

# **Jan Christian Smuts (1870–1950) in Context: An Answer to Mazower and Morefield**

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## **Abstract**

This article engages with the recent scholarship of Mark Mazower and Jeanne Morefield regarding the South African and Commonwealth statesman Jan Christian Smuts (1870–1950), and in particular with their contention that Smuts was preoccupied with issues of racial superiority, and that this was his main motivator in matters of politics, both internationally and domestically. However, during his lifetime Smuts did not see the 'Native question' in the form in which it manifested from the 1950s onwards. It is therefore unfair and inaccurate to over-emphasise the racial question when writing about Smuts. Any historical account of Smuts must keep at least one eye on what Smuts could not have foreseen and must place Smuts in the context of his own time. Progression from smaller to greater wholes – one white nation instead of two language sections; a united South Africa instead of divided colonies and republics; membership of self-governing Dominions in a single British Commonwealth, and membership of international organisations, in particular the League of Nations, and later the United Nations – these were the ends to which Smuts' energies were unreservedly devoted throughout his career. This is the correct lens through which to view Smuts' liberal credentials.

**Keywords:** Jan Christian Smuts; South Africa; segregation; apartheid; Preamble to the UN Charter; human rights; Mark Mazower; Jeanne Morefield

## **Introduction**

This article engages with recent scholarship regarding the South African and Commonwealth statesman Jan Christian Smuts (1870–1950), and in particular with Mark Mazower's (2009) *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and Ideological Origins of the United Nations* and Jeanne Morefield's (2014) *Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection*. It addresses the contention of both authors that Smuts was preoccupied with issues of racial superiority, and that this was his main motivator in matters of politics, both internationally and domestically.

Noam Chomsky once remarked that the contemporary debates about the United Nations and its humanitarian mission are regularly disturbed by 'the rattling ... skeleton in the closet' of history.<sup>1</sup> To a significant degree both Mazower and Morefield view Smuts as that 'rattling skeleton' in the history of international organisations. 'Smuts, exponent of racial

superiority, believer in white rule over the African continent,' states Mazower, 'casts an enigmatic shadow over the founding of the new United Nations Organisation at the end of the Second World War.'<sup>2</sup>

The central aim of Mazower's chapter on Smuts is to lay bare Smuts' Janus face: the dichotomy of how Smuts could promote a colonial system and advocate segregationist policies in South Africa *and* be chiefly responsible for the drafting of the Charter's lofty preamble, through which the world expressed its determination to 'reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights [and] in the dignity and worth of the human person'.<sup>3</sup>

Morefield goes even further to assert that Smuts engaged in a policy of deliberate deception to deflect attention away from the violence and illiberalism of the imperial state.<sup>4</sup> Morefield's essential point is that the liberals she examines, including Smuts, did not merely rely on historical omission, but rather upon 'prolonged and creative forms of deflection that consistently ask the reader to avert her eyes, away from colonial violence and economic exploitation, and back toward the liberal nature of imperial society'.<sup>5</sup> Mazower argues that Smuts sought to prolong the life of empire of white rule through international cooperation:

In Smuts' mind, the UN Charter contained little that was incompatible with his view of the world; there was no commitment to granting independence to the colonies at all, and the United Nations could emerge, as he intended, as a force for world order, under whose umbrella the British Empire – with South Africa as its principal dynamic agent on the continent – could continue to carry out its civilising work. Smuts might no longer speak the classizing language of his youth – when he talked easily about the mission of 'half a million whites' to lift up 'the vast dead weight of immemorial barbarism and animal savagery to the light and blessing of ordered civilization' – but the task was the same as ever. This time, thanks to the new UNO, the white race might succeed.<sup>6</sup>

From this portrait painted of Smuts by Mazower and Morefield a skewed view emerges of Smuts' 55 years in public life in South Africa, in the United Kingdom and on the world stage. At times, these authors' treatment of Smuts paints him as nothing more than a caricature – that of the 'visionary, globe-trotting statesman-philosopher, committed to his evolutionist paradigm of cosmic harmony under beneficent white guidance'.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, both authors label Smuts a 'racist'.<sup>8</sup> Morefield's bias against Smuts is nowhere better exemplified than in her description of him as '[t]he racist darling of Liberal England'.<sup>9</sup> Mazower likewise refers to Smuts' racism.<sup>10</sup> Both authors also tie Smuts to the apartheid system that followed his electoral defeat to the Nationalist Party in 1948. Morefield claims that Smuts 'laid the groundwork for the segregationist state in South Africa during the interwar era, and earned him [Smuts] the reputation as one of the fathers of apartheid'.<sup>11</sup> Mazower asks: 'How could the [United Nations'] commitment to universal rights owe more than a little to the participation of a man whose segregationist policies back home paved the way for the apartheid state?'<sup>12</sup>

## The Peril of Labels

The references to Smuts as 'racist' are problematic. The term itself is loaded and ambiguous, which makes definition inherently difficult. Moreover, it is unclear what the value of a label such as 'racist' would be when applied to a person of the late 19th/early 20th century.<sup>13</sup> If it is supposed to mean a person who held racial prejudices, very few of Smuts' contemporaries would escape that label. It is perhaps more useful to ask to what extent did race inform that

person's conduct, as judged against his contemporaries, and whether it was a dominant or subordinate consideration.

