Afrikaner, nevertheless: Stigma, shame & the sociology of cultural trauma

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Prologue

This book is a study of a community in moral transition. The fate of Afrikaners after apartheid is a matter that is at the heart of the appeal of South Africa’s narrative about the transition. South Africa’s new democracy vowed to create a nonracial country. The moral promise was that white South Africans, and specifically Afrikaners, would adjust to majority rule and shed themselves of their racism and entitlements of white privilege. Reconciliation, which literally means to bring together again, was to work both ways: Afrikaners needed to change, adapt, and accept redress, while the black majority needed to accept and recognize them as the minority. Although the story of the transition can be told quite differently, from various perspectives, Afrikaners did break away from the traditional course of colonial history when they decided to no longer defend white supremacy and political power by arms. Instead, they voluntarily started negotiations and embarked on a path to democracy.

Afrikaner nationalists dominated South Africa’s politics in the second half of the 20th century, coming into power in 1948 with the National Party. Building on the Pass Laws passed by the British-controlled government in 1923, the National Party created apartheid, a system of racial segregation under which the rights of the majority nonwhite inhabitants of South Africa were curtailed, and white supremacy and Afrikaner minority rule was maintained (H. B. Giliomee, 2010). In 1990, the National Party started negotiating with the African National Congress (ANC), the main opposition movement to the government during apartheid. The negotiations ended in the democratic elections of 1994 and with the creation of a new constitution in 1996.¹ Today, Afrikaners are an ethnic group of roughly 2.5 million white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans—a number that equals 7 percent of the people of South Africa.²
This moral promise entails a set of particular challenges for Afrikaners. The first challenge is to come to terms with the past. For most Afrikaners, the question of guilt and responsibility is not necessarily about the actual commitment of atrocities as much as having been part of a system that made those atrocities possible and even necessary to its own survival. Barnard has referred to this moral question as the “structural complicity” of Afrikaners in apartheid’s transgressions (Barnard, 2004). There is no consensus about the appropriate ethical response to the guilt of apartheid or Afrikaners’ culpability, but all Afrikaners have to confront and accommodate the challenge and establish a comfortable relationship with it.

A second challenge is to come to terms with the present. The transition demanded cultural change from Afrikaners. Apartheid’s racist ideology was expressed in all aspects of everyday life, in rigid systems of difference, deference, and domination, in racial division of labor, in discriminatory wages, and so forth. It was part of Afrikaner culture. Now that apartheid as an institutionalized racist ideology is over, Afrikaners have to adapt to what it means to be a nondominant minority. They have to confront the racism in their language and think patterns, and they have to learn to live without the sense of entitlement to white privilege. To come to terms with the present, then, is not about complicity in some past crime but about cultural and identity change (Krog, 2003; Zegeye, 2001).

Questions of morality should be confronted with hesitation by sociologists; we should not want to be philosophers in disguise. On the other hand, the absence of moral discourse has greatly impoverished sociological understanding of identity and human agency, according to sociologists like Andrew Sayer and Craig Calhoun (Calhoun, 1991; Sayer, 2005). Sociologists can illuminate morality’s important social dimension by questioning how institutional structures and patterns of cultural meaning connect to moral judgments and action (Abend, 2008; Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010). In other words, they study the conditions in which people face moral challenges. As a sociologist, my interest is not in the problem of moral transition as a philosophical question, but as an empirical question. I believe sociology has much to contribute to untangle the empirical conditions in which Afrikaners face their moral choices. Once the conditions are carefully mapped, I will make some propositions how Afrikaners can overcome these moral challenges.

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Observers of South Africa in the 1990s believed they had witnessed the death of one world and the birth of another. That is how many participants also experienced it. For some Afrikaners change came in sudden flashes and momentary realizations—they viewed it as a revolution. For other Afrikaners,
the end of apartheid was absolutely incomprehensible and unbelievable. The prospect of integration would be traumatic, many said. In the 1990s, it was not yet clear whether the old order was shattered for good, or whether it merely looked and felt like that at certain fleeting moments and in specific places. Twenty years later, a different picture slowly emerges. From one perspective, South Africa has changed forever; from another, parts of South African life look remarkably similar to two or three decades ago. The picture of change has become considerably more complicated.

