Introduction

The return of the white working class

‘Class has never really been an Afrikaner thing, you know,’ Flip Buys, general secretary of Solidarity, stated matter-of-factly during an interview.

It was September 2011, and I had recently started my doctoral research into white working-class experiences of South Africa’s transition from apartheid to majority rule. I had come to Solidarity – the country’s largest predominantly white trade union – hoping that the organisation would function as an entry point, enabling me to step into the world of working-class whites that historians of late and post-apartheid South Africa seemed to believe did not exist. Buys’ assertion – that social inequality or class consciousness had never been significant factors within the white, Afrikaans-speaking community, and played little role in animating or explaining Afrikaner identities, experiences, and politics – thus seemed distinctly discouraging. Perhaps it was intended as such. However, as this book demonstrates, Buys’ statement in fact alluded to a much more complex reality, intimately bound up not only with the history of Afrikaner class formation and South Africa’s turbulent transition, but also reflective of much greater transnational trends and structural shifts reconfiguring the global political economy since the 1970s.

White workers occupied a unique social position in apartheid-era South Africa, their privilege dependent on the Afrikaner nationalist, race-based social contract upheld by the regime. In the labour arena, this saw whites shielded from black labour competition in exchange for their support for the ruling National Party (NP). White workers

1 Racial terminology and categorisations are problematic and continually contested, especially as apartheid-era labels have in many instances become accepted and widely employed indigenous categories. This book uses the term ‘African’ for South Africans who would have been classified as black (or ‘Bantu’) according to apartheid-era categorisations. ‘Coloured’ refers to those of slave, Khoesan, and mixed-race descent; ‘Indian’ to South Africans of Indian descent; and ‘white’ to those of European descent. ‘Black’ is used in the inclusive sense advocated by the Black Consciousness Movement to refer to African, coloured, and Indian South Africans collectively.
benefiting from these arrangements were deeply invested in the oppression of their black counterparts and the maintenance of the racial order. The white blue-collar workers organised in the Mineworkers’ Union (MWU) exemplified this position of labour vulnerability concealed by race-based status – while the state sanctioned their position as members of a privileged race, they were keenly aware of being a precarious class. Through its focus on the MWU, this book offers the first study of how such white workers experienced and negotiated the dismantling of the racial state and the establishment of black majority rule under the African National Congress (ANC). Starting from the escalating economic and political crises confronting the white minority government from the 1970s onwards, it shows that late apartheid reforms amounted to the withdrawal of state support for working-class whiteness. This sent white workers in search of new ways to safeguard their interests in a rapidly changing world. In the process, the MWU shed its working-class identity and repositioned itself as a culture-based civil society organisation. By the new millennium, the union had been reinvented as the Solidarity Movement, a service-providing social movement expressing state-like ambitions. It presented itself as the voice of South African minorities, and white Afrikaans-speakers in particular, defending their rights and interests, which, it claimed, were being threatened in the context of majority ‘domination’. In the ‘new’ South Africa, it seemed, the organisation no longer represented a vulnerable class but a precarious race.

This book seeks to foreground the shifts and intersections between structure and subjectivity, experience and representation, inequality and identity – whether expressed in terms of class, race, or ethnicity – inherent in this story. This invites a chronological and interpretative rethinking of South Africa’s recent past. My focus on the MWU/Solidarity uncovers the longer chronology of white working-class formation and workers’ search for a new patron, and shows how this process has shaped contemporary white minority politics. In this way, the focus is shifted away from 1994 – so often the fixation of scholarship on South Africa – to highlight a ‘long transition’ on the labour front with regard to the dismantling of the racial state and the adoption of neoliberal policies, and the enduring continuities between the late apartheid and post-apartheid periods. This provides new insight into the end of apartheid, and into the nature of the post-apartheid state, society, and its politics not captured by dominant ‘elite transition’ views.