A fully satisfying answer to Smuts' attitude towards race surely would depend on a detailed appraisal of his handling of the various racial issues that successively faced him throughout his long career. Such an appraisal should also not assume that his thoughts on race were the function of his metaphysical interests in the form of his personal philosophy of Holism, his forays into science, or the experience of his formative years.<sup>14</sup>

The fact is that the more one studies Smuts, the more certain one becomes of the conclusion that, ultimately, Smuts remains an enigma that defies labels. We have his assertions, but his inner core, the cognitive centre of his being, may be impenetrable. In the first half of 1934 Smuts himself stated to Sarah Getrude Millin, in the context of her request to write his biography:

I am a more difficult subject than Rhodes. I have touched life at so many points ... I am also more of a puzzle to people. Winston Churchill once said to me that I was the ablest man he had met who was devoid of ambition. He was puzzled. The outside world does not understand and is not interested. No, it is a difficult subject ...<sup>15</sup>

### **'The General who Spent his Weekends with Quakers'**

Another factor that renders labelling Smuts problematic is that his character was highly complex. He was a living web of contradictions. He had more than one persona, and of his several personae, it would be difficult to say which one represented the true Smuts in any greater degree than all the others. Despite his holistic personality, there are not only contradictions in his actions, but also inconsistencies in his private views and intimate thoughts, as revealed in letters he wrote to various friends. In this he was only human. Smuts himself was the first to admit: 'I ... am a poor errant soul forever seeking and seldom finding – a pilgrim of the world and of life'.<sup>16</sup>

Mazower identifies and emphasises the paradox between Smuts as international statesman, the defender of democratic and liberal values; and Smuts the South African politician, the upholder of racial segregation. However, the contradictions within Smuts were manifold.

On the one hand, he was depicted as a man of iron will, forceful and dynamic in the field of action. On the other hand, as Jan Hofmeyr, who worked with Smuts closely, observed, Smuts was possessed of a peculiar inertia – a dilatoriness; he was prone to 'let things develop'.<sup>17</sup>

Smuts was also a South African patriot who seemed to care more about Europe than South Africa. The more Smuts succeeded with the British, the more he failed with his own people. Indeed, his own people became increasingly puzzled by, and sceptical about, him:

Afrikaner nationalists [saw] him as a clever son of the veldt who sold his birthright for a mess of British imperial porridge, a prodigal son who not only never really came home, but was so compromised at the end of his life as to accept the chancellorship of a British university.<sup>18</sup>

One of the many other contradictions in Smuts' complex make-up was his intense, though presumably platonic, relationships with a remarkable group of women, namely Olive Schreiner, Emily Hobhouse, and the Quaker sisters, Alice Clark and Margaret Gillett. Smuts' relationship with these well-educated and intelligent women – whose outlook may be summarised as enlightened, liberal, pacifist, and humanitarian<sup>19</sup> – intensified while Smuts was

in London, serving in the war cabinet in 1917 and 1918, and then subsequently when he attended the Paris Peace Conference.

During the week, Smuts would be in Whitehall, administering the massed armies of the western front and the mobilisation of civilians at home – ‘an imperial man among imperial men’.<sup>20</sup> In the evenings, Smuts would retire to his suite at the Savoy where he either worked or talked with Alice Clark. At the weekends he would leave London for the Gillets’ residence in Banbury Road, Oxford. A. J. P. Taylor, during the First World War, described Smuts as ‘the general who spent his weekend with Quakers’.<sup>21</sup>

Morefield claims that Smuts ‘assiduously cultivated’ lifelong friendships, not only with these feminist and pacifist women, but also with English liberals and radicals, such as J. A. Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse, to buttress his ‘image as a liberal crusader from the provinces’.<sup>22</sup> Morefield seems to suggest that somehow Smuts maintained these friendships, in many instances for 50 years or more, writing more letters to these women than almost anyone, as a calculated manoeuvre to shore up his liberal credentials. Such a contention does not seem plausible.

## Politics as the Art of the Possible

There is no defence to be made of Smuts on the lines that he was a secret liberal, who realised that to express his views openly would be to lose all chances of political power in South Africa. However, what Morefield seems to ignore, and Mazower barely acknowledges, is that within the framework of South African politics Smuts was cast as a ‘moderate’ in race relations.<sup>23</sup> On two notable occasions, in the ‘Black Peril election’ of 1929,<sup>24</sup> and again in the apartheid election of 1948, he suffered defeat at the hands of those whose views on race were far more extreme and doctrinaire than his own.

It has to be borne in mind that all of Smuts’ public addresses touching on the subject of race were made in the context of his public and political life as a South African politician during the first half of the 20th century. Thus, they could never be divorced from either their historical context or Smuts’ political constituency in South Africa. His views were subject to various constraints, for example, those set by public opinion, especially in South Africa, but also in Britain. Obviously the main constraint related to the need to state his views in a manner that was acceptable to his political constituents. For most of Smuts’ life, this meant the white electorate of South Africa.

When South Africa embarked on its democratic transition in 1989–1990, apartheid’s white supporters had, as Alan Jeeves puts it, been ‘softened for democratic change’ by decades of racial violence in the townships, and war on the borders that had cost them dearly, both in lives lost and wasted treasure.<sup>25</sup> A respected international actor and member of the Commonwealth in the 1930s and 1940s, South Africa became, under apartheid, the world’s leading pariah and rogue state. The reality of the political dead end that the failed policies and violence of 40 years of apartheid rule had produced pressed heavily on the white electorate, and prepared the way for a major break with apartheid.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, at the end of the Second World War, the white electorate of South Africa had experienced practically none of these pressures. It had little presentiment of the decades of international isolation, domestic violence and regional conflict, and instability that would soon descend on the country. In 1945 Smuts led a young country industrialised, enriched

by the war, and attractive to foreign investors.<sup>27</sup> South Africa also enjoyed respect and influence internationally that were out of proportion to its size and geopolitical importance.

The extent to which its racial policies were moving out of step with those of its allies was only beginning to emerge. Domestically, trade union militancy, urban unrest and black political agitation were irritants, but not serious threats to the stability of the state.<sup>28</sup> These problems were not perceived by the white electorate to be structural, but rather attributable to the weakness and vacillation of Smuts' United Party government. In these circumstances there simply was no mandate among the white electorate for a serious, potentially costly programme of liberal social reform that might even seem to empower Africans.

Thus, Smuts was significantly constrained, or even inhibited, by his sense of politics as the art of the possible.<sup>29</sup> Smuts could not transcend the parameters set by the perceptions of the white electorate. This was nowhere better illustrated than in the run-up to the election of 1948.

