Chapter Two

Black and Middle Class in South Africa: 1910-1994

Alan Cobley has pointed out 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 an African working class in whose revolutionary potential the future was, by many, deemed to lie.[1] In contrast, while the social character of a black middle class which had always remained small was not ignored (for indeed it attracted some interest from liberal historians in the 1960s), it continued to be dealt with spasmodically, and then very often only as a subordinated appendage of the black proletariat. Arguably, it is only now that the history of the black 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 – in contrast to the working class – the lot of the middle class is often deemed in the dominant narrative of 'struggle history' to have been unheroic, and indeed in some tellings, such as that of Amilcar Cabral, the only way for the bourgeoisie to contribute to liberation was by abandoning all the trappings of class advantage and actually joining 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 remarkable lack of interest in tracing the holistic evolution of the black middle class after that. To be sure, as we will see, while growth of the black middle class since 1994 has consistently excited the interests of the marketing industry, and while this has been matched by a reasonably concerted focus since around 2000 upon Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) as a vehicle for class formation (and much else!), there has been relatively little else beyond sporadic acknowledgements of the importance and dynamic of what is going to be argued in this book is a very significant process of class formation.

In the pages that follow, I intend to trace the broad outlines of how the black middle class has been treated by historians and social scientists as a preface to examining its present character. In so doing, I will not only accumulate many debts to writers who have gone before me, but also seek to relate themes and issues to the development in class theory as outlined in the previous chapter. Meanwhile, a further preoccupation will be to indicate in passing how past and present literature relates to characterization of African elites and bourgeoisie across the wider continent more generally.

Before embarking upon that journey, however, it is necessary to address the issue of terminology. Readers will already have noted how I have tended to shift between the terms 'middle class' and 'bourgeoisie' rather indiscriminately. That I am not alone in so doing does not obviate the need for some explanation, for generally, while the former term has tended to be associated with Weberian and liberal theoretical traditions, the terms 'bourgeoisie' and 'petty bourgeoisie' have very much more been the property of those working within a Marxist perspective. In consequence, it might seem that the writer who switches from one term to another is being inconsistent, or using words wrongly or simply seeking to have his or her argument read both ways. Perhaps, indeed, in some writings (my own previous work included) this may well be the case. However, in this book, I am going to plead the readers' indulgence in employing both varieties of terminology, and not I think without justification. First of all, less importantly although by no means inconsequentially, is the matter of style.

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1 Alan Cobley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950*,Greenwood Press, Westport, CT. 1990, p.3.

Quite simply, the use of the diversity of terms, while at times risking being inexact, will be intended to make the reading of this book more digestible to readers (and a book without readers is like a preacher without a congregation). Secondly, more significantly and as indicated in the previous chapter, the changing nature of class in contemporary capitalist society is being reflected in a striking diversity in the way in which middling elements within class structures are being characterized and labelled by social theorists, who increasingly draw their understandings and borrow their tools from both the great traditions of class theory. Thus 'the petty bourgeoisie' dissolves variously into the 'old' and the 'new' middle class, while the latter in turn merges into a much broader 'precariat', and so on. Consequently, while in what follows I will seek to ensure that my use of terminology is appropriate, I will want to avail myself of the immense richness of the social theorization of class that is now available. First however, it is necessary to sketch the social environment in which the African middle class was compelled to develop.

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 and aspirations of the indigenous black majority. Thereafter, throughout all the various phases of racial domination, which historians characterize as the period of segregation until 1948 and of apartheid after that, the predominant driver of white politics was the maintenance of white power and privilege. This was expressed through, variously, the passage of a raft of discriminatory acts which legitimized the appropriation of the vast portion of previously black occupied land, restricted the rate and character of black urbanization, blocked access to upward social mobility of all but a tiny minority of blacks, and first eroded and later eliminated completely the rights of blacks to vote for and participate in the country's central political structures. It was only as a culmination of long term historical developments (an increasing tempo of black resistance to white domination; the collapse of white rule in neighboring territories which up till the 1970s had provided a protective buffer for South Africa against 'liberation struggles'; and an eventual withdrawal of Western support for continuing white minority rule after the end of the Cold War) that white political monopoly gave way to a democratic settlement and the arrival in power of the African National Congress (ANC), a political organization formed in 1912 which survived numerous travails, notably its banning by the government in 1960 and its being forced into exile, to emerge as the predominant vehicle of black nationalism.

