The Half-Life of Apartheid: How South Africa's Segregated Past Impedes a United Future

Brindley Fortuin investigates how the segregation of apartheid South Africa contextualises contemporary racial distinctions and continue to factor in present day race relations.

In 2017, the appointment of a black headmistress at Klipspruit West High School in Soweto, South Africa was met with protests from several parents. These protests can be firmly situated within the historical context of apartheid: they highlight the unfortunate fact that racial categorisations which informed legislation, spatial planning, policing, and the distribution of resources in South Africa under apartheid have endured through the 1994 transition to universal suffrage up to the present day. Similarly, the tensions between racial groupings which characterised race relations under apartheid have survived and embedded themselves within post-apartheid racial identities and lived experiences.

The issue of race in South Africa is a deeply layered and multi-faceted phenomenon. Biological conceptions of race which were prominent in colonial thinking from 1652 to 1880 decisively shaped the attitudes of apartheid, which was initiated by the National Party (1948-1994), originally an Afrikaner nationalist party. During the period of apartheid, South African society was formally and officially divided along racial lines, with the White population holding all political, economic, and social power on the basis of their asserted racial superiority. The majority Black population of South Africa was placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, with Coloured and Asian people falling in the middle. The position of Coloured people in the middle of the hierarchy often meant they received preferential treatment, relative to that of Black people, in terms of access to the state and social standing. In order to understand the current racial tensions experienced by Black and Coloured citizens of South Africa, one must place them within historical constructions of race. It is clear that an entrenched historical and political divide persists in South Africa, and it seems to create hostility between the nation's Coloured and Black communities even today. The persistence of this hostility even after apartheid highlights the need to interrogate race and racialised identity in South African society.

A broad literature engages with the nature of Coloured identity. For Zimitri Erasmus, 'Coloured' refers to those South Africans loosely bound together by historical precedents and forces, such as slavery and a variety of oppressive and preferential treatment during apartheid, rather than by common ethnic identity (Erasmus and Pieterse, 1999, 167-187). However, Neville Alexander, who was classified as Coloured, renounced and denounced the category as an apartheid racial category that had to be abolished (Alexander 1985, 51-52). Scholars such as Erasmus and Mohamed Adhikari very perceptively regard the conception of the label of 'Coloured' as transcending political categorisation and acknowledging that Coloured peoples do not exist within a specific socio-political racial category (Adhikari 2006, 468-469); they exist between two exclusive ones. This equivocal position of Coloured identity within the otherwise rigid racial stratification of apartheid South Africa merits an investigation of the dynamics of the apartheid conceptualisation of the category 'Coloured' and how such categories were integral to apartheid governance. The case of the protest at Klipspruit West High School provides a useful lens through which to view how the apartheid construction of race continues to seep into contemporary tensions between Black and Coloured communities.

During 1948, South Africa experienced a wave of heavily racialised, violent, and oppressive nationalism propagated by the National Party. Apartheid, as it is known, was built upon Afrikaner nationalism which believed in a God-given Afrikaner right to rule over South Africa. This political ideology was informed by

notions of white supremacy, Afrikaner Calvinism and anti-British sentiments exacerbated by the Anglo-Boer wars (Dubow 1992). When the National Party gained power, they formally enforced their apartheid policy of total segregation, espousing white superiority and black inferiority as one of the central pillars of the apartheid government. Part of the divide-and-rule strategy implemented by the apartheid government was racially categorising the 'non-whites', which would determine their access to citizenship, a privilege defined here as having equal access to the state, its public goods, and resources (Van den Berghe, 1966).

The 1950 Population Registration Act was key in the formal categorisation of racial groupings in South Africa. Built on various biological and socio-legal definitions of race inherited from colonialism, it created a colossal bureaucratic and political machine that produced a society stratified by race (Posel, 2001). The Act ensured that the entire population would register themselves as belonging to an ethnic group, and then issued them with a corresponding identity document (ibid.). This registration categorised people into biological and socio-legal constructions of race. Decisive biological determinants for racial classification included the curliness of hair, the proportions of the nose, and skin colour. Simultaneously, levels of education, area of residence, and common mannerisms became social indicators to supplement these official biological notions of race. The true parameters of the 'Coloured' category were ambiguous in that those within it could be classified as 'White' based on their class and social status (i.e. education, language) while also having the biological features of a Black person (i.e. texture of hair), or vice versa (ibid.). The socio-legal construction of race allowed for classification and reclassification exactly because of the ambiguous utilisation of racial markers and categorisations.

