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The Rubicon Revisited: A Documentary Approach Re-examining Racial Identity Constructions in 1980s Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract: This paper argues that P.W. Botha's constitutional reforms and, most importantly, his subsequent re-engineering of Apartheid's documentary apparatus, laid the foundation for a future non-racial state. By altering certain Apartheid documents, these reforms re-imagined South African identity as light-skinned, that is, for the first time nonwhite groups were recognized and considered a part of the nation. The effects that emerged from changes to the documentary apparatus opened up possibilities for racial cooperation. Although an enduring symbol of Apartheid, Botha permitted the earliest stages of racial integration while cracking the once rigid Apartheid edifice.

Keywords: Document, Documents, Documentary Apparatus, Apartheid, South Africa, P.W. Botha, Rubicon

P.W. BOTHA'S REFORMS to the Apartheid regime in the mid-1980s were criticized for being merely cosmetic; because he did not abolish Apartheid, his reforms were regarded as superficial and cynical illusions designed to further justify black oppression and exclusion. Botha did not cross the Rubicon, as he claimed in his infamous 'Rubicon' speech of 15 August 1985 to his National Party's Natal convention. Rather, the Apartheid President was seen as taking South Africa to the banks of the Rubicon, hesitating, and defiantly turning back, fearing the consequences of crossing into a racialized unknown. But I argue that Botha did cross the Rubicon, revolutionizing racialized ideas of what it meant to be a South African within the Apartheid context. Botha's constitutional re-engineering dramatically altered the country's racial landscape, particularly through his subsequent changes to Apartheid's documentary apparatus, that is, Apartheid's complex assemblage of documents, documentary practices, and institutions. This documentary re-engineering is significant for it cracked Apartheid's edifice, beginning to expand notions of South African identity away from white superiority to ethnic plurality.

Botha's reforms concentrated on re-engineering the South African constitution, *the* racial document that controlled the Apartheid system, helping to produce, direct, and control all other macro documents – legislative documents – as well as their micro documents, including personal documents and public signs. By altering the Apartheid constitution, all other Apartheid documents had to be changed along with it. In order to re-imagine South African identity as pluralistic, each Apartheid document had to be carefully reformulated to comply with Botha's expansion of certain racial categories.

How did Botha expand the idea of a racially exclusive South African identity, opening up previously rigid racial categories? By re-engineering Apartheid's documentary apparatus he brought certain nonwhite South Africans into the Apartheid fold for the first time in the country's history. Botha's reforms permitted light-skinned racial groups – Coloured and Indian South Africans – into the government. Although these reforms still excluded the black population from any official recognition, they nevertheless resulted in two significant, yet contradictory, changes to Apartheid: (i) an expansion of white South African identity to include nonwhite elements, thereby re-imagining an overarching, more inclusive South African identity; and, (ii) entrenching apartness between light-skinned South Africans and black 'foreigners'. These two changes are contradictory because the first took the country across the Rubicon, while the second hesitated at the banks refusing to cross it. The first change was revolutionary for South Africa, a frightening and ground-breaking change that challenged white South Africans' perceptions of themselves and 'their' country. Admittedly, Apartheid remained a racially exclusive regime privileging and recognizing only light-skinned groups while deliberately ignoring the rights and liberties of blacks. But, significantly, it was no longer imagined as white dominance over nonwhite groups. Botha's reforms re-imagined Apartheid as light-skinned unity in the face of the perceived 'black threat'. Despite its continued racist perspective, this new imagining marked the decline of racialism in South Africa.

It is still important to ask why exactly Botha's reformulations of Apartheid's documentary apparatus matter? They matter because Apartheid's documentary apparatus helped construct South Africans' racial



identities, ensuring total partition at both macro and micro levels. On the macro level, segregation was created, adopted, and turned into law through legislative documents; on the micro level, racial identities were reinforced by daily routines and practices with personal documents – such as racial identity cards and passbooks – and public signs. This documentary apparatus established a link between a person and his or her assigned racial category, transforming these categories into reality. The link was made powerful by the movement of these documents through manifold institutions, including parliamentary ministries, security agencies, bureaucracies, businesses, and societal associations, which imbued each document with status and authority. Further, these institutions standardized, routinized, and normalized each document through documentary practices, including the production, deployment, circulation, checking, comparing and contrasting, examination, and observation of each document. Indeed, as the documents seamlessly traveled through these institutional settings, an individual's racial category was transformed into a real identity, which, in turn, determined and controlled their life.

