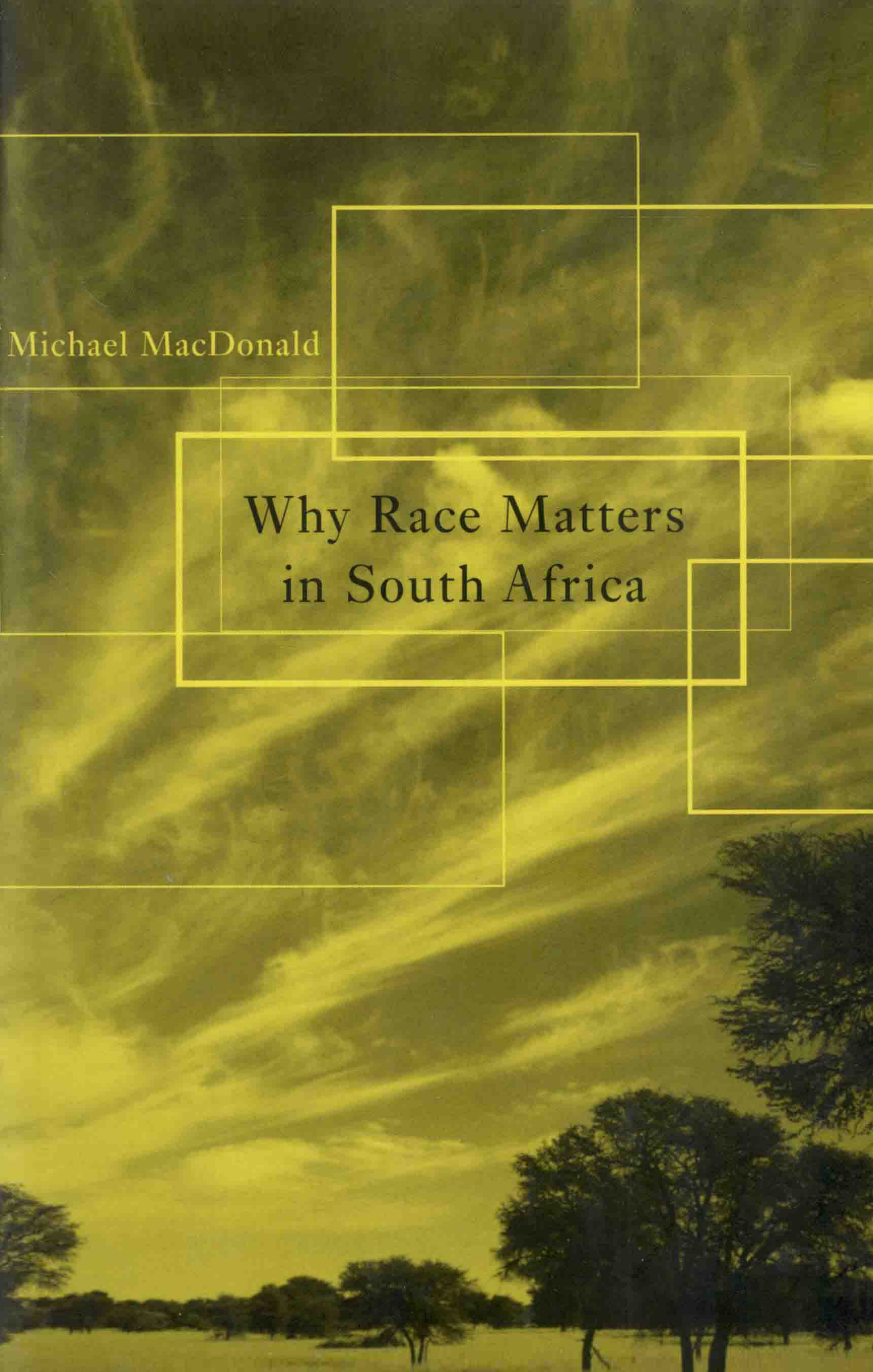

Michael MacDonald

# Why Race Matters in South Africa

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## Michael MacDonald

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# Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction *1*

