Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa
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Abstract: This paper is an analysis of state practice in respect of racial classification and its epistemological underpinnings in twentieth-century South Africa. It shows how apartheid racial categories—drawing heavily on those enacted by the segregationist state—were wielded as instruments of surveillance and control by a state animated by fantasies of omniscience as much as omnipotence. The architects of apartheid racial classification policies recognized explicitly that racial categories were constructs, rather than descriptions of real essences—a version of the idea of race which enabled the bureaucratization of “common sense” notions of racial difference and which contributed directly to the enormous powers wielded by racial classifiers. If constructs, these categories were powerfully rooted in the materiality of everyday life. The ubiquity of the state’s racial designations, and the extent to which they meshed with lived hierarchies of class and status, meant that apartheid’s racial grid was strongly imprinted in the subjective experience of race.

Résumé: Cet article analyse les pratiques de l’état en matière de classification raciale, et leurs implications épistémologiques dans l’Afrique du Sud du vingtième siècle. Nous démontrons comment les catégories raciales de l’apartheid – largement inspirées par celles promulguées par l’état ségrégationniste – furent exercées comme instruments de surveillance et de contrôle par un état animé de fantasmes d’omniscience tout comme d’omnipotence. Les architectes des politiques de classification raciale de l’apartheid ont explicitement reconnu que les catégories raciales étaient des constructions plutôt que des descriptions d’une nature réelle—une version de l’idée de race qui a permis la bureaucratisation de la notion ‘de base’ de la différence raciale, et qui a directement contribué à l’immense pouvoir exercé par ces classifierateurs raciaux. Même en tant que construc-

African Studies Review, Volume 44, Number 2 (September 2001), pp. 87–113

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Apartheid social engineering was shot through with contradictions, uncertainties, irrationalities, and lapses of control. Yet the system endured for over four decades. This tenacity derived in large measure from the repressive might of the apartheid state. But it also had a lot to do with the systematic bureaucratization and normalization of race. With the advent of apartheid (which built on white supremacist foundations laid decades earlier), South Africa became one of the most thoroughly racialized social orders in the world.

Curiously, however, the literature on apartheid has typically had little, if anything, to say about the conception of race that underpinned this exercise, in many instances simply assuming that apartheid’s planners were among the world’s most ardent exponents of a purported science of race.1 Things are beginning to change. Recent work (e.g., Dubow 1995) has identified the contests surrounding the notion of race which informed the elaboration of Christian-national doctrine, showing the uneven impact of theories of scientific racism in the intellectual and ideological milieu of Afrikaner nationalism. But this has stopped short of an analysis of the imprints of these debates in the making of apartheid as a mode of rule. This article focuses directly on the notion of race that shaped state policy and practice after 1948 and which facilitated the overwhelming racialization of South African society. It shows that contrary to conventional wisdom, apartheid’s social engineers drew deliberately and explicitly on a conception of race as a socio-legal construct rather than a scientifically measurable biological essence. There were various reasons for their decision, not least the recognition that the time and evidence required to mobilize and defend scientific definitions of race would have derailed what was intended to be a rapid and all-encompassing process of the racial classification of the entire population. Just as compelling was the effort to buttress the close association of race and social class, which had hitherto formed the basis of the country’s social, economic, and political hierarchies, and which apartheid’s engineers perceived to be under threat. Official categories of race were therefore defined and enacted in ways which connected them closely to factors of lifestyle and social standing.

This is not to say that biologically essentialist versions of race were impotent or irrelevant in the making of apartheid. On the contrary: In the experience of most white South Africans, race was socially constructed in
ways that drew heavily on the myths of racial science. The idea of an objective biological basis for racial difference had popular currency as a self-evident truth, part of the racial “common sense” that permeated white South African society. The article shows that in bureaucratizing the idea of race as a social construct, the apartheid state opened up spaces for this racial common sense to infiltrate the processes of racial classification. The practitioners of racial classification had considerable latitude to interpret the bureaucratic criteria for racial classification in ways that allowed them to draw widely and idiosyncratically on the popular litanies of biological stereotypes, but spared the need for any pretense at scientific rigor in the process.

This article also reflects on the continuities and discontinuities in the politics and epistemology of racial classification before and after the advent of apartheid. It shows striking continuities in the content of racial definitions, but a significant rupture in respect of their form. What made the apartheid system of racial classification notoriously distinctive was its panoptic scope: Every single South African citizen was now compelled to register as a member of an officially designated race, on the understanding that this classification would then inform every aspect of that person’s life. This change was in turn the consequence of a new vision about the scope, powers, and responsibilities of the state. Analyzing the construction and bureaucratization of race under apartheid is therefore inseparable from an understanding of the reconfiguration of the state after 1948. The first section of the article contextualizes the apartheid period by considering practices of racial classification pre-1948. The second section examines the Population Registration Act of 1950, which was the legislative centerpiece of the state’s efforts to produce a nationally comprehensive and uniform system of racial classification. This legislation is widely recognized as one of the fundamental cornerstones of the apartheid edifice; yet it has not previously been the subject of any sustained analysis. This article begins to fill that gap, and in so doing, goes some way toward evaluating the efficacy of the apartheid exercise in racialization against the backdrop of efforts to “modernize” the apartheid state.

**Racial Classification Pre-1948**

The racialization of governance in South Africa reaches back beyond the twentieth century. The two colonies (Cape and Natal) and two Boer republics (Transvaal and Orange Free State) which were merged into a unified state in 1910 all had their own litanies of legislation based on race. They had one central commonality: Only two racial categories were used, with “coloured people” and “natives” subsumed into the same racial category. However, in all other respects, the most striking feature of all this legislation was its variability and imprecision on the subject of race. In most
cases, racial categories were used without any definition at all. Where definitions were produced, these typically “excelled in vagueness” (Suzman 1960:342). And inconsistencies abounded between various statutes within one state and between their respective corpuses of legislation. In the Transvaal, “appearance and descent” were nominated as the primary criteria for race (Smythe 1995:313), with no further specification of the meaning of each or their relative priority. In the Orange Free State, racial definitions drew more loosely on “appearance, descent, general acceptance and repute, as well as mode of living” (Smythe 1995:139–40)—but again with no further elaboration or ranking. In Natal, “natives” were “all members of the aboriginal races or tribes of Africa south of the Equator,” although no specific criteria of “membership” were offered.

The process of Union in 1910 did surprisingly little to move beyond this rather chaotic legal pluralism on the subject of race. With the advance of segregation, the number of laws based on racial differentiation grew rapidly. But paradoxically, the more prolific the legislation, the greater the ambiguities and inconsistencies surrounding the definition of race, as each new law took its own stand on the subject. According to A. Suzman,

an examination of... differential legislation based on race... in the Union of South Africa reveals the absence of any uniform or consistent basis of race classification and presents a bewildering variety of statutory definitions of the various racial groups. The legislation abounds with anomalies and the same person may, in the result, fall into different racial categories under the different statutes. (1960:339)

There was no general constitutional definition of racial categories, which meant that each statute concerned with race produced its own rendition. The result was many sites of ambiguity and inconsistency. The central difficulty lay in defining the scope of the category “native,” and in particular, how to specify the boundary between supposedly “pure” and “mixed” “non-white” races. The earliest controversy was sparked by the promulgation of the Native Labour Regulation Act, soon after Union, in 1911. This law followed the 1904 South African Native Affairs Commission in defining the category of native to include “coloured people”—an unsurprising move, given that the purpose of the law was to extract a tax from all “native” workers. But this definition was successfully challenged in the courts, and indeed, the dominant tendency thereafter was for legislators to recognize three races rather than only two.