The ‘long transition’ view, moreover, facilitates placing South Africa’s white workers within the recent transnational history of capitalism and state formation. White workers’ experiences during this period reflect
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broader global realities such as the rise of free market ideology, the decline of traditional industrial unionism, and the ascent of social movements and new populisms. Taking account of the global political and ideological context in which local labour reform and political change took place connects South Africa to a wider world, thus breaking away from the parochialism and ideas of exceptionalism that so often characterise scholarship on this country. This, in turn, contributes a view from the South to international debates on the political, social, and cultural consequences of global structural shifts since the 1970s and the making of race and class in the context of late capitalism.

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The white labour movement and white working-class lives form the mainstay of a wide-ranging body of scholarship examining the workings of racial capitalism, the making of the racial state, and the entanglement of class struggle and racial identities in South Africa. Significant contributions in this regard were made by Frederick Johnstone, Robert Davies and Dan O’Meara. This generation of Marxist scholars, writing in the 1970s and 1980s, insisted on the analytical primacy of class over race and argued that racial policies served dominant capitalist interests.\(^2\) White workers featured prominently in these analyses, which sought to explain the failure of a non-racial labour movement in South Africa.\(^3\) In parallel, emerging social historians wary of the theoretical abstractions and determinism often characterising neo-Marxist scholarship started producing histories ‘from below’ to demonstrate the agency of ordinary people in the making of their own lives in the context of capitalist development. Charles van Onselen, most notably, produced a collection of studies which included white domestic workers, brick makers and prostitutes.\(^4\) White working-class lives continued to be an important subject of

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historical inquiry amid subsequent historiographical developments. The end of the Cold War saw a turn away from class analysis towards ideas of community, gender, and identity. This resulted in a substantial literature on white working-class women, examining, for instance, their role in the Afrikaner nationalist movement or in non-racial trade unionism in the first decades of the twentieth century. Around the turn of the century, the impact of the cultural turn, postcolonial theory, and the emergence of whiteness studies stimulated new attention to discourse and subjectivities. This inspired Jeremy Krikler's masterful work on the entanglement of class struggle, racial imaginaries, and cultural understandings in shaping white working-class organisation and psychologies during the 1922 Rand Revolt. South Africa's white workers have also featured prominently in recent scholarly efforts to move away from the analytical confines of the nation state, thereby exposing processes of integration and difference between the local, regional, and global. Jonathan Hyslop, in particular, has produced trailblazing work on the transnational dimensions of working-class formation and white subjectivities. Throughout this existing historiography, scholars often approached white miners as proxies for the wider white working class in South Africa – an observation that underlies this book's choice of the MWU as its case study.

Historiographical developments since the 1960s have therefore generated a body of scholarship on white workers that is diverse in terms of approach, focus, and interpretation. Yet – strikingly – this vibrant scholarship has remained restricted to the early twentieth century. With the

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exception of a handful of works, including Wessel Visser’s biography of the MWU, with which I deal extensively in Chapter 4, scholars of the second half of the century have neglected white workers as a historical subject. Scholarship on the late apartheid period has focused either on the high politics of the apartheid state and its reform and repression from above, or on the crescendo of black resistance to apartheid and the liberation struggle from below.

The neglect of white workers from the second half of the twentieth century may be attributed to popular perceptions and scholarly understandings of the effects of NP rule on the material position of whites. Building on existing policies, from 1948 the NP saw to the tightening and expansion of racially discriminatory labour legislation, a dramatic increase in state employment from the civil service to parastatal industries, the widening of the social security net, and privileged educational and employment opportunities. Such policies benefited whites in general and Afrikaners in particular, and, within the context of strong post-war economic growth, they are understood to have facilitated dramatic upward social mobility. The reigning consensus, therefore, is that white poverty was ‘solved’ under the apartheid regime and whites moved up and out of the working class. This narrative of embourgeoisement sees the story of South Africa’s white workers, so vividly portrayed for the first half of the century, fall silent from the 1950s.


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suppression and exploitation of the black population, may well have contributed to the shift in scholarly attention away from white labour.

