

## How does the 1922 Rand Rebellion Reveal the Relative Importance of Race and Class in South Africa?

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**Abstract:** The violent uprising on the Witwatersrand in March 1922 has often been seen by historians as a test case for the Marxist interpretation of race and class in South Africa, led by authors including Frederick Johnstone. This article argues how white workers acted in order to maintain the 'job colour bar', which restricted black advancement in the employment hierarchy. Rather than a purely racist issue, the fact that blacks represented the majority of the population in South Africa at this time meant that they offered a convenient target for whites to exploit for their own economic benefit.

**Keywords:** South Africa; Rand Rebellion; racial conflict; capitalism; class; labour relations

The conflicts between race and class, culminating in the establishment of the apartheid regime in 1948, have been of great significance in South Africa throughout the twentieth century. Though whites represented the minority of the population, they maintained political control for almost fifty years through racial segregation. The Rand Rebellion of 1922, beginning as a strike but soon becoming a violent revolt, demonstrated the opposition of white workers to capitalism, and to the dissolving of the 'colour bar', which prevented black workers from gaining employment in areas of skilled labour and authority; jobs with higher wages, which were preferred by whites.

Capitalism forms a key part of the debate surrounding this subject, as historians argue whether the apartheid was brought about by capitalists for their own economic benefit, or as a result of the racist sentiments of Afrikaners and other social groups in South Africa. Merle Lipton is a key author in the debate surrounding this subject. Describing herself as a liberalist historian, she discusses the relationship between capitalists and apartheid, concluding that South African capitalists were relatively liberal in their views and their personal economic and class interests were more important than the apartheid policies. My examination of the Rand Rebellion will also explore the event in the context of the long term causes of apartheid, as in order to fully understand the issues of race and class in this period we must look further than just the months and years around the Rebellion; the origins of apartheid being closely related to those of the Rebellion. In analysing the origins of 1922, this essay will argue that class was more significant than race in South Africa at this time. Though racial issues certainly were important, the white mineworkers fought for the continuation of the colour bar in protection of their economic and hence class status, rather than against a fear of the elevation above them of those with a different colour skin.

The discovery of diamonds in 1864, and, more importantly, gold on the Witwatersrand in 1884, brought about significant economic changes to South Africa. As Bernard Magubane says, "the gold industry gave a new complexion to almost every feature of South African life".<sup>1</sup> Until the Second World War, gold mining was the driving force behind the South African economy; the industry "stood at the centre of the structure and evolution of the modern South African social formation".<sup>2</sup> At the time, the Witwatersrand gold fields were the largest that had been discovered in South Africa. However, mining was highly expensive and difficult, as the ore was of a low grade, while its location was widespread deep underground, meaning that labour costs were also high. In response to these difficulties, the mining industry rapidly became centralised and capital was concentrated; by 1910 all mines had been brought under the control of six large groups of mining houses.<sup>3</sup>

The 1913 Native Lands Act disallowed Africans (with the exception of those in the Cape) from acquiring land outside specifically assigned 'native reserve' areas; such areas making up 7.3% of the land area of the country. The act also posed severe restrictions on the number of African families, known as 'squatter peasants', who were permitted to stay on farms owned by whites.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, pass laws were introduced at this time, which controlled the movements of Africans and was aimed at keeping down their numbers. Such measures enlarged the supply and so reduced the cost of African labour, greatly benefitting landowners. In particular this helped white farmers, as the policies also reduced competition from black farmers.<sup>5</sup> However, more importantly, these measures provided the basis for an abundance of cheap, unskilled labourers who could easily be exploited by land owning whites to maximise their profits; the areas set aside for Africans by the Native Lands Act "became reservoirs of labor for the mines, towns, and white farms",<sup>6</sup> the significance of which will later be discussed. As they made up the majority of the population, blacks were also targeted by taxation, not only to raise revenue for the government but also to further increase pressures upon them to work for white masters. Such taxes were mainly either hut or poll taxes; taxes which could be imposed upon all the residents of a certain district, regardless of their income.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis leading to the Rand Rebellion began in 1921 with a sharp drop in the price of gold. Mine owners recognised that the most effective way to increase profits was to employ African workers at low rates of pay in place of more expensive white workers. The Transvaal Chamber of Mines, comprised of a group of mine owners, announced that the Status Quo Agreement was to be withdrawn, allowing an increase in the approved ratio of African to white workers. The Chamber argued that while wages for whites were rising, productivity was falling, blaming the white trade unions for "foisting unproductive whites in the industry" via the Agreement, which had frozen the ratio of African to white workers at

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1990), p.103.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick A. Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1976), p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara, Siphon Dlamini, *The Struggle for South Africa* (London: Zed, 1988), p.8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.170.

