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"Prize Negroes" and the Development of Racial Attitudes in the Cape Colony, South Africa"

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Introduction.

In 1842 a debate took place in the Legislative Council and the newspapers of the Cape Colony which provides a glimpse into the way racial attitudes developed in South Africa.

The Council, located in Cape Town, was composed of six official members, all government officials, including the governor, and five unofficial members, all of whom were leading citizens of Cape Town or its vicinity. Because of the official majority, it was unlikely that any significant measure would pass without the governor's approval.

The Council was far from representative of the colony's population. All its members were white, of course, and whites comprised only about 47 per cent of the Colony's population in 1840. Furthermore, the interests of the white population in the colony's eastern frontier regions were often quite different from those of the Cape Town area, and they were completely unrepresented. Thus, to the extent that white settlers influenced British policy in the Colony, Capetonians and their representatives on the Council did so disproportionately.

The issue before the Council on 26 March 1842 was whether the government should subsidize the immigration of Englishmen to augment the Colony's labor supply. Embedded in this question were issues that went to the heart of the Colony's culture.

Labor problems had plagued the colony since its beginning in the mid-17th century. The supposed solution was the importation of slaves, but the steps taken by the British to end the slave trade in the early 19th century and the increasing intensity of the movement to end slavery itself caused many colonists by the 1820s to conclude that slavery was more trouble than it was worth.¹ Despite these sentiments, it took action by London to end colonial slavery. Slavery was officially abolished throughout the empire in 1834, but before they were actually

free, ex-slaves had to endure another four years of "apprenticeship", a condition, as it was practiced in the Colony, almost identical to slavery.²

As actual emancipation approached (its exact date was 1 December 1838), near panic gripped many Cape farmers and their allies. Economic disaster caused by labor shortages was predicted. *De Zuid Afrikaan*, a paper sympathetic to the interests of Dutch farmers, urged action be taken to secure labor in advance of emancipation day: "It is hardly possible to expect any of these Apprentices (however well they may have been treated) will not fancy they may better themselves by quitting their masters for a while; it therefore becomes the duty of farmers collectively to guard against this evil." The paper argued that workers be recruited from Germany, India, and China, among other expedients.³

Others had similar ideas. For example, some colonists petitioned the state that freed Africans be brought from Sierra Leone to work.⁴ A correspondent to *De Zuid Afrikaan* urged the importation of "Hillmen" from India or "Kroomen" from Sierra Leone to provide labor, claiming that the colonists "will thrive...much better than we have hitherto done with our lazy slave labor and freemen."⁵ The editor responded that Indian "Hill coolies" were "very docile and easily managed...well limbed and active." But an essential ingredient of any stable labor supply would be a vagrant law that would keep workers under control. Otherwise, the colonists would face continued "impudence and irritating conduct, and the vexations and prevarications to which the Masters are at present exposed" from their current apprentices.⁶

The issue of vagrancy legislation is complex and debates were contentious, and though related to the subject at hand, they must be relegated to another setting. For the present, we will examine other measures by which the colonists sought to solve their labor problems and suggest some insights that they provide into the debate over race in the Colony.

Another plan was for colonists to take advantage of "Prize Negroes" or, as they were also called, "liberated Africans" to supplement their working population. These were Africans taken off slave ships intercepted by British patrols in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The ships were taken to the nearest available British-controlled port. This would sometimes be Jamestown on the island of St. Helena or Cape Town itself. Here the ships were condemned in Vice Admiralty courts. Africans thus freed became indentured servants. This practice had two phases: during the Napoleonic wars, slave ships were captured as enemy ships, a phase which ended with Napoleon's defeat.

The second phase began in 1839. Parliament authorized British patrols to intercept Portuguese ships if they gave evidence of being slavers, and the process resumed. Of the 9,133 Africans landed at St. Helena in the 1840s, 445 stayed there and survived. 2926 died before any disposition. Another 1,410 were transported to the Cape Colony to become indentured servants. The remainder was shipped to the West Indies.⁷ Christopher Saunders, who has pioneered the study of Prize Negroes at the Cape Colony, estimates that more than 5000 were landed there from all sources from 1808 until the late 1840s, and more than three thousand during the 1840s. The first condemned ship during the second phase arrived on December 25, 1839.⁸

Renewed access to "Prize Negroes" coincided with the fears of labor shortages in the aftermath of emancipation. Their introduction into the Colony promised to increase the complexity of its already complex ethnic and racial composition. The white population was, of course, divided into those of Dutch and English descent, and the Dutch were further divided between those who had accepted British rule, albeit grudgingly, made the best of it, and become at least partially anglicized; and those who had not, many of whom had demonstrated their discontent by joining the "Great Trek" into the interior of southern Africa in the mid-1830s.

There were also the remnants of the original human population of the Cape, the Khoisan (called "Hottentots" by Europeans), most of whom by the 1840s were to be found on the periphery of Cape society, both socially and geographically, where they served as cheap farm or urban labor. Then there were the newly freed slaves, a heterogeneous group whose origins can be found mostly along the east coast of Africa and Madagascar, intermixed with various peoples from south Asia. Many of these were Muslims, and Cape Town had an active

and growing Muslim community whose members were called Malays. Finally, Bantu-speaking Africans from beyond the colony's borders were filtering into the frontier regions. Many of these had entered the colony as refugees from the upheavals largely with the wars and migrations collectively called the Mfecane. Often they were hired as rural laborers.