Even had he been so inclined – which he was not – it would have been political suicide for Smuts to announce a pending overthrow of residential segregation or an effective basis for African representation in parliament, and expect to win the 1948 election.<sup>30</sup> There can be no doubt that Smuts had every intention of winning this crucial election and at all costs to keep the Nationalists out of power. Thus, Smuts dared 'not do anything which will outpace public opinion too much on the eve of an election which may be the most important ever held' in South Africa:

I shall do as much of the right thing as possible, but always keep before me the paramount necessity of winning the election! ... What will it profit this country if justice is done to the underdog and the whole caboodle then, including the underdog, is handed over to the Wreckers.<sup>31</sup>

In essence, Smuts' greatest battles were to vanquish the Hitlers of this world, whom he viewed as the supreme danger to Western civilisation. To be able to continue this fight on the world stage, he had to maintain political power in South Africa.

### **The 'Sphinx Problem'**

Smuts was generally an optimist. His principal biographer, Keith Hancock, writes of his 'trusting optimism' and his 'sanguine disposition'.<sup>32</sup> Even in the inter-war years, characterised by the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe, Smuts retained his faith in the capacity of 'Western civilisation' to prevail against the forces of 'the new barbarism'. In his address at his installation as Rector of St Andrews University on 17 October 1934, Smuts stated: 'I remain at heart an optimist'.<sup>33</sup>

However, on the issue of race in South Africa – coded as the 'Native problem' – Smuts revealed a strong streak of pessimism regarding the longer-term future, or at least about his own ability to resolve it. In March 1906 Smuts contemplated 'the political future of the Natives' in a letter to John X Merriman, the Cape politician:

When I consider the political future of the Natives in South Africa I must say that I look into shadows and darkness; and I then feel inclined to shift the intolerable burden of solving the sphinx problem to the ampler shoulders and stronger brains of the future.<sup>34</sup>

To his Quaker friend, Margaret Gillett, Smuts wrote in 1937 on the 'Native question':

The evils of the Native exodus from the reserves to the big centres of employment are becoming very serious and creating problems which may have revolutionary effects, for white and black

alike. It is most difficult to know how to deal with them and one easily slips into measures which appear harsh and retrogressive.<sup>35</sup>

On issues remote from South Africa, Smuts often had more generous and more constructive ideas than on those nearer to home. Smuts believed that the ‘Native question’ was simply insoluble in the foreseeable future, and he looked vaguely and without any great confidence for a gradual improvement in race relations.

## **Smuts, the Upholder of Western Civilisation**

During his lifetime Smuts did not see the ‘Native question’ in the form in which it manifested from the 1950s onward. For that reason it would be both unfair and inaccurate to over-emphasise the racial question when writing about Smuts. Rather, any historical account of Smuts must keep at least one eye on what Smuts could not have foreseen – although we may see it now – and place Smuts in the context of his own time.

Neither segregation nor human rights was for Smuts his *raison d'être*. Throughout his life, Smuts' primary concern was to defend Western European civilisation, which he viewed as representing the highest form of human achievement.<sup>36</sup> The preservation of Western civilisation was for Smuts an article of faith. ‘Native policy’ or segregation, on the other hand, was for Smuts merely a political expedient. Because of this outlook, the ‘Native question’ found only intermittent expression in Smuts’ words and actions.

Instead, Smuts focused his attention on the importance of white unity in South Africa in order to promote Western civilisation. Once his vision of union for South Africa was achieved, he strove for Western unity in the face of the new barbarism of totalitarian nations – militarist Prussia, Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany.

There is no question that, for Smuts, Europe was always the centre of civilisation, and the two European peoples in South Africa, Boer and Briton, were the guardians of civilisation on the southern tip of Africa.<sup>37</sup> Smuts’ preoccupation with Western civilisation became especially acute from 1940 onward as world war, for the second time in a generation, brought European civilisation to the brink of destruction.

In his address to both Houses of the British Parliament on 21 October 1942, Smuts stated:

Hitler ... has sought strength in the ancient discarded forest gods of the Teuton. His faith is a reversion to the pagan past and a denial of the spiritual forces which have carried us forward in the Christian advance which constitutes the essence of European civilisation. He has trampled underfoot the great faith which has nourished the West and proved the greatest dynamic of all human history and made Western civilisation the proudest achievement of man.<sup>38</sup>

‘The European leadership of the world is in great danger, if not already lost ...’ Smuts wrote to the Australian chief justice, J. G. Latham, in February 1947.<sup>39</sup> With reference to the ‘fissure between East and West’, Smuts declared: ‘I am so partial to West European ideas and outlook that I cannot but pray that the West may continue to fight on its own for its cultural standpoint.’<sup>40</sup>

Progression from smaller to greater wholes – one white nation instead of two language sections; a united South African state instead of divided colonies and republics; membership of self-governing Dominions in a single British Commonwealth; and membership of international organisations, in particular the League of Nations, and later the United Nations – these were the ends to which Smuts’ energies were unreservedly devoted throughout his career.

Smuts gave to the waging of war one year in four of his political life. During both the Great War and the Second World War Smuts thought about both the way of achieving military victory and about the form that the peace and the post-war order should take. In both cases Smuts went beyond a ‘realistic calculation of interest’ to wider, more universal objectives, such as those embodied in the Preamble to the Charter.<sup>41</sup>

By contrast, although Smuts recognised that the ‘Native question’ was ‘the great sphinx-like problem of South Africa’, with regard to its solution, in the words of Alan Paton, Smuts ‘virtually stood still. This magnificent, original, creative mind did nothing’<sup>42</sup> Herein lies another one of the great dichotomies of Smuts.

Smuts lived on several planes. On the world stage his vision was universal, his analysis acute. He displayed statesmanship of the highest character, marked by vision and courage. On the South African plane, however, he was a politician fighting for his party, seeking immediate objectives, and using such means as came to hand.