Producing three racial categories exacerbated the problem of specifying the conceptual boundaries between them. No single, uniform solution emerged. Particular laws produced definitions drawing in discrepant ways on one or more of four basic criteria: descent, appearance, general acceptance and repute, and mode of living (Suzman 1960:343). In cases in which more than one criterion was invoked, the law gave no guidance as to how
to prioritize or rank them. And the meaning of each criterion remained opaque in the absence of any further discussion of relevant evidence. For example, many laws defined a native as “a member of an aboriginal race or tribe of Africa,” but without specifying how such membership was to be determined. It was left for the courts to decide whether it required having one parent, two parents, or grandparents of the same “race or tribe,” and whether the other issues of appearance, general repute, and mode of living were separate indices of race or evidence in themselves of “aboriginal” descent. There were geographical inconsistencies too: Some laws invoked “Africa” as a whole, others referred more narrowly to “Africa south of the Equator.” And still others included “American negroes” in the category of “native.” Some laws produced further criteria for racial categorization wholly absent in others—for example, in stipulating that natives were people living in “native locations or other native areas.” In short, the statute books produced a dense conceptual fog on the subject of race, leaving the bureaucrats entrusted with administering the laws, on one hand, and the courts, on the other, to grope their way through it. They did so in strikingly different ways.

The positions taken by magistrates and judges across the country in adjudicating legal definitions of race were by no means consistent. But according to legal scholars, the dominant interpretation was one that privileged “descent” over the other three possible criteria for defining race (Landis 1961; Suzman 1960). One of the “leading decisions on the subject” (the case of *Rex v. Radebe and Others*, 1945), ruled that

the natural meaning of membership of a race or tribe is membership by descent... [so that] descent is the *factum probandum*, the ultimate matter to be proved.... Once the definition imports descent, factors such as appearance and habits can be used only as evidence of descent. A man may look like a native and live like a native but the question remains whether he is a native in terms of the definition. (Suzman 1960:347)

From this standpoint, race was understood as “a matter of history [which could] ... be proved only in the same way as other historical facts and not by evidence as to the appearance and habits of life of the individual whose origin is in question” (Suzman 1960:351).

The bureaucratic interpretation of the law, however, was very different. Much of the legislation on race was administered by the Department of Native Affairs, which took the position that there was no single test for race, no one *factum probandum*. Rather, racial classifications were seen as discretionary judgments, drawing on multiple sources of evidence, in the light of the particular law or administrative regulation in question. This position surfaced clearly in the ways in which the Department of Native Affairs fielded an assortment of administrative queries on racial classification. Given all the anomalies and tensions on the statute books, bureaucratic conundrums
proliferated. In many laws, “natives” were defined as aboriginals of Africa; did this mean that American “negroes” were “coloureds” (NTS 1763[b])? Generations of intermarriage with other “non-Europeans” meant that Hot-tentots were no longer “full-blooded”; yet they still had “hair of the ‘pepper-corn’ variety” which was generally held to characterize a “native,” so were they “natives” or “coloureds” (NTS 1763[c])? Ethnologically, the Gri- quas were not “natives,” since the first Griqua chief Adam Kok was born to a “coloured” family of the Cape, yet generations of “intermarriage with Bantu” meant that they looked “native,” despite having “customs and law… which approximated [that] of the Europeans” (NTS 1763[d]).

In responding to these sorts of puzzles, the Department of Native Affairs demonstrated its acceptance of the idea that race was not a fixed, stable category, in the manner of an essence—but rather a legal and bureaucratic construct which could be defined differently, depending on the purposes of particular pieces of legislation. This meant, too, that conflicting decisions and judgments on the subject—the inevitable consequence of this sort of approach—were similarly accepted as par for the course. Over the course of two decades, the office of the Secretary for Native Affairs attempted to clarify the meaning of “native.” In 1926 and 1946, respectively, the secretary wrote,

The term “native” as used in the South African statutes is of course artificial and arbitrary [my emphasis] but it is primarily understood as referring and confined to any unit of the negroid races of Africa. Cross breeds do not belong to either of the races from which they spring, but since in this country they are often sufficiently cognate to render their inclusion with natives desirable under specific laws, this is at times effected by extension of the definition. (NTS 1763[e])

The legislature has seen fit to define the term “native” in various ways in different enactments. In view of the position, each case has to be treated with regard to the particular Act in terms of which a person’s status is being considered. (NTS 1763[g])

For the bureaucrats then, racial classification was a situational judgment drawing on multiple sources of evidence, varying from case to case. Given the diversity of legal definitions and judicial decisions, the Department of Native Affairs took the line that racial classification devolved on one or more of a range of considerations, depending on the law in question, with no hierarchy of importance imposed a priori. The various factors, according to the department, were as follows:

1. Is he by general repute or appearance a Native?
2. Does he generally associate with Natives under Native condi-

tions?
3. Does he use one or other Native language as the customary and natural mode of expression?

4 a. What is his district of domicile?

4 b. Does he live in a Native location?

5. Does he pay the Native General Tax (if over 18 years of age)

6 a. Is he married? If so, is his wife a Native and was the marriage by Christian rites or according to Native law and custom?

6 b. Was any lobolo paid?

(NTS 1763[h])

Having paid “Native taxes” in the past, in other words, and/or having paid lobolo in contracting a customary marriage, could be grounds in themselves for classifying someone a “native.” American “Negroes” could be natives for the purposes of the 1928 Liquor Act (which restricted the sale of so-called European liquor to natives), but not otherwise. And “persons known as Griquas, Hottentots and Bushmen” would be considered “natives” if they lived in “rural locations under the same conditions as Natives” (NTS 1763[i]), but not otherwise.

Significantly, the Department of Native Affairs’ rules of thumb for racial classification made no reference to the issue of descent, placing much more emphasis on the ways race was lived in everyday experience. This position was consistent with—perhaps inevitable in the light of—the political imperatives of segregation. As segregationist legislation proliferated, the daily lives of South African citizens were increasingly racialized, particularly in the case of so-called non-Whites. For example, “natives” found their mobility increasingly subject to state surveillance and restriction; finding a (legal) job in the urban areas likewise became the business of designated local officials. For “natives” and “coloureds,” securing employment was subject to different taxes and levies, defined by race. Rights of land ownership were restricted according to racial type. And transport on the state-owned railways was similarly structured by race: Different races paid different fares and sat in different coaches. This meant that de facto, thousands of racial classifications were being decided routinely every day by a host of state officials, ranging from the native commissioners based in rural areas and the urban administrators in charge of municipal townships, to policemen and railway clerks. In most of these situations, what was needed was a rapid, if not on-the-spot, judgment about a person’s racial type, drawing on readily accessible “facts” of the situation. Elaborate investigations into a person’s racial lineage, tracking down birth certificates of parents or grandparents (which in many cases were unavailable anyway) would have been wholly at odds with the political imperative of creating mechanisms for the ongoing, on-the-ground regulation of social and economic life in racially differentiated ways.

