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**THE RISE AND FALL OF THE
WEBERIAN ANALYSIS OF CLASS IN
SOUTH AFRICA BETWEEN 1949
AND THE EARLY 1970S**

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This paper was inspired by Gavin Williams' repeated admonition to take Weber seriously, and my undergraduate students' reaction to my belated inclusion of Weber in lectures on class. Surely, they asked, Weberian ideas cannot have been ignored completely in South Africa. I am grateful to Gavin, Martin West, Margo Russell, Ken Jubber and Chris Saunders for comments, criticisms and suggestions.

The Rise and Fall of the Weberian Analysis of Class in South Africa between 1949 and the early 1970s

Abstract

The hegemony of Marxist approaches to the study of stratification in South Africa has obscured the prominence of Weberian contributions between the late 1940s and the early 1970s. Some of these Weberian studies focused on the nascent black middle class, paying particular attention to the importance of status. Others, influenced by the literature on the American South, used the concept of caste as an extreme form of status in analyzing the relationship between race and class in South Africa. Whilst flawed, these studies did address directly aspects of South Africans' everyday lives – and especially interactions – that the subsequent structural Marxists side-stepped and with which neo-Marxist social historians struggled. Since the end of apartheid, sociologists – and novelists – have returned to the study of everyday social relationships and perceptions of stratification, paying particular attention to status.

Marxist approaches to the study of stratification became hegemonic in South African studies during the 1970s. On the one hand, Marxist analyses of the political economy of South Africa in the Twentieth Century focused attention on the need of capital (especially mining capital) for cheap ('black') labour and the consequences of this for public policy.¹ On the other hand, a new generation of social historians – inspired especially by E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*² – examined the 'making' of South Africa's working classes.³ These 'structuralist' and 'humanistic' strands of Marxist scholarship

¹ See especially F. Johnstone, 'White prosperity and white supremacy in South Africa today', *African Affairs* 69 (1970); Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976); M. Legassick, 'South Africa: Capital accumulation and violence', *Economy and Society* 3 (1974); H. Wolpe, 'Capitalism and cheap labour power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid', *Economy and Society* 1 (1972); B. M. Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1979)

² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1963).

³ See, especially, C. van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914* (London, Longman, 1982).

were divided, deeply and sometimes acerbically, on matters of both methodology and theory,⁴ but they were united by a shared obeisance to Marxist texts and commitment to a broadly Marxist understanding of class, class formation and class conflict. By 1983, assessed Jubber, ‘something analogous to a Kuhnian “scientific revolution” had taken place’ in South African sociology, or at least in English-language universities,⁵ and a similar shift transformed historical scholarship.⁶

The triumph of Marxist approaches to stratification certainly crowded non-Marxist approaches out of the limelight and perhaps even from memory. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Marxist scholars of stratification themselves generally ignored rather than engaged with their Weberian predecessors. More recent accounts display the same neglect. Bozzoli and Delius, for example, imply that there was no ‘radical’ scholarship of value between about 1940 and the early 1970s.⁷ Saunders refers to the ‘liberal neglect of class’, and cites out of context a quotation from van den Bergh suggesting that class was irrelevant in South Africa.⁸ Crankshaw, in his quantitative analysis of the African ‘middle class’, ignores entirely prior Weberian work.⁹ Ally *et al.* dismiss quickly the ‘liberal’ scholarship as concerned with ‘attitudes’ only and for (supposedly) ignoring the broader structural context.¹⁰ Hendricks, who rightly bemoans the ‘amnesia’ of

⁴ M.Morris, ‘Social history and the transition to capitalism in the South African countryside’, *Africa Perspective* new series 1,5/6 (1987); T.Keegan, ‘Mike Morris and the social historians: A response and a critique’, *Africa Perspective* new series 1,7/8 (1989).

⁵ K.Jubber, ‘Sociology and its sociological context: The case of the rise of Marxist sociology in South Africa’, *Social Dynamics* 9,2 (December 1983), p54.

⁶ B.Bozzoli and P.Delius, ‘Radical History and South African Society’, *Radical History Review* 47/48 (Spring 1990), republished in J.Brown, P.Manning, K.Shapiro, J.Wiener, B.Bozzoli and P.Delius (eds), *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Saunders, 1988, 177-8. The quotation is: ‘social classes in the Marxian sense of relationship to the means of production ... are not meaningful social realities in South Africa’ (van den Bergh, 1965, 267). This is also quoted, similarly out of context, by Wolpe (1986, 112-13). The longer passage from which this is extracted is presented below. There is no entry for either Weber or caste in the index of Saunders’ book, notwithstanding his focus on the analysis of race and class, and its many references to Marxist scholarship.

⁹ O.Crankshaw, ‘Theories of class and the African “Middle Class” in South Africa, 1969-1983’, *Africa Perspective* new series 1,1-2 (1986); Crankshaw, ‘Changes in the Racial Division of Labour during the Apartheid Era’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22,4 (December 1996).

¹⁰ S.Ally, K.Mooney and P.Stewart (2003), ‘The state-sponsored and centralized institutionalisation of an academic discipline: sociology in South Africa, 1920-1970’, *Society in Transition* 34,1 (2003).

post-apartheid social scientists with respect to class,¹¹ himself suffers from amnesia insofar as he implies that the ‘revisionists’ of the 1970s were the first scholars to grapple with the issues of class and race.¹² In their recent book on *Class, Race and Inequality in South Africa*, Seekings and Natrass similarly overlook non-Marxist contributions to the study of class in South Africa prior to the 1970s.¹³

Yet South Africa has a significant and long history of non-Marxist scholarship on stratification. Between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, a wave of Weberian or quasi-Weberian scholars pioneered the study of stratification in South Africa.¹⁴ These studies explored the salience of status, though distinctions of ‘caste’, alongside the more economic relationships entailed in class. They tended to focus on the ‘middle classes’, in contrast to the emphasis on the working classes in the subsequent Marxist literatures. They also tended to focus on parts of South Africa less transformed by the industrial revolution than was the Witwatersrand. Some of these studies were conducted by scholars who were regarded as anthropologists rather than sociologists. Their research entailed ethnographic observation of social life, and they focused on the issues of culture, status and the everyday interactions between people. A Weberian approach first appeared in print in 1949, before blossoming in a series of studies researched in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the early 1970s, this approach came to an abrupt end with the rise of Marxist analyses – probably due to political as much as purely intellectual considerations. Whereas Marxist approaches to the study

¹¹ F.Hendricks, ‘Who owns the jewels? Perspectives on social class in South Africa’, in Tessa Marcus and Alexandra Hofmaenner (eds), *Shifting Boundaries of Knowledge: A view on social sciences, law and humanities in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006). See also J.Seekings and N.Natrass, *Race, Class and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005), pp.28-9.

¹² Hendricks does remind us that Govan Mbeki and Isaac Tabata were important antecedents to the 1970s revisionists. Saunders (*The Making of the South African Past*, chapter 13) and J.Simons and R.Simons (*Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, first published 1969, republished in 1983, London, International Defence and Aid Fund) pay careful attention to such early ‘radicals’.

¹³ Seekings and Natrass, *Class, Race and Inequality*; see also Seekings, ‘Theory and method in the analysis of class in contemporary South Africa’, paper presented at the annual conference of the South African Sociological Association, Stellenbosch (July 2008). None of Bozzoli and Delius (‘Radical history’), Hendricks (‘Who owns the jewels?’), Ally *et al.* (‘Sociology in South Africa’) and Seekings and Natrass (*Class, Race and Inequality*) mention *any* of the studies discussed in the body of this paper.

¹⁴ I do not discuss Weberian influences on other topics. On the application of Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic, for example, see R.G.Stokes, ‘Afrikaner Capitalism and Economic Action: The Weberian Thesis in South Africa’, *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1975).

of inequality meshed neatly with the ideological positions of the Communist Party and, from the mid-1970s, independent trade unions inside South Africa, Weberian approaches were more consistent with the social democratic or progressive liberal positions championed by the short-lived Liberal Party.

Whatever the reason, the marginalization of non-Marxist approaches and influences impoverished the study of stratification in South Africa. Different approaches to and concepts of class have value in the analysis of different aspects of stratification and inequality, as has been noted by the pre-eminent American neo-Marxist scholar of stratification, Erik Olin Wright.¹⁵ In a leading text on *Class and Stratification*, Rosemary Crompton writes similarly that ‘the way ahead in class and stratification analysis is to recognize the *de facto* plurality of conceptual frameworks and methodologies in the field’; ‘what is required is a combination of different approaches to class and stratification ... even though the theoretical underpinnings of these different approaches might appear to be incompatible’.¹⁶ The rediscovery of a Weberian tradition in South African has important consequences for the analysis of post-apartheid stratification – not instead of Marxist analysis, but alongside it.