**1** The Logic of White Supremacy *5*

**2** The Mother of Identity Politics *15*

**3** The White Man's Burden *33*

**4** The Politics of the Political Economy *49*

**5** The Power Politics of the Transition to Democracy *64*

**6** Non-Racialism as an Ideology *92*

**7** The Political Economy of Identity Politics *124*

**8** The Who, Not the What *161*

Conclusion *177*

Notes *189*

Bibliography *220*

Index *235*

# Introduction

If nationality is consent, the state is compulsion.
— HENRI-FRÉDÉRIC AMIEL

This book addresses three broad questions about why races have come to matter in South African history and why they still matter in South African politics. It begins with the obvious questions: What are "races"? Where do they come from and what do races *do* in South African politics? How do political actors conceive of races and what are the political implications of rival conceptions?

It has become commonplace to deny the old idea that races are biogenetic realities and to portray races as identities that humans, not nature, devise. Almost reflexively, the void that is opened by denaturalizing races is being filled by the idea of "culture." Races, it is thought, are cultural formations, but the culturalization of races raises questions of its own. If races essentially are cultural identities, what differentiates races from cultures? What weight does race carry that cannot be borne by culture, without the assistance of race? The experience of South African whites (to insinuate the racialization that is being problematized) suggests that races are ways of associating different cultural groups, but why do smaller cultural groups combine into larger racial groups? What was gained by assembling into races and what does this say about race? And does it matter whether communities are designated as "races" or some other way (say, as "nations"), given that the membership of the race and of the nation sometimes is the same, whatever the designation?

The white supremacist state obviously classified people on the basis of race and associated all manner of advantages with whites and disadvantages with blacks.[1] But did state power merely confirm, register, and play favorites among races that existed independently of it or did state power actually help to constitute putatively "racial" communities—to make them? Culturalist arguments see white supremacy as favoring whites and disfavoring blacks, not as creating the categories of "white" and "black" in the process. The white supremacist state enfranchised whites as citizens and disenfranchised blacks as noncitizens. Did this merely manifest in politics differences between existing communities that already had developed on the basis of culture, or did enfranchisement and disenfranchisement help constitute the communities themselves? If whiteness originally was associated with inclusion and the benefits conferred by citizenship, and blackness was associated with exclusion and the costs inflicted on noncitizens, should South Africa's "races" be conceived relationally, as mutually constituting and constituted?

The second set of questions revolves around the role played by race and state in making, undermining, and sustaining capitalism in South Africa. What did the state, which had been intertwined with race by white supremacy, do for capitalism and to capitalism? What were the costs, why were they assessed, and what benefits did business get in return? How did the racial state and capitalism shape each other and in what ways did capitalism sustain or corrode the racial state? How did the relationship between them change over time and what changed it? Why did capital reassess its loyalties in response to the township rebellion of the 1980s, deciding that democratic capitalism offered more than racial capitalism? And how was democratic capitalism accomplished, given that white supremacy had prevented much support for democratic capitalism from developing among blacks and had taken extreme measures to prevent democratic organizations from developing?

The rebellion of the 1980s, which was centered in segregated black "townships" on the outskirts of cities, had stalemated apartheid, encouraging negotiations on a new political dispensation. But negotiations on the new political order required the African National Congress (ANC)—as the representative of the township rebellion—to make compromises and bargains binding on civil society, and then to preside over a government that was destined to disappoint the expectations of many blacks, especially activists, who had forced apartheid to negotiate with the ANC in the first place. What made this possible? Was the ANC in actual control of the rebellion? How did it achieve the authority to moderate popular demands, maintain its popularity anyway, and make binding compromises? What role did racial solidarities play in sustaining and limiting democracy in South Africa?

The third set of questions revolves around changes in the meaning of race in democratic South Africa. If white supremacy associated whiteness with citizenship and blackness with noncitizenship, what happens when "non-racialism" becomes the official ideology of democracy? What is non-racialism? What does "non-racialism" mean in principle and how does it work in practice? If races are cultural communities, do "non-racial" political institutions allow Africans, the largest race, to capture control of the state in the name of democracy? But if races are political (as well as cultural) constructs, do they evolve in new directions under new political circumstances, undercutting the electoral prospects of the ANC as the de facto party of Africans? If racial solidarities originated in political experiences, in shared deprivations and shared struggles in the case of blacks, are racial solidarities unmade by the political and economic differences that have developed in democratic South Africa? What is the role of race in sustaining democratic citizenship and the role of democratic citizenship in vindicating capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa?