<sup>5</sup> Merle Lipton, 'Capitalism & Apartheid' in John Lonsdale (ed.), *South Africa in Question* (London: James Curry, 1988), p.54.

<sup>6</sup> Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, pp.81-82.

<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.55.

7.4 to 1, and other measures such as a reduction in black working hours by insisting upon their supervision by whites.<sup>8</sup> This led to, perhaps most importantly, the formation of the 'job colour bars', which were gradually introduced from the 1890s. The first formal ratification of the bar was in 1893, when the Volksraad adopted a regulation stating that underground blasts could only be carried out by qualified whites, while in from 1898 non-whites were no longer permitted to have a driver's certificate of competency.<sup>9</sup> The 1911 Mines and Works Act gave the bars statutory force, and they were extended and consolidated in the following years.<sup>10</sup> Though in basic definition the 'colour bar' may seem to have been an outcome of racial conflicts, assessment of its economic causes and development allows us to see that the reasons for its imposition were rather more complex. The bar came about due to pressures from white workers in order to protect their higher wages and position in the social structure. The bar restricted competition for skilled employment, hence raising the cost of skilled labour. Coloureds and Indians as well as Africans were excluded from these skilled jobs, which were reserved for whites. As there were many small firms in the agricultural sector and less successful unionisation of white workers than in the mines, farmers were able to evade the job colour bar, even despite high white unemployment in the period before the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> The mines however, as previously mentioned, were being run by a small number of large companies and as such could be regulated by the unions and government without such difficulties.

The job bar also influenced black access to training and education, but unlike in America in this period, this was not due to racism but in protection of the class system. Well trained and educated blacks could become elevated above whites in the class hierarchy, which would displace whites from their highly paid jobs, and threaten their high quality of life. The mine owners sought to reduce their costs and maximise profits, so as blacks represented an abundant, cheap workforce, it was in the interests of the mine owners to exploit them in this way. Krikler argues that, like white workers in the American South, South Africa's militant white workers may have been driven by the 'fear of competition' with cheaper black workers, but they were not long distracted by it. Class militancy trumped racial animosity and culminated in the violent strike against the state-supported mining industry. Krikler's conclusion that "black people were not identified as the enemy by plebeian white", points out that strikers and rebels in fact engaged in far more violence against white people than Africans during the conflict. Evidence suggests that the organised white labourers did not see the black mine workers on the Witwatersrand as their enemies. In reality, as the strike took place, whites opposed any repatriation of these migrant workers to their homes in the rural areas.<sup>12</sup>

Frederick Johnstone comments that racial discrimination provided an ideal way for capitalists to "ultra-minimise" their costs and therefore maximise profits; it therefore became a critical class interest of the mining industries secure a large supply of labour and therefore maintain its "ultra-cheapness".<sup>13</sup> Referring to what he calls 'class colour bars',

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<sup>8</sup> David Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labor on the South African Gold Fields, 1902-1939* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), p.166

<sup>9</sup> Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa*, pp.74-75.

<sup>10</sup> Davies et al, *The Struggle for South Africa*, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Lipton, 'Capitalism & Apartheid', p.54.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Krikler, 'The Commandos: The Army of White Labour in South Africa' in *Past & Present*, No. 163 (May 1999), p.208.

<sup>13</sup> Johnstone, *Class, race and gold*, p.26.