Minerals-led industrialization led to the unfolding of complex patterns of class formation. Above all, these entailed the development of an industrial working class which was divided along racial lines. Protective legislation and practices had been established in the mining industry in the late Nineteenth Century. These secured the wages and living standards of a small minority of white workers in the face of competition from more numerous,

indigenous black workers, and served as a buffer against the evolution of a cross-racial proletarian consciousness, just as the retention of the system of labour migrancy impeded the making of an urban based African working class. Meanwhile, a white capitalist class predominated over the mines and industry, and white landowners, backed by the state, steadily eroded the independence and commercial viability of an independent African peasantry, while drawing upon the ample labour reserves offered by large numbers of landless black workers, squatters and their dependents.

Later decades were to demonstrate that the forces of industrialization and urbanization were unstoppable, despite the best efforts of apartheid ideologues to stem the flow of black people to the towns, and a permanently based and ever growing urban black urban population became a reality with which successive National Party (NP) governments had to grapple. Despite official efforts to reverse the human tide from urban areas by herding the majority of the African population into demarcated African reserves (which later assumed the form of repressive political structures in ethnic 'homelands'), long term migration to the urban areas continued. Ultimately, in appreciation of this, the NP – at first hesitantly, but subsequently with some considerable desperation – came to acknowledge the permanence of an African urban population, and from the mid-1970s sought to promote separate municipal political structures for blacks, which it envisaged as orchestrated by a collaborative African middle class. In combination with racially separate constitutional structures for Indians and Coloureds it devised alongside those for whites at the national level in 1983, it sought to divert black demands away from strident calls for the vote, democracy and inclusion in the central polity.

The class structure fashioned by settler capitalism left little room for the development of 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 (and wider) black middle class was, historically, its small size, and the deliberate limitation by successive governments of its opportunities for upward mobility. Hence followed the theorization of the black capitalist and middle class stratum by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)[2] as an historically progressive class whose interests lay in throwing in their lot 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 very considerable limitations, it regarded as the principal vehicle of an anti-colonial, nationalist bourgeoisie. This was to culminate in the conceptualization of South Africa, effectively a sovereign state, as embodying 'colonialism of a special type', wherein race largely coincided with class, hence demanding the overthrow of racialised political and economic structures as central to the establishment of a non-racial democracy. For the SACP, as for the ANC therefore, in so far as their alliance forged joint theory, a 'National Democratic Revolution' would precede a progression to socialism. Whatever the limitations and ambiguities of such theorizing, it was undoubtedly correct in identifying the black middle class as small and its class interests as frustrated by the racialised polity.

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2 The CPSA chose to dissolve in the face of the Suppression of Communism Act of 1953, only to reform underground as the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The Emergence of the African Middle Class in Colonial Society

The origins of the black middle class, variously depicted as an emergent African elite or petty bourgeoisie, are widely agreed to 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, 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'.[3] The saving of souls demanded, above all, 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':

> The basic elements were a westernized lifestyle – ranging from style of dress and eating
> habits to housing based on the nuclear family, a mode of employment suited to the early
> industrial age (whether cash-cropping farmer, artisan or wage-labourer), aspirations which
> were westernized and capitalistic though tempered by personal humility, and above all,
> rigid conformity to Western norms in all questions of morality and deportment.[4]

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 neighbours. The inhabitants of such communities became known as the *amakholwa* or 'believers', relations between Christian and non-Christian often 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 in a period of rapid social and economic change. The ability to read, write, add up, subtract and communicate with the colonists in their own language were basic 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.[5]

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

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3 Cobley, op.cit., p.59.
4 Ibid, p.60.
5 Ibid, p.61.

