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The Ghosts of Colonialism: Economic Inequity in Post- Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Although political apartheid in South Africa ended in 1993, racial and economic inequity persisted. The end of White minority rule in government prompted the birth of the multicultural/non-racial “Rainbow Nation,” promising freedom and equality for all South Africans. However, the shift in political representation to Black majority rule in 1994—led by the African National Congress (ANC) and former president Nelson Mandela—failed to confront and reverse the vast inequities produced by the former apartheid state. This paper contextualizes the current state of affairs by tracing the histories of occupation and racial capitalism in colonial South Africa.

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“I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, Henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise.”

—Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, *A Long Walk to Freedom*

INTRODUCTION

Although apartheid ended de jure in South Africa in 1993, economic and racial inequity persists. The end of White minority rule and the notorious racial segregation program promised to repaint South Africa into a “Rainbow Nation” of multiculturalism, non-racialism, and equality. However, the shift in political representation to Black majority rule in 1994, led by the African National Congress (ANC) and former president Nelson Mandela, did not result in the economic redistribution necessary to alleviate the vast inequities produced by the apartheid state. By 1995, at least 58% of all South Africans and 68% of the Black South African population was in poverty, while poverty was nearly nonexistent for White South Africans.¹ Still today, many of the vast inequities in education, health, and

¹ Berk Özler, “Not Separate, Not Equal: Poverty and Inequality in Post-apartheid South

access to safe water, sanitation, and housing remain intact. To better understand the current state of affairs in South Africa, the histories of colonial occupation and racial capitalism must first be recounted and traced. Grasping these pasts and situating them in contemporary contexts suggests a need to further instigate a spirit of resistance and rebellion in the masses, one that refuses to cease fighting until liberation for all Black South Africans is reached beyond the superficial political sphere.

Julian Kunnie, in *Is Apartheid Really Dead?*, draws on political economist Bernard Magubane to argue that the colonialism of recent centuries is intimately connected to the birth and growth of capitalism.² Contemporary global capitalist socioeconomic systems are in part a product of European histories of colonial conquest and plunder. The rise of capitalism in the Global North meant the rise of underdevelopment and racial inequality throughout colonized lands in Africa, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Palestine. Therefore, the socioeconomic system that remains in place in South Africa can be characterized as a form of neo-colonialism, where economic and social power remains in the hands of White capitalists and the White minority population under the guise of Black political control. In this paper, I trace the histories of White/European expropriation of land and industry in colonial South Africa in light of the present economic status quo to illustrate how apartheid was able to transform itself from its formal arrangement into its current, more insidious, neo-colonial state. In doing so, I will expose the ghosts of colonialism that continue to haunt the region, arguing that they must be relinquished if this neo-colonial order is to ever be dismantled.

WHITE RACIAL CAPITALISM AND THE MAKING OF COLONIAL SOUTH AFRICA

White settler narratives purported that Europeans were destined to settle and control Africa. The European scramble for Africa and specifically in Southern Africa that began with the Portuguese invasion in 1488 (which faced resistance and initial defeat by the Khoi Khoi) and which was formalized in 1884-5 at the Berlin Conference was legitimized under a set of racial beliefs that constructed Whites as superior to Blacks and people of color across their colonies.³ Colonists proclaimed that colonization was a moral obligation, a mission to “civilize the uncivilized” and bring the great ideas and institutions of the West to the rest of the world. But this was just a story they told themselves—and often repeated—to conceal the agenda of colonial nations seeking foreign lands to plunder their resources in order to fund and enrich their economies back home.⁴ It seems, though, that White colonists told themselves these stories of moral, physical, and racial superiority to the point that it was no longer about justification. Over time, European culture itself came to be defined by these

Africa,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 55 (2007), 487.

² Julian Kunnie, *Is Apartheid Really Dead?: Pan-Africanist Working-Class Cultural Critical Perspectives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 2.

³ Kunnie, *Is Apartheid Really Dead?*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

ideas of supremacy and against the supposed savagery of the people they were brutally exploiting, enslaving, and colonizing for their economic benefit.

In Azania (South Africa), the British colonial forces emerged victorious over the Dutch after the South African War of 1899-1902, and by 1910, the British had declared South Africa “a union of white privilege and domination.”⁵ Kunnie draws on Alber Luthuli to argue that the whole of South Africa was essentially given to the White minority who quickly became exclusive owners of the state. Many Africans quickly became strangers in their ancestral homelands.⁶ Subsequent racist legislation passed by the White regime, such as the Defense Act of 1912—which deemed that only Whites were full citizens—led to the landmark act that would in essence seal the fate of Black Africans in Azania: the Natives Land Act of 1913. This law forbade Black tenant farming on White owned land and forced Africans into “Scheduled Native Areas,” or reserves. Solomon Plaatje argues that this sinister legislation cemented the total expropriation of African land, and “South Africa by law ceased to be the home of any of her Native children whose skins are dyed with a pigment that does not conform with the regulation hue.”⁷ Kunnie characterizes these policies and land-displacement as “part of a genocidal policy conceived by the colonial state to force the Black residents of the 7 percent land area to kill themselves through starvation.”⁸ As Plaatje and Kunnie articulate, these policies were to become the foundation for White colonial and capitalist rule in South Africa, as without the total control and dominance of the land, White industry would fail to expand and flourish. Such repressive legislation became the bones of apartheid, formally sanctioned by the White South African state in 1948. These early histories of land theft and expropriation by the colonial state explain the present unequal land distribution in South Africa, a majority of which is still held by the White minority population, as well as a small population of “Coloreds” and even fewer Black elites.

