

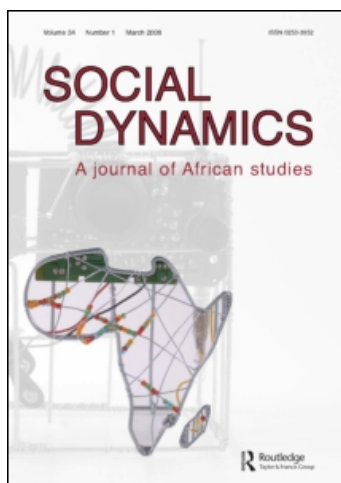
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Publisher Routledge

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## Social Dynamics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t791476125>

## Rethinking the 'race-class debate' in South African historiography

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**To cite this Article** Posel, Deborah(1983) 'Rethinking the 'race-class debate' in South African historiography', Social Dynamics, 9: 1, 50 – 66

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/02533958308458333

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02533958308458333>

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# RETHINKING THE 'RACE-CLASS DEBATE' IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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*This article argues that revisionist historiography has constituted a debate with its liberal opponents which has an 'either-or' form: either class or race has analytic primacy, and either segregation/apartheid is functional or dysfunctional to capitalist growth. This has led revisionists into reductionism and functionalism, despite frequent disclaimers to the contrary. Failure to conceptualise and address the relative independence of social factors has, as a corollary, a functionalist rendition of their relationship to capitalist interests and development. By way of illustration an article by Wolpe and a book by Saul and Gelb are criticised for analytical shortcomings. Finally revised conceptualisations of the relationships between race and class and between capitalist development and racial policies are proposed.*

A theory is as deep and wide-ranging as the kinds of problems it addresses. The way a problem is formulated previews the variables, and their interrelationships and effects which are thought to require investigation. Thus the questions which we ask of history act like probes, on the front end of our inquiry, delineating its ground and directing the depth and range of its focus.

The major contribution of the so-called 'race-class debate' was to have put a new sort of question onto the agenda of South African historiography, which inaugurated a more wide-ranging and penetrating theoretical approach than had informed studies of South African history until then. Challenging liberal historians who saw apartheid (or segregation, before it) as wholly independent of, and at odds with, the logic of economic growth, revisionists such as H. Wolpe, M. Legassick and F. Johnstone stressed the functional compatibility and dependency between South Africa's political and economic systems. The central questions which this 'race-class debate' thus launched were: how did segregationist, and now apartheid policies *reproduce* and *promote* capitalist interests? And how has the course of capitalist development in South Africa *determined* the shape of its racial policies?

However, as we shall see, at least as regards those revisionists who situated and defined their work within the theoretical framework of this debate,<sup>1,2</sup> the very terms of their disagreement with liberals often led them to address these questions almost exclusively. Thus, in many cases, what began as an *emphasis* on the class functions and determinants of apartheid and segregation, expanded and solidified into a theoretical and methodological approach, or

problematic,<sup>3</sup> which imposed a functionalist and reductionist perspective on the study of South African history. Within such academic circles, the South African 'social formation' has been treated as if a functionally integrated whole, its racist political and ideological superstructure wholly serving the interests of the capitalist base which determines it. As a result, having opened up a new ground for historical inquiry, such revisionist theory has also tended to close it off to further expansion. For, the price paid for this approach is a foreclosing of inquiry into other sorts of questions concerning the tensions and contradictions in the relationship between racial policy and capitalism, on the one hand, and the irreducible importance of political and ideological factors, on the other.

Arguably, these are exactly the sorts of questions which economic and political developments during the 1970s, and the state's current 'reform' initiatives bring into sharp relief. The striking degree of compatibility between economic growth and political repression in South Africa during the 1960s provided the historical backdrop and vindication for the early stages of the 'race-class debate'. But it is the stresses and strains in this relationship during the 1970s and into the 1980s, which now demand our attention and explanation, and which can lead us into a new stage in the debate between liberals and revisionists.

This paper is an attempt to develop this argument, in the following way:

1. I will first briefly survey the terms and form of the 'race-class debate', as it originated in the early 1970s.
2. I then suggest how, given the 'either-or' quality of this debate, the very questions which

expanded our theoretical and methodological horizons also came to impose constraints of their own. These take the form of a reductionist and functionalist problematic, which has seeped into much revisionist historiography, despite frequent disclaimers to the contrary.

3. Next, the sorts of explanatory difficulties and limitations which this problematic generates, and which confirm its latent presence, will be illustrated by a brief assessment of two influential revisionist studies, one by Harold Wolpe, and the other by John Saul and Stephen Gelb. My aim is to show that revisionist historiography has often been stuck with needlessly restrictive and inept theoretical resources for dealing with its own historical material.
4. This critique of the reductionism and functionalism inherent in Wolpe's, and Saul and Gelb's positions, leads us into a reconstruction of both the terms of the debate between liberals and revisionists, and the nature of the most convincing revisionist case.

### *The Terms of the 'Race-Class Debate'*

It would be a mistake to impute complete unity or homogeneity to the liberal position. However, since our present focus is on the development of certain revisionist theory in and through the 'race-class debate', rather than on the theoretical perspective of both contending parties, we can safely sidestep a study of variations within the liberal camp at this point. We need only consider the revisionist version of the liberal position, since this is the object of the revisionist critique, which is in turn the main-spring of the alternative theoretical and methodological approach declared by a large number of revisionists.

In the revisionists' eyes, the nub of the liberals' case consists in their stand on two related issues:

- i) The general analytic relationship between the concepts of race, racial policy and ideology, on one hand, and those of class interests, relations and struggle, on the other.
- ii) In particular, the relationship between policies of racial discrimination and capitalist development, from the late nineteenth century onwards.

With respect to the first, revisionist protagonists in the debate interpret liberals as treating racial prejudice, rather than class struggle, as the heart of the conflicts and inequities within South African society. Liberals, on this view,

thus regard the dynamics of racial discrimination as the prime mover of the country's history. 'Race' is therefore taken as the primary variable in liberal analysis, in which class relations are seen to be treated as secondary to, even derivative of, racial conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, revisionists understand liberals to be arguing that apartheid policies have imposed irrational and unnecessary constraints on the vigour of capitalist growth in South Africa. Liberals, they say, see racism in South Africa as wholly at odds with renewed economic growth, the force of the latter being sufficient finally to erode its racial fetters. On this view, industrialisation and capitalist development produce not merely an economic interest in liberal reforms, but an ultimately irresistible pressure issuing inevitably in evolutionary change in that direction. In Frederick Johnstone's words,

According to this approach, the system of racial domination in modern South Africa is seen and explained as a 'dysfunctional' intrusion upon the capitalist economic system, stemming from non-material factors outside it such as prejudice, racism, nationalism, and 'social and cultural pluralism', but doomed over the long term to destruction by the inexorable imperatives of rational industrialism and 'colour-blind' capitalism. (Johnstone, 1976: 1-2).

The liberal position is thus characterised as a declaration of the analytic primacy of variables of race *over* those of class, and of the complete dysfunctionality, *rather than* functionality, of segregation and then apartheid for capitalism in South Africa.

