REINTERPRETING AFRIKANER NATIONALISM, c.1850-1900
by
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Introduction

To a real extent the old approach towards nationalism had to die before the new interest could be born. In the eyes of nationalist historians, nationalism was an organic process in which ethnic groups were awakened or aroused to become a nation. Nationalism was thus an expression of nationalist feelings. The explanatory value of this largely tautological interpretation is obviously limited. (1) New approaches to the phenomenon of nationalism firstly try to locate it within a broad sociological framework. For Tom Nairn it is a response to uneven capitalist development (2), Anthony Smith connects it with the rise of the rationalized, bureaucratic modern state (3), and John Brieully sees nationalism as a form of politics which tries to combine the incompatible concerns of modernity and tradition. (4)

It is generally accepted that the beginnings of Afrikaner nationalism must be sought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There is, however, no agreement on the context in which it developed or the relationship between Afrikaner nationalism and British imperialism. For Robinson and Gallagher, the stirrings of "proto-nationalism" in northern and southern Africa sparked off the spectacular imperial intervention. (5) Deryck Schreuder, analyzing British policy towards southern Africa in the period 1881 to 1895, concludes that Afrikaner nationalism was "perhaps no more than a mirage, a shadow, a spectre". British fears in this respect were groundless: "the Afrikaner unity movement was temporary". (6) In a recent reappraisal of the scramble for Southern Africa covering the period 1877 to 1895, Schreuder changed his position. He writes that it was the strategies of the Imperial Factor in the interior which had provoked into vigorous life the new sense of Afrikaner group consciousness. "In particular, the federalist policies of the 1870s, culminating in the Transvaal annexation and revolt, appear to have pressed Afrikanerdom into a new common bond against British overrule in South Africa." (7) F. A. van Jaarsveld's The Awakening of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1868-1881 takes a similar view. His thesis is that the birth of Afrikaner national consciousness was a reaction to the extension of British control over the Basutoland, the diamond fields and the Transvaal State. Without this intervention "the crystallization of [Afrikaner] national consciousness is unthinkable". Without British intervention "the Afrikaans-speaking section would in all probability have been absorbed gradually into the English stream, and Afrikaans-Dutch would probably have disappeared, as had been the case with the Dutch language in America. But after 1881 Afrikaner nationalism became a factor in South African politics". (8)
This model for explaining the primary phase of Afrikaner nationalism (9) is comprised of the following parts: (a) the changing situation of the Dutch-Afrikaners in the colonial economy, (b) changes in the political and administrative framework, (c) generational and class differences in a colonial dialectic, and (d) the relationship of local nationalism to the global context.

(a) The changing situation of the Dutch-Afrikaners in the colonial economy

Recent analyses see the "new imperialism" as having started in the 1870s and 1880s and as being related to Britain's relative decline, which prompted a more aggressive search for markets in Asia and Africa. (10) South Africa was turned into a growth area for British investment and trade as a result of the mineral revolution following the discovery of diamonds and gold. While the northern republics languished, the Cape economy expanded rapidly between 1854 and 1874. The value of exports (including diamonds) increased eight times, that of imports three times, and the revenue five times. Economic growth created new demands, particularly for developing the diamond fields, constructing railways and other public works, and waging war against Africans. An analysis of the period 1870 to 1885 shows that keeping up the flow of credit was vital for any Cape government which wished to maintain itself in power and for the fortunes of landowners, commercial farmers, local businessmen and commercial middlemen and those active in the import-export sector. (11)

While farmers struggled to adapt to the quickening of the economic pulse, the search for land and labour became desperate in the quarter of the nineteenth century. By the 1870s the land frontier had closed in South Africa. Previously, subsistence farming could be practised on an extensive scale by enlarging the size of the grazing lands or trekking further into the interior instead of using an occupied area more intensively. Now, however, poorer farmers, particularly bywoners, faced an ever sharper squeeze from their richer landholders and neighbours, and had to move on in search of whatever limited vrygrond (free land) remained. (12) The Orange Free State (13) and Transvaal (14) no longer constituted an escape hatch for this class. Labour was the other crucial problem confronting the Dutch-Afrikaner farming class. All over South Africa, African labour steadily became concentrated in the hands of the richer farmers.

