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WISH, 30 August 2021

Draft chapter – Please do not cite or circulate

This chapter argues that the ‘coloured question’ was first formulated as a *biological question* – through the biological essence that underpinned the ‘coloured’ category. Coloured first emerged as a racial category in the 1904 census of the Cape Colony but had been premised on the “use of phenotype and origin as markers for hierarchically structured difference.”¹ However, by the 1930s, the ‘mixing of blood’ became the central descriptor of this category and assumed increasing importance in the political discourse around the ‘poor white’² problem. As local authorities began to identify the poor white problem as a point of state intervention, concerns were also raised over the difficulty in distinguishing between poor whites and coloureds – creating a political imperative to separate coloureds from white society. This would be done by formulating the coloured question intellectually and politically through the problem of miscegenation, largely demonstrated through commissions of inquiry in this decade. Seen as both the biological outcome of miscegenation, and as representative of the threat of miscegenation, coloureds posed a danger to the purity of the Afrikaner *volk*, and more particularly, to those on the margins of the *volk*.

This draft chapter also argues that the formulation of the coloured question as a *biological question* stemmed largely from the Western Cape – the epistemological centre of the

¹ Cheryl Hendricks, “‘Ominous’ Liaisons: Tracing the Interface between ‘Race’ and Sex at the Cape,” in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town*, ed. Zimitri Erasmus (Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers, 2001), 30.

² The term ‘poor white’ is presented in inverted commas when it is used for the first time, but for ease of reading has been used without the quotation marks in the rest of the text.

coloured question in the 1930s. Not only was the Western Cape the region with the largest population identified as coloured, but it was also where the term ‘poor white’ was first used in the late nineteenth century, to describe the largely ‘Dutch’ (subsequently Afrikaner) poor. In addition, it was in the Western Cape where local government officials first expressed concern over coloureds and poor whites living interspersed. It was therefore of great importance to Cape politicians – as demonstrated in the constitution of the Cape National Party (NP)– that the coloured question be resolved through the separation of coloureds from white society. After the NP’s victory in 1948 and under a largely Cape dominant party leadership, many of the recommendations made in the 1930s commissions of inquiry would be legislated as the official mechanisms to separate coloureds from white society *biologically*.

It needs to be emphasised that while I rely on the term ‘coloured’ throughout this project, I am fully aware that ‘coloured’ category in South Africa is not about mixed race, mixed ancestry, mixed heritage or mixed origins. **‘Coloured’ is neither a common ethnic identity nor a biological result.** Instead, the (highly contested) category refers to those loosely bound together for historical reasons such as slavery, creolisation and a combination of oppressive and selective preferential treatment under apartheid.³ I use this category in my project as a lens into the official discourse of the state, the institutional discourse of universities, research institutions, and disciplines to grapple with the terms of reference for colonized subjects that were constituted as neither ‘European’ nor ‘native’. These terms of reference, while premised on false notions of race as a biological essence, had enormous consequences for those the state and universities saw as ‘coloured’. While the category is a construction, there are still real material and social effects

³ Zimitri Erasmus, *Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017), 112.

attached to the category. The purpose of my book project is to examine how those effects linger in institutional discourses and in disciplinary knowledge by exploring this history. The term ‘coloured’ is presented in inverted commas when it is used for the first time, but for ease of reading has been used without the quotation marks in the rest of the text.

The Coloured Question as a Biological Question

In the policies of the Union government during first three decades of the twentieth century, coloureds were constituted as colonial subjects with special and unique features,⁴ who through their “industry, intelligence and self-respect” had “raised themselves to a high standard.”⁵ This ‘high standard’ – or degree of ‘civilization’ – in addition to “shared European values, culture” (and ancestry), had in the Cape liberal tradition, singled coloureds out for limited political and social rights, based on individual attainment. This approach was starkly contrasted by the political culture of the Afrikaner Republics in the Transvaal and the Free State, which until the formation of the modern South African state in 1910 not only included coloureds in the colonial category of ‘native’, but consistently attempted to limit the attainment of any social and economic privilege, often resulting in conflict between local and central government.⁶ Prime Minister Hertzog’s policy towards coloureds in the 1920s to the early 1930s demonstrated the conflict between these two political traditions – Cape liberalism on the one hand, which for coloureds held the promise of being assimilated or at least partially incorporated into whiteness

⁴ Thriven Reddy, “The politics of naming: The constitution of coloured subjects in South Africa” in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers, 2001), 69.

⁵ Report of South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC), 1903-1905 (Cape Town: Cape Times Printers, 1905), 13.

⁶ An example was the conflict that occurred between the local Pretoria Town Council, which insisted on imposing a curfew and a special night pass for coloureds, and the centralized Native Affairs Department, which stated that coloureds did not need to be in possession of a pass and should not be subject to a curfew. Michelle Friedman, “A History of Africans in Pretoria with Special Reference to Marabastad, 1902-1923” (MA diss., University of South Africa, 1994), 21.

and its privileges – and the approach of the Afrikaner Republics such as the Transvaal, which advocated for complete institutional separation between whites and all colonial subjects. By the mid-1930s, the need to constitute the ‘purity’ of the Afrikaner *volk* emerged alongside the articulation of a distinctive Afrikaner nationalism. At this time, Afrikaner nationalism was premised on ideas of being a ‘chosen people,’ of racial purity akin to those in Nazi Germany, and on an idea of the need to ensure the survival of the ethnic group after a discursively constituted historical experience of persecution and victimization at the hands of British imperialism. Coloureds would increasingly come to be seen by state institutions and by Afrikaner nationalist politicians in the Cape through the ‘problem’ of miscegenation. By implication, the coloured question would be formulated through the biological essence of the coloured category. This shift in political discourse – from ‘civilization’ to ‘miscegenation’ – was first demonstrated and given institutional expression in the report of the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem (1932).

