

**THE IMPERIAL COLOSSUS AND THE COLONIAL PARISH PUMP:  
CECIL RHODES AND THE CAPE AFRIKANERS\***

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As a colonial statesman he stands too much above the small game of parochial politics to care much more than fits in with his general plans.

*(De Express, Bloemfontein, October 1890)*

Many observers had animadverted upon the unnatural Bond-Rhodes alliance ... That derided parish pumpers should so complacently range themselves under the banner of an imaginative imperialist seemed to the outside world inexplicable.

*(Jan Smuts, 1896)*

This study is not another inquiry into the exploits of Rhodes. My prime interest is in the evolution of the Afrikaners during the nineteenth century and in particular in the last part of it. Rhodes serves as a prism, a magnifying glass, which facilitates the exposition of the various aspects and layers of this evolution. Although Rhodes owed his political career, which made him different from many other South African capitalists of his time, to the Afrikaners, his biographers have neglected his fascinating relations with them, treating them more as objects of his designs and manipulations than conscious, autonomous actors. The title seeks to convey the complexity of these relations - the contradiction and the convergence or the contradictory convergence.

I intend to approach the subject from two angles. The first is chronological. The study is approached and will be presented in three chronologically consecutive chapters - the courting, the marriage and the divorce - covering respectively the 1880s, 1890-1895 and 1896-1898. The other is analytical. In trying to account for these complex and seemingly unlikely relations I argue that in late nineteenth-century South Africa there existed an historical space in which the seeming contradictions could converge. However, in order to understand fully and properly the relations between Rhodes and the Afrikaners it is not sufficient to dwell on this space. Both Rhodes and the Afrikaners were subjected to external forces of gravitation which had to be taken into account. Indeed, the relations could flourish only when there existed a balance between these centrifugal forces. Once the Jameson Raid shattered this balance, the utilization of the historical space for collaborative relations became impossible and the alliance between Rhodes and the Afrikaner Bond collapsed.

Thus, crucial to this study is the description and analysis of this particular historical space. In dealing with this space one has to concentrate mainly on the Afrikaners. Rhodes did not play a meaningful role in shaping this space. Powerful historical forces of much longer duration had done so. To use another metaphor, Cape Afrikaners represented a field in which Rhodes wanted to sow the seed of imperial expansion through collaboration. And, as is the case in agriculture, the success of the crop resulted more from the fertility of the field than from the competence of the farmer.

The historical space, or field, was created in the process of the socialization of the Afrikaner society into the colonial, imperial world since the onset of British occupation. Essential to this process of socialization was the economic integration of the Cape marginal economy into the expanding British capitalist economy. The impact of this integration was not immediately dramatic. The economic development of the Cape took off on the back of the wool revolution from the 1840s and the mineral revolution in the wake of the discovery of diamonds and gold. Looking at the Cape economy from the vantage point of the late nineteenth century, it is clear that the colony had undergone a veritable economic

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\* This paper is an outline of work in progress for a book on Rhodes and the Cape Afrikaners.

transformation. Areas which had hitherto been on the far margins of the market economy became an integral part thereof as the Cape economy as a whole was engulfed by the global economy. The Cape economy, however, developed a very strong dependence on the powerful British imperial economy. As a producer of primary products it was dependent on the fluctuations and vacillations of the British market.

Economic development fed a rapid process of modernization which facilitated the economic integration of the Cape. It involved the development and improvement of transport and communication systems, the spread of elaborate financial and commercial systems, and a dramatic growth of urban centres. The combined effect of these developments considerably shortened the distance between regions, between centre and periphery and between producers and markets. The physical and economic landscape of the Cape changed dramatically during the nineteenth century.

Economic development and modernization precipitated a process of socio-economic differentiation which changed the social profile of the Afrikaner society. The group of market-oriented Afrikaner farmers, or gentry, which had been largely limited to the Western Cape, expanded considerably, both numerically and spatially. The process of rural accumulation was accompanied by a concomitant process of rural dispossession which gave rise to the marked increase in the number of *bywoners* (squatters) and poor white Afrikaners. Afrikaners were also increasingly attracted to the urban centres as businessmen, artisans, professionals and labourers.

It is pertinent to our investigation that the processes of economic development and social change occurred in a British colonial setting, under the aegis of a colonial government. In addition, the English settlers who established themselves mostly in the urban centres were important agents of change. They provided vital links in the chain of economic development stretching from London to the smallest *dorp*. They also brought with them the Victorian ethos of progress and presented a model of a modern urban society which radiated beyond the urban boundaries.

