbornly refused to accept cash in exchange for patches of arable land, while some fought struggles underpinned by such explicit statements as 'We do not want wages, we want ground.' Labour tenants' most basic concern was to obtain sufficient to eat—and although their plots were often of poor quality and seldom adequate for subsistence needs, they nonetheless usually furnished the bulk of food during good seasons. Moreover, these provisions were cheaper than those sold by traders or landlords, and better than the virtually inedible mealie meal so frequently palmed off as rations on working members of the family.\(^{46}\)

In arable districts, ploughing and planting this land was increasingly dependent on landlords' equipment. This was not an unmixed blessing; it frequently meant that the work was performed too early or too late in the season to ensure good crops. However, cultivation and harvesting were largely the tasks of women, which fuelled male antagonism to farmers' calling on the labour of black females. This in itself was often overdetermined by patriarchal possessiveness: in the words of a Transvaal tenant, 'I must work for the bies, but not my wife ... I buy a woman to work for me.'\(^{47}\)

'Buying' wives to work for husbands generally had as its precondition access to some ten to twenty head of cattle. It was this passage of stock against females that was the usual way of setting in motion the cycle that transformed male workers into homestead heads supported by their families. The exchange also lay at the heart of male control over the productive and reproductive capacities of women and their children, and was prerequisite for increasing the labour-power attached to a homestead. Furthermore, cattle were vital as draught animals, and as producers of milk, meat, fuel, hides and calves. As stores of wealth and items of trade, they were also keys to political authority and social differentiation. For all these reasons, obtaining pastures was far and away the most important reason for surrender to tenancy by homestead heads. Many were those who refused to decrease their cattle in exchange for greater cash
wages, or who asked for trek passes rather than obeying orders to reduce their large stock. Other animals were also valued: horses for transport, as well as sheep, goats, pigs and hens for their cash-producing potential. But prime importance was attached to herds, because ‘cattle beget children’ and ‘a man is no man unless he has a cow’. Typically, the negotiation of labour tenant contracts centred around cattle and children, with landlords grudgingly trading off grazing for the first in exchange for sufficient labour from the second.49

As this suggests, fathers as well as farmers were involved in the extraction of labour from homestead members. Generally, a contract binding on all subordinates was made with the patriarch alone. As well as supervising conduct and work, he controlled familial remuneration, often including the cash wages of working household members. German Skhosana, who refused to work for his Transvaal landlord on the grounds that the contract bound only the homestead head, tasted the bitterness of those who saw fathers transformed into foremen. He was whipped by the farmer until ‘it looked as if I had been burnt with a hot iron . . . . My father’s response broke my heart because he was unsympathetic. That really broke my heart.50

Partly due to the antagonism of such youths, the alliance between black elders and white masters was a contradictory one which was not always consummated. To reap its benefits, homestead heads often had to apply new sanctions such as disinheriting children who refused to labour. Similarly, white landlords tried to enlist the powers of the law to legitimize their ugly partnership with black elders. Farmers’ attraction to the system was understandable: not only could they harness patriarchal authority to replace one deserting family member with another, but they could also obtain the services of the entire household at a cost far less than paying the equivalent number of wage-workers.51

Although drawing on black family labour was a site of intense struggle, by the 1920s children ten years old or younger were regularly being employed in tasks such as herding and seasonal labour. Women were being called up for domestic work in the farmer’s house, as well as for weeding, hoeing and reaping. But the brute of labour generally fell on the shoulders of youths, who theoretically worked from sunrise to sunset. Theoretically too, their annual periods of service ranged from those imposed by the somaar system (whereby tenants simply had to be available at the whim of their landlords); to a quasi-feudal contract involving working between two and four days a week throughout the year; to the more capitalist arrangement of labouring for a continuous three, six, or twelve months out of twelve. But in practice, the irregularity of agricultural work cycles meant that in certain seasons blacks could be forced into back-breaking days stretching from 2 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thus the employer of Free State tenant Phillip Masike was nicknamed ‘Kick the blankets’ due to his custom of harshly arousing workers at about one o’clock in the morning. Furthermore, as struggling landlords farmed more intensively, so work-loads showed a steady upward trend on both a daily and a yearly basis. Spiralling land prices also intensified drives to appropriate more labour, and to substitute more-kom for the somaar system. The connection was not lost on some African intellectuals: as primary gave way to secondary resistance, so mortgage debt was incorporated into their labour theory of value. According to an ICU organizer speaking to a gathering of Free State tenants who were increasingly being forced to work most of the year – the province was white-owned because Africans were ‘paying the bond on the farms and the farmers are looking on . . . . These are not their farms. We have worked and paid for them.’52

They undoubtedly laboured hardest for ‘progressive’ agriculturists, who showed a distinct predilection for extracting from tenants every ounce of their physical strength, as well as every minute of their waking lives. Such whites themselves complained about the added work entailed in trying to produce profitably, using methods more advanced than those characteristic of landlords who plundered the soil or left stock to fend for themselves. According to capitalist mixed farmer Marthinus Raath of Wittehoek in the Free State, no sooner have you finished harvesting than it is time to make hay . . . . and then it is time for the mealies and then it is time to begin to plough; and when you have finished ploughing for the mealies, then it is time to cut the oats and so it continues endlessly . . . . we work 13 months in the year.53

But it was black youths, not white landlords, who performed most of the arduous manual drudgery. And it was black youths whose bodies were relentlessly swallowed up in these Sisyphean tasks, and then rejected once their physical strength was broken. ‘Hey! Farm work killed us’, exclaimed Ret hishe Mapaila when reflecting back on his years as a Transvaal tenant in this period. ‘We are no longer people as we are now’.54

Farm work undermined black bodies all the more because remuneration almost invariably failed to cover the costs of subsistence. Cash was by this time a necessity, both for state-imposed levies and also often for food. But in vast regions of the country – including most of the Transvaal, northern Natal, and much of the northern
Free State – monetary payment of labour tenants was highly unusual. ‘Hawu? Be paid? He, be paid? There was no payment. We were farm workers’, bluntly stated Esther Sibanyoni, an eastern Transvaal labour tenant in the 1920s.55 Apart from selling crops and stock (which remained a significant source of cash or at least ‘good forς’ from stores),56 and aside from toiling as a wage labourer on neighbouring farms during free periods, the only other option was urban work. For most Transvaal farm tenants, as well as for many in the northern regions of the Free State and Natal, the Witwatersrand metropolis served as a magnet, and numerous men ‘took “joyini” bound for Johannesburg’. But males also used ‘to foot it’ or entrain for other labour centres or even nearby villages.57 Here for some months each year, they would work in mines, factories, the tertiary sector or whites’ houses. To a much lesser degree, women too would move briefly to towns to work ‘for a paying white man’, or, especially when industrial enterprises were located in the countryside, to make money from beer-brewing or prostitution. The establishment of such personal linkages between town and countryside supplemented those centring around weekend mingling at beer drinks, brothels, churches and concerts, and were crucial in the transmission to farms of urban ideas and forms of political mobilization. Certainly white masters were acutely aware of the extent to which labour in towns raised worker consciousness on farms. Thus refusal of passes to leave holdings was based not only upon fear of desertion, but also upon knowledge that many who returned demanded Saturdays off or higher wages.58

Farmers’ outrage at such demands to be treated as urban workers were of course conditioned by their own precarious position in comparison to the employers in cities. Within the Transvaal, and land only by ruthlessly driving down tenants’ remuneration, and ceaselessly hunting for increased inputs of black-owned labour-power, means of production and produce. In so doing, they subjected resident workers to relationships which violated almost every norm of capitalist exploitation. In the eyes of many Africans, as well as those of a significant number of white magistrates and liberals, labour tenancy approximated slavery, forced labour or servitude. In the words of an eastern Transvaal victim, it was slavery because we were not master of a single thing, not even of ourselves. A native on a farm has rights to nothing; he is not master of himself, he is not master of his wife or of his children; he is master of nothing.59

Undeniably, labour tenants were not owners of labour-power which each temporarily sold to an employer for a specific purpose.