George Napier, the governor, saw the Prize Negroes as a partial solution to labor shortages caused by emancipation. He welcomed their "beneficial tendency...both to the Colony and to these unfortunate people themselves."² *De Zuid Afrikaan's* editorialist hailed the first arrival of several hundred freed Africans in December 1839 as "a very large accession to the laboring population," which, under proper management, "will afford immediate and permanent relief to all classes of capitalists, or employers of labor...."¹⁰ The response of John Fairbairn, editor of the Colony's oldest independent paper, the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, was unenthusiastic but generally positive: Since the colony had failed to attract sufficient numbers of European immigrants, "we regard the introduction of Prize Negroes, from time to time, in moderate numbers, as the next best practicable mode of enlarging our command of labor."¹¹

Fairbairn's attitude indicates what many whites saw as the ideal solution to the perceived labor shortage: encouraging the immigration of Englishmen. Indeed, some prominent white residents, recognizing the necessity of additional labor, redoubled their efforts to attract English immigrants precisely because of the availability of liberated Africans, whose immigration they opposed for reasons that evidently result from race prejudice.

How "white" could the Cape Colony expect to be? What effects would the introduction of still another non-white group, the liberated Africans, have on social relations? Although the issues were rarely framed in these ways precisely, such questions underlay the debates over the solutions to the Colony's labor problems, and we will explore in this paper how prominent members of Cape society faced them.

When and how biologically based racism developed in what became South Africa has been debated for some time. Cape Colony whites had long viewed Africans and Asians negatively, but whether these negative attitudes were based on cultural differences or on supposed biologically determined qualities is less clear. The debate that occurred in the Legislative Council in 1842 and in the newspapers in the early 1840s may shed some light on this question also.

II.

The Legislative Council debate occurred in the context of increasing discussion in the colony at large of the efficacy of liberated Africans as the solution to labor problems. For example, one correspondent to the *Commercial Advertiser* argued that the Africans were "too young and ignorant" to be immediately useful to the colony. Thus it was necessary to recruit labor in Britain. To do so, some way must be found, the writer asserted, to present a more favorable image of the colony which, despite its many attractions, had the reputation of instability caused by frontier hostilities with Xhosa and other Bantu-speaking people. This writer did not oppose introduction of Africans; he believed, however, that they needed to be supplemented by British workers.

The central question was, were English preferable to Africans as workers? Just before the Council addressed the question, someone calling himself "Hudibras" wrote the *Commercial Advertiser* claiming that "the African is by far the most valuable and...suitable immigrant that can be introduced, and decidedly preferable to European laborers." This was in part because of the presence of "Hottentots and others of the colored race already in the Colony," which meant that plans for improving the Africans "will equally be shared by his colored brethren."

The clear implication of Hudibras's statement is that Africans are capable of "improvement". He evidently sees them as potentially valuable fellow citizens. "It is vain to say," he claims, "that nature has denied to colored race a taste for domestic happiness, [and] to say that they are not as susceptible to the pleasures of conjugal and parental ties as the European...." But Hudibras also suggests the limits to which African advancement is subjected: "I see no reason why the African should not come up to the standard of a peasant in any civilized country." This may imply a belief that social advancement is limited by some inherent qualities, the level of

peasant being the most to which many can aspire. But skin color or race seems to the writer not the decisive factor at this level, because that is evidently as far as some people in "civilized" countries also can expect to rise. There is no indication, however, that Hudibras believes Africans can rise much higher than this, but, just the same, no statement that they cannot. But the key point is that improvement, at least enough to be satisfactory to the writer, is possible.

Hudibras did not think immigration of English workers should be encouraged, because of their racism. They "would be decidedly prejudicial to the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' already in our colony" and would "greatly and permanently retard the civilization, the moral and social improvement of the colored race. They would be treated with more contempt and degradation than ever, and would continue to sink gradually on the scale of society...."

"The principal wish of the boer," he continued, "is to be able to turn round to the Hottentot and to say, 'I can do without you, I have got a better class of laborers, and you may return to your original state of barbarism.'" The English worker would "receive that proper treatment to which he is entitled. The unfortunate African, -- now become a loss value -- will relapse into a state worse than before."¹²

It is notable that Hudibras apparently has little conception of the practical possibilities of using European labor. If, in fact, the English worker received treatment "to which *he is entitled*", wages would have to be considerably higher than most colonial farmers were willing or able to pay. He made no comment indicating his appreciation of this fact, which for many was the chief deterrent to employing European workers. Also, it is worth noting the way he differentiates between standards of living: the European is apparently "entitled" to something better than the African, indicating that Hudibras himself was not free of race prejudice, whether he knew it or not.

Hudibras seems to view the colonial economy as essentially a humanitarian project, a key element of which was to raise "the colored race", a catch-all term for any dark-skinned person, to a higher level of "civilization." That many others at the Cape agreed with this view is, to put it mildly, unlikely. There were, however, more who believed that such an end would be a salutary byproduct of economic processes, a variant of the Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization ideology that emerged in the 19th century. An unnamed letter-writer to the frontier paper the *Graham's Town Journal* referred in 1836 to the African as "the child of nature..., bleak, rough, and uncomfortable," and said that "savage nations have been rendered docile and gentle...only by co-mixture and intercourse" with people from places like Britain.¹³

III.

The debate in the Legislative Council was launched on 26 March 1842 by John Bardwell Ebdon. Born in 1787, Ebdon had been a resident of the Cape Colony since he was shipwrecked there in 1806. He married a local woman and became a prosperous merchant and influential citizen of Cape Town. When the first Legislative Council was established in 1834, he was named an unofficial representative.¹⁴ Ebdon's resolution proposed that Englishmen and their families be encouraged to emigrate to the Cape, and that the Cape government encourage this by selling public lands and devoting the proceeds to defraying their transportation expenses.

