The African Middle Class in South Africa
1910-1994

Roger Southall

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Abstract

Alan Cobley (1990: 3) has argued that no sustained interest was taken in the subject of class in South Africa until the arrival of a generation of radical historians in the 1970s, and then the focus of concern was largely with the origins and development of a black working class in whose revolutionary potential the future was, by many, deemed to lie. In contrast, Jeremy Seekings (2009) has proposed that class was long a concern, if not necessarily the central one, of liberal scholars from the 1940s. Nonetheless, even though it is true that an emergent black middle class attracted considerable interest from liberal historians, anthropologists and social observers, it is fair to say that it was dealt with spasmodically, and then very often largely as a subordinated appendage of the black proletariat.

1 Introduction

Alan Cobley (1990: 3) has argued that no sustained interest was taken in the subject of class in South Africa until the arrival of a generation of radical historians in the 1970s, and then the focus of concern was largely with the origins and development of a black working class in whose revolutionary potential the future was, by many, deemed to lie. In contrast, Jeremy Seekings (2009) has proposed that class was long a concern, if not necessarily the central one, of liberal scholars from the 1940s. Nonetheless, even though it is true that an emergent black middle class attracted considerable interest from liberal historians, anthropologists and social observers, it is fair to say that it was dealt with spasmodically, and then very often largely as a subordinated appendage of the black proletariat. Arguably, therefore, it is only now that the history of the African middle class, notably as it participated in and shaped the African National Congress (ANC), is beginning to receive its due. In part, this is because the lot of the middle class is often deemed in ‘struggle history’ to have been unheroic: indeed in some tellings, the only way for the bourgeoisie to contribute to liberation was by subjecting itself to the leadership of the working class! Yet even while, today, there is a growing interest in the multi-faceted nature of the
struggle against apartheid, there has been a failure to trace the holistic evolution of the black middle class. In what follows I provide an overview of the development of the specifically ‘African’ segment of the ‘black middle class’ in the pre-democratic era, even while recognizing that this places severe limitations upon how we portray past struggles against racial oppression.

2 African Classes under Segregation and Apartheid

The discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1884 on the Witwatersrand led to a minerals-based revolution which brought massive social transformations in its wake. A voracious demand for cheap black labour led to the early development of short-term migrancy from rural areas to the mines; increasing demand for foodstuffs brought about far reaching changes in agricultural production, largely under the control of white commercial farmers; the rapid development of an exports-led mining industry stimulated a rising tempo of secondary industrialization, and an accompanying growth in the number and size of towns; and the scramble for control of the huge mineral wealth led to the outbreak of war between Britain and the independent ‘Boer’ republics of Free State and Transvaal in 1899.

The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, while guaranteeing the triumph of British capital, granted effective sovereignty to a white settler minority at the expense of the political rights of the indigenous black majority. Thereafter, white power and privilege was secured via an industrializing economy which was based upon the exploitation of cheap black labour. Discriminatory acts legitimized the appropriation of the vast portion of previously African occupied land, restricted African urbanization, blocked access to upward social mobility of all but a tiny minority of African, and first eroded and later eliminated completely the rights of Africans to participate in the country’s central political structures. It was only as a culmination of long term historical developments, not least of which was an increasing tempo of black resistance reflective of rising levels of African urbanization and proletarianisation which ultimately governments had been unable to stop, that white political monopoly gave way to a democratic settlement. This ushered into power the African National Congress (ANC), a political organization formed in 1912 which had survived numerous travails, notably its banning by the government in 1960 and its being forced into exile, to confirm its status as the predominant vehicle of black nationalism.

The class structure fashioned by settler capitalism left little room for an African middle class. Indeed, during the long course of history it was designed to inhibit its growth, save in so far as the white minority regime required a class of subaltern black allies and, from the 1970s, began to address increasing shortages of skilled white labour by increasing the provision of black education and housing. Thus it is that the overwhelming characteristic of the African middle class was its small size and its limited opportunities for upward mobility. Hence followed the theorization of the black middle class by the Communist Party of
South Africa (CPSA)\(^1\) as an historically progressive class whose interests lay in allying with the black working class in pursuit of nationalist struggle and political freedom. From 1927, when the CPSA adopted the thesis of the ‘Native Republic’, it forged an alliance with the ANC, which for all its limitations, it regarded as the principal vehicle of an anti-colonial, nationalist bourgeoisie.\(^2\) Whatever the ambiguities of such theorizing, it was undoubtedly correct in identifying the black middle class as frustrated by the racialized polity.

### 3 The Emergence of the African Middle Class in Colonial Society

Following this observation, its author, Paul Maylam (1986:223), remarked that the concept of an African petty bourgeoisie can be ‘problematic’. If anything, this was an understatement. However, in a short overview, space considerations forbid a detailed engagement with the complex debates which have taken place regarding the characterization of the African middle class (for instance, Wolpe 1977; Crankshaw, 1986). Suffice it to say here that I regard the African middle class as having come to occupy an intermediate position between white capital and the African working class, and between the state and the black population it ruled. This class was defined by its employment, early on, in professional, ‘service’, and clerical spheres, and subsequently, increasingly in political and managerial positions, its status dictated not only by its resultant standard of living, but by its education, literacy, political authority and, as Maylam implies, its orientation towards material improvement and individual betterment.

The origins of the African middle class, variously depicted as an emergent African elite or petty bourgeoisie, lie in the scattered educational efforts of the Christian missionaries of a variety of nationalities and denominations which were established from the early days of white settlement in the territories which eventually became South Africa. Cobley (1990: 59), who has provided us with the most holistic picture of the African middle class during the era of segregation, proclaims that ‘the missionary endeavor was crucial to the future character of the black petty bourgeoisie’. The saving of souls demanded the promotion of literacy and the teaching of the English language so that earthly sinners could read the word of God, and with that came the missionaries’ commitment to spreading ‘civilisation’:

To ensure that this westernizing project endured, missions formed their own communities of Christianised communities, often settled on mission-owned land and isolated socially and geographically from non-Christian

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1. The CPSA dissolved in the face of the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, only to reform underground as the South African Communist Party (SACP).
2. For the tortuous debates within the CPSA around the Native Republic, see Sheridan Johns (1995, especially Chapters 11-13).
neighbours. The inhabitants of such communities became known as the amakholwa or ‘believers’, relations between Christian and non-Christian becoming strained and often discouraged by missionaries who believed that indigenous African customs were backward if not actually sinful.

