

CHAPTER

10

AFRICAN PROGRESSIVISM, LAND, AND LAW: REREADING *NATIVE LIFE* IN SOUTH AFRICA

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This chapter examines the long-term economic and political significance of the arguments that Plaatje presented a century ago in *Native Life in South Africa*. I have it in mind to unsettle two largely dismissive readings of his work that are influential today. The first of these comes often from our students, who view the mission-educated elite as liberal agents of imperialism, or as stooges of international capitalism. These criticisms are rarely based on a careful reading of Plaatje's book, but they are nonetheless powerful and pervasive, justifying the neglect of the oldest black South African writers and their arguments. The second emerges from the scholarship that has been produced in South Africa over the last quarter-century on the social history of the countryside. The assessment of Plaatje offered here is more careful, but it also suggests that the arguments in *Native Life* were not representative of the desires of the majority of Africans on the land, nor – most importantly – of the actual conditions under which farming continued for much of the twentieth century.

In this chapter I want to draw out the global importance of the claims that Plaatje presented about the obligations and promises of African imperial progressivism. This is in part a matter of political significance, allowing Plaatje – like M K Gandhi – to assemble an international movement, based mostly in Britain and North America, against the forms of white supremacy that were

developing in South Africa. In his own lifetime these efforts produced only bitter defeat but, arguably, it was the same movement that ultimately defeated the apartheid state. Plaatje's book is also an economic prediction about the consequences of stripping Africans of formal legal rights over land. Here I suggest that we can assess these claims – and the importance of their history – by comparing the linked but substantially different legal and economic developments that have taken place across the border, in Botswana. In both cases I show that we have good grounds to think again, and in new ways, about what was at stake in the writing of *Native Life*.

My interest in this question was initially prompted by the striking similarities between the intellectual and political biographies of Sol Plaatje and Mohandas Gandhi. Both men were determined newspaper editors and publishers, dangerous and prolific writers, skilled consumers and producers of the economy of Isabel Hofmeyr's 'reading commonwealth'.¹

Ardent prohibitionists, they became imperial political activists mobilising the institutions and publics of the metropolis against the racist innovations in South Africa. Using a stream of increasingly angry prose, a global public speaking circuit, confidential letters and private interviews with the British and South African governments, they each targeted a specific legal impediment imposed by the emerging segregationist state. In Gandhi's case it was Act 2 of 1907, the Asiatic Registration Act, which required that all Indians living in the Transvaal recorded their identities using ten fingerprints. In Plaatje's, it was Act 27 of 1913, the Natives' Land Act, which criminalised African landownership and tenancy outside the existing tribal reserves.

Some of the resemblance here was clearly by design, as Plaatje invoked the precedents and strategies that Gandhi had used, with some success, just a few years before him.² They appealed to the global prerogatives of imperial citizenship as an antidote to these racist innovations, and both suffered bitter disappointment at the betrayals of the old promises of Victorian liberalism and the more immediate ones offered by social imperialists such as Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Alfred Milner during the South African War. The distinctive trajectory of Gandhi's political career in South Africa was formed by the promises and the betrayals of an increasingly segregationist progressivism. Gandhi and Plaatje were both abandoned by the institutions of the liberal empire, setting in motion strategies of political opposition and solidarity – internationally and in South Africa – that would eventually overthrow the racist innovations of colonial progressivism. What is interesting about this similarity is not that it

produced long-term success, which was, in any case, so battered by disappointment during their lifetimes (and afterwards) that it precluded even a tentative vindication.³ Rather, I think, these parallels point to a line of inquiry, goading us to examine in Plaatje's life the politics and trajectories of what might be called native progressivism, and its relationship with the emerging administrative forms of the segregationist state.

Progressives and social engineering

Modern South Africa was formed by a specific moment in global intellectual history. As Daniel Rodgers has shown, from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the Great Depression, progressive activists and scholars were in conversation, designing common institutional remedies for the social problems of urban industrialisation. There was, of course, significant disagreement among them, especially on the two pressing questions of popular democracy and racial segregation. But it is possible to map out the basic elements of this movement. Progressives, on both sides of the Atlantic, were hostile to the fundamentals of liberalism: to individualism, to Smith's moral economy, to private property and the supremacy of the law because, at least in the metropolitan countries, they protected the propertied at the expense of social reform. They were generally sceptical, or dismissive, of the workings of parliamentary democracy and political parties, relying instead on the mobilisation of the popular press. While progressives adopted utilitarian ideas on the promotion of happiness and the limitation of suffering, they were distinguished by a preoccupation with elitist interventions, scientific – especially statistical – methods of social enquiry, an insistence on expert-controlled government and an irrepressible interest in social engineering. After 1900 especially, segregation and eugenics were both rhetorically much favoured by progressives, although in England and the northern cities of the US, both faced formidable political obstacles.⁴ Out of a great host, the most famous individuals in the progressive movement included the Fabians, Sydney and Beatrice Webb in England, and Jane Addams of the Settlement House movement in the US. In South Africa, progressivist social engineering was most powerfully articulated by the American mining engineers John Hays Hammond and Hennen Jennings, who founded the mining corporations, and, in the state, by Cecil John Rhodes, Milner and their acolyte, Lionel Curtis.⁵