Aside from the fate of those whose services were bartered away above their heads, it was common practice for landlords arbitrarily to extend the period of contracts; to demand summarily the labour of uncontracted wives or children; to ‘lend’ labour tenants to neighbours; and to tie families indefinitely to farms via debt peonage, passes or retention of tax receipts. Unquestionably, too, homestead heads were not owners of their means of production. Innumerable landlords used tenants’ oxen and implements, seized their prize stock (often as fines for fictitious offences), gelded their male animals, appropriated the cream produced by their cows, and commonly descended to robbing them even of the dung excreted by their cattle. Not even tenants’ so-called remuneration was free from farmers’ grasping fingers. Many indefinitely withheld cash wages and demanded monetary payment for use of pastures. Some reappropriated virgin ground as soon as it had been adequately cleared by tenants. Others contributed endless teams of wild oxen as ‘aid’ in servants’ ploughing. Furthermore, numerous masters used tenants’ arable plots to plant their own winter crops, to provide their own winter fodder, or to increase their own harvests by evicting the servants before reaping. Themselves subordinated to external forces demanding their pound of flesh, innumerable farmers survived by demanding from labour tenants ‘flesh, blood, bones and all’.60

Ideologies and Cultures61

Virulent racism buttressed masters in such relationships with servants. Like most white employers, landlords reduced their labourers to ‘boys’. But unlike ‘organic intellectuals’ of manufacturing capital (who were increasingly representing Africans as children on the lowest rungs of an evolutionary hierarchy ordered by class and race),62 many struggling white farmers subordinated ideas of boyhood to those of eternal barbarism. Utterly dependent on forms of appropriation in which labourers were members of a subject race, and fearing a fate in which they were reduced to competing with blacks on the urban labour-market, landlords verging on ‘poor whiteness’ often drew on much older notions of conquest, civilization and savagery to differentiate themselves from the heathen ‘kaffirs’. In the run-up to the ‘Black Peril’ election of 1924, one Nationalist Party ideologue appealed to this constituency by claiming that whites were fleeing the countryside, ‘voorgedure deur die aanstornende assegaa-loose hordes van naturelle’ (driven out by the insurgent, though now unarmed hordes of natives),
only to find in the cities similar ‘black hordes’ suffocating white civilization.\textsuperscript{63} Or in the almost oftphend words of a Transvaal farmer.

The two races are bound to come into collision. It will be a question of the survival of the fittest . . . Why delay the process of extermination? Our interests come before the black man’s. If it means killing the black man in the last resort we must do it.\textsuperscript{64}

From here, it was an easy step down towards relegating Africans to non-human worlds. This was partly an overdetermined expression of non-capitalist relations: where labourers remain attached to the land, they are frequently treated by dominant groups as no more than an inorganic condition of production.\textsuperscript{65} Thus many ‘white’ masters contemptuously gave their workers names of beasts, commodities or months of the year, such as ‘Bobhejaat’ (‘Baboon’), ‘Sixpence’ or ‘September’. In addition, numerous farmers had no hesitation in calling their labourers ‘louse-brained anthropoids’ with ‘animal instincts’. They were equally prone to refer to their holdings as being ‘stocked with natives’, who either needed ‘thinning out’ or had to be ‘broken in’. Small wonder that one of the most heartfelt grievances of farm labourers was that ‘Boers have never treated a black man like a human being.’\textsuperscript{66}

Because tenants dwelt as well as worked on white landlords’ domains, masters had numerous opportunities to dehumanize their private as well as labouring lives. In the interests of enhancing productivity and suppressing conflict, many strove to contain external ideological influences and forms of organization. Thus the often-banned attendance at social gatherings, denied children schooling and forbade visitors entry to their property. Their rulings were fiercely contested, and blacks certainly surreptitiously reappropriated certain rights. But it was particularly difficult for Africans to batter down defences erected around the colonizers’ culture, since this was perceived as integral to white superiority. Thus Jacob Mothea recalled that if a black wore smart clothes on the Transvaal farm where he was a labour tenant, ‘you would be shot dead! A kaffir wearing clothes?—No! No! No!’ Similarly, ex-labour tenant Lucas Nandela remembered that Africans wearing ties on Sundays on his Free State farm ran the risk of being assaulted by landlords, who cursed: ‘Jy reken jy is n wit mens, jou verdonde ding’ (You think you are a white person, you damned thing). And if a black was so daring as to approach a Boer’s home being elegantly dressed, the children would say, ‘Ma, daar kom ’n mens aan.’ Once you are nearer and they notice that you are a black, they would then say, ‘Oh! Nee, Ma, is nie ’n mens nie, is ’n kaffer.’\textsuperscript{67}

Yet the realities of extracting work from ‘kaffirs’ forced landlords to recognize the contradictions in a philosophy that denied their labourers humanity. Indeed, especially amongst wealthier farmers, harsh racism was sometimes tempered by their adoption of some of the benevolence of familial figures of authority. Often this was little more than enlightened self-interest, as when farmers paid labourers’ poll taxes to avoid losing them to jails, or supplied generous rations to minimize theft. Alternatively, masters might provide ‘good servants with economic assistance: perhaps free dipping, or selling tenants’ produce through the farmers’ own channels which offered better prices.

