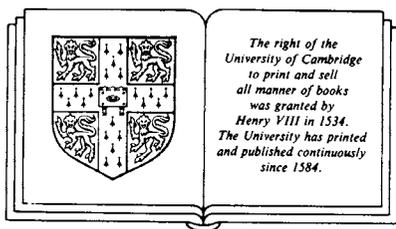


THE HIGHEST STAGE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

THE ORIGINS OF SEGREGATION IN
SOUTH AFRICA AND THE
AMERICAN SOUTH

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1. The problem of segregation

According to Webster's *Intercollegiate Dictionary*, segregation is "the separation of a race, class, or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary residence in a restricted area, by barriers to social intercourse, by separate educational facilities, or by other discriminatory means." And a segregationist is one who favors such separation. Although the separation may be voluntary, the compilers assume that it is ordinarily not. The words "enforced," "barriers," and "other discriminatory means" all imply inequality and deprivation imposed and maintained by force. Moreover, according to common usage, a segregated society is one whose institutions, mores, and beliefs are literally permeated by wholesale discrimination. An American reader, at least, would recognize this definition as useful and accurate. Embodied in those few words is the tortured experience of the reader's own country.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the relevant "S" volume of which was compiled between 1908 and 1914, we find that this definition of segregation is comparatively recent. Several citations are given, some going back as far as the seventeenth century. But they refer mainly to religion or to the natural sciences. Even in the case of a reference to the *British Medical Journal* of 1904 – "Manson has also declared segregation to be the first law of hygiene for the European in the tropics" – the reader must supply the missing social and historical context. One must know that the "sanitation syndrome" was frequently used as a pretext for creating exclusive living and recreational facilities for Europeans throughout the colonial empires, even in countries such as

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Nigeria or Malaya, where the European presence was proportionately minuscule.¹

In the history of race relations segregation is what Raymond Williams calls a key word.² It is a term like those – state, nation, sovereignty – that evolved in the three centuries after 1500 to embody dominant European political trends: absolutism, the rise of the nation-state, the bourgeois and democratic revolutions. It is a word like those – factory, industry, class, capitalism – that were either invented or greatly modified so that nineteenth-century Britons and Americans might discuss the far-reaching and disturbing consequences of the rapid alteration of the mode of production and of social relations in their societies. Clusters of key words reflect the emergence of new social forces or the acceleration of older ones. More precisely, they reveal the conscious recognition and identification of those forces. Together they define the boundaries of a terrain of discourse and controversy.

Segregation is an even more overriding term. It is a word like “culture” in Williams’s seminal book, *Culture and Society*: a term not easily defined, ambiguous and self-contradictory. Culture is both the maintenance of high standards of excellence (as in literature) and the way of life of a whole society (as in anthropology). Yet, as Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century and T. S. Eliot in the twentieth argued forcefully, those definitions and the social aims they imply are in conflict. High standards are essentially elitist. The gradual enlightenment or improvement of the whole society must therefore necessarily result in cultural deterioration. Culture, then, is not merely a key word. It is the centerpiece of a long and unfinished debate, a clue to what Carl Becker and other intellectual historians have called climates of opinion and to what Marxists call mystification and ideology.

Like culture, the term “segregation” is profoundly ambiguous and self-contradictory. It is many things. Simultaneously it is a conscious policy, a process (by definition never completed), a system, and an ideology. It is both discrimination imposed by force and – or so its proponents have often declared – a positive, humane approach to one of mankind’s most intractable problems, enabling each group to develop to its highest potential, at its own pace, in its own way, maintaining its distinctive cultural

values. I shall argue that this state of ambiguity and contradiction was skillfully and very deliberately created. Confusion has been one of segregation's greatest strengths and achievements.

The *OED*'s surprising omission therefore provides an important clue to the problem of the origins, dynamics, and course of segregation in South Africa and the American South. The present usage *is* comparatively recent, having become current in the United States only after 1890 and in South Africa about a decade later.

