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Racial Formations: South Africa

South Africa became a democratic, non-racial state in 1994. The first democratic elections were preceded by fifty years of legislated racial domination. Apartheid (separateness in Afrikaans) involved racial segregation in every aspect of social and political life, from amenities to education, residential areas and marital life. Yet Apartheid built on the foundations laid by previous segregationist regimes. Indeed, ideologies of separate development informed British colonial policy at the end of the 19th century, with the Lagden Commission of 1905 recommending the formal separation of the races and the creation of race-based urban locations.

States are essential in constituting race identities and the Apartheid regime sought to divide the population into four racial groups: African, Coloured, Indian (Asian) and White. These racial classifications continue to shape identities, everyday life and policy-making, for example in relation to affirmative action policies. There are particular challenges associated with implementing Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) legislation in the context of an diverse population that was differently and unevenly affected by racial oppression. Race identities were also formed and challenged through resistance to Apartheid rule, such as in the Black Consciousness Movement or the philosophy of non-racialism.

Colonialism and the origins of racial hierarchies

Capitalist colonialism and racialism were inseparable, and South Africa is no exception. The Cape Khoi were the first African population to experience the violence of European colonial expansionism. Khoikhoi herders and pastoralists had occupied what is today South Africa for over 1,000 years. It is estimated that 200,000 KhoiKhoi and San hunter-gathers (Bushmen) lived in the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape in the 17th century. South African historiography has traditionally begun with the seizing of the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch

East India Company (DEIC), which required a trading post for resupplying ships on the way to East Asia (1652). However, European ships calling at Table Bay had traded cattle and sheep from the Khoi in return for metals since the sixteenth century.

Although the Khoi were not formally enslaved, they were increasingly brought under the control of the DEIC and became dependent on the Dutch for pasture and employment. Unsystematic colonization began in the early eighteenth century with settlers moving inland and occupying the lands of herders. The KhoiKhoi were devastated by a smallpox epidemic in 1713, but the earlier loss of pasture was decisive in the eventual demise of their social structures. The commodification of land was a central element in the establishment of racial discrimination in the Cape as the Dutch settlers – and the British after them – legally owned the land they annexed. Recent historiography has shown that the advance of the colonial frontier produced fragmented identities for many South Africans through their interactions with colonial and African worlds, while at the same time hardening the boundaries between settlers and colonial subjects.

The decision to import slaves (as opposed to free European laborers) to meet labor needs was moreover important in paving the way for racial oppression. Until the end of slavery in 1838, about 63000 slaves were imported from India, Indonesia, Madagascar and other parts of Africa. The South African Muslim and Cape Malay communities developed in the eighteenth century from slaves imported from South East Asia. From this period onwards, the racial label *Coloured* was employed to classify people of mixed heritage, usually KhoiKhoi or Malay with British or Dutch. Female slaves in particular were important to settler households as nannies or wet nurses; incorporating slaves into the settler family through paternalism was a way to control them. The British abolished slavery after they seized the Cape from the Dutch in 1806, establishing a system of cheap wage labor that was extremely profitable for the settlers and further legitimized a white supremacist mindset.

Conquest and the acceleration of capitalist development

The early nineteenth century saw extraordinary changes to the geographical distribution of people and cultures throughout the region, in part due to Zulu expansionism. The Mfecane (crushing in isiZulu; Difaqane, or forced migration, in seSotho) led to widespread warfare amongst different ethnic groups. The causes of the conflict were traditionally portrayed as the outcome of aggressive Zulu nation-building, but scholarship has more recently also attributed it to environmental factors and the upheavals caused by colonial expansion. The Zulu kingdom was destroyed a mere 50 years or so later when the British annexed Zululand in 1887.

British colonialists had started pursuing their aggressive conquest policy when minerals were discovered (diamonds in Kimberley in Afrikaner-governed Transvaal in 1866; gold on the Witwatersrand in today's Johannesburg in 1886). Diamond and gold mining needed capital to build and run mines, as well as a reliable and free flow of cheap labor. Importantly, workers throughout the history of mining in South Africa have been recruited from the entire Southern African region. The discovery of minerals thus accelerated industrialization but also led to the destruction of the independent African states. The demands for cheap migrant labor devastated rural communities and affected traditional family life: workers lived in mining compounds in squalid conditions and without access to services while their families remained in the countryside.