Many missionary societies granted individual title of parcels of land to their most loyal converts, or assisted their adherents to acquire land, believing that this would help entrench solid Christian values and ways of life. This was the origin of various African landed enclaves which were scattered around the country (and were later to complicate Nationalist governments’ efforts to bring about a tidy allocation of land between the different races). Yet as Cobley insists, by far the most important advantage available to kholwa over non-Christian communities was access to education, for this was a ‘vital asset’ for those wishing to prosper. The ability to read, write, add up, subtract and communicate with the colonists in their own language were skills required by the colonial, cash economy. Nonetheless, educational opportunities were severely limited. Mission schools were relatively few; they were usually poorly equipped; many relied on former pupils as instructors; and not many were able to offer more than the most elementary teaching. This ‘fell far short of a comprehensive and effective schools network even for the Christianised African population’, with the result that only a small minority of children had access to formal education, and most of those were confined to lower grades. According to the country’s first census, in 1911, only 6.8 per cent of the African population was able to read or write (Cobley 1990: 61).

Beyond elementary level, kholwa communities enjoyed a ‘virtual monopoly on opportunities in education’. A prime purpose of the missionaries’ efforts was the training of ministers and teachers, to which end, from the middle of the Nineteenth Century, the different missionary societies established a number of ‘Native Training Institutions’. The earliest, and most prominent of these, was Lovedale College in the Eastern Cape, established by the United Free Church Mission in 1841. This was subsequently complemented by other institutions such as St. Matthews, established by the Anglicans near Grahamstown in 1855, Healdtown by the Methodists in 1857, and the Aminzimtoti Institute (renamed Adams College in the 1930s) by the American Board of Education (ABE) in Natal (1853), soon to be followed by Catholics establishing Marianhill in Natal and Morija in Basutoland. Overwhelmingly, the objective of such institutions was to create ‘educated men’, African women being largely excluded from the benefits of formal education. Nonetheless, there were pioneering institutions for women, the most famous being the Inanda Seminary just north of Durban, founded by the ABE in 1853, another the Lovedale School for Girls (Healy-Clancy 2013). Elsewhere, opportunities were provided for a few women to train as nurses, initially at Victoria Hospital (Lovedale Mission Hospital) in Alice, which started a three year general nursing course in 1902. Cecilia Makiwane was one of the first two African women to pass her examinations and to graduate in 1908.

The educational fare provided by the mission schools, although varying in
its emphasis between academic and ‘industrial’ subjects, was basic, the large majority of such institutions preparing pupils to teach at the lower levels of the primary school system.\(^3\) The South African Native College, Fort Hare, founded in 1916 at a site close to Lovedale, became the first and for a long time, the only, institution available for the training of African secondary school teachers.\(^4\) Nonetheless, these and other institutions provided a rudimentary framework of further education for Africans, although the costs involved ensured that only those students who obtained scholarships or had relatively wealthy parents could hope to progress beyond the lowest levels. In turn, the scarcity of opportunity was to impart to further and higher education an aura of exclusiveness.

During the whole period 1901 to 1934, despite the fact that mission schools received modest financial support from the state (although this came along with increased regulation), there were only 253 Africans who successfully passed their Matriculation, while by 1935, only 49 students had graduated from Fort Hare with BA degrees and just 2 with BSc degrees, although the College also successfully trained some 370 odd students at sub-degree level to become teachers, Ministers of religion, clerks, agricultural demonstrators, and so on (Cobley 1990: 61-63). At school level, as late as 1958, there were just 723 African boys and 215 African girls in Standard 10 (Walker 1991: 19). Limitations of opportunity at home necessitated training abroad for a fortunate few. For instance, aspiring black doctors had to seek education abroad until the outbreak of war in 1939 prompted the admission of blacks to medical schools at the Universities of the Witwatersrand in 1941, Cape Town in 1943, and Natal in 1951 (Digby 2013). Even then, graduation amounted to no more than a miserable 6.2 black doctors per annum throughout the period 1946-1956 (Tobias 1960).

Mission education sought primarily to civilize ‘the natives’ – while the latter prioritized the acquisition of useable and marketable capacities. Thus there was a basic tension at the heart of ‘Native education’. For the overwhelming majority of whites, educated Africans were subjects of deep suspicion, as likely to have acquired ideas and aspirations above their station. Preference was therefore often expressed that Natives should be restricted to industrial subjects, as academic subjects were deemed unsuitable for a ‘less developed’ or ‘backward’ race, while the whole body and aura of education emphasized European culture and belief systems and the denigrated African culture. Educated Africans were left in no doubt about their subordinate status in the colonial social hierarchy. However, within their own communities, their education brought both significant material rewards and social respect. Certificated teachers could earn double the amount paid to uncertificated teachers in primary schools, while those who emerged from Fort Hare with degrees could earn up to five times as much.

\(^3\) According to Hilder Kuper, who provides a chapter on Nursing in Kuper (1965: 218) there were some 3446 qualified African teachers by 1910. Virtually all these would have been trained to teach only at the primary level.

