7. Jan Smuts and his 'Sphinx' Problem[5]

Saul Dubow
Cambridge University

I.

To the question 'Was Smuts a racialist?' the response must be in the affirmative. The answer becomes more nuanced, however, if we ask what *sort* of racialist he was - working from the assumption that racism itself has a history and that not all racisms are identical. In this chapter, I shall make the case that Smuts's racialism was deeply grounded in his civilisational world view and his metaphysical philosophy - and also reflected in his persistent temporising. This leads me to conclude that Smuts was a profound racialist in a double sense: first, that he was committed to the preservation of Anglo-Afrikaner white supremacy and 'Western civilisation' and, second, that his philosophy of slow civilisational advance was bound up in a conception of humankind as a product of deep evolutionary time. Smuts's commitment to the advance of Western civilisation coupled with the right of white people to act as custodians of Africa (and Africans) remained consistent through his life.

For Smuts, the evolutionary, geological and anthropological framework through which he viewed humanity allowed the possibility of racial advance or regression over large undefined spans of time. It also encouraged Smuts to defer and dissemble when it came to dealing with the 'native question'. In his first public speech, in 1895, the 25-year-old lawyer argued that it was not possible to 'safely apply to the barbarous and semi-barbarous Native the

5 My thanks to Paul Betts, Richard Bourke and Richard Wilson for most useful comments.

advanced principles and practice of the foremost peoples of civilization.' But he had no ready solution to offer. The 'native question', he said, remained 'the great sphinx-problem of South Africa' (Smuts, 1895:95).[6] Smuts would use this sly phrase again. Delaying tactics and rhetorical feints were a constant through Smuts's career. Ultimately, this contributed to his political defeat in 1948, when Smuts found that he had no compelling answer to the populist appeal to white people of 'apartheid'. On race, Smuts himself was sphinx-like in his ambiguity.

Most biographical accounts of Smuts avoid the topic of race or parse the problem in such a way as to find a balance between his racial policies at home and his espousal of freedom abroad. Sometimes this is cast as 'hypocrisy' (cognitive dissonance might explain more). At other times the temptation is to avoid Smuts's complicity in racial segregation by excusing his ideas as 'of their time'. One of the few historians to have made Smuts's views on race the centre of discussion is Noel Garson, whose conclusions are judicious and meticulously presented in terms of an ethical balance sheet (Garson, 2007). Yet, Garson's criteria of what counts as racism are defined too narrowly and, in any case, much has changed since he wrote his article 20 years ago: in South Africa, political traditions of non-racism are now much weakened with expanded definitions of race ubiquitous in public discourse; beyond South Africa, Smuts has attracted the interest of global historians concerned with internationalism and decolonisation. For the historian Adom Getachew, writing about the post-World War I settlement and the League of Nations, Smuts features along with President Woodrow Wilson as the key promoter of a 'counterrevolutionary' project which, in the guise of advocating national self-determination and

6 Smuts's speech is described by Hancock and van der Poel as his `first appearance on a political platform' (p.80). It took place under the auspices of the De Beers Political and Debating Association and was delivered in response to a paper written by Olive Schreiner (read by her husband `Cron' Schreiner) which criticised Rhodes' `native policy'. Both papers were presented shortly before the Jameson Raid.

freedom, was in fact geared at defending worldwide white supremacy (Getachew, 2019:40, 42-3).

Getachew's formalistic account - her training is as a political theorist - has little to say about the political constraints under which he operated in South Africa. Her transnational focus does not illuminate much about his efforts to cement reconciliation between English- and Afrikaans-speakers in the post-Union era - then ubiquitously known as the 'race' problem. Nor does it take into account the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and, in particular, General Hertzog's growing insistence on passing his segregationist legislation from 1926. This involved a systematic effort at solving the problem of 'colour', a political challenge that Smuts fully recognised but routinely sought to avoid or delay.

Smuts was undoubtedly committed to racial segregation. Here, he positioned himself on the liberal-paternalistic side of the argument rather than with those who sought outright racial domination or *baasskap* (mastery). He eschewed the attempts of those who sought to mobilise racial antagonisms for immediate political gain. Instead, he sought to unite moderate English- and Afrikaans-speakers. This project had an internal and an external dimension. The former sought to bring white people under the banner of broad 'South Africanism'. The latter entailed South Africa's full participation in a Commonwealth comprising the white-dominated Dominions. Smuts defined this emerging bloc in 1917 as a 'system of nations' pursuing mutual interests as free and equal states in voluntary association. This repudiated another idea that was in vogue, namely, a British-centred federation or 'super-state' which was favoured by figures such as Milner. Smuts's approach to the Commonwealth was thus oriented to a colonial Nationalist rather than Imperialist outlook. In tandem, Smuts proposed a League of Nations in 1918 which expressed the view that small European nations merited national self-determination, an idea to which President Wilson became attached. In Africa, Smuts wished to apply these freedoms to fuel South African sub-Imperialism, working from the assumption that white South Africa itself

was a Europe-in-Africa. Thus, he advocated taking over the British High Commission territories or Protectorates (an objective baked into a Schedule of the Act of Union) as well as utilising the mandates provisions which he himself helped to draft on behalf of the League in order to incorporate former German South West Africa (Hyam & Henshaw, 2003: chap. 5). (This twin strategy is often lost by historians working either on the League or on British colonial policy).