The rise of Afrikaner nationalism

The mineral revolution fuelled the conflict between the British and the Boers (descendents of the Cape Dutch) that had been stewing for most of the century. Some Boers had begun, in the 1830s, to migrate north-east into the interior. Increasingly politically marginalized by their new rulers, opposed to the premise of racial equality and concerned about security and land, there were materialist and nationalist reasons for their search of a homeland. The Great Trek led to the founding of the Boer republics of Natal, Transvaal and the Orange Free State. It fed into the growth of Afrikaner nationalist ideology, drawing from the determination of the Voortrekker pioneers and based on the myth (since dispelled by anthropologist Monica Wilson

in 1959) of an empty land already depopulated by the Mfecane. The Anglo-Boer war (1899 to 1902) in fact created the conditions for the establishment of a unitary South African state in 1910, marking the end of African self-determination. The peace treaty betrayed the interests of the black population, some 20,000 of whom had supported the British as soldiers, guides and laborers: despite promises to the contrary, the British denied voting rights to Africans whereas Coloureds were guaranteed the vote.

The interwar period saw a further erosion of black rights. The 1923 Natives Land Act for example established group areas, excluding blacks from white neighborhoods and requiring them to carry passbooks (a law that remained in force until 1986). The Act set aside 7.5 percent of the country for a black population of then 67 percent. Indeed, land reform remains one of the most challenging political issues in Post-Apartheid South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC), established in 1912 as an organization uniting all Africans against racial oppression, criticized this legislation but its moderation left it sidelined. It was only revived and began to mobilize more effectively in the 1940s, under the direction of its more radical Youth League (including figures such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu).

Apartheid and resistance

The National Party (NP) was elected to power in 1948, on a platform of racial separateness and with a commitment to white, and particularly Afrikaner, supremacy. The Apartheid project aimed for a total transformation of South African society, with race determining individuals' access to political rights, opportunity, education, employment, health and so on. However, neo-Marxist scholars have shown the NP's rise to power to involve merely an intensification, along explicitly racial lines, of patterns of in- and exclusion that had already been inscribed during colonialism. Contrary to the liberal strand in South African historiography, revisionist critiques thus explained Apartheid as the product of South Africa's unique process of industrialization. The race/class debate has since been supplanted by work that is sensitive to

the gaps between the policies and practices of Apartheid, the intersection of gender and race and histories of popular resistance, amongst others.

Segregation and racial classification

The government quickly introduced a series of laws that consolidated racial separation, such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Groups Areas Act (1950). 'Separate amenities' – racially exclusive transport, hospitals, building entrances and beaches, to name but a few – were key to what has been termed petty Apartheid. The Bantu Education Act (1953) enforced separate education, effectively designed to equip Africans only with the skills necessary for the lowest ranks of the labor market.

Racial classification was therefore absolutely central to the Apartheid system and to individuals' lives. The Population Registration Act (1950) listed Blacks, Whites and Coloureds as the main racial groups (Indians were added as a forth group later on). Apartheid policies did not affect the three 'non-white' groups evenly: Coloureds and Indians did not need to carry passes and had greater labor mobility, but were excluded from most amenities and forced to live in their group areas.

The Bantu Authorities Act (1951) further restricted the movement of Africans outside of homelands and eventually led to a program of forced removals into ten supposedly distinct ethnic homelands. These so-called Bantustans were arid lands, with no industries, infrastructure or towns, and only made up 13 percent of the South African territory. Africans eventually became legal citizens of their Bantustan and were deprived of their South African citizenship, although many of the displaced had no links whatsoever with their supposed homeland. Families were broken up, communities and neighborhoods destroyed. In total, over three and a half million people were forcibly removed. However, geographical segregation posed a dilemma for the state since the economy relied on cheap African labor. This was partially solved by establishing townships close to white areas, but resulted in the growth of huge shantytowns outside cities. Geographical segregation continues to characterize present day Post-Apartheid South Africa.

Non-racialism and resistance

The ANC had undergone major changes throughout the late 1940s and 1950s due to the impact of the ANC's Youth League (ANCYL) and the expansion of the Women's League. Initially the ANCYL had advocated black exclusiveness, but this was revised in the 1950s when strong ties were formed with the communist and trade union movements. In 1952, the ANC organised a defiance campaign against petty apartheid: women and workers challenged curfew regulations, entered without passes and sat on benches designated for whites. The campaign united the population across the racial groups they were divided into by government. Resistance to Apartheid thus sought to challenge the state's racial classifications. The philosophy of non-racialism is perhaps best captured by the opening lines of the Freedom Charter of 1955, put forward by an alliance of the ANC, the Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People's Congress: 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white'. The Charter formed the basic policy document of the liberation movement and many of its demands were included in the democratic Constitution.