The process of change in Afrikaner society was also fed by the cultural impact of Anglicization which gained momentum in the last third of the century. Increasing numbers of Afrikaners familiarized themselves with the English language and English culture more broadly. The social impact of this cultural transformation was manifested in an explosion of associational life for the promotion of common interests.

Thus, as Afrikaners were increasingly integrated into the expanding British economy, they were also socialized into British culture and way of life. All this occurred within the framework of an alien colonial state. In understanding the process of socialization among the Cape Afrikaners it should be borne in mind that they were never totally alienated from the colonial state. Their participation in the institutions of the colonial state was at first marginal and peripheral. However, they gradually increased and expanded their participation from the local to central institutions. The granting of Responsible Government in 1872 was a crucial milestone in their socialization into the colonial state.

The balance of socialization of the Cape Afrikaners into the colonial economy, society and state was mixed. As there were periods of economic boom, so there were periods of bust. As some economic sectors flourished, so others declined. As there was a minority which was fully assimilated into English culture, so there were very many who were not. In the public political sphere there was also a combination of integration and alienation. For our investigation it is important to emphasize two crucial characteristics of this balance. Firstly, the process of integration and socialization of the Cape Afrikaners occurred in conditions of symbiosis with and dependency on not only the British colonial state but also the English-speaking sector of the colonial population. Secondly, the balance improved considerably, from an Afrikaner perspective, in the last third of the century.

The contradictory nature of their socialization had a definite impact on the Cape Afrikaners' ideological and political orientation. In dealing with this aspect one has to focus on the Afrikaner Bond which was, from 1883, the sole political agent of the Cape Afrikaners as members of an ethnic community. In dealing with this aspect of the evolution of the Cape Afrikaners' political behaviour we have to tackle the Afrikaner nationalists' historiography, and in this case the work of F. A. van Jaarsveld. van Jaarsveld's basic argument is that the

dormant Afrikaner nation was woken to its national destiny by imperialist intervention in the affairs of the independent Boer republics and particularly the annexation of the Transvaal and the ensuing first war of liberation. Even Giliomee, a critic of this interpretation, sees the beginning of Afrikaner nationalism in the Cape in the Afrikaner Bond in the late nineteenth century.

In order to focus on the ideological and political orientation of the Bond we must rid ourselves of two inherent assumptions of the nationalist historiography: firstly, that there was vertical congruity between the more mature Afrikaner nationalism which fathered the apartheid system and the "Afrikaner nationalism" of the late nineteenth century; and, secondly, that there is a horizontal congruity between the development of Afrikaner political consciousness in the Cape and the Republics. The existential experience of the respective Afrikaner communities was totally different.

Thus, in order to understand Afrikaner politics in the Cape, as manifested in the Bond, we must focus on the Cape in the late nineteenth century. Two analytical distinctions may facilitate the uncovering of the true nature of political consciousness of the Cape Afrikaners in that period. Firstly, there is a distinction between ethno-cultural nationalism and ethno-cultural mobilization. Both rest on an effective ethno-cultural consciousness and solidarity. The difference between these two manifestations of ethno-cultural consciousness is that ethno-cultural nationalism seeks to fulfil itself through national self-determination and national exclusiveness, whereas ethno-cultural mobilizers accept the ethno-cultural pluralism of the state and use the ethnic group as a base in the struggle for a share in its power and resources. Secondly, there is a distinction between *ethnic core* and *ethnic diaspora*. From the vantage point of the Cape Afrikaners, their brothers in the republics represented an ethnic diaspora. Their political consciousness and behaviour were primarily shaped by their existential experience at the Cape.