Smuts played a key role in defining the new Commonwealth as well as the League of Nations mandates policy. Yet, he ultimately proved unsuccessful in utilising his device of 'C' class mandates – which included South West Africa and Tanganyika – in order to achieve his larger objective of creating a white-dominated federation of British colonial interests extending from South Africa through Rhodesia and Kenya towards Egypt. He was stymied in this quest by a combination of the League of Nations' Permanent Mandates' Commission; a British colonial office wary of ceding the Protectorates to South Africa; the refusal of white Rhodesians to join South Africa in a referendum held in 1922; and a growing Afrikaner Nationalist movement that saw greater South Africa - South West Africa aside - as a dangerous threat to ethnic Afrikaner dominion.

Smuts's efforts to promote white unity at home and a new Commonwealth abroad led him to articulate a distinctive brand of democratic ethno-nationalism focused on 'whiteness' (or 'broad South Africanism'). This was closely tied to his lifetime support of Western Christian civilisation (he was himself fond of the anachronistic term 'Christendom') powered by science and technology. He viewed black nationalism as a threat, especially if infused with Bolshevism, but mostly he conceived this danger in abstract terms rather than as an imminent threat. Instead of embracing hard or dogmatic forms of exclusion, Smuts appealed, in paternalistic terms, to a sense of common humanity which would allow black and white people to co-exist within a stratified social system based on tutelage or trusteeship.

In respect of race, Smuts was not an original thinker, yet he was, as in other of his intellectual activities, a compelling synthesiser. With rare exceptions, Smuts avoided the discourse of populist racism. On the occasion of his installation as Chancellor of the University of Cape Town in 1937, Smuts delivered a rousing oration on the need to respect the gospel of fact and to eschew ideological extremism in the form of Bolshevism and Nazism. He identified 'tolerance' as the essence of civilisation with respect for a common humanity. This led him to advocate a spirit of what he ventured to call 'racial indifference' (*Rand Daily Mail* (*RDM*), 3 March 1937). It was a clever formulation intended to de-emphasise racial antagonisms but stopping well short of colour 'blindness'.

Smuts's interests in evolutionism and spiritual unity culminated in his integrative theory of holism, a philosophy that stressed organic connections through cosmological time. This assumed the idea of gradual progress while also allowing for its opposite, retrogression. Although infinitely capacious, Smuts did not extend its meaning to conceive of South Africa as a multi-racial society - one can only wonder whether this was a conscious choice. Because Smuts thought in terms of aeons, his approach did not commit him to the zero-sum biological determinism of eugenics which calibrated human progress in shorter, generational spans and, in its more extreme versions, sought the immediate eradication of undesirable dysgenic traits.

Anthropology offered Smuts a way to navigate these alternatives. The culturalist version was conceived in relativist rather than absolute terms. This presumed that human differences were socially constructed rather than innate - though in Smuts's essentialist usage they were easily conflated. He subscribed to ideas of superiority and inferiority but elected to soften the edges wherever possible. Cultural relativism in the Smutsian sense was fully compatible with paternalism and protectionism. Its flexibility and permeability supported a gradualist version of segregationism that bore strong familial resemblances to British indirect rule and

trusteeship ideology. These were key elements of Smuts's philosophical and constitutional thinking.

Smuts was especially attracted to palaeontology, which directed his thinking to deep evolutionary or geological time. His interests thus focused on new discoveries by physical anthropologists such as Robert Broom and Raymond Dart. Their much celebrated and contested discoveries of fossilised hominin remains from the 1920s onwards revealed Africa's importance in human evolution and, though the work of Raymond Dart and others, encouraged typological approaches that laid emphasis on the emergence of different *kinds* of humans rather than a common *humankind* (Dubow, 2007:9). Smuts preferred environmental explanations to account for human variation. This led him to the view that climate was a key determinant or conditioner of difference in the natural as well as the human world.

In a complex and speculative 1932 essay on Pleistocene rainfall patterns which integrated new palaeontological discoveries in East Africa conducted by Louis Leakey with more established European and southern African evidence, Smuts lent his authority to the hypothesis that Africa was the original continent of *Homo sapiens.* If European and African racial types were not so different a mere 15,000 years ago, how had 'the immense difference between the European and Bushman of to-day' come about? 'We see in the one the leading race of the world, while the other, though still living, has become a mere human fossil, verging to extinction. We see the one crowned with all the intellectual and spiritual glory of the race, while the other still occupies the lowest scale in human existence. If race has not made the difference, what has?' To this rhetorical question he added a get-out clause: 'Of course the question is far too speculative, and our ignorance of all the essential conditions far too profound, to make any attempt at an answer worthwhile.' (Smuts, 1932:129).

Unlike eugenists, whose racial alarmism led them to demand rigorous enforceable measures to curb intermixture, Smuts was disposed to allow nature to take its course or, in

terms that he was fond of using in the political sphere, to 'let things develop'. Jan Hofmeyr, Smuts's loyal deputy, wrote critically to Sarah Gertrude Millin about Smuts's dilatory tendency 'to put off doing things which are a little unpleasant'. Hofmeyr was referring here to the likelihood that Smuts would procrastinate and avoid taking decisive action to defend African franchise rights. This was indeed borne out when, after ten years of political arm-twisting, Hertzog's original 1926 suite of segregationist legislation finally made its way through parliament. In 1936 Smuts joined with Hertzog in passing the government's landmark segregation legislation (Paton, 1964:221; Dubow, 1989: chaps 5&6).

