

# RACIAL ANTAGONISM AND THE ORIGINS OF APARTHEID IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOLD MINING INDUSTRY, 1886-1924: A SPLIT LABOR MARKET ANALYSIS

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an effort to examine the historical roots of the massive South African system of racial stratification known as apartheid. Although South Africa has been a highly racially stratified society permeated by a racist ideology for several hundred years, and although South Africa knew a form of slavery based on race, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the system of apartheid that we see so in evidence today began to take shape. Apartheid is one particular version of a "competitive" form of race relations in van den Berghe's (1967) sense of that term. Our basic argument is that apartheid's roots were planted in the early years of South African industrialization, especially with respect to the development of the gold mining industry in the latter decades of the nineteenth and the first few decades of the twentieth century. The gold

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mining industry was the focus of South African industrialization to the same extent that cotton production was the focus of the world's first industrial revolution, and for this reason attention in this paper is given to how the production of gold provided the economic basis for an extreme form of racial antagonism.

On what kind of soil did apartheid take root? There have been numerous ways of approaching an answer to this question, but in recent years some of the most highly regarded sociological works on the early development of apartheid have framed their analyses in Marxist terms, and especially along the lines of the version of Marxist analysis known as "structural Marxism." For the structural Marxists, an ongoing social system organized along capitalist lines constitutes an irreducible whole in which the needs and aims of the capitalist ruling class are fundamental in determining the structure of the whole. Given the domination of a system by a capitalist class, other features of the social system will be structured so as to benefit the capitalist class, and this occurs to a very great extent by virtue of some sort of "unconscious logic" of the social system itself. Thus, for example, the state in capitalist society cannot be other than a "capitalist state": regardless of the intentions of state personnel, the state cannot do other than serve the economic interests of the capitalist class. Similarly, particular forms of racial antagonism are themselves manifestations of the interests of the capitalist class and are structured by the capitalist system's logic to serve that class. It is frequently argued by structural Marxists that racial antagonisms in capitalist societies result from a "divide-and-rule" policy of the capitalist class. By creating divisions between racially diverse segments of the working class, capitalists are able to weaken the organizational potential of the working class, thus keeping wages lower and workers more docile.

How do these general notions apply to the case of apartheid? In his *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa, 1900-1960* (1979), Robert Davies has suggested that the job color bars that developed in South Africa in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth century—the essence of apartheid—actually functioned in the interests of mining capital because they allowed white workers to be "bought off" or "bribed" by higher wages into ideological support for the capitalist system. Although Davies clearly acknowledges that it was white workers who were the ones making vocal demands for job color bars against African workers, he argues that mining capital happily acceded to the white workers' wishes because of the divide-and-rule implications of these color bars. As Davies puts it:

Taking on higher paid "poor whites" instead of blacks or granting economic concessions to white wage-earners, made capital more resistant to the economic demands of blacks . . . Moreover, institutionalising white trade unions on a racially discriminatory basis served

to weaken any possible identification which white wage-earners might have had with even the economic class struggles of the black dominated classes thus depriving the latter of support which at this conjuncture might have proved decisive (1979, p. 131).

A similar view is expressed in Frederick Johnstone's *Race, Class, and Gold* (1976), probably the most comprehensive work yet written on the racial antagonisms in the early phase of South African industrialization. The most significant aspect of Johnstone's argument concerns what he believes were the limitations of the mine owners' opposition to the job color bars demanded by white workers. Johnstone argues again and again that, although it is clear that the mine owners frequently opposed job color bars, their opposition was only partial in nature. Indeed, he suggests, they never wanted to abolish job color bars at all, but wanted simply to reduce the scope of their application. This allowed them apparently to have the best of both worlds, to have their economic cake and eat it too. By reducing the scope of bars against employing African workers, they could employ them in large numbers and at very low wages. But by maintaining a minimal color bar, they could prevent the formation of a larger and more solidary working class composed of blacks and whites united in a common struggle.

It is clear from most of Johnstone's discussion that he is often not engaged in any sort of direct analysis of the motives and interests of mine owners, but rather indirectly infers these motives and interests from certain objective consequences that mine owners' actions are said to produce. For example, he asserts that "the job color bar did have the positive effect for the [mining] companies of reinforcing the division of the working class" (1976, p. 149). It is hard to deny that that was indeed the case, but it is another matter altogether to conclude that mine owners' apparent disinclination to try to abolish the color bar entirely sprang from their *intention* to maintain a divide-and-rule policy. As we shall see later, there is a radically different interpretation of this situation that Johnstone insufficiently considers, and one that, if correct, undermines his theoretical analysis.

Perhaps the most extreme structural Marxist analysis of the South African situation is that carried out by Michael Burawoy (1981) in a recent long essay. Burawoy is apparently unprepared to believe that South African society could ever have functioned in a way other than to serve the interests of mining capitalists. The passage of color bars, for example, is said to do just that:

Although job color bars did protect the interests of white mineworkers, at this time they were in no position to enforce their interests against those of the mine owners. Under the circumstances, the impetus for job color bars could only have come from the mine owners. The new regulations bear eloquent testimony to the thesis that under the conditions created by a particular form of reproduction of *labor power*, namely the system of migrant labor, the most profitable form of *labor process* is based on the job color bar (1981, p. 305).

Moreover, in discussing the role of the Pact Government of 1924, a government voted into power by the white working class and firmly committed to the legal entrenchment of job color bars despite the strong opposition of the mine owners, Burawoy claims that:

The Pact Government upheld the capitalist order and, in particular, the interests of mining capital as its first priority because it accepted the rules of that order, namely that the interests of subordinate classes can only be satisfied *after* the satisfaction of the interests of the capitalist class. However, the Pact Government not only protected the interests of the capitalist class but it did so more effectively than its predecessor, the South African Party. It was in a better position to organize the hegemony of capital, that is, present the interests of the capitalist class as the present and future interests of all, simply because it was not the party of capital (1981, p. 309).