The term ‘poor white’ originated in the United States⁷ and was first used in the Cape Colony during the 1880s, when white poverty progressively came to be seen by white elites as a social danger. For instance, in 1892, a school inspector in the Karoo region of the Cape wrote that white poverty led to increasing social decline, *racial degeneration* (my emphasis) and crime.⁸ John X. Merriman, an influential figure among Cape Afrikaners and the subsequent Prime Minister of the Cape Colony (1908-1910), expressed the fear that white poverty was a drain on white domination that could result in the destruction of minority rule. While there was genuine concern about the poor, there was an overriding anxiety about the socio-political

⁷ Herman Giliomee, *Always Been Here: The Story of a Stellenbosch Community*. (Pinelands: Africana Publishers, 2018), 75.

⁸ Herman Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 317.

implications of white poverty.⁹ In 1912, in a letter to President of the Orange Free State, M.T. Steyn, Merriman wrote that “ [i]t is the crumbling away of the lower fringe of our white population that makes the grave danger...I do not think there is any progress towards social amalgamation except from the vices of the white man, and even in that respect the Dutch-speaking population are far better than their forefathers, to whom we owe the ‘*bruin jong*’ ”.¹⁰ In this statement, Merriman identified white poverty as a precursor to miscegenation, and miscegenation as a grave social danger.

White poverty appeared to be a distinctly ‘Afrikaner’ problem for several reasons,¹¹ such as the disintegration of subsistence farming in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As a result, white farmers who could not survive on the land migrated to towns or cities in large numbers but had no skills to make a living in the urban areas.¹² Another factor was wide-scale immigration from Europe. Between 1875 and 1904, some 400 000 whites entered South Africa, more than the entire white population of 1875, and settled in Cape Town and surrounding areas. Increasingly the Afrikaners who began moving to the towns and cities in the 1890s found that skilled and semi-skilled work, the professions, and civil service positions were already filled by local or immigrant English-speakers. As a result, by the early 1930s a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) remarked that 95 per cent of the poor white parish were ‘Dutch’.¹³ Thus, during the first three decades of Union, a robust debate emerged on how to alleviate this problem. The former Afrikaner Republics had directed a large proportion of their budget to

⁹ Hermann Giliomee, “The Non-Racial Franchise and Afrikaner and Coloured Identities, 1910-1994,” *African Affairs*, 94, no. 375 (1995): 203.

¹⁰ Phyllis Lewsen (ed). *Selections from the Correspondence of J.X. Merriman, 1905-1924* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1969), 226.

¹¹ Report of the Carnegie Commission. Part I: Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus (Stellenbosch: Pro-Ecclesia, 1932), 4.

¹² Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 75.

¹³ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 318.

providing social provisions to the white population because these governments conceived of race and citizenship as identical. The ZAR/Transvaal, for instance, spent a third of its budget on poor relief.¹⁴ In contrast, the Cape Colony's liberal constitution and non-racial membership of the DRC went against providing services to only one section of the population.¹⁵ An additional debate around alleviating the poor white problem was whether coloureds should be 'uplifted' alongside whites in order to strengthen the dominant group.¹⁶

In the Cape Peninsula in particular, there was no clear-cut division between whites and coloureds since the working class lived interspersed. For local authorities, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between who was white and who was coloured, not only due to their shared living and economic conditions, but also due to their similar appearance¹⁷ – a 'dangerous' sign to them that miscegenation was taking place. According to Giliomee, "a 1915 Labour Party pamphlet stated that it was 'impossible in thousands of cases . . . to say definitely whether, judged by appearance alone, a given individual is a Coloured or a white man'. It added that there were some people 'occupying some of the highest positions in the land' who passed for white despite their 'obvious characteristics of known mixed descent.'"¹⁸ Thus, in large part, providing a solution to the poor white problem came to be intertwined with identifying coloureds as both the product of miscegenation, as well as a danger to the dominant group due to their 'mixed blood'. This concern over local authorities' inability to clearly demarcate the racial boundaries between whites and coloureds – first articulated in the Western Cape alongside the notion of a

¹⁴ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 316.

¹⁵ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 317.

¹⁶ Giliomee, "The Non-Racial Franchise," 203.

¹⁷ Giliomee, "The Non-Racial Franchise," 203.

¹⁸ Giliomee, "The Non-Racial Franchise," 203.

growing poor white problem – was echoed in the 1932 report of the Carnegie Commission¹⁹ on the ‘Poor White Problem’.

The Carnegie Commission began its work in 1929, after Dr. Frederick Keppel, the then President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and his secretary were on a tour of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. They were on a mission to find a worthy social and educational project in the British Empire that the Corporation could fund to fulfill the late Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropic mandate. Keppel consulted E.G. Malherbe – a graduate of Stellenbosch University – who did his PhD at Columbia University in New York. Malherbe convinced Keppel that the single most urgent social problem affecting South Africa was the poor white problem.²⁰ The observations made in the report of the commission, however, would indicate that solving this urgent social problem was intertwined with demarcating clear boundaries between whites and coloureds.