Democracy is a good in itself, and the whole history of white supremacy vouches for its value. But democracy also is a means to other ends; it rescues, stabilizes, and governs a society that had been brought to the verge of chaos by apartheid. How does democracy do all of this, and how can it retain legitimacy in spite of continuing, even widening, economic inequality and poverty? Are conventional definitions of democracy, which emphasize the procedural nature of democracy, up to the task of explaining why South Africans value democratic procedures, given that democracy has not repaired urgent problems? Perhaps democracy is legitimated for substantive as well as procedural reasons, for empowering those who previously had been disenfranchised. If so, does this suggest that racial solidarities, engendered by generations of dispossession, common oppression and exploitation, and disenfranchisement, now legitimate democracy for many Africans, and that democracy is legitimate because it empowers the "us" that had been forged by white supremacy? And why has capitalism, which was blamed for apartheid by much of the anti-apartheid movement, become taken for granted, unchallenged and unchallengeable by its erstwhile enemies, now that democracy prevails? Is capitalism also availing itself of racial solidarities to reproduce and sustain itself? If democracy legitimates itself via racial empowerment, and capitalism legitimates itself via democracy, what must capital do to turn racial solidarities to its advantage?

The thesis of this book is that South Africa's races originated in political experiences as well as cultural similarities, that the white supremacist state made communities of "whites" and "blacks" by conferring citizenship on the one and denying it to the other. Whites were molded by the political experiences of inclusion, and blacks were branded by exclusion as well as by their respective cultural affinities; but the role of the state did not end there. The racial state gave economic expression to the disparities between the political experiences of belonging and not belonging. Whites became more prosperous, in part because the state subsidized their living standards, insulated them from market competition, denied blacks access to free markets, and organized the exploitation of blacks. Ultimately, the specter of social collapse persuaded capital to entertain democracy as a solution to the disorder of the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet in spite of the achievement of democracy, wealth still is distributed extremely unequally and economic inequality still is expressed racially. Most of the economic elite is white (which is not the same as saying that most whites are in the economic elite), and most Africans are poor. Consequently business, which historically was associated with white supremacy, fears the possibility of racial and economic grievances combining, of the capitalist economy being seen by the poor African majority as just another version of white supremacy. To fend off that danger, business is joining with the ANC government in encouraging the growth of black middle classes and in enlisting racialism, as embodied by the new African bourgeoisie, to support the new political order. The advantage of African economic elites is that they upset the historic equation between blackness and poverty; summon racial nationalism, hitherto the idiom of resistance and revolution, on behalf of capitalism; and legitimate ongoing economic inequalities. Thus South Africa's formula for stable democratic capitalism: racial nationalism legitimates "non-racial" democracy; "non-racial" democracy legitimates capitalism; and capitalism, building an African bourgeoisie along with black middle classes in conjunction with the democratic state, gives material substance to and sustains the salience of racial nationalism. Racial nationalism, not for the first time in South African history, is bending to the needs of the political economy.

# 1

# The Logic of White Supremacy

> There must be no illusions about this, because if our policy is taken to its full logical conclusion as far as the Black people are concerned, there will not be one Black man with South African citizenship. I say this sincerely, because that is the idea behind it. Why should I try to hide it? That is our policy in terms of the mandate we have been given. . . . [E]very Black man in South Africa will eventually be accommodated politically in some independent new state in this honourable way and there will no longer be a moral obligation on [the South African] Parliament to accommodate these people politically.
>
> —CONNIE MULDER, MINISTER OF PLURAL RELATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT, 1978

South Africa counts as a great success for liberal democracy. It now possesses standard liberal democratic institutions—open elections, individual rights, equality under the law, constitutional government, free political activity, and much more—in spite of a history that was neither liberal nor democratic. Apartheid was not liberal because the apartheid state did not respect the rule of law, did not respect individual rights, and did not consider those it governed to be individuals, subsuming them in what the apartheid state designated as "their" ethno-cultural or racial groups. Apartheid was not democratic because the apartheid state restricted the franchise on the basis of race, denied civil and political rights—even citizenship—to many of its subjects as a matter of course, and rejected the sovereignty of the people of South Africa. Ultimately, the illiberal and undemocratic domination of the white minority over the large black majority was unsustainable. But that apartheid was not liberal and not democratic does not prove that it was doomed to fail because it was illiberal and undemocratic.