No doubt the reasons that change has turned out different than expected are multiple but among them is this: observers have been slow in realizing that the double transition to democracy and the market may not be as simple or as easy as first imagined (Centeno, 1994). Some have called the economic transition of South Africa the “silent revolution” because its importance and consequences were only much later understood than the political transition (Gumede, 2007). A great deal of South Africa’s current social ills is not just a product of the apartheid past but a result of the neoliberal conditions set during the transition. The economic agreements solidified during the democratic transition enshrined a series of neoliberal policy principals in law that have proven durable ever since: the protection of private property, participation in the World Trade Organization, the breakdown of trade barriers, debt servicing, the dominance of private-sector partnerships, and protection of intellectual property rights (Bond, 2000; Schneider, 2003). The negative consequences of these neoliberal policies are now evident for the poor and the socially excluded (J. Ferguson, 2007, 2010).

What about the consequences of neoliberalism for Afrikaners? Superficially, the wealthy, employed, and well-educated white population of South Africa, including Afrikaners, have benefited financially from these economic arrangements (Leibbrandt, 2010). That is the reason why many accused Afrikaners of instigating neoliberalism. However, neoliberalism as a social project was not just instigated by Afrikaners; it also impacted upon them—and highly unevenly.

Macro policy principles set the stage for the privatization of public utility companies, urban services, and education. The urban landscape has been divided by walls, gates, and a private security apparatus that partly supplants the police force. Former state companies struggle to maintain services. At the level of institutions, the social landscape has radically changed, also for Afrikaners. Neoliberalism in South Africa did not, as in Western Europe, simply naturalize as universal the interests of the white middle class. Rather, it opened up a class divide among Afrikaners. The lower middle class, which was overrepresented in public and formerly public companies in 1994, is strongly affected by policies that hollow out public expenditure and public utility companies. When the ANC government at the same time launched a program of affirmative action, lower-middle-class Afrikaners were the most
affected. The question is how the new socioeconomic conditions affected the moral transition.

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Sociology is not commonly thought of as the discipline to study phenomena of moral change. Other disciplines like psychology, history, law, and political science have dominated the topic. Psychologists have studied the phenomena of collective guilt, which is the unpleasant and often emotional reaction that results among a group of individuals when it is perceived that the group illegitimately harmed members of another group (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Zebel et al., 2007). Historians have been concerned with trying to explain the rise and demise of apartheid, often in moral terms (O’Meara, 1996). Scholars of law have introduced the concept of transitional justice to capture a range of approaches that states may use to address past human rights violations (Jon Elster, 2004; Minow, 1999). Finally, political scientists have been interested in ethnic groups in conflict, nationalism, and how democratic transitions solve these conflicts (Eriksen, 2002; Horowitz, 1985).

On the surface, focusing on Afrikaners as an ethnic group after 1994 might seem an odd focal point, seeing as its mere existence is questionable. Politically, the demise of Afrikaner nationalism and the National Party after apartheid has been swift and complete—where in 1994 the National Party still had 24 percent of the votes, the party came to an end by 2006 (Westhuizen, 2008). The cultural network of Afrikanerdom also collapsed after apartheid. Before 1994, the political and public articulation of Afrikanerdom was mediated by an extensive cultural and religious network that built and ideologically sustained apartheid, white supremacy, and ethnic nationalism. The network that occupied Afrikaner civil society and spiritual life reinforced the political party that traditionally occupied political life—the NP (Courtney Jung, 2000, p. 156). All but a few of the organizations of this extensive network have lost their relevance, including the once all-powerful Broederbond, the secret and exclusive male society dedicated to the advancement of Afrikaner interests (N. Smith & Hofmeyr, 1990). Maybe the only dominance Afrikaners still hold is economic, as they continue to control large South African companies that used to be linked to the nationalist project (R. Davies, 2009; Goldberg, 2011).

Many critical social scientists have therefore shifted away from focusing on Afrikaners specifically by directing their attention to issues of inequality, racism, whiteness, globalization and identity politics (P. Alexander, Dawson, & Ichharam, 2006; R. Davies, 2009; Durrheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011; Steyn, 2001). They argue that the old categories of race and ethnicity have been substituted with class as the preferred mechanism for social domination and exclusion in post-apartheid South Africa. Traditionally, it was the political
scientists and historians who wrote about the history of Afrikaners as a collectivity, or a collective identity, and posited that the political culture and ideology deserved specific study (Horowitz, 1985; Le May, 1996; O’Meara, 1996). Some still argue that the study of Afrikaner nationalism deserves attention in the post-apartheid situation (Blaser, 2004; Kriel, 2006). But the majority of social scientists have treated Afrikaners only as a side concern of studying topics like political transformation (Courtney Jung, 2000), the process of reconciliation (Gibson & Gouws, 2002), the collapse of Afrikaner nationalism (Clark, 2004; Van der Westhuizen, 2008), and the study of the new political economy in post-apartheid South Africa (Bond, 2000, 2003; Marais, 1999, 2011).