If such aid flowed less from land-owners’ generosity than from their need to retain labour, reduce friction and justify exploitation, there were nonetheless agriculturists who had ‘a real affection and concern for their people’.\textsuperscript{68} Indeed, the very intimacy of farm life, combined with the master-servant relationship itself, helped nurture a stunted approximation of the ethic of paternalism. There were mistresses who acted as tenants’ midwives, named children, ran night-schools, and even baked cakes for special occasions. And there were certainly blacks who responded to this ideology of mutual obligations with loyal service. Recalling his days as a Natal labour tenant, Moses Majola angrily rejected a suggestion that hungry men might steal. Black parents, he claimed, would send their children to ‘go to the mission, and we would ask what we could eat with our porridge. Sometimes she gave us milk, she gave us fat or sugar . . . Whites’ gave us what we wanted.’ In so doing, they clearly linked individual Africans to their families in ways which inhibited the development of tenant protest and independence.\textsuperscript{69}

Such forms of social control were not, however, widespread. For one thing, they were too expensive. In the words of a capitalist agriculturist who had already allowed his tenants a school and a church, and was contemplating laying out a football field, ‘A large percentage of the farmers . . . are pioneers, and they have no time really to think of any frills.’\textsuperscript{70} For another, blacks who were enmeshed in paternalistic relationships with landlords were primarily those whose racial, class or cultural attributes decreased the distance between them and white masters. They included skilled, acclimated workers and ‘coloured’ foremen, as well as those whom farmers proudly described as their ‘very good educated boys’ or as their exemplary ‘ryk volk’ (rich people). Thus is was to mourn the death of an outstanding sharecropper, and to give sympathy to his privileged and competent labouring son, that a Lindley landlord and his family attended the funeral of Ntie Makume’s grandfather, all ‘crying as if a white man had died’.\textsuperscript{71}
Although labour tenants rarely achieved such closeness with masters, some did try to turn the doctrine of reciprocal duties into a weapon for survival. In this they often met with opposition from ‘progressive’ farmers, who complained about black females running to the ‘misuse’ for everything. Indeed, as the devolution of the mutual obligations of paternalism onto women and children suggests, the ethic was losing appeal amongst labour tenants and landlords alike. As widening class and racial gaps encouraged the development of an Africanist consciousness, so farmers became aware that resident workers were less dependent and co-operative than in the past. Overt hatred was in fact being expressed for tenants who enjoyed favours from whites, or who called on landlords to settle internal disputes. Furthermore, indebted farmers were themselves abandoning or commercializing many customary rights. Thus the replacement of black by white patriarchs in numerous spheres also involved the introduction of the cash-nexus. By the 1920s, many youths were having to pay in money for medicines, food and grazing for cattle.72

In the broader society too, paternalism was losing ground as it was subsumed within an ideology more capitalist in orientation. The rise of twentieth-century ‘economic liberalism’ was integrally related to problems of capital accumulation experienced by all sectors of the emergent national bourgeoisie. Many of its proponents identified three central needs relating to African workers: to use them more economically; to enhance their efficiency; and to raise their purchasing power. The first was a function of the almost universal shortage of black industrial workers in 1925, combined with the shrill protests of mining capital from 1927 over the pending Mozambican Convention, and a perennial shortage of seasonal farm labour which had reached crisis proportions in the Transvaal by 1929. The second was related to fears of increased industrial wage bills for whites, and to efforts to break into world markets on competitive terms. Given the difficulties presented by the latter, the third concern derived from the desire to expand the black market. One strongly mooted solution to all these problems was that of enhanced productivity by better-paid African workers. Indeed, this killed even more birds with one stone: whenever black–white conflicts intensified, higher pay was vigorously promoted as a means of defusing militancy.73

‘Progressive’ farmers were themselves increasingly subscribing to some of these ideas. In part, this was a consequence of changes in the labour processes on their farms. Liberalism’s emphasis on the skilled individual had considerable resonance for those in the vanguard of adopting implements such as tractors, where ‘an intelligent native replaces a horde of malcontent labourers’. The constant battle to dispose of surpluses also caused organized agriculture to display tentative interest in the notion of blacks as high-wage consumers rather than as mere cheap ‘boys’. Often linked to this was calls for better pay to encourage greater intensity and continuity of farm labour. As ‘Ryk’ wrote to The Farmer’s Weekly, if landlords considered Africans from an economic rather than political standpoint, they would establish a proper system of cash wages to enhance efficiency and increase the home market.74

This thesis was expressed even more forcibly by the Secretary for Agriculture. Stating in 1925 that Africans were expensive not cheap labourers, he claimed that their inefficiency led to enormous losses in terms of decreased and inferior production. Therefore, in an extraordinarily convoluted argument which nevertheless displayed the linkages between liberalism, industry and the volatile white underclasses:

The native should be raised in the scale of civilization in order that he might give a greater return, not only in quantity but also in quality of output... It was to the advantage of the white man that the native be raised. More intelligent labour would increase production from a given area or per unit, while increased production would lessen the cost thereof and the cost of living. A reduction in the cost of living would promote the establishment of manufacturing industries, and thereby give an opportunity of employment to a larger white population. This opportunity would react on agricultural and pastoral production, and the latter would react on the manufacturing industries.75

As their resistance to exchanging land for cash already testified, labour tenants usually attached very different meanings to being ‘raised in the scale of civilization’. Black rural subcultures nurtured oppositional as well as alternative values to those of either white liberals or racists – as was made starkly evident to a Natal farmer unable to persuade a trusted tenant to become an induna for fear of the reaction of his fellows. As tightly knit communities, labour tenants were well placed to exert such pressures. Living perhaps a mile from the farmhouse, and generally separated by much greater distances from other Africans, the four to six homesteads on an average farm were bound together by geographical isolation alone. Furthermore, they sometimes worked together in groups related by blood and marriage; they frequently shared political and cultural traditions; and they always had in common subjugation to their landlord. Since much farm labour was performed in isolation, the work-place was often less important than the home in engendering solidarity. Here women played a key role, not only in establishing mutual aid networks indispensable to survival when impoverishment was the norm, but
also in maintaining older customs revolving around the socialization of children and collective labour on plots. Since their traditional work-cum-beer parties frequently involved blacks from neighbouring estates, these helped both decrease tenants’ isolation, and also situated them within broader cultural configurations linked to the past. 76

In a much wider sense, the land question was central in breathing new life into practices and ideas originating in earlier days. In districts where large blocks of ground were controlled by Africans, or where black polities had prior claim to farms now partitioned amongst whites, particular patches of soil were often considered as belonging to the subjects of specific chiefs. In the context of acute land hunger, this in turn could direct struggles for groundwards, to the point where fierce battles arose involving tenants and reserve-dwellers alike. Indeed, new youth groups developed in some regions to co-ordinate such conflicts. Thus, as the power of chiefs declined in the almost entirely absentee-owned district of Weenen, Natal, so that of the igolo rose. Transformed from leaders of dance associations to ‘generals’ elected by youths, these war leaders controlled their own territories, exercised more authority over young men than did black or white officialdom, and would lead their armed detachments to weddings and beer-drinks where ‘faction leaders’ often erupted. 77

Particularist loyalties were also sustained by contact with the reserves. In addition to jobbing, many tenant-and-seasonal workers, many tenants were involved in cattle-lending relationships with dwellers in locations, while some went so far as to maintain huts in these areas. Moreover, both rural and urban work situations frequently reinforced the importance of traditions focused around a common territory, culture and descent. In part, this was due to the deliberate reinforcement of class with ethnic antagonisms by employers and the state. Men in supervisory positions, ‘boss boys’ on farms – were thus often drawn from zien language-groups. In part, too, it was due to African initiatives in establishing migration patterns and defensive associations. As a mine worker during the First World War, Jason Jingoes did not mix much with non-Sotho men ‘because I was afraid of them, not knowing their language. Each group kept pretty much to itself.’ Similarly, the significance of ethnic divisions on farms was borne home to Naboeth Mokgatle when, as a teenager hired to pick oranges in the Transvaal in 1925, he had difficulty in carrying a heavy ladder. Most of the other workers were ‘from other tribes and lack sympathy for me’. It was only aid from two friends – ‘my tribal men’ – that enabled him to conceal his weakness from his employer. 78