The failure of apartheid raises a number of issues, beginning with the meaning of apartheid. What was it? Was apartheid just white supremacy with an odd name or did the name signify a distinctive type of racism? Did apartheid, whatever it was, provide the framework for organizing

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South Africa's political economy or did apartheid adapt to the imperatives of the capitalist economy? What interests did apartheid represent and which—if any of them—were separable from it? Was apartheid a vehicle for the advancement of other interests or did it impose inviolable rules of its own that both conditioned and constrained the interests of whites?

Apartheid prepared South Africa badly for liberal democracy, and not only because of its racism. Apartheid rightly is identified with racism, but it also was racialist. Often the terms "racism" and "racialism" are used interchangeably, but they carry distinguishable meanings. In the United States, where the word "racism" covers a wide range of meanings, the word "racialism" rarely is used. That both terms are used in South Africa suggests their meanings may differ, that "racism" and "racialism" sometimes refer to different things. Racism has members of one racial group, usually whites, dominating members of a different racial group, usually blacks, for material or expressive reasons. Asserting the superiority of one group and the inferiority of the other, racists prescribe supremacy for the superior population and subordination for the inferior one. Racism deems some people as *better* than other people on the basis of their membership in a race. The "better" people—usually whites—deserve more power by virtue of their superiority, with the sequence being critical for racists. Ostensibly, superiority precedes and grounds supremacy, not the other way around. That is, racists do not regard power as the source of their superiority, but superiority as the source of their power. Whites are more powerful because they are superior, because nature or culture has made them better and more worthy; moreover, whites are superior even when they are not more powerful. It is the putative inferiority of blacks that justifies the subordination of blacks.

Racialists, on the other hand, do not necessarily claim that one people is better than another; they are content to claim that one people is *different* from another. The old segregationist precept in the United States, of separate but equal, affected to be racialist. It did not always proclaim that blacks were inferior or necessarily insist that they were subordinate; it could, and on rare occasions did, make the more modest claim that standards for blacks must be different because blacks were different (from whites), and that they were different because they were black. Of course, racialism usually derives from and abets racism, as the American example shows. Black and white might have been kept separate, but they were not kept equal. Yet even when racialism serves the ends of racism, it elaborates a distinct logic. Racialists regard race as the source of identity and identities as the axes of political institutions, and then urge that government be organized on the basis of race. Thus, racialists agree with racists that race is a critical human attribute, that it plays a constituting role in making people who they are and does not merely comprise one trait among others. But racialists and racists may disagree on what should follow from racialization. Racists require inequality to manifest the superiority of one race over inferior races; racialists, on the other hand, require distinct—but not, they claim, necessarily unequal—representation for the various races.

Apartheid, unlike previous forms of white supremacy in South Africa, was predicated on both racism *and* racialism. Obviously, apartheid was committed to establishing and expanding the absolute and systematic supremacy of whites; but that does not mean that it constituted, or was coterminous with, white supremacy. White supremacy long preceded the advent of apartheid in southern Africa, originating in the Cape colony—the site of the first white settlement—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and spreading in the nineteenth century to the interior of what in 1910 became modern South Africa.[1] Apartheid, by contrast, was not instituted until the second half of the twentieth century, which is why apartheid is not reducible to simple white supremacy. Apartheid was a version of white supremacy, one among several competitors, and what distinguished apartheid from its rivals was not racism, which was common to all of them.

Consider two interpretations of South African "segregation," the system of racial organization that preceded apartheid.[2] The first interpretation was developed by a liberal critic of segregation in the 1930s; the second by an author of segregation and the dominant figure in South African politics for the first half of the twentieth century. R. F. Hoernlé, the liberal critic, portrayed segregation in almost Manichean terms.[3] He took South Africa to have been governed by two principles, mastery and subordination. Whites were masters, blacks were subordinates, and the mastery of whites was elevated into the inviolable principle of social organization. Whites dominated every area of life—government, economy, culture, society—partly because of their stake in each, but also because their commitment to dominate some areas required domination in all areas. Whites did not brook equality anywhere lest domination be undercut everywhere.