I do not intend to imply that before those two dates these two societies had not discriminated against people of color. Both of them had done so, in extremely systematic fashion, ever since their founding as settlement colonies in the seventeenth century. Nor does the omission imply that either society had ever been integrated in any sense. In practice, in both societies, the races had always been largely separated. What I do mean to argue is that before the turn of the century, "segregation" in its modern sense had not entered the English language and that rapid adoption of the word in the decade or so after 1900 signals that race relations in both societies had entered an important new phase.

The novelty of segregation must therefore be sharply qualified. Obviously, the construction of discriminatory systems that were so pervasive and totalitarian that they call to mind Marc Bloch's definition of European feudalism as a "state of society"³ could not have been accomplished with wholly new materials. Segregation was a phase, the highest stage, in the evolution of white supremacy. The forces that created it had developed mainly in the past. Only in the twentieth century, however, did the conception of segregation as something more than the mere physical separation of peoples enter the English language and hence become conscious thought. The coining of such an ambiguous, contradictory key word is a clue not so much to new conditions or practices as it is to growing consciousness, synthesis, and ideological crystallization.

The driving force, the ultimate cause, behind segregation was white racism. In both South Africa and the American South color prejudice was very old. It had been imported in the minds and psyches of the earliest European settlers, who could hardly have escaped it. The association of blackness with all things evil, ugly,

and satanic and of whiteness with all things pure, beautiful, and godly was fundamental to their psychology, to the way medieval and early-modern Europeans (especially northern Europeans) perceived and organized the world.⁴ In the conditions of southern Africa and northern America this color syndrome acquired immediacy and relevance. Unconscious associations could be projected upon groups of people who were at the same time different, exploitable, and dangerously competitive. It was in the settlers' interest to attack and dominate them. In these circumstances color prejudice was transformed into racism, which permeated thought, mores, institutions, and social relations.

In both countries, ever since the seventeenth century, racism had been eminently functional. It had legitimized slavery. It had supported long assaults against antagonists on the opposite sides of moving frontiers. Servitude and the Darwinian struggle for existence both became more acceptable to conscience when the victims could be identified as subhuman.⁵ Virtually essential for the creation and survival of "white man's countries" in regions that were already inhabited, racism had been a fundamental component in the evolution of both societies.

Racism would have made difficult or even impossible the establishment around the turn of the century of truly democratic, nondiscriminatory systems of good race relations in either South Africa or the American South. Yet racism would account for a wide range of conceivable alternatives – extermination, the reimposition of slavery, deportation – that were not in fact undertaken. It follows that racism alone cannot be a necessary and sufficient explanation of any particular form of discrimination. The explanation of how and why segregation developed must therefore lie in a conjunction of racism with other forces and processes, which ruled out some alternatives and which made segregation appear to be the natural and even inevitable solution to what was called in America the Negro Problem and in South Africa the Native Question.

In the 1930s liberal commentators in both societies regarded segregation as a temporary phenomenon, an anachronistic survival from earlier, more primitive stages of evolution, the product of rural, preindustrial, economically backward conditions that were being left behind. Fundamentally incompatible with

the imperatives of a modern, urban, industrial economy, both segregation and the race prejudice that fed it would be doomed to comparatively rapid obsolescence. "The race relations cycle," concluded Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the Chicago school of American sociology, "– contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation – is apparently irreversible." As it had proved to be throughout history, the city would once more become the irresistible vehicle of social change and political evolution. Prejudice, that still potent survival from rural exploitation and dominance, would be dissolved in the urban melting pot. Race would be superseded by class. For American blacks the "great migration" after 1915 to the Northern cities would be decisive: "America and, perhaps, the rest of the world, can be divided between two classes: those who reached the city, and those who have not yet arrived."⁶

