APARTHEID—SEPARATION OR EXPLOITATION

by John Wright

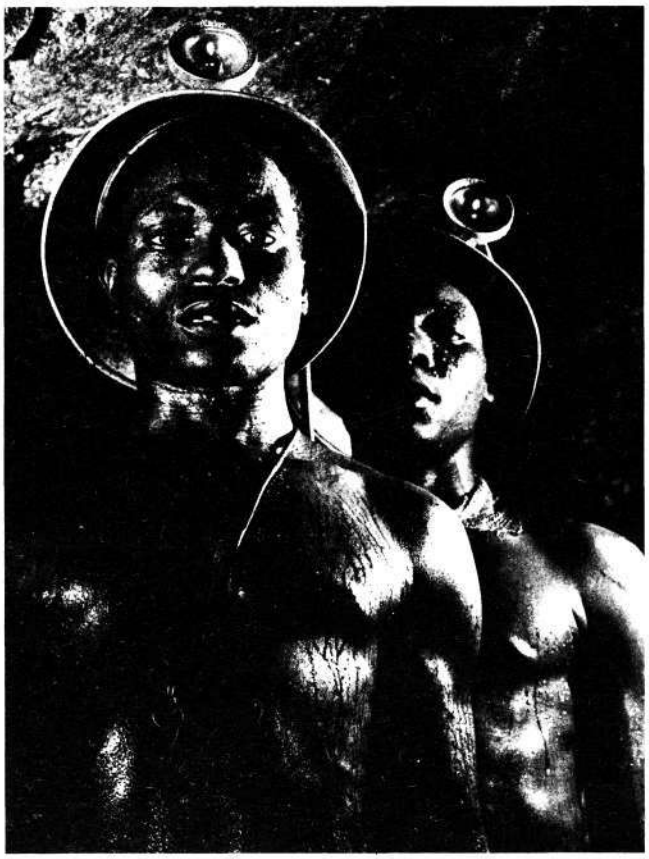
South Africa has grown used to having a Prime Minister who seldom speaks in public without making threats against one or other of the wide range of institutions which he sees as enemies of the apartheid state, but Mr Vorster's recent promises to place tighter controls on the Press deserve to be taken very seriously. For not only does the Prime Minister normally follow up his threats with action, but the legislation which he seems to be contemplating will do more than curb newspaper reporting: it will also inhibit further what local debate there still is at an academic level on contentious issues in South African public affairs. Explicitly, Mr Vorster has stated that he will pull off the streets any newspaper which in his view is guilty of inciting racial hostility and thereby undermining the security of the state; implicitly, his statements have revealed a strong desire to stamp out criticism that strikes at the moral credentials of the National Party's policies of 'separate development'. Nowhere has this been made clearer than in his reaction to the **Rand Daily Mail's** publication on September 4 of a letter that shortly and sharply castigated separate development as a system for the oppression and exploitation of blacks. The appearance of this letter in the columns of the **Mail** seems to have been a major factor in provoking Mr Vorster's public ultimatum to the Press to put its house in order by the new year, for he singled it out in his speech as an example of comment that should not be allowed to appear in print. Written by Vitalis Monkhe of Natalspruit, it originally appeared as part of a series of letters arising out of the Johannesburg City Council's investigation into municipal 'petty apartheid'. To illustrate the sort of opinion that Mr Vorster wants to silence, it is given here as republished in the **Mail** of September 15.

"Behind the refusal to allow the Black to enter the same public bus, train, taxi, the same park, zoological or botanical garden or church, is a complex system of colonialism, racial discrimination, economic exploitation and oppression.

This system is called "baasskap". Separate development or apartheid robs an African of his land and produce; it forces him to live in poverty, misery and disease. It denies him modern education; it herds him into barren reserves called Bantustans. It cuts him off from every form of real democratic expression, freedom of speech, Press and mobility. The most effective of these is the enslavement of the Black mind.

From one end of the country to the other, apartheid is backed by force; with an army and with a galaxy of oppressive racial laws.