The problem with this kind of structural Marxist reasoning has been insightfully identified by Edna Bonacich (1981b), who notes that it puts itself beyond the pale of scientific assessment by systematically protecting itself against any efforts at falsification. As Bonacich comments, "An imaginative person can always think up some reason why a policy serves the long term interests of the system, even though the particular rationalizations may contradict one another" (1981b, p. 338).

Bonacich's objections are directed only to Burawoy, but they apply equally well to the arguments of Davies and Johnstone noted above. Structural Marxism thus constitutes a severely theoretically flawed basis for interpreting the early formation of apartheid in the South African gold mining industry. But more can be said, and that is that the empirical evidence presented by the structural Marxists themselves, especially by Johnstone, is completely inconsistent with their conclusions. Given these theoretical and empirical deficiencies, then, what seems to be called for is a detailed empirical reanalysis of the formation of apartheid in South Africa that is guided by a more logically acceptable theory.

What kind of guiding theory would be appropriate? The answer, we suggest, is one that focuses directly on the concrete *interests* of particular individuals located in specific socioeconomic groupings and not on some vaguely formulated "systemic effects." Such an approach is Bonacich's (1972, 1979, 1981a) split labor market theory of racial antagonism. This theory is rooted in the Marxian tradition but adds an interesting twist to it in explaining racial antagonism. Bonacich accepts the Marxist argument that it is capitalists' search for profits that is the underlying condition giving rise to racial antagonism, but she believes that the actual proximate cause of such antagonism involves the relations between different segments of the working class as each relates to capitalists. She explicitly considers the role of white workers in a way that the more orthodox Marxian theories do not.

In Bonacich's theory, racial antagonism derives from a split labor market, which is a labor market that has been divided into groups of higher-paid and cheaper workers. Given that capitalists always desire to keep the costs of labor down, they will naturally be interested in replacing higher-paid with cheaper workers whenever possible. Thus, cheaper labor is both an actual and a potential threat to higher-paid labor. Not only is there a threat of higher-paid labor being displaced by cheaper labor, but cheaper labor is often used in such economic actions as strikebreaking, and thus its presence in a labor market can keep wages below what they would otherwise be. There is thus an inherent economic basis for conflict between these two segments of the working class.

Conflict that is inherently class conflict can turn into racial antagonism when cheaper and higher-paid labor belong largely to different racial groups, a situation that Bonacich views as resulting from the uneven development of capitalism. When higher-paid labor is economically threatened by cheaper labor, they strive to remove or reduce cheaper labor as a threat. They can do this either by trying to exclude them from migrating into a given territory altogether (an exclusion movement), or, if cheaper labor is already rightfully resident in the territory, by setting up a caste arrangement in which higher-paid labor monopolizes the better paying jobs and relegates the less attractive jobs to cheaper labor.

This paper attempts to show that the split labor market theory makes the best sense of the origins of the apartheid system. White higher-paid gold miners were, by 1924, able to elect a government sympathetic to their interests in removing cheaper African workers from serious competition with them. It was primarily the interests of this group, and not the interests of capitalists, that were being served by job color bars. Had they got their way, capitalists would have prevented the formation of any job color bars because a racially open labor market would have given them free access to African workers and substantially lowered their labor costs.

Although Bonacich has applied her own theory to the South African situation, her analysis deals with a much longer time period and her treatment of the period of the current paper (1886-1924) is brief and sketchy. This paper, therefore, attempts to provide a detailed analysis of that early period of South African industrialization that has so far received little attention from a split labor market perspective.

## **THE SOUTH AFRICAN CLASS STRUCTURE AND THE FORMATION OF A SPLIT LABOR MARKET**

### **The Mining Capitalists**

The main gold-bearing reef known as the Witwatersrand was discovered in the Transvaal in 1886, and from this time on, gold mining became a large-

scale undertaking that dominated South African economic and social life. Gold production on the Witwatersrand was a complicated and expensive process, and for these reasons it attracted large companies with substantial supplies of capital. A handful of large companies came to control the gold production process, and these companies established a common organization, the Chamber of Mines, designed to control the cost of the factors of production, labor in particular (Innes 1984; Lipton 1985). By centralizing and coordinating their operations in this way, the mine owners thus avoided serious competition with each other. The mine owners' control over production costs was thus highly monopsonistic (van der Horst 1971; Johnstone 1976; Lipton 1985), and they had a highly unified economic and political outlook. They were probably as good an example as one could ever find of a ruling class in the Marxist sense.

### African Workers and their Recruitment

One of the greatest problems facing the mine owners in the early years of the gold mining industry was the acute labor shortage. Both highly skilled and unskilled workers were needed in numbers far greater than were initially available. The mine owners had an especially great need for large numbers of unskilled workers. A potentially huge pool of such workers existed in the form of Africans belonging to many different tribal groups. Through a series of so-called Kaffir Wars (1834, 1846, 1851, and 1879) launched against them by British settlers, Africans had been reduced to a conquered and colonized people, making them theoretically available for work in the gold mines. Actually drawing them into the gold mining industry as wage workers, however, turned out to be a very difficult matter. Many Africans continued to have access to productive land and thus to subsistence through their tribal economies, giving them substantial economic independence and making the prospect of working for wages under extremely physically demanding and dangerous conditions very unattractive (Bundy 1979).

One of the earliest efforts used by the mineowners to attract Africans to the mines was the so-called tout system. Under this system, a labor agent or "tout" employed by the mine owners was paid a fee to recruit African workers. However, the touts were generally so zealous in their recruitment efforts that they severely misrepresented wages and working conditions in the mines, thus creating a bad image of the mines among Africans and ultimately intensifying rather than reducing the labor shortage (Callinicos 1982).