Ebdon's goals were both to ameliorate the colony's labor problems and to halt the introduction of Prize Negroes. He was alarmed at the "disposition to promote the introduction of a very inferior species of labor, which so far from adding to the productive industry of the colony, may be regarded as a measure of unmixed evil."¹⁵

The greatest obstacle to the advancement of the ruling class, is the degradation of those whose lot is servitude.... Yet while...we profess to be desirous of importing intelligent laborers, we are again, as in days of yore, importing savages to be our domestics and laborers. They bring nothing with them... They injure the quality of labor as a whole, more than they add to its amount."

He continued, putting the point directly: "By the introduction of these liberated Africans, [we will] perpetuate the evils of a degenerate race."

Ebden had an ally in a person referred to in the transcript only as "Mr. Advocate Cloete"¹⁶, another unofficial member. "God forbid," he exclaimed, that the employment of liberated Africans "should ever become a general measure, and that we should see a tide of such a population flowing in amongst us...." In a variant of "Hudibras"'s prediction of increased racism in the colony, he added:

For we should again see...that baneful "aristocracy of skin" ...an influence which we have already witnessed in its worst features during the state of slavery, and from which I was rejoiced to see my countrymen becoming disentangled. What person of feeling or humanity who has ever seen the effects of that influence, could rejoice to see a black population again poured in upon us, which might be used as mere drudges or slaves?

Advocate Cloete maintained that though his family had lost much property when slavery ended, "yet I hailed that day as the dawn of better times..., opening a prospect of the whole colony becoming generally a self-respecting, enlightened and Christian country." But if liberated Africans are imported

we would now... be going backwards and be visited with all the miseries connected with slavery, and instead of seeing our own population advance in intelligence and morality, and forming a civilized and industrious people we should see these thousands of blacks swarming about our towns and villages in filth and vice, until swept away by another epidemic.

Another unofficial member of the Legislative Council was Michiel van Breda. One of the most prosperous farmers of the Cape district, Breda represented those Dutch colonists who had made their peace with British rule. He supported the immigration of English, though not wholeheartedly. "If the Government... introduce intelligent labor from Europe, it would be something to give great prosperity to the Colony. We do not want cottagers or fine gentlemen. We want laborers; not idle vagabonds picked up on the streets of London, but good industrious men." While Breda clearly preferred the immigration of English to Africans, he did not want too many. In words that betray, perhaps, some anti-English bias, he adds that "I am sure we can have them by the thousands,...but we want a small stream."

Breda's objection to the Africans was mostly practical, involving the length of time required to ready them for their tasks. He did not adamantly oppose their immigration. "Something has been said about the difference between black and white labourers. Now there is a difference, certainly, - the blacks we can teach, but people who come from England,- they are wise enough."

The most vigorous advocate of promoting the introduction of liberated Africans was the Attorney General, William Porter. In a long speech, Porter addressed issues of race, ethnicity, and economics. Referring to Breda, Porter noted that "the question is, not what sort of laborer my honorable friend would like, but what sort of laborer the Dutch Boer, as he is generally found, will like.... The Boers, in general, speak favorably of every sort of labor." However, he added,

I am...grievously misled...if, in his heart of hearts, the genuine Dutch Boer does not look upon English labour with an unfavorable eye.... The Boer and the [English] labourers do not speak the same language; their way of working is different; their way of living is different; all their manners and customs are dissimilar. The Boer has some feudal...notion of his own importance as a landholder, and he does not like to have it intimated...by a bare-breeched fellow, brought in the other day at government expense, that he is looked upon as an absolute ignoramus.

Porter had been born in Ireland and arrived at the Cape in 1839 to take his post. He had resided at the Cape for two and one-half years when the debate in the Legislative Council took place. He remained until 1878,¹⁷ a fact important to bear in mind; it suggests that he may not have had the interests of a temporary sojourner. Whether he had lived at the Cape long enough to know the mind of "the genuine Dutch Boer" is less certain.

Undoubtedly many of the cultural dissimilarities he cited between English and Dutch would also exist between Africans and Dutch. Whether animosity between African worker and Dutch employer would exist because the former viewed the latter as an ignoramus cannot be determined, but it undoubtedly would for other reasons.

Porter claimed that 20,000 liberated Africans would be available for hire in the Cape Colony, and that farmers "would be glad to get them." At this point Hamilton Ross, another unofficial member, interjected, "If they could get them for nothing." "The Boer," Porter responded, "would rather have the African for nothing than the Englishman for nothing." Englishmen, Porter added, showing a firm grasp of the obvious, "won't work for such wages." (There followed a contentious discussion of wage levels in the colony, Ebden and his allies arguing that agricultural wages were already high enough to induce English workers to come, Porter and others arguing that they were not.)

Resuming the comparison of the African to the English worker, Porter noted that Ebden "described the labourers recently arrived as 'savages' and has indulged in some epithets equally unsavoury." He admitted that

the liberated African has no agricultural skill...; but on the other hand, how much of the agricultural skill of the English labourer must be...useless here, for who could attempt to introduce the husbandry of Norfolk into the wilds of Southern Africa? The one has, indeed, knowledge to acquire, but the other has, what is more difficult, knowledge to unlearn.

Porter then delivered an equivocal assessment of the capacities of different races:

Without entering either into physics or metaphysics, or investigating the extent of natural capacity, I do not hesitate to say...the the African is able to do his work when his employer knows how to set him to his work, and that the skill and industry, as laborers, of the colored classes in this colony exhibit as fair a ratio, when compared to the skill and industry of their employers, as is usually presented by the classes of master and servant in most other places.