This was a slow capitulation. At the 1929 'black peril' election - the first time that colour featured centrally in white politics - Hertzog represented Smuts's greater South Africa pretensions in virulently racist terms, castigating Smuts as 'the man who puts himself forward as the apostle of a black Kaffir state' stretching from the Cape to the Sudan. On the platteland, Smuts was wrongly characterised as wishing to grant the vote to black people (Hancock, 1968:218; Neame, 1930:270).

In the lead-up to the election campaign, Smuts had sought to calm the growing racial hysteria by arguing that it had always been his policy to 'keep the native question out of party politics' (*RDM*, 30 January 1929; 17 January 1929). This tactic failed and Smuts duly lost the election, outmanoeuvred and unable or unwilling to mount a principled defence of the non-racial franchise. Hertzog had no compunction about indulging in racial threats, whereas Smuts abjured crude racial politics. He was disinclined to deprive black people of their *existing* rights if the assurances he gave to a meeting of black voters in the rural district of Herschel in April 1929 are to be believed (*RDM*, 11 April 1929). Yet, he was simultaneously of the view that black people should not have a role in national politics. He believed that their political interests should, instead, be represented indirectly by means of decentralised advisory bodies.

II.

There is very little in the Smuts archive - either written or spoken - to show that he deliberately used racist ideas for political purposes. Smuts frequently counterposed terms like civilised and barbarian (or barbarous). The latter word was pejorative but it did not necessarily connote a state of permanent backwardness or retrogression in classical usage, though by the time Smuts was using it they had undoubtedly acquired offensive meanings. Towards the end of his career, in 1947, Smuts wrote privately and plaintively to Daphne Moore, one of his many women confidantes and interlocutors, reflecting on the searing criticisms levelled against him at the inaugural session of the United Nations:

> I continue to swim in my sea of troubles, and may yet drown in it. On one side I am a human and a humanist, and the author of the preamble to the Charter. On the other I am a South African European, proud of our heritage and proud of the clean European society we have built up in South Africa, and which I am determined not to see lost in the black pool of Africa (Smuts, 1947).

Leaving aside the plangent, self-pitying, tone of this passage, Smuts reveals an awareness of the fundamental contradictions in which he found himself, a point upon which several sympathetic women confidantes gently upbraided him. He did not brush his personal critics aside so much as try to persuade them that his hand was constrained by political realities. Similar dynamics can be seen in his relationship with the Cambridge philosopher, H.J. Wolstenholme, member of a well-known radical intellectual family which included the suffragist, Elizabeth Wolstenholme. Until his death in 1917, the reclusive Wolstenholme regularly supplied Smuts with reading material and gentle intellectual guidance.

Scholars such as Shula Marks and Bill Schwarz have shown that Smuts's silences on race, as well as on whiteness and masculinity, are just as telling as his deliberate or conscious statements (Marks, 2001:119-223; Schwarz,

2011:287-293). Like the American poet Walt Whitman (about whom Smuts wrote a remarkable study of the evolution of 'personality' in 1895 while completing his Cambridge law degree) Smuts was simultaneously anti-slavery and critical of abolitionists and humanitarians. Both men were pro-white democrats and pro-Unionists whose respective views of their nations were profoundly shaped by the experience of civil war. Whitman was minded to avoid the problem of race or, as Sarah Churchwell puts it, to hope that black people would somehow 'go away' (Churchwell, 2023; Engels, 2016). Smuts adopted a similar approach. As Liz Stanley remarks in her study of 400 letters written by Smuts to May Elliot Hobbs, part of the circle of radical women friends (including the Clarks and Gilletts) with whom Smuts corresponded so assiduously, there is a resounding 'silence' about black people in his description of daily life: 'fields plough themselves, cars drive themselves, clothes wash themselves, food cooks itself.' This form of silencing or dampening is more characteristic of Smuts's approach to race than Shula Marks's analysis of 'the almost visceral racial fears' that punctuate his writings and which are interposed somewhere between his conscious and subconscious self (Stanley, 2017; Marks, 2001:215, 206).

Rather a lot depends on our interpretation of the 'almost' in Marks's characterisation of Smuts's racial fears and angst. They were undoubtedly present and apt to break through at times in his correspondence and public addresses - though sometimes, one suspects for performative purposes. This leads us to ask whether Smuts feared black predominance in the immediate or distant future. My own view is that it was the latter. Smuts's intellectual confidence or arrogance encouraged his sense that he could disabuse his antagonists of their wrong-headed views. It also encouraged his continuous temporising which included a preference to think about the 'native problem' in abstract terms.