The arrival of Weberian ideas

Weberian approaches to stratification seems to have penetrated into South Africa after the Second World War through two key individuals as well as the more diffuse influence of imported literature. The key individual in terms of research was Leo Kuper (1908-94) at the University of Natal in Durban. Kuper practiced as a lawyer in Johannesburg in the 1930s and served in the South African army in Africa and Italy between 1940 and 1946. After the war he studied sociology at the University of North Carolina in the USA and then at Birmingham University in the UK, before returning to Durban as Professor of Sociology in 1952. He was an active member of the Liberal Party. In 1961 he left South Africa for the USA. He was a prolific author, researching three major books in his short time in Durban. Another important figure was James Irving (1904-69), who gave his inaugural lecture as Professor of Sociology at Rhodes University in Grahamstown in 1949. Irving, a Scot, was steeped in Fabian socialism, although he apparently avoided party political commitment in South Africa. He wrote little but he was an inspirational teacher.

¹⁵ E.O.Wright (ed.), *Approaches to Class Analysis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.2.

¹⁶ R.Crompton, *Class and Stratification* (3rd edition, Cambridge, Polity, 2008), p.xvi.

The rise of Weberian scholarship in South Africa became possible only with the publication, in 1947, of Gerth and Mills' translation *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*.¹⁷ The volume included Weber's essay 'Class, Status, Party', which hitherto was only readily available in German (as part of Chapter 9 of his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, i.e. *Economy and Society*). Here Weber set out his understanding of class as rooted in economic interests but defined in terms of common 'life chances', by which he meant not only the procurement of material goods but also getting social recognition and inner satisfaction. Crucially, Weber understood that ownership of the means of production (and hence the opportunity to exploit non-owners) was just one possible basis for unequal life chances. Skills or credentials comprised another such basis. Weber thus divided the property-less population into two social classes, separating out the salaried and credentialed 'middle class' from the uncredentialed working class.

For Weber, property-ownership was not only one of several bases for class, but class itself was also just one of several possible bases for stratification. Weber distinguished between class and status (and, to complicate things, 'party' also). The class structure, comprising classes, co-exists alongside the status order, comprising status groups. Whilst class is based in economic interest, status concerns prestige and honour, and the deference and derogation associated with these. Weber suggested also that different lifestyles are associated with differential social status. Whilst the distinction might seem clear in theory, even Weber himself tended to elide class and status in practice. Moreover, he recognized that, if occupation is a major source of status, then there is likely to be extensive overlap between class and status. Technological and economic change had resulted in 'the class situation' becoming 'by far the predominant factor' in the determination of status, 'for of course the possibility of a style of life expected for members of a status group is usually conditioned economically'.¹⁸ However, Weber insisted that class and status was not the same thing. The 'typical American Boss', for example, may have economic power but not social honour. Insofar as they differ, status groups are more likely to serve as the basis of political action than are classes. Collective action on the basis of class requires class consciousness, which is less likely than status consciousness. Political divisions within the working class are particularly likely to reflect differences of status, rather than of economic interest.

In the extreme, differences of status within the 'status order' may become reified as 'caste'. A caste, according to Weber in an essay on India included in *From*

¹⁷ H.H.Gerth and C.W.Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.190.

Max Weber, is a special case of a closed status group, i.e. a status group with a membership restricted by descent or some other characteristic. The status distinctions between castes are maintained through ritual as well as convention (or law). Physical contact between higher and lower castes is seen as polluting, so that any such contact (and especially marriage) is prohibited or stigmatized. In ‘Class, Status, Party’, Weber suggested that caste divisions are typically framed on the basis of ethnic difference. Elsewhere in *Economy and Society* he discussed race and ethnicity in detail, including with respect to the American South. Weber – who had visited the USA in 1904 – understood society in the American South in terms of the desire of white Americans – and especially lower-class white Americans – to maintain an elevated status through demarcating racist castes:

The “poor white trash”, i.e. the property-less and, in the absence of job opportunities, very often destitute white inhabitants of the southern states of the United States of America in the period of slavery, were the actual bearers of racial antipathy, which was quite foreign to the planters. This was so because the social honour of the “poor whites” was dependent upon the social *déclassement* of the Negroes.¹⁹

Weber was drawn to view race (in America) in terms of caste precisely because he recognised that race was socially constructed (acknowledging the role of cultural difference in this).

Weber’s analysis of the American South was included in a part of *Economy and Society* that does not seem to have been widely available in South Africa until later, but was to exert an indirect influence in South Africa via the work of the American ‘caste-class’ school. The pioneer of this school, W. Lloyd Warner, argued that stratification in the American South entailed *both class and caste*.²⁰ Whilst there was no possibility of moving between castes (through either marriage or occupational mobility), there were limited opportunities for class mobility. However, caste was socially constructed. To say that race defined caste in the American South, as Warner suggested, was to point to the structural conditions that framed the construction of caste. Castes coexisted with classes, in that each caste comprised classes. He illustrated the relationship between caste and class diagrammatically (see Figure 1). Both the white (W) and black (N, for Negro) populations comprised upper, middle and lower classes (u, m and

¹⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Volume 1 (New York, Bedminster Press, 1968), p.391.

²⁰ W.L. Warner, ‘American Caste and Class’, *American Journal of Sociology* 42,2 (September 1936).

l), with the black upper class being objectively in a higher 'class' position than the white lower class, but constrained by the caste divide (AB).

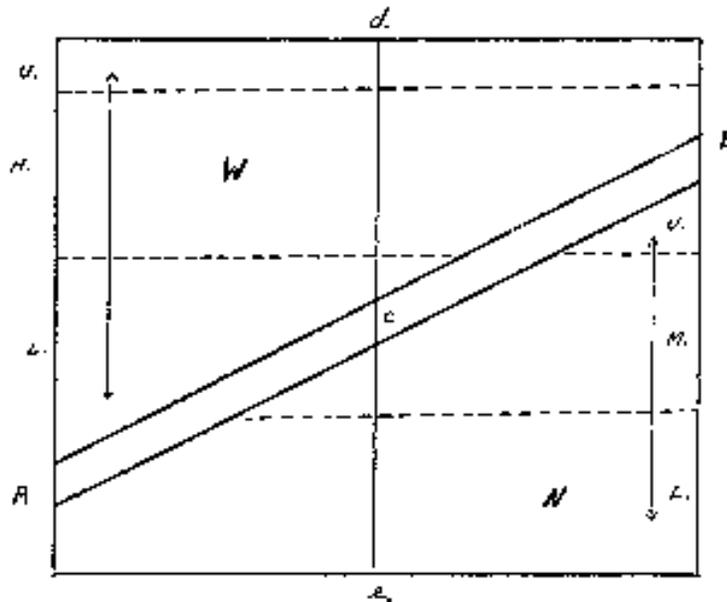


Figure 1: Warner's representation of caste and class.

John Dollard applied Warner's approach in an ethnographic analysis of a racially segregated town in the deep South, which he called 'Southerntown'. Dollard argued that 'caste has replaced slavery as a means of maintaining the essence of the old status order in the south. ... It defines a superior and inferior group and regulates the behaviour of the members of each group'.²¹ Dollard discussed in detail not only relationships between the castes, but also class and status differences within each caste. Dollard's study was followed by Davis *et al.*'s study of another Southern town, and then by Gunnar Myrdal's more sweeping overview in his mammoth – and widely influential – *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944.²² The caste-class school exerted a strong influence in South Africa, primarily through the works of Dollard and Myrdal. It was perhaps not coincidental that the demographic composition of Southerntown and the surrounding county were much as in South Africa: fully 70 percent of the population was black ('Negro') and only 30 percent white.

²¹ J.Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1937), pp.62-3.

²² A.Davis, B.Gardner and M.Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1941); G.Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1944).

Almost immediately, this scholarship on class and caste was subjected to a withering criticism by the Trinidad-born sociologist, Oliver Cromwell Cox. Cox made the semantic argument that ‘caste’ – as, he asserted, in its Indian variant – required value consensus. Cox overestimated how much consensus there was in India over the caste system, and underestimated the role of coercion (or the threat thereof) in maintaining the caste hierarchy there. In any case, it is unclear why value consensus was a necessary condition for the use of the concept of caste. Cox’s more robust argument was that America’s racial divisions were functional to capitalism rather than to the maintenance of white privilege and status.²³

The first scholar to consider the relevance of ‘caste’ in the South African context seems to have been the social psychologist I.D. MacCrone. MacCrone had earlier pioneered the use of social distance scales and other attitudinal data to analyse racial prejudice, which he attributed to conditions on the colonial frontier.²⁴ In an article in 1947, MacCrone used the phrase ‘colour-castes’ as a label to describe ‘racial’ groups, but without linking it to class.²⁵ He discussed the concept more fully in a 1949 publication. He agreed that many of the characteristics of the American situation – including ascriptive membership of hierarchically ranked groups, the impossibility of crossing to another group whatever one’s social class mobility, and prohibitions on inter-marriage – applied in South Africa also. However, he echoed Cox in suggesting that the concept of caste was inappropriate because it was not consensual. Despite this, MacCrone represented South African society in terms of a pyramid based on Warner’s, although with a flat boundary between the lowest part of the higher caste and the highest part of the lower castes.²⁶

²³ O.C.Cox, *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York, Doubleday, 1948).