On the basis of these distinctions I would argue that the Afrikaner Bond was a manifestation of ethnic mobilization rather than ethnic nationalism. Furthermore, an appropriate analysis of the interaction between the ethnic core and the ethnic diaspora reveals that, in fact, in the wake of the Transvaal crisis of the late 1870s and early 1880s, ethnic mobilization rather than pan-Afrikaner nationalism flourished in the Cape. The Bond failed the two basic tests of ethnic nationalism. Firstly, it did not seek to achieve ethnic self-determination through disengagement from the British Empire. The Bond, in fact, gave expression to the basic satisfaction of the Cape Afrikaners with their colonial existence. It also expressed a genuine loyalty to crown and empire. Indeed, the decade and a half following the Transvaal crisis witnessed the peak of Afrikaner satisfaction with and loyalty to the Empire. This loyalty was not simply a manifestation of sentimental attachment to Queen Victoria. It stemmed from an articulated feeling that British rule was both beneficial and benevolent. Consequently, the ideal of the Bond was to exploit the privileges and liberties under British rule rather than to fulfil their destiny through the agency of republicanism. Secondly, the Bond did not strive for ethnic exclusiveness. There were not even hidden thoughts of ethnic cleansing, or even exclusion. They eulogized about the benefits of having Africans as actual or potential providers of labour. And the English settlers were perceived not as enemies but rather as actual or potential allies in the task of ensuring that the black man would carry the "white man's burden". Thus, the Bond's definition of the Afrikaner was voluntary rather than ethnically ascribed. The ethnic group was a means rather than an ideal. The ideal was the amalgamation of English-speaking and Dutch-speaking Afrikaners into one white South African nation. If there were not more unity between the two segments of the white population in the Cape, it was not for lack of willingness on the part of the Afrikaners.

How can we account for this moderate, compliant response of the Cape Afrikaner in the very decade in which pan-Afrikaner nationalism was supposed to have been born or awakened. During the height of the Transvaal crisis, even the moderate and pragmatic Hofmeyr proclaimed that "blood was thicker than water". Yet, by the end of the decade, colonial water, rather than ethnic blood, was flowing in the political veins of the Afrikaner Bond.

In accounting for this we must remember that by the end of the period of Dutch rule the collective self-consciousness of the Cape white population was grossly undeveloped, if it existed at all. Indeed, their collective self-consciousness was a product of their encounter

with the impact of British imperialism and capitalism. It evolved as part of the process of their socialization into the colonial, imperial world. Thus, the colonial reality, with its negative, but also positive, aspects, made a definite imprint on their collective personality. Their particular emotional attachment to Queen Victoria could be construed, from this perspective, as a collective search for a mother figure. Thus, rejection of British rule and heritage, was not necessarily a natural response to their colonial bondage. Furthermore, a deep sense of weakness constituted an integral part of their formative experience. They existed, in their perception, on the verge of survival. The *swart gevaar* was not an invention of the National Party during the 1948 election campaign. It was also uppermost in the consciousness of nineteenth century Cape Afrikaners. They believed that they could survive only through dominating the "Natives". However, they were too weak to secure domination on their own. When they encountered the Xhosa on the eastern frontier under Dutch rule they were forced to survive through conflict and co-existence. With the advent of British rule and British arms, the possibility presented itself for a dominating symbiosis, namely symbiosis with the British in order to dominate the blacks. Thus, the attachment to crown and empire and the desire to amalgamate with the English settlers made definite strategic sense.

However, in order to account fully for this strategic perception, we have to focus on the social basis of the Afrikaner Bond which gave rise to it. The Bond had its following only among certain sectors of the Afrikaner society. It had virtually no support among the anglicized Afrikaners, who had no interest in ethnic mobilization. It also had a very small following among the Dutch Reform Church clergymen. It was thus isolated from most of the educated Afrikaner elite. In other similar cases, members of the educated elite played a crucial role in leading radical ethno-nationalist movements; they were to play such a role among Afrikaners in the twentieth century. The Bond also had no support among the growing number of dispossessed Afrikaners, *bywoners* and poor whites. These were at that time more concerned with individual than collective ethnic survival. In the twentieth century, the politicized, dispossessed Afrikaners provided the troops for the mobilizers of an exclusive, chauvinistic and racist Afrikaner nationalism. The backbone of the Afrikaner Bond was what may be termed as the Afrikaner social centre, the group which has also been labelled as the Afrikaner gentry. These were land-owning farmers who were closely linked to the market economy. This backbone of Cape Afrikaner society did not represent a homogeneous socio-economic group - there were marked differences in wealth; there were also regional differences and those stemming from the types of cultivation. They shared in common an interest in using the state to protect and promote the agricultural sector.