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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 Aminzimtoti, by the American Board of Education in Natal (1853), soon to be followed by Catholics establishing Marianhill in Natal and Morija in Basutoland. Again, the educational fare provided, varying in its emphasis between academic to 'industrial' subjects, was basic, the large majority of such institutions preparing pupils to teach at the lower levels of the primary school system. The South African Native College, Fort Hare, founded in 1915 at a site close to Lovedale, became the first and for a long time, the only, institution available for the training of black secondary school teachers. 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, doctors and so on.[6]

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 to be unsuitable for a 'less developed' or 'backward' race, while the whole body and aura of education emphasized European culture and belief systems and the denigration of 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. Unsurprisingly, the small band of Africans who obtained an education rapidly came to regard themselves, and to become regarded by both uneducated Africans and colonists, as an 'African elite'. Yet Cobley 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.[7] In illustration, Nkululeko Mabandla demonstrates how accidental 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 and advantage which extended over successive generations.[8]

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6 Ibid, pp.61-63.
7 Ibid, pp.64-66.
8 Nkululeko Mabandla, "*Lahla Ngubo* – The Continuities and Discontinuities of a South African Black Middle Class", MA dissertation in Sociology, University of Cape Town, 2012. Mabandla builds upon the study by Sean

Most of 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 African township communities (although, given restrictions and lack of capital, trading generally remained a highly precarious occupation, and only a handful of successful 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 qualifying 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 allowed a greater role to 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 from these somewhat relaxed conditions 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.[9] '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.[10] 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.[11]

Redding, 'Peasants and the creation of an African middle class in Umtata', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26,3, 1993, pp. 513-539.
9 Ibid p.68
10 Ibid.p.69
11 Ibid, pp.78-81.

Self-consciously privileged relative to the mass of the African population as they were, the African elite – however well qualified and talented – were subject to systematized racial barriers which blocked their upward mobility in society, even while some were granted the gift of a liberal education which, even if constructed around notions of white trusteeship, ultimately preached human equality and 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 crudely 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 both of frustrations of African ministers at racially discriminatory pay levels and limits on opportunities for promotion and leadership within the missionary societies and established religious denominations, led to breakaways and the formation of numerous African independent churches which, simultaneously, sought to combine the Christian message with aspects of indigenous beliefs, culture and expression.[12] 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.[13] 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.

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 and representation in the predecessor colonial societies, 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".[14] 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"[15], 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

12 One example of institutionalised discrimination was provided by the Anglican Church., which was more liberal than certain non-conformist churches, and certainly more liberal 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, *Apartheid and the Archbishop: The Life and Times of Geoffrey Clayton,* Cape Town, David Philip, 1973, p. 46.

13 See, notably, in this regard, the influential study by Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism and the State in Twentieth Century Natal*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1986.

14 Peter Limb, *The ANC's Early Years: Nation, Class and Place in South Africa before 1940*, Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2010, p. 117.

15 Mary Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright*, London, Penguin. 1966, p.24.

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",[16] some of whom on that momentous day in January 1912 were formally dressed, "some in frock-coats with top hats, carrying furled umbrellas".[17] Far from being socially or politically radical, such "proto-middle class" elements were drawn from amongst that "sprinkling of educated men and representatives of political associations"[18] whose hopes for inclusion within the politic as citizens of a common, non-racial 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",[19] 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.[20] SANNC, renamed the ANC in 1922, 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 the divisions of African 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' (from within the ANC) or 'outsiders', the latter stretching across liberal, radical and conservative perspectives, yet argues that all such approaches have shared the tendency to identify the leadership of the ANC as having been largely drawn from the middle class or petit-bourgeoisie. Certainly, within the insider tradition, he identifies a predisposition towards hagiography which seeks to minimize class divisions within the ANC for reasons of political unity, 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 for and on behalf of African workers to the authorities. Nonetheless, leaders were mainly middle class. From this perspective, for instance, Francis Meli's unofficial history of the ANC 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, yet nonetheless accepted that even though they were progressive for their time, ANC leaders were "definitely not working class".[21] Similarly, Jack and Ray Simons, whose classic rendering of *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* [22] provided a critical appraisal of the ANC's politics and its connections with labour, portrayed the ANC as a "radical liberation movement", whose leaders were both "intellectuals and trade unionists". However, whilst the founders of the ANC might be characterized as "radical liberals", the ANC was never a "workers' movement" which ever envisaged anything so far-reaching as the socialization of the land, mines, factories, and banks.[23] Again, ANC insiders like Govan Mbeki and John Pampalis, who wrote ANC history after 1990,[24] similarly portrayed the ANC