The whole concept of apartheid is an outrage to human intelligence, dignity and worth. It is our belief that the people of South Africa, both White and Black, will one day jerk themselves out of their complacent smugness and prostration, wake up to their responsibilities, and seek to wipe out from the book of history this chapter of degradation, misery and moral destitution".



Miners a mile under the Witwatersrand (Margaret Bourke-White, LIFE)

This, then , is the kind of thinking that Mr Vorster does not want to see made public. He did not make clear his specific objections to Mr Monkhe's letter, but they are not hard to imagine: the flat statement that apartheid

makes slaves of black men is hardly likely to find favour with the system's chief executive officer. From an apartheid supporter's point of view, Mr Vorster's reaction is justified, but for the opponents of apartheid it is highly disturbing for the state of mind it reveals among the country's political bosses towards public criticism of their policies. Race issues are a part of everyday life in the state that Mr Vorster rules, and action by his dominant minority group against what it regards as 'incitement' will certainly have the effect of further curtailing their public discussion.

And it is not only journalists who will feel the screws, but also those academics who are professionally concerned with analysing the structure and evolution of South African society and who put forward their findings for open debate. Though legislation against 'incitement' may not affect them directly, it will reinforce the climate of opinion which is more and more inhibiting the inclination of South African academics to do research and to publish on topics that are likely to be regarded by the leaders of Afrikaner nationalism as 'political'. Nor, for that matter, will they find much support from the English-speaking section, as is implicit in a statement made by Mr Radclyffe Cadman, leader of the United Party in Natal, at his party's congress in Durban in September. 'White leadership in South Africa, 'he said,' is an existing fact which arises from the political and economic history of this country. It needs neither explanation nor justification because in our context and at this time it is the most natural thing in the world'. **(Sunday Times, 30.9.73)**. By this criteria, the researches of sociologists, political scientists and historians into the origins and effects of 'white leadership' are, if not redundant, then 'unnatural', and therefore to be regarded with suspicion. The portents for social scientists in South Africa, being able to continue their work relatively unfettered are not good.

What makes Mr Vorster's threats to freedom of speech even more ominous for local academics is that they come at a time when many students of South African society, particularly overseas, are beginning to base their thinking on the view that the apartheid system is in fact what Mr Monkhe says it is, and what Mr Vorster says it is not. In the process they are beginning to move away from the idea that is held not only by the Nationalist protagonists of apartheid but also by many of its liberal antagonists, the idea that the present-day apartheid system must be seen essentially in 'racial' terms; that it has developed primarily as a result of the wide cultural (and, according to protagonists like Mrs Betsie Verwoerd, biological) differences that exist, and have in the past existed, between the various race groups; and that the political, social, and economic dominance of the whites today is simply the outcome of their subjugation of the blacks in the course of the 19th century. Superficially, this idea contains an element of truth, but by not taking into account the actual processes by which white domination has been consolidated over the last 100 years, it obscures the real nature of apartheid today. Recently social scientists have begun rather to see apartheid in 'economic' terms, to see that the inter-group tensions which are reflected in a systematic discrimination by whites against blacks are not so much race conflicts as class conflicts.

South African history since at least the 1870's is seen to exhibit a classic case of the struggle between haves and have-nots, whose nature has long been obscured from observers by their own obsession with the more blatant manifestations of race discrimination. This is not to deny the great importance of racial and cultural distinctions as exacerbating factors in these class conflicts, nor to deny that the distinction between haves and have-nots has crystallized in terms of race, but the tensions in South African society are coming to be regarded as fundamentally economic in origin, and apartheid, which is founded on those tensions, as primarily a system not of racial separation but of racial exploitation.