Why, then, focus on Afrikaners as a group? Because it is one thing to hand over political power; it is another thing to reconsider who you are as a volk or people—or to reconsider your identity as a person. When the transition to democracy tore through the myths of apartheid in the early 1990s, followed by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in the late-1990s, both events challenged the attitudes of millions of Afrikaners, undermined their customs, and upended their ways of life. The end of apartheid possessed the rare ability to transform all it touched. It ushered in political change, altered race relations, and transformed institutions, which overturned the apartheid way of life. Many Afrikaners felt these changes just as deeply as non-white South Africans—but much differently. Few escaped its long reach. There are few ethnic groups who are confronted with the challenge of having to come to terms with the past, with the loss of privilege, and to being a nondominant minority in such a short time span.

The moral transition of Afrikaners is a problem not only for its own sake—that is, raising the question of whether an ethnic minority can overcome its past. It also has farther-reaching effects on South Africa’s future as a multiracial nation. There is much at stake for the future of South Africa. The post-apartheid era has ushered in a new form of white migration: the movement of hundreds of thousands of white South Africans out of the country. In 2005, the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) reported that an estimated 796,000 white South Africans had left the country since 1991. Three years later, the SAIRR reported that “The white population continues to experience the effects of large-scale emigration of adults between the ages of 20 and 35” (SAIRR, 2008, p. 1). Members of a political unit do not remain within it if they cease to trust its ability eventually to serve their interests.

If Charles Wright Mills is right, and the sociological imagination is the promise that enables its possessor “to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals,” a sociological approach is surely justified (Mills, 1959, p. 5). Sociology has a long tradition of addressing similar moral issues; a tradition
that started after the World War II in Germany. Sociologists like Adorno and Horkheimer debated the moral challenges that Germans faced after the war and the Holocaust, and they also empirically researched it. Adorno raised the famous question what is meant by coming to terms with the past? (Adorno, 2010). More recently, sociologists like Cohen, Zerubavel, and Alexander have explored the political and personal ways in which uncomfortable realities are avoided and evaded, and “how social groups interact with emotion to create new and binding understandings of social responsibility” (Jeffrey C. Alexander, 2012; Jeffrey C Alexander, Smelser, Eyerman, & Stompska, 2004; Cohen, 2001b; Zerubaval, 2006). These scholars transgress the boundaries of traditional studies of collective memory, and connect the past to people’s cultural and emotional challenges in the present (Halbwachs, 1992; Homans, 2000; Olick & Robbins, 1998). It is in this long, less-known tradition that this study stands.

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In this book I argue that the moral challenges that confront Afrikaners constitute a cultural trauma. This is a claim that deserves explanation. One would expect that the label of trauma is solely used for black South Africans and the consequences of apartheid on its victims. But there is a difference between trauma as a language of experience and a language of analysis. As a language of experience, the terminology of trauma is traditionally reserved for victims of extreme violence and their experience of loss. On the other hand, as a language of analysis, the concept of trauma connects cultural and emotional processes in sociological analysis (Hayner, 2000; Jelin, 2003; Kaplan, 2005). It also expresses the social and cultural dimensions of what are seemingly individual psychological processes (Erikson, 1976, 1995; Robben & Suárez-Orozco, 2000). The language of cultural trauma is not an invitation for the abstract analysis of ultimately practical moral challenges. Instead, trauma as an analytical language points us to the intertwined role of culture and emotions in the moral transition of Afrikaners.