Testing for race on the basis of descent (the American “one drop of blood” notion) was also out of kilter with the social meanings of race.
Although popular discourses of race were shot through with notions of “blood”—“pure” races being “full-blooded”—the daily lived experience of race derived from the ordinary, immediate experience of how people looked and lived. “Full-bloodedness” was a metaphor for racial purity rather a literal statement of its preconditions. Indeed, with many supposedly “white” South African families having distant, or not so distant, histories of intermarriage across color lines, the issue of descent was often a discomforting one, and not considered the most appropriate basis on which to defend white privilege. As the 1938 Commission on Mixed Marriages—one of the few sustained official discussions of racial classification pre-1948—put it,

the main test applied in America, the possession of a certain proportion of blood of a particular race, may advantageously be relegated to a secondary place in South Africa with its relatively small white population, among whom the affairs of others are often claimed to be well known locally. If this were prescribed as the first test, we fear that interference on the part of anonymous busybodies, or maliciously disposed persons, would frequently occur under the guise of advice professedly tendered solely for the good of all concerned. (Union of South Africa 1938: para. 141)

While understood and represented as a biological phenomenon, “race” was crucially also a judgment about social standing. Constructions of a person’s race were based as much on “mode of living” as on physical appearance. The Mixed Marriages Commission was once again to the point:

As a matter of general knowledge, we were aware that a number of persons in the Union had in the past been accepted as Europeans by the European population, or had, at any rate, passed as Europeans, either because of their appearance or because they resided among Europeans and had adopted their habits and standard of living, success or prominence in one or other walk of life. (Union of South Africa 1938: para. 2)

Readings of bodily differences were closely tied to judgments about socioeconomic status and culture, on the assumption that biological differences were naturally associated with different ways of living. Different races, said the Mixed Marriages Commission, have “differences in intellectual development and degree of civilization; different habits and standards” (1938: para. 20).

This sort of racial cataloging was, of course, always hierarchical. (Whites were distinguished by their “high” levels of civilization, as manifest in their levels of education and skill, as well as their relative affluence. Natives were at the bottom of the heap on the grounds of their alleged lack of civilization, education, and skill; coloureds occupied the middle rank
thanks to “their more permanent contacts with civilisation and their superior skill in various crafts” compared to “natives” [Union of South Africa 1938: para. 23]). And in being shaped by the effects of race, these social hierarchies had the sanction of nature itself. Popular myths about white racial superiority were thus rooted in tacitly circular processes of reasoning about race. Superior socioeconomic standing and privilege were considered markers and evidence of biological superiority, at the same time that biological superiority was considered grounds for such elevated social status. Racial hierarchies ratified and legitimised the social and economic inequalities that were in turn held up as evidence of racial differences.

Embedded in this mode of thinking was the view that a person’s race was, for the most part, obvious—a manifest and largely uncontroversial feature of ordinary social experience. According to the Mixed Marriages Commission, the designation “European” or “white person,”

is sufficiently well understood and exact for the purpose of distinguishing in most cases between a European and a non-European, and where a person is not manifestly white, or manifestly coloured, his true classification is generally determined, at any rate, in his own community, by his associations and general mode of life. (Union of South Africa 1938: para. 141)

And in 1950 a Member of Parliament declared, “We… have never experienced any difficulties in distinguishing between Europeans and Non-Europeans.”

This popular epistemology of race, as for the most part a matter of common sense, seeped into the discretionary spaces created by the looseness of the bureaucratic guidelines for racial classification. The Department of Native Affairs provided no instructions on how to measure so-called appearance, repute, or modes of association or how to weigh their relative significance, which meant that the officials concerned had to decide largely for themselves. Some officials occasionally complained that their brief was disconcertingly ambiguous and loose. As one Native Commissioner put it, “I quite often find myself in a quandary owing to the innumerable shades of colour and of characteristics of those who allege they are not natives” (NTS 1763[jj]). The Secretary for Native Affairs was sometimes asked to rule on how to manage the tensions between its various criteria for racial membership—for example, in the cases of people who looked coloured but lived in native locations, spoke a native language, had paid lobolo; or obversely, people who looked native but had married coloured women, lived in coloured areas, spoke Afrikaans, and were devout Christians. Correspondence in the Department of Native Affairs archives also contains several calls for guidance in managing the discrepancies between various statutes, magistrates’ rulings, and official regulations on matters of racial classification. But the volume of queries is minuscule in comparison to the numbers of racial judgments routinely produced. Paradoxically,
despite the multitude of legal anomalies and inconsistencies, the bureaucratic practice of racial classification was relatively uncontroversial and uncontested. And this was in itself an index of the extent to which the officials were confident that their judgments were based on the (socially) obvious manifestations of race.

The idea of racial classification as largely a matter of naming the obvious turned everyone into an expert on the subject of race; knowledge about race drew primarily on experience rather than specialized scientific or other expertise. Yet what was obvious to one person, of course, did not necessarily square with another person’s opinion on the subject. And there was seldom the need or opportunity to account for or justify a decision, unless it was contested in court. In short, the business of racial classification gave free reign to an assortment of social and individual prejudices on what was racially self-evident. If some drew racial conclusions directly from levels of affluence and education—“it is naturally difficult for an illiterate non-European to prove that he is not a native,” wrote the manager of the South African Railways (NTS 1763[k])—others dipped into a potpourri of eugenicist myths, the popular residue of theories of scientific racism. Some officials claimed to know that coloureds could be distinguished by their high cheek bones; another insisted that he could “tell a coloured with absolute certainty by the way he spits.”8 Others referred more directly to the “obvious stigmata” from which a person’s race could supposedly be read.

Again, these varied between cases. Parliament was told of a magistrate who claimed to be able to recognize coloured people by “a certain dullness on the face,” “a shiny face [being] an emblem of... continuity of race” (HAD, May 23, 1949, col. 6350). Other people claimed to have found incontrovertible evidence of race through “the nail test” (“we all know it”), “the hair test,” and “the eyelid test” (col. 6438). In some cases, racial classifications were undertaken by medical personnel, for which purposes more intimate medical examinations were conducted, typically deducing a person’s race from features of his or her genitalia. In the case of women, decisions were made based on the extent of “a pigmentation... visible in the parting of the hair... in certain portions of the anatomy not to be discussed in public,” and in the case of men, by the degree of pigmentation of the scrotum and penis and the presence or absence of the so-called Mongolian spot at the top of the buttocks (col. 6349).9 But arguably, even in such cases of seemingly purely biological criteria for race, the process of classification was infused with social judgments about status and lifestyle. The likelihood of being subjected to these sorts of medical examinations, or of having to endure “the nail test” or “the eyelid test,” was itself a function of social class. Well-to-do, socially prominent, or well-educated individuals were more likely to be spared the humiliation (unless as a deliberate exercise in subjection or one-upmanship).