But if ethnic antagonisms could inhibit the emergence of unity amongst workers, ethnic solidarities could underpin resistance by sections of the labour force. Sometimes this was due to the positing of alternative norms. In the Transvaal, farmers bemoaned the existence of initiation schools, claiming that 95 per cent of youths were either swept off by their parents or themselves deserted in defiance of white masters. Far more disruptive countrywide were the beer drinks that formed the cornerstone of male farm workers’ social lives. Held over the weekends – and especially prevalent when labourers were needed most for harvesting of summer crops – these were key arenas for the dissemination of news. In so far as they were also centres of disaffection and could induce two-day long hangovers, they also symbolized farmers’ inability to impose on their labourers a friction-free industrial work rhythm. 79

More overt protest sometimes drew heavily on particularistic cultures, especially when workers were hired from areas effectively under African control. In 1928, a Natal sugar estate had recruited nearly half of its 120-strong labour force from Weenen, by then an ICU stronghold. Following a delay in the payment of their wages, almost all the members of the Weenen gang gathered at the office to demand their pay. After the manager had refused their request, the men retreated to their barracks singing a war song. Armed with sticks, they continued to dance and sing in a manner highly suggestive of a detachment led by an igolo. One of their number addressed them, urging the killing of their master, and arguing that whites ‘came from England to this country and say this country is theirs whereas it belongs to the Natives’. As sunset following the following day, having sung in Zulu ‘the man who touches us will touch war’, the armed group crowded round the office. But an induna had informed them, and the presence of the police was sufficient to force them back to work. 80

Yet such instances of ethnic attributes informing resistance occurred to a much lesser extent amongst labour tenants. Situational evocation of particularist loyalties remained common: according to a resigned Transvaal chief, in good times farm-dwellers would say:

‘I have nothing to do with the native laws, I am living here on the farm of my master, and he is the only one I obey’. But then, when bad times come and they have to leave the farms ... they will say, ‘I am a Makwena’ or whatever it is, and they say, ‘We want our rights’. 81

Nonetheless, lack of land, leisure and autonomy all undermined practices and values which identified farm-dwellers as members of particular chiefdoms. Compared to location residents, tenants tended to resort less to chiefs’ courts, to hold fewer ritual killings or large dances, and to display smaller kinship networks, less polygyny and greater individualism. They also generally had greater aspirations for
assimilation into a modern world. While many Transvaal labour tenants quietly differentiated themselves from reserve-dwellers through their desires for the white man's food and clothing, a Cape resident worker overtly declared: 'I am a person from European country, I do not know anything about the country of the Xhosa.' Small wonder that in a period when the policy of 'redemption' was on the ascendancy as a means of segregating black from white, officialdom expressed considerable anxiety about the 'detribalization' apparent on farms.

They were particularly concerned about the control over tenants by the two-thousand-odd chiefs and headmen on the state's payroll. White agriculturists themselves helped undermine the authority of this older political elite. Chiefs who lived on farms were often being reduced to ordinary labourers, while those with other landed bases were frequently refused permission to visit followers. The state, too, was tardy in the implementation of its volte-face in policy: from crushing traditional leaders as vanguards of resistance, to incorporating them as forces of control. Thus in the mid-1920s, almost no chiefs were recognized in the Free State, while only those in the reserves obtained salaries in the Transvaal.

Furthermore, numerous farm labourers had either left locations or were reluctant to return precisely because of chiefly tyranny. Amongst these state-appointees were men who demanded compulsory labour tributes, imposed a multitude of levies, or accumulated land at the expense of followers. Their emergence as a distinct stratum of exploiters was supported by many white capitalists, who gave bribes or capitation fees to chiefs who evicted migrant labourers. Naboth Mokgatle experienced the hardships of being subject to black political authorities who collaborated with employers. In an attempt to escape life as a farm worker, Mokgatle sought a pass from his chief who had contracted to supply youths to a tobacco factory. Mokgatle refused to work there - and the man likewise refused to issue him with a pass. Undoubtedly, the transformations wrought in the roles of such chiefs fuelled popular support for movements led from outside the ranks of the traditional elite. As a Nata ICU member exclaimed when his chief publicly berated followers for supporting the Union, 'We who live on private lands are the sufferers... You should have kept away from our meeting... We are suffering, and you have nowhere to put us.'

Another manifestation of decreasing allegiance to traditionalist leaders and values was growing acceptance of Christianity. Earlier in the twentieth century, the stronghold of this new religion on farms had been found amongst the wealthier peasants and acculturated blacks often employed in skilled or supervisory positions. But from the 1920s, there was a remarkable shift in the class composition of converts and the nature of churches to which they belonged. In 1921, while some 32 per cent of rural Africans defined themselves as Christians, only about 50,000 of the 1.3 million converts were members of separatist churches. Fifteen years later, adherents of these Zionist and Ethiopian bodies had increased by nearly 1,500 per cent, standing at over a million Africans. The vast majority of these converts were situated in the countryside, and the great bulk of them were members of the rural poor. Above all, the appeal of these independent churches lay in their proto-nationalism, and in their pledges to lead blacks literally and figuratively to the promised land.

Tenants' very membership of independent churches was almost invariably an act of defiance. Quick to recognize their political role, farmers often forbade entry to separatist ministers or evicted lay preachers from their holdings. However, many blacks tenaciously clung to bodies preaching such revolutionary messages as Africa for the Africans, as well as freedom from serfdom and black ownership of all land. In addition, independent churches allowed farm workers a taste of black-controlled collective activity which could override even ethnic divisions. In 1927, an African minister in an orthodox mission church anxiously warned his Transvaal landlord of separatist activities in the district:

The Natives inclusive the Cape boys, Basothos, Zulus and all the other tribes at all Prayer Meetings pray to God for deliverance from the present yoke of oppression, they pray for the old conditions under President Kruger where they received land to plough and payment in cattle or horses. At present he stated that the Native has not anything left and that he is only working for a few shillings on which it is impossible to maintain a family... unless such freedom as under the old Boer Republic was secured a rising of the Natives would take place... they would prefer death rather than the present treatment... they do not trust one European Missioner nor the white man in general... the present conditions would be driven to a conclusion very soon.