When defined in antithesis to this liberal stance, revisionism amounts to a simple reversal of the purportedly liberal priorities: class now has primacy over race, and segregation and apartheid are seen as functional, rather than dysfunctional, to the development of South African capitalism. Such revisionists thus cast themselves as the opposition to the liberal protagonists in a debate which has a tacitly 'either-or' form: either class *or* race has analytic primacy, and either segregation/apartheid is function *or* dysfunctional to capitalist growth. That both issues are set up in 'either-or' terms is reflected in the form taken by typical revisionist rejoinders to the liberals. For example, Frederick Johnstone, in his pioneering study of racial policies within the gold mining industry, explains that his

... general thesis is that this racial system may

be most adequately explained as a class system — as a system of class instruments . . . generated, and determined in its specific nature and functions, by the specific system of production and class structure of which it formed a part; and that these historical developments may most adequately be explained in terms of this explanation, and tend to confirm, as historical manifestations, the class nature of this system and thus the validity of this explanation. (Johnstone, 1976: 4).

In explaining racial policy in terms of class factors, without *posing* the question of their interdependence or historically variable relationship, Johnstone thus accepts and reproduces the terms of the debate as having an 'either-or' form.<sup>5</sup> 'Class' and 'race' are presumed to be analytically independent categories, ranked hierarchically and invariably, with 'class' as the more fundamental variable, accounting for the development and functions of racial policies. The very terms in which the 'race-class' debate is set up thus preclude a different mode of inquiry, oriented by a different question, which does not seek a uniform ranking of one variable over another, but rather their concrete interrelationships, in the ways in which racial cleavages and practices themselves structure class relations. This would make the concept of 'race' analytically inseparable from our understanding and very conceptualisation of existing class relations in any particular conjuncture.

A similar form of argument characterises revisionist views of the relationship between segregation/apartheid, and capitalism. As if forced to choose between regarding apartheid (or segregation) as always functional or dysfunctional to capitalist interests, many revisionists have set out to show all the various ways in which apartheid has functioned to advance economic growth in South Africa. Not surprisingly then, questions about the contradictions or tensions between the two are not typically incorporated into the theoretical premises and framework of this historiography. Martin Legassick's formulation of his problem in 'South Africa: Capital Accumulation and Violence' typifies this approach:

. . . this essay seeks to show that the specific structures of labour control which have been developed in post-war South Africa are increasingly functional to capital: though the particular combination of class forces which instituted them and have maintained them may be debated, nevertheless they serve the

interests of capitalist growth in the South African situation. (Legassick, 1974: 269).

Of course, the questions which preoccupied the early revisionists have been important and pioneering ones, especially pertinent against the backdrop of the 1960s during which economic growth in South Africa flourished (second only to Japan's) at the same time as state repression continued to intensify. Certainly, the early stages of the 'race-class debate' were conducted in the wake of one of the starkest demonstrations of a largely successful partnership between capitalist growth and racially discriminatory policies. Nor were the capitalist benefits of racism confined to the '60s: the continued expansion of the South African economy testifies *prima facie* to a persistent, if historically variable, compatibility between the country's political and economic systems. Furthermore, the early articles by Johnstone, Wolpe and Legassick, for example, which exhibited this collusion, opened up a new and rich agenda for historical inquiry: studies of the relationship between the state and white working class, the class bases of Afrikaner nationalism, intra-capitalist conflicts, and forms of African working class resistance, were all made possible by the original revisionist breakthrough.

Nevertheless, while probing and innovative, the 'race-class debate' has also led many revisionists into a reductionist and functionalist approach to the study of South African history, one which is needlessly rigid and inhibiting. The following discussion looks firstly, at the source and nature of this approach, and secondly, at some of its analytic constraints.

### *The Drift Into Reductionism and Functionalism*

I have argued above that having situated their perspective within the context of an 'either-or' type of debate with liberal scholars, revisionists have thus tended to limit their theoretical and methodological options, to a choice of class over race as their primary variable, and to viewing apartheid and segregation as functional rather than dysfunctional to South African capitalism. Now in this way, an initial enthusiasm for, and concentration on, questions about the economic determinants and functions of segregation and apartheid often became an exclusive and limited preoccupation with these issues alone. Unfortunately, given the way the terms of the 'race-class debate' were originally cast, questions about the dysfunction of racial policies and about the irreducible importance

of racial factors, have largely been confined to the liberal camp.

We should look now at the theoretical and methodological legacy of this repetition of and preoccupation with a limited set of questions.

Firstly, the systematic ranking of 'class' as a variable more important than 'race' has tended to sponsor a base-superstructure model for the explanation of South African society and history. Even if the terms 'base' and 'superstructure' are not used explicitly, the intention of the model is realised in the treatment of 'class' as uniformly more fundamental than, and analytically separable from, variables of 'race', such that class relations and capitalist growth are seen to determine and account for racial policies, which function to reproduce this economic base. (See Johnstone, 1970; Davies, 1979b; O'Meara, 1975).

Secondly, given the theoretical and methodological constraints engendered by the terms of the 'race-class debate', it is often a highly reductionist and functionalist version of the base-superstructure model which underpins the writings of Johnstone (in his early writings), Wolpe, Legassick, O'Meara and Davies, for example, notwithstanding many disclaimers to the contrary. Consider the slide into a reductionist problematic first. Although declaring a serious respect for the 'relative autonomy' of racial practices and ideology, Dan O'Meara for example, still stipulates that

... variations in racial policy must be seen as flowing from changes in the structure of production and the alignment of class forces in the social formation. (O'Meara, 1975).

Here, an inquiry into the reciprocally determining and relatively independent dynamic of racial policy seems to be precluded by methodological fiat. To go about explaining "variations in racial policy . . . as flowing from changes in the structure of production . . . and class forces" is to set up the inquiry in terms which foreclose an interest in, and treatment of, the possibly autonomous or irreducible role of racial policy in shaping the "structure of production and the alignment of class forces" themselves. The terms in which any question is posed offer a way of discovering some things and ignoring others. O'Meara's approach addresses questions concerning the dependency of South African racial policy on capitalist processes only. This in turn leads him (knowingly or unknowingly) to treat this dependency as *sufficient* to explain the development of the country's racial policies. Hence the tacit reductionism inherent in the

form of his inquiry and ensuing explanations.

Robert Davies too, neglects his own reminders about the need to take questions of race seriously. In introducing the broad outlines of his approach in *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa: 1900-1960*, Davies unwittingly illustrates how an apparent interest in racial factors as forces (in part) in their own right, is no sooner uttered than it is suppressed by the terms in which he formulates the goals of his class analysis.

Contrary to the assertions of certain critics, the purpose of this analysis is not to deny the importance of racist ideology and racial prejudice, but rather to see these as phenomena arising in the class struggle and therefore themselves requiring analysis and explanation, instead of, as in the liberal problematic, the 'self-evident' starting point of all 'analysis' and 'explanation'. (Davies, 1979a: 3).

Davies thus sets out to explain how class struggles account for racial ideology and prejudice, again in terms which prejudice the uniform, unidirectional primacy of the former over the latter. The very way in which Davies formulates and orients his inquiry silences any question about the ways in which class struggle itself "requires analysis and explanation" in the light of the possible reciprocal effects and impact of irreducibly racial factors.

Notice therefore, that my point is not that many revisionist thinkers have explicitly denied, or deliberately excluded, the salience of racial factors as contributing in part to an explanation of capitalist development and class struggles themselves. Rather, any declared interest in these questions is involuntarily rendered mute and impotent by the terms in which the relationship between capitalist production and racial factors is examined and evaluated. It is this foreclosing of inquiry that produces reductionistic explanations, and which evidences the presence of a perhaps unintentionally reductionist problematic.