Much more than was the case in the US or Britain, black progressivism and liberalism were strongly aligned in South Africa. This had much to do with the

specific political history in the Cape Colony, which attached the economic and political fortunes of the mission-educated elite to the rules of imperial liberalism, and to the developing official rejection, under Rhodes, of liberal principles being extended to Africans. As white progressives moved to dismember universal liberalism, figures like Gandhi and Plaatje became increasingly fervent in their appeals to the liberal justifications of imperial government. Much the same applied to the black progressives' approach to capitalism and the state. As the segregationists moved to use the police, municipalities, railways and state-funded education to distinguish and protect white citizens – and as they manoeuvred to place all Africans into communally structured reserves – black progressives invoked the basic promises of capitalist progress. Plaatje, for example, protested repeatedly about the misdirection of taxes raised from Africans into the provision of state support for white families. By the early twentieth century, African progressivism was, as Z K Matthews explained, a mixture of liberalism, Christianity, literacy, law, property rights and racial independence.⁶ The most sophisticated advocates of native progressivism were certainly aware of the developing anti-capitalist critiques in Europe, but they were forced to confront, and exploit, the political forces that were available locally. Like many progressives, Plaatje saw in the mining corporations, and De Beers in particular, the possibility of a more rational, less racist politics, a bulwark against an increasingly potent white working-class racism. This allegiance with the mines was certainly strained. After the 1894 Glen Grey Act – which briefly encouraged limited individual African land titles in exchange for a labour tax – Plaatje was no doubt aware that much of the political and economic assault on African progressivism came from Rhodes, as prime minister. He was also aware that the fundamental weaknesses of African capitalism (especially newspaper publishing) stemmed from the low wages that were paid to black workers employed on the mines.

In this analysis of Plaatje's life I have echoed Adolph Reed's study of the progressive foundations and contradictions in the thought and politics of Plaatje's friend and collaborator, W E B Du Bois,⁷ but in the study of the lives of these two men there are also important contextual variations that lead to different analytical and political conclusions. Reed sees Du Bois's elitism and his obsessions with reformism as the source of a hobbled and contradictory middle-class black politics in the contemporary US. In this sense, the progressive Du Bois provided the intellectual foundations of the black bourgeoisie in that country.⁸ Similarly, I think that Plaatje's ignored and defeated arguments

in defence of progressive interventions in African agriculture, education, law and government account for many of the intractable difficulties that confront South African society today.

The capitalism that developed in South Africa – especially after the devastation of the wild commons in the 1860s and 1870s – reversed the course from common to privately held property that Edward Thompson described for modern England.⁹ By the middle of the twentieth century the regional political economy depended upon tribal reserves, mostly administratively defined and sustained, that served as the legal home for migrant labourers and their families. After 1927, these reserves were arranged and administered politically as truncated commons. In these territories most African families were able to access land allocated by chiefs and headmen, but very little else. Legal and bureaucratic facilities – especially schools, hospitals and courts – were sclerotic well into the 1970s (when the central state began a frantic effort to build public education, health and welfare systems that could not keep pace with an exploding population). In the same decade South African Marxists argued that these communal forms of property were necessary because they sustained the social reproduction of an extremely poorly paid working class. The brutal coercive regimes over movement under apartheid in this argument became necessary as the reserves – under the pressure of demographically driven poverty – deteriorated into spaces of desperate penury.¹⁰ Little of this original explanation has survived subsequent research – studies of the periodisation of rural poverty, the intellectual motivations of white officials, the political interests of African elites, the strategic concerns of the white state and the desires of migrants themselves have all produced a more complicated explanation for the preservation of communalism in the reserves. Yet, at least for this study, what matters is that the poorest third of the South African population continues to subsist – as Plaatje predicted – in desperate poverty under communal property relations – and, under renewed pressure from the politically-rehabilitated rural aristocracy today, they seem likely to do so well into the future.¹¹ In this, what is remarkable about Plaatje's protest about the effects of denying African land-holders legal capacity, is its prescience. His writing is important precisely because – as he noted, in contrast with the largely successful African-American middle-class reformers like Du Bois – it marks out the path of an indigenous progressivism that was deliberately not taken. The failure of his tenacious – and selfless – efforts should provide us with some moral obligation to properly understand them.

As they were emerging, Plaatje attacked the keystones of the racist state that the Milner and Smuts governments fashioned in South Africa between 1902 and 1924. He protested angrily, from 1904, about the effects of the mass imprisonment that followed the application of the new pass laws, and constantly pointed out that taxes (from the same laws) 'provide free education for Dutch children in the 'Free' State and Transvaal, while we had to find additional money to pay the school fees of our own children.'¹² Soon after the formation of the new Union, he began his long-running critique of the fantasy of the segregated polity. Acknowledging the attractions of the 'city of black folks', which would be mercifully protected from white job reservation, the havoc of attorneys' fees and the burden of central government taxes, he pointed to the misery caused by the segregationist removals that had already occurred in Johannesburg, and he warned that the same political struggle that had overthrown Boer independence would immediately paralyse the 'native' republic. A conflict between, on the one hand, 'educated ones striving to enforce a progressive code' and 'hereditary princes on the other hand always regarding the action of educated Natives with suspicion, [who] scheme and manoeuvre for their overthrow.'¹³ These protests – against the brutality of the pass laws, the unfairness of the tax burden, the subversion of the black franchise and the suffering caused by the realities of segregation – remained part of Plaatje's catalogue of grievances throughout his adult life, but the most animated part of his attack was directed against the property-holding proscriptions of the 1913 Land Act.¹⁴