16 P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912-1952*, London, Hurst, 1970., p.34.
17 Benson, op.cit., p25.
18 Benson, op. cit. p.24
19 Saul Dubow, *The African National Congress*, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2000, p.4
20 Limb, op.cit., p.123.
21 Francis Meli, *A History of the ANC: South Africa Belongs to Us,* Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House; Bloomington & Indianapolis, University of Indiana Press; London, James Currey, p.45
22 London, Penguin, 1969; London, International Defence and Aid for Southern Africa, 1983.
23 Simons and Simons, op.cit., pp.621-623
24 Govan Mbeki, *Learning from Robben Island: The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1991; *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: A Short History*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1992); and

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 portray 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".[25]

Amongst commentators coming from outside the ranks of Congress Limb sees a similar tendency to identify the ANC as essentially middle class. Walshe, who he acknowledges 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 movement largely promoted from above, but with working class influence noticeable and growing more pronounced by the 1950s".[26] 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 nuance and emphasis, have argued that the leaders of the ANC of the 1930s and 1940s 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, to such an extent, in Lodge's words, that the ANC represented "a nascent African bourgeoisie".[27] Even so, they all tended to identify as 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 the massive discriminations and oppressions of South African society, 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'".[28]

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"",[29] seeking to correct tendencies of an exaggeration of pre-1940 ANC timidity and aloofness from workers and the adoption by many writers of a mechanistic argument about war time changes stimulating working class expansion and political ferment and the ANC's later move to mass mobilization. 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 middle of the road, 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

John Pampalis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, London, Zed Press, 1991.
25 Limb, op.cit., p. 22.
26 Limb, op.cit., p.22.
27 Find ref
28 Cobley, op.cit., pp. 8 and 183.
29 Limb, op.cit. p.27.

towards "a latent supra-class unity with organized workers because of "the basic contradiction between white rule and black national oppression". If the thesis is scarcely new, his enormously 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 and branches, however limited and intermittent their functioning), offers a corrective to what he regards as the predominance hitherto of 'top-down' history and 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 and weaknesses, the ANC outlasted and outperformed its various rivals (which were themselves similarly afflicted) as a necessary preparation for the qualitative changes that occurred during the 1950s.[30]

The African Middle Class under Apartheid

During the 1950s the ANC underwent a process of radicalization under the influence of the Youth League and an increasingly assertive black trade union movement, and 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 the same year.[31] 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 elitest 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 suggests, positively reluctant,[32] and whether or not the Congress Alliance and its prioritization of national struggle over class struggle served, objectively, to inhibit the radicalizing impact of the black trade union movement,[33] there is agreement that workers and their organisations 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. Even so, the structural position of the African middle class within South African society was little changed.

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*

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30 Limb, op.cit., pp.483-493.
31 The Congress Alliance initially linked the ANC to the 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.
32 Edward Feit, *African Opposition in South Africa: The Failure of Passive Resistance* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1967).
33 For instance, Robert Fine with Dennis Davis, *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa*, London; Concord Massachussetts, Pluto Press, pp. 266-275; and Robert Lambert, "Political Unionism and Working Class Hegemony: Perspectives on the South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955-1965", *LABOUR, Capital and Society*, 18, 2, 1985, pp.244-277.

Bourgeoisie in Durban in the 1950s and early 1960s.[34] 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 finances. In contrast, he was applying it to African "professionals, traders and senior government and municipal clerks".[35]

Kuper's bourgeoisie, as depicted by his empirical study of intellectuals (or graduates of some form of higher education), 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, 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.[36]

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 on the one hand, 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 of grievance among the African bourgeoisie than among African proletarians and peasants, and resulted in their being more demanding of social change. Consequently, third:

> thrown back on the African masses by the denial of entry into the dominant society, (the
> bourgeoisie) may interact with them to forge a nationalist movement with the goal of
> African domination, in which case the development would be from political power to bourgeois
> property, and not from property to power. Or the bourgeoisie may be divided, and sections
> may seek fulfillment in a revolutionary struggle aimed at the creation of a socialist state and
> the destruction of bourgeois property.[37]

Suffice it to say here that, for all that Kuper saw the political situation in the early 1960s as highly polarised, he did not feel that violent conflict was inevitable, as despite

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34 Leo Kuper, *An African Bourgeoisie: Race, Class and Politics in South Africa*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1965.
35 Kuper, p. ix.
36 Kuper, pp. 1-8.
37 Kuper. p.8.

apartheid, South Africa continued to evince significant levels of social interaction and economic interdependence between the races.[38]

