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Class & Colour in South Africa 1850-1950

Foreword

Some twenty years ago, South Africa was held in high esteem as a senior member of the British Commonwealth, a bastion of western capitalism, and the most advanced economic region in Africa. Her people, black and white, could claim with some justification that their material conditions were the best in Africa. The south had the highest national income per head of population, the largest volume of trade, and the widest scope of opportunity for acquiring education or obtaining employment. Men from east and central Africa went south in search of higher wages or higher learning.

Three centuries of white settlement - phased by colonial wars, expropriations of tribal lands, slavery, forced labour and industrialism - had produced a variety of human types, an integrated multi-racial society and a way of life shared by some members of all racial groups. Colour prejudice was endemic and deeply ingrained among whites; but their policy of racial discrimination, though vicious and degrading, differed in degree rather than in kind from the discrimination practised elsewhere under colonial rule.

If racism was most bitter and intense in the south, it experienced a measure of compensation in a countervailing radicalism that stretched across the colour line in pursuit of an open-ended, non-racial social order. Nowhere else in Africa did so many whites, Asians and Coloured participate with Africans in a common struggle against class

or colour oppression. A peaceful transition to parliamentary democracy without colour bars seemed plausible to some observers, as the tide of decolonization began to swell at the end of the war.

Twenty years of unbroken rule by Afrikaner nationalism have all but destroyed the hope of a peaceful revolution. South Africa remains by far the largest producer of goods and capital in Africa. Her public services - the infrastructure of political and economic organization - are still the most advanced. Her standards of public morality, law enforcement and race relations have deteriorated to such a level, however, that she is now a byword among nations for bigotry, intolerance and despotic rule. She has been turned into a police state under the control of a white oligarchy which uses fascist techniques to enforce racial totalitarianism and to suppress movements for social equality.

A wide gulf has consequently opened between the south and the rest of Africa. Millions of men and women in countries north of the Zambezi are being exhorted and trained for the tremendous task of modernizing their societies. Southern Africans, in contrast, are being forcibly regrouped - by a white bureaucracy - into tribal communities under hereditary chiefs. Thousands of Africans in the independent states occupy the highest positions in government, education, industry, commerce and finance positions of a kind that are reserved for whites only in the south.

The balance of advantage is being tilted in favour of regions that are still considered backward by southern standards. The best that black and brown South Africans with professional qualifications can do for themselves is to escape to these countries, where their skin colour is a social asset and where they can apply their skills with dignity and in

freedom. For, as long as they remain under white man`s rule, they must expect to be outstripped in every field of social activity by their self-governing racial compatriots in the north.

Southern Africans have taken up arms against white supremacists to redress the balance. The freedom fighters are the vanguard of a people preparing to rise for the recovery of lost liberties and for the right to move freely on terms of equality with all men at home and abroad. Their struggle is an old one. It began 300 years ago, when the brown men of the Cape - the Nama who were called Hottentot and the Khoi who were called Bushmen - fought the white invaders with bows, arrows and spears. Bantu-speaking warriors - the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana and Venda - continued the struggle, until each nation in turn was defeated and absorbed in the white man`s order.

Wars of independence were succeeded by a struggle from within the industrialized society for parliamentary democracy, national liberation, or socialism. This book traces the interactions between the two main streams of resistance to white domination: the national movements of Africans, Indians and Coloured; and the class struggles of socialists and communists. Although it surveys the record of radical movements for the best part of a century, it is not a history. We prefer to think of it as an exercise in political sociology on a time scale; and we have not hesitated, therefore, to intersperse our narrative with comments and value judgements.

We find no merit in apartheid and are wholly committed, as participants and observers, to the Resistance. We have not refrained from criticizing our heroes; and freely use the advantages of hindsight in evaluating their programmes and procedures. A word of explanation is due to readers who think that this approach is

unscientific, or who resent anything that seems disparaging of the early radicals.

We have no desire to muck-rake or belittle the achievements of men who, rising above the circumstances of their time and class, escaped from the stranglehold of white supremacy and suffered the penalties of opposition to an oppressive regime. We think that they must gain in stature from a frank account of the difficulties they experienced on their political pilgrimage. Our essays in political criticism of communists like Ivon Jones, Bill Andrews and Douglas Wolton, of nationalists like Dr P. K. Seme and Dr Abdurahman, of radical labour leaders like Archie Crawford and Clements Kadalie, have a wider purpose than the purely biographical.

Our view is simply this, that new generations of resisters are entitled to an honest appraisal of the past from the vantage point of the present. Many of the controversies here examined - the proper relationship between national liberation and class struggle, the choice between socialist and capitalist democracy, the concept of African (or `black`) power, the strategies of a multiracial united front or `non-collaboration with the Herrenvolk` are still with us and continue to produce furious debate. Our purpose is to tell a story and at the same time give resisters of today a guide to the background of these controversies. An attempt is made in the last chapter to abstract some conclusions and project them against an analysis of the power structure. Two propositions of theoretical interest emerge from the analysis. One is that an industrialized, capitalist society can perpetuate pre-industrial social rigidities only by adopting the coercive techniques of fascist totalitarianism. The other proposition is that where class divisions tend to coincide with antagonistic national or

colour groups, the class struggle merges with the movement for national liberation.

We collected the bulk of the material in South Africa over a period of about ten years, in between our professional activities and political involvement. The actual writing was done in Manchester and London. We are indebted to the University of Manchester for the generous grant of a Senior Simon Research Fellowship, which enabled us to work in the tranquillity and comfort of Broomcroft Hall; to Professor Max Gluckman and colleagues in the University's department of social anthropology and sociology, for stimulating discussions; to Miss Nancy Dick, who patiently and reliably verified quotations and sources, unearthed material inaccessible to us, and compiled the index; to Michael Harmel and Kenneth Parker for reading and criticizing the draft; and to librarians of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Manchester, London and Moscow for their courteous attention and unfailing assistance. Finally, we acknowledge a debt and pay a tribute to our colleague Lionel Forman (1928-59), whose early death deprived his country of a fine intellect and a brave fighter for freedom.

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Lusaka,
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and

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