The Land Act and the law

South African historians have assessed Plaatje's arguments about the significance and effects of the Act in different ways but, considered cumulatively, they have respectfully disagreed with him, arguing that that law was honoured mainly in the breach, and that tenancy – in both labour and share-cropping forms – remained predominant on the Highveld well into the 1950s.¹⁵ Collective land purchasing, often under the control of chiefs, also continued through the twentieth century. William Beinart and Peter Delius have argued – against Plaatje – that the establishment of inalienable systems of collective and customary land-holding around the 1913 act was the result of a combination of pressures 'from below as well as the re-emergence of chieftaincies' and the emerging segregationist state policy.¹⁶ This – it is worth noting – is a significantly different line of argument to those advanced by Lungisile Ntsebeza and

Gavin Capps, and more recently by Aninka Claassens, in which each view the chiefs' appropriation of control over land as the usurpation of clearly delineated individual and family rights. While there are certainly general grounds for believing that Beinart and Delius are correct about the popular appeal of collective and inalienable tenure reforms leading up to the Act, research on this does not yet exist.¹⁷

There were, of course, many cross-cutting economic and political issues involved in the state's efforts to proscribe private black landowners and tenants. Leading up to the Act the prospects of the independent black farmers were much more gloomy than Plaatje allowed in his descriptions of the upheavals in the winter of 1913; most black landowners already faced unsustainable debts and growing competition from white farmers supported by state-subsidised loans and an expanding rail network.¹⁸ Khumisho Moguerane has shown that the officials who drafted the legislation and shepherded it through Parliament had in mind something like the opposite of what is typically described as Plaatje's concern – they were keen to prevent African landowners from renting out their lands to white tenants inside the boundaries of what became the scheduled reserves.¹⁹

Yet Plaatje, and others in the mission elite, correctly discerned that there was a powerful illiberal political logic at work, both in the Act itself and in its implications for the wider government of Africans in the new Union. In his paper on Edward Tsewu's effort in 1904 to coerce liberal principles of land ownership out of the British administration in the Transvaal, Jacob Dlamini has rightly observed that the laws prohibiting the individual purchase and sale of land nurtured the 'idea that Africans were, by definition embedded in collectives and [that] it was as collectives that they naturally act.'²⁰ This became a model for land and government across most of the continent, with similar effects. The institutional and political outcomes of the truncated and constrained form of commons are now well understood. An influential scholarship tracks many of the most intractable problems of contemporary Africa back to the collectivisation of land use, and to the arcane forms of chiefly and state control that have developed over it.²¹ Much has also been written about the implications, for African families, of the family obligations of the labour tenancy requirements in the 1913 Land Act and later Master and Servants Act.²²

But, importantly, the legal and philosophical implications of the weakness of contract law in the countryside remain largely unexplored. William Macmillan and Martin Chanock both noticed the acute inadequacy of tenancy contracts.²³ 'In Natal, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State,' Edgar Brookes observed

that the Act, 'withdrew from Europeans and Natives alike the right to conclude any arrangement for hiring land on the 'ploughing on halves' system; retaining only, at the owner's good pleasure, the right to continue such arrangements as existed at the commencement of the Act, and to renew them without material alteration.'²⁴ In effect, the state proscribed the legal regulation of individual, contracted tenancy while share-cropping and many other forms of tenancy remained the norm – outside of the political domain of the law – for half a century. The long-term political and institutional – and cultural – effects of the contradictions produced by the 1913 Land Act remain unknown, except perhaps to say that South Africans have grown used to a legal order that in this and many other areas is startlingly at odds with their lived reality.

Plaatje was insistent that the effect of this prohibition amounted to a new form of servitude. By this he meant the end of independence and, more specifically, of the forms of legal status produced by capitalist property relations; that Africans would only be able to remain on the land 'as servants in the employ of Europeans.'²⁵ The impossibility of maintaining independent herds of cattle – 'the Natives' only capital or the Natives' 'Bank' – under the terms of the Act was one of his main complaints.²⁶ In reality, the situation was complicated. As the historical research has shown, tenants fought tenaciously against white landowners who long lacked the capital resources to reduce them to workers.²⁷ Yet Plaatje was also clearly on to something important that we have ignored. By attacking tenancy, the Act effectively stripped Africans of a key operational legal status – as tenants and as landlords – which they had possessed before the Act. After 1913 and without the general operations of the contract law, Africans faced the same legal disability on the land that they would later face in the towns where, as Plaatje warned, they could also only remain 'as a servant in the employ of a European.'²⁸ It is worth noting that the later laws that established segregated cities – between 1923 and 1937 – by funding and administering spatially separated townships and subjecting all black people to a residence test that was set by employment, also functioned by using slum laws simultaneously to attack Africans' rights to contract as tenants and to own property in the city.²⁹

By the late 1930s, Africans had been stripped of access to the legal institutions that protected contracts around property; this was followed, in the 1950s, by a similar removal of the last contracts in employment.³⁰ This was the servitude that Plaatje had in mind and he was correct in highlighting its significance. Bolstered by the attacks on the African franchise,³¹ the removal of contract in the countryside – on commercial land and in the stunted commons

of the reserves – effectively circumvented the legal and institutional conflicts that Robert Brenner has argued account for the development of capitalism in Western Europe.³² As Chanock put it, ‘a transition from Status to Contract could not be accomplished as long as the material basis of life, access to land, depended on Status.’³³ It is important to notice that this absence of institutionalised conflict over property was not intrinsic to colonial rule, to eighteenth century settler mortality rates,³⁴ nineteenth century legal institutions or the labour requirements of the gold mines – it was produced by specific legal innovations like the 1913 Land Act, which Plaatje resisted determinedly.

