Historical Scholarship and the Legitimatization of Apartheid Policy in South Africa, 1948 – 1994

Paul Uche Mbakwe, Ph.D. and Chidi Ejikeme Osuagwu, Ph.D.

Senior Lecturers, Department of History and International Relations, Abia State University, PMB. 2000, Uturu, Nigeria.

Abstract: *Apartheid was a system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced through legislation by the National Party (NP) governments, the ruling party from 1948 to 1994, under which the rights, associations, and movements of the majority black inhabitants were curtailed and Afrikaner minority rule was maintained. Legislation classified inhabitants into four racial groups-'black', 'white', 'colored', and Indian'. The article examined the way that the different racial groups in South Africa in most historical texts were presented. Attention was focused on the nature and extent of ethnic stereotyping in most of the publications and the endorsement of particular social and political attitudes relevant to the particular circumstances in the apartheid South Africa. The overall object of this study was to assess how far and in what way these texts formed part of the legitimatization process of the apartheid regime. Texts books as medium of instruction are capable of reflecting and transmitting dominant social values and the study of history is a particularly potent means of doing so especially when the interpretation of past events is used to give meaning to the present..Obviously, there may be many interpretations of history which ought not to be thought of as a body of permanent truth. Nonetheless, history can be used throughout the world to justify particular forms of social structure and government. Therefore, the central thesis of this paper is that historical scholarship was used to justify the system of racial segregation in South Africa.*
Key Words: *Legitimatization, Apartheid, Education, History, Ideology, Textbooks, Nationalism, Inequality, Legislation*

I.   Introduction

The full implication of the study of historical documents on South Africa can only be appreciated if it is set squarely within the context of apartheid, South African society where a small white minority had access to political power and economic privilege, while over four-fifth of the population were disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged[1]. This manifestly unequal system was based on a person's skin - colour, with racial inequality formally enshrined in the South African constitution in 1949. Apartheid laws defined the freedom and entitlements of every member of the society, ranging from where he or she lived, worked and played to the type of education that children received. All societies operate through some forms of social control operating alongside the dominant values and belief systems of the society, which ultimately help to sustain the given social order. Direct forms of control are found in the legal system of apartheid South Africa, which rested on the use of force.

Education is one institution through which children acquire socially approved values and attitudes, and text books (as a medium of instruction) are capable of both reflecting and transmitting dominant social values. The study of history is a particularly potent means of transmitting values especially when the interpretation of past events is used to give meaning to the present. Clearly, there may be many interpretations of history, which ought not to be thought

of as a body of permanent truths. Nonetheless, history can be, and frequently is used throughout the world to justify particular forms of social structure and government. The study therefore examines the way that different ethnic groups were presented in South African history textbooks. Attention will be focused on the nature and extent of ethnic stereotyping in some of the texts and the endorsement of particular social and political attitudes relevant to the peculiar circumstances in the Apartheid South Africa. This article assesses how far and in what way these texts form part of the legitimization process in South Africa. What is of particular relevance to this study is the extent to which historical documents were used to justify the system of racial separation during the apartheid era. The main argument in this work therefore is that historical documents and textbooks (especially those that stressed white superiority and excluding alternative points of view) were viable weapons used to perpetuate racial prejudice as well as the white dominance of the apartheid South African society.

II.   Conceptual Framework

The key concept in this paper is legitimatization. Legitimatization may be defined at least loosely as the process by which consent is secured among members of a society to the existing social and political arrangements. According to Patrick O'Neil, legitimacy can be defined as a value whereby something or someone is recognized and accepted as right and proper.[2] In

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[1] Dean Elizabeth (ed) History of Black and White, UNESCO, Paris, 1983, p.1

[2] Patrick O' Neil, Essentials of comparative politics, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004) pp. 36 – 40.

other words, a legitimate institution or person is widely accepted and recognized by the public. Max Weber is another authority of this conceptual tool, who argued that political legitimacy comes in three forms: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal[3]. Legitimacy thus confers authority and power. In the case of states, we know that they wield a great deal of coercive force. Without legitimacy, a state would have to use the continuous threat of force to maintain order-a difficult task indeed. Traditional legitimacy often embodies historical myths and legends, as well as the continuity between past and present[4]. The apartheid policy in South Africa assumed somewhat traditional legitimacy in the sense that it was built on history and continuity. The longer a political system has been in place, the more institutionalized it becomes, as it has the weight of history on its side. Change therefore becomes difficult to imagine if an institution has existed ''since time immemorial''[5.] Legitimacy is closely related to the sociological concept of ideology.