Gunnar Myrdal, the great Swedish economist whom the Carnegie Corporation chose in the 1930s to direct a massive survey of the Negro Problem – a work that was to play such a significant role in preparing the intellectual climate for the Supreme Court's historic *Brown* decision of 1954 – also predicted that segregation would be a temporary phenomenon. Although not without trauma and violence, Myrdal concluded, the structure of systematic discrimination that had been built up over the centuries would be dismantled. In this process, however, the primary role would be played not by economic or demographic forces but by those that lay within the American value system. Segregation, the insidious nature of which Myrdal analyzed in such exhaustive detail, blatantly contradicted the highest ideals of the world's largest and greatest democracy. Particularly as the United States attempted to assert its support for the struggle of the colored peoples of the world against colonialism, its exclusion of over one-tenth of its citizens from full civil and political rights would prove increasingly embarrassing. Segregation must and would be eliminated because it contradicted the American Dream.⁷

South Africa's white liberal historians – notably W. M. Macmillan, Eric Walker, C. W. De Kiewiet, the Australian Sir Keith Hancock, and more recently Leonard Thompson – were much more cautious. With a significant watershed occurring in 1936,

when the Cape Province's African voters were disfranchised, segregation was obviously still on the rise. So was its apparent primary cause, the insurgent and as yet far-from-satiated force of Afrikaner nationalism.

For liberal historians the most significant fact, and the central problem, of South African history was the remarkable persistence of the Afrikaner mentality and national character. In accounting for it they weighed inheritance and environment. They stressed the rigid Calvinism that the Dutch and French Huguenot settlers had brought with them in the seventeenth century; their almost total isolation from the liberalizing currents of European thought in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; their development of the habit of dominance over colored slaves; their defiant rejection of British liberal humanitarianism in their Great Trek of the 1830s; their constitutions in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic, bluntly specifying "no equality in church and state"; their long struggle against both the harsh physical environment and the fierce resistance of Bantu-speaking Africans; the unification of all these strands into nationalism under the pressure of the British "imperial factor"; and the final hardening of Afrikaner reaction in the crucible of the Boer War. The history of the Afrikaner people was thus a succession of powerfully formative experiences. None of them, perhaps, was inevitable. But each made the outcome of the next more predictable. As Afrikaner nationalism gained impetus, so South Africa's Native Policy became ever more extreme. Segregation was thus the logical conclusion of the Afrikaner people's peculiar history.⁸

To be sure, liberal historians agreed, English-speaking whites shared the Afrikaner ethos. Natalian sugar planters had exploited and discriminated against Indians. Johannesburg's mining magnates had done the same, and on a larger scale, against Africans. Sir Keith Hancock reserved some of his most biting irony for the English-speaking labor unions, whose notable contribution of the industrial color bar must not be overlooked when patriotic white South African historians came to record the heroic struggle through which an alien egalitarian influence had been driven from their beloved land.⁹

The prejudices of Britons overseas were unattractive. Because they had not been formed by the same process that had shaped

Afrikaner attitudes, they were even less excusable. But English-speaking whites had remained in touch with the liberalizing currents of British and world opinion. Culturally they were on the defensive. By the 1930s they were no longer in political control.

The correlation between segregation and the insurgence of the Afrikaners was apparently clear and direct. To many observers it still is. In Afrikaner nationalism, white supremacy had become a positive ideology, unapologetic and unblushing. This force gave South African race relations their unique character. It accounted for the remarkably persistent power of anachronism. In the series of formative experiences since 1652 a solid base of discriminatory attitudes and practices had been built up, institutionalized in slavery over Malays and Khoikhoi, and then applied to relations with Bantu-speaking Africans. Thereafter, as African participation in the European market and industrial economy had increased, the policy of segregation had been extended: layer upon layer, dimension after dimension.