This book contends that white workers did not unproblematically disappear into the middle class. No comprehensive economic analysis of the class structure of the white population exists for the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. What structural information is available is fragmented and problematic: it does not consistently focus on either whites or Afrikaners, and scholars utilise different occupational categories and different measures of social stratification, some looking at income, others at occupation or skill. For the 1960s, O’Meara records artisans and production workers – what may be called blue-collar workers – as the largest occupational category of Afrikaans-speaking white males and one of the lowest earning in relative terms. This is supported by occupational data offered by Sadie, which shows a substantial blue-collar component to the Afrikaner population throughout the late apartheid period, with 31.5 per cent of Afrikaners in blue-collar jobs in 1980 and 29.1 per cent in 1991. Focusing on income trends, Terreblanche notes that the poorest 40 per cent of white, ‘mainly Afrikaner’ households experienced a significant decline in income between 1975 and 1996. He suggests that this ‘can perhaps be explained in terms of the rapid (perhaps too rapid) embourgeoisement of Afrikaners in the third quarter of the century, and the inability of many ... to maintain their income levels when economic conditions deteriorated’. Of course, income is relative: Seekings and Nattrass categorise the vast majority of the white population as located in the top two income deciles of ‘rich’ or ‘very rich’ by the end of apartheid in 1993. Crankshaw’s quantitative study of African advancement in various South African industries is the closest we get to detailed information about the class structure of the white population. Echoing Sadie, he shows that substantial numbers of whites worked in routine white-collar, front-line supervisory, skilled, and semi-skilled occupational categories throughout the late apartheid period. By 1990, a total of 893,617 whites were employed in these working-class occupations, compared

16 O’Meara, Forty Lost Years, p. 137. See also Chapter 1.
18 S. Terreblanche, A History of Inequality in South Africa (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003), p. 391. He later comments that it would ‘be a mistake to underestimate the traumatic experiences of many Afrikaners who had progressed from relative poverty in the first half of the twentieth century to substantial wealth during the third quarter, and then regressed to substantially lower standards of living in the last quarter.’
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with 676,227 whites in management, professional, and semi-professional jobs. Regrettably, Crankshaw’s study only covers the period from 1965 to 1990.\textsuperscript{20} Existing structural data therefore offers only an impressionistic view of the shape of the white working class from the second half of the twentieth century, suggesting the outlines of continued intra-racial inequality and fragile processes of class formation. The picture is not much clearer when we focus on the MWU/Solidarity as a case study. Precise membership information for the union is unavailable for most of the period under study here. The Chamber of Mines stopped publishing race-based employment information in 1986, and so subsequent records do not reflect the racial composition of the workforce.\textsuperscript{21} Thereafter, the growing diversity of the union’s membership as well as structural changes to the economy, shifting production methods, and changing labour policies mean that it is difficult to determine the exact positions and power of MWU/Solidarity members in the production process and their resulting social relations.

What is clear, however, is that throughout the late apartheid period, white workers – many of them Afrikaans-speakers – remained a significant part of the white population. We know little of how such workers reacted to efforts to reform apartheid from the late 1970s, or how the subsequent transition to majority rule impacted them. Where white workers are mentioned in the existing literature, it is typically as obstinate racists and supporters of conservative or hard-right political parties. While some labour-focused histories give some attention to white workers, acknowledging varying opinions within the white labour movement,\textsuperscript{22} these insights have remained marginal to literature dealing with the fall of apartheid and South Africa’s transition. Rather, the ‘working class’ in the scholarship on the period of reform and ensuing political transformation is typically African – and, to a lesser extent, coloured and Indian. White workers’ experiences of the challenge to white minority rule and racial citizenship, increasingly emanating from the swelling


ranks of urban African labour after 1973, remain absent from the scholarly narrative. Indeed, white workers are absent in the scholarship on white minority-ruled Southern Africa more broadly in the second half of the century.  