For all that Kuper used Marxian terminology, there was nothing particularly Marxist about his (lively and illuminating) analysis, for he was as much concerned with status and 'life chances' as any Weberian. Consequently, it should come as little surprise that Thomas Nyquist should take Kuper's work as one of his major sources of inspiration for his study of *An African Middle Class Elite* in the African townships adjacent to (and serving) Grahamstown, originally a frontier white settlement in the Eastern Cape, but by the 1960s "a large and comfortable country town", whose major claim to distinction was its being home to Rhodes University. Yet rather than following Kuper by himself identifying members of this African elite by virtue of their occupation and profession, Nyquist (whose major field work took place in 1966-67) chose to ask, via administration of some 299 surveys, whether Grahamstown's Africans themselves 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".[39]

He received the answer that respondents identified three major strata,[40] of which the 'upper stratum' consisted of the *abaphakamileyo* or 'high ones', consisting 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). Subsequently, he then used a 'reputational method' whereby ten local 'experts' (identified by African research assistants and themselves from upper tier occupations) were asked to identify members of the community who could be identified as members of the *abaphakamileyo*. Further probing revealed that the major criteria for selection for membership of the *abaphakamileyo* were, in descending order, education, money or standard of living, property, occupation and moral or religious behavior.[41] Thereafter, Nyquist's survey material revealed that that the upper stratum was bound together by close networks of interaction based upon similarities of family lives and situation, shared awareness of achievements, common attitudes and a shared consciousness of exclusivity. Furthermore, he found that the *abaphakamileyo* served as an important reference group for other urban Africans (although the latter's ultimate reference group was actually the white community). Finally, he characterized the upper stratum as located in "an acute position of sociological marginality" in that, while its members were success-oriented, and their measures of success were white measures, their success was restricted by racial barriers and the limited opportunities in life made available to Africans. This in turn led to high levels of psychological frustration, many finding outlet in largely useless activities, but more particularly, their engaging in "debilitating competition with one another and Africans of other strata" in struggles for the most desirable leadership positions within the community that were available. Yet few were attracted by the government's bantustan ideal, even while Nyquist, who had returned to his field site in 1975, could see little immediate future for them than more frustration and uncertainty.[42]

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38 Kuper, pp.365-387.
39 Thomas Nyquist, *African Middle Class Elite*, Occasional Paper No. 28, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1983, p. 21.
40 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'.
41 Nyquist, pp. 21-31.
42 Nyquist, pp. 260-261.

The studies by Kuper and Nyquist, 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 no significant equivalent efforts during the apartheid period, (although as already noted, scholars such as Shula Marks, Phil Bonner and Helen Bradford were to explore various themes highlighted by Kuper and Nyquist, notably the tensions between their class location and their subordinate racial status – and the resulting need for many if not most of them to identify politically with African workers or peasants). Thereafter, for whatever reason, writing on the African bourgeoisie was largely carried on from a social or political (and indeed, academic) 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. Today supplemented by one or two later studies now looking at the African middle class during the apartheid period, such writing revolves around the changing class dynamics introduced by the bantustan project and the reforms pursued by the regime from the mid-1970s.

My own study of the 'independent' Transkei was one of the first to grapple systematically with the issue of class formation in the bantustans, arguing that while the bantustan project had been rejected by the majority of ethnic Xhosa upon whom it had been imposed, there was an emergent petty bourgeoisie – composed of chiefs, politicians, civil servants, teachers and traders – on whom it conferred substantial material benefits and which had induced them to accept a fraudulent independence. 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. Principally I was concentrating upon the enhanced opportunities for material accumulation which were being made available, the broad thesis being 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).[43] Broadly, the analysis backed arguments that while the petty bourgeoisie was largely collaborationist, it was too weak (in relation to the broader contours of the liberation struggle) to carry the bantustan project through to a successful conclusion. Suffice it to say here that, at least in radical quarters, the broad thrust of the argument was largely sustained[44] and accepted for some years (and applied to other bantustans, with or without the frills) until the increasing political pressures of the transition period, culminating in what Jeff Peires termed the 'implosion' of the Transkei and Ciskei saw a significant realignment of class forces, as different elements of the homeland petty-bourgeoisies either haplessly clung to independence or lined themselves up behind popular forces and (for most), the ANC.[45]

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43 Roger Southall, 'The Beneficiaries of Transkeian 'Independence'', *Journal of Modern African* Studies, 15, 1, 1-26, 1976; South *Africa's Transkei: The Political Economy of an 'Independent' Bantustan*, London, Heinemann Educational Books; New York, Monthly Review Press, 1983.