He continued: "Talk as we may of stupidity and sloth, I do believe that there is enough in the head and arm of the colored laborers (when the Master who is to direct is found to exert his own faculties, and lay his own shoulder to the wheel) to draw out...the materials of prosperity."

Porter's statement assumes that people have different capacities for advancement. Some are destined to be masters, others employees. Africans can be as valuable as servants as those Europeans whose lot is to be servants. (There is, however, no evidence in Porter's speech that suggests that any Africans might have the ability to be masters, and the fact that he believes a European must work alongside them indicates that he thinks that they do not.) The statement also exhibits elements of an environmentalist argument. People's natural skills have been shaped by their environments, and this is the issue, he seems to believe, that Cape Colonists must consider before encouraging the immigration of English. They should think twice about having to induce Englishmen to "unlearn" skills better adapted to some other place.

Porter's belief that colonial masters must, to get beneficial results, work beside their laborers probably did not warm the hearts of most whites. His desire to avoid addressing directly the question of inherent or biological capacity might indicate that he felt his beliefs were not in accord with his fellow colonists and would thus damage his credibility, or, perhaps, that there was enough disagreement over this issue that discussion of it would deflect the debate from the main points he wanted to make. The ambiguous statement he made about "stupidity and sloth" hints that he believed that Africans' potential was more limited than Europeans', but perhaps not as limited as many fellow colonists might think. At one point of his speech, he referred to African workers as a "different species", which, assuming he chose his words carefully, indicates that he saw a significant degree of biological difference between Africans and Europeans.

Like Advocate Cloete and Hudibras, Porter feared the effects of white racism. Bringing in more Europeans risked creating "a feeling of caste" in the working class, "the foulest and most disgusting of all aristocracies, the wretched aristocracy of skin." He continued:

White labor is doubtless the best labor where all the mass of laborers are white. But when no human legislation can bring this state of things about,... the mixture of colored people with colored people, may be the most expedient mode of improving your existing labor market; for the newcomers

cannot possibly look down on those who are already here, belonging always to the same race and often to the same tribe, never dream of regarding their sable brethren as their inferiors.

Finally, Porter argued, simple economics argued for increased immigration of Africans. English expectations of comfortable living conditions meant that the government would have to subsidize not only their passage to the Cape but also their wages, which farmers could not otherwise afford. Conditions, however, that "the English emigrant would turn from in disdain," liberated Africans would see as "incalculable blessings."

The wool industry, he went on, is "the great hope of the colony."

The Fingo and the Mantatee herd as well as the Englishmen, and are generally as trustworthy, and work upon much more reasonable terms. None but a madman, I suppose, would set a band of Englishmen, at forty dollars [sic] a month each, to tend sheep, which can very well be taken care of by a fellow in a caross, who serves for a year for a cow or a few goats.

Hamilton Ross also argued against the importation of English workers. In social circumstance, his situation was virtually identical to Ebden's. He had come to the colony as a soldier during the first British occupation of the Cape in the 1790s and had remained. He had married a Dutch woman and become a prosperous merchant. In fact, he and Ebden had cooperated to help form the colony's first private bank.¹⁸

Ross's main argument against English immigration was economic. Colonial employers could never pay English the wages they would expect. He claimed to have calculated carefully such wages and consulted more than a hundred farmers, "and there is not one of them who would have them at the rate I have mentioned..., and generally, they do not wish for white laborers.... If government undertake to bring them out, they will be a pest to the colony, and will do themselves no good."

Earlier in the year, when several boatloads of Africans had been transported to the Cape from St. Helena, some came on a ship named the Hamilton Ross, owned by the firm started by Ross. Further, Ross was among a group of prominent Capetonians who offered to guarantee with their own money the costs of transporting Africans from St. Helena, if London should refuse to do so.¹⁹ We might assume, therefore, that Ross's position on immigration was guided, at least in part, by the financial gain his firm might receive from the continued arrival of liberated Africans. To the extent that it was, it might suggest that Ross's economic interests took precedence over whatever fears he might have had of increasing the number of blacks in the colony. It is also worth noting that Michiel van Breda was another of the group who had guaranteed the expenses of the importation, but he, unlike Ross, voted in favor of subsidizing the immigration of English.

An interesting aspect of the debate was the councillors' views of the propensity of Africans for "filth and vice", to use the phrase uttered by Adv. Cloete. He assumed they were unusually susceptible to it. Ross, however, demurred:

My learned friend has spoken of the immorality and temptations to which blacks would be exposed in Cape Town; but I maintain that there is not a town in England of the size, in which there is less crime and more morality than Cape Town.

To this Governor Napier responded, "I believe it."

The resolution that government defray English immigrants' transportation costs was ultimately defeated. Ebden, Advocate Cloete, and Breda favored the motion, while Ross, Hendrik Cloete, and all official members opposed it. The official members probably took their cue from Governor Napier, who had said relatively little during the debate itself, but had made his opposition clear. He argued that any Englishmen who could be induced to come to the Colony would be of dubious character. He reported a comment he had received from another colonist, that he would rather employ "the boys who had worked for him for years at 10s 6d a week, and whom he could trust, than a set of drunken Englishmen."

Napier had discussed his opposition to English immigration at length in a despatch to the Colonial Office in London in May of 1841. He claimed that the English worker would not adapt well to south African rural culture. When he

finds himself far away from all his friends and the social intercourse of an English village, with no church, no school no comfortable cottage and garden, no doctor if sick, low wages and a master speaking a language of which he understands nothing, he will certainly be disaffected and probably take to drinking...; or, if proof against that vice, most difficult to be withstood in a winegrowing country, he will leave his place and reside in the towns and villages, and the great object of the proposed importation, would be defeated.²⁰

Napier thus joined Porter and others in fearing the effects of cultural differences between the English and the rural Dutch.