The corollary of failures to conceptualise and address the relative independence of racial factors, is a functionalist rendition of their relationship to capitalist interests and development. Consider for example, Johnstone's stance in his early and seminal paper, *White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa*:

... far from undermining White supremacy, economic development is constantly reinforcing it. Its power structure is continually strengthened by its own output. In a circular process, the African workers produce the

wealth and power which enable the Whites to go on strengthening this structure of production which goes on producing the power which goes on strengthening the structure and so on. It is precisely the function of apartheid to render this process as effective as possible. (Johnstone, 1970: 136).

In this paper, he explains the nature and development of apartheid wholly in terms of the functions which it performs in "strengthening . . . the structure of production".

Martin Legassick too, explains the "specific structures of labour control . . . in post-war South Africa" in terms of the functions which they performed in serving the "interests of capitalist growth in the South African situation", (Legassick, 1974: 269) on the underlying assumption that this produces a complete explanation of the said structures of labour control.

Again, I am not accusing any revisionists of expressly precluding the possibility of conflicts of interests having emerged between segregation and then apartheid, and capitalist development in South Africa. Rather, I am pointing to the ways in which the terms of their original questions and the resultant closing off of important areas of inquiry, has involuntarily produced functionalist moulds for the forms of explanation given in answer to these questions.<sup>6</sup> Those revisionist writers who channelled their inquiry into a study of the functions of apartheid/segregation, in terms which ipso facto excluded a simultaneous grasp of its possible dysfunctions, thereby denied themselves the opportunity of conceptualising the effects of apartheid as a specific (and historically variable) *combination* of functions and dysfunctions.<sup>7</sup> Posing the question in this way would entail a shift onto a different theoretical and methodological terrain which, freed from the constraints of the original 'race-class debate', could articulate the contradictions or tensions between South Africa's political and economic systems without thereby crossing over into the liberal camp.

We must look now at some of the costs and limitations of this functionalist and reductionist perspective on South African history. For, my criticism of such revisionists is not the mere fact that a particular problematic or paradigm has accreted through the repetition of certain questions to the exclusion of others; this is an epistemological feature of any historiography. Rather, my contention is that given the needlessly restrictive character of their original questions, these revisionists have ended up with an

inhibiting and uninteresting problematic, ill-equipped to deal with their own historical insights.

### *Analytic Shortcomings*

I will deal with this problem as exemplified firstly in Harold Wolpe's seminal paper, *Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation To Apartheid*, and secondly, in Saul and Gelb's recent book, *The Crisis in South Africa*. Both these writings exemplify the sorts of explanatory limits produced by a reductionist and functionalist problematic, and at the same time, illustrate the curious disjuncture between the kinds of historical insights and commentary which revisionist historiography contains, together with its *implicit* theoretical underpinnings, and the *explicit* theoretical labels and conclusions brought to bear upon them.

Wolpe's paper can be read to contain two hypotheses, one explicit and theoretically articulated; the other, implicit and theoretically anonymous. The first, which Wolpe expressly set out to argue, accounted for the difference in kind between segregation and apartheid policies, and the transition from the one to the other, in terms of the different economic conditions which determined them. Thus, the abstract of the article states:

In this article, substantial differences between Apartheid and Segregation are identified and explained by reference to the changing relations of capitalist and African pre-capitalist modes of production. In these conditions Segregation gives way to Apartheid which provides the specific mechanism for maintaining labour power cheap through the elaboration of the entire system of domination and control and the transformation of the function of pre-capitalist societies. (Wolpe, 1972: 425).

Wolpe argued that during the Segregation period, the state could still rely on agriculture, subsistence production in the reserves to supplement migrants' wages, thus contributing to the maintenance of cheap African labour. The Apartheid state however, confronted a situation in which pre-capitalist production in the reserves had disintegrated, so as to diminish its contribution to the wages of migrant labourers. Thus,

Whereas Segregation provided the political structure appropriate to the earlier period, Apartheid represented the attempt to maintain the rate of surplus value and accumula-

tion in the face of the disintegration of the pre-capitalist economy. Or, to put it in another way, Apartheid, including separate development, can be best understood as the mechanism specific to South Africa in the period of secondary industrialisation, of maintaining a high rate of capitalist exploitation through a system which guarantees a cheap and controlled labour force under circumstances in which the conditions of reproduction (the redistributive African economy in the Reserves) of that labour force is rapidly disintegrating. (Wolpe, 1972: 430-431).

Apartheid represented a combination of attempts to guarantee cheap labour power in the face of the ailing capacity of the reserves to fulfil this function by contributing to migrant workers' subsistence. For example, industrial decentralisation policies facilitated the employment of African labour at low wages, even in semi-skilled or skilled positions.<sup>8</sup> Also, the Apartheid state's intensified control over the allocation of African labour was designed to ensure that Africans were forced into accepting such terms of employment. Finally, the Apartheid state's policy of separate development involved the commitment to revitalising and entrenching tribal authority, customs, and methods of production, as means for the "political, social, economic and ideological enforcement of low levels of subsistence", (Wolpe, 1972: 451) which further abetted the imposition of low wages on the African migrant labour force.

Each facet of apartheid policy was thus seen by Wolpe as a "function of the economic changes in the Reserves, which generate(d) a threat to the cheapness of labour power" (Wolpe, 1972: 447). In this way, Wolpe presented and interpreted his argument as an illustration of the primacy of capitalist development and class interests in determining the forms which racial policy took, and the functions which it performed.

However, this apparently simple connection of explanatory sufficiency between the development and interests of capitalist production, and shifts in South African racial policy, was belied by Wolpe's own historical commentary towards the end of the very same article. This discussion in fact implicitly sponsored a *non*-functionalist and *non*-reductionist explanation of Apartheid policy, but these theoretical and methodological leanings were never made explicit and elaborated. Here, Wolpe showed, firstly, that declin-

ing agricultural production in the reserves, together with the ensuing rural and urban poverty and unrest, were prominent problems on the White political agenda during the 1940s; but, secondly, that different possible solutions to these problems were favoured by different alliances of class interests. For example, English manufacturing capital, represented in the party political sphere by the United Party, supported labour policies which reduced dependency on migrant labour, at least as far as the urban-based manufacturing sector was concerned. Strong enough to pay higher wages and eager to boost the industry's productivity, manufacturing capitalists favoured strategies to stabilise urban African labour, allowing wages, standards of living and levels of skill to rise accordingly. (Wolpe, 1972: 445). The priority of agricultural capital however, was still cheap, unskilled labour, which is why it endorsed the Nationalist Party's labour policies mentioned earlier (*viz.* decentralisation of industry, intensified influx control etc.). Theirs was an interest in enhanced and extended state control over the movements and organisation of the African labour force (which also coincided with the interests of White workers, by protecting their privileged position as a "labour aristocracy"). (Wolpe 1972: 446).

This historical account thus showed that in 1948, both the United Party and the Nationalist Party proposed policies which represented attempts to address the problems produced by the serious decline in the reserves and ensuing urbanisation (*i.e.* problems of urban and rural poverty; growing unrest in the form of strikes and riots). Furthermore, both policies would have promoted the interests of capital, albeit in significantly different ways, by following divergent routes towards renewed capitalist development in South Africa. On this account, therefore, Nationalist Party policy — apartheid — was clearly neither a necessary nor an inevitable outcome of capitalist processes and interests at the time. The transition from segregation to apartheid can no longer be explained in terms of changed conditions of the reproduction of labour-power alone, since this would simply *restate* the problem of why apartheid, and not the United Party's reformism, succeeded segregation. Thus, while these economic conditions and their effects might have been necessary conditions for the transition from segregation to apartheid, they cannot be *sufficient* to explain this transition, and to account for the "substantial differences" (Wolpe, 1972: 425) between

the two. Wolpe's theoretically explicit hypothesis was reductionist in having set up the issue to be explored in terms which tacitly attributed explanatory sufficiency to an account of these merely *necessary* conditions. Furthermore, this reductionist bent steered him away from formalising and explicitly incorporating the non-reductionist theoretical implications of his own historical account, as examined above. In short, therefore, Wolpe's explicit hypothesis was theoretically contrived and inappropriate, while his implicit hypothesis remained theoretically inarticulate.