In first few pages of the Report, the commissioners found it necessary to specify who they were referring to through the term ‘poor white,’ indicating that, “[t]he term itself indicates that a poor white is a person of European descent. Here any one having an admixture of coloured or native blood does not strictly fall under the concept. In our study this means, practically, that all those were excluded where such admixture was recognizable by any means of ordinary observation.”²¹ By highlighting that their research subjects were only disqualified from the

¹⁹ As Adam Ashforth has argued, the commission of inquiry has served as a central institution in the South African state since the late nineteenth century. Commissions of inquiry “have sought to fashion workable schemes of policy by devising coherent schemes of legitimation – sets of principles capable of explaining the problems faced by the state and justifying, by virtue of those explanations, the actions deemed necessary for the future of the state.” (Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth Century South Africa*, 1).

²⁰ Mohammed Seedat and Sarah MacKenzie, “The Triangulated Development of South African Psychology: Race, Scientific Racism and Professionalisation,” in C. van Ommen and D. Painter, eds, *Interiors: A History of Psychology in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2008), 73.

²¹ Report of the Carnegie Commission, Part II: Psychological Report (Stellenbosch: Pro-Ecclesia, 1932), 2-3.

category of poor white “where such admixture was recognizable,” the commissioners inadvertently acknowledged the impossibility of distinguishing between who was white, and who was coloured in the absence of any clearly defined boundaries. This impossibility was further highlighted when they argued that shared economic conditions made coloureds and poor whites indistinguishable. For instance, in the Sociological Report (Part V) the commissioners concluded that,

Signs are, however not wanting that this racial barrier is being broken down, especially where the standard of living of some Europeans is approximating more and more that of natives. The social intercourse between the races which – as pointed out below – is being encouraged by modern economic conditions easily leads to miscegenation. This means that the white colour is lost in the descendants. In this way it comes about that there are whole families who bear the names and surnames of Europeans, *but who are coloured* (my emphasis). The “poor white” problem here appears under a different form, because such families may be indeed “poor” but are no longer “white”. Were it not that some of the lower types of Europeans disappear in this manner, the problem of poor whiteism would undoubtedly loom larger than it does to-day.²²

The commissioners not only expressed a concern that shared economic conditions between poor whites and black Africans would result in closer social interaction across racial lines, but that it would produce more ‘coloureds.’²³ By suggesting that poor whites were in fact ‘disappearing’ and ‘becoming coloured’ as a result of their ‘social intercourse’ with non-whites, commissioners highlighted the need for the state to not only uplift poor whites, but to do so by developing the political and social mechanisms to clearly identify who was white, and who was coloured. More importantly, however, the Carnegie Commission report signalled that coloureds were being increasingly viewed through a growing political discourse on ‘miscegenation’. For instance, they emphasized that,

The great majority of poor whites are still imbued with the conviction of their superiority over the non-Europeans. This feeling has played an important part in preventing miscegenation

²² Report of the Carnegie Commission. Part V: Sociological Report (Stellenbosch: Pro-Ecclesia, 1932), 37-38.

²³ Seedat and MacKenzie, “The Triangulated Development of South African Psychology,” 75.

between the poor white and the non-European, especially the native. On the whole European tradition in South Africa is strongly opposed to miscegenation. *It does occur between the coloured (rather than the native) people and a small minority of poor whites* (my emphasis), namely, those who are also in other respects of an inferior type.²⁴

By highlighting that miscegenation occurred more frequently between coloureds and poor whites, the commissioners pointed to the dangers that coloureds – constituted as the products of miscegenation – presented to white society, and to the Afrikaner *volk* in particular through their shared economic conditions, residential areas, and last names. Indeed, historian J.S. Marais, whose *The Cape Coloured People* (1652-1937) was published in 1938, only a few years after the Commission made its report, observed that “[a] Coloured community as distinct from the European does not exist in any realistic interpretation of the term. White and Coloured are, and have been from the beginning, inextricably mixed up together.”²⁵ In addition, he also underlined the racial anxieties expressed in the Carnegie report by suggesting that “the Coloured do not appear to differ from us day to day in anything except their poverty, and that they share with our large army of poor Whites.”²⁶ House of Assembly Debates at this time also demonstrated the state’s anxiety around its inability to distinguish between whites and coloureds. For instance, in a 1937 House of Assembly debate, a question was posed to the Minister of Railways and Harbours, firstly, around the segregation of coloured and white railway workers, and secondly – and more significantly – about what criteria would be used to determine which workers were white, and which were coloured.²⁷ This anxiety would be given further expression through the appointment of the commission of inquiry into the state of the coloured population of the Union.

²⁴ Report of the Carnegie Commission. Joint Findings and Recommendations of the Commission (Stellenbosch: Pro-Ecclesia, 1932), xix-xx.

²⁵ J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937* (London: Longman’s, Green and Company, 1939), 283.

²⁶ Marais, *The Cape Coloured People*, 283.