According to the noted documentation theorist Bernd Frohmann, a document's place within an institution makes its content – or information – informing, imbuing the document with the authority to sway, command attention, and direct actions. He states that “much of the authority of the informativeness of documents depends on the institutional sites of their production.”¹ A document is required to capture and stabilize any information. Without a document, and practices with that document, information does not emerge. But it is not just the document and its documentary practices that allow for the emergence of information; institutions are important factors in helping transform information into something informative, commanding, and authoritative. Apartheid's documentary apparatus was complex in its institutional design, settings, and procedures. It helped connect various institutions, from governmental to economic, together into a sort of machine that generated powerful constitutive effects: the construction of racial identities. Each document contained racial details about South Africans, such as personal information in a racial identity card or public information in ‘whites only’ or ‘non-whites only’ signs; it was obligatory for every person to carry, follow, and present these racial documents in order to navigate South African society. Indeed, Apartheid's documents

‘lived’ with every South African from the cradle to the grave. Regardless of one's own personal ideas or beliefs about their own identity, these documents sorted each person according to their designated racial group. Apartheid's documents consequently determined, on a day-to-day basis, a person's mobility, opportunities, and rights across South Africa.

To further illuminate my documentary approach to understanding Botha's re-imagining of Apartheid identities, let us now turn to Bruno Latour and Ian Hacking. Both theorists show how assemblages – or, in my case, a documentary apparatus – help construct ‘things’. Latour discusses how, for example, a scientific fact is created and stabilized through manifold associations linked together by a documentary metrological chain resembling a machine. Hacking argues how ideas are constructed through complex assemblages involving actors, material infrastructures, and institutions.

In *Science In Action*, Latour analyzes how scientific facts are constructed through labour, effort, materials, and certain practices by many different scientific actors. All these components must be reliable, credible, and willing to work in unison for an effect, in this case the scientific fact, to stabilize and emerge; he argues that, indeed, a fact is only as strong as its weakest link.² He states that “the simplest means of transforming the juxtaposed set of allies into a whole that acts as one is to tie the assembled forces *to one another*, that is, to build a machine.”³ He continues, “a machine, as its name implies, is first of all, a machination, a stratagem, a kind of cunning, where borrowed forces keep one another in check so that none can fly apart from the group. This makes a machine different from a tool which is a single element held *directly* in the hand of a man or a woman... The trick is to sever the link each tool has with each body and tie them to one another instead.”⁴ Everything must be linked together, functioning as one entity, to attain the same objective. The example of a windmill illustrates this point. When a windmill is in a finished state, its construction over and its parts working, then “no matter how much the winds shift, no matter what the winds want, the whole windmill will act as *one piece*, resisting dissociation in spite of/because of the increasing number of pieces it is now made of.”⁵

There are different ways in which associations remain linked together, one of which is through a complex documentary apparatus. Latour calls this a metrological chain. ‘Metrology’ refers to the “gigant-

¹ Bernd Frohmann, “Documentation redux: Prolegomenon to (another) philosophy of information”. *Library Trends*. 2004, 54 (3), 396-397.

² Bruno Latour, *Science In Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 121.

³ Latour, 128-129. Latour's emphasis.

⁴ Latour, 129.

⁵ Latour, 129.

ic enterprise to make of the outside a world inside which facts and machines can survive.”⁶ A metrological chain amasses huge amounts of papers within institutions that enforce the standardization and routinization of each paper, in so doing, making them authoritative. The scientific fact is constructed through these assembled forces working together and connected by an authoritative metrological chain of documents. If one component does not work in unison with the rest, then the authority, even the existence, of the scientific fact is jeopardized.

Hacking compliments Latour’s analysis of the machine through his discussion of how assemblages help construct people. In *The Social Construction of What?* Hacking argues that an idea is a classification of a *kind* of thing, such as an object, activity, or person. It is not the thing itself that is constructed; indeed, it already exists in some state. But it is the *idea* of the thing that is constructed. For example, a ‘hyperactive child’ is not constructed; he or she is a real person made hyperactive by particular mental, emotional, and environmental factors. But it is the idea of he or she being a *kind* of person, a ‘hyperactive child’, which is constructed.

An individual thus becomes a type of person, or a kind of person, as if he or she were a species to be classified, examined, disciplined, and documented. To become a type of person, however, requires a complex assemblage of actors, documents, institutions, and practices similar to a Latourian machine. The ‘hyperactive child’, as a kind of person, is the product of medical and administrative documents, doctors and psychologists, parents, special schools, support groups, as well as the actual child. Only once this assemblage is connected and stabilized does its effect – ‘hyperactive child’ – emerge.