IV.

When Mr. Advocate Cloete spoke to oppose further entry of liberated Africans to the Cape, he noted their alleged propensity for "filth and vice" and a recent epidemic. The epidemic to which he referred was a smallpox outbreak that had started when the first boatload of Africans, which landed on 25 December 1839, had been prematurely distributed to colonists as indentured servants. Some of the Africans were infected. The disease first appeared on or about January 6, and was reported in the *Commercial Advertiser* on 8 January 1840.

Almost immediately, the Collector of Customs, who had been charged with the management and distribution of the Africans, issued an urgent call that all to whom the Africans had been indentured should return them immediately to Cape Town, whereupon those healthy would be quarantined in military barracks, and those ill would go either to the military hospital or the government free school in Wynberg, near Cape Town.²¹

It was too late. By January 17, *De Zuid Afrikaan* reported no incidence of the disease among "inhabitants", by which it apparently meant white colonists, but said cases among the liberated Africans were reported in several of the rural districts; one case was thought to exist among apprentices, meaning former slaves.²² By 29 January, European residents of nearby Wynberg had been infected,²³ the disease had spread to rural areas by May,²⁴ and 6000 cases were reported by the 20th of that month.²⁵ By the end of the epidemic, government reported "upwards of 15,000 cases"; Saunders puts the total of deaths 973.²⁶ The *Commercial Advertiser* reported the end of the epidemic in Cape Town in July, though it continued to spread in the country districts for another year. By 17 April 1841, smallpox was reported among Xhosa beyond the Colony's borders.²⁷

The story of the 1840 smallpox epidemic is important in its own right, revealing much about the colony's culture. Here we shall concentrate on what it revealed about colonial racial attitudes.

No one doubted that the disease had been introduced by the liberated Africans. As the *Commercial Advertiser* noted in May, "The Epidemic came to the Colony with the Prize Negroes, spread from them upwards through the different classes of the Colored population. Several European colonists...have now been affected, and some have died."²⁸ While negative evidence is hardly decisive, I have found no criticism, in the colony's four newspapers²⁹ or in despatches and enclosures transmitted to London, levelled at the Africans for their role in perpetrating the misery.

What was discussed at length, however, was the role of crowded slums and a dirty environment in fostering the spread of the disease, and those who inhabited the slums were mostly not white. Fairbairn, editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*, was an especially enthusiastic campaigner for greater cleanliness in Cape Town. This was, in part, prompted by an epidemic of measles that raged in the first half of 1839 and played itself out by June. I have not found official statistics, but Fairbairn reported that by 9 May, 718 individuals had been infected and 145 had died. As the epidemic spread, he extolled the virtues of cleanliness as the key to health and

denounced the authorities for their neglect of the streets and alleys of Cape Town, which he described as "pregnant hotbeds of malaria."

The central problem, for Fairbairn, was the "fearfully narrow living conditions of the poor. As the measles continued, there was apparently criticism by some of the poor for being dirty and thus abetting the disease. Fairbairn was more sympathetic and makes it clear that what he and others meant by "the poor" is former slaves:

These people are blamed. They ought to have been more provident. They ought to have sought employment out of town. [But] who [is] so ignorant of nature and society...as to think it possible for a numerous class of human beings... born, nurtured, worked, and supported in a state of slavery, suddenly made free and thrown upon their judgement...within the first three months of their new and untried condition, to select for himself the safest and most advantageous position? ...The state of the poor in Cape Town is one of great suffering, but that suffering will be treated with sympathy and kindness, not with reproaches, by everyone able to judge honestly its origin.

As far as the disease was concerned, however, Fairbairn was quite certain that "they should be warned of the danger to which, in their crowded and destitute condition, they are constantly exposed. The present epidemic...has shown something of this danger." He then worried about the possibility of "a visitation of a more deadly character, pestilence, smallpox, or cholera". He repeated this warning three weeks later, equating both good ventilation and better cleanliness with good health, and ending with an admonition to both rich and poor: "BE CLEAN".³⁰

Fairbairn saw the matter in terms of personal choices. In an 6 April 1839 editorial, he said: "The excess of squalid poverty into which they have been plunged will force them to look upward, and to ask themselves, not what is the lowest condition in which we can bear life, but what is the highest amount of comfort which, by prudent industry we may hope to secure and enjoy."³¹ One need be only modestly alert to see that Fairbairn put the responsibility for clean and spacious living quarters on the poor themselves. His sympathy for the poor had its source in the effects of the slavery from which they had recently been liberated, but apparently did not extend to the difficulties of life in the competitive, relatively free labor market in which they now found themselves.

When the smallpox hit, criticism of the state of public cleanliness intensified. At a public meeting of 25 April 1840, the meeting's chair, F. S. Watermeyer, claimed the streets were "shamefully neglected." Several resolutions were produced, listing both causes of the epidemic and recommendations to government to cope with it. The picture one gets of Cape Town in the early 1840s is somewhat less than inviting. "A self-respect and purity of manners is unknown in the abodes of crowded indigence, which surround us on all sides." Such conditions produce "a positive poison to the lungs, the heart, and the blood, and hence the total unfitness of hundreds of our people for performing a good day's work." Furthermore, "water is scarce in the abodes of our poor" and the refuse in streets and public places produces "deleterious effluvia which sickens the inhabitants." Such refuse produces "pestilential filth at almost every door, and fish, dead dogs, cats, dead rats, and poultry, are suffered to remain and impregnate the air with their putridity."