In 1906, as the prospect of closer union and segregation was beginning to clarify, Smuts wrote to the Cape liberal politician John X. Merriman:

> I sympathise profoundly with the Native races of South Africa whose land it was long before we came here to force a policy of dispossession on them. And it ought to be the policy of all parties to do justice to the Natives and to take all wise and prudent measures for their civilization and improvement. But I don't believe in politics for them. ... I would therefore not give them the franchise, which in any case would not affect more than a negligible number of them at present. When I consider the political future of the Natives in South Africa I must say that I look into shadows and darkness; and then I feel inclined to shift the intolerable burden of solving that sphinx problem to the ampler shoulders and stronger brains of the future (Smuts, 1906:242).[7]

As David Katz remarks, this 'non-policy' was 'short-sighted' even by the standards of the day, but Smuts tried to hold to this line throughout his political life (Katz, 2022:28). Habitual vacillation finally caught up with him in 1948.

Smuts's disinclination to concede political agency to black people or to confer with black leaders on a basis of equality meant that he avoided, despite Lloyd George's urging, an opportunity to meet with Sol Plaatje and other ANC leaders in London or Paris in 1919 in order to discuss what the British Prime Minister thought of as their 'legitimate grievances' (Willan, 2018:351-2, 361-4). Smuts batted the suggestion

7 On his view of the non-racial franchise, see also Smuts to J.A. Hobson 13 July 1908 in *Selections from the Smuts Papers Vol. II*, pp.440-43, where he argues `that the only sound policy at this stage is to avoid any attempt at a comprehensive solution of the various questions surrounding the political status and rights of the Natives.' And, further: `Public opinion in the majority of the South African States is against a Native franchise in any shape or form, and while it cannot be denied that on this delicate subject responsible public men are probably in advance of the rather crude attitude of the people at large and would be prepared to consider the subject on its merits, still the fear of the people will be with them and they will probably shrink from any far-reaching innovation.'

aside on the grounds that the ANC was unrepresentative, and he expressed irritation at their leaders' decision to vent protest outside South Africa. Smuts treated ANC president A.B. Xuma in much the same way in 1943 when Xuma sent him a copy of *Africans' Claims* with a request for an interview. This was rebuffed by a note asserting that the document was 'propagandist'. No useful purpose would be served by any meeting. In 1946, Xuma was in New York as the guest of Paul Robeson and the anti-colonial Council on African Affairs. Xuma and Smuts were both there for the first session of the United Nations. They met, apparently by accident, at a press function. Smuts was said to have been taken aback. Xuma had the last word, explaining his presence in New York by saying: 'I have had to fly 10,000 miles to meet my prime minister. He talks about us but won't talk to us.' (Dubow, 2008:62, 67. Also see Ngqulunga in this volume)

Smuts's reluctance to meet directly with black leaders contrasts with his close encounters with Gandhi, which were forged in the first decade of the century as the Indian protest movement in the Transvaal gathered momentum. Leaving aside the complex negotiations that ensued after their first meeting in 1908, there was also a personal and philosophical dimension to the encounter: Gandhi used the interaction to hone his ideas about Satyagraha and home rule; Smuts, also committed to higher theories of ethics and philosophy, embarked on a process of statecraft which, a decade later, would evolve into the idea of white ascendancy and sovereignty within the context of Commonwealth. Gandhi and Smuts were both critics of Imperialism - albeit not of empire as such - who came to appreciate the constraints imposed by their respective political positions. Theirs was a distant friendship underpinned by mutual regard. Gandhi and Smuts can indeed be seen as coeval intellects, both philosopher statesmen (and lawyers) who gained renown by translating their specific South African experiences into ideas of freedom - to which international audiences proved receptive.

In 1933 Smuts sent a private telegram to Gandhi, appealing to him in the name of 'old friendships sake' and

in recognition of the causes he had successfully campaigned on (like 'untouchability') to abandon his planned fast: 'Endangering your life might lead to dreadful calamity and irreparable setback at most critical moment.' In 1939 the Indian philosopher and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan invited Smuts to contribute to a volume marking Gandhi's seventieth birthday. Smuts agreed and wrote a piece on 'Gandhi's Political Method' which reflected on 'our clash in the early days of the Union of South Africa' about the 'Indian question in South Africa'. Smuts referred to this question as a 'skeleton in our cupboard'. On a more personal note, he recalled Gandhi having made a pair of sandals for him while the Indian leader was imprisoned in South Africa. Smuts said he wore the sandals over many summers, adding in tones of humble brag: 'I am not worthy of standing in the shoes of so great a man!' (Smuts, 1949:280, 281, 282).[8]

Yet, Smuts's personal regard for Gandhi did not dissuade him from taking a hard line against Indian rights in their lawyerly political negotiations. The fact that, by the 1930s, both were acknowledged as world leaders, meant that they were able to regard one another as statesmen. Smuts was deeply aware that India had a long and distinctive civilisational history - an achievement that he did not concede to any existing African societies. He saw Asia as on the cusp of renaissance. Yet, he was adamant in his refusal to concede the principle of equal citizenship and voting rights to South African Indians and clashed with liberal Indian politicians V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and Tej Bahadur Sapru at the Commonwealth meetings in London in 1921 and 1923 on this matter (McKay, 2024: chap. 7). It is impossible to uncouple

8 Radhakrishnan invited Smuts to contribute to this volume on 12 January 1939, writing from All Souls College, Oxford (Smuts's Personal Correspondence, University of the Witwatersrand historical papers). Prior to this Radhakrishan sent Smuts a 17pp. typescript dated 25 March 1935, on `East and West'. The telegram to Gandhi was sent via Kunwar Sir Maharaj Singh Quyamans. My thanks to Sumathi Ramaswamy for helpful conversations about Radhakrishnan and Smuts.