Like contemporary Americans, liberal South Africans perceived segregation as a legacy of prejudice that had survived from an isolated, rural, frontier past. First formed in a simple, undifferentiated, unindustrialized economy, segregation would become increasingly anachronistic as the society developed. The forces that were breaking down the lines of caste and class elsewhere in the world would, it might be hoped, gradually dissolve them even in South Africa. Ultimately segregation would be – and would be seen to be – fundamentally incompatible with the needs of modern industrial capitalism. Then, in time, it might disappear.

As Keynesian economists argued in the 1930s, the most important factor in the healthy development of any economy was an expanding home market. South Africa's had scarcely been tapped. Increasing consumption by the African majority would stimulate secondary industries and services. Improving African living standards would raise the prosperity of all. As industry became more sophisticated the color bar would become increasingly inconvenient, inefficient, and expensive. Presumably, at some point, anything that stood in the way of the "rational" development of capitalism would dissolve. In particular, as Afrikaners moved into cities and into industrial jobs, as they be-

came more prosperous and better educated, it might be supposed that they would become more tolerant.

We are less sanguine now. In the United States the legal edifice of segregation has indeed been largely dismantled, and partially for reasons that Myrdal, Park, and other liberals predicted: the changing climate of American (especially Northern) opinion, the embarrassment of blatant domestic discrimination for American foreign policy, the large increase of black voters in the North during and after World War II, and, most important, the struggle of blacks themselves for civil liberties and political rights. Driven by these forces, desegregation developed momentum, often going far beyond the wishes of individual presidents or heads of the Department of Justice. Federal intervention overcame the campaign for states' rights. Disproving countless predictions that desegregation would fail unless it were voluntary, the power of the national state changed folkways.

Few, however, now conceive that the Negro Problem, especially its socioeconomic aspects, is close to being resolved. The problem, we now realize, depends comparatively little on individual attitudes and much more on the racism that is ingrained in institutions. Successive efforts to break the cycle of poverty, poor education, low expectations, and low achievement have so far largely failed. The most significant change has been a widening of geographical focus. Racism is now a national and not merely Southern problem. Particularly in the large cities, North and South, there is more residential segregation now than there was in the 1950s. Some blacks are moving into the middle class, but then some so-called exceptions always did. In aggregate statistics the gaps between white and black in education, salaries, unemployment, and standards of living are being reduced very slowly even in times of prosperity. In periods of recession the gaps widen perceptibly again.

In South Africa the long run to which liberals of the 1930s looked with hope has become increasingly remote. The modernization of the economy, which they counted on so heavily, has happened. The country is no longer backward, no longer dependent on European industrial production. Although it remains very significant as an earner of foreign exchange, the mining sector is not the single great engine from which secondary industries spin

off. Except for oil, in which South Africa as a nonproducer is in company with such industrial giants as Japan and West Germany, the economy is largely self-sufficient. The white population is overwhelmingly urban, with less than ten percent employed in agriculture. Even the vast majority of Afrikaners live in town. The "last trek" has been completed. The poor-white problem has been solved.

Yet only the white half of the cycle of development has taken place. The living standards of the large majority of Africans have improved only slightly, if at all. In the 1930s their population was six million. It has since more than trebled. But the portion of territory that is demarcated as Bantu homelands remains precisely what it was under the Natives Land Act of 1913: less than thirteen percent.¹⁰ Even before World War II, according to the Native Economic Commission of 1932, the African reserves were hopelessly eroded and overcrowded. Increasingly, as liberals predicted, Africans have perforce taken jobs in so-called white areas. Most of them remain in unskilled positions at very low pay. But there are increasing exceptions: individual Africans in skilled positions, breaches of the job color bar. The consequences that were presumed to follow from industrialization, however, have not occurred. What is impressive is the South African economy's ability to incorporate growing numbers of skilled African workers while continuing to maintain a persistent pattern of discrimination.