This meant that in the area of policy and practice, Smuts did not, as Morefield and Mower seem to suggest, attempt to carry out some blueprint or master plan to resolve the ‘Native question’ in favour of securing white dominance on the southern tip of Africa. His engagement with race in the domestic sphere tended to be reactionist, rather than creative. As Smuts did not have any comprehensive plan for dealing with the many problems in the field of race relations, he was compelled to meet each of these problems as it arose and in accordance with its degree of urgency as a matter of crisis management.

Smuts believed that ‘the Native question’ could not be tackled in one fell swoop, and that it was not susceptible to ‘finite solutions’<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Smuts’ various responses to the ‘Native question’ over time were always dictated by practical expediency. When segregation became an issue of policy Smuts procrastinated and prevaricated. Over matters of implementation he was notably inconsistent, more often than not reacting to proposals from others. At no time was this more apparent than in the 1930s when J. B. M. Hertzog was prime minister. Smuts fought a rearguard action against Hertzog’s proposed Native bill, stating that:

[I]f we want to entrench our position merely as white oligarchy by getting around us a ring fence of hate from all the other communities in South Africa, we shall have a very hard and difficult row to hoe in future.<sup>44</sup>

However, in February 1936, after nearly 10 years of opposing Hertzog’s ‘Native legislation’ in every possible way, Smuts voted in favour of the Representation of Natives in Parliament Bill No. 2, which had the effect of dismantling the Cape Native franchise and with it the last remnant of the Cape Liberal tradition. Of this decision Smuts later said: ‘Of course I could have died in the last ditch, so to say, I could have said “I fight to the bitter end of the Cape Native franchise,” but what would have been the result? It would have been not I who died, but the Natives, metaphorically speaking’<sup>45</sup>

It was to Smuts’ credit, and in keeping with his stature, that he should recognise and accept responsibilities beyond the shores of South Africa. Smuts had dedicated himself to the task of building a new world order. But, asks Bernard Friedman, was it logical to assume that he could play a leading part in the construction of the world and leave the structure of society in South Africa unchanged and unaffected? One can argue that the problems that Smuts faced at home were no less challenging, and probably should have claimed the highest place in his scheme of priorities.<sup>46</sup>

If anything, *this* is perhaps the major point of criticism that can be lodged against Smuts: that for all his scholarly learning, paternalist sympathies and constant talk of justice, fair

play, human fellowship and interdependence, of the world as a holistic ‘great society of companionship,’<sup>47</sup> he did nothing to promote the political advancement of Africans. Whether it was from inaction or indifference, caution or obtuseness, few among posterity have much good to say of the Smuts who failed to grapple with this problem.

For Smuts there was no compromise, no solution and no reprieve. At the United Nations Smuts experienced some measure of the deep-felt distaste and abhorrence in the eyes and minds of the rest of mankind about South Africa’s policies of racial segregation. In South Africa he lost the election of May 1948 to the Nationalists on the colour issue. The one issue which he neglected all his life proved to be his Achilles heel and produced the blemish on his character and international reputation.

## Cosmological Time

On a philosophical and scientific level, racial transformation in Smuts’ view ‘would occupy eons rather than centuries: “cosmological time,” as Hancock puts it.’<sup>48</sup> In a speech in parliament in 1933, Smuts stated:

[W]hat are a few years in the Native question? Our grandchildren two hundred years hence will still be labouring at the Native question. It is our problem. It is the great problem which has been entrusted to South Africa ...<sup>49</sup>

‘[W]e must take the long view in these matters,’ Smuts urged the South African Institute of Race Relations in 1942, ‘[w]e must look ahead not merely for generations but for centuries’.<sup>50</sup>

In a speech to the United Kingdom branch of the Empire Parliamentary Association in London on 25 November 1943, Smuts warned against a ‘patent solution’, a ‘general formula’ and a ‘simple standard procedure’ in resolving the ‘problem of race and colour in the Empire’.<sup>51</sup> The problem of race and colour was:

[A] root problem in our Empire ... which is going to test our wisdom, our farsightedness, our statesmanship, our humanity, probably for generations before any solution can be reached. You can have no simple standardized solution ... to a problem such as the vast diversity of race and colour, culture, and levels of civilization existing in our Empire ... It calls for continuous experiment, for variety of treatment, and for very prolonged practical experience before any satisfactory solution could be reached.<sup>52</sup>

Smuts was born on Queen Victoria’s birthday, midway through her reign. As Keith Hancock notes: ‘It was the age of Charles Darwin, Bishop Stubbs, Walter Bagehot and the Fabian Society. It was an age that took for granted the “inevitability of gradualness,” not only in biological but also in social and political evolution.’<sup>53</sup>

Smuts had grown up with the assumption that time was a commodity in bountiful supply. However, in his old age Smuts had come to see time ‘as a rushing torrent threatening destruction to his life’s work’.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, time was not on Smuts’ side. More perhaps than any other development, it was Asia’s dramatic entry into world politics that made the colour problems of South Africa urgent; that made them the supreme issue in the elections of 1948.<sup>55</sup>

The problem was that Smuts’ metaphysical hypothesising about the solution to South Africa’s ‘Native question’ had no bearing on the Africa of his own day.<sup>56</sup> It did not give rise to any precept for action. Moreover, it offered no comfort to those on the receiving end of racial segregation, possibly for two centuries or more.

In Smuts’ suggestion of ‘practical social policy away from politics’ government paternalism would do all that was required to improve the lot of natives. However, by the mid-1940s

the Native Representative Council was far more concerned about citizen status and political rights than about the social benefits that were due to them. Africans could no longer be ameliorated with social and material betterment. In the spirit of the Atlantic Charter, they wanted political rights.