²⁴ I.D.MacCrone, *Race Attitudes in South Africa: Historical, Experimental and Psychological Perspectives* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1937).

²⁵ I.D.MacCrone, ‘Reaction to domination in a colour-caste society: A preliminary study of the race attitudes of a dominated group’, *Journal of Social Psychology* 26,1 (August 1947).

²⁶ I.D.MacCrone, ‘Race Attitudes: An Analysis and Interpretation’, in Ellen Hellman (ed.), *Handbook on Race Relations in South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1949), pp684-6. The dotted lines appear to represent intra-racial stratification, and arrows the possibilities for downward white or upward black mobility.

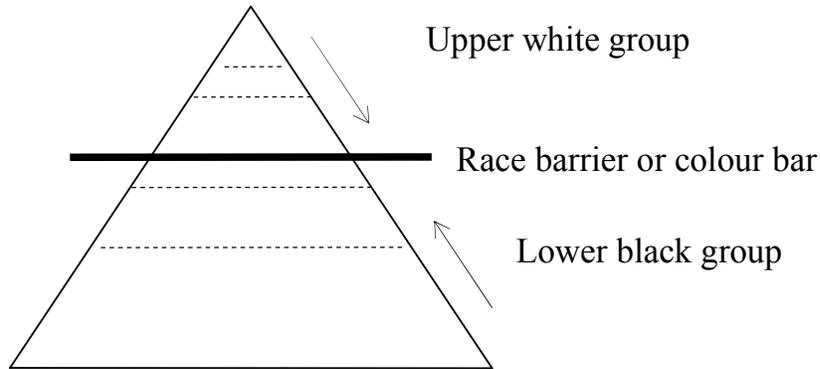


Figure 2: MacCrone's representation of 'caste' and the limits to mobility

Leo Kuper first considered carefully the relationship between caste and class in South Africa. Whilst still a student in North Carolina, Kuper published his first scholarly article, on whether black South Africans comprised a caste, proletariat or race (a subject with, he noted, important political implications).²⁷ He first defended the use of caste against the criticisms levelled by Cox in his very recent book. 'Race', in South Africa, conformed to Cox's insistence that caste was as much a cultural as a physical construction. The racial system in South Africa was not consensual, but Kuper rejected Cox's argument that caste required value consensus. He doubted that the lower castes in India accepted the Indian caste hierarchy as entirely legitimate and, in any case, there was no reason why caste should require value consensus rather than coercion from the more powerful castes.

Moreover, Kuper argued, caste was more important than economic class. Kuper acknowledged that there was a proletariat in South Africa: Black people either did not own the means of production, or had access to too little such productive property to subsist, and were therefore compelled to work for wages. Indeed, Kuper noted that the Chamber of Mines set its wages taking into account the value of rural production, so that it could pay less than the cost of reproducing its labour force.²⁸ However, Kuper argued, someone's class situation was less important than their caste position in determining their life-chances. White workers, despite their lack of property, benefited from and thus had an interest in maintaining the system of racial discrimination. For black workers:

²⁷ L.Kuper, 'The South African Native: Caste, Proletariat or Race?', *Social Forces* 28,2 (1949).

²⁸ This observation, made in successive official commissions of enquiry and by other scholars also, was later rediscovered by Wolpe ('Capitalism and cheap labour power').

It is by virtue of race that he is not free to sell his labour where he will, that he is subject to criminal sanctions in the carrying out of his employer's instructions, and that his efforts to organize for improvement of his conditions of service are hampered. The scale of remuneration for unskilled work is influenced by standards of uncivilized labor, which is specifically a race criterion. The opportunity to take up both semi-skilled and skilled positions and the educational facilities which would equip the worker for skilled occupations are again limited by racial factors, not by non-ownership of productive property. And, finally, the lack of productive property is itself a consequence of race criteria which determine the distribution of the available land in South Africa and rigorously control the right to acquire property.²⁹

In Kuper's analysis, black South Africans comprise a proletariat, but they do so because they have been proletarianised through racial discrimination. It is 'race' that 'secur[es] and reinforce[s] non-ownership of the means of productive property as a determinant of the class position of the Native worker', whilst leading the white worker to identify with white capitalists. 'The proletarianization of the Native is one of the forms in which race conflict is expressed'.³⁰

In this remarkable article, Kuper presents a clearly Weberian analysis on stratification in South Africa. He quotes from Weber (using *From Max Weber*) on both the character of caste and the definition of class as well as engaging directly with the American work on caste and class. Like Weber, he sees life-chances as being shaped by both class and status (the latter through caste in the South African case).

There is little evidence that Kuper's article attracted any attention inside South Africa. Shortly after, Sheila Patterson completed a rather superficial study of South African's coloured population, in which she echoed MacCrone's assertion that the concept of caste should not be applied to South Africa (or the American South) because it was not consensual. Nonetheless, Patterson focused on status, and her analysis of the status order in South Africa resembled closely the work of Dollard and Myrdal.³¹

²⁹ *Ibid*, p152.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p153.

³¹ S.Patterson, *Colour and Culture in South Africa: A study of the status of the Cape Coloured people within the social structure of the Union of South Africa* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

The African middle-class in South Africa

It was only in the late 1950s that researchers in South Africa began to conduct substantial empirical research on stratification using a broadly Weberian approach. The topic that attracted most attention was the emerging African middle class. This class was still small, comprising only 2-3 percent of the total African workforce in about 1950, and their earnings were rarely sufficient to support a style of life similar to that of even working-class white people.³² However, this was a class determined to differentiate itself from the African working class, amongst whom they usually lived because of racial segregation. This was also the class that provided political and ideological leadership within the African population, and to whom power was being transferred through decolonisation across the rest of Africa. In South Africa, this class provided the natural allies for liberal or social democratic white opponents of apartheid, whose opposition to racial discrimination stopped short of a commitment to socialism or communism. South African scholars seem to have been encouraged also by the publication in the USA in 1957 of another study in the caste-class tradition: Franklin Frazier's *The Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class*. Frazier argued that the combination of upward class mobility and racial segregation led to a class structure within the black population 'based upon social distinctions such as education and conventional behaviour, rather than upon occupation and income'. The black bourgeoisie, he wrote, was 'obsessed' with the 'struggle for status'.³³ A series of scholars conducted detailed studies of the African middle class in this political, social and intellectual context.

The pioneer was Kuper, who began research in Durban in 1958. His lead was followed by Mia Brandel-Syrier in the pseudonymous 'Reeftown' on the East Rand, and by Archie Mafeje and Monica Wilson in Langa (Cape Town).³⁴ A little later, Thomas Nyquist researched the African middle class in Grahamstown (Eastern Cape). These studies – and especially Kuper's – were important in breaking with anthropological scholarship that prioritized either

³² A.H.Cobley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (New York, Greenwood, 1990), p39.

³³ Franklin Frazier, *The Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (New York, The Free Press 1957), pp 20 and 236.

³⁴ At about the same time, E.A.Brett surveyed the attitudes of middle class African people in the Pretoria, Johannesburg and Vereeniging areas: 'African Attitudes: A study of the social, racial and political attitudes of some middle class Africans' (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, *Fact Paper* no.14, 1963). His survey focused primarily on attitudes towards white South Africans and the political situation, rather than issues of class and status within the African population, and is therefore of limited relevance to this paper.

ethnicity or rural-urban differences. Kuper and these other scholars of the new African middle classes anticipated the subsequent work of scholars of the new African working classes in engaging directly with the ways in which economic and social changes resulted not only in urbanization but also in class formation, and more specifically of the kinds of class formation that characterised the rise of ‘modern’, capitalist societies in Europe and elsewhere.

The anthropologists Wilson and Mafeje were the first to publish their study, and theirs unsurprisingly showed only a partial break with the prior concern with the experience of urbanization. They described the distinctions drawn in Langa based on age, migrant status and respectability. One section of the population considered themselves to be ‘decent people’.