Fairbairn attended the meeting and argued that as the liberated Africans "brought the disease, they should assist in removing it." He proposed that those Africans remaining healthy should be put to work cleaning the town. William Field, the Collector of Customs who was responsible for managing the Africans, replied that at present he was not authorized to put them to work, but, should the possibility arise, there were two hundred available. Saunders states that liberated Africans were in fact used to clean Cape Town's canals during the epidemic.³²

Fairbairn's comment was the nearest anyone came to blaming liberated Africans for Cape Town's plight, but many criticized the poor in general, most of whom were not white. We have already noted Advocate Cloete's comment on their squalid living conditions. The Muslim Malays were singled out for not taking vaccinations. Some thought the Malay priests forbade vaccinations, but there was disagreement over this. The measure that probably most discouraged the poor from getting vaccinated required a five shilling deposit at the first visit to the doctor. This would be refunded when one returned to take the necessary revaccination. Some argued that because

the poor were not sufficiently aware of the refund and the fact that doctors could waive the deposit at their discretion, they stayed away from the doctors' offices altogether.³³

In the country districts, cleanliness and the availability of vaccine were seen as the keys to coping with the epidemic. The *Graham's Town Journal*, often very critical of sympathetic government policy toward Africans, wrote with relief that by August in Albany district "no white person has been attacked, and which we think may be attributed...to the general prevalence of vaccination, and to the excellent regulations adopted by the authorities on the spot."³⁴ In January 1841, as the disease still spread in rural areas, the Journal noted that it was most prevalent among "the Hottentots, whose general want of cleanliness, and habits of intemperance render them peculiarly liable and accessible to its attacks."³⁵

In Cape Town, government was roundly criticized for its handling of the epidemic. As early as January 10, *De Zuid Afrikaan* wondered why the Africans were indentured and distributed before the state of their health could be determined. It asked,

Did the precipitancy of distribution arise from a feeling of *humanity*, to relieve the poor Negroes from their crowded ship habitation? Or from an overanxious feeling for *Negro-freedom*, reckless of what may be the consequences upon the community at large? Or was it occasioned by an extreme degree of *economy*, to save the expenses of maintenance...or of competent medical attendance, that those Slaves were even taken out of the hospital to be given away?

De Zuid Afrikaan added, "Perhaps it will be asked, 'the people is [sic] to be blamed; why did they take those Negroes?' But what is the use of having a Government, when the people is to do everything? Could the people have doubted, when the Slaves were distributed, that the Government had taken precautionary measures?"³⁶ Criticism of the authorities by the paper continued throughout the epidemic; on one occasion it accused government of "laying on its oars" while the epidemic spread.³⁷

De Zuid Afrikaan had always distrusted the humanitarian "philanthropist" impulse, promoted by missionaries and others and adopted by the British government in the 1820s, that led to the freeing of the slaves in the first place.³⁸ Similar sentiments can be seen in the above comment. And readers can make what they will of the fact that the editorialist still refers to the Africans as slaves.

Swanson argues that general European attitudes towards the non-European population were influenced by "the imagery of infectious disease as a societal metaphor, and that this metaphor powerfully interacted with British and South African racial attitudes to...shape the institutions of urban segregation" in early 20th century Cape Town. He continues, noting that "overcrowding, slums, public health and safety,... were in the colonial context often perceived largely in terms of colour differences.... In this context the accident of epidemic plague became a dramatic and compelling opportunity for those who were promoting segregationist solutions to social problems."³⁹

Citing an outbreak of bubonic plague in the first decade of the 20th century, Swanson presents convincing evidence that a desire to protect the white population from disease was became a prime motivation for creating segregated living areas. He quotes, for example, the chief medical officer in Cape Town in the late 19th century, Bernard Fuller, as claiming that "uncontrolled Kafir hordes were at the root of the aggravation of Capetown slumdom brought to light when the plague broke out.... [Because of them] it was absolutely impossible to keep the slums of the city in satisfactory condition."⁴⁰ While there seems to be no direct evidence that the Cape authorities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw crowded and dirty conditions as the result of some inherent quality on the part of the blacks, one can infer such an attitude from statements such as the one cited above. The implication was that the only way to deal with filth in certain living areas is to segregate those who produce it, because their behavior cannot be changed. Bickford-Smith reports similar policies and attitudes in Cape Town in response to a smallpox epidemic in the 1880s.⁴¹

There appears to have been no comparable impulse to segregate the non-white population during or in the immediate aftermath of the measles and smallpox epidemics of the early 1840s, despite clear evidence that almost everyone saw their living conditions as a source of disease. The responses to this problem generally were that the "colored classes" should be taught cleanliness and convinced of its benefits. For example, one correspondent to the *Commercial Advertiser* stated that "in checking the progress of the disease,... cleanliness and ventilation are especially to be enjoined."⁴²

V.

The arrival of the liberated Africans and the associated outbreak of smallpox in the early 1840s gives us a glimpse of Cape Colony culture at a time when it had not yet made up its collective mind about race.

Both John Ebden and Hamilton Ross were merchants, two of the most prosperous in the colony. As merchant middlemen, their prosperity was tied directly to that of the farmers and other primary producers in the colony; they both, therefore, would be especially concerned about the welfare of farmers and their labor needs. That two individuals so alike in social status and economic interest could disagree so profoundly on an issue such as immigration of workers begs further analysis.