John Saul and Stephen Gelb's discussion of purported "crises" during the 1940s and 1970s in South Africa, involuntarily inherited the functionalist legacy of the 'race-class debate', which finally disabled their conception of "crisis" itself. Furthermore, as in Wolpe's case, Saul and Gelb's formal theoretical categories and perspective are at odds with some of their historical, theoretically anonymous (but not theoretically neutral or presuppositionless) commentaries.<sup>10</sup>

Saul and Gelb collude with the picture of twentieth century South African history which seems to have become dominant, and perhaps unquestioned, within many<sup>11</sup> revisionist circles. The history of the South African state post-1910 is cast in terms of a functional alliance between segregation, then apartheid policy, and capitalist growth, which was disturbed only by the eruption of two major "crises", in the 1940s and 1970s respectively.<sup>12</sup> By reviewing Saul and Gelb's discussion of the said "crisis" of the 1940s, I hope to illustrate some of the ways in which this depiction of recent South African history is itself symptomatic of a revisionist failure to escape a functionalist perspective. The ambiguity and inapplicability of Saul and Gelb's concept of "crisis" are exactly a measure of the limitations and distortions which a functionalist problematic imposes.

Saul and Gelb's account of the 1940s-"crisis" is already so short and compressed that it is worth simply quoting it in full:

A number of trends coincided, most important the rapid escalation of Black resistance to the exploitive racial capitalist system. This, in turn, was directly related to the continuing evolution of South African capitalism. There were two main features here. First, the overcrowded reserves had entered into precipitous economic decline, and could no longer play quite the same role they had in subsidising wages. Full, rather than quali-

fied proletarianisation was afoot, meaning that Africans in larger numbers than ever before were being pushed to the towns and held there. Moreover, this coincided with a second process. In the wake of the protectionist policies established between the wars and of a boom — begun when South Africa abandoned the gold standard in 1933, but reinforced by the economic opportunities provided by the war — rapid economic growth highlighted by secondary industrialisation was taking place. The fresh demands for African labour including that of the semi-skilled and therefore more stabilised variety, meant that an active pull was also being exerted by the towns and by emergent industrial capital. It was these trends, then, which produced not only a vast — and ultimately irreversible — growth<sup>13</sup> in the urbanised African population, but also a dramatic escalation of trade union organisation and working class militancy. When the latter process advanced so far as even to include migrant workers, and culminated in the extraordinary African mine-workers strike of 1946, South African ruling circles were shaken to the core. (Saul and Gelb: 13-14).

But have Saul and Gelb really described and accounted for a state of "crisis"? What is a "crisis", and how was it determined and manifest in this case of South Africa during the late 1940s? Saul and Gelb describe the crisis as a point at which a number of trends "come together",<sup>14</sup> as if this coincidence differentiates the "crisis" from preceding periods. However, the interrelationships and reciprocally exacerbating effects of these trends, described in the quote above, surely characterised them from their inception. What then makes their conjuncture in the 1940s sufficiently singular and profound as to warrant the designation "crisis"? Saul and Gelb do not formulate, let alone address, the question. They do not attempt to differentiate the hallmarks of a "crisis" as a recognisably distinctive threshold in an otherwise ongoing "coincidence" of these escalating trends. Instead, they locate the presence of the "crisis" in the mere existence of these trends, and the fact of their interrelationship. The result is a failure to distinguish the critical features of the 1940s, as compared with preceding or subsequent decades. As we shall see, the concept of "crisis" is left barren, and its application to the 1940s analytically superfluous. Consider each of these trends, the alleged sources of the "crisis", in turn.



Firstly, the decline of the reserves had set in by the late 1920s already,<sup>15</sup> so that their role in subsidising black wages had been diminishing steadily long before the 1940s. Nor did this trend cease after 1948,<sup>16</sup> the beginning of what Saul and Gelb see as the Nationalist Party's strategies to "manage" the crisis. Arguably, agricultural production in the reserves (later, the bantustans) has never enjoyed a permanent or wholesale recovery<sup>17</sup> since the early part of this century — long before, and after, the said "crisis". At what point then, and why, did this *ongoing* decline reach crisis proportions?

A similar point can be made about the increasing rate of African urbanisation, the second crisis-producing trend. "Full proletarianisation" (i.e. complete reliance on wage labour) was already "afoot" during the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the rate of increase of the urban African population was already dramatic and rising by then.<sup>19</sup> Also, growing proletarianisation has persisted long after 1948, when the process of "crisis-management" allegedly began. Again therefore, what Saul and Gelb offer as an "index" of an "organic crisis" in the 1940s was an endemic and constant phenomenon. Yet they fail to distinguish the onset of the "crisis" according to a particular — specified — *degree* or mode of development of these structural tensions.

The prevalence of militant black resistance is also endemic to the system of South African capitalism. Certainly after World War I, the country saw a wave of strikes which never wholly abated up to, and beyond, the 1940s "crisis". Nor were popular uprisings, boycotts and riots unique to this period. Furthermore, obversely, Saul and Geld have not established convincingly that popular resistance during the 1940s ascended to "critical" proportions. Or, at least, if the level of resistance reached during the 1940s coincides with what they understand to be a "critical" threat to the very survival of the state, then their meaning of the term is suspect. They describe the 1940s as a period in which black resistance, culminating in the 1946 African miners' strike, was sufficient to shake "South Africa's ruling circles . . . to the core". But on what grounds is this assertion based? Certainly the state's response to the 1946 strike was swift and unwavering; the strike was quickly and effectively crushed. At no point was the stability of the White state seriously endangered. In what sense, therefore, was the very "core" of White hegemony besieged? Again, Saul and Gelb do not acknowledge or confront

the question.

Finally therefore, the only evidence which Saul and Gelb adduce for the presence of an "organic crisis" during the 1940s is the manifestation of certain endemic tensions and stresses in the system. The fact that these have been ever-intensifying and -receding means that the existence of a "crisis" would have to be distinguished according to a particular *degree* or moment of their intensification — namely, that point at which the quantitative escalation of these systemic stresses became *qualitatively* singular and important, in bringing the South African state to a critical threshold. Yet the problem of identifying this qualitative discontinuity is one which Saul and Gelb never confront.