44 For instance, Duncan Innes and Dan O'Meara, 'Class Formation and Ideology: The Transkei Region', *Review of African Political Economy*, 7, 1976, pp. 69-86. However, see Sam Nolutshungu's *Changing South Africa: political considerations*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1982 for a more nuanced view which questioned the extent to which the bantustans could satisfy the class interests of even the core members of the homeland petty-bourgeoisies.

45 Jeff Peires, 'The Implosion of Transkei and Ciskei', *African Affairs*, 91, 365-387, 1992. For similar analyses, see Peter Delius, 'Chieftainship, Civil Society and the Political Transition in South Africa', *Critical Sociology*,

Alongside generic studies of petit-bourgeois collaborationism in the bantustans, there was an accompanying focus upon the impact of government reformism upon the prospects for African capitalism. In turn, this merged into broader efforts to assess post-Soweto efforts by the regime to create a supportive African middle class in urban areas. Building upon an earlier study of African entrepreneurship in the Transkei and Ciskei homelands by Gillian Hart (which endorsed Kuper-esque arguments that African business was stunted by apartheid's racial restrictions),[46] my own study 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 the thrust of this body's activities were deeply ambiguous. Hence while arguing the merits of private enterprise, and hence 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.[47] Its theme was later taken up by Peter Hudson and Mike Sarakinsky, who extended its broad line of argument by tracing the government's slow relaxation of restrictions upon African business activity in the urban areas during the 1980s.[48] Such analyses were later endorsed by an interesting in-depth MA thesis by Charles Kekana which explored how despite an easing of restrictions on Africans in urban areas in the late apartheid period, 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 political and economic obstacles.[49] However, as argued by Sam Nolotshungu, despite all the racial barriers they faced, black businessmen were largely silent or apathetic about politics, and rarely engaged in explicit political debate.[50] Nonetheless, despite such nuances, both the theoretical approach and the empirical study of this period tended to reinforce radical perspectives that notwithstanding some subordinate contrary tendencies, "the immediate fate of the black middle sections is linked much more with that of the black workers and peasants than with their equivalents across the colour line".[51]

The Black Middle Class: Containment and Liberation

We may conclude this chapter by summarizing four interrelated and overlapping themes which pervade the historiography of the black middle class in South Africa.

1996, 22: 37-5.

46 Gillian Hart, *African Entrepreneurship*, Occasional Paper No. 16, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1972.

47 Roger Southall, 'African Capitalism in Contemporary South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7,1, 1980, pp.38-70.

48 Peter Hudson and Mike Sarakinsky, 'Class Interests and Politics: The Case of the Urban African Bourgeoisie', *South African Review 3*, Braamfontein, Ravan Press, 1986, pp.169-185.

49 Charles Kekana, 'The Effect of Influx Control on the African Middle Class, MA thesis, Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990.

50 Notlutshungu, 1982, pp.196-197.

51 Joe Slovo, 'South Africa: No Middle Road', in B. Davidson, J. Slovo and A. Wilkinson, *South Africa: The New Politics of Revolution,* (Harmondsworth, Penguin,), 1976,pp.126. See also Harold Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State,* London, James Currey; Addis Ababa, OAU; Paris, Unesco Press. But, note as always, the perpetual undercurrents in debate, which challenge easy generalization: for instance, Shula Marks, *Divided Sisterhood: Race, Class and Gender in the South African Nursing Profession*, London, Macmillan, 1994, which explores the political tensions resulting from black nurses' ambiguous location as both professionals and low paid, exploited workers.