### Hofmeyr as Smuts' Successor

It is abundantly clear that Smuts looked upon Jan Hofmeyr – a professed liberal – as the future leader of his party and his political heir. On Smuts' cosmic time-scale, Hofmeyr's were probably 'the ampler shoulders and stronger brains of the future' on to which Smuts wanted to shift 'the intolerable burden of solving the sphinx problem'.<sup>57</sup>

During an important by-election in January 1947 Hofmeyr had prophesied from the United Party candidate's platform that the day would come when Indians and Africans would have representatives of their own ethnicity in parliament.<sup>58</sup> Not only did Smuts defend Hofmeyr's controversial statement, but also, 12 months later, Smuts appointed Hofmeyr as deputy prime minister. With this act, Smuts not only designated his political heir, but also delivered himself into the hands of his enemies.

On 29 April 1948 Hofmeyr warned the country that apartheid must, in logic, lead to South Africa's territorial dismemberment, with a truncated white state ringed around by black states. The Nationalists seized upon Hofmeyr's liberalism as a campaign target – he became their bogeyman. In a keynote address at Paarl on 20 April 1948, Dr D. F. Malan, leader of the National Party, asked: 'Will the European race in the future be able to and also want to maintain its race, its purity and its civilisation or will it float along until it vanishes in the back sea of the South African Non-European population?'<sup>59</sup> Smuts, Malan continued, was doing nothing to save South Africa from the rising tide of Colour. In fact, Smuts was ready to open the floodgates. Was he not grooming Hofmeyr as his successor? Under a Hofmeyr government, white South Africa would not survive.

In June 1948 Smuts Wrote to Margaret Gillett

What is called Liberalism is at a discount here even more than in Britain, and Hof's [Hofmeyr's] liberal views have been exploited against the party in a most unfair way. My successor must be killed in advance of his advent.<sup>60</sup>

In spite of Hofmeyr's liberal views on 'Native policy' and the opposition to which they gave rise, even in his own party, Smuts continued unreservedly to support Hofmeyr against all detractors. Upon Hofmeyr's unexpected passing on 3 December 1948, Smuts expressed his profound grief in a broadcast:

He [Hofmeyr] too is a war casualty, and perhaps the most grievous of our personal losses ... his loss is and will remain irreparable, and my sense of that loss, both personal and national, is one which I find impossible to express and almost impossible to bear ... [T]he sense of what we have lost in his passing remains and will never leave me.<sup>61</sup>

To Margaret Gillett, Smuts described Hofmeyr as 'our ablest and most high-minded public man, and ... in a sense the conscience of South Africa'.<sup>62</sup> 'To me he was my right-hand, Smuts stated, '... and ... my destined successor'.<sup>63</sup>

The question naturally arises: why did Smuts continue to support Hofmeyr, despite the fact that Hofmeyr had become a serious political liability? Hofmeyr's biographer, Alan Paton, asks:

[D]id [Smuts] know that not even his creative genius could split the rock from which he himself had been hewn? Did he let Hofmeyr speak on, unrebuked, because this man was his own conscience, unpraised because it was not politic?<sup>64</sup>

It is more than likely that Smuts anticipated that, after he was gone from the scene, Hofmeyr would unfurl his own banner as the rallying point for a great liberal revival. The conclusion is therefore justified that, in Smuts' view, Hofmeyr's uncompromising liberal views with regard to African-European relations, was the Africans' – and South Africa's – best hope for the future. It was not for nothing that the Africans had named Hofmeyr 'Ntembu', meaning 'our hope'.<sup>65</sup>

### **Smuts, the 'Father of Apartheid'?**

To be sure, until the end of his life, Smuts upheld the principle of state-enforced residential and social segregation. Like Hertzog, Smuts was a convinced segregationist.<sup>66</sup> However, unlike Hertzog, a paternalist element was present in Smuts' thinking from an early age, and eventually received full expression in his attachment to the concept of trusteeship. Saul Dubow wrote: 'Smutsian segregation drew on the incorporationist and "protective" elements inherent in liberal segregation and made explicit reference to the paternalist idiom of trusteeship ideology'.<sup>67</sup>

In his own mind, Smuts regarded segregation conducted without the beneficence of British liberality to be a danger. Segregation could only work as part and parcel of the civilising mission. Conversely, Smuts believed that segregation deriving only from the instincts of a narrow Afrikanerdom – as he perceived apartheid – could only bring about the destruction of South Africa.

While racial segregation for Smuts was necessary for the preservation of 'European civilisation', it could not justify the wholesale oppression and exploitation of other races in the interests of whites. For the very reason that white rule was an agency for civilising other races, it had to conform to the standards of Western civilisation. Thus, there was a moral restraint governing white rule, which arose from the obligation of just guardianship towards the subject races.

In a speech at the Savoy Hotel on 22 May 1917, on the occasion of the 'South African Dinner' given in his honour, Smuts stated:

[I]n all our dealings with the natives we must build in our practice on ... the granite bedrock of the Christian moral code. Honesty, fair-play, justice, and the ordinary Christian virtues must be the basis of all our relations with the natives. We don't always practise them. We don't always practise that exulted doctrine, but the vast bulk of the white population in South Africa believe sincerely in that doctrine as correct and true ...<sup>68</sup>

Contrary to what Morefield seems to suggest, Smuts did not claim that Africans were forever incapable of acculturation to Western standards or norms, whether by substituting them for their own or by achieving some kind of cultural synthesis.<sup>69</sup> While his Nationalist successors used concepts such as the implications of ethnic and linguistic differences among the Africans of South Africa as part of the 'divide and rule' strategy inherent in apartheid, Smuts did not ever adopt that approach. Smuts recognised the universality of the human mind as a feature shared by peoples of all cultures.

Thus, although Smuts never fully abandoned his paternalistic segregationism, he certainly was not the 'father of apartheid' either. To refer to Smuts as one of the fathers of apartheid

is to mischaracterise Smuts' attitude to race as ideological or dogmatic (like that of his Nationalist opponents), not paternal, and to think away his struggle against the Nationalists and his well-documented opposition against their policy of apartheid. Such claims are not history, but modern attempts at reconstructing the past as it logically should have been.