In their recent assessment of the 1913 Act, Beinart and Delius point out that Plaatje was closely aligned with the Barolong landowners who lived in the Thaba ‘Nchu and Mafikeng districts of the Free State and the Transvaal. These were among ‘the largest black owners of land in private tenure in the country as a whole.’³⁵ It is certainly true that the Barolong landowners had unusually formal private rights, a product both of their military alliances with the Trekkers and the Methodist missionaries’ obsession with securing formal title as a moral and political instrument.³⁶ It is also, as Moguerane has shown, especially interesting that the largest Barolong landowners offended the Native Administration Department officials’ racially-ordered paternalism by renting land to white tenants. There is a striking contrast, here, with the forms of collective and racially-exclusive native locations under chiefs that were developed and defended by Theophilus Shepstone in Natal and then implemented in the Transvaal.³⁷ Yet it would be a mistake to argue that Plaatje’s interest in private landownership and tenancy was somehow exceptional or, to use the language of some young South Africans today, that he was a member of a comprador elite looking to align itself with the economic and institutional arrangements of white property holders. Ironically this charge – that the educated elites did not ‘speak for the “masses of the native population”’ – was routinely used by colonial officials, in the highest organs of the state, to dismiss Plaatje’s criticisms.³⁸ Nor is it fair. Even a cursory reading of his writing shows the care with which he supported his claims to speak on behalf of ordinary Africans.

Native progressivism

The evidence of a general movement of native progressivism – with private landownership, production for the market and probate inheritance for women at its core – is much more widespread than the two Barolong enclaves.

Across much of the country a profound disagreement – as Plaatje suggested – between increasingly-educated progressives and traditionalists, especially hereditary elites, dates back to the 1850s. It was precisely this conflict that underpinned the ‘cattle-killing’ ordeal in the Eastern Cape, a horrifying struggle between *amaThamba* (the soft, the believers, where softness ‘indicates the abnegation of self and willing submission to a greater duty than self-interest’) and *amaGogotya* (the hard, the unbelievers, those who sought to profit from the emerging capitalist order and free themselves from the demands of aristocracy).³⁹ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as Bundy showed, African peasants dominated the new markets for agricultural products in the Cape and Natal, and a fraction among them had become commercial farmers holding ‘land on some form of individual tenure’.⁴⁰ In Natal progressive individualism was much more contested. The struggles of mission-educated farmers to secure land were constrained from early on by competition with settlers and land-speculators, by Shepstone’s opposition to private African title and by the attractions of tradition for men, especially in regard to marriage. Yet even here the struggles of African farmers to secure adequate schooling for their children were important, and part of the general movement that Plaatje was describing.⁴¹

For decades, factions of the hereditary aristocracy were closely aligned with mission-educated farmers. By the late 1920s – under pressure from increasingly radicalised workers, the Garveyite appeals of a segregated polity and the state’s efforts to co-opt chiefs with increased salaries and judicial authority – most of the hereditary aristocracy had changed sides decisively in this struggle, aligning themselves with the segregationist state, and abandoning the interests of private property holders.⁴² Lungisile Ntsebeza has tracked this conflict in the Xhalanga district of the Transkei from the 1860s into the present, showing how the colonial state and hereditary elites manoeuvred to deny private landowners legal rights to formally surveyed, registered and purchased land.⁴³ In the western districts of the Transvaal something similar occurred as both the Boer and the British governments intervened after 1890 to transform land-holdings that had been assiduously purchased in the names of missionaries on behalf of individuals, families and syndicates into an unusual system of tribal trust, effectively dissolving all forms of private title.⁴⁴ It is certainly true that by 1913 – after a short moment of promise during the South African War – the constituency of African private landowners was on the defensive across the country. But that should not lead us to think that it did not exist at all.

It is also true that in the nineteenth century properly registered, individual property rights were more fully elaborated among the Setswana-speaking peoples on the borders of the Free State and the Transvaal than was typical on the eastern side of the subcontinent. The reasons for this derive in part from the alliance between the Freestaters and the Barolong chief Moroka, which saw the government surveyor registering the farms of the chief's supporters in the 1880s. But it also follows from the general interest among the Barolong chiefs in paper-based systems of land registration in the previous decade.⁴⁵ There are some ironic twists in this story. On the eastern side of the Free State, in the Thaba 'Nchu district, African private tenure was secured by a Boer state typically hostile to African property holding, while on the western edge the Barolong chiefs' demands for private titles to the nominally liberal 1886 Cape Colony commission – charged with carving up British Bechuanaland – were denied on the grounds that it would disturb African tradition.⁴⁶ The Comaroffs have commented on the transparent cynicism of the Cape commission:

... [T]he report said that sovereigns ought still to hold the land 'according to native custom' as trustees for those using it on 'communistic' principles; until 'the people' requested it, a better system of tenure under 'separate ... deed' could not be introduced. But the people were asking for it. Or, at least, their royal representatives were, for the latter were fully aware of how 'customary' tenure was being used to discount their holdings, personal and collective. As one Tlhaping ruler insisted, the only way to ensure that his 'farm' did not become a 'location' was to secure it by title.⁴⁷