After the 1960 Sharpeville massacre where 69 peaceful protesters were killed by Apartheid police, the ANC and the Pan African Congress (PAC) formed armed wings and the struggle became militarized. The government banned both organizations and in the Rivonia Trial imprisoned for life a dozen ANC leaders – Mandela, Sisulu and Govan Mbeki amongst them. The resistance movement was crushed and took a decade or more to recover.

The resurgence of popular resistance in the 1970s was connected to rising unemployment and inflation, but also to the significant influence of the Black Consciousness Movement. Activists such as Steve Biko criticized the paternalism of white liberalism and argued that blacks alone could overthrow the racist Apartheid state, locating the struggle in the restoration of African consciousness. The movement contributed to unity amongst the oppressed and influenced the Soweto uprising of 1976. Thousands of children were striking against the introduction of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in schools when the police

moved against them, killing 200 people. The protests were a turning point in the liberation struggle that had previously been fought outside of South Africa.

The subsequent decade saw the introduction of the racist tricameral system under Prime Minster PW Botha (1983). Tricameralism gave representation to Coloureds and Indians in racially exclusive and essentially powerless chambers, but excluded Blacks. This led to new waves of protests and revolts, and eventually to the declaration of a state of emergency (1985) and even harsher repression by the government. Drawing from township civics and many other church, student and workers organizations, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was established in 1983, initially in order to oppose the tricameral reforms. With strong affiliations to the ANC, but non-violent and influenced by non-racialism, the UDF gave the resistance movement a broad-based internal legitimacy.

Despite political negotiations for a non-racial democracy being underway from 1991, the transition period was characterized by great unrest and violence between right-wing white groups and the ANC, but also by inter-ethnic violence between ANC supporters and supporters of the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Of the 21,000 people that died as a result of political violence under Apartheid, 14,000 were killed in the transition period. Many of these deaths occurred as a result of battles between ANC and IFP supporters, but have partly been attributed to state and paramilitary third force activity associated with right-wing groupings opposed to a non-racial dispensation.

Post-Apartheid race relations and Black Economic Empowerment

With the end of apartheid in 1994, non-racialism became official democratic state policy. However, racial barriers persist, as witnessed for example by the fact that the majority of South Africans do not socialize with individuals from other race groups. Racial classifications inherited from Apartheid continue to be employed, for example in relation to affirmative action policies.

In addition to structural legacies, new inequalities have emerged. Mandela's presidency (1994 to 1999) was characterized by a discourse of national unity and reconciliation, encapsulated in images such as the 'rainbow nation' and by transitional justice initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But it also saw rapid economic liberalization that contributed to living conditions becoming worse than under Apartheid for sections of the black population. Despite considerable economic growth and access to an particularly progressive constitution, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. While the social grant system has been extended to 13 million South Africans, two thirds of children continue to live in poverty. Race no longer has the same relationship to inequality as under Apartheid but, in intersection with class and gender, continues to shape inequality. Indeed, South Africans citizens see socioeconomic inequality as amongst the most significant source of division, according to the 2010 round of the SA Reconciliation Barometer. The xenophobic attacks of 2008, when tens of thousands of immigrants were forced to flee their homes, have however brought issues of racism and race relations to the fore again.

BEE describes the affirmative action policies aimed at increasing prospects in the work place and business ownership of the historically oppressed. Under the terms of the Employment Equity Act of 1998, Black includes the Apartheid-era classifications of African, Coloured and Indian, but it is the latter labels that continue to be used in everyday discourse. Neville Alexander, amongst other critics, has suggested that there exists a problematic relationship between affirmative action and the perpetuation of racial identities in Post-Apartheid, especially given that the legislation requires people to self-identify in terms of their race. Other issues surrounding the legislation are contested, too: it has been criticized for serving the enrichment of a few politically well connected individuals. BEE has certainly predominantly benefited the growing black middle classes, whereas the majority of previously disadvantaged remains desperately poor. Indeed, the Gini coefficient measuring inequality for the black population is considerably higher than it is for the whole population.

The government has since adopted a policy of broad-based BEE – addressing employment, procurement, ownership, skills development, management and socio-economic

development – which has sought to deal with some of the afore-discussed shortcomings. Nonetheless, the effects of the Apartheid-era Bantu education system continue to affect the availability of skilled labor in appointing people under the BEE legislation. There have been wide-reaching initiatives to tackle educational inequality from primary through to the tertiary sector, but they too are facing the formidable challenge of dealing with the legacy of 400 years of colonial and Apartheid racial oppression.

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