\(^4\) Fort Hare was a product of the Inter-State Native College Scheme, supported by the Cape government and driven in enthusiastic African circles in all four colonies by J.T. Jabavu. See Odendaal (2012: 326-41).
Unsurprisingly, those few Africans who obtained an education came to regard themselves, and to become regarded by both uneducated Africans and colonists, as an ‘African elite’. An elite they were, for they numbered little more than a few thousand, amounting to no more than 11,067 ‘professionals and salaried personnel in 1936 increasing to 18,165 in 1946, the bulk of these being teachers and clergymen), alongside some 6,400-odd ‘managers-proprietors’, clerks, shop-assistants and hawkers in 1936. Yet Cobley (1996: 64-66) stresses how even amongst this elite, there was an upper stratum composed of the most successful land-owning farmers and the most highly educated teachers, ministers, professionals and clerks, who together with their spouses established themselves as leaders of their communities. Furthermore, their relative privilege was to become entrenched by laws of inheritance, intermarriage amongst leading families, and by the advantages that their social background gave them for acquiring access to higher education. In illustration, Nkululeko Mabandla (2012) demonstrates how African access from the early 1900s to an area of freehold land in the otherwise exclusively white municipality of Mthata (Umtata) provided the means to middle class status which extended over successive generations. In turn, this poses the intriguing question of the extent to which the more successful of Colin Bundy’s commercially-oriented peasantry managed to parlay their agricultural resources into urban social advantage, despite (or because of?) the increasingly brutal limitations which were imposed upon African independent agricultural production by white appropriation of land.

The best opportunities for employment were in the rapidly industrializing cities, although even in the smaller towns of the rural hinterland, a growing demand for teachers, nurses, clerks, interpreters and ministers of religion complemented the increasing scope for Africans in trade and business to service the needs of growing township communities (although, given restrictions and lack of capital, trading generally remained a highly precarious occupation, and only relatively few entrepreneurs were able to sustain a position amongst local elites). Thus while their counterparts in kholwa communities continued to enjoy relative privilege among the rural African population, a recognizable African elite took shape in urban areas, its position reinforced by individuals’ ability to acquire certificates or letters of exemption from the provisions of ‘native laws’. This was critical in terms of their legal ability to conduct business and acquire land outside locations, and could free them from demeaning restrictions on the movement, from curfew regulations and the requirement to live in a location, particularly after such restrictions had been tightened up by the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923.

The grant of exemptions varied across the provinces. Formally, at least until 1936, they were not required in the Cape, where the achievement of a legally defined status of civilization was notionally admitted by inclusion of qualify-

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6 There were 8,284 African teachers and 2,429 clergymen in 1936; and 14,002 teachers and 2,697 clergymen in 1946.
7 Mabandla builds upon the study by Sean Redding (1993).
ing individuals on the common voters’ roll. Across the other three provinces, the extent to which exemptions were granted reflected historical and local circumstances, the Transvaal considerably more generous than Natal and far more liberal than the Orange Free State, although during the first decade following Union the total number of exemptions amounted to no more than around 1550 in total. Although the number of exemptions was to increase after the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1937 made it easier for municipalities to grant exemptions within their boundaries (so that perhaps 5 per cent of Africans employed in Johannesburg in 1945 were exempt from carrying passes), those who benefited always remained a tiny minority. Nonetheless, by the 1920s ‘even the smaller dorps in South Africa had a nucleus of successful black citizens... who were the authoritative heart of their communities’, while many kholwa families who had remained in rural areas boasted one or more relatives in urban areas (Cobley 1990: 68).

‘The shared origins of rural and urban black elites’ were constantly reinforced with ‘bonds of friendship and marriage’, often across ethnic lines, these bolstering their homogeneity as a privileged social group across the urban-rural divide (Cobley 1990: 69). Above all, however, in addition to the manner in which social activities such as ‘white weddings’, funerals and dances, and cultural associations (such as debating societies, choirs and literary groups) reinforced a sense of elite identity, the forming of professional associations, notably for teachers, nurses and ministers of religion, served to promote elite coherence and a sense of mutual interest. Teachers’ associations, particularly, became vehicles of protest and representation regarding salaries and conditions, although it was only a Native Mine Clerks’ Association on the Witwatersrand which was to achieve a modicum of success in the form of recognition by the Chamber of Mines as a negotiating body. Meanwhile, at a lower level in the social hierarchy, African traders and businessmen were also to form their organizations, although it was only with the foundation of the African Chamber of Commerce in the early 1950s that they acquired an association of any lasting consequence (Cobley 1996: 78-81).

Self-consciously privileged relative to the mass of the African population as they were, the African elite were subject to systematized racial barriers which blocked their upward mobility, even while some were granted a liberal education which, although incorporating notions of white trusteeship, ultimately preached the capacity of ‘native peoples’ to achieve western standards of civilization. The gap between the promise and reality was readily apparent to the African elite, notably in so far as the politer paternalisms of white churchmen, senior administrators and professionals were cruelly challenged by the rougher and ruder treatments of poorer and less privileged whites to whom educated Africans represented a greater threat in both market and status terms. Unsurprisingly, reactions varied. One response, reflective of frustrations of African ministers at racially discriminatory pay levels and limits on opportunities for promotion within the missionary societies and established religious denominations, led to the formation of numerous African independent churches which, simultaneously, sought to combine the Christian message with aspects of in-
digenous beliefs, culture and expression.\(^8\) Another, of which the formation of the Inkatha movement by members of the emergent Zulu petty-bourgeoisie and aristocracy was the most prominent, was a post-conquest reassertion of the value of African culture in defiance of its negative evaluation by white society, which many early Christianised Africans had themselves imbibed (see, notably, Marks 1986). Yet another was the leading role taken by members of the African elite in the formation and activities of political associations, of which the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later to become the ANC, was key.