²⁷ House of Assembly Debates, 1937, col. 4521-4522

Chaired by Professor R.W. Wilcocks – Vice Chancellor (Rector) of Stellenbosch University – ²⁸ the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union* was made in 1937, and would also articulate the coloured question through the coloured category’s biological essence. It did this by defining a coloured as:

...a person living in the Union of South Africa, who does not belong to one of its aboriginal races, but in whom the presence of *Coloured blood* (my emphasis) (especially due to descent from non-Europeans brought to the Cape in the 17th and 18th centuries or from aboriginal Hottentot stock, and with or without an *admixture* (my emphasis) of white or Bantu blood) can be established with at least reasonable certainty, (a) from a knowledge of the genealogy of the person during the last three or four generations; or/and (b) ordinary direct recognition of characteristic physical features (such as colour of skin, nature of hair, and facial or bodily form), by an observer familiar with these characteristics.²⁹

The preoccupation with ‘blood’, ‘admixture’ and ‘physical features’ (phenotype) in this definition was reliant on the understanding of coloured as a category premised on the biological process of miscegenation. The commissioners of this report also commented with alarm on the growing frequency with which coloureds were able to ‘pass’ for white and thus assimilate into white society with ease. They stated that,

Due, however, to a number of social and economic disabilities affecting the Cape Coloured... which have in some respects become more severe in latter years, there is an increasing tendency for Cape Coloureds to “pass over the line” if their appearance enables them to do so. There is ample evidence that a number of Coloured persons have already “passed over” and been absorbed in the European population. The Cape Coloured are well aware of what is taking place. It is important, however, for the individual who attempts to “pass over”, that this fact should not be known to the European community of which he desires to become a member; so that from the very nature of the process, Europeans generally are not aware of it to nearly to the same extent as the Cape Coloured

²⁸ Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 94.

²⁹ Union of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1937), 10.

themselves, and there is no doubt that it is taking place on a considerably larger scale than is thought to be the case by the majority of Europeans.³⁰

By highlighting the ability of (fair-skinned) coloureds to assimilate ‘undetected’ into white society, the commissioners attempted to demonstrate that the close proximity of coloureds to white society provided them (unearned) access to the benefits and privileges of whiteness. More particularly, the anxiety around ‘passing’ also demonstrated commissioner’s fears around miscegenation. Although the commissioners recommended that “no legislation be introduced to prohibit marriage between European and Coloured persons”, half of the commissioners, including Wilcocks, suggested that miscegenation should be “combatted...by an avoidance of circumstances likely to lead to miscegenation.”³¹

Two years after the 1937 commission of inquiry, Wilcocks would serve as a member of the Commission of Inquiry into Mixed Marriages. The task of the commission was to determine whether marriages between ‘European’ and ‘non-Europeans’ were on the increase, and if the increase would be “detrimental” to future of the Union. The commission was also tasked with recommending steps to be taken to discourage mixed marriages.³² In the conclusions and recommendations of the Report (1939), the commissioners stated that mixed marriages were in part responsible for the “coming into being of a group not only itself unhappily situated in the existing social structure of the country, but also forming a serious social problem”. In addition, they argued that mixed marriages accounted for the infiltration of ‘non-European’ *blood* into the ‘European’ population, posing a “risk” to “racial and social heredity”.³³ As in the Carnegie

³⁰ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population*, 30.

³¹ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population*, 31-32.

³² Union of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages in South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1939), 1.

³³ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 33.

Commission report, the commissioners also argued that the deterioration of the economic position of sections of the white population (ie. ‘poor whites’) could possibly result in an increase in the number of mixed marriages.³⁴ In addition to recommending segregated housing, the Report suggested that existing legislation against mixed marriages in the Transvaal provided a potential solution to this “social evil” taking place elsewhere in the country.³⁵ In the Transvaal – where mixed marriages were treated as “almost unthinkable” – there existed two separate marriages laws: one for ‘Europeans’ only (Law no.3 of 1871) and one for ‘Coloured’ persons only (Law No.3 of 1897) – “Coloured persons” including all ‘non-Europeans’.³⁶

In the Report of the Carnegie Commission (1932), the Wilcocks Commission (1937), and the Commission on Mixed Marriages (1939), it is clear that the coloured question was formulated through the problem of miscegenation. In the report of the Wilcocks Commission in particular, miscegenation is listed and discussed as a “special social problem.”³⁷ Drawing on the inputs of three Afrikaner members of the commission and the three Stellenbosch professors who gave testimony,³⁸ a common thread could be observed in this report:³⁹ that the state had a social and political imperative to demarcate clear boundaries between who was white and who was coloured, and to separate those relegated to the category of coloured by virtue of *phenotype* and *heredity* and/or *origin* from white society. It was, unsurprisingly, through the appointment of the Wilcocks Commission and its findings that the first secular formations of what would become apartheid took place.⁴⁰

³⁴ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 34.

³⁵ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 33.

³⁶ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 35.

³⁷ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population*, 2.

³⁸ Hendrik Verwoerd, Gawie Cillie and H.P. Cruse (Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 94).

³⁹ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 464.

⁴⁰ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 464.

In the aftermath of this Report, D.F. Malan, who had emerged as leader of the Purified National Party (PNP), declared that the only solution to the poor white problem was to implement segregation.⁴¹ Malan had broken away from the National Party in 1933, in opposition to Hertzog's decision to merge the NP with Jan Smut's South African Party (SAP) to form the United Party. On Malan's part, the establishment of the PNP marked a turn towards a more radical Afrikaner nationalism.⁴² He believed that Hertzog had diluted the Afrikaner cause by joining forces with political parties that had historically catered to the interests of English-speaking whites – the Labour Party in 1924 and the SAP in 1933.⁴³ The establishment of the PNP also marked a shift in Malan's approach to the coloured question. While still in the NP, Malan supported Hertzog's 'coloured policies', largely premised on the notion that,

It would be very foolish to drive the Coloured people to the enemies of the Europeans—and that will happen if we expel him—to allow him eventually to come to rest in the arms of the native.⁴⁴

According to Hertzog, coloureds shared European values and culture and thus should not be separated from white society. At the very least, this was the discourse Hertzog used to win coloured votes in the Cape in the 1924 general elections. Through a coalition with the Labour Party, the National Party won the election with substantial coloured support.⁴⁵ Almost immediately after this election, Hertzog implemented the Civilized Labour Policy in which “labour rendered by persons whose standard of living conforms to the standard generally regarded as tolerable from the European standpoint” was to replace ‘uncivilized’ labour, rendered by ‘less developed’ and ‘barbarous’ peoples. Implemented largely as a response to the

⁴¹ Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 142.