When Ross and the others who supported the continued immigration of liberated Africans argued so strenuously for it, they indicated, among other things, that they did not mind that the population of the Cape Colony would become blacker. This does not, of course, mean that they were not racists. Though it would be nice to have direct evidence to confirm these speculations, it probably meant that whatever their feelings about the qualities of people of darker skin, the desire for cheap and malleable labor took precedence over all else. They undoubtedly knew that, because of their race and the attitudes of whites towards them, the Africans would be more easily exploited than white workers. Any personal revulsion they may have felt towards people of different race and culture did not overcome their economic interests, which in Ross's case, were also abetted by his firm's role in transporting the Africans.

Ebden and his allies evidently had different priorities. They were willing to ignore the obvious: that English labor would be more expensive than African. Their race prejudice, the apparent belief that black Africans' mere presence in the colony would degrade its culture, was strong enough to transcend what was, at least in a superficial way, better for business. The conflict between Ross and Ebden, allies in so much else, suggests a split in the Cape's dominant class over race.

It is also interesting that the debate over immigration produced three participants who professed to fear the creation of "an aristocracy of skin", that is, a state of affairs in which one's skin color was the key to social advancement. The fact that one of these, Mr. Advocate Cloete, opposed the influx of Africans and the others, Hudibras and Porter, supported it suggests the degree to which positions on race relations were still in flux. So does the fact that Hudibras and Cloete exhibited elements of the very attitude, race prejudice, that they decried.

These people's worry about others' race discrimination indicates either that they believed themselves not to be susceptible to such behavior, or that if they were, theirs was more benign. In any case, they believed that increasing the number of white people in a settlement already significantly black would prompt a proportionate increase in race prejudice, an outcome to be resisted. That they seem not to have noticed that an "aristocracy of skin" already existed may be further evidence of the relatively undeveloped racial ideology in the Colony.

All, however, whether or not they exhibited race or cultural prejudice, were keen to command labor, to use Fairbairn's term, as much as possible.

Imbedded in the debate over immigration and the discussions of the measles and smallpox epidemics is further evidence of the ambivalence of the white population regarding racial matters. Some who opposed the arrival of additional liberated Africans did so because they feared it would retard the "improvement" of the non-white population already present. The notion that people of different skin color could be "improved" in habits and morals is another indication of a belief that people's qualities were not biologically fixed. Michiel van Breda, for

example, preferred attracting a "small stream" of English, but did not rigidly oppose the importation of Africans. He also believed Africans to be teachable, thereby indicating his belief in the mutability of their behavior. Many missionaries already believed this, but white attitudes towards missionaries were frequently hostile and most were on the periphery of the colonial culture. But none of the people arguing for continued African immigration was a missionary, unless Hudibras, whose identity cannot be known, was. None of his arguments was notably theological, nor did anything else imply a missionary background.

And the fact that there was apparently no call for segregation as a solution to the potential spread of disease caused by crowded and dirty living conditions suggests that Cape Europeans believed that the conditions, and the habits that created them, could be changed. The fact that some of the people who believed this, such as Fairbairn, thought that changing the living habits and conditions was merely a matter of choice and not of the workings of the economy's wage structure, does not undermine the point.

It may be worth noting that at this level of society, in which people were reasonably well off and literate enough to write to newspapers, one's ethnic background, Dutch or English, apparently allows no prediction about whether an individual opposed or supported immigration of Africans. Nonetheless, elite members of Cape society of both groups, not surprisingly, had a firm belief in a social hierarchy that exploited labor. Even some of the most "liberal" of them, Hudibras for example, relegated workers, whether white or black, to a subservient position in society that apparently could not, and indeed should not, be changed. In the early 1840s, therefore, white colonists were still debating whether the qualities that relegated people to the lower echelons of society were inherent in people with darker skin.

As Elphick and Giliomee convincingly argue, Cape society had made the inferiority of indigenous Africans an economic and social fact early in its history, a point elaborated more recently by Keegan.⁴³ Bank shows that some whites of both Dutch and English descent were already convinced of the "innate imbecility" of native Africans, as one Dutch intellectual delicately put it in 1834.⁴⁴ Color prejudice in the early nineteenth century "was clearly present at the Cape," as Keegan puts it, "but it did not constitute a racial ideology."⁴⁵ The debates over the immigration of Africans and what to do about epidemic diseases suggest that as late as the early 1840s, whites still had not reached consensus on a racial justification for their exploitative social order.

Postscript

Unlike the leading white people of Cape society, the liberated Africans, not surprisingly, did not view themselves as merely "hands" to be exploited by their employers. The governor of St. Helena, Hamelin Trelawney, reported a problem he faced when readying some Africans for shipment to the Cape:

I had intended only to have sent forty females, but there appeared to have formed amongst themselves a determination not to embark if a certain number, namely twenty-seven men, forty-nine women, and fifty-seven children were separated. Nay, if one of their lot were kept back, the others positively refused to embark.⁴⁶

The law legalizing the intercepting of the Portuguese ships required the consent of the Africans if they were to be shipped anywhere. The result was that, to his chagrin, Trelawney had no choice but to transport to the Cape all the Africans who had determined to maintain their social ties. (We cannot know whether the ties had been formed during the ordeal of enslavement or had existed beforehand.)

Saunders notes the difficulty of tracing the fates of the liberated Africans after the expiration of their indentures, but concludes that they came to form "one of the many constituents of the Cape working class which would in time be called 'colored'."⁴⁷ The episode described by Trelawney may suggest that the Africans may have formed a more coherent group than students of Cape history have realized, that they struggled to maintain that coherence, and that their contribution to the development of working class culture may be correspondingly more significant.

Endnotes

*I am grateful to the American Philosophical Society for its support of research that is integral to this paper.