The close, “commonsense” association of racial and class hierarchies,
coupled with the acceptance within the state that racial classifications were somewhat fluid, meant that social and economic mobility could sometimes enable a change of race. This “unobtrusive back door which is left open at present” was well known, said one senator, and it was an increasingly sore point among more right-wing white communities. It enabled some individuals born to parents regarded as coloured who had attended largely coloured schools and lived in predominantly coloured areas to “pass” for white as adults if they had attained suitable levels of education and affluence. In the case of “natives,” the possibility of racial upward mobility was legally enabled by a provision of the Representation of Natives Act of 1936, according to whose terms a “native” could petition the Minister of the Interior to be declared a “non-native.” Confirming the close association of race and class, a person eligible for such reclassification was someone “of repute” and “held in good public esteem in the locality where he resides and by his associates”; proficient in either English or Afrikaans and demonstrating “intellectual or other attainments more characteristic of European or other non-natives than natives”; and “conform[ing] in regard to his standards and habits of life to the standards and habits of life of Europeans.”

So the instability of racial definition was temporal as well as spatial: A person’s racial identity could be differently classified by a number of laws operating simultaneously, but could also change over time along with other life circumstances.

In short, prior to 1948, racial classification was the site of many paradoxes. As the state’s segregationist ambitions advanced, the corpus of law grew increasingly messy on the subject of defining race. The task of injecting some order into the business of racial classification fell in part to the magistrates and judges adjudicating legal anomalies, but in the main, to a host of administrative officials implementing racially differential laws and regulations. Their approaches were strikingly opposed. If descent made judicial sense as the basis for defining race, it had little place in the routine judgments of the officials kitted out to pour the motley mix of racialized common sense into the various bureaucratic moulds of segregationist institutions and regulations. Ordinarily, decisions about race were inseparable from perceptions of class and status—variable and subjective as these perceptions were. And no one made much of a fuss. Nor was there any significant energy directed into trying to produce a more streamlined or systematic approach. In 1921, Patrick Duncan, the Minister of Mines, first mooted the idea of creating a national population register to allocate a fixed racial identity to every citizen; but his proposal was stillborn. A 1935 Parliamentary Select Committee reconsidered the prospect but remained unenthusiastic, rejecting it as impracticable and unnecessarily costly (HAD, March 13, 1950, col. 2814). It was the National Party, elected to power in 1948, which rose zealously to this challenge, perceiving it to be central to the production of more effective and integrated mechanisms of racial sur-
veillance. The following section examines the National Party's attempts at producing a more orderly—and rigid—system of racial classification by means of the codification and implementation of the 1950 Population Registration Act.

The 1950 Population Registration Act

Preserving “Racial Purity”

The Nationalist government acted swiftly to create a new legal and bureaucratic machinery for racial classification. The Population Registration Act, passed in 1950, was an attempt to produce fixed, stable and uniform criteria for racial classifications which would then be binding across all spheres of a person’s life. Every citizen was to be issued an identity document recording his or her race, as either “a white person, a coloured person or a Native,” assessed according to the Act’s specifications. These racial classifications would be recorded in a new national population register, alongside a host of other pieces of information about all the citizens listed—place of residence, employment, marital status and dependants, place of birth, entitlements to social security, and so on. From an ideological point of view, the 1950 Population Registration Act demonstrated the National Party’s commitment to the preservation of “racial purity,” one of the central issues during the 1948 election, fanned by the white electorate’s fears of “die swart gevaar” (the black menace) threatening to engulf the cities. Indeed, the parliamentary debates about the Population Registration Bill contain singularly strident assertions of white supremacy, and the need to protect it. “The White man,” said one speaker, “is the master in South Africa, and the White man, from the very nature of his origins, from the very nature of his birth, and from the very nature of his guardianship, will remain master in South Africa to the end” (HAD, March 15, 1950, col. 3610). “You cannot get away from the fact,” said another, “that we are a country of many races and the people of South Africa have decided once and for all that in this country we must keep the different races pure” (HAD, March 8, 1950, col. 2548).

The Minister of the Interior introduced and motivated the bill as evidence of “the fierce determination of the majority of South Africa to leave no stone unturned to ensure the preservation of a white South Africa” (HAD, March 16, 1950, col. 3157). “We should have one aim and purpose,” he insisted: “the preservation of white civilisation in South Africa” (HAD, March 15, 1950, col. 2972). Nationalist MPs supported the bill for its capacities to “build walls” at a time when “dividing walls are very rapidly collapsing” (HAD, April 18, 1950, col. 1007).

The Population Registration Act created the legal and administrative
equivalents of this ideological fervor for erecting impenetrable barriers—what the Opposition party called “jackal-proof fencing”—between races. The idea behind the bill was “to demarcate very sharply and very definitely now and for all time” (HAD, June 1, 1950, col. 3926); to “reach the stage where the lines of demarcation are clearly laid down and where everybody knows where he belongs” (HAD, March 15, 1950, col. 2969). If racial categories were imprecise and mobile under the previous regime, the intention now was to designate racial identities in ways that were rigid and binding throughout a person’s lifetime, rather than subject to repeated negotiation. In this respect, the Population Registration Act was as much a tool in the remaking of the state as it was an instrument in the preservation of “racial purity.”

“Modernizing” the State

Although Union in 1910 established a nationally unified state, this incorporated a strong tendency for the decentralization of power to provincial and local authorities. Prior to the 1940s, there was relatively little emphasis on the need for regional uniformity. Nor was there much of an effort to establish consistency across the various pieces of legislation produced within the central state. Each department of state was responsible for its own legislation, without necessarily consulting or collaborating with others in the production of policy of mutual concern. By the late 1930s, however, this form of state came increasingly into question. The growing global enthusiasm for a more centrally unified and assertively interventionist state attracted mounting support within a range of bureaucratic circles, particularly with the advent of World War II (Posel 2000).

As unprecedented numbers of black people deluged the cities, existing apparatuses of state control failed dismally to exercise any effective control over the situation. Local authorities declared themselves wholly overwhelmed as unemployment, overcrowding, ill health, and crime escalated alarmingly. The need for a more centralized, systematic, and multipronged approach to problems of governance, particularly where black people were concerned, grew increasingly apparent—so that by the 1948 election, a consensus had emerged within the white polity on the need for a bigger, more powerful central state, taking full responsibility for restoring social order and buttressing the foundations of white supremacy. As the National Party saw it, this commitment to rethinking the powers, responsibilities, and institutional character of the state was essentially a modernizing project, enabling a more expert, well-planned, and systematic strategy for racial domination. The apartheid version of the modern state was one that was sufficiently large, powerful, knowledgeable and well coordinated to keep each race in its proper place economically, politically, and socially.

In this, the idea of a national population register was vaunted as having an integral and critical role to play. The influential Afrikaans newspa-
per *Die Burger* saw it as “an indispensible part of the machinery of a modern state” (cited in HAD, March 13, 1950, col. 2826); Nationalist MPs celebrated the Population Registration Bill on behalf of all those “who believe in order, and who believe in better organisation, and who believe in a better arrangement between the various races in South Africa” (col. 2794). The Minister of the Interior saw the legislation as necessary “to establish a proper organisation for our State” (col. 2793); “through the medium of this population register,” he said, “we are laying the foundation for a planned organisation of our national life” (col. 2837). For what the national population register promised was the prospect of a single, centralized, and all-encompassing system of racial classification linked to a comprehensive and integrated data base, in which “presently scattered information” about the lives of individual citizens would be “concentrated and brought together” and cross-checked with their racial type.