⁴² Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A history of South African 'Coloured' politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 159.

⁴³ Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa – A Modern History*, 337; 334.

⁴⁴ J.B.M. Herzog cited in Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 5.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 119.

poor white problem, this labour policy effectively protected white workers from black competition through job reservation and created employment opportunities on the railways and the South African Iron Steel Industrial Corporation (ISCOR).⁴⁶ As promised by Hertzog, coloureds were incorporated into this policy theoretically – based on their ‘shared European values and culture’ – but in practice, only whites benefitted. For instance, on the railways, the increase in white labourers far outpaced that of coloureds, and coloureds hired to replace black Africans were paid less than their white counterparts.⁴⁷

While still a member of Hertzog’s party, Malan had supported his leader’s attempts to draw coloureds into the white mainstream – if only politically in order to secure their vote. However, when Malan formed the PNP, the party sought tighter forms of segregation between whites and coloureds. A United Party pamphlet from the 1948 elections provided comment on Malan’s change of policy:

[s]trangely enough, prior to 1919, the Nationalist Party and the present leader of the “purified” Nationalist Party, Dr. Malan, were the strongest protagonists of equal political rights for the Malays and the Coloured people. The present-day attitude, or policy, of the Nationalist Party leaders dates only from the time when they broke away from the late General Hertzog...⁴⁸

It was Malan’s commitment to Afrikaner nationalism and the plight of the poor whites that dominated his agenda, and in turn, shaped his policies towards coloureds.⁴⁹ Indeed, Malan took great care to position the NP as the party for the poor whites. He not only carried this concern

⁴⁶ Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders, eds., *South Africa – A Modern History*, 5th ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 301.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 133.

⁴⁸ “The United Party, The Natives and the Coloured People”, ARCA, Cape National Party Collection, PV27, 11/3/1/1/1, 1.

⁴⁹ Lindi Koorts, *D.F. Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014), 309.

into his new party, but the poor white question had been one of his priorities since before his entry into politics.

In 1913, Malan took a position as minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Graaff-Reinet – in the Cape Colony. Although he had been informed of the town’s large poor white population before his arrival,⁵⁰ Malan was shocked to discover that they lived alongside coloureds in a neighborhood nicknamed, ‘The Black Horde’. His house calls to these white families revealed “a tale of *degradation* that worsened with every generation.”⁵¹ Some of these families were related to prominent Afrikaners, but their children often played with the children of the coloured neighbors and at times were absorbed into the coloured community through marriage. Malan sought urgent assistance to rectify what he saw as an alarming state of affairs.⁵² Together with a member of the town council, he called white residents of the town to a public meeting. Malan believed that the only solution was to proclaim ‘The Black Horde’ a coloured area and to forbid whites from buying land or occupying houses in this neighborhood. Coloureds, in turn would not be allowed to buy or occupy land in the white neighborhood. This scheme was directed at the transferal of property: when a white family decided to sell their house in the coloured neighborhood, they would have to sell it to a coloured buyer and then move to the white area. Malan believed that in time, this situation leading to Afrikaner ‘racial degeneration’, could be rectified, allowing the poor whites to be ‘rehabilitated’ in part by living among their ‘own kind’.⁵³

⁵⁰ Koorts, *D.F. Malan*, 104-105.

⁵¹ Koorts, *D.F. Malan*, 108.

⁵² Koorts, *D.F. Malan*, 109.

⁵³ Koorts, *D.F. Malan*, 108.

When Malan explained this plan to the white residents of Graaff-Reinet, they gave him their enthusiastic support. With the backing of these residents, Malan made representations to the town council. While the town council agreed with the merits of the case, only the central government had the power to enforce residential segregation between whites and coloureds. Malan was forced to abandon his campaign at this time, but would subsequently prioritize the upliftment of poor whites by means of separating coloureds from white society in his political career.⁵⁴

A week before the 1938 election, Malan held a meeting in Stellenbosch where he outlined his policy of segregation to huge applause. Segregation, according to Malan, was the solution to the all-consuming colour question and the poor white problem.⁵⁵ Separation was necessary because whites – Afrikaners in particular – and coloureds were so alike.⁵⁶ The danger was not so much ‘uneducated’ or ‘uncivilized’ coloureds, or that points of contact could cause friction, but exactly the opposite. Coloureds in the Cape in particular had become more educated and it had become increasingly difficult for the less wealthy white residents of mixed neighborhoods to ‘maintain’ themselves as whites.⁵⁷ On this basis, Malan and his PNP made total political and social segregation between all blacks and whites a central part of their campaign in the 1938 general elections, and pressed for legislation to prevent sexual relations between whites and all non-whites.⁵⁸ Indeed, the question of mixed marriages was central to the

⁵⁴ Koorts, *D.F. Malan*, 108.