While the chiefs were the main protagonists for land titles, their strategies were supported by the London Missionary Society (LMS), especially its representative at Kuruman station in the 1870s, John Mackenzie. He was an energetic proponent of the idea that private land titling would protect African independence and stimulate the capitalist transformation of individuals and the regional economy.⁴⁸ Mackenzie was no doctrinaire Lockean – he sought private titles, and strict limits on the sale of land, to preserve African land-holding in the face of market speculation. He was an acute and sympathetic observer of the details of African society, and it was there that he found precedents for his recommendations for private property holding; these were claims about African society that contradicted the emerging consensus about the traditional

basis of despotic chiefly trusteeship. He was also aware of the progressive critique of private property in Britain, 'where there is so much talk of land and so little land to talk about', but he insisted that in South Africa the trajectory of progress was 'strongly from communism to individualism'.⁴⁹ African traditionalists, progressives, Christian missionaries, settlers and entrepreneurs of many stripes fought over the implementation of these forms of property (and their political implications) on the northern boundaries of the Cape colony from the 1860s.⁵⁰ For Mackenzie, what was at stake in this bitterly contested project, which economists would later glibly call defensive modernisation, was the protection of an emerging elite of capitalist farmers. 'What Mackenzie was most ardently opposed to,' as Shillington noted of the 1880s, 'was the dispossession of 'progressive' African farmers by white land speculators.'⁵¹ And this abstract denial of individual property rights, legal disqualification of tenancy and the dispossession of progressive black farmers was precisely Plaatje's obsession a generation later.

Botswana miracle

Most historians have dismissed these worries as a liberal shibboleth ill-matched to the gritty realities of racist paternalism on the Highveld, where few Africans held title. Yet it is possible to track the significance of Plaatje's argument by examining the substantially different history of property that developed on the opposite side of the Limpopo River. Economists and historians have spent a considerable amount of time in the last decade attempting to account for the distinctive institutional and economic history of modern Botswana. Broad interdisciplinary curiosity has been prompted by the fact that, for the last thirty-five years of the twentieth century, the Botswana economy – at least as measured in GDP – was the fastest growing on the planet.⁵² This performance contrasts with the general pattern of decline across the continent and, especially after 1973, with South Africa's weak economic growth under apartheid.⁵³ The world's most influential economists have attributed Botswana's success to well-chosen government policies which themselves reflect the influence of what they have called good institutions, meaning a 'social organisation which ensures that a broad cross-section of the society have effective property rights'.⁵⁴ Critics of the Botswana miracle have shown that economic growth derives almost entirely from diamond mining, that inequality is nearly as severe as it is in South Africa and that the most that should be said about government policies

is that they have not been especially destructive.⁵⁵ Yet given the pervasiveness of destructive policies on this continent, this is no small matter. And there can be no denying the comparative success with which the state has managed to domesticate accumulation, avoiding rents and offshore capital transfers – what Bayart has called extraversion – that have shredded institutional capacity and economic growth elsewhere on this continent.⁵⁶ There is, indeed, a case to be made for the development of an unusually rational-critical state in Botswana.⁵⁷

Researchers have accounted for this success in many ways, yet, viewed in combination, it is fair to say that they assemble the formula of African success that Plaatje described and endorsed in *Native Life*. Some have noted the unusual legitimacy of local government structures built directly on to the institutions and geographies of nineteenth century chiefly authority.⁵⁸ Others – following Isaac Schapera – emphasise the paradoxical limits on these old forms of power, where an obsessive concern with consultation and institutional hierarchy was nurtured by densely settled towns.⁵⁹ The scarcity of arable land between the desert and the Boer republics strengthened private claims over property and, after the 1840s, encouraged the Tswana states to batten onto the ivory and ostrich trade between the Zambezi valley and the Cape Colony. A long, and ideologically legitimated, history of structured inequality between individuals and groups, is another distinctive characteristic of Botswana. But – as Plaatje would surely have predicted – it was state-supported, export-led cattle-ranching that fostered a class of modernising, capitalist farmers.⁶⁰ Through the transformation that began in the 1870s, the increasing power of private claims to property in land, cattle and water sources – fostered by wealthy, modernising aristocrats – lies at the centre of the political-economy. ‘The contradictions of progressive but autocratic local chieftainship,’ as Robinson and Parsons suggested, ‘gave birth to the political elite that adopted liberal democracy at a national level.’⁶¹

The origins of this unusual class of progressive farmers in Botswana lie with the same families, mission institutions and ideologies that produced Plaatje in the 1870s. At the heart of this story was the alliance between Khama, king of the BagammaNkwato between 1875 and 1923, and Mackenzie of the LMS. Khama, under Mackenzie’s teaching, was a famous champion of Christianity, an enthusiastic supporter of trade, the money economy, literacy and education – and a determined opponent of circumcision, traditional healers, and, importantly, all forms of alcohol.⁶² He was also responsible for the transformation of the Tswana aristocracy through the unusual introduction of private property rights in cattle. This was not an equalising reform. ‘It was only the large cattle-owners

and serf-employers who could obtain real benefits in cash value from the sale of cattle and hunting produce in exchange for imported goods in the long-distance wagon trade prior to the late 1880s,' as Parsons observed, 'and Khama was the largest cattle-owner and serf-employer.'⁶³ In case any doubt remains about the premeditated revolutionary cultural implications of these reforms, he was also the conspicuous patron of the massive four-faced clock-tower that looms over the LMS school at the Tiger Kloof Native Institution in Vryburg.⁶⁴

