

RACISM
and **PUBLIC**
POLICY

Durban, South Africa
3 - 5 September 2001

CONFERENCE PAPER

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and Citizenship in South Africa**

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UNRISD work for the Racism and Public Policy Conference is being carried out with the support of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. UNRISD also thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.

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Social Construction of Race and Citizenship in South Africa

Ben Magubane

Paper prepared for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)
Conference on *Racism and Public Policy*, September 2001, Durban, South Africa

“Africa is in general a closed land, and it maintains this fundamental character. It is characteristic of the blacks that their consciousness has not yet even arrived at the intuition of any objectivity, as for example, of God or the law, in which humanity relates to the world and intuits its essence. ...He [the black person] is a human being in the rough.” (Hegel 1830, 1975:176-7)

“The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as the present.” (Joseph Conrad.)

Historical Antecedents¹:

The use of “race” and “racism” has a long and ugly history. Hegel provides a logical point of departure. He reminds us that attempts to naturalize inequalities in order to justify slavery and oppression of Africans was made in the crudest terms eminent European philosophers could think of. In the construction of Africa as a Dark Continent and the African as ‘human being in the rough’, a lot was at stake. In 1517 Las Casas, the Spanish theologian feeling guilty about the certain destruction of indigenous Americans, (who were being forced to work in the mines and plantations), recommended Africans to be enslaved because they were plentiful and stronger. Since then, European Christianity, philosophy, biology and other social sciences, to justify the barbarism of slavery, orchestrated contempt and sub-humanity of the African, so much so that today their degradation have become accepted as well deserved.

Whilst the focus of this paper is on South Africa, it is my belief that to understand the essence and nature of racism, is useless, at least to me to focus exclusively on developments in any particular European country. Racism is inseparable from the advent of what Cornel West (1993:18), calls the Age of Europe. White supremacy and racism are but expressions of measures European adventurers and colonizers deemed necessary to colonize, expropriate and exploit and rule colonized peoples. In the colonies the structural injustices of foreign domination produced a cultural system of beliefs and images that inflicts ‘ontological wounds’ on colonized humanity, wherever they are in the ‘white’ world. It attacks their intelligence, ability, beauty, and character in subtle and not so subtle ways (cf. West: Ibid.).

Racism is not simply a discourse, but a practice which produces certain knowledge of the colonized, and indeed, exploited, that makes the practice of domination, restructuring, and having an authority on the colonized natural. And effective political ideas like racism and white

¹ A methodological note; In this essay I allow certain chosen text to define the essence and practice of white supremacy and its ideology of racism.

supremacy², according to Said, (1979), need to be examined historically in two ways: (1) *genealogically*, in order that their provenance, their kinship and assent, their affiliation both with other ideas and with political institutions may be demonstrated, (2) as practical *accumulation* (of power, land, ideological legitimacy) and negation of others, and their ideas of legitimacy? Although racism cannot be simply correlated with the process of *material* exploitation, the discourse produces forms of knowledge which are of great utility in justifying the degradation of the exploited. It serves to define the superior whilst at the same time serving to regulate the inferior and putting them in their proverbial place.

From the vast literature on this subject, I have selected two writers who have broached the subject of Europe's relations with its others – Adam Smith and Karl Mark. In 1776, Smith, described two events that he said “were the greatest and most important in the history of mankind: the discovery of America, and the passage to the east Indies by way of the Cape of Good Hope”. Asking, “What benefits, or what misfortune to mankind my hereafter result from these great events,” he lamented that “no human wisdom can foresee.” But it was possible even in 1776 for Smith, to foresee that “the savage injustice of Europeans” towards those who were in the process of being colonized would “render an event, which ought to have been beneficial to all, ruinous and destructive to several of those unfortunate countries.”

Almost a hundred years later, Marx, (1867), wrote about how the “discovery of gold and silver in America,” was a disaster for the colonized peoples everywhere. It led “to their extirpation, enslavement and entombment in the mines. For India it led to its conquest and plunder, and Africa was converted into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins.” These tragedies, “characterized the rosy dawn of capitalist production.” Marx (1976.:928), also reminds us that ‘while the cotton industry introduced child slavery in England, in the United States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery’ into a system of commercial exploitation’. Indeed, he says, “the veiled slavery of the wage labourers in Europe needed for its pedestal the unqualified slavery of the New World.”