Overlaying these demands for more land and labour was the Dutch-Afrikaner insistence on a native policy that would impose unquestioned white dominance over Africans. During the 1870s and 1880s British imperial intervention was instrumental in helping to tip the balance of power in South Africa in favour of the white colonial societies against the African chiefdoms. (15) Yet, for Dutch-Afrikaners, particularly in the Cape and Transvaal, this dominance was not yet complete. At the Cape the Afrikaner Bond and its newspaper organ, De Zuid-Afrikaan, demanded that the Khosa lands be thrown open for colonization and development and that independent peasantries be pushed out to create a mass black labour force. Influenced by late-Victorian racist thought, the Zuid-Afrikaan in the 1880s produced a spate of editorials in which it, for the first time, spoke in grandiose terms of the mission of the "Teutonic race" and of the need to achieve a complete victory for the "great and noble race" over African society. (16)

Opposed to these demands was the Cape liberal tradition which, as Stanley Trapido has shown, drew support not only from missionaries, editors and administrators but also from a merchant class with an interest in the survival of a free peasantry. (17) The Zuid-Afrikaan realized that in some respects there were incompatible interests at stake. In an editorial of 1885 it wrote: "Do the farmers who want land and cheap native labour have the same interest as merchants who see in the native consumers? Indeed not ..." (18) Yet the Zuid-Afrikaan
advanced the argument that ultimately there was indeed a larger common interest between the Dutch-Afrikaner farming class and the English commercial and professional classes.

The Colonial population have, despite that which disturbs their unity, a common sense of purpose and common interests which can triumph in the long run over division. Not only are there in their hearts many ties which make them into one people (volk) but the great majority prefers British to Dutch rule, and the great majority must realize that they ought to toe one line in the struggle for existence against the natives. (19)

It was to this "people" (volk) that the term Africander or Afrikaner was applied by leading politicians of both Dutch and English descent. Changing economic conditions have thus led to an expression of volk identity in terms of common interests and ideology rather than of common descent and historical memories. James Rose-Innes, a leading Cape liberal, acknowledged this when he observed that he would have considered himself an Africander had he not subscribed to different views about the native question. (20) In the Transvaal, the apparently irreconcilable clash between burghers and outlanders led to the concept Africander being defined narrowly and in a way which differed sharply from the Cape definition. In a First Volksraad debate of 26 June 1895, F. G. Wolmarans (ex-Chairman of the First Volksraad) expressed the view that "those reared in Natal and the Cape Colony were to be distrusted as much as men of other nations ... A man might be an Africander in name, and by birth but not in heart and soul". (21) The Chairman of the Volksraad, Schalk Burger, declared that "the word Africander should be interpreted as Transvaaler. Everyone from beyond the borders of the Republic must be viewed as a stranger, no matter if he came from the Free State, the Colony, England or Holland, etc." (22) The Jameson Raid and the South African war meant the eclipse of the Cape definition of Africanderhood. Subsequently, Afrikaner identity would increasingly be couched in terms of descent and cultural tradition. However, the goal of gaining effective control over African land and labour would remain the same. This formed a base upon which the political platform of Afrikaner nationalism would be built in the twentieth century.

The closing of the frontier together with the complete English dominance of trade, industry and government jobs meant that the economic opportunities for Dutch-Afrikaners were fast shrinking by the end of the nineteenth century. Some found work in the mines, but on the farms a large and growing class of poor whites was developing. "Poor whites" is perhaps a misnomer, for very often these people were destitute, illiterate and unable to find any work - an underclass that, in Marx's terms, was "passively rotting away". Ignorant and illiterate, they were equipped only for farm work. But if they entered the service of a farmer for wages as low as ten shillings a month they were despised by the blacks and considered pariahs by their own people. (23)

