

Roots of Apartheid: South Africa's Mining Industry

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OVERVIEW:

While apartheid in South Africa was formalized in law in the late 1940s, the seeds for its creation were established years beforehand. The mining industry, especially, spurred the creation of laws and practices in South Africa which progressively disenfranchised the country's indigenous black peoples. At the behest of the mining industry, successive all-white governments implemented measures to simultaneously oblige black men to abandon family farms for mine-work, but also prevent them and their families from permanently settling in urban areas. How and why all-white governments pursued these aims reveals much about the connection between economic models and government policies regarding indigenous peoples.

The development of South Africa's mining industry, and how it laid the foundations for Apartheid

Although some mining had taken place in what is now South Africa centuries before Europeans arrived,¹ the modern mining industry emerged as the major shaper of South Africa's economy and race relations in the latter half of the 19th century. Important diamond deposits were discovered at Kimberley in 1869. Gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand —the Greater Johannesburg Area—in 1886, leading to a gold rush that attracted prospectors, labourers, shopkeepers and others from all over what was soon to become South Africa². The areas around the mines urbanized rapidly. Housing was hastily constructed, and in some cases, slums sprang up. Races mixed in these areas, despite opposition by the Afrikaners (descendants of the Dutch settlers who had arrived in the mid-17th century), who were convinced of white superiority and worried that racial mixing would weaken their control of the migrant labour economy. Within 10 years of the gold discovery, Johannesburg, previously a smaller centre, had become South Africa's largest city.^{3 4}

South Africa, until the mid-19th century a predominately agricultural society in which most people, black or white, lived off the land, was thereby rapidly transformed into a more industrial and urban one.

Deep rock mining is a capital-intensive industry. Only a handful of people, eventually referred to as the Randlords, managed to obtain the capital needed to engage in that activity.⁵ The Randlords were all either born in Europe or the sons of people who had been. Cecil Rhodes, Abraham Bailey, Alfred Beit, Ernest Oppenheimer and Joseph Robinson were some of the better known Randlords.⁶ The mining industry's growth generated massive profits for the Randlords and gave rise to new labour policies in rural and urban areas.

Government involvement in the structure of work in the mines

The gold mine owners faced three challenges to maximizing their profits: the gold deposits, although vast, were deep in the ground; the ore was low-grade; the price of gold was set internationally, so the gold companies could not simply pass on the costs of extracting and refining vast amounts of ore to consumers. As mining production rocketed, the owners therefore sought to keep wages down. Given that tax revenue from the mining sector quickly became a significant part of government revenues, the government was receptive to the powerful Chamber of Mines' urgings that the government ensure a steady supply of cheap labour. The government did this by taking various steps to create a migrant black labour force with little negotiating power.⁷

Special taxes on blacks and their communities

To induce more African men to leave their farms in the countryside and work in the mines, the central government imposed a "poll tax" on every African male and a "hut tax" that black communities had to pay for each hut in their community.

Criminalization of job desertion

Black workers signed contracts. Abandoning one's job was deemed a criminal offence. This made it easier for mine owners to impose low wages and extremely cramped mine-compound bunkhouses (instead of family homes) on black workers.

Introduction of passes

Although laws requiring blacks to carry passes had been introduced prior to the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley, and in theory some applied to whites and blacks, in practice, only black men were obliged to carry a pass. The requirement was more consistently enforced after the diamond and gold rushes began, in an effort to prevent blacks from moving into the cities.⁸ Under the Urban Areas Native Pass Act (1909), blacks were issued passes allowing them to be in towns for up to six days to seek work. If they did not find work, they had to return to the rural area.⁹ During the 70's, the pass system resulted in, on average, one person being arrested every minute of the day and night for being somewhere that the restrictions stipulated in their pass did not allow them to be.¹⁰

Municipal segregation policies

Johannesburg city authorities designated certain neighbourhoods for certain races.¹¹

Native Lands Act (1913)

This Act—by far, the measure with the greatest impact—prohibited blacks from buying or renting land outside the areas delineated by the white government. The areas constituted only 7.3 percent of the territory (see right), although blacks were 70 percent of the population.