Afrikaners’ cultural trauma has its own, specific cultural-emotional logic. As a former perpetrator group, Afrikaners face a very different set of challenges than the victims of apartheid. The language of trauma is appropriate because Afrikaners have to confront emotions of loss, guilt, shame, and (injured) pride. Their cultural habits have to be unknit and rewoven. This cultural aspect is not just about the past and the heritage of apartheid; it is also about coming to terms with the present. That is why the various moral challenges that confront Afrikaners are best analyzed at the institutional level. Here, the everyday work of meaning making and the emotional friction of racial life come into full display.
Afrikaners’ cultural trauma manifests itself not as an abstract and isolated cultural rupture but in the daily struggles of Afrikaners to make sense of multiracial South Africa and to manage the stigma of being Afrikaans after apartheid. I borrow the idea of stigma from Fanon and Goffman, who both believed that a trauma can be shared and cultural rather than individual and psychological. In contrast to modern trauma theory, which emphasizes memory and representation, they emphasize the effects of a stigma in the creation of cultural trauma (Fanon, 1986; Goffman, 1963; Hook, 2004). When historical crimes like apartheid are committed in the name of an ethnic group, as was the case for Afrikaner nationalism, a characterological inference is almost certainly made by its victims and others. In day-to-day life, non-whites perceive little difference between group behavior and “group character.” Because groups tend to be perceived as underlying essences, Afrikaners are collectively blamed. In their own experience, Afrikaners are constantly confronted by non-Afrikaners for who they are. They feel stigmatized.

This study shows that the burden of cultural trauma is unevenly distributed among Afrikaners. By comparing different groups of Afrikaners in various institutional settings, I demonstrate not only how neoliberal policies and multiracialism affect Afrikaners’ classes very differently, but also what the implications are for the cultural and emotional dynamics of moral transformation. Those Afrikaners who profited the least from apartheid not only fell the hardest after apartheid, but carry the heaviest emotional load. Whereas Afrikaner nationalism was built on class coalition, post-apartheid neoliberalism is built on class schism. Racial redress in the form of affirmative action affects the lower classes of Afrikaners much harder, and this in turn affects their ability to come to terms with apartheid and multiracial South Africa. As Afrikaners shift from being a dominant minority to a subjected minority, some groups are stigmatized daily for what was done in the name of Afrikaner nationalism.

Stigmatization may sometimes be justified, for Afrikaners struggle to adjust their behavior and language to the new democratic norms. However, not all Afrikaners respond in the same way to stigma, even if they occupy a similar institutional setting or class position. The lower middle class has far less economic, institutional, and cultural resources to manage the effects of stigmatization. Moreover, stigmatization leads to shame, particularly among men young and old, and this is a problematic emotion. I do not mean shame like being embarrassed or withdrawn, but primitive shame, an emotion rooted in a demand for control and omnipotence and the unwillingness to accept neediness. Shame impedes the process of coming to terms with what they
did wrong; of accepting what they have lost; and understanding what it means to be a minority not in control but dependent on a dominant majority. Precisely because emotions like shame play a large role in the moral transition, gender differences matter. Men are more prone to shame, as they hide their need for others and avert their own gaze from their inner world. In the end, my institutional and intersectional approach toward the analysis of cultural trauma reveals not only the commonality of Afrikaners’ moral struggles, but also the differences in the outcomes.

Cultural trauma can be overcome only when Afrikaners manage to find methods of generating a new cultural language, despite their past, and the loss and shame the change has brought. I am hesitant to argue that the language of trauma is morally enlightening, as some have done (Fassin, Rechtman, & Gomme, 2009). And I do not encourage more shame, as others do, or withdrawal from the political arena. I do argue that public policies can be shaped not to burden the wrong sections of Afrikaner people. Policies can also nudge Afrikaners from shame to guilt, a more productive emotion that stimulates people to do acts of reparation. At the same time, Afrikaners should acknowledge that sacrifices are necessary to make democracy work. The black majority will not forgive and forget easily what apartheid did to them and stop stigmatizing Afrikaners. Therefore, it is necessary for Afrikaners to free themselves by becoming what they feel a good South African citizen should be.

None of this is to say that, given the current state of the moral transition, the completion of this process is at hand. And none of this is to say that, given current social ills in South Africa, any of this is easy. Ultimately, the moral promise of South African democracy, when it comes to Afrikaners, is a grand collective psychological and sociological experiment of moral transition. What will be the definitive outcome of the “experiment” for Afrikaners? Will theirs be a story of moral transformation or one of a protracted cultural collapse? Or should such grand claims be avoided altogether in favor of a more nuanced picture of some adjustment and adaptation along with prolonged resistance and resentment?