An idea, moreover, is contextually contingent, existing within a matrix⁷ consisting of actors, documents, institutions, machines, material infrastructures, and so on. Every part of the matrix is necessary to construct the idea, or in a Latourian sense, the machine works only when every association is reliable, credible, and unified. If one component of the matrix, or machine, were lost, then the idea would destabilize because, on its own, it does not construct the idea. Only when the matrix is cohesive and stable does an idea emerge into reality. Further, an idea interacts with the person with whom it is associated. Hacking states that a ‘woman refugee’ is an interactive kind because she learns she is a particular kind of person and then responds accordingly, thus interacting with that kind.⁸ But this interaction is possible

only within the matrix in which both person and kind operate. Hacking argues that “the matrix can affect an individual woman. She needs to become a woman refugee in order to stay in Canada; she learns what characteristics to establish, knows how to live her life. By living that life, she evolves, becomes a certain kind of person (a woman refugee). And so it may make sense that the very individuals and their experiences are constructed within the matrix surrounding the classification ‘women refugees’.”⁹ Indeed, ideas and kinds are significant; if one is classified as a certain kind, their possibilities are either expanded, limited, or changed, as a result of being so classified.

The Apartheid matrix required the unified assemblage of the political, economic, security, diplomatic, religious, and social spheres. Each sphere could not establish or enforce total apartness by itself; assembled as one, however, they constructed and permitted the idea of Apartheid to emerge. Apartheid’s documentary apparatus functioned as the metrological chain connecting the spheres together. Documents linked each sphere into a single, unified force that produced significant effects: the creation, stabilization, and normalization of Apartheid’s racial categories. Also, Apartheid’s racial categories were interactive kinds. A South African’s racial category obligated them to become a certain kind of racialized individual. The documentary apparatus facilitated interaction between racial category and individual because, through documents, South Africans were linked to their officially designated categories. Regardless of personal desires, each person was forced to interact with their category on a daily basis.

The significance of Botha’s reforms rests in their focus on expanding notions of South African identity. The reforms crossed the Rubicon of strict racial categories between whites and nonwhites to more expansive categories of what it meant to be a South African. The South African identity no longer belonged to whites only, but rather was opened up to include certain nonwhite groups, specifically light-skinned peoples. The reforms altered the Apartheid matrix, forcing a change in *kinds* of people, which, subsequently, created new interactions between the kind and the individual. Nonwhite groups – the light-skinned Coloured and Indian racial groups – were now incorporated into the official South African identity, creating a new multiracial notion of South Africa.

⁶ Latour, 251.

⁷ Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.

⁸ Hacking, 32.

⁹ Hacking, 11.

Botha's major concern remained the protection, support, and continued elevation of racial identity; however the dramatic change was over *whose* identity had to be protected and guaranteed. In *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, Aletta Norval argues that "while the self-determination of white South Africans was important, it had to be qualified by the right of other groups to the same. The right of others was held as a prerequisite for the maintenance of 'white self-determination.'"¹⁰ Coloured and Indian groups were now re-imagined as part of the South African nation, while the country itself was re-imagined as a pluralistic society composed of light-skinned minority groups. Each minority group held important stakes in the survival of the country and, therefore, had the right of self-determination and autonomy in their own racial spheres. Botha's reforms therefore concentrated on the establishment of a tripartite parliament consisting of three racially separate governmental chambers between white, Coloured, and Indian groups. The once white-only power structure was transformed to include light-skinned racial groups, albeit on the old terms of Apartheid's racial categories. The government was thus racially divided along "a fixed 4:2:1 numerical ratio of white, Coloured, and Indian representation in Parliament that entrenched white hegemony."¹¹ Whites held the largest power bloc because they were the largest of the minority groups. Arguing for the logic and justice of this newly inclusive power structure, Botha claimed that South Africa was made up of various minorities and that there was no such thing as a black majority or a white minority. He stated that

"We [South Africa] are not prepared to accept the antiquated, simplistic and racist approach that South Africa consists of a White minority and a Black majority. We cannot ignore the fact that this country is a multicultural society – a country of minorities – White minorities as well as Black minorities. While the National Party accepts and respects the multicultural and poly-ethnic nature of South Africa's population, it rejects any system of horizontal differentiation which amounts to one nation or group in our country dominating another or others."¹²

Reforming Apartheid resulted in the re-articulation of the *idea* of self-determination for each light-skinned minority group, ending white dominance and permitting nonwhite groups into government. Botha's claim that blacks also consisted of minority groups effectively re-imagined them as smaller, fragmented groups, hoping to promote division and dilute any mass unity or movement to challenge the Apartheid state. The black minorities were still not considered a part of South Africa and were to continue to exercise their limited political rights within their tribal homelands.