The first is quite simply that the pattern of capitalist development fashioned under segregation and apartheid, whilst allowing for the evolution of a black middle class, imposed massive constraints upon its growth and opportunities through legislated restrictions which forced all blacks into systematized racial subordination. In functional terms, therefore, whilst the upper ranks of the emergent petty bourgeoisie was significantly rooted in the early movement of blacks into 'old middle class' professions, notably the law, teaching and the ministry, the services they performed took place within the confines of a highly segregated society, and were overwhelmingly directed at the needs of, and consumed by, their 'own people'. In contrast, at the lower end of the middle class spectrum, opportunities arose for upward social mobility by blacks, who in terms of language capacity and basic education, were capable of performing service functions (such as translation and clerical work) more directly on behalf of colonial capital and the state. Meanwhile, within this highly constrained colonial situation, opportunities for blacks to participate more frontally in capitalist development were largely blocked off by a maze of restrictions and licensing. Whilst in any case lowly prized by a colonial value system which elevated education as the route to high-status, non-manual occupations, the severely limited opportunities available for black traders and business to perform as entrepreneurs ensured that they could offer no threat to white petty capital, just as the historical appropriation of African lands and the restrictions imposed by the various land acts had decimated the threat of an African peasantry to white commercial agriculture.

Second, as explored throughout the literature, but emphasized most explicitly by the high apartheid era studies of Kuper and Nyquist, the black petty bourgeoisie encountered a marked disjuncture between social class and racial status, this experienced most notably by individuals at the higher end of the former. This was played out, on the one hand, in feelings of injury, humiliation and frustration on the one hand, this not uncommonly leading to intensely fought battles for position and privilege within black society; and on the other hand, to political protest and resistance, this formulated in terms, variously, of humble supplication to the authorities, appeal to liberal conscience, demands for greater or full racial equality, and eventually intensified nationalist struggles during the 1950s, these characterized by a radicalization of petty bourgeois elements and the flowering of Limb's historical, incipient middle class alliance with workers within the framework of the ANC.

Third, while the political clampdown upon the ANC, PAC and other movements during the 1960s seemed to confirm the impermeability of a racially-bounded class system, subterranean developments within the economy and external political pressures forced the regime to modify the structure of racial oppression and to lend it greater fluidity. Ideologically, the regime had sought to head off black political resistance by diverting it into ethnic nationalisms within the bantustans, the various political and economic structures it erected allowing for limited, but nonetheless wider avenues for upward mobility – as politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and trader-entrepreneurs – for those blacks willing to avail themselves of them. As later events were to demonstrate, for perhaps the majority of these petty-bourgeois elements, ideological commitment to the bantustans took second place to pragmatic pursuit of the greater opportunities which the homelands allowed. Yet even as it pressed ahead with the bantustan programme, it became increasingly evident to all but the most myopic of the regime's ideologues that the Verwoerdian project of relegating blacks to rural peripheries was an impossible dream. Black urban populations continued to grow; labour struggles intensified; and from 1976, the government became caught up in a self-contradictory, series of reforms which, while seeking to cultivate a black middle class in urban areas as conservative ally against mass revolt, simultaneously frustrated it by refusal to

remove all constraining racial barriers. While, certainly, the regime succeeded in drawing significant segments of the black petty bourgeoisie into collaboration, the changing dynamics of both the political situation and of the economy thrust the majority of the black middle class into opposition or, simply, quiet subversion of the status quo. Black professionals emerged in leading positions of such formations as the UDF simultaneously as improved educational opportunities allowed for slow, but sure, black movement entry into the corporate sector. Similarly, from notably the later 1980s, small but significant numbers of black entrepreneurs graduated into a proto-capitalist stratum able and willing to challenge white capital, albeit (as will be seen) within restricted economic sectors.

Finally, fourthly, the culmination of the struggle against apartheid saw the fruition of the cross class alliance of black petty bourgeoisie and the black working class which the ANC and SACP had long theorized. Class differences within the liberation movement were minimized, with the slogan of 'a better life for all' placing not merely the overthrow of all racial restrictions, but economic emancipation for the hitherto racially oppressed, at the core of the ANC's political agenda. Given the international (post-Cold War, neo-liberal) moment, the broader context of stalemate between anti-partheid forces and the regime, and indeed (but *sotto voce*!) middle class pressures for distinctly unsocialist moderation within the ANC and Tripartite Alliance, what emerged was what many analysts have characterized as an 'elite transition'. The democratic outcome that eventuated was thereafter theorized by the ANC, as the newly ruling party, as the National Democratic Revolution, under whose historical auspices the deracialisation of capitalism and the patriotism of an emergent black bourgeoisie would lay the basis for faster growth, development and social re-distribution, with any transition to socialism quietly delayed. The question then became the extent to which the pursuit of the NDR would become, in effect, a class project, of principal benefit to a party and state-aligned black bourgeoisie, whose fortunes would be tightly bound to the goals and fate of the ANC.