The South African war showed how far the class cleavages had developed within Dutch-Afrikaner society. By the end of the war more than a fifth of the Afrikaners in the field were fighting at the side of the British. Of the roughly 5,000 "joiners" in this war, the vast majority had been bijwoners (tenant farmers). In an important sense their treason was a rebellion against class exploitation. A recent study cites evidence of serious pre-war bijwoner discontent. In the 1880s and 1890s they often had to go on commando against Africans without any recompense to defend the property of landholders, while their own families were destitute. The Joiners of the Boer War clearly hoped that the British would offer them a better dispensation. (24)
The political context of the 1850s and 1860s can be described as that of merely nominal representative government. In the Transvaal and Orange Free State, the predominance of subsistence farming and a weak tax base produced factionalism and largely powerless political centres. Attempts to create a spirit of nationality were largely the work of outsiders. In the Cape Colony, the political centre was much stronger but in Dutch-Afrikaner eyes there existed no real arena for power contests. Power was effectively in the hands of the British governor and Parliament was seen as a transient English institution where the conflicting claims of Cape Town and Grahamstown-Port Elizabeth were being thrashed out. In the rural areas the impact of government laws and institutions was hardly felt. Field-cornets still performed a large part of government functions. Merchant capital was steadily extending its economic control and with it British cultural influence but it was not necessarily a revolutionary influence. It did not aim at transforming productive relations and tended to form alliances with or act as political spokesman for the dominant class in the rural areas. (25) It is in this context that one must understand the ambivalence of the Zuid-Afrikaan which at times resigned itself to the gradual assimilation of the Dutch nationality and language to English and at other times vigorously protested against British cultural pretensions and called for Dutch-Afrikaner grievances to be redressed.

The expanding Cape economy and growing government revenue, particularly as a result of the development of the Diamond Fields, dissolved the Dutch-Afrikaner political apathy of the preceding decades. The politicization of latent ethnic ties was the result of the need to put a political movement together which could promote especially farming interests, which were under-represented in Parliament. Why no Anglo-Dutch farmers' party was formed has not yet been fully investigated (26), but it seems important that the Dutch-Afrikaner farmers in the east were relatively poorer in having switched less successfully to wool farming and that they were not involved in the Eastern Province separatist movement of the 1860s which had cleaved Cape politics. In societies where class and ethnic ties tend to coincide rather than cross-cut, it seems almost inevitable that political entrepreneurs who seek to establish or maintain a following rely on primordial ties to distinguish between "us" and "them". (27)

It is in this connection that the so-called discovery of Cape Dutch-Afrikaners' ties with the republics in the north, in the period 1869-1881, be seen. Citing several statements from Dutch papers, Van Jaarsveld argues that "the Cape Afrikaners found the road to themselves via the Republic". (28) Yet these statements expressing indignation about the annexation of Basutoland and the Diamond Fields were mostly made in the mid-1870s, long after the events. And the reason why these events were built as a grievance seems less related to any discovery of an ethnic identity than to the need to mobilize local political support for entry into Cape politics.

The annexation of the Transvaal and the successful burgher rebellion of 1880-81 were successfully utilized for local political mobilization, especially by the Afrikaner Bond. Hofmeyr, who in 1881 was quick to forgive and extol the British, took control of the Afrikaner Bond in 1883, which gave him a firm political base. The proportion of the Dutch-Afrikaner representatives in Parliament increased from an average of 32 to 56 per cent for the period 1854 to 1884, to just under 50 per cent in the last sixteen years of the century. From the mid-1880s this bloc dominated Cape politics. Yet Hofmeyr clearly subordinated ethnic or cultural demands to the material objectives of his supra-ethnic Afrikaanderdom and to Cape colonial interests. Despite the Bond's predominant position in the Cape Parliament and despite its commitment to promote the unity of all Afrikaners, it did not help to ease the financial plight of the republics by getting the Cape government to pay out their share of the custom duties or to enter into a customs agreement with them as proposed by both Kruger and Brand. (29)
The advent of Responsible Government also put the amendment of the Cape constitution on the agenda. André du Toit recently traced the evolution in the political thinking of the Dutch-Afrikaners since the 1850s when their spokesmen accepted the low non-racial franchise. (30) In the first stage the popular franchise was supported as something essential for the attainment of the goal of representative self-government to replace colonial "despotism". Two arguments were advanced for having equal and shared voting rights in a plural society. The first was that it may serve to counteract what the Zuid-Afrikaan called "the fictitious inequality of wealth". A low franchise would favour the Dutch-Afrikaners and would prevent the wealthy from looking "with contempt on the poor, because he depends on him for that which wealth alone cannot provide". (31) The second argument was that non-racial popular representative institutions would serve as a necessary safety valve, which was considered more important than asserting social and ethnic prejudices.