Although they expanded the idea of South African identity, Botha's reforms were ironically based on Apartheid's founding document, the Population Registration Act. This Act obsessively classified and categorized South Africans according to their racial features, enforcing "the classification of people into four categories: white, coloured, 'Asiatic' (Indian) and 'Native' (later 'Bantu' or African)."¹³ It placed skin colours into strict categories, claiming that each one had its own goals of national and cultural self-preservation separate from the rest. This Act was the first link in Apartheid's metrological chain of documents; the starting point of the racial network in which the inertia of documents, inscriptions, and practices generated and gained momentum. From a Latourian perspective, this Act invented new groups of people¹⁴, or, as Hacking would argue, it helped make up people. This document, consequently, helped stabilize Apartheid's racial identities, transforming them into everyday facts. Botha's reformed constitution directly relied upon and referenced this Act when it specified the racial separation within the new nonwhite parliament.¹⁵ Each light-skinned racial group was still defined and categorized by this Act, necessitating other Apartheid documents to remain intact, continuing to link each group to their designated kind. For example, the Separate Amenities Act remained in place, for a time, to ensure that social traffic was still guided by race. This particular Act was actually needed to justify the partition of government along racial lines, requiring each light-skinned group to have their 'own' separate chambers.

Because Botha's reforms were guided by Apartheid's old racial categories, governmental affairs were segregated. It was no coincidence that the Separate Amenities Act created three racially separ-

¹⁰ Aletta J. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (New York: Verso, 1996), 210.

¹¹ Robert Schrire, *Adapt or Die: The End of White Politics in South Africa* (The Ford Foundation and the Foreign Policy Association, 1991), 65.

¹² Address by State President P.W. Botha, August 15, 1985. Appendix A in Robert Schrire's *Adapt or Die: The End of White Politics in South Africa* (Ford Foundation and the Foreign Policy Association, 1991), 149.

¹³ Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation and Apartheid* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 95-96.

¹⁴ Latour, 115-116.

¹⁵ Timothy Sisk, *Democratization in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 9.

ate chambers for each light-skinned group. Meanwhile, Population Registration ensured that parliament was divided between jurisdictions of 'own' and 'general' affairs. 'Own' affairs was "defined as those bills 'affecting the identity of a recognized population group', and depended upon the ability to categorize people into different racial groups. In areas of concern pertaining to a particular group, that group would have the right to make laws and regulate actions... Own affairs, however, had to be administered with due regard for general laws related to them, which reinforced rather than devolved the power of central government."¹⁶ 'Own' legislative documents were imagined to be of exclusive interest to each racial group, including education, health, community development, art, and recreation; everything else was considered of 'common' concern and therefore placed under 'general' affairs, such as foreign relations, economic matters, and security issues and threats. Legislation on 'general' affairs required concurrent majorities within each chamber, but with one important caveat. While the white chamber enjoyed veto power, the nonwhite chambers did not. A lack of veto power meant that the numerically powerful white chamber could easily reject any bill or motion it wanted, thus ensuring the continuation of white authority. Nevertheless, even though Population Registration's racial categories continued to

define South Africans, Botha's ability to bend its provisions of racial exclusivity demonstrates the extensiveness his reforms were for Apartheid South Africa.

Despite legitimate criticisms aimed at his reforms, most notably the fact they did not abolish Apartheid, Botha did cross a documentary Rubicon, expanding notions of South African identity. By including Coloured and Indian groups into the Apartheid matrix, Botha cracked white exclusivity and opened up the possibilities for nonwhite self-determination. The documentary apparatus, functioning as a metrological chain connecting Apartheid's spheres together and linking individuals to their racial categories, was dramatically re-engineered to allow and recognize the rights of certain nonwhite groups. This documentary alteration had the unintended effect of weakening racial categories, proving they were not as rigid as Apartheid's documentary apparatus desired, but rather more open and changeable. In 2006, Nelson Mandela acknowledged that "while to many Mr. Botha will remain a symbol of apartheid, we also remember him for the steps he took to pave the way towards the eventual peacefully negotiated settlement in our country."¹⁷ The eventual transition from racial exclusivity to nonracialism was made possible by Botha's documentary reformulation of Apartheid's racial identity constructions.

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¹⁶ Norval, 210.

¹⁷ BBC News, "PW Botha: Reaction in quotes" Wednesday 1 November 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6105178.stm>