Still less has the "rational" development of industrial capitalism produced the anticipated liberalization of South African politics. Indeed, political and economic trends seem to have been running in opposite directions. After 1948, when the Nationalist Party began its uninterrupted ascendancy in power, segregation hardened into apartheid. In a long series of acts – the Group Areas Act, the Bantu Education Act, the Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act, the latter being a bill that emphatically did not abolish passes – what nationalist politicians called the laxity of mere segregation has been tightened with unprecedented thoroughness. Under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, all effective African political organizations (including the Pan African Congress, the African National Congress, and most recently the black consciousness movement) have been

banned as statutory Communists, their leaders placed under house arrest, incarcerated, or (in hundreds of “suicides” or deaths under interrogation for which no responsibility could be determined) worse. Until the mid-1960s, at least, apartheid steadily became more thorough, more efficient, and more severe.

Since then, the system has in some ways softened again, into what is now called separate development. Beginning with the Transkei, some homelands (which still remain less than thirteen percent of the land) have become “independent.” Even in white areas there have been indications or promises of some relaxation, principally in sport, and perhaps some recognition of African trade unions. On the whole, however, Leonard Thompson’s masterful survey, completed in 1965, remains depressingly current.¹¹ The millions of Africans who live and work permanently in white areas continue to be regarded and treated as transient aliens, as are Turks or Italians in Germany: They must carry identity passes, they can be returned to the homelands if they become “redundant” (or for no reason at all), and they lack the votes and rights of citizens.

Because the Nationalist Party did emerge as the spearhead of right-wing Afrikaners, with heavy reliance on rural votes in its early victories, many students have maintained the liberal interpretation in much the same terms as had their predecessors of the 1930s. There are good reasons for their doing so. Only since South Africa’s departure from the Commonwealth in 1962 have large numbers of English-speaking whites supported nationalist candidates. Most of the leading politicians, most of the police, and of course all of the members of the influential secret society called the Broederbond continue to be Afrikaners. But in the face of the continuing ability of the economy to modernize while persisting in discrimination, both the argument that segregation runs against the economic grain and the hope that it is therefore doomed to collapse someday from internal causes have become increasingly less credible.

Thus the course of South African history since World War II has strongly favored structural interpretations, which place less emphasis on the remote frontier past and stress instead the integral, organic, perhaps even essential role of racial exploitation in the country’s modernization. If these analyses are correct, then

the prediction that segregation will eventually fade away like some quaint museum piece is dangerously mistaken.

As Pierre Van den Berghe has reminded us in an excellent if necessarily outdated survey, the mixing of white and black (or brown, red, or yellow) in the same society has by no means always produced the same results. Comparing race relations across a broad spectrum – from societies like Mexico that apparently are successfully integrated; through those like Cuba, Jamaica, or Brazil, where, in his opinion, race relations over the last century have been comparatively tolerant; to those of South Africa and the American South, in which extreme racial hostility exists – Van den Berghe argues that all systems fall between two poles or ideal types. These he calls the paternalist and the competitive.¹²

Of the two the paternalist has been much more prevalent. It is, or used to be, found in most of the settlement colonies of Africa – Kenya and Rhodesia until the 1950s, the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique until the 1960s – in the Caribbean, and in South America. It is characterized by a preindustrial economy, which concentrates on one or two cash crops for export, such as sugar, tobacco, or coffee. Social mobility, both horizontal and vertical, is limited. The white ruling class is small, indeed numerically insignificant. The large subordinate caste is typically composed of slaves, indigenous forced labor, serfs, or subsistence peasants. In standards of living, in social status, and in law, extremely wide gaps separate the two castes. In part for that very reason – because the superior caste's hegemony appears to be secure – concubinage, miscegenation, and other forms of interracial contact are frequent. In such a society an aristocratic government aims to maintain the status quo. Among the dominant group there is a constant but not necessarily aggressive racist ideology, which stresses the innate, childlike inferiority of the subordinate caste and its need for guidance and protection.