The failure of this method of labor recruitment led the mine owners to turn to what has come to be called the migrant labor system. This came into being through the creation by the Chamber of Mines of the Native Labour Supply Association (WNLA) in 1898. The WNLA came into full operation in 1901 and was charged with the responsibility of recruiting African labor both within

and outside the territorial boundaries of South Africa. It employed a new strategy to induce Africans to take up work in the mines. It offered to pay the taxes of prospective workers to the government and to provide them with certain quantities of cash. The workers could then repay the money they owed to the WNLA by working in the mines under contract. This created an indebtedness on the part of the workers, thus reducing their economic independence and establishing a certain compulsion for them to engage in wage work in the mines (Johnstone 1976). In addition to its capacity to increase the supply of labor, the migrant labor system had another advantage for the mine owners: It allowed them to pay very low wage rates to African workers. Under this labor system, workers were separated from their families and their family members continued to subsist through their traditional, precapitalist economies. This meant that the mine owners were responsible only for the subsistence of the worker himself, and this allowed them to pay much lower wages to Africans than to other fully proletarianized workers (Wolpe 1970).

In order to be effective, however, the migrant labor system had to be supplemented by coercive measures because the working conditions in the gold mines were so dangerous and the wages paid to miners so low that a high rate of desertion resulted. The mine owners therefore found it necessary to control the movement and behavior of African workers (Legassick 1974). One of the methods they employed to monitor African workers' movements was housing them on the premises of the mine in prison-like compounds. This compound system allowed mine owners to deal effectively with the problems of absenteeism and desertion (Callinicos 1982; Rex 1974).

Another coercive measure created to supplement the migrant labor system was the contract system. This measure established by the Chamber of Mines required all Africans employed in the gold mines to enter into a binding contract during which they could not seek or accept employment elsewhere. It also forbade African workers to strike or to engage in insubordination. Breach of the contract by African workers was a criminal offense carrying penalties of imprisonment (Callinicos 1982).

Yet, despite the existence of the contract system, Africans still deserted the mines in large numbers, either to return home or to seek work elsewhere. Most of the deserters were never retrieved. This situation led to the creation by the government of "pass laws" (Callinicos 1982). One of the pass laws required Africans to wear a metal badge as an indicator of employment. The other pass law divided the gold mining areas into labor districts that Africans could enter only by possessing a district pass. Africans were permitted to be in a given labor district for up to three days to look for a job. Their failure to find work within this period required them to leave that district to seek work in another one.

Although the migrant labor system and its coercive supplements were somewhat effective in satisfying the mine owners' needs for cheap unskilled

workers, it was not until 1913 that these needs began to be met at a level close to their expectations. In this year, the government of the newly formed Union of South Africa passed a notorious Land Act that allocated 13 percent of the total land area of South Africa to Africans and the remaining 87 percent to whites (Lacey 1981). This act provided that no whites could own land in areas designated as African and no African could own land in areas designated as white. A major consequence of this act was that it pushed thousands of Africans off the land and into wage work. It was after the passage of this act that the mine owners finally began to achieve a stable supply of cheap African labor.

### The White Working Class

The exploitation of gold in South Africa required deep-level mining, a technique unfamiliar in the South African mining industry in the 1880s. Because skilled workers who could perform this kind of mining were not available in South Africa, they had to be imported from abroad. Such workers were drawn primarily from Europe, and especially from the British Isles (Johnstone 1976). Because of the scarcity of their skills, and because they had to be lured from a long distance, European immigrant workers had to be paid high wages. They therefore came to constitute from the very beginning a kind of "labor aristocracy." They were, in Bonacich's terms, higher-paid labor.

The other segment of the white working class in South Africa was made up of Afrikaners, descendants of the original Dutch farmers (Boers) who had settled the country. In the late nineteenth century the Afrikaners were mostly engaged in small-scale farming, and wage labor was largely foreign to them. Yet, around the turn of the century, a number of factors conspired to push Afrikaners increasingly into the wage labor market, and largely as unskilled and semiskilled workers. To a very large extent these involved economic changes affecting farming, either by making Afrikaners increasingly landless, or by making farming an increasingly precarious (or even impossible) way of making a living. The South African War of 1899-1902 was also involved. At the end of the war many farmers were left without homes to return to, and thus they had to turn increasingly to wage work in the mining towns in order to earn a living (van Onselen 1982).

### The Formation of a Split Labor Market

What had developed in the gold mining industry by the early twentieth century was a division of labor and a class structure in which skilled workers were almost exclusively white European immigrants, and in which semiskilled and unskilled workers were both Afrikaners and Africans. Moreover, the price of labor for these groups differed greatly. Skilled European workers were far and away the best paid, earning on average about a dozen times the wage rate



of African workers (Johnstone 1976). As semiskilled and unskilled workers, Afrikaners were paid substantially less than skilled Europeans, but they earned considerably more than Africans. Africans, obviously, were cheap labor.

It is thus clear that there came to be formed very quickly in South Africa a split labor market within the gold mining industry. How do we account for these differences in the price of labor? Bonacich tells us that such differentials result from the uneven development of global capitalism, and this seems to apply to the South African case. European immigrants commanded very high wages for at least three reasons: they had scarce skills that were in great demand, they had to be lured over a long distance, and they were politically enfranchised workers who could organize into labor unions to promote their interests. At the other end of the wage spectrum we find that Africans could be paid very low wages for at least three reasons: they were unskilled; they still maintained close ties to their tribal subsistence economies, thus allowing them to be incompletely proletarianized and paid wages sufficient to reproduce only their own labor power rather than that of their entire families; and they were not politically enfranchised, thus making them vulnerable to all kinds of coercive methods to cheapen their labor power. As for the Afrikaners, they were engaged in unskilled (or only partly skilled) work, thus helping to keep their wages lower than those of Europeans. Yet they earned greater wages than Africans, and for two reasons: unlike Africans, they were politically enfranchised and thus could not be subjected to the same coercive methods used against Africans to cheapen their labor power, and moreover, they had no ties to a precapitalist subsistence economy and thus had become completely proletarianized, making it necessary for mine owners to pay them wages sufficient to support not only them but their families as well. As we shall see, this higher cost of their labor power put them at an extreme competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis Africans in the labor market.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the existence of a split labor market set the stage for massive conflict between different segments of the working class as they interacted with the capitalist mine owners. Although the skilled miners commanded high wages and enjoyed considerable privilege, their status was threatened by the presence of ultra-cheap Africans who, once they began to acquire skills, were very tempting to the mine owners. In a somewhat different sense the same economic situation beset less-skilled white miners. As Johnstone notes:

There was no economic reason why, if non-white workers acquired skills, such workers could not be used in place of white workers; there was no economic reason why in the gold mining industry non-white workers could only be used for unskilled labor. And there certainly was an economic reason for the employers to seek to employ ultra cheap (non-white) labor in more skilled work in place of relatively expensive (white) labor (1976, p. 59).

## CLASS STRUGGLES AND COLOR BARS IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1893-1924

The essence of apartheid as it developed in the early decades of the gold mining industry lay in the existence of job color bars. What was the precise character of these color bars? How did they change over time? Who wanted them and who opposed them? What kinds of struggles were fought over their implementation or dismantlement? These are the central questions that must be addressed, because they are the central focus of the clash between split labor market theory and structural Marxism. This section of the paper will attempt to answer such questions as systematically and as accurately as the historical materials permit.

### Early Color Bars

The first job color bar was introduced in the South African gold mining industry in 1893 as part of a more general mining law (Simons and Simons 1969; Johnstone 1976). This law forbade Africans to prepare charges, load drill holes, or ignite fuses. In the new mining regulations of 1896 this racial restriction was relaxed and the holding of a blasting certificate was substituted for skin pigmentation as the criterion for working with dynamite (Simons and Simons 1969). But even though this legal color bar had been lifted, a *de facto* color bar still generally remained, and "it was evidently assumed that only white men would hold a certificate" (Simons and Simons 1969).

The mining code of 1896 also created two new color bars (Simons and Simons 1969). In one of these, whites were given the exclusive right to work as banksmen and onsetters, and in the other, the job of engine driver was restricted to certificate-holding whites. It is clear that at least the color bar with respect to engine drivers was pressed for by the white workers, who argued that it was an essential safety regulation because Africans lacked the skills and abilities to do such work properly. And it is also clear that the mine owners were opposed to this kind of labor restriction, arguing that a competence test rather than color should determine employment (Simons and Simons 1969). The mine owners argued that many Africans were just as capable as whites were, and thus there was no justification for barring them. A compromise in the disagreement between the mine owners and the white workers was eventually reached, for in 1897 the government eliminated the color bar with respect to banksmen and onsetter jobs while maintaining it for engine driving (Simons and Simons 1969).

### The "White Labour Policy"

Information about these early color bars, which were applied to skilled work, is thin and sketchy, but what we do know about them suggests that they were

generally promoted by white workers and opposed by the mine owners. This tells us something about how they related to the economic aims of each group. Most importantly, they suggest that the mine owners viewed color bars as against their economic interests. Another early development in the gold mining industry that suggests precisely the same thing even more strongly and explicitly was the "White Labour Policy." This policy was applied to the economic situation of unskilled (largely Afrikaner) workers rather than skilled European workers. It involved the state as an employer, and amounted to reserving certain public-sector jobs (especially those involving railways, harbors, and postal services) for unskilled whites at wages that were higher than usual for unskilled work (Johnstone 1976). This policy arose as a result of the growth of a large group of impoverished whites, and was thus designed to solve what came to be known as the "poor white problem."

The White Labour Policy did not generally operate in the gold mines, although there were efforts to apply it there, and it is the response of the mine owners to such efforts that is of particular relevance. The leading advocate of the White Labour Policy was a man by the name of Frederick Creswell. Creswell experimented with the use of unskilled white labor in the mine in which he was manager and attempted to convince the mine owners that the gold mines could be operated productively and profitably with extensive use of such labor (van der Horst 1971). However, the mine owners were anything but taken with Creswell's arguments, for the results of his experiment showed that significant economic losses accompanied the substitution of white for African labor. These were apparently so severe that, "if generalized to the industry as a whole, [they] would have eliminated the profitability of most companies" (Johnstone 1976, p. 84).

The results of Creswell's experiments in the gold mining industry led the mine owners to denounce the White Labour Policy in the most strenuous way and to regard Creswell himself as a faddist and a fanatic who was completely out of touch with economic reality (Johnstone 1976). Indeed, as Johnstone remarks, "Few things filled the companies with greater alarm than the White Labour Policy" (1976, p. 82). This whole episode in South African labor history clearly shows that the mine owners were strongly opposed to any racial restrictions on their use of labor. They wanted to use African labor as fully as possible in unskilled work because of the extreme cheapness of this labor.

### The Importation of Chinese Workers

As we have already noted, though, the mine owners had continual difficulty in these early years attracting Africans to the mines in the numbers they desired. Because of this difficulty, and because of the obvious unacceptability of employing unskilled whites in the mines, the mine owners carried out their own labor experiment, one involving the importation of Chinese workers to

perform unskilled mining work (van der Horst 1971; Johnstone 1976). Chinese workers were desired for two fundamental reasons: They could be paid wages even lower than those of Africans, and they were also regarded as being especially docile and industrious workers who could be easily supervised and ordered about (Levy 1982).