Smuts's personal prejudices from his sense of vulnerability to right-wing political antagonists in South Africa - and surely worth remembering that for many white voters and Afrikaner Nationalists anti-Indian feeling was in some ways even more intense than anti-black sentiment. Much the same can be said of the anti-Semitism of the National Party in the 1930s. Indians and Jews were both seen as direct, proximate threats to white people by right-wing English- and Afrikaans-speakers and also as irredeemably 'foreign' (or, in the case of Jews, too easily assimilable). Yet even the most extreme segregationists did not question the fact that black people were 'natives' and therefore autochthonous.[9]

If Smuts made an exception for Gandhi (as he occasionally did for individual house-guests of colour or protégés such as Noni Jabavu or Radhabai Subbarayan), he saw Jews as exceptional too. For many South African Jews, Smuts was regarded as a valuable ally and source of protection. Smuts's close relationship with Chaim Weizmann, his role in the Balfour Declaration[10], his support of a Jewish national state and his anti-Nazism were all well known. Even so, Smuts's philo-Semitism bore distinct traces of stereotyping. In 1922, Smuts laid the foundation stone for a Jewish War Guild memorial in Johannesburg at which many communal figures were present. 'I always envy my Jewish friends', he said, amidst much laughter, 'for the easy way in which they raise money. It seems to be genius of the race to 'raise the wind'. It had taken a lot of effort to raise a small sum of

9 On anti-Semitism at this time, see Milton Shain, *A Perfect Storm. Antisemitism in South Africa 1930-1948* (Shain, 2015). For anti-Indianism, see e.g., G. Cronjé, *Afrika Sonder die Asiaat* (Cronjé, 1946). Anti-Indian and anti-Semitic racism was by no means confined to Afrikaner Nationalists. In pro-British Natal, anti-Indian hysteria led by the Dominion Party resulted in the restrictive `Pegging Act' of 1943 and the `Ghetto Act' of 1946.

10 If one includes the 1926 Balfour Declaration which resulted in a new formulation of the Commonwealth and which Smuts indirectly contributed to, it would be possible to say that Smuts had a role in two Balfour Declarations.

money for a Delville Wood Memorial, Smuts added by way of explanation. 'You Jews, on the contrary make no noise and no effort. It comes to you quite naturally (Laughter)'. Smuts went on to praise the little land of Palestine as a national home while assuring his audience that 'anti-Semitic feeling would never find a place' in South Africa. 'The Jews would always be welcomed here. They were part and parcel of South Africa' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 9 November 1922).

How to interpret the laughter? Relief, embarrassment, deference? We cannot be sure but this example of maladroit jocularity was not unique. In 1930, Smuts travelled to North America after giving his Rhodes lectures in Oxford. Speaking in New York at the Civic Forum Town Hall he reprised some of the themes about race relations which he had recently delivered, albeit to a very different and less appreciative audience. In response to a question from the floor, Smuts advised African Americans not to be hasty. He compared them to Africans, 'docile animals, the most patient of animals, next to the ass.' Tuskegee Institute Principal, Robert R. Moton, rose to challenge Smuts for his hurtful statement saying that the audience would otherwise leave with a 'bad taste' in the mouth; Smuts compounded his error by explaining that he had not meant to give offence and that he was in fact expressing 'admiration for the natives' (Edgar & Houser, 2016). The controversy threatened to ruin his next engagement at Howard College in Washington. This event had been arranged by the Phelps-Stokes Fund and was attended by a select group of African American leaders. Smuts rowed back on his remarks in New York a few days earlier, saying that he had now gained a 'new view of the American race question' – though as Edgar and Houser note, he later commented that his audience was lacking in the sense of humour that he found in 'South African natives' (Edgar & Houser, 2016:41).

Edgar and Houser's analysis of the response to Smuts's speeches reveal the depth of African American leaders' anger towards Smuts's condescending paternalism. W.E.B. Du Bois, who had been following the South African situation for many years (Du Bois played host to Sol Plaatje who visited the United

States a decade previously) remarked, 'It's no use telling us to go on dancing and singing. The question is, how far are the negroes in the Union of South Africa to become free men?' Smuts refused an invitation from Walter White to debate with Du Bois, offering a dismissive 'Life is too short'. William Pickens of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) likened Smuts to 'the average politician from Mississippi' (*New York Times*, 11 January 1930). Yet, Edgar and Houser point out that not all who attended the Howard meeting were quite so critical. The head of Howard's sociology department, Kelly Miller, thought Smuts was well-meaning and commented drily that their visitor had been provided with a 'liberal education'. Alain Locke sought to look beyond Smuts's 'infelicitous remark' in New York and considered that his visit to Howard and the discussion it elicited was overall constructive from the point of view of understanding a critical, if distant, racial situation (Edgar & Houser, 2016:15-16).