This was indeed a high-modernist fantasy, a hankering for totalizing order, positioning the eye of the state at the pinnacle of an orderly bureaucracy, with a panoramic view of the racial landscape and everything constructed upon it. The scope of this vision was unprecedented, not simply in respect of black people. For the first time ever, white people, too, were to be subjected to copious information-gathering, being required to carry official identity documents as the fulcrum of integrated and cross-referenced biographical data. This was the issue that in fact generated the most heated controversy in the bill’s passage through parliament. As an Opposition MP put it, “this is extraordinary legislation. We are all to be docketed, ticketed, information is to be given about everyone of us . . . . It is going to be a life history of everybody from the cradle to the grave” (Senate Debates, May 29, 1950, col. 3637). The Bill authorized similarly panoptic surveillance of racial boundaries on the ground through the proviso that a policeman or any other “duly authorised officer” could demand to see a person’s identity document—with its racial label—at any time.

**Defining “Race” for These Purposes**

The version of race written into the Population Registration Act was shaped largely by this law’s role in the process of “modernizing” racial domination—although this conceptualization was not without some controversy. Talk about the Population Registration Act as the safeguard of “racial purity” was suffused with the semiotics of “blood.” “Pure” races were “full-blooded,” whereas the “racial mixture of blood [was] an evil thing” (HAD, June 24, 1949, col. 9066), bringing biological, moral, and social pollution. One National Party Senator went so far as to ponder with horror exactly “what the biological reaction would be on . . . a person who got the blood of a different race into his veins” (Senate Debates, May 11, 1950, col. 2389). So unsurprisingly, some of the protagonists of this legislation argued strongly that the law should define race according to strictly biological criteria:
If we are going to make a... clear demarcation, as to who is going to be classified as European in this country and who is going to be classified as Coloured, then we must definitely take blood into consideration. It is no use saying that we know these people are Coloured. We know these people are Coloured but, because by repute and common consent they are white, we are going to make them white. By so doing we are going to allow Coloured blood into this race which we, some of us, wish to maintain so wonderfully pure. I feel it is very, very urgent (Senate Debates, May 1, 1950, col. 40020).15

Similar reasoning must have inspired the Prime Minister D. F. Malan to propose to the 1950 National Party congress that race should be defined on the basis of “one-sixth of ancestry” (cited in HAD, March 13, 1950, col. 2781). As before, however, the prospect of basing racial type on descent exposed a raw nerve within white communities generally, and among white Afrikaners particularly. As the parliamentary Opposition was wont to point out, “which of the honourable members... is prepared to say that he knows of no white person in South Africa who has no tinge of non-European blood somewhere?” (HAD, March 17, 1967, col. 3183).16 Equally important, basing judgments about race wholly—or even largely—on “blood,” which would have required documented evidence of descent, was utterly at odds with the political and bureaucratic logic of the national population register. From this point of view, what was required was a process of mass racial classification, encompassing millions of people, to be undertaken as efficiently and inexpensively as possible.17 Hence the need for a definition of racial categories that was minimally controversial and maximally practical. The architects of apartheid race policy recognized that introducing an expectation of scientific precision in the definition of race would have scuppered the project from the start. As Eiselen, the Secretary for Native Affairs, put it, “it is almost impossible to determine with any certainty which people are natives and which people are coloureds.... [Therefore]... it would be an uneconomical waste of time and money to try, throughout the country, to determine a person’s race with precision” (NTS 1764[a])—a view widely echoed by practitioners of “native administration,” among whom “the general consensus of opinion is that an ‘ideal’ or ‘watertight’ definition... of race is practically impossible” (NTS 1764[b]).18

It is probably also significant that Verwoerd, who was already a powerful player in shaping the development of apartheid policies, took the view that there were no purely biological determinants of race, preferring to speak of “a higher social civilisation [of] the Caucasian race” (HAD, March 16, 1950, col. 3419; cited in Miller 1993:650) as the basis for white privilege.19 As a sociologist based at the University of Stellenbosch during the 1930s, Verwoerd had taken the view that “at bottom... differences between blacks and whites [should be seen] in a social rather than a biological context” (cited in Miller 1993:651).
In motivating the Population Registration Bill, the Minister of the Interior was therefore resolute that “there is no question of descent or blood” (HAD, March 16, 1950, col. 3419), preferring to stick to the notion of race that had come to dominate administrative practice during the previous regime: that is, treating it as a judgment based on appearance and lifestyle. Indeed, if anything, the architects of the new racial classification policy were much more explicit than their predecessors in defining and justifying race as an avowedly social construction. They had already made this position clear with the promulgation of the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 (prohibiting interracial marriage), instructing all marriage officers that “racial appearance and social habits, not birth certificates, must be deciding factors” in pronouncing on racial type.\textsuperscript{20} The Group Areas Act of 1950 also highlighted the social dimensions of race in its provision that women would automatically assume the race of their husbands or partners (unless in the case of a partnership “up” the racial ladder, when an African or coloured woman paired up with a white man).

In debating the Population Registration Bill, the Minister of the Interior argued in similar vein, that a racial classification was a judgment of a person’s “social status” (HAD, March 8, 1950, col. 2520), made in accordance with the views of his or her social peers. The test of race was therefore “the judgment of society—conventions which had grown up during the hundreds of years we have been here… The intention of the legislature was… that the classification of a person should be made according to the views held by the members of that community” (HAD, March 17, 1967, cols. 3183, 3172). A person’s appearance or social associations would be the deciding factor in classification: “The test, as stipulated by the law, is the opinion of a person’s fellow citizens (HAD, March 8, 1950, col. 2520).

In some respects, the substance of the law itself was less clear-cut, drawing (as previous segregationist legislation had done) on considerations of appearance, social acceptance, and descent in the classification of race. But the emphasis was placed on the first two (which in turn shaped how the Population Registration Act was implemented—as discussed later in the paper). Three racial groups were defined as follows:

A white person is one who in appearance is, or who is generally accepted as, a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person. (Section 1[xv], author’s emphasis)

A “native” is a person who is in fact or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa. (Section 1[x])

A coloured person is a person who is not a white person nor a native. (Section 1[iii])
Legal commentators have often drawn attention to the vagaries of these definitions, particularly the residual definition of a “coloured.” The new law remained imprecise in specifying exactly what distinguished a white from a coloured in appearance; nor was the idea of “general acceptance” uncontroversial. Indeed, the looseness with which these racial categories were defined was crucial to the relative ease with which they were administered bureaucratically. Still, there is a little more flesh on the racial bones of this law, which is important for the emphasis it placed on the social dimensions of race. Unlike much of the previous legislation on racial categories, the Population Registration Act supplied a few more clues as to how to assess “appearance,” in ways that made the link between race and social class absolutely explicit. In deciding whether a person was in appearance obviously white, “his habits, education and speech and deportment and demeanour in general shall be taken into account” (Section 1[2]). Being light-skinned was expressly seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for being classified white, because “general acceptance” had likewise to have been established (see definition of a white person quoted above).