4 The African Elite and the ANC: from Union to Apartheid

The formation of the SANNC on 8 January 1912 came in response to African military defeat and land loss during the Nineteenth Century, and the entrenchment of white privilege, power and political domination under Union in 1910. Embodying appreciation of the commonality of subordination to white rule across all African classes, social strata and ethnic groupings, and drawing upon prior African experiences of organization in the predecessor colonial societies (Oden- daal 2012), the inaugural meeting of the SANNC was hailed as ‘nothing less than a Native parliament’. Thereafter, throughout its history, in keeping with its ambitious aims, ‘Congress began to develop nation-wide contacts and attract support from diverse African social strata’ (Limb 2010). Emblematic of this was the provision in its 1919 constitution for a House of Chiefs, the intention being that chiefs would represent ‘their districts and places under their rule or control’, this implying the indirect affiliation to Congress of African people under their jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the early meetings were attended by ‘clerks, messengers, and servants, members of the new African urban proletariat’ (Benson 1966: 24), and rural working people were soon to become involved in SANNC protests against the Natives’ Land Act of 1913. Nonetheless, as portrayed by Peter Walshe, the founders of the SANNC were overwhelmingly drawn from the emergent African petty bourgeoisie: ‘ministers, teachers, clerks, interpreters, a few successful farmers, builders, small-scale traders, compound managers, estate and labour agents’ (Walshe 1970: 34), some of whom on that momentous day in January 1912 were formally dressed, ‘some in frock-coats with top hats, carrying furled umbrellas’ (Benson 1996: 25).

Such proto-middle class elements were drawn from amongst that ‘sprinkling of educated men and representatives of political associations’ (Benson 1996: 24) whose hopes for inclusion within the polity as citizens of a common, non-racial

\(^8\) One example of institutionalised discrimination was provided by the Anglican Church, which was more liberal than certain non-conformist churches, and certainly more so than either the Catholic Church or the Dutch Reformed Churches. In 1934, it had more African adherents than white, but all its bishops were white (and usually from England!), and only one African priest had attained the rank of Canon. Meanwhile, the stipends of African priests were one third or less of those of white priests. White priests were in charge of ‘black work’, but no black priests were in charge of ‘white work’. See Alan Paton (1973: 46).
society had been disappointed. However, although their stance was informed by Christian and liberal conceptions of justice and humanity, they were ‘proud of their African identity’ (Dubow 2000: 4), so that while SANNC’s nationalism was ‘tempered by the demand of its members for incorporation into South African political life, Congress objectively presented an anti-colonial variety of nationalism’ which ‘required African middle strata to return repeatedly to the need for cross-class unity in order to survive.’(Limb 2010: 122-123) SANNC, renamed the ANC in 1923, consistently thereafter reiterated its status as the embodiment of the African nation and stressed the need for national unity, even in the face of inescapable organizational weaknesses and divisions of Africans across class, ethnicity, ideology, religion and region. Nonetheless, overall, historians have chosen to portray the ANC during its early decades as largely dominated by a middle class elite.

Limb, in his comprehensive overview of ANC historiography, classifies writers as being either ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’, the latter stretching across liberal, radical and conservative perspectives, yet argues that all such approaches have identified the leadership of the ANC as having been largely drawn from the middle class or petit-bourgeoisie. From within the insider tradition, he acknowledges a predisposition towards hagiography which seeks to minimize class divisions within the ANC, although a particular contribution of his own work is to stress how contemporary ANC observers, activists and writers indicated how the early ANC continuously spoke on behalf of African workers to the authorities. Nonetheless, leaders were mainly middle class. From this perspective, for instance, Francis Meli argued that any suggestion of a dichotomy between the leaders and the mass was artificial, and posited very close connections between class and African nationalism. Even so, he accepted that even though they were progressive for their time, ANC leaders were ‘definitely not working class’ (Meli 1988). Similarly, even though Jack and Ray Simons (1969: 621-623) characterized the ANC as a ‘radical liberation movement’, they acknowledged that it was never a ‘workers’ movement’. Again, ANC insiders like Govan Mbeki (1991, 1992) and John Pampalis (1991), who wrote ANC history after 1990, likewise portrayed the ANC as led by the petit-bourgeoisie, even while the former, in particular stressed that the movement was representative of all classes. In sum, Limb proposes that even while there are differences in the extent to which these writers characterise the ANC as having close ties with workers, they remain ambiguous about continuity of class influences in ANC history. Thus while wanting to highlight the broad, multi-class appeal of the ANC and stressing how after 1948 the ANC’s elitism and moderation shifted to a more mass-based and radical political orientation, they nonetheless ‘tend to perpetuate the idea of a ‘middle-class’ Congress’ (Limb 2010: 22).

Amongst ‘outsider’ commentators, Limb sees a similar tendency to identify the ANC as middle class. Walshe, who still provides ‘the most detailed history of pre-1952 ANC structures and politics’, charts diverse class and ideological currents coursing through the ANC. Yet he also stresses that it drew ‘the great proportion of its members from the new ‘middle class”, and while he appreciates the varying involvements of the ANC with labour, he sees it as ‘a political move-
ment largely promoted from above, but with working class influence noticeable and growing more pronounced by the 1950s’ (Limb 2010: 22). Limb goes on to cite a formidable array of distinguished authors (Tom Karis, Gail Gerhart, Paul Rich, Shula Marks, Helen Bradford, Stanley Trapido, Dan O’Meara, Luli Callinicos, Baruch Hirson and Tom Lodge), who albeit with varying emphasis, have argued that the leaders of the ANC of the 1940s and 1950s were largely middle class, were socially distant from the workers, feared being plunged into working class ranks, and had limited support outside their own charmed circles. Even so, they all tended to identify the ANC of the 1940s as having undergone qualitative changes which rendered it capable of being transformed into a movement capable of mobilizing the masses. Their view is shared by Cobley, who argues that groups of privileged Africans enjoyed ‘a virtual monopoly of formal activity’ which extended across the activities of all the various organizational challengers to ANC hegemony (notably the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union and the All Africa Convention) during the inter-war period. Members of this black petit-bourgeoisie, he writes, ‘were involved at all levels of political activity and in groups and organisations which espoused a bewildering variety of political ideas’ (notably Garveyism, communism and democratic socialism). Nonetheless, confronted by massive discriminations and oppressions, they had looked to the mobilization of mass black support. ‘By the 1950s it had become increasingly clear to many members of the black petty bourgeoisie that there was little alternative to this kind of practical “radicalism”’ (Cobley 1990: 8 and 183).