Resistance and Repression

But the norm amongst farm labourers was not overt collective resistance but subterranean individualistic protest. Thus, a work stoppage amongst labour tenants, let alone a rising, was almost
unthinkable for western Transvaal ex-sharecropper Kas Maine. In his dismissive words, ‘Hoe sal jy kan “strike” maak en jy is binnekant ‘n man se huis, “strike” binnekant man se huis, jy kan mos nie so doen nie’ (how can you strike when you are inside a man’s house, strike inside a man’s house, you just can’t do that). Not that the only restraint was that imposed by living on the white man’s property: the quasi-jail conditions on many holdings themselves inhibited open confrontations. ‘You had to escape. We moved by escaping’, recalled Esther Sibanyoni, powerfully evoking the clandestine nature of one of the most common forms of protest. Many deserters also had to evade familial warders, especially when they were youths opposing a system so innated with reshaped kinship structures that those who contributed most to the homestead’s security had little control over its property or their own lives. July Lusiba, having fled from an eastern Transvaal holding because he was not paid, was recalled by his relatives. He fiercely argued that he was not obliged to work against his will, since he did not ‘have a field of my own like my father…’. They said, but, I was his child, and so I was held responsible. I said I was his child but I was not a tenant.’ For Lusiba, such cogent class logic outweighed any considerations of clan, and he quickly absconded again to the towns.88

If desertion was an act aimed less at threatening farmers than escaping intolerable conditions, not so the anarchic violence endemic in the underpoliced countryside. Hatred for masters and their property could explode in such vengeful acts as poking hooked wire up oxen to damage their entrails, driving needles into the brains of sheep, or poisoning landlords by all over the farm, because ‘this was our land from the beginning’. July Lusiba had already participated in the collective theft of crops when his landlord shifted to poorer plots tenants who regarded the entire holding as their own. After his first desertion, he was inspired to new heights. In attempting to resolve the contradiction between being a labourer and not yet a tenant, he one night ‘hoisted my white flags marking the boundaries of my own declared farm’. He triumphantly recalled his landlord’s shock in the morning on seeing the flying flags, and deserted that same day when his master grimly went off to report him.93

Labour tenants were equally infamous for being inefficient, uncooperative and deliberately destructive workers. Farmers complained angrily that these servants were often reluctant to leave their own crops and tend to those of their masters. Labour tenants tried; they claimed, to dawdle to work and to knock off early, and intentionally wasted about one-quarter of the time supposedly spent working. ‘They call it themselves “forced labour”, and they are very difficult to get on with… these men do not obey their masters, and pastoralists some six thousand pounds over a couple of years in the later 1920s, while at least one farmer sold out because he was unable to stand the losses incurred through stock theft. Countrywide, 147,000 beasts were reported stolen in 1927, and although rustling was not necessarily an act of protest, it frequently involved the rejection of relations of exploitation that denied blacks their subsistence. For Kas Maine’s wife, stealing was just ‘another way of making ends meet’. Jantjie the Jacobsdal sheep-thief took matters much further by becoming a social bandit. Revelling in white commandos’ vain pursuits of him, Jantjie sent farmers taunting messages, via their black herdsmen, that he was ever in their midst, and would sometimes mockingly laugh from the bushes when whites discovered his meat scorching on the coals.99

Resident workers in particular were generally in the vanguard of protest. Because they were tenants as well as labourers, their resistance was qualitatively different from that of hired hands. As a leading agriculturist complained, the labour tenant ‘het ’n soort van gevoel wat die huur kaffer nie het nie; hy het die gevoel dat hy net soveel reg op die plaas het as die eienaar’ (has a sort of feeling which the hired kaffer has not; he has the feeling that he has just as much right to the farm as the owner).92 Sometimes this challenge to white ownership was legitimized by translating precapitalist norms of ownership into a new context, and arguing that all land belonged to the government rather than to private individuals. Much more widespread was the belief that blacks had prior right to the ground. Thus labour tenants were notorious for mutilating stock, stealing wood, or letting their crops wither while they worked elsewhere.94

Covert and spontaneous though many such crimes of protest were, they were nonetheless capable of being incorporated into a broader movement fighting against violations of customary rights. They could also be stunningly effective: there were farmers forced to leave districts because the black intelligence network starved them of labour. Furthermore, pocketbooks were frequently badly hit. In the eastern Transvaal, a labourer who declared he was ‘not going to allow any white man to beat him’, responded to a thrashing by setting fire to a barn and causing damage of over two thousand pounds.90 In East Griqualand, malicious poisoning of stock cost
that is why we are against it, and it upsets all your other labour',
complained one 'progressive' farmer. Or as another expressed it,
he would not have a tenant on his Free State farm if he could obtain
sufficient hired labour. 'They are useless scavenegers and very
expensive . . . They flog our oxen and cows at milking, and if you
tell them to stop it you get cheek or "Pay me and let me go". 49
At first glance, there was a web of coercive legislation which
masters could invoke to suppress such protest. Under the Natal
Masters and Servants Act, first-offender labour tenants could be
sentenced to a month's imprisonment for refusal to labour, for
carelessly performed work, or for absence from the holding without
permission. Two month's imprisonment on spere diet 2 wanted those
who damaged their masters' property or insulted their persons.
In addition, pass laws, vagrancy legislation and regulations relating to
the dipping and movement of cattle harshly discriminated between
black and white. (Often the former were subjected to criminal
sanctions for offences for which the latter paid no or only civil
penalties.) Such legal class instruments were made even sharper by
pressures which undermined the autonomy of courts from white
landlords. According to one rural magistrate, the popularity of men
like himself depended largely on the severity shown in sentencing
negroes, 'and if his sense of justice is not sufficiently developed it may
easily be swamped by a desire to be well spoken of by the farmers'. 50
Undoubtedly, at least one labour tenant regarded the magistrate as
having been bribed by his master, 51 and many abrogated rights of
complaint because subsequent victimization — including being
charged for desertion — generally left them in an even worse state.

The experiences of the Natal conference of the SAAU in 1928, the Secretary for Native
Affairs even urged relaxation of the pass laws tying blacks to farms.
Although purges of personnel and reordering of lines of authority were transforming this Department in a more repressive direction,
the elections of 1924 clearly did not instantaneously reshape an apparatus previously infused with certain 'liberal' tenets of large-
scale capital. 53

Yet Ndawonde's acquittal also points to the existence of differences between masters and magistrates on the issue of suppressing protest.
Landlords complained endlessly about the ineffectiveness of the state.
Many claimed bitterly that courts were biased towards Africans and
the pass laws were a farce; that the police were useless and assistance
from the Native Affairs Department was a myth; and that it was
impossible to farm successfully under existing legislation. Perhaps
the confl icts are best captured by examining opposing attitudes to
stock theft. Pastoralists' own solutions ranged from herding labourers
into closed compounds from sunset to sunrise, to branding cattle
thieves on the forehead, and from sentencing first offenders to ten
years, to giving farmers the legal right to shoot them. Not surpris-
ingly, the Deputy Commissioner of Police in the eastern Cape
zooned a furor in 1925, when he declared that stock theft occurred
because some landlords underpaid, underfed and mistreated their
labourers. 100

Clearly, the interests and outlooks of social forces deeply opposed to the primitive nature of South African agriculture, and committed to
economic upliftment as a way of defusing conflict, were crystal-
lized out in some state apparatuses. Although 'progressive' farmers went some way along this road, neither they nor their struggling
countrymen tended to go as far as officials in certain state depart-
ments. Landlords' frustration with the Native Affairs Department,
for example, was well-founded. Privately, many Native Commiss-
ioners urged better treatment of farm labourers. Publicly in their role
as magistrates, some refused to convict tenants subject to contracts
perceived as reducing blacks to serfdom. Indeed, when addressing
the annual conference of the SAAU in 1928, the Secretary for Native
Affairs even urged relaxation of the pass laws tying blacks to farms.