For, as the Minister of the Interior declared, “there are people who are Coloured in appearance although they are actually Europeans”—people who lived as whites and needed protection against the indignities and harassment of being deemed coloured. The issue of descent became relevant insofar as “a person shall not be classified as a white person if one of his natural parents has been classified as a coloured person or a Bantu” (Sections 1 and 5[5]).

If the substance of the Population Registration Act did not fundamentally change the content of racial categories operative pre-1948, it radically transformed their form. As one of the Chief Native Commissioners put it, “once a native . . . always and for all purposes a native” (NTS 1764[b]). For the first time, a racial classification would be uniform and immobile, established once and for all, to apply across the range of experiences subject to racialized legislation. Under segregationist policies, a person’s official classification could slip and slide, across space and over time, with varying degrees of correspondence to the individual’s subjective sense of his or her race. The Population Registration Act promised to eradicate this fluidity, giving fixity to hierarchies of privilege and opportunity. A person’s racial classification would become a verdict on his or her future entitlements and prospects, as much as on those that had marked that person’s past. In this respect, the Population Registration Act was not only an instrument of a modernizing state, but also a powerful tool of patronage in the pursuit of a party political project. Conferring the judgment of whiteness on loyal National Party supporters—accepted as such in like-minded communities but whose appearances were open to readings as “coloured”—provided a means of reward as well as discipline, one which promised a lifetime’s worth of social, economic, and political privilege to the beneficiaries.
Implementing the Population Registration Act

The Population Registration Act created a mechanism for the surveillance and reproduction of racial boundaries that was available for popular, as well as bureaucratic, use. Having defined racial categories in ways intended to resonate closely with their social construction, the Population Registration Act also established procedures for adjudicating and policing race which empowered racial communities to defend their racial “purity” as they understood it.

Putting the Population Registration Act into Bureaucratic Practice

The Population Registration Act conferred the highest administrative power for racial classifications on the Director of the Census, on the understanding that the first round of racial classifications would form part of the 1951 national population census. The plan was that every citizen (with the exception of African women) would receive a racial classification during the process of being enumerated for the census. In other words, census-takers became racial classifiers.

Yoking the process of racial classification to the population census underlined the modernist notions of statecraft underpinning the Population Registration Act. The idea of a population census typifies the sort of comprehensive and systematic information-gathering, coupled to modes of orderly regulation and surveillance, which Foucault identified as the hallmark of modern governmentality. However, the Nationalists added their own distinctive imprint to the process, in making race the mould within which all of this knowledge and power were constituted. Every social “fact” was racially coded; race became the unit for every social measurement.

All of this, then, gave unprecedented powers to the people entrusted with the business of racial classification—power that was often inversely proportional to their social standing, education, or training. As the architects of the new policy readily admitted, these were “raw teams” (NTS 1764[c]) of census-takers, in many cases otherwise unemployed. The Opposition was outraged: “The whole future status of a man and his children would depend on the opinion, the unchecked opinion, of an enumerator who is not a judicial officer” (Senate Debates, May 29, 1950, col. 3642), of “ordinary people subject to their prejudices and subject to their particular political points of view” (HAD, March 8, 1950, col. 2527). But the Nationalists were undeterred, insisting that “ordinary untrained people” were fully capable of making racial classifications (HAD, March 13, 1950, col. 2810)—a position thoroughly in line with the epistemology of race undergirding the Population Registration Act. Race was as before, largely a matter of common sense. Indeed, the ordinary social experience of white privilege was exactly the standpoint from which race was to be judged, so as to perpetuate “conventions” of race already ingrained in the social fabric.
Predictably, the enormity of the undertaking was such that the process of racial classification remained incomplete after the 1951 census. To facilitate its continuation, in 1953 the Director of the Census delegated his powers of racial classification to all officials of the Department of Native Affairs (and then again in 1969 to all public servants). Unless an appeal was lodged to the Race Classification Appeal Board, these officials had breathtaking power with little or no accountability: Guided loosely by the racial definitions supplied by the Population Registration Act, they made decisions that would then dominate the lives of the individuals concerned at all times and in every facet of experience. Notwithstanding the gaps and uncertainties of the legislative guidelines, only rarely did an official complain that his brief was too vague. Most proceeded with confidence and surety, making “native” the default classification wherever any uncertainties existed (NTS 1764[c]). When an interdepartmental committee was appointed to evaluate the racial categories instituted by the Population Registration Act, it reported finding that none of the officials interviewed found the categories inappropriate or unworkable (NTS 1764[d]).

As before, however, one person’s commonsense convictions about race did not necessarily coincide with another’s, and the legislation permitted each to proceed as assertively as the other. So conducting racial classifications became a process as heterogenous as the officials undertaking them. Although there is no single record of these practices, press reports, case histories documented by the South African Institute of Race Relations, personal anecdotes, and legal appeals go some way toward an exposé. In some cases, the criteria were (at least overtly) crudely physical—such as the use of the so-called pencil test to differentiate between whites and nonwhites.” If a person’s hair was sufficiently tightly curled to hold a pencil, then supposedly that person was not white (the issue of being native or coloured then being decided separately). Appeal boards adjudicating requests for reclassification sometimes called barbers to testify as to the texture of the person’s hair (SAIRR 1967: 20).

I have been told of a process in one of the small towns in the Western Cape whereby people were lined up on the station platform and then racially classified by an official who walked up the line shouting out who was “coloured” and who was “native.”22 (Naturally such processes never included people who were deemed white, which again underscores the tacit coupling of race and social class, even in the case of these seemingly purely physically based racial classifications.) In other instances, the criteria for race were exclusively social—sometimes bizarrely so. For example, one of the judges presiding in a case to a Race Classification Appeal Board acknowledged that “the environment and dress of the person concerned” were crucial determinants of race: “If the applicant were to appear in a waiter’s uniform in the company of a number of non-European waiters, he would pass as a coloured” (HAD, March 17, 1967 col. 3173). And the Cape Times (July 21, 1956) reported that “these methods have been reported in
Johannesburg as being used by the Race Classification Boards to determine whether a man was Native or Coloured: a soccer player is a Native, a rugby player is a Coloured. A high bed is Coloured, a low bed Native.”