The mine owners were given license by the state to begin importing Chinese workers in 1904. By the end of that year nearly 11,000 Chinese were employed, and some 63,000 were brought to the Witwatersrand between 1904 and 1906 (Levy 1982). All of this occurred, however, in the face of severe opposition by white workers. White farmers were afraid that the Chinese would compete with them in agriculture, and the skilled white miners were fearful that the Chinese might displace them from their skilled jobs (Richardson 1977). An organization formed to combat the importation of the Chinese was the White League. The White League feared that:

Asian labor would be "detrimental both morally, socially, and physically" to the country . . . that the introduction of Chinese would cut up trade unionism in the mining industry by the roots . . . that the laborers would not remain confined to skilled work and would replace the white workers (Levy 1982, p. 213).

Because of the strong opposition of skilled workers to the Chinese, the mine owners were compelled to make certain concessions regarding how the Chinese workers were to be used. These concessions were embodied in the Transvaal Labor Importation Ordinance No. 17 of 1904 (Denoon 1967). According to this ordinance, 56 occupations were set aside for whites only, and it was additionally specified that Chinese workers had to be employed exclusively in unskilled work (Richardson 1977).

Although this caste provision mollified skilled white workers, their fear of displacement was not entirely eliminated, and they were mistrustful of the mine owners' agreement to confine Chinese workers to unskilled work. As one skilled miner expressed it:

Unskilled . . . that is what they ask . . . But how long will they consider certain work as unskilled? Only as long as it takes John Chinaman to learn it—say for instance running a rock drill or sharpening drills for these machines. John Chinaman is clever and the best imitator born in this troublous world (quoted by Callinicos 1982, p. 74).

Thus, white workers continued to press their opposition to the presence of Chinese workers. With the election of the Het Volk and Nationalist parties to power in the Transvaal in 1907, this opposition actually intensified. The new government revoked the mine owners' licenses for the importation of the Chinese and ordered that these workers be repatriated upon the expiration of their contracts. The last group of Chinese workers left in 1910 (Jeeves 1976).

What does the struggle over the introduction of Chinese workers into the South African gold mining industry show? We suggest that the most important thing it shows is the significant political power of white skilled miners and the way that political power could be used to establish caste arrangements to protect whites from the economic threats of workers who were ethnically different and who could be employed in the mines at much cheaper wages. The mine owners were able to bring the Chinese in only by granting concessions to skilled white miners, and it was the political power of these workers (as expressed in the new government of 1907) that ultimately led to the repatriation of the Chinese. Moreover, as Johnstone remarks, these events "set a precedent for the extension of the job color bar in coming years" (1976, p. 67).

### The Mines and Works Act of 1911

Before the turn of the century, skilled workers had considerable economic power because of the scarcity of their skills. If they were to go on strike they could severely disrupt the production process because there were few replacements with equivalent skills. But as time went on this situation began to change. Other workers began to acquire valuable mining skills. It was the acquisition of such skills by Africans that was to have the most important consequences for the economic situation of skilled miners (Katz 1974).

One of the most significant events of the first decade of the twentieth century was the strike of 1907 called by the Transvaal Miners Association, a strike that quickly spread through the Witwatersrand (Callinicos 1982). Anticipating the strike, the mine owners had prepared themselves carefully to avoid any serious disruption of production. Assisted by the state, they began to replace skilled workers with Afrikaners. Afrikaners, of course, lacked skills and experience, but they soon were to receive the necessary training from African and Chinese workers. This was the first time that Afrikaners gained an opportunity to work in substantial numbers in the gold mines (Kennedy 1984). In regard to this situation Brian Kennedy has said:

Fearful of the growing militancy of organized white labour, mine owners sought to replace the "spoilt Cornishmen" with cheaper, unorganized and more conservative Afrikaners. In the process management discovered new virtues in the Afrikaner: "he is quick of resource, dexterous, highly intelligent," and can manage black workers better, observed one of their publications (1984, p. 4).

But it was not only the Afrikaners whose virtues came to be more evident to the mine owners. During the strike the mine owners also saw that African workers could be trained to carry out highly skilled work in a thoroughly adequate manner. As Simons and Simons have pointed out, the mine owners came to see that "by keeping the mines in production during the strike . . . Africans had shown a capacity to master all parts of the mining operation.

They were not intellectually inferior and often performed skilled work, though the law deprived them of freedom of contract and held them down as unskilled" (1969, p. 87). It had thus become apparent to the mine owners that they no longer needed to employ as many highly priced whites in skilled work as they had been. That the mine owners were beginning to think this way is clearly revealed by evidence given before the Transvaal Mining Industry Commission of 1909 by the manager of the Geldenhuis Estate Gold Mining Company:

We have some of the Kafirs who are better machine-men than some of the white men. I have boys who have been working on the mines from twelve to fifteen years and they are better than many on the Rand nowadays.

Q. Can they place holes?

A. Yes, they can place holes, fix up the machine and do everything that a white man can do, but of course, we are not allowed to let them blast.

Q. If the law was not what it is, do you think they could blast with safety?

A. I do not think; I feel sure about it. I have had experience with natives since 1879 and I know what a native can do (quoted in van der Horst 1971, p. 175).

That the gold mines were employing too much expensive labor is also revealed by another man's testimony before the Transvaal Mining Industry Commission of 1909:

One of the greatest economies to be made in my opinion is at present we have far too many whites employed on the mines. In my opinion two men are employed underground doing work one man could do easily. The white man underground is not a working man at all (quoted in van der Horst 1971, pp. 175-176).

Comments like these understandably alarmed skilled miners and made them acutely aware of the declining importance of their hard-won skills in the mines. They became extremely fearful that the mine owners would increasingly attempt to undercut and displace them with much cheaper African workers. And in fact this general strategy was substantially pursued by the mine owners, mainly by a process of redefining skilled jobs as semiskilled so they could be given over to Africans. As this displacement continued, tensions between whites and Africans escalated, and the class consciousness of the white workers began to give way to a racial consciousness (Katz 1974). Skilled workers began to open up their old craft unions to all white miners, transforming them into industrial unions with race rather than craft as the essential qualification for entry. As Callinicos has expressed it, this shift in the direction of an intensified racial consciousness marked a fundamental "turning point in the policy of the skilled miners. Previously they had used their skill to unite them and give them strength. Now they were beginning to turn towards race to protect their workers' rights" (1982, p. 72).