Nor did the advent of the Pact regime give farmers undisputed
purchase on the legislature. More than a decade after Union, relations
between masters and servants were still regulated by a chaotic,
provincially differentiated thicket of legislation, much of it
formulated years earlier in response to completely different relations
of production. When the judiciary stuck to the letter of such laws, the
results for agriculturists could be disastrous. In the early 1920s, a series
of Supreme Court decisions imposed grave limitations on landlords' ability to use the Masters and Servants Acts against their tenants.
While a 1926 Amendment patched up some of the worst fissures
in Natal and the Transvaal, gaping holes remained, partly because agricultural interests had been subordinated to those of urban capitalists and white wage-earners. In some districts, this in itself allowed black resistance to labour obligations to gain momentum. Even before the advent of the ICU, numerous youths realized they could not be convicted for breaking contracts made by homestead heads, and simply refused to enter service. 102

Such resistance was another wedge widening the gap between farmers and the state. By destroying, stealing, forging, loaning and selling the unsophisticated documents supposedly maintaining them as a cheap and servile labour force, Africans fuelled white complaints that passes were not worth the paper on which they were written. Indeed, when blacks on one Transvaal farm had studied how their master 'twists his hand when signing', their foreman could produce permits 'more beautiful' than the originals. Moreover, in Natal by the 1920s, labour tenant resistance to carrying identification passes had won them de facto freedom from the practices of using these permits to enforce contracts, check desertion, peg wages and control movement. Since, however, labour agreements made without the endorsement of passes were still technically illegal, many landlords were helpless when attempting to charge farm workers defended by ICU lawyers with having broken their contracts. 103

In trying to use the state's repressive armoury to discipline workers, masters were also disadvantaged by their very location in the countryside. Charging blacks in court involved repeated absences from farms, as well as travelling many miles to police camps and magistrate. Furthermore, the expense was often prohibitive. Statistics confirm farmers' claims that courts were used only in the last resorts; even assuming that African farm labourers constituted all of the 20,752 Masters and Servants prosecutions in 1926, this meant that less than 5 per cent of regular workers were so charged. In addition, many other forms of rural resistance were extraordinarily difficult to attribute to individuals. Given, too, the critical and ever worsening countryside shortage of constables throughout the 1920s, as well as they ability of communities to make life unbearable for police informers, many crimes of protest simply went unpunished by the state. 104

The limitations of state intervention in rural conflict gave a final twist to landlords' role as masters, in so far as farmers deliberately assumed some of the powers of the repressive apparatuses. This was apparent in their appropriation of the functions of magistrates and chiefs in settling disputes amongs labourers. It was evident too in their establishing themselves as law-makers in order to rectify shortfalls in existing legislation. In the Free State, where the courts had undermined a regulation forcing blacks to obtain a 'special' pass to move off the farm, farmer Martinus Raath bluntly informed his tenants: 'my wet is dat als jul waa die plaas afhaan dan moet jul 'n pas dra; ek het niks die land se wette te doen nie' (my law is that if you move off the farm then you must carry a pass; I have nothing to do with the laws of the land). And to enforce a will that had nothing to do with the laws of the land, farmers concentrated in their hands the means of exercising physical violence. 105

Thus fists, whips and guns were central in maintaining master-servant relationships on farms. Undeniably, the ability to exercise control by injuring black bodies was for white masters one of the advantages of employing African labour. According to one farmer, while you could 'boot, biff or sjambok the "bally nigger" if he does not do everything expected of him, you cannot treat the white labourer in the same way'. Indeed you could not: African nicknames for landlords such as 'Ra-Sjambok' or, more ominously, 'killer of other men', give some indication of the sheer barbarism that went unchecked on isolated holdings. Labourers were murdered for refusing to say 'good day, baas', and were shot for demanding withheld wages. They were killed by being hung upside down on a tree and thrashed to a pulp, or by being tied to galloping horses which dragged their mutilated bodies long after life had expired. 106 It was a brutal and bloody world that black farm labourers inhabited in the 1920s. It was made all the more so by the less physically obtrusive but equally violent course of capitalist penetration.

The Dynamics of Dispossession

Amongst 'progressive' farmers, abolition of labour tenancy had by this time been drafted on to earlier calls for suppression of 'kaffir farming'. This was more than a response to the difficulties of controlling recalcitrant resident workers in the absence of adequate support from the state. It was also a way of tackling a whole complex of farming interests through one institution. Labour tenants, after all, exacerbated the problems of soaring land values by holding ground out of the sphere of production. They increased the difficulty of selling produce at a profit, both because they were paid predominantly in kind and because they hindered increases in productivity. They acted as a brake on the development of productive forces by constantly migrating (and deserting) to towns, and they undermined the estates' viability with their scrub stock and primitive methods of cultivation. Numerous wealthier landlords tackled some of these difficulties by buying 'labour farms', so that tenants lived separately
from the holdings on which production occurred. But by the mid-1920s, leading members of the Executives of provincial Farmers’ Unions had agreed on a far more radical solution. They were almost unanimous that labour tenancy was a disgraceful form of ‘partial slavery’. Such men and women should, they argued, be replaced by blacks trained in agriculture, paid entirely in cash, and working at least eleven months out of twelve. Completely within the paradigm of classical liberalism, they argued that only such ‘free labour’ would produce efficient and economic farm workers. 107

Understandably, the solution of paying farm labourers entirely in cash did not have mass appeal. Confronted with statistics referring to the high rental values of tenants’ land, most farmers replied from their own logic that ‘money is still more expensive’. 108 But if bourgeois methods of accountancy were used to allocate cash values to the various items of tenants’ remuneration, then in most types of arable farming labour tenants constituted at least 25 per cent of running expenses. 109 It was a cost exceeded only by that of interest — and as cultivation increased and farm sizes diminished, it was an expense that became even more real to the mass of farmers. In maize districts, where holdings were smaller, farming more intensive and land values higher than average, by the end of the decade even tenants’ patches of arable ground were being valued in commodity terms by agriculturists. Far more widespread dismay was expressed over the fact that countrywide, land worth eighteen million pounds was being ‘wasted’ on tenants’ grazing. Gone were the days when labour tenants were considered to be working for nothing: they were increasingly being generally recognized as prohibitively expensive. 110

Thus, in a process which was uneven but inexorable, farmers were limiting the size and quality of arable plots and pastures. In the Cape by the end of the decade, labour tenancy had effectively ceased to exist in all but a few eastern districts. In the Free State in the thirty years after Union, the size of the pastureage permitted dropped by an estimated 40 to 50 per cent. Innumerable tenants were shifted to less fertile plots, while the spread of fencing and paddocking allowed masters to confine servants’ beasts to inadequate, overgrazed camps. Small stock was the first to suffer: between 1923 and 1929, the number of tenant-owned woolled sheep fell by nearly 70,000. Although in absolute numbers African-owned cattle dropped in the Cape alone, by the end of the decade it was only the exceptional farmer who was not setting tighter limits on the number allowed. 111 Many were the tenants leaving farms in arable districts because ‘the contract was “sour”. Because when your livestock multiplied the Boers would say you must reduce them.’ 112 Many too were the youths encouraged to desert, because elders could no longer provide bridewealth to hold juniors to farms.