The system Hoernlé described was self-perpetuating and interlocking:

"It is contrary to the principle of domination for any White man, let alone a White woman, to be in a position to receive orders from, or to be otherwise subordinate to, a non-European and more particularly a Native. . . . That White domination is incompatible with the subordination of White to non-White is a principle which applies . . . throughout all social relations between the races."[4] Segregation for Hoernlé, rather than being inspired by racial feelings and solidarities, was motivated by considerations of power. Power begat power, and power was the preserve of whites. Color identified who was the subject and who was the object of power, but otherwise did not matter much. Whites acted, blacks were acted upon, and the logic of domination counted for more than racial sentiments. Whites protected all components of their privilege, even those that were trivial, because they considered domination to be indivisible. The pretense, not to mention the substance, of equality in some areas—the economy, say—undercuts the principle of inequality everywhere.

Jan Smuts, the central figure in South African politics in the first half of the twentieth century and an author of the policy of segregation, saw things differently. Smuts, unlike Hoernlé, started with racialized subjects. Racial natures were taken as given. Whites were European, civilized, mature; blacks had the "psychology and outlook" of children.[5] Smuts asserted, "By temperament [Africans] have not much initiative, and if left to themselves and their own tribal routine they do not respond very well to the stimulus for progress. They are naturally happy-go-lucky, and are not oppressed with the stirrings of that divine discontent which have made the European the most unhappy but the most progressive of all humans."[6] Africans and Europeans needed each other, however. Africans provided whites with physical labor, labor being scarce otherwise and Africans being better suited to it; and whites provided the guidance that Africans required, acting as "trustees" for them. Whites were the adults whom the African children needed.

Talk of children and adults helped only so much. It justified white supremacy, in that adults must preside over children. But it did not justify segregation, the purpose of the stereotype. Africans, if the metaphor was extended, could "mature" into adulthood, becoming more like their white teachers. That, however, was precisely what the policy of segregation was meant to prevent. According to Smuts, "Nothing could be worse for Africa than the application of a policy, the object or tendency of which would be . . . to de-Africanize the African and turn him either into a beast of the field or into a pseudo-European."[7] Africans had to be kept different, culturally, politically, and religiously (a position taken without irony by a man whose middle name was "Christian"). To fend off the prospect of Africans assimilating into "European" culture, whites must "evolve a policy which . . . [would] preserve [African] unity with her own past, conserve what is precious in her past, and build her future progress and civilization on specifically African foundations."[8]

The policy of segregation was to allow whites to have their cake and eat it too. It conferred the benefits of control on whites while keeping Africans different. In classic colonialist fashion, segregation had Africans being governed indirectly. As Smuts reported, "The white administration remains responsible for the larger functions of government. . . . But all the purely tribal concerns are left to the chief and his counsellors whose actions are supervised by the white officer only in certain cases intended to prevent abuses."[9] Africans, in other words, were different from whites, and differences had to be respected by and manifested in distinct cultural and political institutions. Different institutions hinged, therefore, on prior differences between white and black, which Smuts tried to impute to nature. But the prospect of Africans assimilating into white culture belied his effort, suggesting the differences were cultural, not natural; and cultural barriers were surmountable, which is why segregation was necessary: in "preserving" supposedly inferior cultures, segregation had the effect of justifying white supremacy.

Smuts, of course, might have advocated assimilating (some) Africans into "white" civilization, because educated Africans resented segregation and were tempted to adopt "European" ways. Instead, he maintained, "It is . . . evident that the proper place of the educated minority of the natives is with the rest of their people, of whom they are the natural leaders, and from whom they should not in any way be dissociated."[10] That is, segregation trapped educated Africans among their "own" people, who were governed by "traditional" chiefs, leaving educated Africans no alternative to being "African" and to being stuck beneath "their" chiefs. With Africans bound by obedience to chiefs and with chiefs bound to the white state, Africans were subordinated indirectly to whites. Whites controlled the chiefs, and the chiefs controlled the people.