From the mid-1860s, however, disillusionment with the low franchise and the constitution gained the upper hand. The Zuid-Afrikaan no longer believed that the constitution would counteract economic inequalities. Furthermore, non-white electoral support for English "merchants and traders" gave rise to expressions of anti-democratic sentiments, strong racial prejudices and an insistence that the constitution be changed. (32) Self-government from now on became an exclusive notion discussed in terms of Afrikaanderism. It basically related to whites but the Cape Coloureds were not quite excluded, and the Zuid-Afrikaan at times found it necessary to point out that the demands of Afrikaanderism concerning the Dutch language would benefit the Dutch-speaking Coloureds too. (33) Afrikaanderism, as enunciated by Hofmeyr and his organ, the Zuid Afrikaan, was concerned with limiting African representation, which increased sharply in 1884 when the Cape annexed the greater part of the Transkei territories. The big constitutional question, according to the Zuid-Afrikaan in 1889, was to weld the Dutch-Afrikaners and the British fellow-colonists into an Afrikaner nation and to incorporate the Africans into colonial society but to exclude them from that nation. (34) The constitutional amendments of 1887 and 1892-3 sharply reduced the African share of the total poll. It considerably curtailed the Bond's hostility to the non-white franchise. With the help of the Cape liberals it succeeded, in 1898, in attracting a considerable number of African votes. By the turn of the century, Trapido concludes, non-white representation was becoming part of the political culture of the Cape, accepted by both parties as a necessary safety valve allowing for the controlled release of political energies.

To an important extent the absence of parties in the republics (neither the Progressives in the Transvaal nor the Afrikaner Bond in the Free State can be viewed as parties in the modern sense of the word) shaped the populist style of politics in the two republics. Through memorials, opposition was whipped up against the construction of railways, the grip foreign merchants had on the economy, the growth of English in schools (promoted by wealthy farmers), and the lack of government sympathy for popular demands. Several well supported memorials also requested the unification of the two republics. However, there were no parties which could turn these populist demands into a political strategy. Memorials often involved Afrikaner nationality in support of local demands, but the effect was to prop up local nationalism rather than a sustained pan-Afrikaner movement.

(c) Changes in political generations

In the period 1850 to 1910 distinctions appeared among three different generations within the broad framework of ethnic politics. The first generation, of which Hofmeyr, Brand and Burgers were the main representatives, can be seen as liberal modernizers trying to reconcile traditional Dutch-Afrikaner society to British imperialism. The second generation, represented by S. J. du Toit, Kruger and F. W. Reitz, rebelled against the way in which the first generation allowed traditional society to be undermined. It sought to conserve traditional society while pursuing modernization on their own rather than British terms. The third generation of Hertzog and Smuts (before 1907) were secular nationalists who sought to achieve a synthesis between conserving traditional society and responding to the
demands of capitalist development in a modern state.

In pushing the claims of the Dutch language, Hofmeyr did not work with the concept of any absolute rights or see Dutch as embodying the spirit of the people. Dutch was simply a tool by which a unilingual, culturally backward people could be induced to improve their literacy, reading habits and general background. Ultimately the goal was to put together a political constituency in which the Dutch-Afrikaner population, in a vague sense, could claim parity with English speakers and be reconciled to both the English-speaking colonists and the British empire. Once reconciliation and a "sane feeling of nationality" had been achieved it would matter little if Dutch as a language disappeared.