The scope for capricious and arbitrary judgments was breathtaking, as illustrated by the case of Willie Vickerman, brought to the attention of the South African Institute of Race Relations. Mr. Vickerman had grown up “coloured,” the son of a white father and African mother. He worked on the railways in a job given only to a coloured person and earned coloured wages. His five children were all classified as coloureds. He owned land in a coloured area and paid coloured taxes. Then, on the morning of August 4, 1955, everything changed: Willie Vickerman was reinvented as “a native.” He recounted how a team of race classifiers had set up office in the laundry where he was employed:

When I entered the office, a European man, standing with two African policemen, asked my name. I told him. The conversation was in Afrikaans only… The other European man asked the following questions: my name, what race I was (I said “kleurling”), where I was born, to whom I was married, my wife’s maiden name, what race my father was, and what race my mother was; they asked by wife’s race, where I lived, what was my home language (I said English and Afrikaans), he asked if I could speak Sechuana and I said “yes”); then he examined me by looking at me, and made notes. Then the document was passed to Mr Morgan and he said to me: “You were born in Bechuanaland?” I said “yes.” He said: “but in Bechuanaland there are no Coloureds.” He said: “if you put milk in coffee, how does it look?” I said: “it remains coffee but it changes colour.” He then said: “you are the same as that chap. Go that side” and he gave me a form B.V.R. 30…. He said nothing more. It was only when I read the paper outside that I saw that I was refused classification as Coloured.23

As in Mr. Vickerman’s case, family and personal lives were utterly shattered by racial classifications that violated a person’s subjective sense of his or her race.24 Literally overnight, people in this position found themselves disbarred from living in the houses and areas where they had lived up to that point, their children excluded from schools they had been attending, their positions of employment in question, with instant liability for a new set of taxes and levies, and generally subjected to “the deep sense of shame” attached to being pushed down a rung on the racial ladder.25 The South African Institute of Race Relations documented many cases of the extreme hardships inflicted by racial classifiers who, for their own reasons, chose to impose a racial classification at odds with the judgment of a person’s social peers. Many families were ruptured when children of the same parents received different racial classifications, or all children were classified differently from their parents.26

The Population Registration Act allowed people to appeal their race classification. Many of these cases were heard by Race Classification Appeal
Boards. Presided over by a judge or magistrate, the appeal boards were appointed by the Minister of Interior. Ironically, the appeal procedure gave new life to the “scientific” discourse of race, as physical anthropologists or geneticists were called as expert witnesses by the appellants to testify that their physical features (such as skin, hairs, ears, and nose) did not conform to the racial category officially assigned to them.\textsuperscript{27}

By March 31, 1964, 3,940 appeals had been lodged, of which approximately one-third were by persons wanting reclassification from “coloured” to “white,” and the remainder from “bantu” to “coloured.” By June of that year, 2,823 of these applications had succeeded, and 17 appeals against the Race Classification Appeal Board were due to be heard in the Supreme Court (SAIRR 1964:137–38). These statistics are interesting in two ways. First, most of the appeals were successful, and second, the number of appeals constituted a very small proportion of the millions of racial classifications undertaken by that time.\textsuperscript{28} The first point did not go unnoticed by the architects of the population registration policy, who were concerned to end “the creeping integration . . . of alarming proportions” (HAD, March 17, 1967, col. 3180) facilitated by the supposed leniency of the appeal boards.\textsuperscript{29} From the late 1960s, greater emphasis was placed on the issue of descent, through the provision that a person’s racial classification had to be in line with those of his or her parents (on the understanding that if the parents themselves differed racially, the “lower” racial ranking would apply to the child) (see HAD, Jan. 17, 1967, col. 3176).

The second point, however, exposes the baselessness of these anxieties. Unfortunately, the system established under the auspices of the Population Registration Act was remarkably effective in drawing a huge chunk of the population onto the national population register, and the basis for this success was the fact that in the large majority of cases, the racial classifications produced by officialdom were not contested. To some extent, this must have derived from ignorance of the appeal procedure, or an inability or unwillingness to go through with it. But it seems unlikely that these factors can fully explain the many millions of people who did not appeal against the definitions of race imposed by the state. A full explanation is beyond the scope of this article. But the line of argument taken thus far suggests, as an hypothesis, that appeals might have been forestalled by the extent to which the state’s racial classifiers accorded official legal status to existing social versions of peoples’ racial type. This is not to presume an exact fit between bureaucratic and lived versions of racial classification. Indeed, there are many stories that indicate a much more hybrid relationship between the two. The suggestion is rather that the state’s typology of racial difference was sufficiently institutionalized and normalized for racial classifiers, armed with a notion of race explicitly sensitized to existing class boundaries, cultural styles, and patterns of prejudice, to have produced classifications that in most cases resonated closely with those produced socially.
Social Mechanisms for Policing Racial Boundaries

It was not only individuals who were entitled to appeal against their own racial classifications. Having understood race as a judgment of social standing, the Population Registration Act also allowed “third parties” to object to a racial classification with which they disagreed. The effect of this measure was to empower racially designated communities to police their racial boundaries as they defined them, with the sanction of the law. Naturally, the legislators had the interests and anxieties of white communities uppermost in this regard. As the Minister of Labour put it,

The correct classification of every individual is a matter of public interest. If I, for instance, live in a suburb which is predominantly a European suburb . . . and a person who is obviously a Coloured person moves in and lives next to me, and I know he is a Coloured person but ostensibly he is considered to be a white person, surely I have the right to object to his classification as a white person . . . . I can also say that in regard to the admittance of children to schools that if any children go to a European school and children are admitted to that school whom I know are Coloured but who have been mistakenly classified as European, I should have the right to object to the classification. That is in the public interest. (Senate Debates, June 1, 1950, cols. 3943, 3944)

The looseness with which the Population Registration Act defined racial categories—allowing for both appearance and social habits as criteria—gave maximum flexibility to these self-preserving powers of racial communities. On the one hand, the law was concerned to protect people socially accepted and “known” to be “white” from being classified coloured if they had a “darkish complexion.” And on the other hand, the law also allowed white communities to query the racial credentials of people whom they considered to be coloured on the basis of their appearance, even if in other social circles they had become accepted as white.

There were many such cases, of white communities denying access to their neighborhoods or schools to families or individuals considered non-white—in some cases overriding racial classifications made in terms of the 1951 census itself. For example: Early in 1967 two children of the Dickson family who were officially white were admitted to a small white primary school in Plettenberg Bay. In protest, the parents of forty-two of the other forty-five pupils kept them away from their classes. It was announced in November that the Race Classification Board had reclassified the whole family as coloured (SAIRR 1967:21).

These communal powers were not restricted to whites, however. It must have been very gratifying to the architects of apartheid that African and coloured communities also sometimes used these avenues for ensuring their racial “purity.” For example,
Dottie was born to African parents in Randfontein, but happened to be lighter-skinned than are most Africans and to have long, wavy, copper-coloured hair. Because of this she was rejected by principals of African schools, and cannot attend a coloured school because she can speak only Sotho. (SAIRR 1967:21)

Conclusion

The primary focus of this paper has been an analysis of state practice in respect to racial classification, and its epistemological underpinnings. It has shown how apartheid racial categories—drawing heavily on those enacted by the segregationist state—were wielded as instruments of surveillance and control by a state animated by fantasies of omniscience as much as omnipotence. The architects of apartheid racial classification policies recognized explicitly that racial categories were constructs, rather than descriptions of real essences—a version of the idea of race which contributed directly to the enormous powers wielded by racial classifiers. These powers were allocated increasingly widely over the years, within growing legions of state officials and communities set on preserving their racial boundaries.

If constructs, these categories were powerfully rooted in the materiality of everyday life. The ubiquity of the state’s racial designations, and the extent to which they meshed with lived hierarchies of class and status, meant that apartheid’s racial grid was strongly imprinted in the subjective experience of race. This is not to say that those subject to processes of racial classification wholly acquiesced to them, nor that these categories were fully or simply internalized. The complexities and hybridities attached to the ways in which apartheid’s racial categories were lived are beyond the scope of this article. Yet it would be difficult to deny the extent to which the demarcation of South African society into whites, Indians, coloureds, and Africans has been normalized—for many, a “fact” of life.