Skilled miners also began increasingly to support the South African Labour Party. Since this party had been involved in important attempts to persuade the government to pass laws protecting white workers against competition with African labor, the skilled workers viewed it as fundamentally aligned with their economic interests. The Labour Party advocated an exclusion policy known as the "Civilized Labour Policy." According to Callinicos, a fundamental belief of the party was that

blacks should be left alone to farm on the reserves. They did not really need wages. The mine owners were forcing them to leave home to go to work. All the immigrant "Asiatics" should be sent back to India. They should not be allowed into South Africa. "Coloureds" would gradually disappear if mixing of the races was prevented. Coloureds would then become part of the black race and live separately from the whites (1982, p. 77).

Through the pressure of the Labour Party the government passed the Mines and Works Act of 1911. This was the first color bar of the newly formed Union of South Africa and by far the most comprehensive color bar yet developed with respect to the employment of labor in the gold mines. The Act reserved 32 types of skilled jobs in the Transvaal and Orange Free State for whites (Callinicos 1982). It is clear that the Act emerged as the result of political pressure applied by white workers and their representatives (Johnstone 1976). But what was the reaction of the mine owners to it? Clearly, they opposed it. In fact, the Chamber of Mines filed a formal protest against it, pointing out that the discriminatory regulations it embodied "would be *ultra vires* [roughly, unconstitutional] if not authorized by the enabling statute; and suggested that 'competent' or 'reliable' be substituted for 'white person'" (Simons and Simons 1969, pp. 91-92). The language change recommended by the Chamber is extremely telling, for if the wording of the Act would have been altered in that way then the mine owners would have been entirely free to have continued to do exactly what they had been doing—substituting African workers for skilled whites—and thus the Mines and Works Act would have been meaningless to them.

As it turned out, the Act was not completely effective in preventing the undercutting and displacement of white workers, for to some extent the mine owners seemed to be able to circumvent it through a continuing process of job redefinition and deskilling. As we shall see, the problem of displacement would actually loom larger for white workers in the years ahead, and not only for skilled workers, but for semiskilled workers as well (Katz 1974; Walker and Weinbren 1961).

### The Status Quo Agreement of 1918

By the beginning of World War I skilled white workers in the gold mines had achieved a relatively privileged and protected position. As Johnstone

(1976) notes, they had achieved a color bar that officially (if not always in practice) protected them from displacement by Africans in 35 skilled occupations. However, many white workers were now employed in semiskilled work, and these workers were unprotected by any color bar. They were therefore to find themselves in an extremely vulnerable economic position, and increasingly so as the years wore on. For the mine owners began to adopt a strategy of attempting to replace white semiskilled workers with Africans as fully as possible. The mine owners seemed to recognize that the semiskilled workers constituted a "path of least resistance" in their efforts to substitute Africans for whites.

Throughout World War I the mine owners followed this displacement strategy, and as a result the tensions between them and white workers were considerably exacerbated. By early 1917 white workers issued a set of demands to the mine owners regarding the exclusion of African workers from various semiskilled jobs (Johnstone 1976). The mine owners refused and continued their displacement strategy. A partial resolution of this growing conflict between workers and mine owners was reached in 1918 through the agreement of both parties to what was known as the Status Quo Agreement, which came into effect in September of that year. The Status Quo Agreement was in effect a kind of class compromise. In it the mine owners refused to accede to the workers' demand for the complete exclusion of Africans from semiskilled work, but they agreed to maintain a constant ratio of white to African workers in semiskilled work. In other words, the mine owners agreed to no further intensification of their displacement efforts (Johnstone 1976).

### The Rand Revolt

Even though they themselves had initially proposed the Status Quo Agreement to which white workers acceded in 1918, the mine owners found that they could live with it only so long. By 1921 they had renewed their attack on the white working class. According to Johnstone (1976), this was largely the result of a serious crisis in profitability suffered by the mine owners. This profitability crisis had begun during World War I when white wages began to rise as a result of an increasing scarcity of white skilled workers, a scarcity due to the involvement of whites in the war. But it seems that this crisis continued well after the end of the war, and Johnstone (1976) reports that white labor costs were 60 percent higher in 1921 than they were in 1914.

The renewed attack on the white workers in 1921 involved a three-fold proposal on the part of the Chamber of Mines (Johnstone 1976). The Chamber wanted to reduce the wages of the highest-paid white miners, to abolish the Status Quo Agreement, and to reorganize underground work. It was prepared to maintain the job color bar in skilled work, but it demanded the freedom to replace semiskilled workers with Africans as it saw fit.



This new class offensive was to produce perhaps the most violent labor conflagration that South Africa has ever seen—the Rand Revolt of 1922. This was a general strike declared by all of the white workers' unions, and the rallying slogan for the workers was "Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa." Over a period of several weeks some 25,000 workers stayed away from work. They eventually took up arms and attempted to prevent Africans from going to work in the mines. Prime Minister Smuts ultimately called out the army, and four days of armed struggle ensued. The death toll from such struggle came to 153, and more than 500 people were wounded. After the white workers were defeated, 5,000 of them were imprisoned or fined, and four men were given death sentences and hanged (Callinicos 1982).

The defeat of the white miners led to the economic results that the mine owners wanted. They began to replace many semiskilled workers with Africans. The ratio of African workers to white workers in such semiskilled jobs as drill-sharpening, winch and locomotive driving, timbering, wastepacking, and pipe-fitting increased sharply over the next two years. In 1923 there was a test case in the courts regarding the legality of the job color bar in skilled work, and the Supreme Court declared this bar to be illegal (Johnstone 1976).