In material terms, white supremacy in South Africa means that the whites control the wealth of the country, as well as the control of the instrument of coercive force. For such a system of domination to be viable and lasting, it is necessary that the dominant group should maintain ascendancy in the symbolic sphere as well; that is, the exercise of economic and other powers need to be backed by an appropriate ideology. It is important for those who benefit most from these arrangements that they should be widely accepted as legitimate throughout the society. From the point of view of the dominant group, it is desirable as many members as possible of subordinate group should at least acquiesce in their position in society. Ideally, the latter should regard their subordinate status as inevitable, natural and even God-given. This reduces the need to use coercive means to secure their compliance.

In order to sustain existing patterns of wealth and privilege, the dominant elite needs to be able to count on the enthusiastic support of a proportion of the members of its own group in any conflict with subordinate groups, and the acquiescence of most of the rest. Those with power, therefore, characteristically tend to encourage beliefs and outlooks favorable to the prevailing social order, and to discourage any that threaten to undermine it. This may occur in spite of government's efforts to reverse the trend. In practice, popular consciousness is cultivated in varied and diffuse way - through the values transmitted in the home, churches, schools, the armed forces, the press, entertainment and other institutions. These may all play an ideological role to the extent that the beliefs and values they foster, or the world-views they help to cultivate, promote the endorsement of prevailing patterns of inequality. This is not to say that such institutions are all the same in their cultural impact, since there may still be important value differences among them. It must be noted that the major institutions of any society are typically the main means through which a dominant ideology is propagated, whether or not they are under direct political control and in whatever form any such control or regulation might take.

History is an account of past events, and one of its uses is to make sense of the present. People's perception of their present day world is conditioned by their understanding of what has gone before. Different versions of history can lead to different interpretations of the present. School history may be ideological in so far as it offers an understanding of the world favorable to the continuation of white supremacy and the policy of apartheid. The ideological role of history teaching is an isolated phenomenon. It is one among many interlocking institutionalized cultural forces in South African society .Like other ideologies, the ideology of White supremacy is not something that can be reduced to a set of neat proposition's which can then be subjected to definitive scholarly examination. For one thing, the importance of an ideological statement lies not in its truth or falsity, but in the function it serves in justifying particular social arrangements. Accurate statements make better ideology than falsehoods because their legitimate power is more difficult to undermine. What is important about an ideological statement is that it should be convincing to those who need to be convinced. It is the use to which it can be put that gives a statement its ideological character.

From the point of view of ideological efficacy, it matters little whether it is claimed that apartheid is necessary because blacks are congenitally inferior to whites or merely cultural inferiority, so long as the idea can be made to serve the purpose of justifying the policies of white supremacy. The ideology of apartheid had many variants which commanded varying degrees of credibility in different sections of the South African population. Ideologically based versions enjoyed endorsement among sections of the white Afrikaner population[6]. White nationalists had always insisted on the view that God ordained that the races should not mix; embracing explanations that stressed cultural factors and racial inferiority of the blacks. It was therefore more common then to refer to the difference between various population groups as their distinctive national destinies. Having said

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[3] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation", in H. H. Garth and C. Wright Mills Trans. And eds; From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (New York: oxford University Press, 1958) pp. 77 – 128.

[4] See, Max Weber Ibid, "Politics as a Vocation", in H. H. Garth and C. Wright Mills trans. And eds; From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (New York: oxford University Press, 1958) pp. 77 – 128.
[5] Patrick O' Neil, Op cit, p. 37.

[6] See Josey, Charles Conant, The Philosophy of Nationalism, (Washington D. C.: Cliveden Press, 1983), p. 41 and Samuel Francis, a Key White Nationalism writer, a movement that rejects equality as an ideal and insists on an enduring core of human nature transmitted by heredity.

this, it remains true that the twin notions of white superiority and the need to maintain separation between the races were the very heart of the ideology that justifies the prevailing pattern of inequality in South Africa.