Many of them are educated and essentially middle class, and some, indeed, suggest that all the ‘decent people’ are educated, but this is not strictly true. The educated people are referred to by others, somewhat derogatorily, as *ooscuse-me*, and accused of being aloof and conceited. They pride themselves on being respectably dressed, and gentle and polite in their manner. ... English is used in many situations among themselves, ... Those with highest status in Langa are those who have absorbed most of Western culture. For the *ooscuse-me* the reference group whom they seek to resemble is the white middle class.³⁵

Most were interested in current affairs, read newspapers and magazines, and attended church. ‘Less well educated than the *ooscuse-me*, but still respectable, is the middle-aged and elderly type known as *amatopi*’, mostly engaged in small business. The emerging class cleavages between decent people and others ‘complicated’ long-established ties and responsibilities to kin: ‘Probably most extended families include educated and uneducated, migrant and townsmen, but people tend to marry within their own class – this is particularly marked among the *ooscuse-me* – and some informants were quite frank about “dropping” relatives whose way of life differed very much from their own’. Wilson and Mafeje report that their informants differed in how they see the relative importance of wealth, occupation and education in determining social position. However, the markers of status seem clear: not just appropriate behaviour (honesty, sobriety) but also membership of sports or social clubs (as well as informal social cliques). Wilson and Mafeje cite Frazier’s analysis of conspicuous consumption among middle-class African-Americans, and suggest that this applies to Langa also. However, the middle class in Langa is still

³⁵ M. Wilson and A. Mafeje, *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1963), pp 26 and 145.

subject to racial discrimination and segregation. Thus, whilst ‘class distinctions plainly exist in Langa’, ‘they are flattened by the cleavage between the colour groups which, in a technical sociological sense [sic], form castes’ between which mobility is prohibited.³⁶

Kuper, in his *An African Bourgeoisie* (1965), focuses directly on the African middle class rather than (as Wilson and Mafeje) on urban African society as a whole. At the very start, he explains his choice of title and subject:

Bourgeoisie may seem a pompous word for the African professionals, traders, and senior government and municipal clerks who are the subjects of this study. It may also carry the quite misleading implication that there is a well-defined class structure in the African communities of South Africa, consisting of a bourgeoisie and a proletariat, and that by some mysterious process of enclosure, the bourgeoisie comprises all persons following the above occupations and no others. Nothing so definite, rigid or classificatory is here intended. ... I apply it specifically to the “upper” occupational strata of African society. ... I [also] want to suggest a struggle by rising groups against privilege resting on the traditional basis of birth, the aristocratic privilege of race. I want also to convey significance and a rather special status, based on the fact that these men belong to the circles from which, in other territories in Africa, many of the leaders are drawn, and in different circumstances they would furnish the presidents, the international statesmen, the ministers plenipotentiary, and the new men of wealth.³⁷

Kuper does include small businessmen in his ‘bourgeoisie’, but overall this is not a bourgeoisie in the Marxist sense of a class defined by its exploitation of workers through its ownership of the means of production. As Kuper himself discusses, ‘their property rights are weak, in the sense that not much sanctity attaches to the little property they own’. ‘Indeed’, he suggests, ‘*proletariat* might seem more appropriate for all Africans’, given that race (or ‘colour’) was ‘the main basis of stratification’.³⁸ However, he countered, ‘the races do not confront each other as solid antagonistic blocks. ... A common subjection has not stifled class differences within the African community, nor has the low ceiling placed on their achievements prevented Africans from drawing distinctions among themselves.’³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp 28, 84-5, 137, 142, 152.

³⁷ L.Kuper, *An African Bourgeoisie: Race, Class and Politics in South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965), p.ix.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp.4-5; italics in original; see also pp.63-4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp.5-7.

Whilst Kuper preferred to cite other studies in Africa, apparently seeking to develop an appropriately African sociology rather than ape European antecedents, he nonetheless presented a recognizably Weberian analysis. His 'bourgeoisie' included a range of salaried professional or white-collar occupations, whose privileges were derived primarily from educational credentials.⁴⁰ Kuper was especially concerned with status: was this class, he asked, 'simply an occupational classification, conveying no more than certain objective differences implicit in the occupational structure', or were there 'social correlates to this occupational classification' such as 'a distinctive style of life, with special patterns of association and claims to prestige made manifest in conspicuous consumption'? Kuper discussed at length how the status of this 'African bourgeoisie' was constrained by apartheid: an African man might go to university and become a lawyer, and enjoy heightened status within the African population, but he must still carry his 'pass', suffer 'routine police degradation', and remain subject to the battery of segregationist and discriminatory legislation. Such experiences of racial discrimination and racism were especially humiliating precisely because the members of the African bourgeoisie were being treated like 'ordinary' people. Kuper's research led him to conclude that class was viewed in terms of status rather than wealth or commercial achievement, that status meant an amalgam of education, 'culture' and respectability, and that differences in status were also linked to a lifestyle of 'conspicuous consumption'. Prestige was manifest in living in the right area, in ownership of a car and good furniture, in clothing and cosmetic appearance (especially hair straightening and skin lightening), in distinctive social activities, and in a general embrace of 'the new world of Western civilization'.⁴¹ Nonetheless, Kuper emphasized, the 'life chances' of the African bourgeoisie were circumscribed by 'race'. It was their combination of prestige (within the African population) and subordination, and exclusion (in the wider society) that resulted in a profound incongruity.⁴² Kuper documented at length their political opposition to apartheid, and it is perhaps the central message of the book that it was apartheid's restrictions of their life chances that pushed this 'class' into radical (or even revolutionary) politics.

The limits of Weberian influence on Kuper (as on Wilson and Mafeje) lie in the lack of clarity about the relationship between (occupational) class and status (or prestige). Kuper referred to 'class' and 'class distinctions' when, if he were to employ a fully Weberian approach, he would probably have used the terms

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.73.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp.xi, 119-21, 130-3, 74, 112-7, 131, 138.

⁴² See especially *ibid*, p.398ff.

‘status group’ and ‘status distinctions’. In eliding class and status, in combining the economic with the social and even aesthetic dimensions of stratification, Kuper’s analysis reflected the influence of American studies of stratification. However, he did not go as far as the predominant American approach in reducing class to status (and, in this respect, his analysis displayed similarities to the analysis being developed at about the same time by Pierre Bourdieu in the contexts of Algerian and French society).

Status and prestige also lay at the heart of Brandel-Syrier’s account of the ‘social elite’ of ‘Reeftown’. Indeed, her account emphasised snobbery even more than did either Wilson and Mafeje or Kuper. Unlike these prior studies, however, Brandel-Syrier moved towards a distinction between class and status. She distinguished her ‘social elite’ from an ‘occupational elite’ on account of their social status: ‘They occupy positions at the top of the social pyramid in Reeftown. They can claim a position of social superiority in the social life of the township’.⁴³ Brandel-Syrier found that this township elite had distinct tastes. They were contemptuous of ‘African culture’, drawing (selectively) on western culture:

The elite’s tastes in art and literature inclined towards Victorian standards. Furniture had to be heavy and ornate. Stories should have a moral; evil should receive punishment; and virtue should be rewarded. Dickens was a favourite. They also liked to read biographies of famous people – Napoleon, Catherine the Great, Hitler, Marx, Churchill and other figures in history. The interest here was in discovering why such individuals had achieved fame. What was their magic?⁴⁴

This aesthetic snobbery was, however, superficial. The elite feigned interest in western culture whilst rejecting African culture, with the consequence that the elite ‘lived in a cultural no-man’s land’ and suffered from deep anxiety.⁴⁵

Nyquist took the analysis of high-status social groups to its logical conclusion by allowing ‘the upper stratum of the African community’ to be defined by ‘the Africans themselves’. He polled a range of African people in Grahamstown to rank occupations by their prestige or status. Doctors ranked highest, and education was singled out as the most common basis of ranking.⁴⁶

⁴³ M.Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite: A study of social mobility in a modern African community on the Reef* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. xxv-xxix.

⁴⁴ Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p.92.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp.93-4, 61-2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.24.

... within each urban African community of South Africa there is an upper category of people designated as the “high ones”, the *abaphakamileyo*, by members of the community. This group ... forms a distinct stratum bound together by common characteristics and a high degree of interaction inasmuch as: (1) there is a consciousness of the existence of the upper stratum by the community; (2) there is a similarity of family background and family life; (3) members of the stratum have achievements in common which distinguish them from the rest of the community; (4) there are important bonds of association suggesting that the stratum has a kind of organic existence; (5) members hold attitudes in common which distinguish them from non-members; and (6) there is a binding network of social relationships. These urban *abaphakamileyo* are important as a reference group for other urban Africans.⁴⁷

However, Nyquist emphasises, along the lines of the previous studies, this group’s opportunities are limited by apartheid. ‘Status does not signify power, nor does it mean economic security. What status does mean is a high-ranking in a low-ranked community’. Nyquist discusses both the frustrations and alienation of this social group in the face of racial discrimination, and their feelings of superiority over less educated, ‘labouring people’. Elite men should marry educated women, who ‘know how to behave in front of people’: ‘One is able to attend functions with such a woman. She knows how to dress, how to introduce herself to people, how to discuss in meetings.’ An uneducated woman, in contrast, ‘will not fit in a high and educated society’. Similarly, high-status children should not play with ‘raw’ children from lower-status groups, because the latter would ‘have a bad influence’ and ‘spoil’ their characters. The elite ‘despise the uneducated people’, and complain that they ‘even swear’ during meetings.⁴⁸

This series of studies examined a social group whose growth reflected the transformation of South African society. Their focus on status reflected their concern, first and foremost, with social interactions, especially with respect to other ‘classes’ within the urban, black population. They suffered evident weaknesses. The relationship between class and status was never adequately explored, nor was there much consideration of the origins or causes of status. The focus was almost entirely on *men*. Women’s perspectives were neglected. These weaknesses notwithstanding, these studies provided an important foundation on which subsequent studies of class might have built.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp.4, 213, 232, 235.