Why is it, then, that Saul and Gelb fail to pose the very question on which the viability of their thesis concerning the presence of a "crisis", be it in the 1940s or 1970s, must depend? Why do they investigate the "crisis" in terms which premise its purportedly singular and rare existence on the mere presence of economic and political trends which became endemic to the development of South African capitalism long before, and outlasted, each of the said "crises"? The ways in which Saul and Gelb do and do not go about investigating the "crises" illustrate the strictures of their latent functionalist problematic. For, it is only by starting off within a broadly functionalist perspective, in terms of which a social system is 'normally' functionally integrated, that one is led to treat the mere manifestation of dysfunction as 'abnormal', the index of a "crisis". Surely the fact that Saul and Gelb are content to identify the indices of the 1940s crisis according to the manifest stresses and strains within South African society, without differentiating between their 'normal' ups and downs, and the critical threshold, testifies to their failure to escape a functionalist perspective on the problem? That their use of the term 'crisis' finally does not mean anything more than 'a period of intensified threat' simply reflects the inappropriateness of this perspective, and its mismatch with the nature of South African historical development.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, the way out of a functionalist perspective on the 1940s, as well as a functionalist conception of a "crisis", is latent within Saul and Gelb's own historical account. Their "crisis theory" can be seen as an attempt to expose the historical limits and failures of the functional alliance between South Africa's racial policy and capitalist system, but one which is still caught up within a functionalist

problematic. This is why the functional alliance in question is seen to break down in periods of "crisis" only. To steer clear of a functionalist perspective on the South African state, with its vacuous notion of "crisis",<sup>21</sup> we must recognise that the historical relationship between racial policy and capitalist development in South Africa has *continuously* exhibited a *combination* of functional and dysfunctional features. The functionalist treatment of the mere manifestation of dysfunction as 'abnormal' is wholly inappropriate and misleading. Furthermore, in fact, this alternative perspective on the history of the South African state makes better sense of Saul and Gelb's own historical narrative. For, each of the "trends" which they single out as the source and hallmark of the "crisis" of the 1940s (i.e. the decline of the reserves; ineluctable growth of African urbanization; growing African mass militancy) exemplifies exactly the *endemically dysfunctional* aspects of the relationship between South Africa's racial policies and capitalist system.

Firstly, declining reserve production was the price paid for efforts to concentrate large sections of the African population in the reserves, and their exploitation as migrant labourers with mere "temporary sojourner" status in the 'white' urban areas of South Africa — a strategy which was in evidence, albeit unevenly, from the early 1920s. Dependent on the existence of the reserves, the migrant labour system represented, in part, an attempt by the state to keep wages low, urban African numbers down, and to legitimise the denial of political rights and adequate social services to those who did become urban residents. However, the migrant labour system increasingly overburdened its own foundation, namely, the capacity of the reserves to absorb these large numbers of people. The continual decline of the reserves, in part, exacerbated the urban influx, one of the very factors which the migrant labour policy was intended to control.

Secondly, the trend towards "full proletarianisation" in the urban areas of South Africa, influx control measures notwithstanding, also displays the systemic tension between the economic pressures of capitalist development and the racial policies contemporaneous with it. In the interests of White economic and political supremacy, the practitioners of both segregation and then apartheid sought to curb the numbers of urban Africans, in part to contain the visible and ongoing threat to the regime from within these urban communities (the

larger ones in particular). However, the growth of urban-based secondary industry since the 1920s, and especially during and after the boom of the 1930s, was accompanied by growing demands for semi-skilled and skilled workers, "stabilised" and permanently settled in these urban areas.

The apartheid period has continued to reproduce this tension between these economic and political interests. The result has been an ever-growing African influx into the urban areas, despite increasingly repressive influx control measures. This has been coupled with a permanent (if variable) housing shortage in these areas, a deficiency of social services, urban poverty, disease and dissatisfaction — in short, the very conditions which have, in part, nurtured the urban African threat to White hegemony which apartheid policies have long since sought to contain.

Lastly, Saul and Gelb's third "critical" trend, the permanent militant mass African opposition to the system of racial capitalism, has reflected the costs borne by the South African state for having avoided policies which would have incorporated the African population into the institutions of parliamentary democracy in South Africa, political parties and trade unions in particular. For, having been denied a legitimate, institutionalised platform for the expression and resolution of grievances, and largely opposed to the racist regime, the African population has presented a constant threat to the state, wielded in illegal forms. Yet, the functional alliance between capitalism and racially discriminatory policies has run on exactly this exclusion of the African majority from the sorts of institutions which would have increased their legitimate economic and political bargaining power. The very strengths of the relationship between racial policy and capitalist growth in South Africa, have also been the sources of its weaknesses.

In short, therefore, the very trends which Saul and Gelb singled out as the hallmarks of such a serious abnormality as an "organic crisis" (one of only two in the country's recent history), are thus more fruitfully conceptualised as the endemic 'dysfunctions' in the relationship between economic development and racial policy in South Africa, since the 1920s at least. These 'dysfunctional' trends have vacillated in degree and prominence, depending on the period in question. Saul and Gelb are certainly correct in describing the 1940s as a period in which the tensions between racial policy and economic in-

terests had rapidly intensified, particularly after the war, and had won a conspicuous and important place on the White political agenda (as Wolpe showed). However, this should not of itself entitle us to see the decade as one of "organic crisis". Indeed, the term remained analytically superfluous and empty throughout Saul and Gelb's account. Instead, we have now only reformulated the *question* of how to distinguish a threat to the state as profound as a "crisis": a "crisis" must be recognised and specified as a *qualitative* singular degree or threshold in quantitatively ongoing trends of opposition and structural tension. (An investigation of this problem is beyond the scope of this paper, however).

Wolpe's, and Saul and Gelb's arguments have shown up the sorts of explanatory blinkers which are imposed by a reductionist or functionalist problematic. Indeed, the very presence of the blind spots in each of their explicit hypotheses testifies to the effective, if involuntary, presence of these limiting perspectives on their respective problems. Furthermore, while purportedly arguing in defence of their declared hypotheses, each presents a historical account which is better conceptualised in different — non-reductionist and non-functionalist — ways. In exposing the analytic shortcomings of these writings, we were thus led in the direction of non-reductionist, non-functionalist positions on the key issues in the 'race-class debate' viz. firstly, the general analytic relationship between variables of 'race' and 'class', and secondly, the relationship between segregation/apartheid and capitalism. It is worth briefly recapping the course of this argument, before reconstructing the terms of the 'race-class debate' and the revisionist position within it.

Both Wolpe's, and Saul and Gelb's writings on the 1940s have shown that an understanding of South Africa's capitalist history must start from the premise that there is no single road to capitalist development. Capitalist interests in general neither functionally necessitate nor wholly determine any one particular set of economic and political structures and policies. Wolpe's account demonstrated that two different capitalist scenarios were both on the political agenda, each favoured by different class alliances represented politically by the National and United Parties respectively. (Viz. agricultural capital, together with the Afrikaner petty bourgeoisie, parts of the White working class, and growing pockets of Afrikaner commercial capital, supporting the National Party's

racially discriminatory and labour-repressive policies, on the one hand; and English manufacturing capital, elements of mining capital and the remainder of the White working class, preferring the United Party's liberalisation of the capitalist system, on the other.) Both possible avenues for capitalist growth represented attempts to grapple with the salient economic and political problems of the time, discussed by Wolpe. Both can be described, and indeed in part explained, according to the different class alliances which endorsed them. Yet an account of these problems and class interests adduces at most the *necessary conditions* for the particular route of development followed; but it is *not sufficient* to explain this course fully. Economic and class variables set limits on party political and ideological forces, but there comes a point at which an explanation of the transition to apartheid devolves on the simple fact that the National Party had a surprise and slim election victory in 1948. Well-organised, ideologically assertive and uncompromising, the National Party capitalised on the United Party's ideological and political disarray and the collapse of the Labour Party,<sup>22</sup> drawing a large vote from the White mine-workers to clinch the election. Saul and Gelb's account shows, moreover, that the victorious National Party policy was not consistently functional towards the interests of capital in the country. The system of racial capitalism was shown to exhibit inherent contradictions, its very strengths the source of instability.