All of this should prompt us to reconsider what was at stake in the claims that Plaatje (and Mackenzie) made for the progressive effects of private property rights in African society. Most historians will be suspicious, I am sure, of the neat correlation between the liberal recommendations of the nineteenth century missions and contemporary economists' diagnoses of Botswana's success. Yet it is also undeniable that Mackenzie's advocacy of private property rights, and the successful mobilisation of the humanitarian public sphere in London in defence of Tswana autonomy after 1882, stood against the strongly-moving currents of white liberalism in South Africa and in the empire.⁶⁵ By the turn of the century, South African liberalism had been eclipsed by a form of progressivism that was inflected by social imperialism.⁶⁶ At the core of this movement was a pessimistic biological racism, which insisted that the trajectory of progress of the 'subject peoples' would deviate from the path of universal liberal citizenship to follow 'direction[s] of their own'.⁶⁷

The overthrowing of Cape liberalism's tenuous commitment to basic equality in this period is well demonstrated by the key role played by Plaatje's friend Richard Solomon in the drafting of the segregationist laws that were introduced in the Transvaal. Solomon, Milner's attorney general and arguably the dominant force in the new state, was the nephew of Saul Solomon, the Cape Liberal leader described by the editor of the *Natal Witness* in 1881 as a 'proprietor of the Cape Argus, a political party in himself, a maker of Ministries, the unflinching advocate of native rights, the fearless exposé of native wrongs, the most influential man, without exception, in the whole South African continent'.⁶⁸ Richard Solomon was a child of the Eastern Cape missions, he attended school alongside the children of the African converts at Lovedale, and – along with Olive Schreiner's husband and Henry Burton – he had been an important member of Lenkoane's 'magnificent group' defending African civil rights in the 1890s.⁶⁹ Yet the same man was responsible for assembling the legal foundations of segregation including the prohibition – after Edward Tsewu's challenge described by Jacob Dlamini – on African land purchases. Solomon was specifically

responsible for the re-introduction of the 1899 republican pass law that criminalised all freedom of movement for Africans and made provision for their compulsory imprisonment without trial.⁷⁰ After the 1913 Natives' Land Act, it was this law that most outraged and infuriated Plaatje, providing the basis for his accusation that Africans had been made into peons in their own country.⁷¹ He would have been devastated had he known that Richard Solomon, nephew of his liberal patron in London, was responsible.

Disappointment

Overseas, Plaatje had extraordinary success in the 1920s, addressing, and persuading non-conformist audiences in Britain and Canada, and African American audiences in the United States, of the ongoing mistreatment of black people in South Africa.⁷² In this he was clearly drawing on the older forms of humanitarian mobilisation that Mackenzie and Gandhi, and many others, had used to move imperial politics before him.⁷³ Yet it also seems that the distinctive combination of church-based humanitarianism in England, especially in London and the north, and race-based solidarity in the cities of the American northeast, set new foundations for what would be a century-long public conflict over the morality of white-minority rule in South Africa.⁷⁴ In an important sense, then, he may be said to have won, in the end.

But during his life, Plaatje faced a long string of bitter defeats. Not the least of these was dealing with the 'peculiar sharpness' of an inconsistent law of property, which, while denying Africans the right to own land or transact as tenants, held them personally responsible and liable for debt.⁷⁵ By the early 1930s, his fears of a concerted project of subordination had been fully realised. As Willan notes, during the consultations in Pretoria for the Native Service Contract Bill in 1930, a law to tighten even further the already onerous controls on black workers on the farms, Plaatje mocked the inconsistency of a law allowing flogging in the Transvaal and Natal, but not in the Cape or Free State. He taunted: 'Are not the Natives of the Cape and Orange Free State cheeky?'⁷⁶ The world of involuntary servitude that he feared in 1913 had come fully into being.

Plaatje's loss – quite unlike the compromises that Reed describes in Du Bois's life – was also the defeat of the progressive bourgeoisie (and especially of progressive African farmers) in South Africa, because the state was able to co-opt the rural aristocracy (and those who supported them). In February 1928 he looked back on the difficulties of his own life in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, providing a

rueful assessment of the failure of native progressivism in these terms: 'Natives as a race recognise only one leader, namely, their hereditary prince ... A man may be a genius but the Native population will regard him very much like a clever actor on the stage – to be admired, not followed ... be he ever so faithful and self-sacrificing, they will desert him at the first sound of the call of the tribal chief, even if the latter implied nothing but a tribal chief and clan-nish tyranny. ... The failure is not on the part of the leaders of whom we have had several of outstanding ability; the fault lies with the Native masses who by nature object to follow one who is not their tribal chief.'⁷⁷ That this question, of the legitimacy of the hereditary elites and their control over communal land would remain a key problem of the democratic South Africa, nearly a century later, would, I think, astonish him.

NOTES

- 1 Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 71.
- 2 Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2007), 128, 182, and 198. All invoke the precedent of effective imperial intervention after Gandhi's protests against the Asiatic laws passed in the same year as the Natives' Land Act. Unless indicated, citations are to this edition.
- 3 Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Chapters 12, 16; Keith Breckenridge, *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Chapter 3.
- 4 Michael E McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Daniel T Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Freedon, 'Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity', *Historical Journal* 22/3 (1979), 645–671; Morton Keller, 'Anglo-American Politics, 1900–1930, in Anglo-American Perspective: A Case Study in Comparative History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22/3 (1980), 458–477; Beatrice Webb, 'Someone Has to Think Things Out and Our Task in Life is to be Pioneers in Social Engineering' in Norman Ian MacKenzie and Jeanne MacKenzie, eds, *The Diary of Beatrice Potter Webb, The Power to Alter Things, 1905–1924* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1984), 357.
- 5 Breckenridge, *Biometric State*, Chapters 1, 3; John W Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); C Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*; McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*; A Lichtenstein, 'Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South: "The Negro Convict Is a Slave"', *Journal of Southern History* 59/1 (1993), 8–110.