Class and status outside of African townships

The most important studies of class and/or status distinctions focused on the urban African population, presumably because of their perceived political importance. However, there were some other, less notable studies of South Africa's Indian, coloured and white populations. None of these achieved the depth of analysis of Leo Kuper *et al.*... The analysis of the African middle class was matched only by analyses of caste in urban society as a whole.

Before any of the studies of the African middle classes had been published, Hilda Kuper published an anthropological study of the Indian population. The context for this was the general work done on the 'racial ecology' of Durban, by her husband and others,⁴⁹ not the subsequent work on class and status. Whilst Hilda Kuper did discuss class and status, her analysis was much less developed than the subsequent work on the black middle class. Hilda Kuper emphasised that the status distinctions associated with the traditional Indian caste system were declining in salience, such that previously prohibited inter-caste interactions and even marriage were now becoming acceptable. The divisions by religion, area of origin within India, and language as well as of traditional caste were giving way to new lines of class and status formation. In two chapters on the 'new South African Indian elite', defined as people 'of recognized pre-eminence', she discussed political, business, intellectual and 'sport and entertainment' elites, not members of higher castes. 'Social classes are now forming within the Indian community of Durban', she wrote, adding that too little 'of the basic research necessary for class analysis among South African Indians has been carried out', with the result that she could not go beyond an 'exploratory approach'.⁵⁰ She did note the tragically ironic point that, just as traditional caste was declining in importance within the Indian population, the apartheid state was exacerbating caste-like divisions between the white, Indian, coloured and black populations. There was no comparable scholarship among South Africa's coloured population at this time. Patterson's study failed to fulfil its ambitions. Carstens attributed stratification to status among the rural population of one of the coloured 'reserves' (Steinkopf) in

⁴⁹ L.Kuper, H.Watts and R.Davies, *Durban: A Study in Racial Ecology* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1958).

⁵⁰ H.Kuper, *Indian People in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, Natal University Press, 1960), p.44.

Namaqualand, north of Springbok.⁵¹ Only in the later 1960s did Martin West examine Port Nolloth, and he quickly expanded his study from the town's coloured population specifically to the population of the town as a whole, and hence from intra-racial to inter-racial relationships (see further below).

Status differences among white South Africans were also explored, most notably by Pierre van den Berghe as part of his study of the company town of Tongaat ('Caneville') in the sugar-cane belt on KwaZulu-Natal's north coast. The white population of Tongaat was stratified along the lines to be found in Europe or North America, 'except for the absence of a real proletariat' and the tendency to play down intra-white differences in the face of the majority non-white population. Nonetheless, he found that 'although it is considered in bad taste to make class-conscious remarks, in practice, minute distinctions of status are made'. The status order among white people in Caneville was largely determined by the corporate hierarchy.⁵²

The upper class consists of the top executive families, most of whom are university educated and steeped in the highly respectable, conservative English Natalian way of life. They all live in large, comfortable houses, perched on isolated hills in the pleasant rolling countryside of the sugar-cane fields. ... All executive mansions are surrounded by large, immaculately kept gardens... These little private domains are kept up by a staff of five or six servants and guarded by one or two large watchdogs. ... A university education is an important prestige symbol in the upper class... Of highest prestige value is a British university education at Cambridge or Oxford... Everything British, from tea services to monarch to clothing (but excluding liberalism) is praised in the typical more-British-than-the-British attitude of the natal English upper class. A South African accent, whether Afrikaans or lower-class English, is considered a colonial stigma. Houses are luxuriously but discreetly furnished with a studious avoidance of "knick-knacks" that could be considered in bad taste. Travel ranks high among the most important status symbols. ... Politically... it has become fashionable to claim allegiance to the ... Progressive Party, and to be willing to shake hands and drink tea with "clean Natives" at charity bazaars. ... The top executives all drive grey Mercedes motorcars (or are driven in them by chauffeurs), and

⁵¹ Patterson, *Colour and Culture*; P.Carstens, *The Social Structure of a Cape Coloured Reserve: A Study of Racial Integration and Segregation in South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁵² P.Van den Berghe, *Caneville: The Social Structure of a South African Town* (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1964), p.159.

there is a further minute status distinction between two models of Mercedes.⁵³

Van den Berghe goes on to describe lower-class white and (less insightfully) different classes within the Indian population of Tongaat. A few years later, in 1968-69, Van der Merwe found that there was a strong awareness of class differences within the white population among both Afrikaans- and English-speaking white elites. Asked to list what criteria distinguished class, almost all respondents pointed to occupation or income, but large minorities also pointed to education and prestige or status.⁵⁴

Van den Berghe's study of Caneville examined not only the status order among white people, but also stratification in the town as a whole. In this analysis – echoed in Martin West's study of Port Nolloth and subsequent analysis of South Africa generally by Van den Berghe and Kuper – inter-racial stratification was understood in terms of the impermeable boundaries of caste, which were seen in a Weberian way as an extreme case of status distinction. Van den Berghe explicitly identifies Weber as his source for separating out the political, economic and status components of social life – although, as he notes, these overlap considerably. He was not convinced by the Marxist insistence that 'power and wealth necessarily coincide'⁵⁵, pointed out that in South Africa, English-speakers held economic power and Afrikaans-speakers the political power. Van den Berghe's analysis of the economic structure was not couched in terms of exploitation, although he documented fully the deep inequalities in the town. He dedicated a separate chapter to 'the status system'.

If one adopts a minimum definition of caste as an endogamous, ascribed group into which one is born, out of which one cannot move (except by surreptitious "passing"), and which is ranked in relation to other similar groups, it is clear that the "racial" groups in South Africa and the United States are castes. Each of these colour castes is internally stratified into relatively permeable social classes, so that the stratification system can be described as a dual hierarchy of closed castes sub-divided into open classes.⁵⁶

After discussing the status systems within each racial group (or 'colour caste'), he concludes:

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp.160-3.

⁵⁴ H. Van der Merwe, 'Class derivations and perceptions of Afrikaans- and English-speaking elites', in Van der Merwe, M.J. Ashley, Nancy Charton and Bettina Huber, *White South African Elites* (Cape Town, Juta, 1974).

⁵⁵ Van den Berghe, *Caneville*, p.65, emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp.151-2.

The complexity of Caneville's status system surpasses, I believe, that of any community described in the sociological literature. ... In short, Caneville consists of three hierarchized colour-castes, each of which is further segmented horizontally and vertically according to a multiplicity of criteria that overlap only partly from one group to another. The general tendency is for the African and the Indian to develop an internal class system along Western lines and to discard traditional criteria of status. ... The end result of the process will presumably be a situation similar to the 'caste and class' system of the United States described by Myrdal, Dollard, Warner and others. To a certain extent, I have followed that 'caste and class' schema, but I have also shown that, in the present state of cultural heterogeneity in Caneville, that schema oversimplifies reality.⁵⁷

In the final chapter, he considers relations between these 'colour castes'. He documents the extent of segregation – imposed from above, by the white colour-caste, as he found when he and his wife were welcomed at a dance organized by Indian friends – and discrimination and outright racism.

A few years later, in 1968, Martin West conducted similar research in the fishing village of on Port Nolloth, on the Atlantic coast. West framed his analysis explicitly in terms of the American-inspired debate over caste and class.⁵⁸ He objected to the term 'colour-caste' on the grounds that the relationship between skin colour and caste was very imprecise. West argued that the relationship between caste and class varied according to one's vantage point. White people, he suggested, tended to think that there was a clear and impermeable barrier between the lowest class of white people and the highest class of coloured people; coloured people had the same view of the barrier between them and African people. However, higher-class coloured people considered themselves higher than lower-class white people, whilst higher-class African people considered themselves higher than lower-class coloured people did. West represented these alternative perspectives in a set of diagrams similar to MacCrone's. Figure 3 reproduces West's diagram representing the social structure from the perspective of coloured people.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp.192-3.

⁵⁸ M. West, *Divided Community: A study of social groups and racial attitudes in a South African town* (Cape Town, A.A.Balkema, 1971).