Origin and Modus Operandi of Apartheid Policy

Apartheid was adopted as the main platform of the Afrikaner National Party which came to power in 1948 and dedicated to preserving white supremacy. In practical terms, apartheid meant the systematic separation of South Africa's population along racial line, thereby formalizing and extending the prevailing system of racial inequality[7]. The idea of racial segregation started as far back as 1652 when Reinbeck, Van Jan arrived at the cape under the auspices of the Dutch East Indian company (DEIC). Reinbeck, who later became the first governor of the cape settled in the Table Bay, encountered and clashed with the Bantu-speaking black groups, became increasingly displaced in the face of white expansion. During the nineteenth century, apartheid laws were passed by the National Party depriving Africans of legal rights to land and "native reserves". Controls on the movement, settlement and economic activity of black people were further consolidated by both the British and the Boers during the twentieth century so that by the time the National Party came to power in 1948, the practice of racial segregation and discrimination was well entrenched[8.]

Apartheid was not only a system of racial separation; it also served the needs of white economy. The creation of 'native reserves' severely limited the land resources available to black people while the imposition taxes forced them to seek cash employment in white enterprises. This system operated to the direct advantage of white employers who, partly through the process of recruiting black migrant labour and by barring men from bringing their families to the place of employment, were able to keep wages to the barest minimum[9].

As the South African economy expanded during the mid- nineteenth century, an increase in the number of black Africans in urban areas seeking for jobs occurred which accelerated during the twentieth century as a result of expanding and flourishing South African economy. At the same time, impoverished rural white Afrikaners[10]-- made up of the white settlers from Netherlands and other parts of continental Europe were also migrating to the cities where they competed with urban blacks in the labor market. In response to this situation, a complex body of legislation such as the implementation of some of the recommendations of the Tomlinson Commission was introduced over the years to protect white workers. This legislation ensured that white workers were given preferential treatment through a system of 'job reservation' whereby skilled work was reserved for whites.

The government also tried to create border industries that would allow Bantu workers to remain in the Reserves and travel daily to work. By these measures the Tomlinson Commission hoped to use the increasing work capability of the growing Bantu population and so halt the continual drift to the established industrial centers. Despite measures introduced to curb it, black urbanization increased with South Africa's economic growth and was used as a rallying cry by the National Party in the 1948 elections[11]. The perceived threat to white supremacy from the numerically dominant black group was magnified by events occurring elsewhere on the African continent. The advent of Black Nationalism, independence movements and eventual decolonization elsewhere in Africa brought the specter of black majority rule ever closer to South Africa's borders. South Africa's white leaders, through policies of apartheid had attempted to contain black political aspirations by creating a number of separate 'black states' as the Transkei, Venda, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei within South Africa while at the same time preserving white economic privilege.

The emphasis on separation of 'races' enshrined in apartheid laws affected all racial groups in South Africa. The basis of apartheid is segregation. Each group was therefore socially, politically and as far as possible economically segregated with their respective rights rigidly defined[12]. For example in 1949, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act made marriage between white and non-white illegal. The population Registration Act of 1950, with its later amendments, provides for the classification of South Africa's population into four main groups: white, black, Asian (Indian) and colored. The Group Areas Act was passed which aimed at segregating the urban areas, by declaring certain areas for whites only and other areas for non-whites. But

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[7] Dean Elizabeth, History of Black and White, op. cit. p. 3.

[8] Dean Elizabeth, ibid, p. 4

[9] See Ehiedu, Iweriebor, "The ideology of Black Consciousness in South Africa: continuity and Change", Essays in history 3, (April 1983), pp. 30 – 39 and Paul U Mbakwe, "Black Nationalism in South Africa", Post graduate seminar Paper, University of Calabar, 2003, p. 15.

[10] 'Afrikaner' – The idea of Afrikaner" came about in the 16th century when one Hendrick Bibacult described himself as an Afrikaner in 1704.

[11] Dean, Elizabeth, Op. cit, p. 5

[12] Comevin, M, Apartheid: Power and Historical Falsification, (Paris: UNESCO. 1980), p. 6.

perhaps, the most sinister move by the government was the passing of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950. The Act was designed to stamp out communism which the Nationalists complained was undermining the stability of the government and encouraging Africans to rebel. But in effect the Act was much broader; bringing any liberal actions under the umbrella of 'communism' and giving the Minister of Justice power to name any person a communist and so prevent him from taking any part in public affairs[13]. Really, the Act was used to silence liberal opinions.