Marx depicts the origin of European capitalism as “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire,” and the Western world exploitation of the rest of the globe, provides the appropriate historical context for understanding modern Western racism. If we are honest, we have to acknowledge that it is a horrendous story, and in it “the past weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (ibid.).

Using Smith and Marx as a point of departure, the term “race” and its ideology of “racism” should be understood, is a shorthand for inhuman social practices, exploitative and oppressive relations that brutalize, degrade and reduce people who are colonized and oppressed to less than human status. It is both a specific term, as in dehumanizing of a whole people, and a global social practice, i. e., elevating Europeans and/ or white people into ‘lords of humanity’. It also refers to direct actions, say murder and torture, and structural relations, such as exploitation and oppression of those whose means of subsistence have been forcibly usurped. Exploitation refers to the unconscionable extortion of some ones labour after they have been dispossessed of their means of livelihood or means of subsistence. Racism absolved the perpetrators of institutionalized injustices by blaming the victims. Race is the mask of class in the final analysis.

During the Enlightenment era, arm-chair philosophers, from Locke, Hume, Kant, etc. had made it a habit to speculate about the inferiority of Africans and Asians, which they

² I have substituted white supremacy for orientalism.

attributed, among other things, to biology, climate, despotic governments and of course to ignorance of Christian virtues. Indeed, the genealogy of the use of racial theory illustrate how in order to become the ruling theory of bourgeois civilization, it had to shed its feudal trappings and put on the costume and mask of the very latest philosophical and “scientific thinking.” “This change involved more than merely a change of dress. The later was only a reflection of a change in the decisive class character of the new racial theory. Even in its most modern form certainly, it was still a pseudo-biological defense of class privileges. But now the issue was no longer merely that of the historical nobility – as was the case with Gobineau. It concerned, on the one hand, the privileges of European races who were now exploited all so-called non-White races.” (Lukacs 1962:682)

The Dutch and the Khoisan:

In 1652, the Dutch first incorporated the Cape into the evolving world capitalist economy. The ideas of Enlightenment philosophers about the *other* were part and parcel of their ideological arsenal and informed their attitudes towards the San and the Khoi. The process had a material base: it was shaped by the strategic imperatives of developing capitalist economy and the savage injustice they would inflict on indigenous peoples. The Dutch East India Company (DEIC), itself was a parastatal multi-national, commercial slaving, “octopus” with international tentacles. The first settlers reflected this. They included Hollanders, Germans, Flemings, Poles, and Portuguese, who are described in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as having been “for the most part people of low station and indifferent character, with a small number of higher class, from whom was selected a Council to assist the Governor.” (Quoted Olivier 1927;8)

There is a striking coincidence, according to Lord Olivier (1927:11) in the foundations of the slave civilizations of the United States and South Africa: both were laid by joint stock capitalist companies who provided the slaves for their colonists. In a slave owning white settler colony, freedom is defined by slavery of the other. The use of slaves in the process of colonization was a calculated strategy to ensure a captive labour force to reap high profits, on territory appropriated without regard to any rights of indigenous owners. Any resistance to this ‘savage injustice’ was dealt with as treachery, justifying extermination.

The career of Jan Van Riebeeck, (who headed the first Dutch colonizing expedition of the Cape), is informative. He had served the DEIC in Java, Sumatra, China and Japan from 1639 to 1649, when he was recalled and fined for trading on his private account in Batavia. Following his suspension, he went to Brazil, the West Indies and Greenland. He used his 10 year experience as a trafficker and corrupter in Tonkin, China and Nagasaki, Japan, to build up a DEIC trading post and slave colony in the Cape (CF. Jaffe 1994:380).

Van Riebeck discourse on the indigenous peoples of the Cape – the San- Khoi, is contemptuous. It put them outside the pale of humanity. Even before he was based in the Cape, he had warned the VOC in a memo, that he found the San-Khoi to be dangerous savages. “They are by no means to be trusted, being a brutal people living without conscience” (C. Louis Leipoldt 1936: 90). In various entries in his *Diary*, Van Riebeck, referred to the San-Khoi as “dull, stupid, and “odorous” and as “black stinking dogs.” (Ibid.:67) Wouter Schouten viewed the Khoi as heathen and Biblical descendants of Ham. “[A]lthough descended from our father *Adam*,” he wrote, “[they] yet show so little of humanity that truly they more resemble the unreasonable beasts than man... having no knowledge of God nor of what leads to salvation. Miserable folk, how lamentable is your pitiful condition! And Oh Christians, how blessed is ours!” (Cited Elphick 1977:195). The Khoi language was compared to the ‘cackling of geese or clucking hens’.