Wealthier and non-labouring tenants were among the first victims of these restrictions. In 1927, it was reported that evictions of Natal ‘squatters’ were common, as Crown land was alienated to settlers and as estates became too small to contain tenants ever less able to pay rising rents. Moreover, it had become fairly common in Natal and elsewhere to cheat sharecroppers out of the entire harvest by evicting them before reaping. Such ill-gotten gains — combined with the fact that these were years of intensified state assistance and easy mortgage credit — allowed agriculturists to invest in more sophisticated implements which decreased their reliance on blacks’ ploughing equipment. In particular, there was a marked shift from one-furrow to two-share ploughs. Vernacular names for various versions of those two implements — the ‘pick-me-up’ versus the ‘flying bestman’ — neatly symbolize the extent to which this allowed farmers to plough greater acreages more quickly with less dependence on sharecroppers. 113

Labour tenants also suffered badly in this drive to rid farms of surplus blacks, especially since remaining residents could be driven harder to make good their loss. They were rejected or left as a result of stock limitations; due to desertion by a child; or because the land allotted to them could more profitably be used for wattle, sugar or sheep. Indeed, so common was the fate of eviction that labour tenants were termed ‘grasshoppers of the field’, 114 often given no more than three days’ notice to jump from one farm to another together with their families and their stock. By the later 1920s, amalgamations were being drawn with the creation of a ‘poor white’ problem in Elizabethan England during the transition to capitalist wool farming. According to a journalist reporting on his travels through the Free State in 1928,

Day after day one overtakes or meets dismal processions of labour-tenants in search of a new home, mere starving scarecrows ... with household goods dear at two pounds a family, traping in search of a home through country valued at five to six pounds an acre, where sheep are a gift-edged investment. 115

Their plight was given political dimensions by the Land Amendment Bill. As well as enlarging the area open to African purchase, this turned the screws on tenants. Carefully catering for the needs of small agriculturists, it allowed all farmers to retain five labour tenant families. Reinforcing the general drive to extract as much work from as few homesteads as possible, it defined labour tenants as those who, together with twelve- to eighteen-year old dependents,
worked at least six months each year on a white-occupied farm. All other black residents who did not conform to this definition, or who exceeded the set limit, were subject to prohibitive licence fees. In essence, the state was attempting to eliminate the sharecropping and ‘squating’ peasantry; to increase the labour appropriated from resident workers; to make farmers for whom this supply was still inadequate obtain hired hands from the reserves; and to augment the flow of migrant labour to other sectors of the economy.  

Protagonists of the Bill ardently promoted the onslaught on tenants. At that time a Free State sharecropper, Voetganger Manapa slowly remembered a meeting of ‘Boers’ addressed by the Prime Minister at Dover. According to him, General Hertzog focused on the fact that black peasants were the economic equals of white farmers, and declared:

the day they are awakened in their minds you won’t have people to drive your horses . . . you should finish their livestock and leave them with nothing. They shouldn’t go on killing the land. They should work for you and come to beg for mealle meal if they starve.

Like numerous other wealthier peasants, Manapa dated the end of sharecropping, as well as relentless reduction in stock, to the very year that Hertzog appeared to encourage landlords in these actions. Associating as he did sharecropping landlords with Jews, he defined the Pact period as one in which ‘Afrikaners come into the Parliament and ousted the Jews’, and ‘these little Boers started Hertzog’s “law”’.  

Although ‘Hertzog’s law’ has been interpreted as yet another sign that the Pact government favoured agricultural capital, ‘progressive’ farmers facing competition from better-paying employers were in fact demanding additional measures to ensure they benefited from the wage labourers expected to emerge phoenix-like from the ashes of the peasantry. However, no success was achieved in efforts to expand the areas from which mine recruiters were banned. Mouthing liberal platitudes about Africans’ right to sell their labour in the best market, the Secretary for Native Affairs simply responded that the government opposed any recommendation restricting the supply of mine labourers. Nor did organized agriculture make any headway with suggestions which strikingly prefigured policies implemented decades later in apartheid South Africa. Thus the NAU’s call for a state-run labour bureaux system was brushed aside, as was the TAU’s claim that white prosperity depended on complete urban segregation, and on gradual repatriation to the countryside of all male Africans apart from those accommodated in compounds.  

Similarly, landlords were not in the main delighted that less land than promised a decade earlier was being added to the reserves. On the contrary, they were infuriated by the offer of any additional land at all. Unlike mine owners, agricultrists had little interest in enlarging these hinterlands of migrant workers. For them, the unreliability of wage labour proved only that it was insufficiently proletarianized. At Free State farmers’ meetings, there were hostile questions as to whether the Bill was in white or black interests. The NAU, which had already resolved that not another acre of land should be given to Africans, called a special conference in 1927 for its Executive to justify public support for the Bill’s land provisions. Many angry members were not mollified by their President’s explanation that land was to be given to prevent blacks seizing the vote, and that ‘The ICU was a warning to them to put their house in order.’ The path of reform was a perilous one, and if it entailed giving Africans ground at the expense of farmers, then there were many who preferred to tread more repressive roads. Temporarily, they had their way: the Bill was not in fact enacted for another nine years.

Thus, in the 1920s, blacks frequently experienced the shedding of a surplus population from the farms in terms of being abruptly dumped on the roadside, ‘knowing not whither to go’. Population statistics clearly pointed to the ultimate choices they made. Countrywide between 1926 and 1936, the number of Africans on white-owned farms rose more slowly than the general population increase, while the reverse was true of black-owned farms and towns. The most striking shifts occurred in Natal. Here the proportion of Africans on holdings owned or occupied by non-Africans remained almost static in absolute terms, and fell dramatically from 41 to 26 per cent of the province’s total African population. Simultaneously, numbers in the reserves increased by almost one-quarter; on African-owned holdings they doubled; and in towns they more than trebled. Primitive accumulation in the countryside was clearly more than the infliction of untold misery on black tenants by separating them from land and stock. It was more, too, than a process whereby soil was incorporated into nascent capital. It was also a precondition for rapid industrial development, in so far as many of Africans were suddenly severed from their means of subsistence and thrown onto the labour-market as vulnerable proletarians.

Conclusion

If agrarian transformations helped precipitate workers into the cities, then urban growth facilitated the emergence of capitalists in the
countryside. But the terms of exchange were always heavily tilted against landlords. While the development of capital in towns provided many 'progressive' farmers with not only their initial wealth but also greater markets, these were rarely large or profitable enough to sustain accumulation from agriculture alone. Although the ease with which mortgage credit could be obtained encouraged commercialization of the countryside, it also contributed to class differentiation and to the exodus of 'poor whites' from the land. Despite the fact that many struggling landlords supported a government promoting manufacturing, white jobs and the maintenance of settlers in the countryside, this particular trajectory of development widened the gap between 'progressive' farmers and the state. And while some capitalist agriculturists were assuming the ideological colouring of the rising national bourgeoisie, liberalisms ill-suited their grouping whose vulnerability induced a tendency to 'squeeze' rather than 'uplift' their labourers.