It is no surprise, then, that despite the repeal of the Population Registration Act, these racial categories are still writ large in the everyday life of the citizens of the “new” South Africa. New debates and contestations on the subject of race have begun to proliferate. But it remains the norm for articles and letters in the press, reports on radio and television, and other modes of conversation and commentary to identify social actors in racialized terms, attesting to the lingering salience of these racial constructions within social consciousness. There is little reason to suppose that they will atrophy spontaneously. Paradoxically, one of the principal legal instruments for redressing the racial imbalances of the apartheid past—the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998)—reproduces the racial categories enacted in the Population Registration Act as the basis on which affirmative action is to be instituted and measured. This legislation names “black people” as one
of three “designated groups” identified as the targets for affirmative action. But “black people” are in turn defined as those who were previously classified as “Africans,” “Coloureds,” and “Indians” (chap. 1). If, as Paul Gilroy argues, “action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively when it has been purged of any lingering respect for the idea of “race” (2000:13), then the residues of apartheid’s racial categories remain a daunting obstacle to the pursuit of a nonracial democracy in South Africa.

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NTS 1763[c], 53/276, Magistrate, Graaff Reinet to Commissioner of Pensions, Pretoria, May 30, 1929, re “Hottentots.”

NTS 1763[d], 53/76, SNA to General Manager, South African Railways, Aug. 27, 1937, re “Native Fares: Griqua Passengers.”

NTS 1763[e], 53/276, SNA to Under-Secretary for Native Affairs, March 5, 1926, re “Definition of ‘Native.’”

NTS 1763[f], SNA to General Manager, SA Railways and Harbours, July 11, 1945, re “Non-European Staff: Proof of Race.”

NTS 1763[g], 53/276, SNA to Receiver of Revenue, OFS, Aug. 27, 1946, re “Definition of a Native.”

NTS 1763[h], 53/276, SNA to Messrs. Stegmann et al., April 1, 1946, re “Purchase from Native.”

NTS 1763[i], 53/276, SNA to General Manager, SARH, July 11, 1945, re Non-European Staff: Proof of Race.”

NTS 1763[j], 53/276, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, to Chief Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, Nov. 23, 1936, re “Pass Laws: Definition of ‘Native.’”

NTS 1763[k], 53/276, General Manager, South African Railways and Harbours to SNA, June 23, 1945, re “Non-European Staff: Proof of Race.”

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Notes

1. For a diagnostic reading of the silences in the scholarly literature, see Posel (forthcoming): On the planners of apartheid, see, e.g., Marks and Trapido (1987:21): “The petty-bourgeois obsession with racial ‘purity’ and eugenics was given expression in the passage of the Population Registration Act, the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act.”

2. In the Cape, by early in the twentieth century, a three-way racial grid was emerging—the 1904 Census for example, classified three racial groups. See Goldin (1987:13).

3. For example, the Transvaal legislation used the categories “kaffir” and “coolie” without any attempt at producing definitions (Smythe 1995:67); most statutes of the Orange Free State used the terms “native” and “kleurlingen”/“coloured person” without definition (Smythe 1995:139), while the Cape legislation referred to “natives” typically with no definition (Smythe 1995:313).

4. Central Archives Depot (SAB) NTS 1763[a], File 55/276, Acting Chief Commissioner, SAP, to Secretary for Justice, June 11, 1912, re “Native Labour Act no. 15 of 1911.” All future references to this archive will be noted parenthetically.

5. The same position was reiterated in later years; see, e.g., NTS 1763[f].
6. Even the Nationalist Minister of Interior was clear on this point—see HAD, March 7, 1967, col. 3172.
7. House of Assembly Debates (HAD), March 13, 1950, col. 2782. All future references to this source will be cited parenthetically.
8. The Star, Nov. 28, 1950, “Woman shows the colour of her skin”; quoted in the Senate by a UP Senator claiming to have heard this from a member of the National Party Executive (Senate Debates, June 1, 1950 col. 4004).
9. Thanks to Professor Trefor Jenkins for this information.
11. There were probably striking and important regional differences in the prospects for such mobility, facilitated by different versions of the distinction between whites, coloureds, and natives. Arguably, in the Western Cape, a long history of racial coexistence with coloureds meant that whites often felt far more comfortable with the idea of upward racial mobility on the part of a “respectable” coloured, whereas in the Transvaal and Natal, the notion of “cross-breeding” and “half-castes” provoked greater degrees of suspicion and distaste. This point needs further research; thanks to Dunbar Moodie for his insights.
13. Section 5(1) of the Population Registration Act, no. 30 of 1950. The Act also provided for ethnic subgroupings within the “Coloured” and “Bantu” groupings. At this stage, “Asians” were considered a subgroup of the coloured population group. In theory, these racial classifications would supersede all others made for the purposes of other legislation, even if these other laws were still on the statute books. In practice it took much longer to realign all the other racial legislation in accordance with the definitions provided by the Population Registration Act.
14. Senate Debates, May 30, 1950, col. 3687. All future references to this source will be cited parenthetically.
15. See also HAD, March 15, 1950, cols. 3001–2.
16. See also HAD, March 13, 1950 col. 2803, where Opposition MPs accused the Nationalists of lacking the “moral courage” to delve into the ancestry of whites.
17. Initially African women and children were exempted from the exercise; but even so, this was thought to leave around 11 million people to whom racial IDs were to be issued (University of Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, AD 1715 24.4, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1949, “National Registration”).
19. See also Senate Debates, June 1, 1950, col. 3946: “There is no provision in this Bill for investigating the ancestry of any individual.” At this stage I have no evidence of Verwoerd’s direct intervention in the formulation of racial categories. But his stature was already such that his critique of scientific racism must have resonated in policy-making circles.
21. Given the enormity of the task, a decision was made to leave African women off the population register in the first instance. The process of census enumeration was planned as follows: Once a person had completed the census form, the enumerator would give him or her a provisional identity (ID) number; this was then recorded on the census form along with the enumerator’s decision...
Race as Common Sense

about that person’s race; the person was then instructed to send a photograph to the Director of the Census, together with the ID number, so that the photo could be attached to the national population register and included in the person’s ID document, along with the racial classification (Senate Debates, May 29, 1950, col. 3624).

22. Personal communication from Francis Wilson.
23. UWL Historical Papers, AD 1715 24.4, statement by Willie Vickerman.
24. Mr Vickerman appealed against his classification to a Race Classification Appeal Board, and lost—this time on the grounds that his wife was a “native.”
25. UWL, Historical Papers, AD 1715 24.4, SAIRR, “Some Points Raised by the Deputation of Coloured People Interviewed by Action Committee on Tuesday 16th August 1955.”
26. Such cases are reported in the SAIRR’s annual surveys of race relations.
27. Personal communications from Phillip Tobias and Trefor Jenkins.
28. By 1966, over 12 million racial classifications had been entered on the national population register.
29. “Descent” therefore was less a matter of “blood,” more a bureaucratic matter of using the racial classifications of one generation as the basis for classifying the next.
30. The purpose of the act is “to provide for employment equity” against the background of “pronounced disadvantages for certain categories of people,” namely, “blacks, women and disabled people.”