This group was extremely conservative, and unlikely to be attracted by fancy ideas or radical politics. In rejecting, in 1881, accusations of disloyalty the committee of the Graaff Reinet branch of the Bond stated: "Therefore we candidly make use of this opportunity, to throw such an indignant accusation far away from us ... for most of us are landed proprietors, and it a well-known fact that landed proprietors are conservatives." Such a group might have turned to anti-colonial radicalism if the status quo had been clearly inimical to their survival or to their vital interests. This, however, was certainly not the case during the 1880s. The existential balance of the Afrikaner farmers was more favourable than before. Their main ethnic grievance, the status of the Dutch language, was being rectified and the Afrikaner Bond, representing their interest, enjoyed such success that very soon it became the power broker of Cape politics. If the Bond did not form the government within a year after its amalgamation in 1883 it was only because it preferred to be the "king maker" rather than the king. It is this group of conservative Cape Afrikaners which responded to the crises of their ethnic diaspora in the late 1870s and mid-1880s (Bechualand crisis). These crises definitely agitated Cape Afrikaners and sharpened their ethnic identity and consciousness. However, the balance between colonial experience and the call of pan-Afrikaner solidarity boosted colonial ethnicity rather than pan-Afrikaner nationalism. Thus, the overwhelming rejection by the Bond of S. J. du Toit's more ethnic, integral conception of Afrikaner nationalism and the acceptance of conservative and pragmatic Hofmeyr as the unchallenged leader of the Bond were congruent with the existential experience and vital interests of its social base.

The contradictory impact of the pan-Afrikaner crises went further, also shaping the nature of Cape Afrikaner ethnic consciousness. Indirectly, through their contribution to ethnic mobilization which brought about domestic success, they also contributed to the dilution of their ethnic consciousness. Essentially, the ethnic consciousness of the Cape Afrikaners,

as manifested in the Bond, which was informed by a definite ethno-cultural identity, but also by a mixture of ethnic grievances and trans-ethnic interdependence, was marked by ambivalence. This ambivalence was reflected in the very meaning of the term "Afrikaner", which conveyed, interchangeably, ethnic as well as trans-ethnic identity. While the Bond appealed to ethnic identity and experience in the process of political mobilization, it also celebrated its de-ethnicization through the incorporation of English speakers in its ranks. While language, the innermost core of ethnic identity, was a major grievance, the goal was equality with English rather than supremacy of Dutch. The ultimate political manifestation of this ambivalence was that the goal of ethnic mobilization was not the fulfilment of an ethnic destiny but rather the creation of conditions which would obviate the need for it. As D. C. de Waal told the 1887 Bond congress: "... where is the Bond going? It is moving towards the time when there will be here neither Dutch nor English and all will be Afrikaners." This ambivalence was also reflected in the attitude of the Bond towards their republican brothers. While the Bond definitely showed solidarity towards them, Theron, its secretary, spoke with equanimity in parliament in 1888 on the possibility of the Transvaal's becoming an English republic. Finally, this ambivalence informed the Bond's political goal - neither ethnic exclusiveness and domination nor disengagement from the British empire. Indeed, the Bond was essentially a truly white, non-ethnic, Home-Rule party.

This was the Afrikaner historical field in which Rhodes sought to sow the seed of Cape collaborative imperialism. The success of his endeavour was not simply a testimony to his manipulative powers and scheming. In the Bond he found willing collaborators. The question, indeed, is why the Bond came forward. It had already supported two Englishmen as prime ministers - Upington and Sprigg. The support of the latter was, in a way, much more natural. Both Upington and Sprigg were, like the Bond leaders, essentially parish pumpers. The crucial question is why did they dump Sprigg, the compliant parish pumper, in favour of Rhodes the imperial visionary? Why did they allow him to use their political space as a launching pad for his grand imperial design? Why did they give him almost unlimited trust and credit? And, finally, why did they give him their love?

The explanation that Rhodes secured Bond support through the liberal distribution of shares, farms and other presents does not hold much water. These benefits represent the lubricant, not the engine, which drove the Bond into Rhodes's arms. What, then, motivated the Bond? Firstly, Rhodes was more prepared than his predecessors to identify fully with and promote the material interests of Afrikaner farmers. Furthermore, towards the end of the 1880s the *Zuid Afrikaan* began to articulate the need for a new class alliance between the farmers and the mining capitalists. Both were land-owning classes sharing an interest in the steady flow of cheap black labour. Rhodes was portrayed as a "national bourgeois" in contradistinction to those who repatriated their profits. Rhodes was also the only prominent English politician who supported the Bond in its "native" policy, not only regarding labour but also on the crucial issue of the franchise. He also supported the "strop Bill" which caused the rift between him and Olive Schreiner. In sum, the Bondsmen viewed Rhodes not as an imperialist but rather as a genuine colonialist. His expressed views as to the role of the empire in South Africa were identical to theirs - minimal interference in domestic South African affairs, imperial coastal defence and an imperial common market based on colonial preference. In this respect Rhodesia was viewed by Bondsmen as a promised land, a wonderful combination between Utopia and Eldorado - abundance of land for their young generation, plenty of gold, an open market for their produce, an appropriate "native" policy and no say for English liberals and humanitarians. Ironic as it may sound, Rhodes was viewed by Bondsmen as a bulwark against imperialism. They also regarded him as a bridge between them and Kruger at a time when the relations between the Cape Afrikaners and their Transvaal brothers were strained.