Clearly therefore, with respect to the first issue in the 'race-class debate', racial policy in South Africa cannot be *reduced* to the simple reflex of class forces. Political and ideological factors which explain the capacity of a particular party and class alliance to win political power, also thereby contribute to an explanation of the very structure and history of capitalist production in the country. As regards the second issue, functionalist explanations of segregation and apartheid policies fly in the face of historical accounts of their development. Neither was wholly functional for capitalism in the country. Thus their political implementation cannot be explained by the functions alone, in the manner characteristic of a functionalist analysis.

### *Rethinking the 'Race-Class Debate'*

We are now in a position to redefine the terms of opposition between liberal and revisionist

historiography, to make for a more apt and interesting debate between them. It is time to supersede the original 'either-or' options regarding, firstly, the general analytic relationship between variables of 'race' and 'class'; and secondly, the relationship between capitalist development and racial policy. Let us consider each of these issues in turn.

### 1) *The Relationship Between Variables of 'Race' and 'Class':*

The original terms of debate pit the least interesting and convincing versions of both the liberal and revisionist cases against each other. I hinted earlier in this paper that revisionists tended to take on the crudest liberal position, in terms of which variables of 'race' alone explained the structure and history of South African society. Their more sophisticated liberal opponents however, have also recognised economic forces at work in the shaping of South African racist policies. S. Herbert Frankel, for example, writing in 1928, claimed that

... there is no purely 'native' problem at all, and ... the really pressing problem is one of National Production and the economic status of the Union. (Frankel, 1928: 15)

He interpreted the segregation into locations of Africans living outside the Reserves, as having been a policy "designed to meet two fears", one of which was "that if the natives were all placed in a compact area of their own, a sufficient labour supply would no longer be available." (Frankel, 1928: 15)

More recently, Francis Wilson, writing in the *Oxford History of South Africa*, alleged that the political pressure for the passing of the Natives' Land Act (in 1913) came, almost entirely it seems, from those who wished to ensure a cheap supply of labour. (Wilson, 1971: 129)

Also, Ralph Horwitz has contended that "the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911 was designed to force Africans off the land at less than market cost to capitalist employers." (Wright, 1980: 46)

Still, even on the most generous interpretation, the liberal understanding of the economic underpinnings of South Africa's political system is confined within a methodologically individualist problematic; that is, the economic determinants of racial policy are characterised in terms of the intentions and volition of particular individuals or groups thereof. Class forces, on this view, represent merely the arithmetic sum of the power and influence of such

groups. For, the concept of 'class', if invoked at all, here refers to an aggregate equal simply to the sum of its parts. 'Class', in other words, does not designate an objective structural phenomenon which analytically precedes an account of the interests and intentions of particular individual members, either singly or collectively. However sophisticated an interpretation we give of the liberal position, it still stops short of an understanding of the role of objective class forces which both constrain and enable individual intentions and actions, and which are not fully subject to conscious individual or group control.

Revisionism, on the other hand, operates with an historical materialist conception of class, as a set of social relations, structurally specified<sup>23</sup> according to the position of members vis-à-vis the means of production. Classes are divided according to their differential access to ownership and control of the means of production.<sup>24</sup> Now the historical materialist notion of 'class' is, of course, notoriously controversial, and subject to constant rethinking and updating. This is not the time to explore the complexities of such issues. Still, it is important to indicate some of the analytic contributions of the concept, which are lost to the liberal historian.

There is nothing mysterious or metaphysical in a structural<sup>25</sup> conception of 'class'. It refers simply to a series of relations of production, which constitute the role and position of individual members. Membership of the working class, for example, is defined according to the common lack of either ownership or control of the means of production, and the necessity to sell labour-power in exchange for a wage. On this view, the perpetuation of economic inequality between working class and bourgeoisie is thus not simply a reflection of personal failings or wholly political constraints on workers, but illustrates the objective economic constraints on the possibilities for their acquiring and accumulating capital, individual effort and determination notwithstanding. Liberal historians however, explain economic inequality in South Africa in terms of individual limitations or institutionalised racial discrimination alone, without incorporating an analysis of the structural constraints on the majority of Africans *qua members of the working class*. Then, since institutionalised racism is taken as the only systemic determinant of the inequality of resources, opportunity and income in the country, the removal of apartheid is seen to be suffi-

cient to restore at least equality of opportunity and resources to the population as a whole. The naivete of this expectation derives directly from liberals' failure to take the *combination* of racial policy and objective class forces into account.

A methodological individualism is similarly inept in its analysis of the power of the African working class. In methodologically individualist terms, the power of a class *qua class* is explained as the arithmetic sum of the power of individual members. So, class power increases as a function of the number of class members. Moreover, there is no difference in *kind* — only in degree — between the power of an individual class member and the power of the class as a whole. In terms of this approach then, the threat to White supremacy posed by the African work-force derives first and foremost from its numerical majority. However, this sort of analysis surely fails to grasp the nature and significance of the working class' power to withhold its labour in any capitalist society, including the South African case. Any single worker can in principle always refuse to work, and be sacked as a consequence, with no cost to anyone but himself or herself. However, when a mass of workers withdraws its labour in a strike, capitalist interests are threatened as the source of profit is temporarily frozen. The power of the working class here derives from its structural position in the process of production, which is not reducible to a simple sum of the individual powers of its members. Their power *qua class* is qualitatively distinct from that of a merely arithmetic aggregate of individuals. In the South African case therefore, the relationship between the state and African work-force should be grasped within the framework of a class analysis. For example, the National Party's original attempts to control African workers by outlawing their unions and banning their union leaders, cannot be seen as simply the product of racist policy. It is also motivated by an interest in control over the African working class *qua class*.

This revisionist case against liberal historiography should not, and need not, depend on the kind of reductionist class analysis which many revisionists have advanced. The sort of class analysis which my paper has been advocating is non-reductionist in two sorts of ways. Firstly, as we have seen, an account of class relations is necessary, but not sufficient, for an understanding of the South African state and its preferred path towards renewed economic growth. The *political power* of one class alliance over another requires in part, its electoral majority,

at least, which is in turn affected by such variables as ideological and political control, individual leadership, ethnic cleavages and nationalistic sentiment, and historical contingencies such as wars or droughts. In particular, an explanation of any popular action — or inaction — must allow for the role which ethnic and ideological affiliations might have played as forces in their own right. As Adam and Giliomee ask rhetorically, "why should the independent role of beliefs not be granted, even in shaping an economic environment?" (Adam and Giliomee, 1979: 47)

Furthermore, the relative priority and particular impact of any of these variables vis-à-vis class determinants is historically variable, and therefore not amenable to general, a priori theoretical specification. Class analysis does not involve the application of a complete, ready-made general theory of class relations to particular historical cases; rather, the very nature and significance of class relations is in part historically specific and variable.