This view began gaining intellectual respectability in the 1960's among British and American sociologists and political scientists, but now the historians, normally more cautious in their professional judgements, are also beginning to add the weight of their opinions to it. Significantly, it has to a large extent been the appearance of the **Oxford History of South Africa,** with its liberal thesis, that has stimulated them into doing so. (Vol 1, 1969; Vol. 2, 1971.) The publication of volume two in particular has provided the opportunity for several leading overseas Africanists to write incisive critiques which are concerned not merely to bring out the book's merits and demerits but to point to possible new directions for the writing of South African history. Examples are the reviews by Martin Legassick **(Journal of History,** Vol. 13, 1972), Shula Marks **(Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies,** Vol. 10, 1972), and Stanley Trapido **(African Affairs,** Vol. 71, 1972). But the most deliberate and sustained attempt made so far to formulate a new conceptual approach is that of two young British historians, Anthony Atmore and Nancy Westlake, in their review article, 'A liberal dilemma: a critique of the **Oxford History of South Africa',** which appeared in the October 1972 number of **Race.** Though the authors tend to oversimplify some of their judgements, and to obscure their argument with sociological jargon, their closely-reasoned thesis provides a starting point for a fresh look at South Africa's past, and at the same time provides some much-needed historical insights into the nature of apartheid.

The main thrust of their argument is directed against what they see as the liberal notion that apartheid is based on white, and particularly Afrikaner, race phobia, which have their origins very early in South African frontier history and which have, rather surprisingly, not disappeared with the growth of white prosperity since the beginnings of industrialization in the 1870's. The key to their approach lies in the following statement:

"one of the main presuppositions of current liberal ideology, certainly in the South African context, is that modern capitalism is basically an economic and social system which results in the peaceful interaction of mutual co-operation between, and equivalent benefit to all its participants". If the Progressive Party can be regarded as one of the major voices of liberalism in South Africa, then this statement holds good, for the party's leaders have frequently expressed their belief that the capitalist system of 'private enterprise' is a catalyst for beneficial social change. Similarly, Alan Paton, one of the most respected of South Africa's liberal leaders, exhibits

the same belief in his recnt statement: 'In white South Africa the struggle between ideology and economics has become intensified, but ideology, though grievously wounded, always wins'. **(Sunday Tribune, 25.11.73)**

But, Atmore and Westlake claim, it is not the perpetuation of an old, fontier-type racial ideology that underlies the apartheid of today, but the development of an economy whose purpose above all is the making of profits, which the whites have been concerned to seize for themselves by excluding blacks from any real share of political power. As they see it, systematic apartheid essentially took root 100 years ago with the beginnings of large-scale mining in the 1870's. They do not deny that white racism had existed in South Afirca for two centuries before, but insist that it is important to differentiate between the comparatively flexible racism of the pre-industrial period and the much more rigid attitudes of the industrial period. In quoting recent studies which point out the considerable amount of informal intermingling that was still taking place betweeen blacks and whites as late as the mid-19th century, they specifically contradict the **Oxford History** (and Nationalist) supposition that race distinctions were by then already rigidly established. In the pre-industrial period, though relationships between white small-scale farmers and their black servants were frequently marked by violence, blacks were allowed a certain measure of agricultural independency, and often became involved in the life of the master's family. By contrast, after the rise of an industrial economy, relationships between the small number of mine and plantation owners and their large numbers of black labourers became much more formal and impersonal. Racially discriminatory practices, in the form of job and wage bars, became established in laws as a result of the demands made by the small class of white workers, supported by politicians, for privileged treatment. The owners were certainly under considerable political and social pressure to favour their white workers, but the point that Atmore and Westlake stress is that it was to their own advantage to co-operate with the state and with the white labour aristocracy to enforce wage and job bars against black workers. Where the **Oxford History** tends to see the owners as having been forced by political pressures to discriminate against their black employees, Atmore and Westlake emphasize the obvious but nowadays often disregarded point that a cheap and easily controlled labour force was precisely what the owners themselves wanted, and still want. Thus it is that the president of the Natal Chamber of Industries, Mr E. G. Hotchkiss, can say that the time is not ripe for African trade unions **(Natal Witness, 30.11.73**; Natal Mercuty, 1.12.73); thus it is that a Bull Brand subsidiary in Durban can dismiss 155 black workers without notice **(Daily News, 30.11.73).**

Apartheid, then, is seen to have developed in intimate association with an economic system that has a vested interest in keeping workers underpaid and rightless. This is not to say that some blacks have not made good under the system, but this is in spite of apartheid, not because of it. Economic intermingling of black and white has, ever since the destruction of black political independence in the 1870's and 1880's, taken place not on the black man's terms, but on those of the white, according to the white's particular needs. Thus the **Oxford History** itself points out that blacks have in many cases risen to become managers of farms for absentee white owners, but that it is inconceivable in the 1970's, just as it was in the 1870's, that blacks should become managers of white-owned factories or mines.