This collective and oft-repeated identification of Khoikhoi with the beasts, constitute an “elementary ethnology,” and was to have a sinister influence on the armchair philosophers. According to Mostert (1992:107),

It was gross and intemperate as any opinion held by one body of peoples against another. These ideas were formulated on the basis of accounts of travelers who were happy to use Khoikhoi as the link between man and animals in the Great Chain of Being. Indeed, these ideas led to a flow of racial abuse that has no equal in literature. It forms, a litany of declared revulsion that is quite remarkable for its continuity and unanimity, as much as for its idiom. It was the first obvious and extensive exercise by Europeans of a belief in the sub-strata within humanity: lesser species; and the word Hottentot would long be used as a synonym for brute or boor in many Western European languages. Its transferred value in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* remains: ‘a person of inferior intellect and culture.

In 1693 John Ovington, Master of the East Indiaman *Benjamin* set down with vitriolic emphasis a description of the Khoikhoi that might very well be seen as a consensus of those who called at the Cape: “Of all people”, he said, “they are the most bestial and sordid. They are the very reverse of human kind. So that if there’s any medium between a rational animal and a beast, the Hottentot lays the fairest claim for that species.” (Quoted Ibid.)

The broad social consequences of these racist beliefs are well known, terrible injustice and genocide against both the San and Khoikhoi. Even if granted human status, the San, mode of subsistence made it impossible for Van Reibeck to enslave or deprive of the means of subsistence. Thus, like the Tasmanians they became victims of the most successful act of genocide. Thomas Pringle (1966:226), who arrived with the 1820 British settlers, has left us this memorable account of one of the commando raids organized to hunt and kill the San. He says it is based on an interview with one of the Boer farmers who took part in the raid.

‘God forbid that I should deny we have much to answer for!’ he claimed. ‘I still often shudder, when I think of one of the first scenes of the kind, which I was obliged to witness in my youth, when I commenced my burgher service . . . , We had surprised and destroyed a considerable kraal of Bosjesmen. When the firing ceased, five women were still found living. The lives of these, after a long discussion, it was resolved to spare, because one farmer wanted a servant for this purpose and another for that. The unfortunate wretches were ordered to march in front of the commando; but it was soon found that they impeded our progress—not being able to proceed fast enough. They were, therefore, ordered to be shot. The helpless victims, perceiving what was intended, sprung to us, and clung so firmly to some of the party, that it was for some time impossible to shoot them without hazarding the lives of those they held fast. Four of them were at length dispatched; but the fifth could not by any means be torn from one of our comrades, whom she had grasped in her agony; and his entreaties to be allowed to take the women home were at last complied with. She went with her preserver, served him long and faithfully, and, I believe, died in the family.—May God forgive the land.

Pringle reveals the colonizer’s mentality and will to exterminate those whose lands they wanted to settle. By a strategy called Salami tactic, in 1657 some servants of the DEIC had occupied Khoi-San land in what is now Rondebosch. By 1679 they had reached the Hottentots-

Holland, off False Bay and Stellenbosch, by 1688 Paarl, along the Berg River, and in 1688 the French Huguenots, fleeing from the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, were brought to the Cape. Thus began a new campaign of dispossession and the harnessing of the dispossessed into serfs and slaves in the vineyards that still goes on even today.

The Advent of the British;

If events in England, America, Ireland and India after 1780, are taken into account, the aims and objectives of the Second British Empire emerge very clearly. The expansion was an answer to the loss of American colonies, but it seemed to gain a new momentum with the emergence of revolutionary France and domestic disorders caused by the Industrial Revolution. As early 1785 the Pitt government³ was looking for a settlement of its convicts on its "Caffre Coast". Shaw (1966:47-8) summarizes the arguments for the colonization of the Cape as follows:

The 'Caffre Coast' was obviously important for the route to India where the great expansion of English interests was beginning. Though the Cape itself produce no shipbuilding materials, it had a good base nearby for repairs, victualing and water would be a great asset. 'The Power possessing the Cape of Good Hope has the key to and from the East Indies'. Though any new settlement would incur 'great losses' in its early days, and even 'total Ruin' to some, this one would have 'great advantages' in the long run. Transported criminals could provide its labour force. The surrounding savage Kaffirs would prevent their escape, but they would be spared the horrors of the fever-stricken West Coasts, and England would avoid 'those daily Executions so shocking to Humanity'. If established, 'a settlement on the Caffree Coast would be of the most important consequence to Britain and the India Company... We should in a few Years derive every advantage from a Settlement here that the Dutch have from the Cape... We have lost America, and a halfway house would secure India, and an Empire to Britain.'