It is interesting that the mine owners did not attempt to replace skilled workers with Africans even though, with the legal invalidation of the color bar in skilled work, they now had a strong legal foundation for doing so. Johnstone interprets this inaction on the part of the mine owners from his characteristically structural Marxist position. He claims that the mineowners wanted merely to reduce the scope of the color bar because it served a vital function for them in maintaining a cleavage within the working class. This cleavage helped to maintain the ultraexploitability of African workers and weakened the working class's organizational and political potential. But although this explanation seems to be the one that Johnstone really favors, he does suggest another reason why the mine owners might have been reluctant to try to abolish the color bar in skilled work. As he notes, "any attempt by the employers to abolish the job color bar altogether would have provoked a far greater conflagration than that of 1922, and the potential costs and dangers of such a policy far outweighed its potential benefits" (1976, p. 149). Indeed, this seems a far more plausible explanation of the mine owners' inactions than one that attempts to infer a class's subjective motives from certain observable systemic effects. The skilled white miners had shown themselves time and again as a political force to be reckoned with, and the mine owners respected their power. We strongly doubt that attacking the economic position of semiskilled workers while leaving skilled workers in a more protected position was a divide-and-rule policy, as Johnstone would have it. On the contrary, we suggest that such a strategy sprang not from some subtle conspiratorial plan, but from a simple pragmatic strategy of following the path of least resistance.

## The Pact Government

The defeat of the Rand Revolt was a shattering blow to the economic interests of white workers, leaving them in an even more vulnerable and insecure position than they had been before. In the aftermath of this defeat, the white working class began to turn toward more conventional channels of protecting their interests (Johnstone 1976; Callinicos 1982).

The two major political parties that represented the interests of the white workers were the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party. The former represented the English-speaking segment of the white working class, while the latter was supported primarily by Afrikaner petty bourgeois and workers. These parties formed an alliance that was to prove extremely favorable for the white working class as a whole. In the election of 1924 the Labour Party won 18 seats and the Nationalist Party 63 seats, giving them a total of 81 seats. When compared to the 53 seats won by the South African Party, this gave the Labour-Nationalist alliance control of the government, and the government that was formed came to be known as the Pact Government.

To a very large extent, the Pact Government came into existence because it promised the white working class that it would protect them from the extreme economic threat of Africans. It basically made good on this promise. The new Minister of Labour was none other than Frederick Creswell, the originator some two decades earlier of the White Labour Policy, a policy that chilled the blood of the mine owners (Johnstone 1976). The Pact Government followed a "Civilized Labour Policy" designed to establish a rigid caste arrangement between white and African workers for the benefit of the former. The most significant accomplishment of the Pact Government in this regard was the passage of the Mines and Works Act of 1926, a labor policy that one observer has called the "most drastic piece of colour bar legislation which the world has ever experienced" (Hutt 1964). This Act was actually an amendment to the Mines and Works Act of 1911 that legalized the racially discriminatory provisions of the earlier act (recall that these provisions had been declared illegal in the courts in 1923).

The Pact Government signified a major economic victory for the white working class, a victory that was to become fairly permanent from this time until the present day. It may be thought of as the first serious establishment of the apartheid labor policies that have characterized South Africa for so long (cf. Fredrickson 1981). For the first time since the early years of the twentieth century white workers had achieved a reasonable measure of economic security with respect to the likelihood that they would be displaced by much cheaper African labor.

## CONCLUSIONS

We believe that the historical evidence presented in this paper strongly and consistently supports the split labor market theory as the best available interpretation of the racial antagonisms that developed in the South African gold mining industry from the late nineteenth century until 1924. In fact, South Africa during these years seems to be an almost ideal case for the application of split labor market theory. Again and again we have found capitalists and higher-paid workers behaving in exactly the ways predicted by that theory. As capitalist mine owners sought to use much cheaper African workers in increasing numbers, white workers struggled vigorously for the implementation of caste arrangements in the occupational sector in order to protect their jobs and their high wages from African intrusion. This, we believe, is the meaning of such important historical events as the Mines and Works Act of 1911, the Status Quo Agreement of 1918, and the Mines and Works Act of 1926. The first and last of these were job color bars that were strongly opposed by the mine owners and enacted at the behest of white workers. The second was a class compromise that temporarily reconciled the opposing interests of white workers and mine owners over the use of African labor, but it was an agreement that was ultimately not respected by the mine owners, thus eventually precipitating the violent Rand Revolt of 1922.

There is an additional aspect of the class struggles in South Africa during these years that is precisely the sort of thing predicted by split labor market theory. As we have seen, the struggles between white workers and mine owners over the use of African labor became more intense from approximately the beginning of the First World War until 1924. The white workers who were at the center of these struggles seemed to be Afrikaans-speaking semiskilled workers more than English-speaking skilled workers. The mine owners had conceded substantial job protection to skilled English-speaking workers and focused their displacement efforts primarily on semiskilled Afrikaners. This latter category of the white working class, therefore, was the one for whom the greatest economic threat existed. It should thus come as no surprise that it was the political role of the Afrikaner segment of the working class that made the difference in the election of 1924, an election that brought the Pact Government and its strong white protectionist legislation into office. It is true, of course, that English-speaking workers allied themselves increasingly with Afrikaners as the economic threat against the Afrikaners mounted. They increasingly opened their labor unions to them, they were united with them in the Rand Revolt, and they joined with them in the political alliance that created the Pact Government. Why did they do so if, as Johnstone (1976) suggests, the color bar protecting their jobs was still in effect? In the first instance, it must be remembered that skilled workers had been suffering economically for several years because of the mine owners' strategy of

redefining a number of skilled jobs as semiskilled and giving them over to Africans. Moreover, the English-speaking whites must have feared that it was only a matter of time before the mine owners attempted an onslaught against the color bar that officially protected them from African labor. Thus, even though Afrikaners were in a more precarious economic position, skilled workers had definite economic interests to protect in uniting with Afrikaners in a common struggle.