Hand in hand with legislation which erected job and wage barriers against blacks went laws designed to ensure a constant flow of controlled labour from the African reserves to the mines, industries and farms of the whites. Such was the Natives Land Act of 1913 which, by curtailing the rights of blacks to buy land, had the effect of squeezing out those who could not make a living in the reserves as they began to become overpopulated, and forcing them to take the only course that was open to them – to work as wage labourers for white owners. This view receives strong support in another article of seminal importance, ('The emergence and decline of a South African peasantry', **African Affairs,** Vol. 71, 1972), written by Colin Bundy, a former Natal University student now studying in Britain. As a counter to the stereotype which most white South Africans hold about blacks as always having been lazy and ingorant farmers who could only be trusted to ruin good land, Bundy makes a convincing case that in the second half of the 19th century a small but thriving class of African peasant landholders was beginning to emerge in parts of the eastern Cape and Natal, and even in the two Afrikaner republics where the land and labour laws were quite uncompromising. By producing a surplus of food, which they exchanged for material goods, this class was beginning to make the transition from a subsistence to a market economy. In so doing it came into competition with white farmers, and also created an obstacle to the flow of the labour which was essential for the growth of industry, and in the first decades of the 20th century it was broken up by laws like the Natives Land Act and the Land Bank Act of 1912 which was designed to provide state assistance for white farmers and hence protect them from competition.

As a result ot this development, and of the fact that by about 1900 most land once occupied by Africans, had been expropriated in one form or another, the African reserves came more and more to be what they largely are today – overcrowded rural slums which cannot produce enough food to support the resident population, let alone a surplus. On this point Bundy takes the Oxford historians to task for their uncritical assumptions about the nature of South Africa's 'dual economy', as they call it. Where the Oxford historians talk of an industrial economy in the towns operating side by side with a subsistence one in the reserves, Bundy points out that the economy of the reserves is in fact at sub-subsistence level, and that its inability to support the population of the reserves is directly related to the nature of the white-controlled capitalist economy with its demand for a large and cheap labour force. Approaching this subject another way, Atmore and Westlake point out that the poverty-stricken rural societies living in the reserves today do not simply represent curious relics of the past which have somehow missed the benefits of 'progress', but exist because they

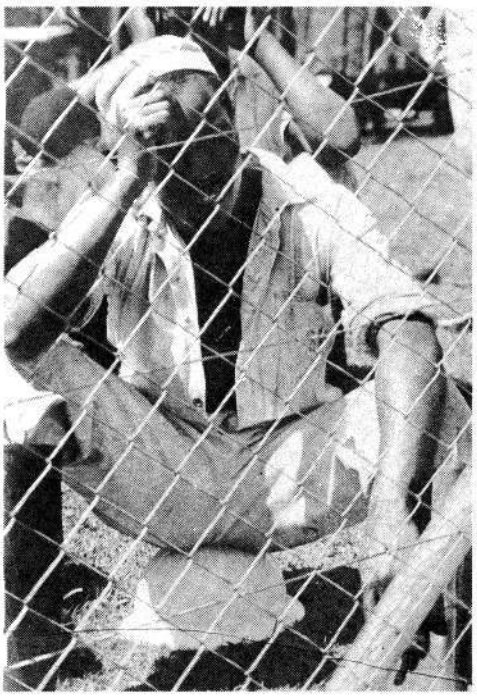
fulfil necessary functions in the modern economy. Similarly, the serf-like status of farm labourers, factory workers, kitchen maids and garden 'boys' is not simply a cultural survival from the feudal-type African societies of the pre-industrial period, but a direct product of laws designed to keep the present-day profit-oriented economy running as efficiently as possible. The designation of these people as 'migrant' labourers covers the fact that they have no alternative means of livelihood, and is simply a euphemism to rationalize the payment of low wages to blacks and their exclusion from political power.