Johnstone describes how the measures of racial discrimination served to secure class interests and to resolve class problems. These were the measures that through racial discrimination – “exploitation colour bars” – comprised the contract system, the pass system, the compound system and the wage minimisation system.<sup>14</sup> The white working class, in a social position of great insecurity, attempted to protect themselves against this insecurity.<sup>15</sup> White mine workers thus came to institute and operate a system of racial discrimination in the form of a job colour bar in skilled work. This specific involvement in racial discrimination is seen and explained (as with the involvement of mining companies with such discrimination) as a response to a specific class problem – the extreme structural insecurity of the white workers – and as a product of the specific system of production and class structure from which that class problem derived.<sup>16</sup> In particular, Afrikaners objected to competition with blacks not so much because they were black but because they were offering their labour at a cheaper rate than whites could socially afford.<sup>17</sup>

Technological advancement also contributed to the erosion of the job colour bar, as a less defined area of employment was created by mechanisation of the mining industry. These semi-skilled jobs were largely as machine operators; preventing a straight forward division between skilled and unskilled jobs, meaning that the job bar became more difficult to enforce.<sup>18</sup> As Lipton notes, “the policies of capitalists had dynamic consequences”, as the erosion of the job colour bar “led to a variety of changes in education and training, wages, the stabilisation of labour and urban rights, job mobility and (eventually) trade union rights”.<sup>19</sup> However, “the fact that mine owners were autocratic and liberal, disliked all trade unions, and supported racist measure forcing blacks to work for them, does not mean that they wanted the job colour bar”.<sup>20</sup>

The Chamber of Mines in fact opposed the first statutory colour bar established in the Transvaal in 1893, arguing that a test for miners should be based on competence, not colour.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, after the union of South Africa in 1910, the Chamber again opposed the legalisation of the bar in the 1911 Mines and Works Act, though the act was successful as it was backed by the combined power of the white unions and their Labour party. It is logical that white workers should support the establishment of a bar limiting competition for their jobs at a time of high unemployment, and as their main competitors were blacks; it is clearly understandable why whites would support the bar. The prestige accorded to occupations is an important element in this awareness of class distinctions, as Leo Kuper describes, observing how “it is often said that Africans, throughout the continent, have strong aspirations to white collar work, and that they attach high prestige to intellectual occupations, while despising the manual.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.71.

<sup>17</sup> Hermann Giliomee, ‘The Growth of Afrikaner Identity’ in William Beinart and Saul Dubow, (eds.), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.194.

<sup>18</sup> Lipton, ‘Capitalism & Apartheid’, p.58.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.62

<sup>20</sup> Merle Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa, 1910-1986* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1986), p.115.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>22</sup> Leo Kuper, *An African Bourgeoisie: Race, Class, and Politics in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p.119.

The exploitation of black labour and this convenient racial discrimination can help us gain a greater understanding of the explanations for apartheid. Lipton outlines the two main schools of thought regarding the relationship between capitalism and apartheid. The first argues that apartheid was created by, and served the interests of, capitalists. The abundant supply of inexpensive labourers meant that the companies run by these capitalists profited greatly; a theory which says that it is proved by the success and rapid growth of the South African Economy. The alternative argument describes apartheid as the outcome of racist feelings, in particular amongst the politically dominant Afrikaner Nationalists.<sup>23</sup> Lipton's own argument incorporates features from both of the aforementioned points of view, saying that capitalists who relied upon an abundance of cheap labour were the chief supporters of apartheid.

In the aftermath of the Rebellion, there were successes for both the state and capital, as it rapidly became more evident that the National and Labour parties had been combined into the centre rather than estranged by the events of 1922; importantly, "the Rand Revolt showed it that a radical alliance of nationalist republicans and working-class revolutionaries was still possible".<sup>24</sup> In suppressing the strike, Smuts' government had alienated much of their support in working class districts. This led to the alliance between the parties, consolidated by the Nationalist-Labour Pact of 1923, as with the backing of white farmers and workers they became united against Smuts.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the rapid growth of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) during the 1920s attracted the attention of the Communist Party, formed in 1921. Though the party had initially concentrated on recruiting support among white workers, but after the Rand Rebellion turned its attention to Africans.<sup>26</sup> Class consciousness was far more important to politics at this time than race; white workers had been able to establish political power through the trade unions, as discussed earlier, which enabled them to protect their middle class position in South African society. The recently formed Communist Party targeted blacks for recruitment as they came to represent the majority of the working class, forced into a lower social standing by the government through a revitalised entrenchment of the job bar.