Du Bois, who appears not to have attended either the New York or Washington events, had a considered understanding of Smuts and of the South African situation. Having observed Smuts's contributions to the redesign, with Wilson, of the League of Nations, Du Bois wrote in 1925:

> Smuts is today, in his world aspects, the greatest protagonist of the white race.... He is fighting to insure the continued and eternal subordination of black to white in Africa; and he is fighting for peace and good will in a white Europe which can by union present a united front to the yellow, brown and black worlds. In all this he expresses bluntly, and yet not without finesse, what a powerful host of white folk believe but do not plainly say in Melbourne, New Orleans, San Francisco, Hongkong, (Du Bois, 1925:82, 83).

This was Smuts seen as draughtsman of the global colour line. In locating Smuts as a leading advocate of the white race – albeit with 'finesse' – Du Bois was also cognisant of the complex internal conditions of South Africa in which Smuts was operating, specifically, the fact that racial and class

oppression were fundamentally interlinked. Domination, Du Bois argued, 'involves two things - acquiescence of the darker peoples and agreement between capital and labor in white democracies.' But, in South Africa, the political situation made for curious 'bedfellows—English capital and African black labor against Dutch home-rulers and the trade unions. The combinations are as illogical as they are thought-producing.' Smuts's philosophy thus led to 'puzzling' results (Du Bois, 1925:84.)[11] As an activist, Du Bois saw Smuts as an adversary, as a fellow intellectual he appears to have been more understanding.

III.

Clumsy and offensive remarks in America, notwithstanding, Smuts's racism was for the most part disguised. It was often a corollary of his primary commitment to the defence of white 'civilisation' (Schwarz, 2011:292, 293). There is thus an underlying consistency in Smuts's lachrymose confessional letter to Daphne Moore in 1947 in which he construes Africa as a 'dark pool' and his *cri de coeur*, *A Century of Wrong* (1899) written a full half century earlier in which he fantasised about the future while railing against the forces of British Imperialism and capitalism gathering to overthrow the Boer republics. Here, Smuts dreams about 'the distant prospect of Bantu children playing amongst the gardens and ruins of the sunny south around thousands of graves in which the descendants of the European heroes of Faith and Freedom lie sleeping.' Why, Smuts asks, has this occurred? 'An invisible spirit of mockery answers, 'Civilisation is a failure; the Caucasian is played out!' and the dreamer awakens with the echo of the word 'Gold! Gold! Gold!' in his ears.' The confused and confusing image of a future racial apocalypse triggered by capitalist greed is likened to Xerxes' attack on 'little Greece' and the imminent attempt at 'Infanticide' about to be perpetrated by Britain, 'gentle and kind-hearted

11 Du Bois was likely thinking of the contradictions shown up by the 1922 Rand Revolt.

Mother of Nations'. Impassioned to the point of incoherence, this passage may be interpreted either as an insight into the opaque mind of the 'inner Smuts's or else set aside as a peroration, a by-product of Smuts's last-minute effort to appeal to the better instincts of anti-war opinion in Britain (Reitz, 1900:55).[12]

There were just a few occasions when Smuts addressed the question of colour in a deliberate, considered manner. These set-piece meditations require close attention. One of the most notable examples was his Rhodes lectures in Oxford in 1929 which are laden with racial paternalism. The second lecture, 'Native Policy in Africa', followed his talk on 'African Settlement' and made the case for pursuing a white-led trusteeship policy in British Africa. A central claim was that segregation in South Africa was fully in accord with Lugardian principles of indirect rule which, Smuts argued, had a precedent in Rhodes's 1894 Glen Grey Act. While Smuts decried slavery, he set himself firmly against its opposite: egalitarian-based assimilationism. A compromise solution was therefore required. 'It is clear that a race so unique, and so different in its mentality and its cultures from those of Europe, requires a policy very unlike that which would suit Europeans.' Smuts thus mobilised cultural relativist arguments derived from anthropology to make the case for segregation as 'the fullest freest development of [the empire's] peoples along their own specific lines.' To reach this position – and foreshadowing his remarks in the United States – he characterised black people as 'child-like' and possessed of a 'happy-go-lucky disposition' (Smuts, 1930:67, 78, 75). This patronising trope was shaped by his experience as a young man growing up in the agrarian Western Cape amidst the regulating relations of deference required by servants in relation to their masters. Yet Smuts took care not to set any bar on ultimate progress.

12 *A Century of Wrong* was issued by F.W. Reitz with a preface by W.T. Stead. It is generally believed to have been written by Smuts and J. de Villiers Roos. Smuts never claimed authorship.

J.H. Oldham, a leading Christian ecumenist and ethicist, issued a rapid rebuttal of his Oxford lectures by way of a 70-page pamphlet in which he defended missionary work in Africa. Oldham (like the anti-Imperialist J.A. Hobson) was not opposed to colonialism if it brought benefits to subject peoples, nor did he question the principle that African development should be led by 'the higher civilization'. At issue were the methods employed as well as who the ultimate beneficiaries were. Whereas Smuts spoke for the expansion of a white dominion as the spearhead of civilisational advance in Africa, Oldham was concerned that this should not impinge on 'equal justice and equal opportunity' for black people. Oldham's response was thus more a critique than a fundamental repudiation of Smuts's assumptions. It was intended to shift the 'equilibrium' so as to ensure that black people 'be considered as ends in themselves, and to share in the benefits and privileges of the society of which they form a part.' He quoted the ANC's demand for 'recognition of their rights as human beings' to make this point (Oldham, 1930:20-1.)[13]