Indeed, Rhodes presented himself to the Bondsmen as the epitome of the ideal Englishman with whom they wanted to amalgamate into a new South African nation. There was, however, an additional dimension to the way the Afrikaners related to Rhodes, which gave the relations amazing warmth and depth. In their encounter with the English-speaking settlers, the Afrikaners suffered from a "rejected lover syndrome". They were deeply hurt by the arrogant, patronizing and contemptuous attitude of many prominent Englishmen towards them. Rhodes, however, was different. He was the most prominent Englishman in South Africa and perhaps the most celebrated imperial statesman of the time. Yet, he not only identified with their interests and prejudices but also opened up to them. In his attitude towards them there was no shred of arrogance or contempt. On the contrary, he

was open and warm. He visited them on their farms and extended to them the finest hospitality. He showed admiration for their Cape heritage and to their sterling qualities. This earned him the nickname "the young burgher" among his English friends. Among the Afrikaners he was better known as *de Engelsman met de Afrikaner hart* (the Englishman with the Afrikaner heart). This deep, intimate quality in the attitude of the Afrikaners towards Rhodes was sensitively captured by a brilliant young Afrikaner. Shortly after the Jameson Raid, Jan Smuts wrote: "It will never be known there [England] to what an astonishing extent Mr Rhodes had in six or seven years become the national idol of the Dutch Afrikaners. I, who had an opportunity to watch the growth of this profound devotion, could find nothing comparable to it in the sphere of political relationships except the beautiful, truly religious attachment of liberals of the old school to Mr Gladstone."

For the Bondsmen the transition from Sprigg to Rhodes was a transition from the politics of the possible to the politics of the desirable. He embodied for them the ideal empire and the ideal Englishman with whom they wished to identify and amalgamate. Rhodes was for them not merely a political ally but an admired and beloved leader.

However, in order to understand fully the shift of the "parish-pump" Bond to an alliance with Rhodes the "Colossus", we have to examine the position of the external forces of gravitation operating on both. Rhodes was attracted by the call of empire but pinned his hopes on a Cape sub-imperialism. He had no problem cultivating this imperial strategy because this was also Britain's preference. Rhodes was attracted to the north partly by an imperial vision which transcended his immediate arena. However, at least part of the urgency of his approach to northern expansion was linked to the shift in the focus of economic power from the Cape to the Transvaal which resulted from the discovery of gold on the Rand in 1886. The parochial Bond was also engulfed by this great movement of economic forces. In joining Rhodes they were, thus, swimming with the economic stream. However, the economic stream northwards was leading not only along the Missionary Road to Rhodesia; it was flowing even more forcefully into the Transvaal, the land of their ethnic brothers. However, the Transvaal, through various economic means, blocked, or severely limited, the access of Cape products to its expanding markets. Had Kruger been more responsive to the supplications of the Bond, the latter would have certainly chosen the Transvaal route, not only for sentimental, ethnic reasons. Kruger, in fact, pushed the Bond to the alternative of Cape British sub-imperialism and straight into the arms of Rhodes, the young, charming, promising and insistent suitor.

And so, in 1890 the contradictions finally converged. The marriage which lasted for some five years was a happy one. The love and admiration of the Afrikaners for Rhodes far exceeded those of the courting period. But, even at the height of Rhodes's standing among the Afrikaners, the alliance had definite boundaries which were delineated by Afrikaner ethnic taboo. Referring to the possibility of a confrontation between Rhodes and the Transvaal, the *Zuid Afrikaan*, in October 1893, was blunt: "But one thing is clear - if such a conflict will occur all the state of affairs in South Africa will change and the Cape Afrikaners will treat Rhodes in a totally different manner." Rhodes must have been either extremely desperate or extremely foolish when he got involved with the conspiracy which climaxed in the Jameson Raid. The resulting divorce was a painful one. It was not a clean, instant break. It lasted for more than two years and left deep scars on the Bond and Afrikaner society. It should be stressed, however, that it was a divorce from Rhodes personally rather than from crown and empire. Nor did it eliminate their desire to forge a white South-African nation out of the English and Dutch. Afrikanerdom in the Cape was definitely not an exclusive *laager* by the end of the nineteenth century.