It is not only through political means that we can assess the concepts of class consciousness. Krikler highlights how "tracking women (and womanhood) through the documents also alerts the historian to the way in which the substitution of black for white workers in the mines was interpreted as threatening not just jobs, or rights within the workplace, but elements of the white worker's world far beyond these".<sup>27</sup> Krikler also notes the importance of the role of women during the rebellion to historians in helping us to understand the "enormous extent to which the revolt was the upsurge of a community rather than that merely of a male workforce".<sup>28</sup> Unlike many other rebellions in the past, the Rand Rebellion was more complex in its origins; the white workers fighting to protect their (and their families') place within the entire class structure, rather than simply to maintain

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<sup>23</sup> Lipton, 'Capitalism & Apartheid', p.52.

<sup>24</sup> Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, p.185.

<sup>25</sup> Al Stadler, *The Political Economy of Modern South Africa* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p.48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Krikler, 'Women, Violence and the Rand Revolt of 1922' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22: 3 (September 1996), p.350.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.369.

wages or working hours. Intense class consciousness and anti-capitalism were integral to the white workers' conception of themselves and their place in the world.<sup>29</sup>

Although the explanations for the events of 1922 are found in class conflicts, there were also some racial issues, though between whites themselves rather than whites and blacks. Hermann Giliomee analyses the effects of the forces of industrialisation upon Afrikaners, who were increasingly being forced to move to the cities in South Africa; their urban population quadrupling from 1900 to 1926.<sup>30</sup> Those who moved to the city often suffered financially from the beginning of their migration, struggling to reach the economic level of skilled English speaking whites. Giliomee argues that the result of the Afrikaners' struggle in the economic field "would be decisive in determining whether they would see themselves primarily as an ethnic group or as a class", concluding that their group mentality was more racially than class based.<sup>31</sup> Although the actions of individuals such as Benjamin Farrington, who utilised the nationalism of Afrikaners in some cases to encourage them to support Sinn Fein,<sup>32</sup> Krikler reminds us that although the pride and consciousness of being an Afrikaner was important to many of the strikers, we should be careful not to give Afrikaner nationalism "a salience in the struggle of 1922 that it did not possess".<sup>33</sup> During the Rand Rebellion the symbolism of Afrikaner nationalism could "mingle rather easily with the other principle ideologies of the strike",<sup>34</sup> and so was less distinctive than one may initially have conceived.

The Rebellion took place due to the efforts of whites to protect their class status from those below them in the social hierarchy, in this case mainly blacks, from becoming elevated above them. Though certain racial issues were significant in this, these were largely between the white working classes and Afrikaners, as opposed to whites and blacks. While in America many whites believed blacks to be biologically inferior, and as such sought to keep them as the 'mudsill' of their society, blacks in South Africa at this time offered more of a convenient target for whites, as they represented the majority of the population and so could be economically exploited. The anger from the rebelling whites was not directed at blacks, but rather toward the threat to their already insecure position in society. As has been discussed, blacks were not the sole targets of the racial killings that took place, and the white workers did not class them as their enemies. The Rand Rebellion is a key event not only in comprehending social issues at the time, but also helps us toward an understanding of the beginning of apartheid. As Johnstone says, the Rand Rebellion was "the tip of the iceberg, merely one of many significant developments of class relations and class conflict within the white group and between whites and non-whites at that time".<sup>35</sup> One of the most significant economic and political events in South African history, "to this day, mass unrest and labour action in South Africa – actual or contemplated – are almost inevitably accompanied by media coverage explicitly suggesting an analogy with 1922. The Rand Revolt

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<sup>29</sup> Krikler, Jeremy, *White Rising: the 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.112.

<sup>30</sup> Giliomee, 'The Growth of Afrikaner Identity', p.191.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.193.

<sup>32</sup> John Atkinson, 'Benjamin Farrington: Cape Town and the Shaping of a Public Intellectual' in *South African Historical Journal*, 62: 4, p.681.

<sup>33</sup> Krikler, Jeremy, *White Rising*, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.105.

<sup>35</sup> Johnstone, *Class, race and gold*, p.3.

was the last sustained challenge from organized labour to the legitimacy of the South African state up until the present".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, p.164.

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