Geopolitical Structure and Pattern of Distribution of Wealth

Geographically, South Africa is considered by proponent of apartheid as divided into separate black and white territories. 'White' South Africa consists of four provinces. The Transvaal, the Orange Free State, Natal and the Cape Province were British colonies and were united in 1910 to form the union of South Africa, a dominion within the British Empire. It became part of the British Commonwealth in 1931 but in 1961, South Africa became a republic and withdrew from the commonwealth. Within the so-called 'white' South Africa, only white citizens hold the franchise and enjoy the benefits of a prosperous economy.

The apex of apartheid policy was the creation of a number of so-called 'black states', 'homelands' or 'Bantustans' within South Africa's national boundaries. These 'black states' were created partly around the former 'native reserves' and were intended to accommodate each of South Africa's main linguistic black group. The ultimate objective for creating these "black states" was that they would eventually include all black South Africans and become 'independent republics' with limited sovereignty which will form a federation with "white" South Africa. Four 'black states - Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei were made independent in 1959 following the recommendations of the F.R.Tomlinson's **Commission**[14]. It should he stressed that this process had met with much opposition from black people within South Africa because these republics were not recognized by the rest of the world. The opposition was led by the African National Congress (A.N.C) who along with other groups organized series of protests from the early 1950's.

Two distinct contradictions arose out of the structure of black states. First, these territories together comprised only 14 percent of the total land area of South Africa and are incapable of supporting the black population, which accounts for more than 75 percent of South Africa's total population. Secondly, the South African economy continues to be totally dependent on black labor. In fact there is a growing demand for skilled as well as unskilled non-white labor as the economy expands. Thus, the idea of separate black and white nations seems totally unviable for the blacks. Rather, the independent home lands, like the reserves, seem destined merely to be reservoirs of black labor for the South African economy, while no longer constituting a burden on either the exchequer or the conscience of white South Africa[15].

More than 50 percent of black population resides in white South Africa[16]. Here, they were regarded as 'visitors', having, like their counterparts in other areas, no voting rights and subject to forced 'repatriation' to 'homelands' with which they may have no direct association. Those black people were at greatest risk of deportation. They were assigned citizenship of an 'independent' homeland and automatically deprived of their rights of South African citizenship. In white areas, black people live in specially designated townships such as Soweto, or in accommodation provided by employers at the workplace from which families were normally excluded. Strict controls were placed on the movement of black people into and within white areas through a system of pass laws. All black people were required to carry a "reference book" (or pass) which contains details about the holder. Failure to produce the reference book on demand was considered criminal offence[17].

Also residing and working in white South Africa were the other two non-white population groups - Indians and coloured. These groups, like the blacks, live in strictly defined geographical locations. Under the Group Areas Act of 1950 (and subsequent amendments) areas had been set aside for the exclusive occupation of the different population groups. In practical terms this had meant mass eviction and resettlement of people to enforce segregation. Like blacks, Indian and coloured people did not vote in white South Africa. Special councils were established by South African government to represent these two groups aimed at advising them on policies and programs of government. Despite the appearance of some measure of political autonomy in this system, overall political power was still retained by South African Government. It should also be noted that these councils were by no means universally recognized by the people they are intended to serve. This was particularly so in the case of colored people[18].

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[13] Toyin Falola (ed.), "The Apartheid Era", in Contemporary Africa, Vol. 5, (Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2003), pp. 216 – 217.

[14] Toyin Falola (ed.) Contemporary Africa, Ibid, pp. 218 – 219.

[15] This information was extracted from appendix 1 of "Population Distribution in Province and black state' as contained in South Africa in 1979, p. 26.

[16] Paul Hartmann, An Analysis of South African History Textbooks, UNESCO, 1980, p. 2

[17] Paul Hartmann, Ibid, p. 3.

[18] See South Africa, 1979, p. 26 Op. cit.

On the issues of population and wealth in South Africa, South African society was characterized by gross inequality between groups. The whites, which constitute only one-sixth of the total population, control a disproportionate share of the wealth of the country.[19] The average earnings in men – agricultural sectors as at 1976 showed that whites earned 5890 rands as against 'blacks' 1278 rands at an index of 100 and 22 respectively. The other groups; Indian and coloured did not fare better even though they were still better than the earnings of the blacks which ranked lowest in the statistics[19].

