

SOCIALIST POLICY AND THE RESERVES

By EDWARD ROUX

12.1

ASSUMING that there were a Socialist Government in South Africa, what policy should it adopt towards the Native Reserves? This is a very difficult question and it is not easy to give a clear and concise answer. The facts are complicated and not too well known. Looking at the problem from different points of view, the economist, the agricultural scientist, the anthropologist and the politicians may formulate contradictory policies. In this article I can only attempt a brief outline of the position as I see it and some tentative conclusions.

AREA, POPULATION AND FERTILITY

The Native Reserves at present occupy about ten per cent. of the area of the Union. The additions promised by the amended Land Act of 1936 should increase them by about half as much again. A little over 3,000,000 people have their homes in the reserves. Much of the additional land handed over since 1936 was already occupied by native squatters. Some of the most densely populated rural areas are found in the Reserves and there is no doubt that they are overcrowded both relatively (as compared with the white rural areas) and absolutely (in terms of the ability of their Native inhabitants, with their backward agricultural methods, to make a living in them).

Most of the reserves in the Transvaal, Natal, the Northern Cape Province and the Ciskei were at no time very fertile. They were the poor areas into which the Africans were crowded when the Europeans appropriated the more fertile regions. On the other hand the Transkei, the largest Reserve, originally contained some of the best grazing and agricultural land in the country. But the soil in the Transkei is rapidly deteriorating as a result of overcrowding and wasteful agricultural methods.

Agriculture in the Reserves produces little but maize, kafir-corn and cattle. It barely suffices to feed the inhabitants. There is practically no surplus available for conversion into money for purchasing other requirements. In certain years it has been necessary to import mealies into the Reserves. The standard of living, such as it is, is dependent largely on money earned outside the Reserves by migrant labourers.

LAND TENURE

With some exceptions, land in the Reserves is held on tribal tenure. The chief holds the land from the Crown. He, in turn, in accordance with tribal custom allocates arable portions for the use of the different households. In practice every family has a patch of land for its private use and this land remains in the possession of the family. The chief may make land available for widows and may re-allocate land which has been abandoned for any reason. Each family works its own patch or patches and the products belong to the family. The chief usually has a larger patch and may requisition the labour of other families for use on his patch. Most of the work (hoeing, weeding, etc.) is done by women. Ploughing (where ploughs are available) is done by the men. There is a certain amount of co-oper-

ative labour, particularly during harvest time. An individual peasant may invite his neighbours to a "work party" and after the work is done, reward them with beer.

In addition to arable patches or strips, there is usually a communal grazing ground on which all the tribesmen are entitled to graze their cattle. After the mealies are reaped, the arable lands also become temporarily part of the grazing area and the cattle are driven in to eat up the stalks. Fences are generally unknown. Cattle are private property, and religion and tribal custom make every man anxious to own as many as possible. Africans only slaughter cattle when compelled to do so by religious necessity (for special ceremonies, to placate the spirits of the ancestors). The lobola custom requires a bride price in cattle. Cattle may be demanded back in the event of a wife proving unfaithful. For these and other reasons Africans are loth to sell their beasts and usually only do so to raise money for taxes. Apart from a little milk, and the flesh and skins of animals which have died of old age, hunger or disease, the tribe gets very little value from its cattle.

SOIL IMPOVERISHMENT AND WASTAGE

The twin scourges of soil impoverishment and soil erosion are rapidly converting the reserves into deserts. This is not an exaggerated statement. De-forestation has destroyed nearly all the trees in the reserves. In the absence of other fuels, such as wood, coal or paraffin (which poverty places beyond reach) Africans burn cowdung in their fires. Thus mineral salts and humus are continually removed from the land and never replaced. Africans know little or nothing about artificial composts or fertilisers and in any case cannot afford to buy the latter.

Soil erosion is an even more serious danger. There is no attempt to limit cattle to the number which a given area of grassland can support without deterioration. Paddocking (rotational grazing) is in general not practiced. Donga formation goes on unchecked. Already large areas of surface soil have disappeared in almost all the reserves and the number of starved cattle they are able to support is steadily declining.

REMEDIAL MEASURES

The capitalistic Government of South Africa is aware of what is happening in the Reserves. It realises that soil wastage is resulting in human malnutrition and disease, and it knows that the chief economic asset of South Africa—Native man-power—is in danger of withering at its source. It has, therefore, taken certain remedial measures. But these measures are hopelessly inadequate, and I think I am justified in saying that they have not halted or even appreciably slowed down the advance of soil deterioration in the Reserves.

Government effort so far has been mainly concentrated in the Eastern Cape, where four native agricultural schools exist. These carry on propaganda and train native agricultural

demonstrators, who are paid by the district councils. Government supplies pedigree bulls at special low prices and will exchange one good bull for two scrub oxen. The Ciskeian General Council a year or two ago began to enforce compulsory culling of scrub bulls within its area. These efforts to improve the breed of cattle are proceeding slowly. In certain districts tentative attempts at paddocking and cattle limitation have been started.

Nearly everywhere these efforts have met with the open or covert hos-

(Continued on page 8)

Forward
26/2/43

SOCIALIST POLICY AND THE RESERVES

(Continued on page 2)

tility of the vast mass of the African peasants. The new methods come up against the old-established tribal customs and prejudices. Government decrees are always regarded with suspicion and, when they interfere with tribal ideas about cattle, the suspicion may develop into open hostility or sabotage. In certain parts of the Transkei, where erosion was very bad, certain areas were fenced off by the authorities to allow grass cover to regenerate. The local tribesmen broke down the fences at night and drove their cattle into the enclosures. In the Herschel district much money was spent on contour ditches and other anti-erosion works. Within a few years erosion was going on as badly as ever, because the tribesmen did not keep the works in repair. From Natal come reports of chiefs using their influence with the Government in an attempt to stop compulsory paddocking. In the Northern Transvaal a political agitation of some magnitude recently developed because the authorities tried to stop ploughing on the river banks. The feeling about land and cattle is so strong that even some of the native representatives in Parliament are shy of speaking openly to their constituents about these matters for fear of losing votes.

THE NEED FOR EDUCATION.

There are two possible ways of dealing with a backward peasantry that refuses to adopt modern ideas about agriculture. One is to use force. The other is to convert the peasants by education and propaganda. In Soviet Russia the Communists began their collectivisation programme with education, but progress was too slow and finally they had to supplement persuasion with more drastic methods.

Our South African Government is in an even more difficult position. It do not wish to educate the Africans, to get them to break completely with superstition, backwardness and ignorance. That would mean the end of white domination in this country. This tribalism, this "developing along their own lines," is useful to the mine-owners, the farmers, and all who batten on cheap black labour. The chief, too, is a useful Government agent for collecting taxes and keeping his people quiet. And what authority would the chief have if the cattle cult and tribal land tenure were to go? Force, also, our Government cannot use effectively, because force at least must be supplemented by other methods. The Russian Communists had to use education and propaganda and the support of the poor peasants in order to liquidate the kulaks and establish the collective farms.

A SOCIALIST POLICY

I have said enough to indicate that a Socialist government will be faced with difficulties. I will assume that such a government will have the help of the masses in carrying out a progressive policy.

It has been said that Africans will be able to by-pass a good deal of capitalistic development and will be able to go from primitive tribal communism to modern socialism without passing through the intermediate historical stages. There is probably much truth in this. We should realise, however, that Bantu "communism" had already developed very strong individualistic traits long before the Europeans came to this country. This is particularly true with regard to the ownership of cattle. (See above).

Forward 26/2/43

Collection Number: AD1715

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974

PUBLISHER:

Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document forms part of the archive of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.