It is against this background that Limb challenges “the simple axiom that the ANC before the turn to mass action in 1949 was “middle class”, seeking to correct an exaggeration of pre-1940 ANC timidity and aloofness from workers. Suffice it to say here that he does this convincingly. Whilst accepting that the ANC switches back and forth during the 1920s-40s period between centrist, constitutionalist and more strident approaches, and that such moderation was ‘largely the produce of the class composition its leaders’, he argues that nonetheless Congress was perpetually pushed towards a latent supra-class unity with workers because of ‘the basic contradiction between white rule and black national oppression’. If the thesis is scarcely new, his detailed exploration of what he deems to be virtually inescapable linkages between middle class leaders of the ANC and labour at sub-national level (throughout the four provinces), offers an antidote to what he regards as the predominance hitherto of ‘top-down’ history. It argues his case that ‘the gradual development of a distinct African political culture with a constituency including workers and propertied strata was crucial in embedding Congress in the gaze and memory of African society’. For all its much documented failings, the ANC outlasted and outperformed its various rivals as a necessary preparation for the qualitative changes that occurred during the 1950s (Limb 2010: 483-493).
5 The African Middle Class under High Apartheid

The triumph of the National Party (NP) in the election of 1948 ushered in the era of apartheid, a political project intended to reverse nascent tendencies to racial integration inherent in urbanization and industrialization, and to promote ‘the separate development’ of races. Correspondingly, it was during the 1950s that the ANC underwent a process of radicalization under the influence of the Youth League and an increasingly assertive black trade union movement. It also forged strong linkages across racial groups by means of the Congress Alliance (formed in 1953), whose discrete bodies effectively absorbed communist influences and activists into their own structures following the dissolution of the CPSA (and underground formation of the SACP) following the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. The mass mobilisations of the 1950s, from the Defiance Campaign in 1952 through successive bus boycotts, stay-aways, campaigns around the Freedom Charter and mass protest meetings which culminated in the banning of the ANC (and its rival Pan-Africanist Congress) in 1960, saw the emergence of a Congress movement which was distinctively less elitist and more manifestly rooted amongst both the urban and rurally-based masses throughout the country. Even so, argues Limb, the ANC continued to be viewed as dominated by middle class elements (notably intellectuals, lawyers and other professionals), even while it found itself at the head of an increasingly working class base. Whether or not this involvement of the ANC middle class leadership was, as Edward Feit (1967) suggests, positively reluctant, and whether or not the Congress Alliance and its prioritization of national over class struggle served, objectively, to inhibit the radicalizing impact of the black trade union movement (Fine and Davis 1990; Lambert 1985), there is agreement that workers and their organizations became increasingly influential throughout the 1950s. It was during this period, in short, that the ANC was transformed into a radical movement of national liberation, with radical middle class individuals such as Nelson Mandela preparing the ground for a move to armed struggle.

That the African middle class was becoming more radically disposed is unsurprising. Notwithstanding official determination to limit African aspirations, signified most notoriously by the introduction of Bantu Education in 1953, the demands of an increasingly industrialised economy brought about both quantitative and qualitative shifts. The number of African children in school increased from 588,000 in 1945 (State of South Africa 1967) to over 2,741,000 in 1970 (SAIRR 1971: 257); the launch of the University Colleges of the North (1959) and of Zululand (1960) brought about a modest increase in enrollment for Africans at tertiary level (which was to have dramatic unanticipated political consequences in so far as they were to foster the development of Black Consciousness); and by the mid-1970s, the number of African ‘salaried employees

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9 The Congress Alliance initially linked the ANC to the (South African) Indian National Congress, the Coloured People’s Congress and the Congress of Democrats (for whites) before being joined by the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) after its formation in 1955.

10 There were a total of 5407 African students enrolled in South African universities in 1971.
and businessmen’ had grown to just over 94 000, the most remarkable aspect of this being the dramatic increase in the employment of women as teachers and nurses (aided by their significantly lower salaries compared to those paid to men) (Jordan (1984, citing Table 4, Ch, 31, in State of South Africa 1975).11 Even so, hemmed in by manifold racial restrictions, the structural position of the African middle class was fundamentally unchanged.

The most comprehensive effort to portray the composition and contradictions of the African middle class during this period was provided by Leo Kuper’s study of An African Bourgeoisie in Durban in the 1950s and early 1960s. He justified use of the word ‘bourgeoisie’ by virtue of the fact that the class to which it referred was ‘the ‘upper’ occupational strata of African society’, even though he admitted that it was misleading to suggest that there was ‘a well-defined class structure in the African communities’. Of course, he allowed that the bourgeoisie in Marxist theory referred to the class which owns the means of production, and wields political power by its control of the state and the propagation of ideologies which promote its domination. As such, the term usually referred to large landowners, industrialists, merchants, bankers and financiers. In contrast, he was applying it to African ‘professionals, traders and senior government and municipal clerks’ (Kuper 1965: ix).

Kuper’s bourgeoisie, as depicted by his study of intellectuals, teachers, nurses, clergy and other professionals, was constituted of rising groups which had struggled against the traditional privileges of African aristocracies, and which in other African territories were providing presidents, government ministers and ‘new men of wealth’. In contrast, the African bourgeoisie in South Africa was largely denied the opportunity to acquire significant property by legalized racial barriers and, on the whole, was poorly remunerated. Nonetheless, collectively, they were considerably better off than the mass of Africans, distinguished from the latter by their more educated backgrounds, higher incomes, better life chances and superior styles of life. Generally, too, they sought to put their relatively elevated positions to advantage, not least through their dominating the leading positions in the various voluntary associations, municipal advisory boards, and sporting and social bodies open to Africans. However, because their lack of property and opportunity was dictated by their racial subordination, this bourgeoisie shared much in common with the African masses (Kuper 1965: 1-8).