[1.](#) Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage* (Hanover: University Press of New England and Wesleyan University Press, 1994) provide comprehensive overviews of south African slavery. For the debate over slavery in the 1820s and 1830s, see R.L. Watson, *The Slave Question: Liberty and Property in South Africa* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1990).

[2.](#) See Worden, "Between Slavery and Freedom: The Apprenticeship Period, 1834 to 1838," in Worden and Clifton Crais, eds., *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Nineteenth Century Cape Colony* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 117-144.

[3.](#) Editorial, *De Zuid Afrikaan* (henceforth ZA), 29 December 1837. Italics in original.

[4.](#) C. Saunders, "Between Slavery and Freedom: The Importation of Prize Negroes to the Cape in the Aftermath of Emancipation," *Kronos*, 9 (1984), 37.

[5.](#) Letter from "Philo-Africander", ZA, 29 June 1838.

[6.](#) *Ibid.*, 12 July 1838.

[7.](#) E. C. Jackson, *St. Helena: Its History from Its Discovery to the Present Date* (London: Ward and Lock, 1903), 261.

[8.](#) In addition to the article cited in note 4, see Saunders, "Liberated Africans in Cape Colony in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18 (1985), 223-239, and "Free Yet Slaves': Prize Negroes at the Cape Revisited," in Worden and Crais, *Breaking the Chains*, 99-115.

[9.](#) Legislative Council debates, *Cape Town Mail and Mirror of Court and Council* (henceforth CTM), 12 June 1841.

[10.](#) ZA, 4 Jan. 1840.

[11.](#) *South African Commercial Advertiser* (henceforth SACA), 1 Dec 1841.

[12.](#) SACA, 16 May 1842. Hudibras is the title character, described by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as a "grotesque Presbyterian knight", in Samuel Butler's 17th century epic poem. It is not entirely clear what the author intended by adopting this *nom de plume*. Perhaps because the poem is a satire on extremism and bigotry, it is the poem itself the letter-writer hopes to invoke, not its main character.

[13.](#) *Graham's Town Journal* (henceforth GTJ), 21 April 1836.

[14.](#) *Dictionary of South African Biography* (henceforth DSAB), II, 212.

[15.](#) All quotations from the debate come from the transcript, published in CTM, 2 and 9 April 1842. It also appears, slightly abridged, in Great Britain, Public Record Office (Kew), CO 48/219.

[16.](#) There were two Cloetes on the Council in 1842. One is referred to in the transcript, perversely, only as "Mr. Advocate Cloete". The other, Hendrik Cloete, has his full name given, and he was also an advocate and later a judge. I have not been able to identify "Mr. Advocate Cloete" further, suggesting that there were more lawyers than people in the Cape Colony.

- [17.](#) *DSAB*, I, 623.
- [18.](#) *DSAB*, II, 606.
- [19.](#) Napier to Stanley, 12 Jan 1842, CO 48/217, and Saunders, "Between Slavery and Freedom," 38-39.
- [20.](#) Napier to Russell, 15 May 1841, CO 48/211.
- [21.](#) Napier to Russell, 10 Feb 1840, CO 48/207.
- [22.](#) *ZA*, 10 Jan 1840; 17 Jan 1840.
- [23.](#) *SACA*, 29 Jan 1840.
- [24.](#) *ZA*, 8 May 1840; *SACA*, 13 May 1840.
- [25.](#) *Ibid.*, 20 May 1840.
- [26.](#) Napier to Stanley, 5 Jan 1842, CO 48/217. Saunders. "Between Slavery and Freedom," 38.
- [27.](#) *SACA*, 11 Jul 1840, 5 Aug 1840, 17 Apr 1841, 17 Jul 1841.
- [28.](#) *Ibid.*, 20 May 1840.
- [29.](#) The four newspapers I examined are the *SACA*, *ZA*, *CTM*, and *GTJ*.
- [30.](#) *SACA*, 1 May 1839.
- [31.](#) *Ibid.*, 6 Apr 1839.
- [32.](#) Saunders, "Between Slavery and Freedom," 40.
- [33.](#) A transcript of the meeting appears in *SACA*, 23 May 1840. All quotations from the meeting come from this source.
- [34.](#) *GTJ*, 13 Aug 1840.
- [35.](#) *GTJ*, 7 Jan 1841.
- [36.](#) *ZA*, 10 Jan 1840. Emphasis in original.
- [37.](#) *ZA*, 1 May 1840.
- [38.](#) For a discussion of *De Zuid Afrikaan's* role in arguments leading to the end of slavery, see Watson, *Slave Question*, pp.116-24.
- [39.](#) Maynard Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909," *Journal of African History (JAH)*, XVIII (1977), 387.
- [40.](#) *Ibid.*, 392.
- [41.](#) Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Racial Pride and Ethnic Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 84, 105-6.
- [42.](#) *SACA*, 22 Jan 1840.

[43](#). Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, "The Structure of European Domination at the Cape," in Elphick and Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society* (2nd ed., Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), pp. 559-561. Timothy Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 24-5.

[44](#). A. Bank, "The Great Debate and the Origins of South African Historiography," *JAH*, 38 (1997), 272 and *passim*.

[45](#). Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*, 24. Saul Dubow concludes that the "landmark" work of scientific racism was not published in England until 1850. The work was Robert Knox's *The Races of Men*, and it claimed that individual and "national" character "is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs." Quoted in Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27.

[46](#). Trelawney to Napier, 24 Feb 1842, CO 48/218.

[47](#). Saunders, "Liberated Africans", 237-8; and "Free Yet Slaves", 115.

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