- 6 Zacharia Keodirelang Matthews, 'A Short History of the Tshidi Barolong', 1945 <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/5566>, [accessed 24 January 2016]; Paul S Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995).
- 7 Adolph L Reed Jr, *W E B Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Colour Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapters 3, 4 and 5.
- 8 Reed, *W E B Du Bois*, Chapter 9.
- 9 Edward P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).
- 10 Harold Wolpe, 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid', *Economy and Society* 1/4 (1972), 425–456, esp. 436–438.
- 11 Ben Cousins and Cherryl Walker, eds, *Land Divided, Land Restored: Land Reform in South Africa for the Twenty-First Century* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015), Chapter 1; Lungisile Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised: Chiefs and the Politics of Land in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006); Aninka Claassens, 'Denying Ownership and Equal Citizenship: Continuities in the State's Use of Law and 'Custom', 1913–2013', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40/4 (2014), 761–779.
- 12 Plaatje, *Native Life*, 126; Ernst Gideon Malherbe, *Education in South Africa*, 1 (Cape Town: Juta, 1925), 409.
- 13 'Segregation: Idea Ridiculed', *Tsala ea Becoana*, 18 January 1911; Brian Willan, ed., *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1997), 140–141.
- 14 Sol Plaatje, *Some of the Legal Disabilities Suffered by the Native Population of the Union of South Africa and Imperial Responsibility* (London, 1919); Willan, *Selected Writings*.
- 15 Timothy Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1986), Chapter 6; Charles van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996); William Beinart and Peter Delius, 'The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives' Land Act of 1913', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40/4 (2014), 667–688, summarise this scholarship; Colin Murray, *Black Mountain: Land, Class, and Power in the Eastern Orange Free State, 1880s to 1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, 1992), Chapter 4, largely supports Plaatje's account of the effects of the Act in the Thaba 'Nchu district.
- 16 Beinart and Delius, 'The Natives' Land Act of 1913', 682.
- 17 Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised*; Gavin James Capps, 'Tribal-landed Property: The Political Economy of the BaFokeng Chieftaincy, South Africa, 1837–1994' (London School of Economics and Political Science: University of London, 2010), <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.528664> [accessed 25 January 2016]; Claassens, 'Denying Ownership and Equal Citizenship'; Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, Chapter 8, shows that many of the leading white progressives certainly saw the law in this way; Edgar Brookes, *The History of Native Policy in South Africa from 1830 to the Present Day* (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1924), Chapters 15 and 16, for a defence of the 1913 Act and history of legal forms of African land tenure; Sara Berry, *No Condition Is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), for the general argument.

- 18 Murray, *Black Mountain*, 98–108.
- 19 Khumisho Ditebogo Moguerane, 'Black Landlords, their Tenants, and the Natives' Land Act of 1913', (Unpublished, 2015); 'A History of the Molemas, African Notables in South Africa, 1880s to 1920s' (PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2014), <http://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:be5284ad-37a1-4725-9a18-32f674676bb7>, accessed 25 January 2016.
- 20 Jacob Dlamini, 'The Land and its Languages: Edward Tsewu and the Pre-History of the 1913 Land Act', in Cousins and Walker, *Land Divided, Land Restored*, 50.
- 21 Berry, *No Condition Is Permanent*; Catherine Boone, *Property and Political Order in Africa: Land Rights and the Structure of Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Capps, 'Tribal-Landed Property'; Martin Chanock, 'A Peculiar Sharpness: An Essay on Property in the History of Customary Law in Colonial Africa', *Journal of African History* 32/1 (1991), 65–89; Claassens, 'Denying Ownership and Equal Citizenship'; Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Cape Town: James Currey, 1996); Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised*.
- 22 Plaatje, *Native Life*, 71; Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*, Chapter 6; Helen Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), Chapter 2.
- 23 William M Macmillan, *Complex South Africa: An Economic Foot-note to History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930), 90–91; Martin Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture, 1902–1936: Fear, Favour and Prejudice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175–176.
- 24 Brookes, *Native Policy in South Africa*, 338.
- 25 Plaatje, *Native Life*, 58.
- 26 Op. cit., 106–107.
- 27 Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 203–204; Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*, 4–12.
- 28 Plaatje, *Native Life*, 53.
- 29 T R H Davenport, 'The Triumph of Colonel Stallard: The Transformation of the Natives' (Urban Areas) Act between 1923 and 1937', *South African Historical Journal* 2/1 (1970), 90–92; Keith Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), Chapter 3.
- 30 Breckenridge, *Biometric State*, 141–146.
- 31 Plaatje, *Legal Disabilities*; Willan, *Selected Writings*, 134–135.
- 32 Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', in T Aston and C Philpin, eds, *Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 33 Chanock, 'A Peculiar Sharpness', 87.
- 34 Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A Robinson, 'The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation', *The American Economic Review* 91/5 (2001), 1369–1401.
- 35 Beinart and Delius, 'The Natives' Land Act of 1913', 675.
- 36 Matthews, 'A Short History'; Kevin Shillington, *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana, 1870–1900* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985), Chapter 7; Murray, *Black Mountain*, Chapter 1; Timothy Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), Chapter 8; Jean Comaroff and