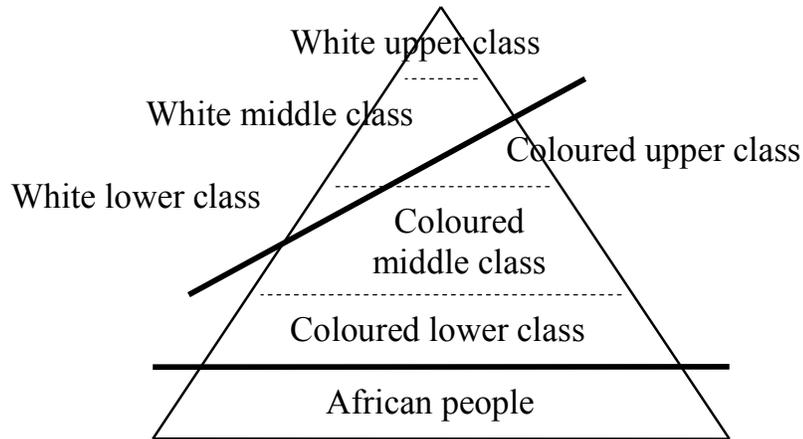


Figure 3: West's representation of the social structure from the perspective of coloured people

Subsequent to his study of 'Caneville', van den Berghe turned to South Africa as a whole. Whilst his basic analysis remained unchanged, he now seemed less certain about the conceptual utility of 'caste'. On the one hand, he wrote boldly that:

Society is compartmentalized into four main racial castes ... Other factors, notably linguistic divisions and social class, also contribute to social pluralism, but the ubiquity and increasing rigidity of racial barriers relegate these other factors to a secondary position. ... To be sure, there exist income and occupational strata within each of the four races, but, at the same time, there is a high correlation between socio-economic variables and race. Social classes in the Marxian sense of relationship to the means of production exist by definition, as they must in any capitalist country, but they are not meaningful social realities. Clearly, pigmentation, rather than ownership of labour or capital, is the most significant criterion of status in South Africa.⁵⁹

He sets out his understanding of caste – explicitly shaped by the American literature – as an endogamous group, hierarchically ranked in relation to other groups, and with membership determined by birth and for life. On the other hand, he described South Africa as being 'far too complex' to conform the American 'class and caste' model.

⁵⁹ P. van den Berghe, *South Africa: A Study in Conflict* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1965), p.267.

Each of the four colour-castes is internally subdivided and stratified according to criteria which differ from one group to the other. While there is a general tendency in all groups to develop social classes along Western lines, numerous other traditional factors continue to play an important role. Even when status is distributed according to Western class criteria, the standards of achievement are proportionately lower according to the position of the racial group in the colour-caste hierarchy. A middle-class African is, for example, not equal in status to a middle-class Coloured or White, because he belongs to a different “race” which is itself hierarchically ranked. Furthermore, the relative emphasis placed on the various criteria (such as wealth, education, and occupation) differs from one “race” to the other.⁶⁰

These complexities were not entirely absent from the American South. Whilst the concept of caste was flawed in the South African case, the flaws were generally ones shared with the American case.

The disappearance of Weberian concepts from the study of stratification

For a while in the 1950s and 60s, Weberian social science had a powerful presence in *some* South African universities. Rhodes, where James Irving taught, was one stronghold. In a retrospective account, one of Irving’s students recently recalled what the Sociology Department had been like then.

The Departmental approach under James Irving was of a broadly Fabian or British Labour party bent. We were schooled in the great early British social surveys of the poor by Townsend and Rowntree. We confronted the great work of Thomas on the integration of Polish peasants in the USA. In the tradition of British socialism at the time, Marx did not feature much. James Irving was not active in the political party sense. He was, however, very active in trying to foster institutions of civil society in black and coloured communities. This he saw as the essential foundation to social change, and the emergence of leadership structures. While the political route was more glamorous for students, Irving argued that the emergence of institutions of civil

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.72.

society would be a less vulnerable and more meaningful path to change.⁶¹

Among Irving's students were John Rex, J. Clyde Mitchell and T. Dunbar Moodie, all of whom went on to write studies steeped in a Weberian perspective. The Weberian presence was far from uniform, however. Martin West recalls a marked lack of *any* theoretical engagement at the University of Cape Town in the mid-1960s. His supervisor, Monica Wilson, recommended the work of Dollard and other American caste-class scholars because it was deeply ethnographic and avoided explicit theorizing. Student politics was in the doldrums, and none of the professors provided a theoretically-informed intellectual leadership.⁶²

This Weberian moment proved short-lived as well as geographically uneven. In the early 1970s, South African social scientists – both inside and outside South Africa – embraced Marxism. Weberian social science was eclipsed, totally and quickly. The death or dispersion of leading Weberians was clearly one factor in this. Irving died in 1969. Two years later, Leo Kuper emigrated (to the USA). Most of their students also emigrated. More importantly, they (and Kuper) generally turned to the study of other societies. John Rex wrote about race relations in Britain and elsewhere. Clyde Mitchell and Margo Russell wrote about other parts of Africa. Kuper himself turned to the comparative study of racially-divided ('plural') societies. Dunbar Moodie was the only one to continue writing about South Africa, and his work applied Weberian ideas to aspects of society other than stratification. The Weberian analysis of class and status was abandoned rather than debated, its strengths as well as its flaws simply set aside.

The key strength of the Weberian approaches was that, notwithstanding a lack of clarity in key details, they suggested that status distinctions coexisted with differentiation by occupational class – a point that was frequently overlooked when class analysis was reduced to its Marxist variant. The two key weaknesses of the Weberian approaches were the lack of detail on the status order and the lack of analysis of the underlying causes or origins of stratification.

The legitimacy of the status order was an issue in the debate on 'caste' on both sides of the Atlantic. Inferior status was imposed on members of the lower castes. As West wrote, 'Port Nolloth society comprises a hierarchy of three castes in which the dominant caste has decreed that the castes should be

⁶¹ James Christie, 'Social and Intellectual Trends at Rhodes in the Early Sixties and Seventies', *African Sociological Review* 9,1 (2005), p.146.

⁶² Discussion with Martin West, Cape Town, 13th October, 2008.

separated as far as is possible, and is powerful enough to enforce its decree without the consent of the other castes'.⁶³ The intra-racial status order may have been based on respect, prestige and deference, but the inter-racial order was based primarily on coercion – as was, of course, the inter-racial class structure, in ceilings were imposed on upward class mobility among African people and floors provided for downward mobility among white people. Scholars of South Africa dodged this in much the same way as their American counterparts, by fudging how the category of 'class' combined occupational class and status distinctions. The diagrammatic representations of the caste-class system thus conflated a consensual conception of status (encompassed in 'class') with a non-consensual conception in the form of 'caste'.

More importantly, the broadly Weberian scholarship had little to say about the origins of the class structure and status order. MacCrone had pointed to the frontier, but Kuper *et al.* kept quiet. This was important because it raised the question as to what kinds of social or economic change would be required to reduce or remove invidious and racist forms of status distinction. Whilst van den Berghe pointed to the deep roots of racist status distinction among white people in Caneville, other evidence pointed the other way. Kuper's student Margo Russell found that Indian and white neighbours coexisted amicably in a mixed residential area of Durban. This was a very subversive finding. In many of the neighbourhoods from which coloured or Indian people were removed under the Group Areas Act, white and coloured/Indian people had cohabited with few difficulties.⁶⁴ Indeed, segregationist legislation was introduced to prohibit inter-marriage, sexual relationships and residential mixing precisely because, if people were left to themselves, these forms of interaction were quite common! Insofar as the concept of caste as status had any meaning in South Africa, it was not that this concept was imposed from above by all white people, but that it was imposed on black, coloured, Indian *and* (where necessary) *white* people, by the state. Unfortunately, in many senses, further research along the lines of Russell's was rendered impossible by the implementation of the Group Areas Act. Many liberal activists thought that racial status distinctions could be set aside, primarily within the middle classes. Similarly, many Marxists – starting with Simons and Simons – hoped that black and white workers could and would find a way of overcoming racial difference and combining against the bourgeoisie (and Peter Alexander's work on the Second World War provides

⁶³ West, *Divided Community*, p.70.

⁶⁴ M.Russell, 'A Study of a South African Inter-racial Neighbourhood', M.Soc.Sci thesis, University of Natal, Durban (1961).

some evidence that this hope was not entirely far-fetched).⁶⁵ Racial segregation, imposed at least in part from above, prevented scholars from exploring just how far-fetched were these kinds of hope.