In the late 1870s Hofmeyr's approach was challenged by a new generation headed by S. J. du Toit and expressing itself in De Patriot. A new stratum of teachers and clergymen, what Seton-Watson calls the language manipulators, whose livelihood depended on mastery of a language (36), sensed that the fight for Dutch was a losing struggle because it had become as much a foreign language as English for the great majority of Dutch-Afrikaners. To counter the headway English was making in schools and among DBC members, the spoken language of Afrikaans had to be elevated to a national language, a close connection had to be established between language and nationality, and a distinctive Afrikaner outlook had to be cultivated. Moreover, the secularist trend of the education ordinances of 1859 and 1865 had to be reversed and the Church's influence over the minds of the young had to be restored by securing the principle of confessional religious instruction in the schools. (37) Du Toit also wanted to build a coalition on a base different from Hofmeyr's. Hofmeyr clearly had a coalition between the Afrikaner landholders and well-disposed English colonists in mind - he once said that he would rather have five English colonists join the Bond than a hundred Dutch-Afrikaners. (38) Du Toit, on the other hand, had in mind the mobilization of all "nationally inclined" Afrikaners, including lower class Afrikaners. The upper class scorned Du Toit's strategy and his championing of Afrikaans. Du Toit's Patriot was denounced in the Zuid-Afrikaan with the words: "Brandy and the Patriot have this in common that they are enemies of civilisation." In the Orange Free State a correspondent of the Friend reported that, as news, the Patriot was "not only read by the lowly bijwoners amongst us but by civilized people as well". (39) Clearly seeing Du Toit as a threat, Hofmeyr successfully manoeuvred to get control of the Afrikaner Bond.

In the Free State, Brand was succeeded by Reitz, seen by some as the first Afrikaans poet. In reaction to the growth of English influence under Brand, Reitz vigorously promoted the Dutch culture and republican independence. In the Transvaal, the rebellion of Kruger against the Burgers government did not so much represent the advent of a new generation as a throwback to traditional frontier society. The traditionalists rejected the modernization of the state under Burgers and especially his introduction of secular education. Whatever state education there was - and they did not want much - had to be based on religion and taught only through the medium of Dutch. The traditionalists were also uncompromising in their demand for a Transvaal-Afrikaner state, resisting citizenship not only for English outlanders but Cape Dutch-Afrikaners as well.

(d) Local nationalism and the international context

For both treasury and military reasons Great Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century created an empire of association in South Africa run by local clients and collaborators. (40) Winning the Cape Dutch-Afrikaners over to the role of sub-imperial agents was the touchstone of this policy. It has often been suggested, both by contemporary politicians and by historians, that the Jameson Raid, together with growing Transvaal economic independence, irrevocably destroyed this strategy. Quoting Chamberlain, Robinson and Gallagher concluded that Afrikaner nationalists all over South Africa were coming together again, as they had in the first Transvaal war of 1881, in defence of republicanism. The nationalist reaction had set the politics of South Africa against imperial federation.
and in favour of a republican future. Only direct intervention could now prevent South Africa from drifting out of the empire and weld it into a British dominion. (41)

Leaving aside the issue whether Britain entered the war to restore traditional British supremacy or to construct a modern policy in South Africa (42), the question is whether Afrikaner nationalism stood poised for victory after the Jameson Raid. Certainly the Raid severely dented the image of Britain and its local agents, but it is remarkable how little Hofmeyr, apart from breaking with Rhodes, changed his collaborationist course. In the political crisis preceding the war Hofmeyr and Schreiner put all the pressure on the Transvaal to make concessions. (43)

Even the two Afrikaner republics did not rush into each other's arms after the Jameson Raid. Between 1889, when a political and trade treaty between the Free State and the Transvaal was signed, and 1895, relations between them deteriorated. Disagreements led Reitz of the Free State to the conviction that Kruger was deliberately trying to frustrate the ideal of republican unity. After the Raid, President Steyn of the Free State, in a letter of 13 June 1896, proposed that negotiations be opened about the unification of the two republics. As the Free State was tied to the Transvaal by a defensive treaty, Steyn was keen to acquire a moderating influence over the Transvaal. To Steyn's disenchantment the Transvaal waited more than eight months to respond to his overtures. A recent analysis suggests that it was only after Chamberlain, in January 1897, attacked Kruger's handling of the Outlander grievances that Kruger decided to pursue closer unity with the Free State. (44) Merriman, in October 1899, was convinced that it was only the unyielding demands of Milner in the preceding year that converted the Free Staters, "our best and firmest friends ... into stern and determined foes". (45)

Undoubtedly the existence of an increasingly independent Transvaal state would, as Milner feared, promote the growth of Afrikaner nationalism throughout South Africa. (46) Yet so strong were the conflict of interests between the states and colonies, the pull of local nationalisms and the divisive effect of imperialism and capitalism that it was only Milner's determination to crush Afrikanerdom that produced a measure of pan-Afrikaner unity that never existed before. Britain's grand illusion was not so much restoring imperial supremacy (47); it was anticipating a full-blown Afrikaner nationalism in the Raid's aftermath.