Smuts glided over the benefits of white supremacy to whites, presenting segregation as an obligation borne by whites for the benefit of Africans (and the world). Africans, he claimed, were forever children. Yet if Africans were sentenced to a life term as children, Smuts need not have fretted about the danger of Africans adopting the ways of "European" civilization. Obviously, Smuts's problem was that Africans were not children and were capable of assimilating into Western culture, which undercut the justification of trusteeship and the benefits whites derived from it. Consequently, segregationists could not celebrate what they might have claimed as the greatest achievement of white supremacy, the edification of the African race. The dialectics of segregation meant that Africans who thrived in the ways of whites did not validate the "white" order: they endangered it.

Hence the political problem with justifying the structure of domination via racist myths about the indelible inferiority of Africans. Smuts's "happy-go-lucky" children were changed by exposure to Western ways and schools, undercutting the ideological basis of domination. Whites might have accepted that detribalized natives, having adopted "European" civilization, could participate in governing South Africa. But if Africans matured into adults, whites would become unneeded as trustees; and if whites were not trustees, they would forfeit their right to supremacy (since they no longer were *better*). Thus, to the extent whites were committed to preserving the fruits of racism in the face of the increasing Westernization of African elites, it behooved them to reconceive race. Racist power structures could not be defended with silly stereotypes; they required transplanting in less malleable, more absolute conceptions of race. Racism needed augmenting from racialism.

Racism is not what distinguished apartheid from segregation. Both rendered the systematic subordination of black to white as an inviolable principle of public and private relations; both reserved the vast bulk of land for whites, prohibited Africans from leasing land owned by whites, and shunted Africans to reserves—later called "homelands"—to be administered by chiefs who, in turn, were propped up by the white state;[11] both restricted the access of Africans to labor markets, limiting their mobility and reducing their wages; both reserved jobs for whites; both obstructed the urbanization of Africans; both imposed residential and territorial segregation; and both regarded government as the preserve of whites.

The apartheid state went even further in extending and formalizing segregation. It enacted, among other things, the Group Areas Act, mandating residential segregation (to the particular disadvantage of Coloureds in Cape Town and the surrounding areas); the Separate Amenities Act, requiring segregation in public facilities (so-called petty apartheid); the Immorality Act, forbidding sexual liaisons across the color divide; the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act; Influx Control, obstructing African urbanization and mobility; and the Population Registration Act, which underpinned apartheid by defining racial categories and the criteria for classifying individuals in them.

But if apartheid deepened segregation and white supremacy, it did not invent either of them. What it did innovate, and what in principle differentiated apartheid from segregation, was a distinct conception of race. Segregation ordained blacks to be *inferior* to whites; apartheid cast them as indelibly *different.* Of course, apartheid openly regarded blacks as inferior for reasons of nature and culture, and systematically subordinated them. But apartheid did not justify white supremacy only in terms of black inferiority.[12] Apartheid did declare African claims in South Africa to be inferior to white claims, but on the grounds that African claims were unfounded. Not belonging in South Africa, Africans lacked standing to claim rights for themselves. They belonged elsewhere, in societies of their own, because their race was different.

Apartheid sought to secure what Hoernlé had described as segregation, the interlocking and absolute domination of white over black, by regrounding domination. Segregation had claimed that whites and blacks possessed distinct cultures and that the twain should never meet (which is why segregation was necessary). Apartheid likewise associated races with cultures, but implicitly addressed the prospect that the link between them was not indissoluble, elaborating a state policy—"separate development"—to prevent Africans from adopting "European" culture. The kernel of separate development was that races are akin to nations, that they engender primary solidarities, organize society, and establish allegiances. It followed that, as combining multiple nations in one state is dangerous (because it associates people with conflicting loyalties), so combining multiple races in one state is dangerous. Throwing multiple racial groups together into one state inevitably thwarts the right of some to national self-determination; inevitably causes friction, breeds disorder, and incites violence; and inevitably prevents conflicts from being adjudicated on the basis shared values (because values spring from groups and each group produces distinctive values).

Apartheid did not apply the multicultural principles of separate development consistently or evenhandedly. It treated the "race" of whites as sufficient basis for a single, encompassing nation, but South Africa was

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