When Marxist sociologists began to dispute the ‘liberal’ interpretation of race and class, they generally did not engage directly with the work on class by sociologists and anthropologists, but rather focused on the arguments about apartheid and markets made by (selected) economists (such as Houghton, Hutt and Horwitz). The Marxists did not dispute that social interactions in towns like Tongaat or Port Nolloth – or Cape Town or Johannesburg – were organized along racial as well as class lines and that racial interactions entailed elements of a status order. Nor did they dispute that the attitudes or behaviour of, say, the African middle class should be understood in part through the prism of a status order within neighbourhoods populated by African people. Rather, they side-stepped around these issues, juxtaposing the Marxist emphasis on class (defined in terms of exploitation) with neo-classical economics and in particular the argument that apartheid was dysfunctional for economic growth (i.e. for capitalism).⁶⁶ The idea that class might concern who gets what, or that life-chances are determined by factors other than ownership of the means of production, was neither entertained nor disputed.⁶⁷

In constructing a powerful argument that (aspects of) racial segregation and discrimination were *functional* to capitalism, or at least of the politically dominant fractions of capital, the Marxists turned to a different body of evidence to the one used by their non-Marxist predecessors. The evidence presented for this functionality concerned not so much social interactions at the local level – as emphasized by Kuper *et al.* – but the organization of production, especially in the gold-mining industry. Marxist analyses shouldered aside neo-Weberian ones by switching attention from the neighbourhood to the workplace, from the middle classes to the working classes, from the complexity of social relationships in towns like ‘tri-racial’ Tongaat to the raw exploitation of black workers on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, and from the present to the past.

Some (at least) of the Weberian scholars were later willing to concur with the Marxists in the latter’s emphasis on exploitation. John Rex spelt this out in a

⁶⁵ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*; P.Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa, 1939-1948* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000).

⁶⁶ See N.Natras, ‘Controversies about Capitalism and Apartheid in South Africa: An Economic Perspective’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17,4 (1991).

⁶⁷ See Seekings and Natras, *Class, Race and Inequality*.

paper published in 1988 in which he defended his Weberian approach to the study of race in the face of Marxist attacks. He accepted that conflict between white and African people in South Africa

... resulted not primarily from perceived physical or cultural difference but overwhelmingly from the fact that whites were engaged in the exploitation of Bantu labour. If it is Marxist to say that these group formations, and the actions and forms of consciousness to which they led resulted from the differential relationship of the groups concerned to the means of production then my position was Marxist. Bantu workers typically worked in unfree conditions and because of the power controlled by whites had little control over the means of production, thus being subject to ultra-exploitation. Whites controlled the means of production or, if they were workers rather than entrepreneurs, were protected from ultra-exploitation by trade unions, by welfare provisions and, above all, by their control of what van den Berghe has called a '*Herrenvolk*' state.⁶⁸

However, he continued, there were several important respects in which South Africa deviated from the Marxist story. He doubted that capitalists controlled the state, and the privileges of white people – including white workers – had a real basis in military conquest and continued coercion. Kuper also had criticized the emerging Marxist approach to class as overly reductionist, in that it failed to recognize political and social factors driving stratification or to explain adequately the relationship between white and black workers.⁶⁹

The differences between neo-Weberian and Marxist approaches lay not in any denial among the former of the importance of class and exploitation, or any denial among the latter of the daily inequities of class and status within and between South Africa's racial populations. Rather, the differences lay in the Marxists' attribution of racial prejudice and division to the imperatives of capital accumulation. The Marxists would probably have disputed Van den Berghe's description of Caneville as a 'microcosm' of South Africa⁷⁰ not because they disputed that the town was unrepresentative of personal interactions in South Africa, but rather because such interactions were the symptom not the cause of structural exploitation and oppression. Marxists would probably have argued that his *description* of stratification there was no substitute for an analysis of

⁶⁸ J.Rex, 'The role of class analysis in the study of race relations: a Weberian perspective', in John Rex and David Mason (eds), *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.66.

⁶⁹ L.Kuper, 'Review of Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950', in *Race, Class and Power: Ideology and Revolutionary Change in Plural Societies* (London, Duckworth, 1974).

⁷⁰ Van den Berghe, *Caneville*, p.3.

why stratification took this racialised form. Wolpe correctly summarized Kuper's analysis that class coexisted with race, underpinning two separate systems of stratification, one economic, the other not, with racial differentiation being independent of class.⁷¹ But this, he wrote, was a 'reductionist' approach to status because it treated status as independent of economics.⁷² For the Marxists, racial differentiation was not independent of class, but was rather the product of the very same exploitation that defined classes; insofar as racial differentiation entailed status, it was not independent of the economic factors that constituted class.

The Marxist argument about the sources of stratification in South Africa rested on a mix of theoretical, empirical and political arguments. The sociologist who considered the merits of alternative approaches to class most directly and frankly was Johnstone. In the introduction to his 1976 book, Johnstone set out what he saw as the essential difference between Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to class:

The philosophical and theoretical specificity of Marxist science resides in its dialectical materialism and historical materialism – in its general theory and conception of the nature and social significance of the system of production in any given social formation, and in its specific materialist analysis of specific historical systems and developments. And what basically distinguishes Marxist class analysis from other so-called class analysis is that it is an integral part of this more general theoretical framework, from which it derives whatever explanatory power it has.

Class analysis has come to mean various things, but Marxist class analysis means something quite specific, and its specificity must be recognized. It is obviously completely distinct from idealist class analysis (in which class is defined in terms of such things as status) of the kind evident in American sociology. And, more importantly, it does not mean, and is quite distinct from, empiricist-materialist class analysis (which merely involves an empiricist 'attention to economic factors', such as income and occupation, and the correlation of such factors with others in an empiricist study of 'social stratification', without forming part of any general social theory with explanatory power, and tending to lead only to re-description rather than substantial explanation of social inequality). What it means, above all, is the systematic elucidation of the differential relationships of

⁷¹ H. Wolpe, 'Class concepts, class struggle and racism', in Rex and Mason (eds), *Theories*.

⁷² H. Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (Oxford, James Currey, 1988).

individuals and social groups to means of production in historically and structurally specific systems of production and social formations, and the elucidation of the various ramifications of these structural differentiations, within a general theory about these systems and formations, from which it acquires its explanatory power.⁷³

If Johnstone is to be believed, the explanatory power of Marxist class analysis is derived from the overall theory of historical materialism. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, adherence to Marxist analysis often resembled closely a religious experience, with the ritual invocation of theological dogma. Because the *sociological* value of Marxist analysis was rooted in Marxist *political economy*, its explanatory power declined the further one moved into the terrain of everyday social relationships.

Johnstone short-changes himself. His book is full of detailed evidence for precisely the kind of soft analysis that he decries. His analysis revolves around three social groups: a rapacious bourgeoisie, racist and high-wage white workers, and low-wage black workers with one foot in the countryside. He demonstrates that the self-interest of white workers from the early 1900s led them to lobby for and secured the colour bar, because the employers' cost-cutting led them to prefer to employ black workers who were willing and able to work for far less than white workers. There is nothing in Marxist theory that suggests this explanation, nor that explains why workers in South African mines could be divided so easily compared to workers in mines in, for example, the north of England. Conversely, it is not obvious that a Weberian analysis of gold-mining would differ from Johnstone's in any key respect. As Weber himself argued with respect to Germany, skilled and unskilled workers might well come to view their interests and loyalties rather differently, even in the absence of racial cleavages. Indeed, the social historians who followed were less comfortable with structuralist Marxism (and more inclined towards the dreaded 'empiricist-materialist class analysis'). The closer they looked at the lived experiences of people in these abstract classes, the more they took seriously issues of identity and culture, and to tread on much the same terrain as their non-Marxist predecessors.

The Marxists did bring three compelling bodies of evidence to the table. First, Johnstone and Legassick apparently demonstrated that the origins of racialised labour and other segregationist policies lay in the requirements of capitalist industrialization, especially the gold mines – and not in the experience of

⁷³ Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold*, pp.9-10.

conquest (or other interactions on the frontier).⁷⁴ Secondly, historians and sociologists began to reveal the extent of proletarianisation in the early and mid-twentieth century. The neo-Weberian scholars had been more interested in the middle classes, and paid little attention to the making of either the white or black working classes, or to the struggles waged by these classes. Thirdly, a series of scholars (including notably Copley) argued that the emphasis on status by Kuper and others tended ‘to overshadow or even obscure discussion of the structural position’ of the middle class or petite bourgeoisie.⁷⁵

Ultimately, however, it was surely political as well as intellectual considerations that accounted for the triumph of Marxist analysis and the sidelining of Weberian alternatives. Intellectuals linked to the exiled Communist Party were active in promoting Marxist analysis (whilst a genuinely liberal political opposition remained very weak). The global of the 1960s permeated South Africa also. In the early 1970s, the re-emergence of ‘independent’ trade unions, based among semi-skilled black industrial workers, legitimated the Marxist pre-occupation with exploitation by powerful capitalists. Not only was the working class more amenable to Marxist analysis, but the Weberian emphases on, first, class differences according to credentials and skills and, secondly, the difference between class and status were politically inconvenient, because they raised the prospect of divisions within the oppressed black majority and even within the exploited working-class. Marxism was associated with a utopian vision, a political programme dressed up in revolutionary rhetoric and a legitimate political constituency (the working class or masses). Weberian analysis, in contrast, led to a political position that was more sympathetic to reform, especially insofar as reform entailed the expansion of educational opportunities for disenfranchised South Africans, at a time when ‘reform’ and the concomitant growth of a black middle class became associated with attempts to preserve apartheid and ward off democratic change. The intolerance of Marxist social scientists to non-Marxist alternatives reflected and contributed to the political context.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Johnstone, ‘White Prosperity’ and *Class, Race and Gold*; Legassick, ‘South Africa’. This was later challenged by Keegan (*Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1996)), who demonstrated that segregation and apartheid had important roots also in the ways in which the Cape was integrated into the global economy in the nineteenth century.