Conclusion

Among the colonists of Dutch, German and French descent ethnic sentiments, as distinct from those of class or caste, were slow to develop despite a high degree of endogamy and shared culture. Even the name Afrikaner went through several permutations in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. This fumbling to find and define an ethnic name gives some indication of how difficult it was to put a nationalist movement together. Certainly political impulses, such as the Transvaal rebellion of 1880-81, produced protests, which suggests that feelings of nationality were present. Taking a larger view, one can conclude that political and economic structures described in the previous section provided the potential for nationalist mobilization. Yet to a real extent the development of nationalism had to await both war and the fuller development of capitalism as a social as well as an economic system. Merchant capitalism could not break the parochial mould of subsistence farming. Education, a small-scale operation, was largely the concern of the rich, who even in the republics demanded that priority be given to instruction in English. Only by the 1890s did Dutch-Afrikaner leaders become aware of the full impact of capitalist development on their people. The poor-white issue leaped into prominence in the Transvaal, the Free State and the Cape. In the Transvaal state, absentee owners held more than half of the land and they were
making inroads in the Free State, particularly in the northern and eastern parts. It is significant that it was Steyn, one of the first nationalist leaders in the modern sense of the word, who issued a warning to the Free Staters that their sons would in due course become tenants on their fathers' land. In 1898 Steyn remarked that the struggle of South Africa was not between Dutch and English but between individualism and capitalism, which was robbing the workers of their living and identity. (48)

The war produced a much greater sense of ethnic community than ever before existed. But as important was the advent after the war of a modern, capitalist state in South Africa. (49) Of particular significance was the introduction of compulsory education for whites. In the race for power in the new state no political leader could afford to remain indifferent about the state of education and the language of instruction. For controlling the schools and building a political constituency a separate language would be an excellent device. But that language had to be vigorous. The hour of the predikanten, the teachers, the poets and the historians had come.

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Notes

(1) In his biography of D. F. Malan, the historian H. B. Thom gives this nationalist account of the nationalism of his subject. "Ons het hier te doen met iets wat bale diep is: in'n mens se afstamming, in die diepte van die gees, van waar dit die rasionele denke beïnvloed en dikwels beslissend daarop inwerk. So was dit ook met dr. Malan. In die diepte van sy siel was hy ware nasionalis." (H. B. Thom, D. F. Malan [Cape Town, 1980]), p. 11.


(4) John Brittey, Nationalism and the State (Manchester, 1982).


(9) I am indebted to John Lonsdale of Cambridge University who, in a lecture, constructed such a model of West African nationalism. He should not be held accountable for my application of the model to late nineteenth century South African history.


(12) P. J. van der Merwe, Trek (Cape Town, 1945), p. 60.
(18) Ibid., 14 April 1885.
(19) Ibid.
(20) James Rose Innes, Autobiography (Cape Town, 1949), p. 3.
(22) Ibid.
(28) Van Jaarsveld, op. cit., p. 104.
(29) Lewsen, op. cit., p. 127.
(31) Zuid-Afrikaan, 6 October 1853.
(32) Ibid., 3 May 1866.
(33) Ibid., 4 November 1882.
(34) Ibid., 21 February 1889.
(38) Hofmeyr, op. cit., pp. 43-44, 374.
(39) Zuid-Afrikaan, 23 April 1879, p. 407; S. F. Malan, Politieke Strominge onder die Afrikaners van die Vrystaatsrepubliek (Durban, 1982), p. 92.
(40) Schreuder, The Scramble for Southern Africa, 1877-1895 ...
(43) Lewsen, op. cit., pp. 210, 261.
(44) Malan, op. cit., pp. 277-78.
(45) Lewsen, op. cit., p. 216.
(47) Robinson and Gallagher, Africa and the Victorians, p. 461.
(49) For a new evaluation of Milner’s Reconstruction, see Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, “Lord Milner and the South African State”, in History Workshop 8, 1979, pp. 50-81.