The process of reclassification illustrates the absurdity of racial classification in South Africa. It was informed by haphazard biological and socio-legal ideas of race. For example, Posel (2001,105) recounts that barbers would often be called to testify about hair texture in order to ascertain the curliness of hair and which race it could belong to. This convergence of such pseudo-biology with social conceptions of racial inferiority produced one's racial identity. In another instance, a Coloured person who is 'white-looking' and had a good education could be reclassified as White if their community would consider them as such (ibid.). Furthermore, reclassification works to illustrate how citizens could utilise ideas of race to subvert oppressive and restrictive racial classifications. This agency becomes important in understanding the power of race during apartheid and its implications for contemporary racial tensions. The difference between Black and Coloured people did not just become a legal distinction, but an observable fact – being one meant having measurably different physical features and an observably different social class from the other (ibid.). Forcible reclassifications and voluntary application for reclassification illustrates how apartheid, violently enforced, produced effectively distinguished but nonetheless 'perceived' White, Coloured, and Black populations.

The observable 'reality' of the differences between Black and Coloured people was heavily formalised and violently entrenched into the social and legal fabric of South African society. The Population Registration Act paved the way for the 1950 Group Areas Act which hierarchically allocated specific living, working, and public spaces according to race (ibid.). In any given city, White people were usually concentrated closer to the central business district, Coloured people to the periphery of the city, while Black people were forced to live in townships outside the city limits (Posel, 2001, 99-100). Black people were considered ideal for manual labour, whereas Coloured people were relegated to the service and manufacturing sectors (Ahluwalia and Zegeye, 2003, 254). These acts also created different levels of access to education, healthcare, policing, and other essential state facilities between White, Coloured, and Black people (Posel, 2001, 99-100). Expectations of personal safety, access to knowledge, and general quality of life became firmly rooted into ideas of race.

Any analysis of contemporary Black and Coloured relations cannot ignore the impact that apartheid had in creating a socio-political structure of inequality between Black and Coloured people. It is from this now-informal structure that historical racial tensions permeate into the lived realities of contemporary Black and Coloured communities. The past inequalities in accessing housing, jobs and a better quality of life across races has produced post-apartheid identity politics reminiscent of apartheid racial hierarchies. Therefore, race became not just biologically visible, but socially and economically apparent, constructing real lived experiences. The revocation of race as the legally determining factor in one's socio-political status did very little to address the informally entrenched place of race as an implicit social divider and, to non-whites, a barrier.

Klipspruit West High School is situated in Soweto, a township outside of Johannesburg originally demarcated for a predominantly Black population but which has experienced a growing Coloured presence in recent years (Macupe, 2017). The school has a 60 percent Coloured attendance, making it a predominantly Coloured school situated within a predominantly Black township (ibid.). This disparity created problems in the township when a Black woman was appointed headmistress of the school in 2017. The media reported that the parents of children attending the school started protesting the appointment of the Black headmistress, calling instead for the appointment of a Coloured head teacher. Much of this anger reportedly stems from the warrant that 'Coloureds deserve the opportunity too' (Makhetha, 2017). Reading further into their arguments, it was reported that the Coloured community of Klipspruit West felt marginalised within the broader politics of South Africa, echoing similar sentiments held by the greater Coloured community (ibid.). One of the most striking comments made by protesting parents was the claim that Coloured teachers related better to Coloured students as they know 'where they come from' (Macupe, 2017). These arguments are all racially charged and grounded in lived realities and social structures that still force people to consider race as the primary determinant of social relations and access to state resources – more than twenty years into South Africa's post-apartheid democracy.

Much like other remnants and reminders of inequality that have persisted after apartheid, racialised institutions have prevailed, mainly because these areas are still predominantly racialised in terms of population demographics (Erasmus and Pieterse 1999, 171). A Coloured person was not just considered biologically different from a Black person, but there existed a power relation between the two groups where Coloured people lived a marginally better material life than Black people. Here is where the case study becomes crucial in understanding this post-apartheid dynamic between Coloured and Black people. What at first sight might be considered a simple protest then becomes one of the many expressions of continued tension between Black and Coloured people in South Africa.

The protestors' arguments in Klipspruit reflect a deep-seated division between racialised communities which has its roots in both colonial and apartheid notions of race. Understanding the history of race allows us to challenge traditional assumptions of difference. An acknowledgement of the political and historical contexts that shape contemporary attitudes towards race relations is essential for recognising the complex ways that South African lives are racialised. The transition from apartheid was effective as a political tool but what the case study of Klipspruit West illustrates is the dire need for spaces in which racialised identities can be renegotiated and, one hopes, neutralised in their negative effects. The aggressive nature of apartheid has meant that racialised differences have become so ingrained and 'normal' that any challenge to them is met with resistance. Ideas of Blackness in South Africa must unpacked because the power dynamic between Black and Coloured persons is a historical and relational construction with negative effects for both groups. Until take the challenge of grappling with these concepts seriously, ideas of superiority, historically marginalised citizenship, structural inequality, and violence will remain part of our lived realities as Coloured people.

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