Mines and Works Act (1911) and its amendments (1926)

The Mines and Works Act effectively excluded blacks from skilled labour in the mines by stipulating that certificates of competency for skilled trades in the mines could only be issued to whites, and to coloureds in certain occupations. These “colour bar” laws were designed to prevent black workers from competing with white workers for the better-paid jobs.¹²

The above combination of punitive taxes and other laws and measures artificially induced black unemployment and restricted blacks' job mobility, creating a supply of readily available cheap labour for the mines.^{13 14 15 16} Stripping rural areas of male workers and leaving women and the elderly to support families supplemented by low mine wages contributed to South Africa's long-term rural underdevelopment and poverty to this day. In effect, rural mine profits were maximized by policies that caused rural underdevelopment. These policies were designed to prevent the emergence of a stable black urban working class and to minimize racial mixing other than in situations in which whites needed blacks' labour.

Suppression of unionisation

The Industrial Conciliation Act (1924) set up industrial councils where trade unions could negotiate with employers. However, it excluded Africans from trade union membership, and thus from negotiations. Black miners were granted collective bargaining rights only in 1980¹⁷.

“Civilized Labour” policies from 1924 on

The Herzog government promoted policies to protect its electoral base—Afrikaners—from competition from African workers. White workers were to be favoured over black ones in the civil service and railways. According to a circular by Prime Minister Herzog to government departments,

“Civilized labour” is work done by people whose standard of living conforms to the decent standard of white living, while “uncivilized labour” is work done by persons whose goals or aim are restricted to basic necessities of underdeveloped and “savage” people.¹⁸

The working conditions and living standards of black mine-workers

Black miners were obliged to live in company-owned compounds near the mines, and to leave their families behind on the farms in the rural areas. (Meanwhile, the companies usually provided white mine-workers with individual family homes.) The fact that black workers' families could conceivably earn income back on the

farms was used to justify paying black miners extremely low wages: a tenth of the wages paid to skilled white workers. However, in reality, low mining wages—and ultimately company profits—were in effect subsidized by black women’s labour in the subsistence activities in the Bantustans.

The limited duration of their contracts made it extremely difficult for black mine-workers to pressure for improvements in their working conditions.¹⁹ The government policies that guaranteed mine companies’ access to an almost unlimited quantity of black workers minimized the leverage that black mine-workers might otherwise have had in negotiating their working conditions.²⁰

State avoidance of providing social security

Conveniently considered part-time workers, the government also exempted the mines from the obligation to pay any kind of social security to black mine-workers.²¹ Instead, it was considered the role of the family back in the Reserves to assure the reproduction of the migrant work force by taking care of the very young and the very old, the sick, the migrant labourer in periods of ‘rest’, and by educating the young, etc.²²

Political control

Entry to and from the mine compounds was monitored by the companies, enabling them to control political unrest and making it difficult for black mine-workers to obtain community support to improve their conditions.

Dangerous working conditions

Mine temperatures were very high and the work particularly heavy. The workday often exceeded 14 hours and serious accidents were frequent.²³ For example, an 1888 fire at a De Beers mine killed 178 African and 24 white mine-workers; there had been no extinguishers and the escape shaft was closed.²⁴

Unhealthy living conditions

Company housing for black workers was unsanitary and overcrowded.²⁵ The food provided by the mine-owners was of mediocre quality.

High mortality rates

Deaths from major accidents, pneumonia, tuberculosis, silicosis and malnutrition were extremely frequent.²⁶ It is estimated that one in ten black mine-workers died per year.²⁷

Impoverishment of their families’ communities and destruction of the traditional rural economy

As male workers were working far from the reserves, their meager earnings were not being spent in the economies of the reserves. Instead, the earnings stayed in the areas surrounding the mines, which were “white” areas. The stripping of a large part of the male labour force from the rural areas caused production of a marketable surplus in the reserves to become increasingly rare, and it finally ceased altogether.²⁸ Thus, the traditional economies of “black” areas suffered from this economic strategy.²⁹ This mode of production geared to maximizing mine owners’ profits inexorably provoked the deterioration and destruction of the rural economy.³⁰

Another particularity of the South African mining industry was that the workers were recruited from all over rural southern Africa—where policies promoting the creation of a migratory labour force were also imposed—not only within South Africa itself.³¹ The mine companies subjected these workers, also black, to the same harsh conditions and low pay that they imposed on black South African mine-workers. Thus, South Africa’s apartheid structures affected workers from all over southern Africa.

Black mine-worker resistance to the imposed restrictions and conditions

Despite the challenges, black mine-workers organized themselves. In 1920, 70,000 African mine-workers downed their tools. Police were called in to break the strike; they fired on the workers, injuring 35.³² In 1946, 76,000 black miners struck. Again, police stepped in to crush the strike. They drove the strikers into underground shafts, killing 12 and injuring 1,200. About 50 union leaders and leftist leaders were charged

with sedition.³³ Clearly, the government saw any challenge to mine owners as a challenge to the state. Mine-workers eventually struck to protest apartheid itself.