⁵⁵ *Die Burger*, 13 May 1938.

⁵⁶ Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 180-181.

⁵⁷ Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 183.

⁵⁸ For his own part, Malan abhorred mixed marriages. During a trip to then Rhodesia in 1912, he was disconcerted by the number of mixed marriages that he saw. In Bulawayo, he was shocked to discover that three white children were taken in by a coloured family since the DRC’s orphanage had no room for them. Malan was so vehemently opposed to this living situation that he moved the white children from a comfortable home, to a small corrugated-iron structure in the backyard of the parsonage where he stayed. Koorts, *D.F. Malan*, 91-92.

PNP's election campaign – geared towards the protection of white womanhood from the potential dangers of miscegenation.⁵⁹ This 1938 election campaign also coincided with and was shaped by the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek, which along with the growth of Afrikaner cultural organizations and its accompanying surge of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s, was crucial to demarcating racial boundaries that would constitute the Afrikaner *volk*. Indeed, the following year, in a House of Assembly Debate, Malan stated that,

The colour question and its solution is at the root of the poor white question...the solution of the colour question affects the ideal of the white race in SA. It affects the desire, the fixed desire, of the European race to remain a purely white race in the country and to protect itself as such.⁶⁰

It is thus not surprising that the mid-to late 1930s would see the 'problem' of miscegenation being pushed to the fore of political debate – precisely because the very existence of coloureds implicated Afrikaners in the miscegenation⁶¹ and threw into doubt the 'purity' of the *volk*.

Marriage records from the Anglican Church also indicate that there was decline in interracial marriages in Cape Town in the late 1930s, which is attributed to two interrelated factors: the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the poor socioeconomic conditions of urbanising Afrikaners in the early twentieth century (constituted by the state as the 'poor white' problem).⁶²

On the eve of the 1948 elections, Malan's Party – by then known as the *Herenigde Nasionale Party* (HNP) – appointed its own commission of inquiry into the state's existing policies of segregation at the time. Known as the Sauer Commission (1947), the report stated that

⁵⁹ Jonathan Hyslop, "White Working-Class Women and the Invention of Apartheid: 'Purified' Afrikaner Nationalist Agitation for Legislation against 'Mixed' Marriages, 1934-9," *Journal of African History* 36, no.1 (1995): 57; 59.

⁶⁰ House of Assembly Debates, 22 March 1939, col. 2141

⁶¹ As acclaimed novelist J.M. Coetzee put it, "(b)ut if bastardization, the mixing of races, is a sin against Creation, is white-led South Africa, with a "bastard" Coloured population numbering millions, not implicated in the sin from its beginning?" J.M.Coetzee, "The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-)," *Social Dynamics*, 17, no. 1, (1991):9.

⁶² Johan Fourie and Kris Inwood, "Interracial marriages in twentieth-century Cape Town: evidence from Anglican marriage records," *History of the Family* 24, no.3 (2019): 631.

the HNP's policy of apartheid was, first and foremost, aimed at upholding the white population as a 'pure' race, through the complete elimination of *rassevermening* ("race-mixing", ie. miscegenation) between 'Europeans' and 'non-Europeans'.⁶³ Even before laying out the proposed policy towards black Africans, the report stipulated its 'coloured policy'. While constituting coloureds as a separate group – to be separated from whites socially ("*apartheid op 'n maatskaplike gebied*" – apartheid on a social level) – the 'coloured policy' makes special mention of prohibiting marriages between whites and coloureds to prevent "*verbastering*".⁶⁴ The specific use of this term, translated into English as 'bastardisation', speaks to both the supposed illegitimacy of coloureds' origins, as well as the racial debasement/degradation represented by miscegenation. What this suggests is that although the political imperative to separate coloureds from white society was also about constituting them as a social group, the coloured question primarily took the form of a biological question at this time.

By the 1948 elections, Malan's campaign was not only hinged on the total segregation of coloureds from white society in every sphere of life, but also on legislation to ban all marriages between coloureds and whites, segregate all public amenities, place coloureds attending white universities in a separate coloured university, and enforce compulsory residential segregation. Coloureds in the Cape – the only part of the country where coloureds still had the vote – would be removed from the common voters' roll and would in future, be placed on a separate voters' roll, in which they could be allowed to elect three white members of parliament to represent their political interests.⁶⁵ In return for their social and political segregation, Malan's party – by then simply known as the NP – promised them that it would encourage the development of coloured

⁶³ Herenigde Nasionale Party, "Verslag van die Kleurvraagstuk-Kommissie van die the Herenigde Nasionale Party", 1947, 1.

⁶⁴ "Verslag van die Kleurvraagstuk-Kommissie", 5.

⁶⁵ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 245.

businesses and job opportunities in predominantly ‘coloured areas’ – the Western Cape in particular. In addition, coloured workers in the Western Cape would receive protection from ‘unfair competition’ from black Africans, and training facilities would be established for coloureds to prepare them for employment in the fields of work suited to ‘their nature and character.’ The Afrikaner newspaper *Die Burger* explained that the NP’s policies would replace political equality of coloureds with whites – promised by other parties but never delivered – with increased economic opportunities within the framework of separate development.⁶⁶

Following the NP’s victory in the 1948 election, it passed the Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) – aimed specifically at preventing miscegenation. In contrast to the existing Immorality Act of 1927, which outlawed sex between whites and black Africans, the 1950 Act was amended and expanded to prohibit sex between whites and coloureds. The Mixed Marriages Act prohibited marriage between all “Europeans and non-Europeans”, relying on the “presumptions of race from appearance”⁶⁷ (ie. *phenotype*).