The maintenance of a large, minimally-paid, and politically rightless black labour force is, then, seen as the basic function of apartheid. Where the Oxford historians tend to see it as a survival of what they call the Afrikaner's traditional outlook, Atmore and Westlake see it rather as a product of the capitalist economy that has grown up over the last 100 years. Where the Oxford historians see apartheid as an aberration which has lingered on in spite of the supposedly civilising effects of capitalist industrialization and urbanization, it is these very processes which Atmore and Westlake see as responsible for fostering a more extreme form of racism. Where the Oxford historians accept the idea that apartheid has been developed by the Afrikaner to safeguard his heritage, Atmore and Westlake see the Afrikaners' obsession with their past sufferings as obscuring the fact that they have been the most successfully aggressive of all southern Africa's peoples. Where the Oxford historians believe that economic growth will undermine apartheid, Atmore and Westlake consider that if South Africa becomes rich under the present economic system, it will still remain racist.

Some liberal commentators see the emerging Bantustans as possible platforms for a black nationalism that will eventually undermine or else crush apartheid, but in the view of Atmore and Westlake their development will not basically affect the political predominance of the whites. Whatever formal political status they may achieve, they will still remain integrated into the South African economy, and hence in the last resort politically subservient to the South African state. The industrial economy that has developed over the last 100 years has always depended heavily on black labour, but this has not given blacks any control over it, and the development of the Bantustan concept is dismissed as an exercise in sleight-of-hand. Possibly it could be said that Atmore and Westlake do not take sufficient cognizance of the rôle which independent Bantustans could play as political catalysts in the Southern Africa of the future, but certainly the author's conclusion gives added weight to the view that the Bantustan policy is designed not so much to give blacks their 'own' political rights as to exclude them from any share of the political power now held by whites. The idealism, or wishful thinking, with which some whites, at least, regard the Bantustans policy (witness the declaration made recently in its support by a large number of Afrikaner academics) covers a much more pervasive selfishness and cynicism.

Such are the judgements which in the post-**Oxford History** era historians are beginning to pronounce on apartheid. If Mr Vorster does not like Mr Monkhe's opinions, he will like what the academics have to say even less. And if he shares the view of General van den Bergh of the Bureau for State Security that the **Oxford History** itself is subversive (see Monica Wilson's article in **S.A. Outlook,** October 1972), then the long-term prospects for historical research in South Africa are dark.

Meanwhile liberal critics of the apartheid system would do well to enlarge their understanding of it by studying its historical dimensions. It is vital to appreciate that apartheid is not simply the recent creation of Afrikaner ideologists but that the Nationalist governments which have been in power since 1948 have taken over and refined a pre-existing system of racial discrmination that has its main roots in the last third of the 19th century. Statements such as the following befog the issue by shifting the responsibility for the present existence of apartheid from where it should be: 'Separate development . . . was a blend of incompatibles, of courage and fear, of love and hatred, of idealism and cruelty. It was Dr Verwoerd, with the help of Dr W. W. M. Eiselen, Secretary of Native Affairs and son of a missionary, who planned it all.' **(Alan Paton in the Sunday Tribune, 25.11.73).** Dr Verwoerd may have given apartheid a new ideological gloss with his talk of 'separate development,'but he made no radical changes: His Bantustan hallucinations were still centred on the same poverty-stricken reserves whose history goes back to the mid-19th century. Dr Paton's comment obscures the fact that apartheid as a system of expoitation is not merely a product of Nationalist ideology. It is buttressed by the tycoons of Anglo-American Corporation and the English-speaking golfers of the country clubs, no less than by the railway shunters and the Afrikaans-speaking farmers of the platteland. White liberals have an important role to play in unmasking them.□



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