However, White colonists did not merely steal Azania for settlement. European colonial settlers “discovered” diamonds in 1867 and gold in the Witwatersrand region in 1886, therefore making the expropriation of African land economically crucial for the capital hungry colonial project. Africans, then, were to be enslaved by the very lands that were once their homes. Therefore, the Natives Land Act and other policies of land-acquisition and domination also intended to produce a desperate and famished African labor force that could feed the booming capitalist socioeconomic order of the White South African state. Giovanni Arrighi in his chapter on “Labor Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia,” argues that the production of a cheap and exploitable African labor force was produced and constructed by the colonial state. Although Arrighi focuses his analysis on Colonial Zimbabwe, the processes adopted in Rhodesia often mirrored those in South Africa. For example, The Land Apportionment Act adopted in Rhodesia in 1930 was nearly the same as the Natives Land Act passed earlier in South Africa. Arrighi traces the economic processes that produced African reliance on colonial capitalist economic systems through his critique of the colonial ideological

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969) 197.

⁸ Kunnie, *Is Apartheid Really Dead?*, 12.

framework, which purported that African societies were underdeveloped before European settlement. These assumptions, reproduced by economists like W. A. Lewis and W. J. Barber and other colonial actors, claimed that the injection of capitalism into African societies was inherently positive because it would “develop” the already “underdeveloped,” driving Africans into the “civilized” European monetary systems and labor forces.⁹ But as Arrighi argues, it was not a necessity for Africans to work for Europeans until they needed to in order to survive.¹⁰ Policies like the Natives Land Act in South Africa, however, swelled the need for African’s to enter this wage-labor force, as their agricultural production capabilities were all but decimated and their land all but gone.

The theft of land and the production of an exploitable African labor force allowed White industry—notably the mining industries—to grow and flourish beyond measure. By paying Africans scant wages and extracting as much labor and energy from them as possible, various mining companies and conglomerates, such as the Anglo American mining company, were able to extract unprecedented super profits on the backs of Black Africans. But Africans did not yield to White settler ascendancy like sheep to the slaughter. They resisted, like the Khoi Khoi in 1488, whenever and however they could. William Worger argues that the struggle for the control of diamonds in South Africa began as soon as they were “discovered” (many Africans knew of their existence beforehand) at Kimberly in the late 1860s where it took fifteen years for early White mining companies to deprive blacks of access to the ownership of diamonds.¹¹ In order to do so, they had to establish a firm discipline over Blacks who refused to cede to White invasion of their lands and industry.¹² Worger’s analysis exposes the use of criminal law to subdue Africans and the ways in which such legally sanctioned policies are linked to the economic and political development of a given society. Thus, the forced construction of class and racial hierarchies by the colonial regime in South Africa was beginning to take shape on various economic fronts, from land control to control of labor and industry. Apartheid did not just appear, but rather it was with these policies over time.

Nonetheless, African workers did not stop fighting. Two years before the formalization of apartheid in 1948, 76,000 workers a part of the African Mine Workers Union went on strike.¹³ Twelve workers were killed and thousands injured. In the same year, another strike of 72,000 gold miners was staged in Witwatersrand. These actions fueled Black anger throughout the country and bolstered the liberation struggle, moving more members within the ANC to call for armed resistance against the White regime. Such acts of resistance are important to recount because they make visible the agency of the colonized Blacks (as well as “Coloreds” and some “Indians”), reveal the extreme practices repression used to maintain colonial domination, and, significantly, expose the depths of colonial control

⁹ Giovanni Arrighi, “Labor Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia,” in G. Arrighi and J. Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, (New York: 1973), 181.

¹⁰ Arrighi and Saul, *Political Economy of Africa*, 192.

¹¹ William Worger, “Workers as Criminals: The Rule of Law in Early Kimberly, 1870-1885,” in *Struggle for the City*, ed. F Cooper (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983)51.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51.

¹³ Arrighi and Saul, *Political Economy of Africa*, 192.

of land, industry, and law in South Africa. Therefore it is no surprise that many of the relics of apartheid in terms of the social and economic spheres remain in place considering that the end of formal apartheid was largely a political change.