Segregation as government policy needs to be distinguished from apartheid, if only due to the 'dogmatic intensity' of the latter.<sup>70</sup> Ronald Hyam articulates the difference as follows:

What happened from 1948 was that a seismic shift took place, from pragmatic, occasional and limited measures of discrimination and separation, to an ideological, unified, and systematic denial of black rights in all spheres of life: something dogmatic, rigorous, and totalizing. Ad hoc arrangements were superseded by an unmerciful programme, regulating not just physical space, but human movement and social relationships too.<sup>71</sup>

Whatever criticisms can be made of Smuts, this was emphatically not his world view, let alone that of any British government.

Smuts was adamantly and vociferously opposed to apartheid, which he condemned as 'a crazy concept, born of prejudice and fear'.<sup>72</sup> Some four months before the election in 1948 Smuts declared that '[t]he Native policies of the opposition will create chaos here and must be frustrated and the good work of racial peace and economic progress must be continued'.<sup>73</sup> The apartheid proposals that the Nationalists were contemplating seemed to Smuts devoid of all feeling for the well-being of the African people.<sup>74</sup>

In 1948 Smuts faced the most crucial election of his career. It was to be a watershed in the political history of South Africa; it was to determine the direction in which the stream of destiny would run. Smuts' fall was not just a personal tragedy, but because of its consequences for South Africa, it constituted a national disaster.

In the wake of the 1948 election Smuts detected 'a wave of reaction rolling over the country'; the policies that he had stood for, 'once more under the hammer'.<sup>75</sup> The Nationalists had exploited the 'Black Peril' to the limit and played upon the prejudices of 'the good unthinking people' of South Africa until they would not listen to 'any counsel of wisdom or prudence'.<sup>76</sup> Smuts feared that South Africa would 'pay dearly for all this colour propaganda ...'.<sup>77</sup> Smuts expressed much the same sentiment to another friend: 'Our last general election was fought under an anti-colour complex, in which the forces of reaction won a partial victory. 'Perhaps I had demanded too much of my poor people,' Smuts contemplated, 'moved too fast and too far ahead of their ordinary outlook'.<sup>78</sup> In this 'reversal', Smuts did not feel sorry for himself, 'but for the causes I stood for and the prospect which had opened before this country in the new African phase'.<sup>79</sup>

To Margaret Gillett Smuts wrote

[My] heart did go out to South Africa, who is preparing a heavy future for herself by these childish, thoughtless pranks and indulgences of comfortable prejudices. She simply cannot afford them. But she has not cared, and gone her way rejoicing, not thinking of the tears which will follow, but cannot wash out, this shame.<sup>80</sup>

By the 1950s segregationist policies that were held in common around the British Empire as the 20th century began were gradually being legislated out of existence by other states. However, under the Nationalists, South Africa was legislating racial discrimination into existence with a vengeance. It was this difference in direction that created an ever-widening chasm between South Africa and the rest of the world. In sum, under the Nationalists South Africa marched firmly against the whole trend of human progress. Smuts made an ominous

prediction: '[T]he racial situation must surely get worse, and become a dark problem for our future.'<sup>81</sup>

## Social Policy Away from Politics

While Smuts continued to uphold segregation and the denial of political rights to black South Africans, it can likewise not be denied that Smuts took a reformist direction in 'Native policy' in the early 1940s.<sup>82</sup> By then the acceleration of urbanisation had indeed demonstrated the obsolescence of the inherited practices of the Hertzog segregation policy. Smuts understood this clearly.

In early 1942 he delivered an address to the South African Institute of Race Relations. Smuts advocated what he called 'trusteeship', which aimed at the social betterment of black South Africans, providing them with welfare and education from general revenue. Smuts concluded that segregation in South Africa had been 'a very great disappointment', and that it has fallen upon 'evil days'. Above all, segregation simply was not efficacious in the urban areas: 'You might as well try to sweep the ocean back with a broom'.<sup>83</sup>

Smuts did not propagate the incorporation of Africans into a single polity with whites. He was also not prepared to recognise that, as a permanent part of the urban population, Africans had a claim to political rights. What he *did* advocate were major government interventions to address the education, health and housing conditions of the African people. This marked a significant departure from the recent past, in which education and health provisions for African people had largely been left to missionaries, and public housing projects had been almost exclusively for whites.

In the wake of Smuts' address to the Institute of Race Relations, there followed a flourish of government initiatives to address the social conditions of African people.<sup>84</sup> Hofmeyr, in two successive budgets, had extended old-age pensions and invalidity grants to the Natives, albeit not on par with those to whites. Expenditure on Native education increased more than fivefold between 1939 and 1947. Industrial conditions for African workers improved substantially, and African real wages in industry rose dramatically, starting in 1942. This period also saw planning for a national health service and the flourishing of a number of local public health initiatives. In 1944 a social security committee proposed a comprehensive scheme of benefits for all South Africans. Non-contributory pensions for Africans were implemented, albeit on a racially differentiated scale.

The key point about these developments is that they were, to a large extent, premised on a recognition of the breakdown of the African reserve system and the need to address the social conditions of a permanent African proletariat.

In their treatment of Smuts' position on the issue of race, Mazower and Morefield seem to support a teleological history in which the rise of apartheid becomes inevitable. The fact is that South Africa in the 1940s did move in significantly new political directions that cannot sensibly be understood as merely the prelude to apartheid.<sup>85</sup> The policies of these years represent the direct opposite of the attempts to drive the African working class out of the urban areas, which was to be the central feature of apartheid. Instead, they moved towards a strategy based upon acceptance of African urbanisation.<sup>86</sup> Contrary to the conventional historical wisdom to which Mazower and Morefield ascribe, 'apartheid was only one of several competing visions of the future ... In no sense was the triumph of apartheid preordained'.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

This article is not an apologia for Smuts. Not even the most ardent apologist could deny that Smuts was consistently an advocate of racial segregation. One also cannot get around the difficulty by saying that Smuts, a child of his time, had his blind spots; that he was a blinkered genius. Smuts was someone with a remarkable capacity, in some ways, to see into the future. In other respects, however, he was extremely short-sighted.