Secondly, in addition to its avoidance of the pretence of having provided complete or sufficient explanations, the sort of class analysis of South African society which I have defended, is also non-reductionist in acknowledging the interpenetration of class and racial cleavages as a *single* reality. Class relations in South Africa have been constituted in part along racial lines; that is, access to ownership and control of the means of production in the country has itself been a racial issue. Thus, the formation of an African bourgeoisie, for example, has been *structurally distinct* from that of the White bourgeoisie, given the presence of manifold politico-legal barriers on the acquisition and accumulation of capital by Africans within South Africa. Likewise, we cannot fully make sense of the structural (ie. objective relational) position of the African working class *qua class* without also taking account of their race, as the basis of what some revisionists such as Frederick Johnstone have called the "ultra-exploitability" (Johnstone, 1976: 20-22) of African workers, that is, the use of extra-economic coercive measures to facilitate a supply of 'ultra-cheap labour' (Johnstone, 1976: 20) for White capitalist enterprise. As Johnstone explains,

... the white property owners... developed their system of class domination as one of racial domination, which, by restricting the property ownership and property rights of non-whites, and by restricting the political rights of non-whites to various forms of

extra-economic compulsion and domination, served specifically to perpetuate the economic dependence of the non-white population and to secure the ultra-exploitability of their labour. (Johnstone, 1976: 23)

It is methodologically sterile, therefore, to insist on a variant of class analysis of South African society which depends on hierarchically ranking 'class' *over* 'race', as the fundamental variable which accounts for all others but which is itself self-explanatory. Racial cleavages contribute to an explanation of class differentiation itself. Thus, what is fundamental and distinctive about the South African case is the *unity* of class and race as the source of structural differentiation in the society.<sup>26</sup>

## 2) *The Relationship Between Capitalist Development and Racial Policy:*

I have argued in this paper that the original terms of the 'race-class debate' tended to reserve the acknowledgement of "contradiction between economy and polity" (Wolpe, 1970: 151) in South Africa for the liberal camp. Yet, albeit under the banner of their "crisis" theory, Saul and Gelb for example, *did* expose the *duality* of South African racial policy this century, as simultaneously functional and dysfunctional vis-à-vis capitalist production there. Although they failed to formally conceptualise it as such, their historical account revealed both segregation and apartheid as a contradictory combination of policies which have simultaneously both promoted and undermined the cornerstones of the social formation.

Indeed, other revisionists too, such as Stan Greenberg, Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara and Alex Callinicos, have dealt with the state's patent instabilities and problems during the 1970s by focusing exactly on the conflicting economic and political imperatives of the system of racial capitalism in the country — but through a functionalist lens, which produces the image of a "crisis", rather than of endemic contradictions. In his paper, *Capital Restructuring And The Modification of the Racial Division of Labour In South Africa*, Rob Davies for example, has argued that

the continued reproduction of a racist, hierarchical division of labour, at least in its present form, no longer accords with the interests of the bourgeoisie or indeed of any significant fraction thereof. (Davies, 1979b: 182)

Clearly Davies acknowledges the current contradiction between the racist division of labour and the "economic imperatives of capital accumulation in the South African social formation". (Davies, 1979b: 182) However, he omits to mention that job reservation has consistently been opposed by certain sectors of the bourgeoisie, notably, amongst English manufacturing capitalists — an omission which confirms my suspicion of the latent functionalist problematic underlying his analysis, which only takes account of 'dysfunctions' in the system via the notion of "crisis".

A more fruitful, non-functionalist, revisionist appraisal of the relationship between capitalism and racial policy in South Africa should take full account of the long-standing, internal contradictions within capitalist interests themselves. While mining, agriculture and manufacturing capital have all shown their overall compatibility with the country's racially discriminatory policies and institutions, these have arguably inhibited the optimal development of at least certain sections of the manufacturing sector. The shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labour, together with the restriction of domestic markets, has constrained the productivity of branches of manufacturing industry. David Yudelman makes this sort of point in criticising revisionists for having failed to repudiate convincingly the liberal thesis that

. . . as an industry later develops new demands on its labour, . . . it generally make(s) *economic* sense to educate that labour, stabilize it and pay it better. (Yudelman, 1975: 92)

Now perhaps Yudelman is wrong in stating the point generally, for all sectors and on all occasions. The revisionists influenced by Nicos Poulantzas have ably demonstrated the need to disaggregate the idea of capitalist interests,<sup>27</sup> so as to recognise 'fractional' differences. Still, Yudelman's point is in fact conceded by revisionists such as Saul and Gelb, Davies, Callinicos and others, with respect to the manufacturing sector at least.

Once the revisionist position is reformulated in a non-functionalist way, the motion for debate with liberals concerning the relationship between racial policy and continued economic growth, must be revised accordingly. Clearly, the versions of the liberal and revisionist positions now under consideration *concur* in acknowledging "contradiction between the economy and polity"<sup>28</sup> in South Africa. Indeed, both liberals and revisionists have drawn

attention to the ways in which the pressures of capitalist development do seem to be wearing down its racial fetters.<sup>29</sup> Both schools of thought, when confronted by the contemporary South African state, are agreed that the important and interesting question to be asking is: can the country keep to its present racially restricted course of economic growth, or are the costs (such as the shortage of skills; restricted domestic markets and African purchasing power; a narrowing power-base of White hegemony; escalating militant opposition amongst African communities, trade unions etc.) becoming too great?

This degree of unanimity between liberals and revisionists does not obliterate their differences, however. Firstly, liberals are still liable to the revisionist charge of having ignored or underplayed the functions which racially discriminatory practices *have* performed in promoting capitalist enterprise in the country. As Martin Legassick has said, contrary to liberal opinion,

... far from being archaic, the economic policies of the Nationalist government were equally (ie. like those of the United Party, issuing from the Fagan Commission) directed in the interests of capitalist rationalisation, including the securing of foreign capital, loans and technical know-how. (Legassick, 1974: 10)

Like many revisionists, most liberals too fail to start from the premise that "there is no single road to industrialization", (Trapido, 1971: 309) and instead regard the development of liberal democracy as functionally necessary for the pursuit of economic growth in South Africa. Our reconstructed revisionist position however, interprets the relationship between racial policy and economic growth in the country as both functional and dysfunctional, and thus inherently contradictory. Different periods in the country's history can be distinguished according to which of the antithetical faces of this relationship is uppermost. Thus, for example, during the 1920s, 40s and 70s, the stresses and strains of the system of racial capitalism were visibly exacerbated; whereas the 1930s, 1960s were periods in which the functional alignment between the booming economy and racially discriminatory policies was noteworthy. The particular degree of stability which characterises the South African state during a given period depends primarily on the relative strength of opposing forces, both within the capitalist class and between capitalist and working classes.

Thus the course of South Africa history is conceived as one of *continual, but oscillating* struggle between conflicting class and other factions, rather than as long periods of stability and repression of conflict, interrupted occasionally by the finally irrepressible eruption of "structural" or "organic" crises.

Secondly, while both the liberal and reconstructed revisionist positions recognise manifest contradictions between South Africa's political and economic systems, they diverge in their analyses of the state's response to these problems, and in their prognoses for the course of change in the country. Liberals remain confident that the country's injustices and inequities can be eradicated by liberal reforms of existing political and economic institutions, enacted by the state, finally cognisant of the irrationality of racially discriminatory policies. The elimination of the contradiction between economy and polity is treated as a matter for incremental reform from above, in response to the inescapable pressures of economic 'realities'. For revisionists on the other hand, liberals still underestimate the degree of endemic functional compatibility between apartheid and capitalism in the country, and thus also the resilience of existing political institutions against genuinely liberal reform. Current reform strategies are interpreted as adaptive, rather than liberalising. Furthermore, the class underpinnings of racial injustices in South Africa are such as to mitigate the possibility of a just distribution of resources by the changeover to liberal democratic institutions alone.