Apartheid System in South Africa: A Historical Justification

Apartheid is not only a set of policies designed to maintain white political and economic domination; it is also a political philosophy which underpins these policies. In a nutshell, apartheid was derived from a sense of superiority on the part of whites as well as from the growth of Afrikaner nationalism[20]. These policies emphasize the rational for cultural differentiation and racial separation.

One of the most common stories (myths) perpetuated by the proponents or apologists of the apartheid state was that when the early Europeans arrived at the Table Bay, the territory that constituted the present day South Africa was inhabited by only a small number of indigenous people, the Khoisan (Hottentots and Bushmen). According to Davenport, the Bantu-speaking people who formed the greater majority of South Africa's population were migrating South wards at the same time that the white stock-breeding farmers were extending their territorial settlement North and East. Thus, he argued that whites have as valid a claim to this territory as blacks. Antagonists of this scholarship have argued that the Bantu speaking blacks have inhabited this area (present-day South Africa) thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans[21]. If the views of the apologists were anything to write home about, it would mean that historical scholarship has aided the justification of the apartheid policy in South Africa.

In using history as a justification for the apartheid system in South Africa, apologists for the idea attempt to persuade the less-informed that the separation of racial groups was a natural state of affairs. In this context, the official year book of the Republic of South Africa states:

Over the centuries the various Black peoples settled in different regions where they evolved their own social and cultural systems and tribal organizations. It was only 120 years after the first white men settled in South Africa that there was any appreciable contact between Black and White. From this settlement pattern it followed naturally that relations between the various peoples of South Africa would form the separate land ownership, distinctive traditions, cultures, languages, as well as on the basis of differing stages of socio-economic development[22].

History is again invoked in support of apartheid in the same work where it was stated:

In the light of the country's multinational and historical realities, the majority of whites are convinced that relations between the white nation of the RSA and the various white peoples within the borders of present day South Africa cannot be satisfactorily regulated in a single integrated super state but rather on the historically tried basis of separate nation state, i.e. a system of political independence coupled with economic independence. This policy evolved from a philosophy forged and determined by the realities of more than three centuries - has in both official and common parlance become known as separate development or multinational development[23].

Thus, interpretations have tended to present South African history predominantly from a white point of view even after black South Africans had made visible strides. The curriculum taught in schools also reflected and legitimized the ethnically based stratification system that included the production of a semi-skilled black labor force, the socialization of black students to accept an inferior status, and the notion that social relations under apartheid were natural. The interpretation of South African history follows nationalist beliefs and this reinforced racial prejudice. Even books read in the white schools had to be selected from special lists that excluded alternative points of view. By these measures the government hoped to perpetuate the superiority of the white race; educating white children to believe in white superiority and training the non-whites to accept 'their position in the community[24].

Attempts made to write history from the black perspectives started after South Africa's first non-racial elections in April 1994 won by Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress (ANC). Efforts to build a stable democracy were

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[19] Paul U. Mbakwe, "Histography of South African History" Unpublished paper, Abia State University, Uturu, 2013, p. 7.

[20] W. M. Macmillian, Bantu, Boer and Briton: The making of South African Native problems. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 51.

[21] See Paul Hartmann, An Analysis of South African History Textbooks, UNESCO, 1980, p. 5

[22] See official Year book of Republic of South Africa, Johannesburg, Van Ransburg Publications,1979, pp. 200 – 203.

[23] Ibid, p. 203

[24] Toyin Falola, (ed.) Education in a Settler Colony: South Africa", in Contemporary Africa, Vol.5, Op. cit., pp. 78 – 81.

accompanied by South Africa's history being rewritten in textbooks to include the achievements of the black ethnic groups and their historical figures.

III. Conclusions

The article examined the role of historical scholarship in the justification of apartheid system in South Africa from 1948 to 1994.The study tries to show the ways the invocation of history supported the policy of racial segregation in South Africa. In using history as instrument of legitimatization of apartheid, the apologists tried to persuade the not-much- informed that separation of racial groups was a natural state of affairs, and originating from the philosophy of whites racial superiority. It is in this context that this paper argues that racial policy in South Africa was invented to maintain the dominance of the white race by asserting superiority over the blacks. In the post- apartheid South Africa, writers and scholars on African history must intensify effort to revise the trend whereby whites are given undue elevation in the analysis of black – white relations. Attempts to build a stable democracy must be accompanied by South African history being rewritten to appreciate the achievements of black Africans, ethnic groups and their historical heroes.