The African bourgeoisie’s ambiguous situation provided them with three political options. First, in line with the government’s evolving bantustan strategy, they could opt for the ‘separate development’ of tribal states in backward, rural areas. Second, they could seek fulfillment through evolutionary change. In this context, however, they were perpetually frustrated by the contradiction that while they enjoyed high regard within the African community, their achievements were systematically denied or denigrated by white society, notably by lower strata of petty officials and policemen who were most threatened by their higher social status. The resulting tension engendered a more pronounced sense

11 For the feminization of the teaching profession, see Mahlase (1997: 56-59).
of grievance among the African bourgeoisie than among African proletarians and peasants, and resulted in their being more demanding of social change. Consequently, third:

For all that Kuper used Marxian terminology, there was nothing particularly Marxist about his analysis, for he was as much concerned with status and 'life chances' as any Weberian. Status was similarly a marked theme of Langa by Monica Wilson and Archie Mafeje. Despite its diversity – ‘decent people’ being ‘mixed up’ with town toughs (tsotsis) – Langa was presented as the ‘the most ‘middle class’ of the African communities in the Cape’ (Wilson and Mafeje 1963, 1967: 7). The ‘decent people’, only some of whom formed an ‘educated middle class’ were known as the Ooscuse me while the others constituted a ‘respectable lower class’ (Wilson and Mafeje 1963, 1967: 15). The former were composed of the familiar categories of teachers, nurses, lawyers, doctors and clergymen, who while not necessarily emerging as leaders in bodies such as churches and sports clubs, tended to be favoured when it came to dealing with whites. Yet this carried costs, for ‘Africans who are in any position of authority have conflicting obligations, to the blacks they control and to the whites who are in authority over them. They are in an inter-calary position’, and if they were seen to be timid rather than expressing opposition to white authority, they were likely to be dismissed as ‘Uncle Toms’ (Wilson and Mafeje, 1963, 1967: 147). Sadly however, because the ANC and PAC were banned during the period of their coursework, Wilson and Mafeje felt constrained not to investigate political attitudes, although like Kuper they proffered a marked contradiction between the racial straightjacket imposed by the government and the social complexity of African townships.

Similar patterns were explored by Mia Brandel-Syrier’s Reeftown Elite, an anthropological study conducted at around the same time in a township to the south-west of Johannesburg. Rich in detail, it is notable for its contextualization denoting change in the composition of the elite. As white township officials increasingly withdrew into a more impersonalized municipal bureaucracy, they were being replaced by ‘the new elite of public servants’ as administration of housing, welfare, and community centres etc were handed over to African control. Also evident were ‘the beginning of a managerial elite’, as white retailers opened up African branches in townships, staffed by African personnel who were knowledgeable about changing African consumer trends. Then too she identified ‘the rise of an entrepreneurial elite’, who were lauded by local society as the token whereby ‘the so-called African middle class could become a ‘true’ middle class’. These developments were accompanied by ‘the decline of the first urban aristocracy’, those whose status had been founded upon their occupation of stands when the township was first founded; and significantly, the replacement upon the Reeftown Advisory Board of earlier ‘notables’ (stand-owners, businessmen, tribal aristocrats and an occasional professional) with professional politicians. Although the elite was somewhat contemptuous of a local political
leadership that ‘played to the gallery’, they were happy enough for it to do their ‘dirty work’ for them, as ‘township politics had changed from co-operation to resistance’ (Brandel-Syrier 1971: citations from 8-20).

A not dissimilar study was undertaken by Thomas Nyquist in the mid-1960s (although it was only published in 1983). Rather than identifying members of the African elite by occupation and profession, he asked the inhabitants of the townships adjacent to Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape whether they believed that their community had an ‘African upper stratum’ which constituted a ‘distinct group bound together by common characteristics and a high degree of interaction’ (Nyquist 1983: 21). His respondents identified three major strata, of which the ‘upper stratum’ consisted of the *abaphakamileyo* or ‘high ones’, composed not merely of lawyers, teachers, social workers, nurses and ministers of religion but also shopkeepers, carpenters and taxi drivers (a finding which indicated that African perceptions of middle-classness was both extensive and flexible). In familiar fashion, he characterized the upper stratum as located in ‘an acute position of sociological marginality’ in that while its members were success-oriented, their success was restricted by racial barriers and resultant limited opportunities. This in turn led to high levels of psychological frustration, and their engaging in ‘debilitating competition with one another and Africans of other strata’ in struggles for the most desirable leadership positions within the community. Yet few were attracted by the government’s bantustan ideal, even while Nyquist (1983: 260-262), who had returned to his field site in 1975, could see little immediate future for them than more frustration.

These various studies, the principal ones of their era, were distinguished by their deep levels of empirical research which linked contemporary African middle class perceptions of their structural location in society to their social behavior and attitudes. There were to be few significant equivalent efforts during the later apartheid period (but see Dreyer 1987), (although as already noted, scholars such as Shula Marks (1994) were to explore similar themes, notably the tensions between (lower) middle class location and subordinate racial status). Thereafter, for whatever reason, writing on the African bourgeoisie was largely carried on from a social or political distance, in the sense that it rarely involved actual engagement with African middle class people themselves and was largely versed in terms of their political relationship to the struggle for liberation.

6 The African Middle Class under Late Apartheid

The banning of the liberation movements in 1960 was followed by a decade of political quiescence during which the regime faced no significant challenge, and oversaw an economy which was booming. However, this changed rapidly from the early 1970s. The Durban strike wave of 1973 was followed by the Soweto uprising of 1976, itself a prelude to more intensive political resistance throughout the 1980s. Meanwhile, the economy entered a long decline, featuring much

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12 Actually, there were 5 tiers, with the profession of ‘Doctor’ standing alone as ‘very high’ and ‘latrine worker’ similarly on its own as ‘very low’.
reduced rates of growth, falling rates of investment, skilled labour shortages resulting from white upward mobility, and an increasing mechanization of industry. External pressures – military, political and diplomatic - also increased dramatically. NP governments were faced by the contradictory challenges of implementing political and economic reforms to apartheid while placating the more insecure segments of their own constituency. Yet the project of reforming apartheid was what Dan O’Meara (1997: 272-274) has termed ‘The Impossible Art’. The more the government sought to modernize apartheid, the more it alienated major segments of its own constituency whilst simultaneously raising and disappointing hopes amongst the black population.