'Progressive' farmers did, however, draw on liberal ideas to posit the abolition of tenancy as the key to tackling an entire nexus of problems. Their commitment to this solution was not simply verbal: there was a growing tendency amongst capitalist farmers to replace all resident blacks with wage-labourers. For this grouping at least, older relations of exploitation were being transformed into letters on further capital accumulation. By contrast, amongst the mass of small farmers faced with rocketing land prices, decreased farm sizes and greater indebtedness, it was the threat of dispossession not the lure of capitalization that forced them to turn on their tenants.

Proletarianization thus hung like the sword of Damocles over the bulk of white migrants and their struggle with considerable hatred and despair. By the end of the decade, state officials were anxiously commenting that the labour tenant system, having worked well for decades, was causing considerable trouble due to cutbacks in land. 'Hence the questions of the amount of remuneration for farm labour, and of the quantity and quality of labour supplied have come to the fore.' Only too well did black tenants know this. Their tortuous transition from peasants to proletarians involved dispossession, extension of work periods, intrusion of the cash-nexus, and loosening of bonds with chieftains. And their sense of being subject to rapidly deteriorating conditions was expressed by a Natal African from Ixopo: 'In the olden days the farmers allowed the natives to live comfortably, but it is now suddenly that they have adopted a different attitude and we feel it.'

There were other key developments in the 1920s, as downward transmission of farmers' pressures contributed to capitalization of the countryside. Firstly, some 50,000 whites were added to the landed populace between 1918 and 1931, after which year the trend was reversed and figures began to fall. Since the accommodation of this black population occurred partly through the spread of white-occupied farms over the face of South Africa, tens of thousands of blacks were for the first time either brought into the orbit of tenancy or threatened with dispossession. Secondly, landlords' ability to make economic concessions diminished as the transition from a net importer to an exporting country of agricultural produce necessitated greater involvement in a generally depressed world market. As one farmer expressed it in 1927, 'It will be impossible for the maize grower to compete with the Argentine in the maize markets of the world if he has to pay higher wages.' Thirdly, as sharecroppers, 'squatters' and labour tenants were thrust ever closer in class terms to hired hands, so the desertion of farm youths to towns came to constitute one of the most important migrational movements of the era. Fourthly, from the late 1920s it was evident that in terms of agricultural production as well as stock and implement ownership, farm tenants were on average poorer than reserve-dwellers. Thus it was in this decade that a major turning-point occurred. From being the eagerly sought-after site of a prosperous peasantry in the early twentieth century, white holdings were by the 1920s predominantly the work-places of a poverty-stricken tenancy, and by the 1950s regarded by many reserve-dwellers as 'something to which one may be driven by calamity'.

In resisting this fundamental transformation, tenants testified to the fact that it is frequently the process of proletarianization rather than its end result that produces the most militant explosions. Their protest was rooted in subcultures, the oppositional character of which was being consolidated by work in towns as well as by separatist churches. And despite its generally individualistic and clandestine nature, it was often extremely effective. Nonetheless, tenants' resources were few, their divisions many and their enemy strong. Eviction was the most important weapon held by landlords--and insecurity of tenure exacerbated class, ethnic and familial differences inhibiting the emergence of overt, collective protest. Furthermore, even trajectories of struggle were at issue in this time of transition. If land-hunger remained of widespread importance, cash wages were also being thrust to the fore in the very process of transformation into workers.

However, immediately prior to the ICU's rural activities, news of the Land Amendment Bill sharply raised both tenants' levels of struggle and their consciousness of themselves as rural cultivators. Paradoxically, while 'Hertzog's law' was sometimes understood as confirming the alliance between landlords and the state, those who
recognized a disjuncture between the two forces could place a very different interpretation on the news as it filtered down to farms. Thus in early 1927, rumours of the mooted 50 per cent increase in area open to African occupation precipitated a flurry of strikes in the Natal Midlands, based upon the belief that farms were to be expropriated from landlords and granted to labourers. Months before the ICU formally appeared in Weenen, the wealthy farmer representing the district announced in Parliament that

practically the whole of my natives are on strike. I asked the reason why and they said - We have been informed that the Prime Minister is passing legislation which is going to take all these farms which the white men own and hand them over to us, so why should we work. 152

Why indeed - especially when underlying tensions were coming to a head and the ICU arrived with a similar message. Ndle Mzimne’s recollections of the Pact period capture the coalescence of some of these strands, as well as the extent to which this was a time which sharply broke with the past. For him, ‘It was between 1926 and 1927 when the world changed for us.’ Hertzog’s laws, he claimed, were responsible for the fall in maize prices and the end of sharecropping; they also encouraged Boers to reduce tenants’ plots, limit their stock, and force Africans to work for nothing. But he recalled that these were also the years when there came people asking: ‘Man! Tell us where your grandfathers were settled? And you would tell them, and complain to them that the whites came and drove your people away.’ In short, these years were for him simultaneously ‘the time when General Hertzog was already standing on top of the black man’s head’, and ‘the time... when those men came, those who said they were going to liberate people...Kadalie’. 130

Although these liberators were Africans who can all too easily be dismissed as ‘petty bourgeois’, contemporary white landlords were far more perturbed by the nature of the class alliance being forged. According to the TAU President in 1927, farmers with families scattered on lonely holdings dared not be complacent ‘while an uneducated, semi-civilized, largely irresponsible and, under certain conditions, highly inflammable native population is being incited to class hatred, sedition and law breaking by agitators, no matter how highly educated and civilized these agitators may be’. 131 From exploring just how inflammable the black rural poor was, we can now turn to examine why the match was lit by these ‘educated and civilized agitators’.

EDUCATED AND CIVILIZED AGITATORS:
The Social Origins and Character of ICU Leadership, 1924–1930

Nothing but social contradiction in action: there are few more apt characterizations of the petty bourgeoisie. 1 On the one hand, members of this grouping resemble capitalists: they either own small-scale property or exercise a managerial role over the exploited and oppressed. On the other hand, they resemble the working class in performing either manual or mental labour. Small wonder that they are notorious for simultaneously condensing conflicting interests and wavering between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

But in specific times and places, elements within the broader middle classes can identify with the downtrodden. Thus in racist societies where capitalism is not full-grown, colour and class combine to encourage the weak intermediate strata to act as men of the people rather than as minions of the powerful. And where racial oppression is compounded by downward social mobility in more developed capitalist countries, the political consequences are potentially explosive. In view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, even the traditionally most conservative sector of the petty bourgeoisie, the self-employed, can become revolutionary. Moreover, many more groupings within the wider oppressed middle strata may ‘desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat’, and thus ‘defend not their present, but their future interests’. 2 In the backward countryside of peripheral South Africa, ICU organizers undoubtedly never subordinated themselves to the underdeveloped working class. But because they were being precipitated into the labouring poor, they certainly partially transcended some of the contradictions of their backgrounds.

To begin at the beginning: with the elitist origins of most Union officials of the late 1920s. In a society where some 66 per cent of Africans were non-Christian, about 75 per cent were labourers or rural cultivators, nearly 90 per cent were illiterate, and almost 100 per cent had no direct voice in Parliament, ICU leaders of this period