To conclude, if one of the goals of revisionist analysis is to inform the process of change in South Africa, then it is important that the 'race-class debate' be engaged anew in these revised terms. The analytic limitations of a functionalist approach can produce politically naive expectations of change as structurally inevitable. For, the idea of a "structural crisis" developed from a functionalist perspective on the last decade in South Africa gives the misleading impression that irresistible structural pressures will do the work of exacting fundamental change in the country. It is true that structural strains weaken, and could at some unspecified future time break, the edifice of White supremacy. But the eradication of economic and political inequities in South Africa is still, as it always was, a matter for ongoing and fluctuating struggle. Furthermore, the composition and course of this struggle should be perceived in non-reductionistic terms. For, firstly, it would be

politically shortsighted to underestimate the importance of political and ideological affiliations as forces in their own right, with respect to both the defenders of the status quo and their radical opposition. Secondly, an understanding of the complex interplay of economic, political and ideological forces in the country illumines the need for, and forms of, multifaceted strategies for change, which do not see opposition to White supremacy as being mobilised along class lines alone.

Revising the terms of the 'race-class debate' not only expands further the scope and agenda of revisionist inquiry into South Africa's past; it is especially pertinent to a realistic assessment of the contemporary period.

## NOTES

1. For example, many of the writings of Harold Wolpe, Martin Legassick, Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara, Alex Callinicos, John Saul and Stephen Gelb, Frederick Johnstone (he shifts towards a methodological pluralism by 1978 — see *The Labour History of the Witwatersrand*, Social Dynamics, Vol. 4 no. 2 Dec 1978) Marion Lacey, Mike Morris, and others. Obviously however, there are many revisionists who do not fit into this category; my case is not a blanket critique of all this revisionism, but is directed only against those revisionist writings which have, voluntarily or involuntarily, been set within a reductionist or functionalist problematic.
  2. Cf. many other revisionist writings which implicitly or explicitly exemplify a non-reductionist, non-functionalist approach. eg. by W. Beinart, P. Delius, S. Marks, S. Trapido, C. Van Onselen, and others.
  3. By the term 'problematic' I mean a set of categories and a priori assumptions and premises, which together imply a particular way of posing problems and articulating their solutions. A 'problematic' is thus an epistemological concept, referring collectively to the means whereby the object of inquiry is conceptualised and investigated.
  4. The writings of P. Van den Berghe and I.D. Macrone are typically cited as exemplary of this liberal stance.
  5. By 1978 however, his position had changed. See footnote 1 above.
  6. The same sort of argument has been levelled by marxists against liberals, criticising them not for deliberately suppressing questions of class, but for being unable to appreciate the significance of class determinants from within the confines of their individualist problematic. See eg. Davies: 1979a: 2
  7. A number of revisionist historians have pointed to these 'dysfunctions' in various concrete cases; indeed, I later argue that this is exactly what emerges from Saul and Gelb's account of the growth of racial policy in their book (Saul and Gelb, 1981). My point here is rather about the limits of the revisionist problematic on a declared theoretical and methodological front, which affects the ways in which questions, premises and conclusions are explicitly conceptualised and articulated.
- One of the points which I make later in the paper concerns the curious mismatch between this explicit theoretical and methodological perspective, and some of the historical material purportedly marshalled in confirmation of it.
8. These industries were not subject to the Industrial Conciliation Act or Wage Act, and were therefore not hampered by job reservation laws which kept skilled and semi-skilled positions for whites, paying them higher wages than could have been the case had white and black labour been able to compete for the same positions.
  9. He claims, for example, that the Fagan Commission, on which the United Party based its electoral platform in 1948, had been "appointed in 1946 by the United Party government precisely in response to the changing nature of African political struggle," (Wolpe 1972: p. 445) and thus by implication, also the changing economic conditions accounting for this struggle.
  10. These commentaries are theoretically anonymous, but not theoretically neutral. I am not arguing in empiricist fashion that historical accounts can be presuppositionless. My point is rather that the presuppositions which *do* inform these revisionist historical commentaries are evident in content but not by name, lacking formal, declared theoretical status.
  11. In addition to the works already cited in the text and footnotes of this paper, see also B. Bozzoli: 1978, S. Greenberg: 1980.
  12. Rob Davies, for example, also sees a "crisis" in the early 1920s. But Saul and Gelb finally settle on taking the 1920s as a period of near, but not complete, crisis.
  13. Was it ever reversible? Certainly the statistics show an ever-increasing growth rate from the 1920s, which was always irreversible in the sense that the urban pull was irreversible, as the manufacturing sector grew.
  14. A state of crisis is commonly depicted as a point at which things 'come to a head', as if this concentration of tensions explains and differentiates the crisis. (See, eg. B. Bozzoli: 1978: 48) But the idea of things coming to a head is simply a metaphorical synonym for, rather than a solution to the problem of, identifying a crisis.
  15. This was noted by the Native Economic Commission of 1932, for example.
  16. According to D. Hindson, the GDP per head of the de facto African homeland population fell between 1946 and 1960, and attained a level in 1970 which was probably little different from that in 1946. (Hindson, 1977)
  17. Of course, this is not to deny regional variations in the degree of agricultural productivity, nor its dependence on income or class.
  18. For example, the Economic and Wage Commission of 1926 drew attention to the plight of "detrilled natives" who had severed all connections with the reserves. (UG 14/1926: 198)
  19. Between 1904 and 1921, the number of urban Africans (including temporary residents) rose by 71,4% (Paul Rich, 1978: 180)
  20. Saul and Gelb claim to be using the concept of "organic crisis" in its Gramscian sense, but fail to explicate the concept fully. Their case about the applicability of a Gramscian approach to the understanding of "crisis" to the South African case is wholly unargued. Indeed, as I have explained in another paper, *Theories of "Crisis"*



- sis*" and *The Crisis of Theory*, Gramsci's notion of "organic crisis" rests on assumptions which do *not* apply in the South African case so that it cannot be appropriated unreflexively and en bloc, in analyses of South African state. Thus, recourse to Gramsci's concept of crisis does not address or answer any of the problems which I have been discussing in Saul and Gelb's account of the "crisis" of the 1940s.
21. I am not arguing that *all* concepts of "crisis" are vacuous, only the ones which issue from a functionalist problematic unable to conceptualise systemic dysfunctions in any other way.
  22. See R. Davies, 1979a: chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of these developments.
  23. By 'structure' I mean a set of relations which constitute and define the place of individual members as bearers of these relations. This is not meant to entail that individual identity is exhaustively determined by its structural nexus; structures are necessary but not sufficient conditions of individual agency. Individuals are bearers of structural relations in this limited sense only.
  24. 'Ownership' and 'control' of the means of production are difficult notions to specify precisely. But the point I wish to make does not necessitate exploring these complexities, although it does presuppose the assumption on my part that the difficulties involved are not in principle insuperable.
  25. Note that there is an important distinction between a structural and structuralist conception of class. On a structural version of the concept, objective social relations constituting a class are seen as necessary conditions of, and partial constraints upon, the agency of their individual bearers. Structuralism however, regards an analysis of such objective relations as *sufficient* to account for individual agency, at least as far as is relevant to the social scientist. The structuralist takes agency as the explanandum, but never part of the explanans.
  26. This does not imply that variables of race are exhaustively dealt with at this level, only that the fundamental structural impact of racial cleavages must be understood in conjunction with class divisions.
  27. Of course, recognition of important intra-capitalist differences and tensions is not restricted to a Marxist structuralism. The point can be made without necessarily carrying along with it the entire structuralist position.
  28. Wolpe characterised the liberal position thus, *in contradiction* to his revisionist alternative.
  29. The point is made especially with regard to the fate of the racist hierarchical division of labour. Always used in accordance with economic need, job reservation policy has completely eroded in response to a serious skills shortage.
  30. This perspective is not original to this paper, of course. It is explicitly stated by Martin Plaut and Duncan Innes, for example, in Plaut and Innes, 1976 and implicit in the works of C. Van Onselen, Trapido, Beinart and others.
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