A changing racial division of labour featured a remarkably increased pace of black upward advance into occupational spheres previously dominated by whites, themselves upward mobile (Crankshaw 2002). Increasingly, industry declared the lack of trained personnel a massive brake upon the economy. This in turn required a major increase in the provision of education to black children, ‘who now rose to levels their parents could only dream about’ (Giliomee 2012: 146). The number of African children in school leapt dramatically from 2.7 million in 1970 to over 7 million in 1988; and the opening up of new universities in black areas and increased African access to ‘white’ universities saw enrolment of Africans increase to over 98 600 (33 per cent of all students, this backed up by another 11 000 Africans enrolled in technikons (SAIRR: 1971: 257, 289; 1990: 824,862 and 872). Although still concentrated in the law, medicine, teaching and nursing, the African middle class increasingly began to penetrate the corporate sector as managers.  

Initially, the government had sought to African political aspirations to the homelands. Alongside an early analysis by Nancy Charton, my own study of Transkei argued that while the bantustan project had been rejected by the majority of Xhosa upon whom it had been imposed, there was an emergent petty bourgeoisie – chiefs, politicians, civil servants, teachers and traders – on whom it conferred substantial material benefits. To flesh the argument out, I provided data regarding the steady increase in salaries paid to state functionaries, the occupational backgrounds of politicians (which were almost exclusively middle class), the increase in the size of the public service and the opportunities provided to African businessmen by the extrusion of white traders from Transkei and the generous loan facilities provided by such bodies as the Transkei Development Corporation. In essence, my thesis was that the closer such petty bourgeois elements were to the bantustan state, the stronger their political adherence to it (so that, for instance, while the chieftaincy and the politicians were the most loyal, the teachers were by far the most ambivalent category, and the most likely to exhibit political dissidence). However, as the regime’s crisis

13Dreyer (1987: Table 2.1, p.16) cites a total of 2860 Africans in managerial and administrative occupations.
14Southall (1976, 1983). An interesting follow up, by Xoliswa Jozana (a daughter of Transkeian President Kaiser Matanzima who was teaching at the University of Transkei), argued more strongly that ‘there is no evidence that teachers favour collaboration with the Nationalist Government’ (Jozana 1989).
intensified, the extent to which the bantustans could satisfy the class interests of even the core members of the homeland petty-bourgeoisies was increasingly brought into question. Resulting doubts were to be confirmed in the early 1990s when, faced by the intensive political pressures of the transition, the various bantustan regimes ‘imploded’. This process was best described by Jeff Peires in relation to Transkei and Ciskei, which underwent a rapid realignment of class forces, as different elements of the homeland petty-bourgeoisies either haplessly clung to independence or lined up behind popular forces (for most, the ANC).

Alongside generic studies of petit-bourgeois collaborationism in the bantustans, there was an accompanying focus upon the class implications of government reformism in the urban areas, where attempts to address the voracious needs for a better educated workforce merged with desperate post-Soweto efforts by the regime to create a supportive African middle class in urban areas. What to do about urban Africans became ‘a major preoccupation of the Botha government’, featuring notably, important changes to the overall conception of Grand Apartheid, whose central strategy was to divide Africans into ‘urban outsiders’ and rural ‘outsiders’. Close to the government’s heart was the cultivation of an urban African middle class as a bulwark against revolution. ‘New housing, education and employment policies now offered limited but real social mobility to this diffuse stratum’, including the lifting of various restrictions upon African business (O’Meara 1996:272-274). By 1988, we are told, Spaza shops in the townships were to account for a turnover of over R3150 million (Jones and Miller 1992: 321).

Building upon an earlier study of African entrepreneurship in the Transkei and Ciskei homelands by Gillian Hart, my own review of African capitalism traced the historical development of official policy towards African trading, broadening the focus away from the homelands towards the urban areas. Pursuing this through analysis of the activities of the National African Federated Chambers of Commerce (NAFCOC), formed in 1955 from prior African trading bodies, it was argued that this body’s activities were deeply ambiguous. Hence while lobbying for the removal of all legal restrictions upon African business, it attempted to realize the protective potentialities offered by apartheid racial barriers against white capital; and while claiming to be ‘non-political’, it operated within the framework of separate development while staking its claim to urban leadership and urging to government the supposed stability to be derived from the expansion of an African middle class (Southall 1980). Its theme was later taken up by Peter Hudson and Mike Sarakinsky (1986), who traced the government’s slow relaxation of restrictions upon African business activity in the urban areas during the 1980s. Increasingly, NAFCOC’s political ambiguity saw it distancing itself from government and aligning itself to the ANC, although Sarakinsky (1987: 59) insisted that its programme consisted of ‘a concerted attempt to win allies over to its reformist cause, rather than itself to be won over to another perhaps more radical cause’, even if black businessmen rarely engaged in explicit political debate (Nolutshungu 1982: 196-197).

In line with O’Meara’s argument regarding the limitations of reform, Charles Kekana (1990) explored how despite an easing of restrictions on Africans in
urban areas, both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ segments of the African middle class were still prevented from entering the mainstream of economic life in South Africa by multiple obstacles. Yet things were changing. Indeed, as argued elsewhere, the origins of Black Economic Empowerment, a major thrust of the ANC after it moved into government, and the makings of a more assertive black business class lie very much in the changing conditions of the 1980s (Lindsay and Southall, unpublished). For all that liberation theorists asserted that ‘the immediate fate of the black middle sections (was) linked much more with that of the black workers and peasants than with their equivalents across the colour line’ (Slovo 1976: 126; Wolpe 1988), the liberation that dawned was far from radical — and the African middle class was to prove a primary beneficiary of an ‘elite transition’.