Oldham had previously published a critique of the doctrine of race superiority which attacked the scientific racism of figures such as Gobineau (Oldham, 1924). Smuts would have little difficulty in endorsing such arguments against racial science. In 1917, in a speech given at the Savoy Hotel in London (a week after he delivered his major speech on the Commonwealth to a joint sitting of parliament), Smuts spoke with unusual frankness about the challenges of achieving national unity between English and Dutch and the challenges of bringing together 'different racial strains and different political tendencies' (Smuts, 1917:82). He observed that all 'great Imperial peoples really are a mixture of various

13 While critical of Smuts's stereotyped view of African mentality – as well has his lack of detailed empirical knowledge of African conditions - Oldham's tone was generally polite. The respect shown to Smuts by his British audience may help to explain why he thought he could get way with making similar arguments to those of the Rhodes lectures in New York and Washington in front of a mixed audience.

stocks' and took particular issue with the 'Germanised Englishman, Houston Chamberlain' and his fallacious doctrine of racial purity. From dealing with problems of white nationhood, Smuts segued into a discussion of 'that other larger question of the black man's future'. Why, he mused, had the traces of civilisation in Timbuktu or Zimbabwe receded into 'barbarism'? (Smuts, 1917:85).

The potential for evolutionary retrogression was a common trope in Smuts's thought, fitting with his predilection for long-range thinking. In terms even more graphic than those he used in his 1929 Rhodes lectures, Smuts proceeded to lay out the principles of segregation in South Africa, noting that the recent conquest of the German colonies in Africa opened up new routes for white expansionism or, as one may think of it today, racial replacement. Smuts rejected intermixture and berated Christian missionaries who preached 'full belief in human brotherhood' (Smuts, 1917:86). Experience was instead showing the importance of 'creating parallel institutions on parallel lines with institutions for whites.' Rather than 'mixing up black and white in the old haphazard way, which instead of lifting up the black degraded the white, we are now trying to lay down a policy of keeping them apart as much as possible in our institutions'. It might 'take a hundred years to work out' a general policy, but keeping apart may ultimately 'be the solution of our native problem' (Smuts, 1917:88, 89).

Ruminating in this way, Smuts laid out in bare detail key elements of the segregationist mindset that had been developing in South Africa over more than a decade since Godfrey Lagden's 1903 to 1905 *South African Native Affairs Commission* and the deliberations of discussion groups such as the Johannesburg Fortnightly Club. He also added a reminder (conveniently crediting Lord Selborne who was chairing this meeting) that the Act of Union made allowance for the future incorporation of the Protectorates into South Africa. There was little original thinking on display in this talk delivered to a small audience. His presentation was less polished than in 1929 when the dual pressures of speaking at a named lecture series in Oxford and in the immediate aftermath of the

bruising 'black peril' election must have weighed on him. For these very reasons his Savoy speech might be seen as more revealing of his thoughts. He gave voice to these ideas during a fertile moment in his conception of the Commonwealth and the League – more or less midway between his expression of the inadvisability of perpetuating the non-racial franchise (as revealed in his correspondence with Merriman and Hobson in 1906-8) and his fuller discussion of 'native policy' in 1929. The former was influenced by the intense politics of closer Union, the latter by the gathering momentum of Hertzogite segregation. We thus see in the 1917 Savoy speech the evolution of Smuts's views on race and observe, too, his inclination to defer resolution of the problem to an indefinite point in the future.

The final occasion in which Smuts addressed race in a concerted manner was in his January 1942 address to the Institute of Race Relations. This speech was conditioned by the acute threat of a Nazi victory in the war, the revival of mass politics in South Africa, and the need to ensure that black support for the Allied effort could be relied upon. Just a year later, the ANC was to issue its major manifesto, *Africans' Claims* (1943) which set out an ambitious statement of unconditional citizenship and democratic rights by way of a reworking of the Atlantic Charter adapted to South African conditions. (Smuts is explicitly called out in the document for his assurance that the post-war world would be based upon 'the principles enunciated in the Atlantic Charter'.)'

Smuts's 1942 address is often remembered for his statement that 'Isolation has gone, and I am afraid that segregation has fallen upon evil days too', widely interpreted as signalling a relaxation of racial restrictions in urban areas (*RDM*, 23 January 1942).[14] Insofar as he addressed the idea of race, Smuts condemned Nazi race theories outright

14 The phrase `I am afraid' which is sometimes excised when this line is quoted, is susceptible to different interpretation. It is likely not a statement of fear so much as a statement that there is no alternative and an indication of his own ambivalence.