- John L Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), Chapter 8.
- 37 Jeff Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013), Chapters 3 and 6.
- 38 Dlamini, 'Edward Tsewu', 44; Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 245.
- 39 Jeff Peires, *The Dead will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement of 1856–1857* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1989), Chapter 5. The quote is from page 175; Shillington, *Colonisation of the Southern Tswana*, Chapter 3, describes a similar cleavage among the Thlaping in the 1870s. For similar conflicts in Asante see T C McCaskie, 'Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History. I. To the Close of the Nineteenth Century', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 53/1 (1983), 23–79; T C McCaskie, 'Accumulation: Wealth and Belief in Asante History: II. The Twentieth Century', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 56/1 (1986).
- 40 Colin Bundy, *Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 238. For criticism of the Bundy thesis, see Michelle Hay, *South Africa's Land Reform in Historical Perspective: Land Settlement and Agriculture in Mopani District, Limpopo, Nineteenth Century to 2015* (PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2015), Chapter 1.
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- 42 Nicholas Cope, *To Bind the Nation: Solomon kaDinuzulu and Zulu Nationalism, 1913–1933* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993), Chapters 4 and 7.
- 43 Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised*, esp. 40–80.
- 44 Capps, 'Tribal-landed Property', Chapter 5.
- 45 Murray, *Black Mountain*, 34–35.
- 46 Shillington, *Colonisation of the Southern Tswana*, Chapter 7.
- 47 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 423.
- 48 Op. cit., 420–425.
- 49 John Mackenzie, *Austral Africa: Losing it or Ruling it 2* (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1887), 345–348.
- 50 Shillington, *Colonisation of the Southern Tswana*; Mackenzie, *Austral Africa 1* (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1887), Chapter 4; Mackenzie, *Austral Africa 2*, Chapter 6.
- 51 Shillington, *Colonisation of the Southern Tswana*, 154.
- 52 Abdi I. Samatar, *An African Miracle: State and Class Leadership and Colonial Legacy in Botswana Development* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999); Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James A Robinson, 'An African Success Story: Botswana', (2002), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=304100, accessed 29 January 2016; James A Robinson and Neil Parsons, 'State Formation and Governance in Botswana', *Journal of African Economies* 15/1 (2006), 100–140.
- 53 Terence Moll, 'Did the Apartheid Economy "Fail"?' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17/2 (1991), 271–291.
- 54 Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 'An African Success Story', 6.

- 55 Morten Jerven, 'Accounting for the African Growth Miracle: The Official Evidence, Botswana 1965–1995', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36/1 (2010), 73–94.
- 56 Jean-François Bayart, 'Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion', *African Affairs* 99/395 (2000), 217–267.
- 57 Pauline E Peters, *Dividing the Commons: Politics, Policy and Culture in Botswana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1994), 207–217; Robinson and Parsons, 'State Formation and Governance'.
- 58 Peters, *Dividing the Commons*, 211–217.
- 59 Isaac Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* (Oxford: James Currey, 1994), Chapters 11, 12 and 13.
- 60 Neil Parsons, 'The Economic History of Khama's Country in Botswana, 1844–1930', in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 'An African Success Story'; Robinson and Parsons, 'State Formation and Governance', 114–115; Ellen Hillbom, 'Botswana: A Development-Oriented Gate-Keeping State', *African Affairs* 111/442 (2012), 67–89; see Plaatje, *Native Life*, Chapter 11, for Plaatje on cattle and capital accumulation.
- 61 Robinson and Parsons, 'State Formation and Governance', 136.
- 62 Solomon T Plaatje, 'Chief Khama of the Bamangwato', *English in Africa* (1976), 20–22; Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom*, Chapters 1–4; John Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River: A Story of Everyday Life and Work Among the South African Tribes*. (Edmonston and Douglas, 1871), Chapters 9, 12 and 13.
- 63 Parsons, 'Economic History of Khama's Country', 119.
- 64 Plaatje, 'Chief Khama', 22; see Edward P Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present* 38 (1967), 56–97.
- 65 Anthony Dachs, 'Missionary Imperialism: The Case of Bechuanaland', *Journal of African History* 13/4 (1972), 647–658. Harriet Colenso's isolated and lonely liberal criticism reflects the same trend: Jeff Guy, *The View across the River: Harriet Colenso and the Zulu Struggle against Imperialism* (London: James Currey, 2001).
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- 67 Lionel Curtis, 'The Place of Subject People in the Empire', 9 May 1907, 37, A146, Fortnightly Club, (Johannesburg: South African Historical Archive).
- 68 Francis Reginald Statham, *Blacks, Boers, and British: A Three-Cornered Problem* (Macmillan and Co., 1881), 46; see also Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 129; On Solomon's importance to the Reconstruction of the Transvaal, see Donald Denoon, *A Grand Illusion: The Failure of Imperial Policy in the Transvaal Colony during the Period of Reconstruction, 1900–1905* (London: Longman, 1973), Chapter 2.
- 69 Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 47.
- 70 Richard Solomon, 'Enclose in No 15. Minute. Penalties under the Pass Law and Gold Law of the Transvaal', 15 July 1901, Cd 904, Papers relating to Legislation

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- 71 Plaatje, *Legal Disabilities*; Willan, *Selected Writings*, 252–253.
- 72 Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, Chapters 10 and 11.
- 73 Dachs, 'Missionary Imperialism'; Guy, *View across the River*, Chapters 27–29.
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- 75 Chanock, 'A Peculiar Sharpness'.
- 76 Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 317.
- 77 Ibid.