Marxists like Davies, Johnstone, and Burawoy are very much aware of the historical events that we have described in this paper. Indeed, Johnstone has discussed many of these in detail and his work has served as one of our principal empirical sources.<sup>1</sup> But these Marxists have refused to make their theoretical interpretations on the basis of any simple or straightforward inference of the interests of particular groups from their actions in the economic arena. They have opted for a much more indirect form of interpretation, one that concentrates on consequences or "systemic effects" rather than apparent interests. And they (Burawoy and Davies in particular) have argued for two kinds of consequences that they believe support a Marxian interpretation of South African racial antagonism: (1) since the state is a capitalist state it therefore serves (at least indirectly and in the long run) the interests of the capitalist class; (2) capitalists benefit rather than suffer (or at least benefit more than they suffer) from the existence of job color bars. Let us examine these allegations more carefully.

There is no need to deny that, in general, the state in South Africa has been strongly oriented toward serving the interests of the capitalist mine owning class. But has it served its interests specifically with respect to the question of the employment of African workers? Can a capitalist state in some ways promote the interests of subordinate groups against the wishes of the capitalist class? Of course it can and does, and the South African state seems to be a classic instance of this. As Merle Lipton has argued, South Africa

did not conform to the Marxist model of the state as the instrument of capital. The power of the bureaucracy and the political establishment lent more support to Weberian views of the nature of state power. . .

... there was no simple correlation between economic and political power in [South Africa]; capitalists often did not get their way in conflicts with the supporters of apartheid.... (1985, pp. 9-10)

Lipton also suggests the ways in which the South African state was and was not a capitalist state. It was a capitalist state in that it strongly supported a capitalist mode of production, but it was not a capitalist state to the extent that it placed certain limitations upon the economic maneuvers of the capitalist mine owning class. As Lipton says in discussing the formation of the Pact Government, "White workers won, not because of their industrial power—which was unable to prevail against the Chamber—but because of their political

power" (1985, p. 188). The reasons for the political power of the white working class are not difficult to discern. White workers were the only politically enfranchised workers in a society in which the vast majority of workers could cast no votes to promote their economic interests, and this gave them an unusual ability to control the actions of the state.

The Marxists have also asserted that the mine owners derived significant benefits from the job color bars established by the white workers. Johnstone has argued the matter this way. Job color bars, he suggests, are only one part of a total system of apartheid. These were desired by the white working class, but only because they were needed by white workers to protect themselves from another kind of color bar, the so-called *exploitation color bar*, which was the mine owners' practice of employing Africans only at ultracheap wages. Since mine owners did not want to give up this practice, they were willing to live with the other aspect of apartheid that was brought into existence by white workers to protect themselves, that is, the job color bar. In other words, the benefits mine owners reaped from the exploitation color bar exceeded their losses from the job color bar, and thus the job color bar did not really contradict their long-run economic interests.<sup>2</sup>

Did the mine owners benefit from what Johnstone calls the exploitation color bar? There is every reason to believe that they did, and probably very greatly.<sup>3</sup> However, there is no warrant whatever for Johnstone's conclusion that such benefits led them to adopt an attitude toward the job color bar that was basically one of "peaceful coexistence and accomodation" (1976, p. 81). The historical evidence on this matter, much of which is presented by Johnstone himself, suggests that the mine owners adopted no such conciliatory attitude. On the contrary, they opposed job color bars as vigorously as they could, the main constraint on the strength of their opposition being their due regard for the capacity of the white working class to fight back. Did the job color bars fragment the working class and weaken it as a political force, and did the mine owners benefit from this racial fragmentation of the working class? Yes, perhaps there were positive consequences of this too. But the specific actions of the mine owners in regard to job color bars suggest that *they themselves thought they would benefit even more from removing artificial barriers to the employment of African workers*. We believe that speculation about the net consequences for the mine owners of the total system of apartheid is doomed to perpetual uncertainty, and is thus a very poor basis on which to rest firm conclusions. And this is why we insist that the only meaningful form of analysis in explaining racial antagonism in South Africa (or anywhere else for that matter) is one that concentrates on a social class's perception of its own interests. Carrying out the analysis in such a way forces us to conclude that the mine owners thought that job color bars undermined their own interests. Had they got their way, mine owners would have abolished job color bars and engaged in extensive substitution of African workers for more expensive whites.

Nothing suggests this more dramatically than the mine owners' attempt in 1921 to ride roughshod over the provisions of the Status Quo Agreement. As Lipton has remarked, the mine owners were prepared to risk virtually a civil war in order to erode barriers to their employment of African labor:

Ignoring Smuts' warning that the job bar must be treated as "sacrosanct" and that a "frontal assault" on it would lead to violent resistance by the white unions supported by the bulk of the white population of the Rand, the Chamber announced that it would withdraw the Status Quo Agreement and increase the ratio of Africans to whites. . . . There is no clearer illustration of the importance both sides attached to the job bar than the ensuing events, which led to a general strike and the declaration of martial law, resulting in the death of 250 people and the wounding and imprisonment of hundreds more (1985, p. 113).

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## NOTES

1. It is a striking irony that, stripped of their Marxist interpretations, Johnstone's empirical analyses read almost exactly as if they were directly informed by a classic split labor market perspective.
2. This is alleged to be a direct economic benefit quite in addition to the indirect benefits of a divided and organizationally weakened working class.
3. Indeed, the existence of such an effort on the part of capitalists to attract a pool of cheap workers is obviously a crucial assumption of split labor market theory. However, we would strongly question Johnstone's use of the term "exploitation color bar." Such a phenomenon would perhaps be more appropriately labeled a "labor recruitment strategy."

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