In 1809, explaining further the reasons why the Cape should be usurped from the Dutch Lord Caledon the first the governor of the new Colony wrote; "The true value of this colony is its being considered an outpost subservient to the protecting and security of our East Indian possessions" (Quoted James, 1994:251). From that time on, he goes on:

The strategic value of the Cape remained unaltered for the next hundred years. In the early 1900s, Admiral Lord Fisher, the First Sea Lord, designated Cape Town, along with Singapore, Alexandria, Gibraltar and Dover as one of the 'Five strategic keys [which] lock up the world. In 1887, nearly twenty years after the opening of the Suez Canal, Cape Town was chosen as the principle staging post for reinforcements bound for India in the event of a war with Russia. At that

³ 'For one man in William Pitt's government, his Minister of War, Henry Dundas', writes Mostert (1992:254), 'possession of the Cape of Good Hope by Britain was an obsession, as great as any strategy his office grappled with in the renewed war with France, and arguably the greatest. It was a preoccupation that entered office with him in 1784, and remained one of his highest priorities through all the difficult years he was there until 1804. The failure to take the Cape in 1781 led Dundas into a constant, nervous diplomatic worrying over the possibility of another French occupation, the risk of which, through the 1780s and into the 1790s, grew steadily more serious in its likely consequences for Britain'. He told the British Parliament in 1796: 'I would be glad to see the minister who should dare to give up the Cape of Good Hope on any account'. (258)

time the Cape was guarded by 4,200 regular troops, supported by 3,000 local volunteers. /If Britain was to rule the waves, Britain had to keep the Cape. (Ibid.)

In 1819 Britain appeared to be haunted by the specter that had haunted Bacon in 1606. The country appeared to be on the verge of the sort of upheaval that had swept over France in 1789. A Tory magistrate and Member of Parliament declared that disaffection in Lancashire had become ‘open hostility, not only to the government but to the higher classes, whose landed property is ... actually parceled out for future distribution’. (Quoted Mostert 1992:519)

‘Lord Liverpool’s government, struggling to hold itself together in the face of nation wide radical discontent that, one way or another, affected all classes, was pleased to encourage the export of at least some portion of the disaffected populace to new worlds’. (Ibid.) In 1819 the Earl Balhurst, under heavy pressure to resolve the class contradictions by providing assisted passage to the surplus population to North America, opted to deflect some of the traffic to the Cape Colony. *The Times*, (18.06.1819), supported the decision. After expressing some reservation that ‘the stream of emigration from the United Kingdom’ had taken ‘a westerly course’ to the United States’, the natural advantage of North America were far from perfect from presenting to the British emigrants the best resources.’ On the other hand,

Southern Africa has been often pointed out as the most precious and magnificent object of our colonial policy, and the most fruitful field of adventure for our emigrant population. ... *Our noble station at the Cape of Good Hope has the finest soil and climate in the world*; it is the centre of both hemispheres – it commands the commerce of the globe . . . It is the natural key to India, the bridge of America . . . Make the Cape a free part for the nations of Europe, and we banish North America from the Indian seas; carry out as settlers all the families who have not bread or labour here, and we lay for posterity another England (*My Italics*)

The laudatory comments of *The Times* were followed by even more extravagant claims concerning the potential of South Africa. On such ground as these, on the 12 July 1819 Parliament voted £50,000 for assisted passage to the Cape. Some 90,000 applicants, from all walks of life were received but only 5,000 were accepted. They came practically from every part of the United Kingdom, including Ireland and Scotland. One unusual feature of the exodus was that it took a slice section of early nineteenth-century British society, in all its layered complexity, from indigent to gentry, and set it afloat southward, as though Britain was set on planting a wholly rounded microcosmic representation of itself abroad. (Ibid.:520)

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