In addition to this legislation, the newly elected party passed the Population Registration Act (1950), in which it defined a coloured person as

... a person who is not a white person or a native. A native means a person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe in Africa. And a white person means a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as, a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person (Statutes, 277).⁶⁸

By drawing attention to the fact that a person who is “generally accepted as a coloured person” could, in fact, in “appearance be white”, this Act spoke to the factors that necessitated its passing

⁶⁶ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 246.

⁶⁷ Prohibition of Mixed Marriages, Act no. 55 of 1949.

⁶⁸ Reddy, “The politics of naming,” 74.

in the first place: the impossibility of establishing who was white and who was coloured.

Together with the Mixed Marriages Act, it would attempt to curtail both miscegenation, as well as the existing process of ‘passing’.

Smuts, leader of the United Party, made a plea for the NP to abandon their plan to classify coloureds. He pointed out that the Wilcocks Commission had found it impossible to distinguish between whites and coloureds. In the House of Assembly, he stated, “[d]on’t meddle with this thing, because it touches things which run very deep in this country.”⁶⁹ He regarded the Population Registration Act as an attempt to classify the unclassifiable and remarked that “one had only to walk the streets of Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula to realise that it was practically impossible to draw a line – the colour gradations were so gradual and infinite.”⁷⁰

Along with the passing the Group Areas Act (1950), all of these forms of legislation would attempt to separate coloureds from white society *biologically*. The coloured question was thus first and foremost, articulated as a *biological question* through the state’s discursive shift from viewing coloureds as colonial subjects with unique and special features in the first few decades of the twentieth century, to the emergence of the poor white problem and the constitution of coloureds as products of miscegenation threatening to dilute the purity of the *volk* by the late 1930s.

The Coloured Question as a Western Cape Question

The Western Cape was the region where those constituted as coloured – through phenotype and origin – were largely concentrated. According to the 1904 census, of the total 444,991 identified

⁶⁹ House of Assembly Debates, 1950, col. 2534

⁷⁰ House of Assembly Debates, 1949, col. 6177, cited in Giliomee, *Always Been Here*, 180-181.

as coloured, over 80 percent lived in the Cape Colony, and mostly in the Western Cape.⁷¹ In the 1937 Wilcocks Commission Report, the commissioners stated that “by far the greater portion of the people falling under this interpretation have always been, and still are, inhabitants of the Cape Province, whence the term ‘Cape Coloured.’”⁷² According to the commission’s 1936 population estimates, 88.8 per cent of the coloured population was concentrated in the Cape Province – the majority of whom lived in Cape Town.⁷³ However, it was not merely the concentration of coloureds that situated the coloured question *epistemologically* in the Western Cape. It was this region where the ‘origins’ of miscegenation in South Africa have been located discursively, where the term ‘poor white’ had first been used, and also where the key expertise in the commissions of inquiry of the 1930s stemmed.

Both the Wilcocks Commission and the Mixed Marriages Commission attributed the origins of miscegenation in South Africa to the Western Cape, and more particularly, to the arrival of European settlers in Cape Town and their liaisons with slave women.⁷⁴ For instance, the Report of the Wilcocks Commission stated that miscegenation originated through “slaves that were brought to the Cape in the 17th and 18th century,”⁷⁵ while the commissioners of the Mixed Marriages Commission argued that miscegenation began with “the establishment of the first European Settlement by Johan Van Riebeeck, which arrived at Table Bay with a small fleet of sailing ships in April 1652” and through the “illicit intercourse and... marriage between European males and coloured females...”⁷⁶ The historiography of the 1930s too, conceives of the coloured question as one that inherently stems from the Western Cape – as the biological home

⁷¹ Giliomee, *Always been here*, 76.

⁷² *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union*, 10.

⁷³ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union*, 10-11.

⁷⁴ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 4.

⁷⁵ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union*, 7.

⁷⁶ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 4.

of the coloured population, brought about through miscegenation between Europeans and their colonial subjects. J.S. Marais' *The Cape Coloured People* (1652-1937), as the title suggests, describes coloureds residing in the northern provinces (Orange Free State and Transvaal) as having come "originally from the Cape either in the days of the Voortrekkers or subsequently: and to them the term *Cape* (my emphasis) Coloured is also applied."⁷⁷

Although white poverty was also seen as a social problem in other parts of South Africa, especially the Transvaal, it was in the Western Cape where the term 'poor white' was first used and where the 'poor white' problem had first been identified. For instance, the first poor white conference was held in Stellenbosch in 1893. In addition, one of the commissioners, E.G. Malherbe – a graduate from Stellenbosch University – had proposed the poor white problem as a topic of investigation to Dr. Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation, based on his own experiences with woodcutters in the Cape, George and Knysna in particular.⁷⁸ The 'poor woodcutter' in this region of the Cape was one of the 'types' of poor whites identified in the findings of the Carnegie Commission.⁷⁹ It was also in the Cape where local authorities voiced concern over the inability to distinguish between poor whites and coloureds. For instance, in the Report of the Mixed Marriages Commission, the commissioners pointed out that it was specifically in Cape Town that "the difficulty of distinguishing between slightly coloured persons and persons of unmixed European extraction is acknowledged."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Marais, *The Cape Coloured People*, vii.