Smuts viewed the ideological commitment to ‘human rights’ as expressed in the Preamble to the UN Charter first and foremost as a method ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’ – to prevent at all costs a third world war that humanity, let alone Western Christian civilisation, could not survive.

In advancing human rights, Smuts’ point of reference was the conflicts in which he was engaged, which were directed against international aggression, and which originated as European conflicts. The struggle for racial equality on the domestic front in South Africa was still in its infancy during his lifetime. His great failure – made all the more apparent by his expansive vision in matters of international relations – was that he could not, or did not want to, see what is so obvious today, namely that the same underlying issues were at stake in both cases. Thus, although the tension between the shining ideal and practical realities cannot be denied, the chasm between these opposites may not be as wide as Mazower and Morefield may suggest.

Bill Schwarz formulates the essential point commendably:

[W]e ... have to remember how difficult it is to deal with such issues without the condescension of posterity, whatever its enormity. Positions which to us look bizarrely self-contradictory can be experienced in their own historical time as banal in their obviousness. So it was ... with Smuts.<sup>88</sup>

As Morefield herself acknowledges, in June 1917 Edward Marshall referred to Smuts in an interview as ‘a democrat of democrats, a man for the second time involved in the great struggle for ideals which in human life is wagered against human life with freedom as the ultimate stake’<sup>89</sup>

Is this not the correct lens through which to view Smuts’ liberal credentials? By the end of his life he would have been involved, for a third time, in the struggle for ideals through the crucible of war, ‘with freedom as the ultimate stake’ – first, freedom from the British Empire, then freedom from Prussian militarism, and lastly freedom from Nazi totalitarianism.

## Notes

1. As quoted in Taha (2011, p. 1,529).
2. Mazower (2009, p. 19).
3. Mazower (2009, pp. 19–21). Mazower describes Smuts as ‘the architect of white settler nationalism who did more than anyone to argue for, and help draft, the UN’s stirring preamble’ (p. 19).
4. Morefield (2014, p. 4).
5. Ibid, p. 3.
6. Mazower (2009, p. 30).
7. Ibid., p. 57.
8. Noel Garson points out that, in general discourse, the term race was used ‘very loosely for much of Smuts’ lifetime’ to identify the Afrikaner and English sections of the white population as the ‘two white races’. This usage was quite common until at least 1948. There was frequent

- talk of ‘racial conflict’ between the two sections and Smuts often condemned as ‘racialistic’ the efforts of his political opponents to mobilise the ethnic and linguistic affinities of Afrikaners in the interests of an exclusively Afrikaner nationalism (Garson, 2007, p. 157).
9. Morefield (2014, p. 174). Morefield’s description of Smuts, driven to its logical conclusion, would mean either that (i) in their wholehearted acceptance of Smuts, English liberal society was, by and large, also ‘racist’, or (ii) that Smuts was successful in concealing his ‘racism’ and pulling the wool over the eyes of the whole of liberal England. Neither conclusion seems plausible.
  10. Mazower (2009, pp. 53–54).
  11. Morefield (2014, p. 172).
  12. Mazower (2009, p. 19).
  13. For example, Normand and Zaidi point out that racism, as it is commonly understood today, was the rule, not the exception, throughout the United States and Europe. The great powers openly practised what we would term ‘racism’ especially in the colonies. In addition to the discriminatory legislation that offended Japanese and Asian citizens, the United States was, in significant part, a racially segregated society, and the rudiment of British and French imperialism was the distinction between the ‘superior’ Europeans and the ‘inferior’ native peoples (Normand and Zaidi, 2008, p. 52).
  14. Garson (2007, p. 160).
  15. As quoted in Millin (1955, p. 124).
  16. As quoted in Beukes (1989, p. 185).
  17. Friedman (1976, p. 186). Smuts, who could be high-handed and imperious in the administrative sphere, was strangely cautious and even timid in taking political initiative. He ruled his cabinet with a rod of iron; no one, save Hofmeyr, dared to question his decisions. Disagreement would have been a sign of insurrection. Yet, in parliament his style was placatory. He rarely struck an angry or aggressive note. He preferred the minor key, even when debating great issues. He would rather propitiate the opposition by conceding an element of validity in their case, than triumph over them by a display of superior debating skill (of which he was eminently capable) (*ibid.*, p. 187).
  18. Hyam (2010, p. 405).
  19. Garson (2007, p. 155).
  20. Schwarz (2013, p. 308).
  21. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945*, p. 137, as quoted in Tothill (2007, p. 186).
  22. Morefield (2014, p. 175).
  23. Garson (2007, p. 162).
  24. The 1929 general election came to be known as the ‘Black Peril’ election, as the National Party exploited the racial question. The Nationalists claimed that Smuts and his South African Party stood for a policy of ‘niksdoen’ (doing nothing), as far as the ‘Black threat’ was concerned, and that he also stood for ‘gelykstelling’ (equality of Blacks and Whites). Smuts had played right into his opponents’ hands, when, in a speech on 17 January 1929, he stated: ‘Let us cultivate feelings of friendship over this African continent, so that one day we may have a British confederation of African states ... a great African dominion stretching unbroken throughout Africa ... That is the cardinal point in my policy’. As quoted in Cameron (1994, p. 113).
  25. Jeeves (2004, p. 7).
  26. Davenport (2005, p. 204).
  27. Lentin (2010, p. 143).
  28. The seeds of that resentment were already germinating in Smuts’ time, but it was only in his closing years that he began to realise the full implication of this growth (Ingham, 1986, p. xii).
  29. Garson (2007, p. 175).
  30. Davenport (2005, p. 202). To be sure, Smuts was not prepared to do anything but to stay the government’s course of ‘practical social policy away from politics’ (Smuts to J. H. Hofmeyr, 28 September 1946, in Van der Poel, 2007c, p. 93).
  31. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 13 January 1943, in Van der Poel (2007b, p. 408). Smuts was acutely cognisant of not straying too far from his political base: ‘The danger is that by appearing