Nor has post-apartheid South African scholarship remedied this omission. In terms of structural analyses, the post-apartheid era has seen some studies of the impact of racial redress on employment trends, but these are typically industry-specific. More often, there is a general consensus that post-apartheid South Africa witnessed ‘the remarkably successful material adjustment of whites … despite their largescale departure from state employment and certainly from official preference’. This, argues Freund, reflects the skills, education, and capital built up by white households during the apartheid era, as well as the fact that, after 1994, the state ‘respected private suburban property, preserved pension funds and other private investments, and has not imposed punitive taxes to make white South Africans pay reparations for past injustices’, thus further facilitating the maintenance of white wealth and privilege after apartheid. Such observations, while undoubtedly accurate on the whole, perpetuate homogenising views of white society – views that continue to conform to ideas of comprehensive white embourgeoisement under apartheid. This is also the case in sociological and social anthropological research. Here, scholars have offered a range of critical analyses of how whites have sought to negotiate the ‘identity crisis’ spawned by their loss of political power and the collapse of the Afrikaner state. This is exemplified by the work of Melissa Steyn, who identified a range of reactions among Afrikaans- and English-speaking whites respectively, cast as varying efforts to ‘rehabilitate a whiteness disgraced’ while safeguarding white power, privilege, and status within the new democratic context. Further research pointed to physical, political, and

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psychological withdrawal into private ‘comfort zones’ and homogeneous cultural circles, or announced the ‘death’ of Afrikaner nationalism. In apparent contradiction, some scholars reported that Afrikaners were adopting a defensive and exclusivist ethnic identity through discourses of post-apartheid victimhood and second-class citizenship. This included appeals to minority rights – although this strategy was also identified as being involved in mobilisations around a more inclusive Afrikaans identity focused on language. I discuss this literature in further detail in Chapter 4. But, surveying this scholarship, the reader might well be tempted to accept Buys’ assertion that ‘class had never really been an Afrikaner thing’. In fact, the overwhelming focus on subjectivities and discourse in this period reflected not only the ‘death’ of class analysis and the growing dominance of identity debates, but also the widespread acceptance of ideas surrounding apartheid-era white embourgeoisement.

A welcome exception in this regard is provided in a recent ethnographic study of white working-class lives in post-apartheid Pretoria. This research by John Sharp and Stephan van Wyk is restricted to the


capital city, but the processes of deindustrialisation, rationalisation, and resulting livelihood struggles that form the backdrop to their ethnographies may be taken as suggestive of developments throughout the country’s industrial centres. The west side of Pretoria had long hosted various parastatal industries. Most notably, it was the site of the first state-owned steel mill, set up in the 1930s under the parastatal Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation (Iscor) to create employment opportunities for impoverished, unskilled, and newly urbanised whites. Capital shortages in the midst of escalating economic and political crises saw the apartheid government privatise Iscor in the late 1980s. Under the ownership of the multinational Mittal Steel, the plant’s labour force was systematically downsized until the Pretoria West works were closed down entirely in the mid-1990s. This had detrimental knock-on effects for other industries in the city, particularly those producing armaments and munitions, which were already struggling to stay afloat amid the rapid decline in demand following the end of the apartheid regime’s military interventions in Southern Africa and, after 1994, in South Africa’s townships. In the space of just a few years, this reduction in industrial activity in Pretoria West left some 15,000 white workers unemployed. Those made redundant from state employment lost not only their jobs but also company-sponsored housing and amenities. These processes coincided with the transition to majority rule and the institution of policies of racial redress. For laid-off white workers, employment equity policies blocked access to alternative employment in the civil service or armed forces, both headquartered in Pretoria. While some were able to find other industrial employment, the majority were unable to do so. They resorted to the informal economy, trying their hand at self-employment, or became reliant on other household members. Sharp’s and Van Wyk’s research follows the fortunes of these whites. Rather than white subjectivities, they are interested in the economic and social strategies that individuals devise to adapt to their new