In such paternalist societies violence is usually initiated from below in the form of peasant risings or slave revolts. On such occasions the ruling class, who typically feel themselves betrayed by ungrateful servants for whom they have done so much, may retaliate savagely. If their repression succeeds, the storm passes and the paternalist regime is reestablished. If the revolution is accomplished, however, its triumph is swift and conclusive. The

white ruling class undergoes a sudden, traumatic transformation. Because the ideology of dominance no longer fits the facts, it evaporates, leaving salty traces such as the wry jokes old Kenya hands used to tell about having the Kaffirs be prime minister. Within a short time most whites leave. Those who remain adjust with remarkable ease to their new status as marginal, politically powerless, but still probably comfortable members of a black society. For most of the subordinate caste, however, for those whom Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth," the revolution changes little. They continue to be the deprived, powerless citizens of an underdeveloped country.

At the other end of the spectrum of race relations is what Van den Berghe calls the competitive model, found in South Africa, in the American South, and (until the revolution of the 1950s) in Algeria. It is characterized by a comparatively sophisticated, industrializing economy, a relatively complex division of labor, and a high level of social mobility. The dominant race is either a majority or a proportionately significant minority. Between the two races the gap in economic position and social status is wide, but not so wide as in the paternalist model. However, the range and degree of personal contact across racial lines are also much less frequent. There is segregation, both *de facto* and *de jure*. Such a society possesses not an aristocratic government but a "democracy" restricted to members of the dominant race: a "pigmentocracy" or a *Herrenvolk*.¹³ The tone of race relations is especially virulent, volatile, and explosive. Aggression is initiated not only from below but from above, in the form of lynchings, police riots, or waves of blatantly discriminatory legislation. The prevailing ideology of the dominant race is a curious and contradictory mixture. The subordinate group is portrayed not only as naturally inferior, childlike, and servile but also as innately aggressive, dangerous, and uppity.

Van den Berghe's typology contains several important suggestions for the student of segregation. First, segregation is typical of modern, complex, industrializing, and therefore increasingly urban societies. We should not expect to find it prevailing in simple, undifferentiated countries. In the case of a plantation economy we expect some variety of forced labor: slavery, an indentured immigrant population, or an indigenous labor supply that

is “encouraged” by a quota system or a labor tax. But segregation is essentially a horizontal organization of society: on the plantation, in rural areas generally, the relationship of master and servant is typically vertical. On the moving frontier, on the other hand, we expect incessant competition for living space and resources between members of economic systems that are not only separate but fundamentally incompatible. We expect warfare to be more or less permanent, very likely ending in the extermination or physical removal of the weaker people.

Unlike the frontier, segregation is a settled system, in which all sections of society participate, albeit unequally, in a single economic whole. The plantation and the frontier may well have contributed to segregation; but they are quite different situations.

Second, many societies, those with histories of “good race relations,” have maintained themselves for long periods somewhere near the paternalist pole of the spectrum. For a society to gravitate from one typology to the other is therefore not automatic. At some point in their histories, however, South Africa and the American South, both of them examples of bad race relations, moved from the paternalist to the competitive model. In both societies slavery was abolished by outside authority: by act of the British parliament in 1834 in the case of South Africa, by the Thirteenth Amendment after the Civil War in the case of the American South. Yet slavery was also abolished in the Caribbean and in Brazil, neither of which developed either competitive race relations or segregation. One must therefore explain not only why segregation developed but why some other form of paternalism did not replace slavery.

Third, it can be inferred from Van den Berghe’s analysis, as well as from the definitions from the *OED* with which this chapter began, that segregation is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Historically both South Africa and the American South have been backward parts of the Western world, where the various indexes that have been associated with the core areas of Western Europe and the northeastern United States – high standards of living, large cities, factories – have appeared only within the past half-century or so. Precisely in those periods, race relations left the paternalist and entered the competitive phase.

It is possible – but not probable – that one system of race re-