- pro-Native I may run the risk to lose the general election next year, and thus hand the Natives over to the other extreme' (Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 1 February 1947, in Van der Poel, 2007c, p. 121). Smuts had to contend with the views of 'the people by whose vote' he governed South Africa, 'many amongst them hopelessly bigoted and deaf to reason' on the colour question. As quoted in Hancock (1968, p. 487).
32. Hancock (1962, pp. 32, 121).
  33. Smuts (1944, p. 73).
  34. Smuts to J. X. Merriman, 13 March 1906, in Hancock and Van der Poel (2007, p. 169).
  35. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 15 May 1937, in Van der Poel (2007b, p. 78).
  36. Ingham (1986, p. 235).
  37. Garson (2007, p. 160). Likewise, Saul Dubow states that, for Smuts, always the spread of Western civilisation was the driving logic or spirit (Dubow, 2008, p. 55).
  38. Smuts (1944, pp. 260–261).
  39. Smuts to J. G. Latham, 12 February 1947, in Van der Poel, 2007c, p. 124). 'What is the future of Australia going to be in that Asiatic world? Similarly what is the position of South Africa going to be if she can no longer look to European leadership as her bulwark?' (Ibid.).
  40. Smuts to G. G. A. Murray, 17 December 1947, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 169).
  41. Tsokhas (2010, p. 81).
  42. As quoted in Beukes (1989, p. 178).
  43. Cameron (1994, p. 90).
  44. Cameron (1990, pp. 110–111).
  45. As quoted in Cameron (1994, p. 111).
  46. Friedman (1976, p. 157).
  47. Unpublished notes of an address by Smuts in the chapel of Christ's College, Cambridge, on Sunday 21 October 1934. A copy is on file with the author.
  48. Garson (2007, p. 172). The South African diamond magnate, Harry Oppenheimer, in the foreword to Beukes' *The Holistic Smuts*, wrote: '[I]s it possible to be a party politician, a practitioner of the art of the possible, and at the same time a mystic? ... I have come to wonder if this was not Smuts' personal tragedy ... It was his misfortune that the environment in which he was born and his own temperament made it necessary for him to work on two time scales. As a holist he thought in terms of eternity; as a politician and patriot, trying to serve South Africa to the best of his ability in turbulent times, he had to think in terms of the next election' (Beukes, 1989, p. 10).
  49. Smuts, 'Speech 1933', in Van der Poel (2007a, p. 544).
  50. Smuts, 'Address (21 January 1942)', in Van der Poel (2007b, p. 338).
  51. Smuts, 'Speech (1943)', in Van der Poel (2007b, p. 457).
  52. Ibid., p. 457.
  53. Hancock (1968, p. 486).
  54. Ibid., p. 486.
  55. Hancock (1964, p. 14).
  56. Garson (2007, p. 172).
  57. See text accompanying note 34 above.
  58. In response to a question, Hofmeyr stated: 'Natives will eventually be represented by Natives, and Indians by Indians' (Hancock, 1968, p. 497). The result of the by-election was not a positive augury for Hofmeyr's prophecy. The United Party's 'first-class' candidate, Sir de Villiers Graaf, suffered a 'bad defeat' at the hands of the National Party, leaving the 'enemy ... now cock-a-hoop' (Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 14 January 1947, in Van der Poel, 2007c, p. 118).
  59. As quoted in Friedman (1976, p. 206).
  60. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 28 June 1948, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 212).
  61. Smuts, 'Speech (1948)', in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 271).
  62. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 6 December 1948, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 272).
  63. Ibid., p. 272.
  64. Paton (1952, p. 4).
  65. Friedman (1976, p. 161).

66. Dubow (1989, p. 15).
67. Ibid., p. 44.
68. Smuts (1917, pp. 86–88). On another occasion, Smut stated: ‘It will be a black day for South Africa if the Black man is treated with ill-feeling and prejudice. While it is imperative to build up among the European section a spirit of co-operation and unity, it is also imperative to create a spirit of trust and goodwill so far as the Natives are concerned’ (as quoted in Blanckenberg, 1951, p. 88). And on yet another: ‘As long as the Natives are poor and oppressed, South Africa will be poor and oppressed. We can only be happy by raising the level of everybody irrespective of race and colour’ (as quoted in Blanckenberg, 1951, p. 88).
69. Morefield (2014, p. 190).
70. Dubow (1989, p. 299).
71. Hyam (2010, p. 408). This difference is exemplified in the extension of specific legislation against inter-racial prostitution in the 1927 Immorality Act, to an ideologically driven criminalisation of racial mixture in the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, the ‘highly symbolic first act of the apartheid regime’ (*ibid.*).
72. As quoted in Hyam (2010).
73. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 24 January 1948, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 175). Smuts wrote: ‘I see no other course but to carry on and await developments and trust to the chapter of the unknown. The Native question especially weighs very heavily on me, although even there I think disappointment and frustration may be in store for me. But rather defeat than running away, when there is still fight in me’ (*ibid.*).
74. Ibid., pp. 174–176.
75. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 29 September 1948, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 251).
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Smuts to D. Moore, 17 October 1948, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 254).
79. Ibid.
80. Smuts to M. C. Gillett, 20 July 1948, in Van der Poel (2007c, p. 218).
81. Friedman (1976, p. 178).
82. Davenport (2005, p. 196); Tsokhas (2010, p. 84).
83. Address, 21 January 1942, in Van der Poel (2007c, pp. 335, 336).
84. Hyslop (2012, p. 453).
85. Ibid., p. 439.
86. The Nationalists’ proposed policy of apartheid would involve the gradual deportation and restriction of urban black South Africans to exclusively black territories or Bantustans that in theory would become autonomous regions (Tsokhas, 2010, p. 85).
87. Dubow, ‘Introduction’, in Dubow and Jeeves (2005, pp. 1–2).
88. Schwarz (2013, p. 319).
89. Interview with Edward Marshall in Smuts (1917, p. 99).

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