⁷⁵ Copley, *Class and Consciousness*, p.7.

⁷⁶ See K.Jubber, ‘Reflections on Canons, Compilations, Catalogues and Curricula in Relation to Sociology and Sociology in South Africa’, *South African Review of Sociology* 37,2 (2006), pp.338-9; also Christie, ‘Social and intellectual trends’, p.149.

Whatever the reason, the outcome was a mix of neglect and derision of non-Marxist approaches to class. One telling indication of the extent of this was the revision by Martin West of his earlier research in Port Nolloth. West revisited Port Nolloth in the mid-1980s and added a new, final chapter in a new edition of his earlier work. Very little was changed in the seven chapters first published in 1971 – except that all references to and discussion of caste were excised. West did not explain why he felt that this was necessary beyond writing that ‘in most cases the term [caste] could be removed from the text without significantly affecting what was being said’ – although he found he had to retain some references to ‘caste-like’.⁷⁷ Given that the first edition was structured entirely in terms of ‘caste’, this revision entailed changing the titles of many of the chapters. The chapters on ‘the caste hierarchy’ were retitled and consolidated into ‘domination, segregation and integration’ and ‘attitudes and myth’. The ‘caste hierarchy’ became ‘the structure of domination’. ‘Stratification within castes’ became ‘internal differentiation’. West excised also figures illustrating the relationship between caste and class, as viewed from different vantage-points (see Figure 3 above), as well as references to Dollard and other scholars in the American caste-class school (although they remained in the bibliography). In the scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, it was not just that the work of Kuper and others was largely ignored; even the concepts of status and caste were excised from sociology.⁷⁸

The continuing relevance of Weberian ideas

It was easier to excise references to these historiographical traces of Weberian analysis than it was to ignore the aspects of society that had provided an impetus to these traces in the first place. From the 1980s onwards, a steady stream of scholarship pointed to the importance of either (a) class differences within the working population by skill or credentials or (b) status, as distinct from class.

⁷⁷ M. West, *Apartheid in a South African Town, 1968-1985* (Berkeley: Institute of International Affairs, University of California, Berkeley, 1987), p.xi. Martin West recalls that one colleague at the University of Cape Town had challenged him on the concept of caste (discussion, Cape Town, 13th October, 2008).

⁷⁸ Another curious example is a volume of essays on the history of Cape Town, edited by Wilmot James and Mary Simons, published under different titles in the USA and South Africa: *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1989) and *Class, Caste and Color: A Social and Economic History of the South African Western Cape* (Edison, NJ: Transaction, 1992).

Johnstone himself had emphasized the importance of skill-cleavages in the gold mines in the early 1900s. Webster picked up this argument in his study of the labour process in iron foundries. In Webster's account, racial cleavages were the consequence of labour market segmentation. Webster chose, however, to locate his study in relation to the quasi-Marxist work of Braverman than to that of Weber.⁷⁹ With the growth of the independent trade unions, and especially after 1994, however, even union-linked scholars began to write about such Weberian topics as the bureaucratic and oligarchic tendencies within trade unions and the unions' failure to extend their membership from their base among skilled and semi-skilled workers to the ranks of unskilled and especially casual workers. Analyses have proliferated into differentiation *within* the ranks of the working population, between the fast-growing 'African middle class' and the working class, and even within the 'working class'.⁸⁰

At least as importantly, a series of scholars have drawn attention to precisely those issues of status that were central to the work of many of the earlier generation of neo-Weberian scholars of class. Goodhew re-examined the importance of 'respectability' in the crime-ridden location of Sophiatown in the 1950s. Salo and Jensen similarly place respectability at the centre of their analyses of crime-ridden, low-income 'coloured' neighbourhoods of Cape Town in the late 1990s.⁸¹ Research conducted in Soweto by Peter Alexander and students at the University of Johannesburg also indicate the importance of status, although not so much with reference to class as to cultures of consumption.⁸² Status is, however, a complex issue, because what earns respect and prestige from some people is disregarded by others. Ramphela warns that educational

⁷⁹ Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold*; Edward Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1985).

⁸⁰ L.Schlemmer, 'South Africa's new middle class', in Ann Bernstein and Sandy Johnston (eds), *The Next Decade: Perspectives on South Africa's Growth and Development* (Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2005); S.Muller, 'The Challenge of Joining Two Economies: Assessing Changes in the Black Middle Class post-1994', in D. Gqubule (ed.), *Making Mistakes, Righting Wrongs, Insights into Black Economic Empowerment* (Johannesburg, KMM Review and Jonathan Ball, 2006); Muller, 'Looking for the black middle class in post-apartheid South Africa', unpublished conference paper (2006); Seekings and Nattrass, *Class, Race and Inequality*.

⁸¹ D.Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown* (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2004); E.Salo, "Respectable Mothers, Tough Men and Good Daughters: Producing Persons in Manenberg Township, South Africa", PhD thesis, Emory University (2004); S.Jensen, *Gangs, Politics and Dignity in Cape Town* (Oxford, James Currey; Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press; and Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁸² C.Ceruti, 'Class in Soweto', *South African Labour Bulletin* 31,1 (March/April 2007); 'Divisions and dependencies among working and workless', *South African Labour Bulletin* 31,2 (May/June 2007).

success often provokes hostility in a neighbourhood riddled with mistrust, jealousy and envy. The accusation that someone is ‘playing white’ can lead to ostracism, scorn and humiliation, harassment and even violence.⁸³

Novels point to the importance of status within the ‘African middle class’, now (after apartheid) growing very rapidly, as well as among aspirants to upward social mobility into this class. Kopano Matlwa in her novel *Coconut*, for example, details the airs and graces assumed by the upwardly mobile. The importance of status differences is corroborated in ethnographic accounts by Dolby and Nkuna of the importance of fashion as a marker of status among adolescents in post-apartheid South Africa.⁸⁴

This new research on status is suggestive, but runs up against two hurdles. First, in what ways is this emerging status order actually consequential? It might be that these status distinctions are simply the reflection of the changing occupational class structure, and have no independent effects on any other important social phenomena. If this were true, then scholarship on the status order would be essentially descriptive rather than analytical. Chan and Goldthorpe have recently argued with respect to Britain that the status order is consequential, shaping a range of social interactions more directly than class.⁸⁵ There is no comparable research in South Africa that demonstrates that the status order is consequential. Secondly, the analysis of status in post-apartheid society suffers the same weakness as was demonstrated in the work of the earlier scholars: Is it possible to construct an overall and integrated account of the status order, or does status remain fragmented into different, perhaps even overlapping social settings? It was the lack of a general theory that was a key flaw of the caste-class approach in the American South and South Africa: the status distinctions that defined castes had allegedly different criteria than the ones that defined stratification *within* castes or racial groups.⁸⁶

⁸³ M.Ramphela, *Steering by the Stars: Being Young in South Africa* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2002); A.Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) also emphasises the importance of gossip.

⁸⁴ K.Matlwa, *Coconut* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2007); N.Dolby, *Constructing Race: Youth, Identity and Popular Culture in South Africa* (Albany, State University of New York, 2001); L.Nkuna, ‘“Fitting-in” to a “classy place”: The Zone and youth identity’, in P.Alexander, M.Dawson and M.Ichharam (eds), *Globalisation and New Identities: A view from the middle* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2006).

⁸⁵ T.W.Chan and J.H.Goldthorpe, ‘Is There a Status Order in Contemporary British Society? Evidence from the Occupational Structure of Friendship’, *European Sociological Review* 20,5 (2004).

⁸⁶ No attention has been paid to the ways in which status is surely gendered, just as class was and is; on gender and class, see Bozzoli, ‘Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies’,

One way of tackling these sorts of questions is provided by Bourdieu, who argued that status and class needed to be reintegrated and provided compelling empirical support for this from France and Algeria. Shifting away from the economic reductionism of much structural Marxism, and taking on board the ideas of historians such as E. P. Thompson, Bourdieu argued that classes were constituted in part through aesthetic judgments and cultural capital, as well as through financial and other forms of capital. Applying Bourdieu's ideas to South Africa would not be an easy task. Under apartheid, different forms of status distinctions were imposed from above and endorsed from below, often in contradictory ways. White South Africans refused to recognize the status claims of the black middle class, despite the fact that this middle class was accorded great respect and prestige from within the black population. With the end of apartheid it is possible that a more standardized conception of the status order has emerged. Recognising that there is a history of non-Marxist analysis of stratification in South Africa might make it easier for scholars after apartheid to tackle questions and topics like these.

Journal of Southern African Studies 9 (1991); and *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1991).

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