The link from the mining industry's early development to apartheid

Many of the features of the apartheid system more formally and rigorously imposed throughout South Africa in the 1950s—restrictions on black people's movements and on where they could live and work, passbooks—had already been imposed in a more uneven manner decades earlier, in order to ensure mine companies' access to cheap black migrant labour. White mine owners made fortunes, and white farmers and white urban families also benefitted from and came to depend on cheap black migrant labour. Subordination of black workers and exclusion of black people from central areas of the cities (unless working for white people) eventually characterized South Africa as a whole.

Despite the continuous profitability of this industry, black mine workers saw minimal increases in their wages and the majority of the profits continued to benefit mining company shareholders abroad rather than South Africa and its people. Even now, the wages are still far below the international average and the poor conditions in which mine-workers continue to work today in South Africa are the direct legacy of the early years of the mining industry and apartheid.

¹ According to the US Congress's "Country Notes" about South Africa, "Iron mining and smelting sites in the northeast were used as much as 1,700 years ago; copper was mined south of the Limpopo River more than 1,000 years ago; and historians describe early mining activities in the Witwatersrand ... area... as early as the thirteenth century."

² South Africa was formed in 1910, the union of two British colonies and two Dutch colonies following the British defeat of the Dutch during the Boer Wars.

³ Pons-Vignon, Nicolas and Ward Anseeuw. 2007. "Le paradoxe sud-africain : les conditions de travail depuis la fin de l'apartheid." *Politique africaine*. Vol. 2, No. 106, pp. 151-152.

⁴ Apartheid Museum (Online). *Chapter 1: the origins of apartheid*, Oxford University Press.

⁵ Some arrived with money earned prior to immigration to South Africa. Others leveraged contacts with European diamond merchants and financiers. Rhodes amassed capital by renting equipment to other miners, then bought up claims. By 1887, his company, De Beers, was the sole owner of all diamond mines in South Africa, according to Tobias Kretschmer (*De Beers and Beyond*). Many Randlords reinvested diamond mining profits in gold mining, also buying up claims.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Harrison, Philip and Tanya Zack. 2012. "The power of mining : the fall of gold and rise of Johannesburg." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 554

⁸ South African History Online. Pass laws in South Africa 1800-1994.

⁹ Apartheid Museum (Online), Segregation in Action.

¹⁰ Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1, 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1,

¹³ Bezuidenhout, Andries and Sakhela Buhlungu. 2011. "From compounded to Fragmented Labour : Mineworkers and the Demise of Compounds in South Africa." *Antipode*. Vol. 43, No.2, p. 244.

¹⁴ Pons-Vignon, Nicolas and Ward Anseeuw. 2007. *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Apartheid Museum (Online). *Chapter 1: the origins of apartheid*, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ South African History Online. *Bridging two worlds* (online)

¹⁷ Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1

¹⁸ Apartheid Museum (On line). *Chapter 2: Segregation in Action*. *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Wolpe, Harold. 2006. "Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid". *Economy and Society*. Vol. 1, No. 4, 435

²⁰ Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1, 110

²¹ Bezuidenhout, Andries and Sakhela Buhlungu. 2011. *Ibid.*

²² Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1, 435

²³ Apartheid Museum (Online). *Chapter 1*. *Ibid.*

²⁴ South African History Online. Timeline of the Labour and Trade Union Movement in South Africa 1881–1919.

²⁵ Jeeves, Alan H. "Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: The Struggle for the Gold Mines' Labour Supply, 1890-1920". *McGill-Queen's Press*, p. 323.

²⁶ Apartheid Museum (Online). *Chapter 1: the origins of apartheid*, *ibid.*

²⁷ Jeeves, Alan H. *Ibid.*

²⁸ Wolpe, Harold. 2006. "Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid". *Economy and Society*. Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 433

²⁹ Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1, 105

³⁰ Wolpe, Harold. 2006. "Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid". *Economy and Society*. Vol. 1, No. 4, 432

³¹ Wilson, Francis. 2001. "Minerals and Migrants : How the Mining Industry Has Shaped South Africa". *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 1, 105

³² South African History Online. Timeline of the Labour and Trade Union Movement in South Africa.

³³ *Ibid.*