(though as Noel Garson points out, without mentioning anti-Semitism) (Garson, 2007:169). The form of Smuts's argument accorded closely with his previous attempts to find a middle way between extremes: in this case, a compromise between the *herrenvolk* ideology inflaming militant Afrikanerdom and renewed liberal-democratic demands for racial equality emanating from elements within his own party. Yet, he could do no more than offer the tired trope of trusteeship as 'another viewpoint' for consideration. For Smuts, 'trusteeship' was a matter of ethical duty and religious obligation held by the guardian on behalf of the ward. It was also a key means to align his outlook with British colonial thinking. There was no acknowledgement in Smuts's 1942 speech either of African agency or of rights, certainly not as Smuts would conceive of these in his uplifting contribution to the Preamble of the United Nations constitution. Educated liberal-minded white people were his target audience and Smuts duly appealed to their better instincts by dealing in the currency of enlightened self-interest. There were some notable rhetorical shifts, reflecting the growing mood of liberal expectation and intimations of post-war reconstruction. Garson notes that Smuts's 1942 address dropped any mention of miscegenation or of 'barbarism'. Difference was coded instead in the more flexible discourse of culture (Garson, 2007:171).

Smuts's address gave some liberals reason to hope that substantial reform was now part of the government's agenda. Jon Hyslop argues that Smuts's 1942 speech was not merely cosmetic. Its attack on European master-race ideology reflected genuine, existential anxieties about imminent Nazi military victory; its recognition of a permanent black presence in urban South Africa represented a substantial shift away from older segregationist ideas based on rural tribalism (Hyslop, 2012:451-4). Smuts's address was widely reported in the African press but his words had little discernible impact on black politics: the ANC was simply no longer interested in lobbying for concessions and now demanded rights as of right. In America, Howard University historian, Rayford W. Logan, writing in *The Crisis*, presented a detailed account of

Smuts's views on race as they evolved from 1917 to the present. Logan concluded that 'whatever guise he may present his end policy, good-will, justice or trusteeship, segregation is the fundamental basis. The only exception is the unescapable need of using Africans in industry so that South Africa may maintain her important position in world affairs.' (Logan, 1943:279).

When Smuts recommended adopting a spirit of 'racial indifference' to a predominantly liberal University of Cape Town community in 1937, this was in the context of a desire to inspire a new generation of graduates; yet, he was also prevaricating by resorting to elliptical reasoning and promises. In 1942, Smuts was recommending colour blindness once more in a contemplative university setting dominated by white liberals but he stopped short of promoting non-racism as an active political principle or as an essential component of a postwar democratic age. The strategy was counterproductive: it merely served to goad right-wing racial zealots as well as disappoint the expectant liberals who took Smuts at his word and placed their hopes in his leadership.

IV.

Aside from his 1942 address to the Institute of Race Relations, Smuts did not think much about a future racial settlement. He preferred to spend what little free time he had during the war years contemplating the deep past. When not engaged in fighting against Nazism, Smuts turned to the study of South African palaeontology, geology and rock art. He was responsible for bringing the eminent French rock art specialist, Abbé Breuil, to South Africa from occupied Europe to study Bushman paintings while continuing to support the research of van Riet Lowe. As a patron of prehistory and a key promoter of the South African Archaeological Survey, Smuts did not take a stand between the speculative racial diffusionism of Breuil and the professional work conducted by van Riet Lowe and Goodwin who were seeking to deracialise prehistory's assumptions. Instead, Smuts stood aloof, content to harness such intellectual activity for the promotion of broad white

South Africanism and scientism. There was also a personal element to this. In the midst of war, Smuts purported to find private solace in the idea of evolutionary deep time and the interconnectedness of human prehistory: his broader holistic cosmology, mixed with his Christian ethics, found optimism in the future (Dubow, 2019). In a foreword to Breuil's book, *Beyond the Bounds of History* (1949) Smuts offered this thought:

> On the time-scale of history which covers only a few thousand years we do not see much essential progress. Institutions change, forms of human life and existence change, but man himself remains much the same, [...] To see the true picture we have to take a larger time-scale. We have to call in the witness of prehistory. And then the answer is no longer in doubt. The progress physically, mentally and socially is almost beyond belief (Breuil, 1949:8-9).

But time was not on Smuts's side. In the rapidly changing domestic political environment of the 1940s and with the advent of sweeping decolonisation in South Asia, the *Ou Baas*'s genial blandishments and his inveterate paternalism were diminishing assets both in South Africa and abroad. Smuts's belief in white-led Western Christian civilisation was rapidly becoming anachronistic. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's evisceration of Smuts at the United Nations in 1946 revived the strong criticisms of him at Commonwealth conferences levelled by Sastri in 1921 and Sapru in 1923. These diplomatic occasions revealed the inadequacy of Smuts's studied ambiguity. It was exposed with devastating consequences in the 1948 election campaign when Smuts found no convincing argument against apartheid (Thakur, 2017).

During election campaigns Smuts never sought to inflame racial tensions as Hertzog notoriously did in 1929 and Malan in 1948 but he could no longer contain or deflect the populist appeal of supercharged racial rhetoric. He did not at any point take a lead in promoting segregationist policies but nor did he challenge them convincingly or with conviction. Reviewing the second volume of Hancock's still unsurpassed

biography of Smuts the year after Verwoerd's assassination, A.J.P. Taylor shrewdly observed that Smuts 'evaded difficulties in the hope that they would gradually disappear and was bewildered when instead they grew stronger'. In Taylor's view the 'present position of South Africa, rigidly racialist and isolated at the extreme end of the continent, is the measure of his failure.' In respect of race, this failure was as much a matter of acts of omission as commission, of seeking to rationalise race away without adequately confronting its stark political reality (Taylor, 1968).

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