7 The Black Middle Class and the Politics of Liberation

The late 1980s was to see the final unraveling of the apartheid enterprise. The various political reforms enacted by the government – the tricameral constitution of 1984 (which granted (segregated) representation to Indians and Coloureds in the central polity but continued to exclude Africans), the granting of full municipal status to elected Black Local Authorities, and the significant extension of urban privileges and services – all failed miserably. Although Botha’s Total Strategy was intended to secure support from the African middle class against the threat of ‘Marxist tyranny’, it instead drove the bulk of them into the welcoming arms of the ANC, by now seen as likely to triumph over the NP. Nor indeed did the government’s reformist efforts convince large scale business, which now came to view apartheid as an obstacle to profitability. Alarmed by the urban-based mass revolt of the mid-1980s (triggered by mass rejection of the tricameral constitution), white capital geared up to embrace ‘democracy’, so long as it could be tailored to its interests. When the fall of the Berlin wall signaled withdrawal of active Soviet support for the ANC, business proved a major force backing the efforts of the NP under De Klerk to fashion a political solution which would render a transition to democracy safe for capitalism. Although, of course, the NP was to be thoroughly outplayed by the ANC during the course of negotiations, the latter’s more radical ambitions were to be reined in by what it termed ‘the balance of forces’: the power of business backed by international financial institutions and the West, as well as, importantly, its own character as a multi-class alliance.

Radical theorists aligned with the liberation movements had been scrambling to discern the class implications of the changes taking place under late apartheid from the early 1980s. Essentially, they were attempting to ascertain the political affiliations of the African middle class, which they felt had for too long been dismissed by the ANC as insignificant, and bound by its shared subjection to racial oppression to throw in its lot with the working class. Yet the
vigorou s efforts of the apartheid regime to woo the African petty-bourgeoisie had increasingly called this assumption into question, raising the issue of how the ANC should respond. In particular, if it was the case that the African middle class was increasingly being drawn into collaboration with the regime, should the ANC respond by moderating its programme? The answer given by Pallo Jordan was a resounding ‘no’! In a paper which analysed the vacillating political stance of NAFCOC, he argued that the organization had only begun to adopt a more assertive stance to the regime in the wake of mass struggles. Consequently:

In contrast, a more cautious note was sounded by Bonginkosi (Blade) Nzimande when he assessed the political and ideological position of the ‘new’ African middle class, by which he meant in particular the small, but growing, number of Africans employed as managers by the large corporations. This was a trend which had been increasing visibly since the early 1970s, as the corporations responded to a mix of labour market shortages and international pressures (such as the Codes of Conduct introduced by Western investor countries to appease their anti-apartheid critics). Nzimande warned that the ideological influence of this group, which he saw as articulated by their various professional associations (notably the Black Management Forum, founded in 1976), should not be taken lightly. Despite its small size, it performed two clearly identifiable functions in favour of the ruling class:

The deracialisation of industrial relations following the Wiehahn Commission had enabled white capital to argue a distinction between apartheid and the free enterprise system. In turn, African managers had largely responded by internalizing capitalist ideology. Certainly, the mass struggles of the mid-1980s saw the BMF backing popular political demands, not least because African managers continued to be confronted by racial obstacles in the workplace. However, their political interventions should be understood as attempts to enter the terrain of class struggle on their own terms:

They were ‘reluctant partners’ of white capital, but only because racial domination was interfering with the advancement of their class position within South Africa’s capitalist structures. The liberation movement should therefore be alive to the danger of worker interests being subsumed under a ‘people’s alliance’ led by the middle class (Nzimande 1990).

Looking back upon that era, many critics have argued, in essence, that the class character of the political transition provided for little more than a deracialisation of capitalism. Philip Eidelberg, in echo of Nzimande, has suggested that this can be explained by the capture of the ANC by the African middle class during the 1980s. In arguing against interpretations which proposed that the ANC’s close relationship with the burgeoning black trade union movement of those years indicated that it was becoming more working class than nation-oriented, he proposes that the liberation movement’s turn to urban guerrilla
warfare rendered it more community oriented and gave it a social base quite
different from that of the industrial unions. ‘It was ultimately township sup-
port, including elements of the African middle classes, most notably the civics,
which would provide the ANC with the main source of its strength.’ (Eidelberg
1999: 51). Rather than apartheid urban reform being viewed as merely an
attempt by the regime to co-opt the middle class, it should be read as ‘a growing
loss of political control over the very class upon whose suppression apartheid
had been posited’ (Eidelberg 1999: 51).

After Soweto, most radical Black Consciousness adherents lined up behind
the ANC, just as conservative organisations such as NAFCOC were later to
do. Adoption of ‘People’s War’ gave the ANC credibility with emerging radical
middle-class civic associations which were soon to form the United Democratic
Front (UDF), itself aligned with the exiled liberation movement. The UDF
was dominated by an urbanized petty-bourgeoisie, and was to reinterpret
the radical content of the Freedom Charter, entailing ‘a frontal challenge to inter-
national capitalism’, in a reformist manner. This paved the way towards the
far more limited political objective of securing the ANC’s ‘seizure of power at
township, and ultimately at national level’ (Eidelberg 1999: 54). In the long
run, this would lead to the transformation of the ANC into a predominantly
middle class, rather than multi-class, organization and the scaling down of its
institutional ties with organized labour. Eventually, COSATU was to recognize
the ANC’s leadership in the liberation struggle, and in effect to reinforce the
political hegemony of the middle class.

Although we may take issue with aspects of Eidelberg’s argument (black
workers, as distinct from the ‘urban poor’, are largely excised from his analysis),
the thrust of his thesis is powerful. The interests of ‘big capital’ and the ANC’s
township middle class constituency would not always coincide – but that was a
problem for the future. In the shorter term, ‘the end of white rule would permit
the accelerated expansion of the new African middle class’ (Eidelberg 1999: 62).
In short, as I have proposed elsewhere, after 1994 the ANC was set to become
‘the party vanguard of the black middle class’ (Southall 2012).

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