⁷⁸ E.G. Malherbe, "The Carnegie Poor White Investigation: Its Origin and Sequels," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 9, no. 2, June 1973, 87.

⁷⁹ Report of the Carnegie Commission: Joint Findings and Recommendations of the Commission (Stellenbosch: Pro-Ecclesia, 1932), vi.

⁸⁰ *Report of the Commission of Mixed Marriages*, 1.

It was also by way of a largely Cape-based constituency that defined the coloured question as a *biological question* and sought a solution by calling for (and subsequently implemented) the separation of coloureds from white society. For instance, the Cape National Party constitution articulated a clear political imperative to separate ‘coloureds’ from whites biologically, in conversation with the discourse of miscegenation in the commissions of inquiry of the late 1930s. In the constitution of the Cape NP in 1933, for instance, there is a clear articulation of the need to maintain strict segregation between whites and ‘natives’ through a policy of “Kristelike voogdyskap” (Christian trusteeship).⁸¹ By 1940, however, the Cape NP’s constitution articulates its coloured policy for the first time – and specifically in relation to the 1939 Report of the Mixed Marriages Commission. More specifically, this constitution stated that, “[m]et die verskyning van die ‘Verslag van die Kommissie oor Gemengde Huwelike, 1939,’ het die Kleurvraagstuk ongetwyfeld ’n nuwe stadium bereik, wat beluidsformulering in seker rigtings makliker en wat die daarop gegronde asksie meer dringender maak” (With the appearance of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Mixed Marriages, 1939, the colour question has undoubtedly reached a new level, which makes it easier to formulate policy in particular directions and makes sound action more urgent).⁸² This observation was accompanied by the strong recommendation⁸³ for the Party to extend its prohibition of mixed marriages to include coloureds and to make the existing laws around interracial sex between whites and black Africans inclusive of coloureds.⁸⁴

The Cape NP’s dominance over the party at this time had a significant impact on the policies of HNP – subsequently the NP – as a whole. For instance, in a policy pamphlet titled,

⁸¹ Die Nasionale Party van die Kaapprovinsie, *Program van Beginsels and Konstitusie* (1933), 10.

⁸² Die Nasionale Party van die Kaapprovinsie, *Program van Beginsels and Konstitusie* (1940), 19-20.

⁸³ The actual text states “dring hy aan” – “dring” meaning to “press” or “push”.

⁸⁴ Die Nasionale Party van die Kaapprovinsie, *Program van Beginsels and Konstitusie* (1940), 20.

“Apartheid en Voogdyskap: kort opsomming van HNP beleid” (Apartheid and Trusteeship: a short summary of HNP policy), the HNP first outlined its policy towards coloureds, stating that they formed a separate group between whites and black Africans and that the principles of separation must be brought about through residential segregation, and segregation of public transportation, places of recreation and places of employment. In another election pamphlet, D.F. Malan, as head of the National Party, provided a short summary on party policy. Titled, “Nasionale Party se Kleurbeleid” (The National Party’s Colour Policy), the position towards coloureds is also stated first, with a clear articulation of the intention to prohibit mixed marriages.⁸⁵ In an English election pamphlet for the NP, one of the first “apartheid measures” it outlined is to implement the recommendations of the Mixed Marriages Commission – barring coloureds from marrying whites.⁸⁶

The coloured question also emerged very clearly as a Western Cape question by way of the experts drawn together for two of the key commissions on the 1930s. Experts of both the Carnegie and Wilcocks Commissions were largely drawn from institutions in the Western Cape. A central figure in these two commissions and in the Mixed Marriages Commission was R.W. Wilcocks – a professor of psychology at Stellenbosch University and Vice-Chancellor from 1933 to 1954. Wilcocks compiled the psychological report of the Carnegie Commission and assembled the team of experts for this commission.⁸⁷ Other experts from the Western Cape included J.F.W. Grosskopf, a professor at Stellenbosch University who served on the Carnegie Commission, as well as Stellenbosch professors Verwoerd, Cilliers, and Cruse, who gave testimony before the 1937 commission. Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman also served on the 1937

⁸⁵ “Nasionale Party se Kleurbeleid” ARCA, Cape National Party Collection, PV27, 11/2/1/1/4, 2.

⁸⁶ “It is for the People to Decide: The Colour Policy of the National Party” ARCA, Cape National Party Collection, PV27, C2/19/1/1.

⁸⁷ Malherbe, “The Carnegie Poor White Investigation,” 88.

Wilcocks Commission. As the president of the African Political Organisation (APO), Aburahman worked from his political base in the Western Cape to defend and protect coloured citizenship across the country.

Conclusion

Although the coloured question was first formulated as a *biological question*, tied to the coloured category's biological essence and articulated through a growing state discourse on miscegenation, it would by the 1960s, increasing come to be articulated as a *social question*. More specifically, the coloured question would no longer be solely articulated through a discourse of miscegenation, but through a growing body of disciplinary knowledge that no longer saw coloureds as a biological threat to the *volk* (since this threat was resolved legislatively), but as a social problem in need of resolution. As this question moved from the discursive space of the biological to the social, it would also shift away from the epistemological space of the Western Cape, to the Transvaal. This was in large part, due to the ascendancy of the Transvaal National Party in the 1950s and the accompanying shift in the ruling party's political weight from the South to the North, as well as the geographical relocation of the NP's thinktank, the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) from Stellenbosch to Pretoria.