This is not to imply that there have not been important and significant changes post-apartheid or that Black leadership itself is the problem. Kunnie argues that although by 2000 “680,000 houses [have been] constructed or [are] under construction, electrification now reach[es] 63 percent of the population, 3 million more people [have] access to clean drinking water, and 5 million school children now [receive] free lunch meals,” many of these changes have been surface level rather than systematic.¹⁴ In 2000, 5 million people still lived in shacks or were landless and unemployment was at 42 percent.¹⁵ Kunnie writes:

Much of what has happened since 1990 has functioned to undermine the revolutionary potential of the black working class and its allies. It is palpable that although the post-apartheid government gives the impression that it is committed to Black liberation and empowerment, in actuality, ore Black working-class and underclass people have become poorer, and the Black elite has grown wealthier. The resistance movement has been hijacked by neocolonial politics bent on adhering to the ideology and practice of the global capitalist economy. The result is frustration, anger, and despondency on the part of the Black oppressed.¹⁶

Although the ANC touts its commitment to Black liberation and although South Africa’s constitution is hailed across the world as being one of the most democratic and progressive of any nation, Black people who constitute the supermajority of South Africa would have benefitted from economic redistribution of wealth from the White classes. The ANC, however, and Mandela himself, had begun secret negotiations years before with the former White ruling party of South Africa and with White colonist and former president P.W. Botha to come to a settlement that would benefit both parties. Mandela wrote, in a secret letter to Botha in 1990, that he would ensure that a deal with the ANC, beyond the demand for majority rule, would also include “the insistence of whites on structural guarantees that majority rule will not mean domination of the white minority by Blacks.”¹⁷ As the evidence suggests, the ANC seemed to have sold out to the White ruling party to end apartheid on a surface level without dismantling all of its fabrics, as the ANC unfortunately seemed to have conceded even as early as 1990 many elements of the deal that could have resulted in true systematic change. White interests in South Africa seem to mean interests of capital.

The negotiations to end apartheid, then, were inherently flawed, as the White ruling party had the upper hand in the process. In fact, with mounting international pressure and increased resistance within the nation to end apartheid, it was no longer *profitable* for the White ruling class to maintain apartheid. They could tolerate Black rule, as long as their social and economic interests were safeguarded.¹⁸ Thus, apartheid is far from over and the notion that it is not is far from absurd. The neocolonial and racial capitalist systems that have

¹⁴ Kunnie, *Is Apartheid Really Dead?*, 46.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 63.

replaced formal apartheid remain still today.

APARTHEID IS NOT DEAD: ECONOMIC AND RACIAL INEQUALITY IN MODERN SOUTH AFRICA

When Mandela passed away on December 5th, 2013, the mainstream media and the entire global political world celebrated his life, as many characterize and give credit to the fall of the apartheid regime with Mandela and the ANC's resistance and leadership. Mandela's achievements and his enduring commitment to building a better, more just South Africa are monumental and not to be disregarded. But at the same time since his passing South Africa "remains one of the world's most unequal societies and Whites still control huge swathes of the economy."¹⁹ Often missing from these commemorations are the stories of the millions of people in South Africa/Azania that are still suffering because of apartheid and colonial era policies and structures. What is also often forgotten are the thousands of Black workers in South Africa that are still resisting such oppressions today. For example, in 2012, Black miners in Marikina area near Rustenburg in South Africa participated in a "wildcat strike," a strike often undertaken without official approval from a trade union, to protest poor pay and other various concerns and inequities, that began on August 10th and culminated in August 16th, when the South African Police Service open fire on strikers, leaving 34 people dead and dozens more injured.²⁰ Dozens of strikes followed the Marikana massacre across South Africa, and many Black working class people continue to challenge and resist the oppressive economic structures that remain firmly in place in the nation.

This article began with a quote from Mandela's famous book, *A Long Walk to Freedom*. I did this because, as I stated above, Mandela and the ANC are dominantly associated with resistance to apartheid. But what is left out of the picture when we simply commemorate his life and his struggle? What oppressions are concealed in such celebrations? When apartheid is accepted, uncritically, as fundamentally over and a mistake of the past, what injustices are replicated? When South Africa is reproduced as a progressive and multicultural "Rainbow Nation," in the media, what great ills and brutal histories are painted over and forgotten? What are the ghosts of colonialism that continue occupy Azania when such histories are erased, when such realities are dismissed?

Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is far from over for many Black South Africans. Again, this is not to shame his memory and his feats; they are great and should always be remembered as such. But as I have shown—and as various contemporary scholars and journalists have expressed—when we allow our celebrations to overshadow our mourning and when we saturate our grief with clichés and recycled jargon that claim present-day freedom for all South Africans, we fail Mandela's memory. We fail colonized people everywhere, those who resisted and those who continue to resist today from Azania to all

¹⁹ Tiisetso Motsoeneng, "Mandela's legacy: peace, but poverty for many blacks," *Sowetan* (December 6th, 2013).

²⁰ Christopher McMichael, "The South African Police Service and the Public Order War," *Think Africa Press* (September 2nd, 2012).

across Africa. We fail to notice that those *thousand slights* and those *thousand indignities* have not been eradicated. The system that imprisoned Mandela still exists today; it is merely cloaked. Remove the mask and neocolonialism, racial capitalism, and apartheid-era economic dominance hide confidently underneath. Thus, any and all movements and organizations fighting for economic and racial justice within and beyond South Africa today should be rebelliously supported and pursued.

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