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This book is a modest contribution to cultural sociology and the sociology of emotions, and particularly the sociology of cultural trauma and stigma. My goal in looking at the response of Afrikaners to racial integration through the lens of stigma and destigmatization is not to make a moral statement, but to demonstrate and understand how ordinary Afrikaners culturally and emotionally struggle in their daily life with the legacy of apartheid. To define the outcome of the struggle of Afrikaners as a cultural trauma might seem like an exaggeration, given how the term of trauma is typically used. My
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Conclusion is that the use of the term “cultural trauma” indicates how
difficult and troublesome it has been and still is for Afrikaners to rework
the habits of the past, and deal with the emotions that come with the process of
coming to terms with the past and the present. That is the central claim of
this study. It does not mean there are no differences among Afrikaners; it
means that the people in this study remain Afrikaners, nevertheless.

From the start, I want to clear the conceptual ground and clarify my
perspective and theoretical concepts. In Part 1, I introduce the problems with
studying Afrikaners after apartheid with an analysis of the media debate about
the Afrikaner song “De La Rey” (chapter 1). The debate highlights the need
for an intersectional and interview approach, if one wants to do justice to
emotions of different groups of Afrikaners. The media’s analysis shows that if
a sociological study wants to take emotions seriously, it cannot solely rely on a
discursive analysis of media debates. What is needed is an institutional
perspective that studies Afrikaners in their daily lives. In chapter 2, I discuss
the advantages of this institutional perspective by contrasting it against
alternative macro- and micro-level approaches, and discussing their problems.
Understanding Afrikaners after apartheid, and their moral transition,
demands a theoretical approach that makes a distinction between the process
of coming to terms with the past and the present. Therefore, in chapter 3, I
juxtapose cultural trauma theory with findings from postcolonial, new racism,
and whiteness studies. Each of these approaches theorizes the relationship
between culture and emotions, but emphasizes different aspects. The
theoretical insights and concepts are translated into a methodology that
combines discourse analysis with a case study approach (chapter 4).

What follows is a set of detailed case studies of Afrikaners, in which I
explore the cultural and emotional dimensions of the process of coming to
terms with the past and the present. I start my analysis, in Part 2, with the
stories of Afrikaner men in the work sphere. Developments in the neoliberal
economy after apartheid benefited white South Africans overall, including
Afrikaners. Nevertheless, the ANC’s government programs of racial redress,
specifically black economic empowerment and affirmative action also had an
impact on different classes of white Afrikaner men (chapter 5). The Afrikaans
business elite are studied through the case study of the Afrikaanse
Handelsinstituut (AHI) and the identity narratives of individual Afrikaner
entrepreneurs (chapter 6). The Afrikaner lower middle class is analyzed
through the prism of Solidarity, the former Afrikaans Mine Workers Union
(MWU) that has metamorphosed in an activist ethnic movement that
campaigns against affirmative action and for minority rights. For
lower-middle-class Afrikaans men, the restructuring of former state companies like
Eskom and Telkom, together with affirmative action, provide serious
challenges to keep work as a stable source of male pride (chapter 7).
Since apartheid, South Africa saw the emergence of hundreds of gated, privatized communities, while cities experienced a surge in crime and pressure on urban services. In the introduction to Part 3 on the institutional sphere of living, I emphasize the role of security and aesthetics, and how it relates to the politics of the wealthy (chapter 8). Aesthetics, in particular, plays an important role in understanding how people’s sense of place is not only shaped by fear but also by disgust. There is a sharp contrast between the experience of home of the upper-class Afrikaner women within the gates (chapter 10) and the lower class women outside the gate (chapter 9). The upper class has created a sharp social boundary supported by their financial resources and the practice of gating. Nevertheless, the concerns of the women revolve around the same themes of order and beauty, almost being each other’s mirror image. The young generation of Afrikaners, the subject of Part 4, is studied within the context of two racially desegregated schools: the first an upper class school and the other a lower-middle-class school (chapter 11). The new “diversity talk” of the upper-class girls (chapter 12) contrast sharply with the renewed interest of Afrikaner lower-middle-class boys in their Afrikaner identity (chapter 13). Emotionally, the upper-class girls struggle with questions of guilt and fear for the future, while the lower middle class boys tackle loss and shame.

In the conclusion, Part 5, I tie the strands of this book together by comparing the developments in the different institutions as well as addressing the intersection of class, gender, and generation in the identity discourses of Afrikaners. I argue that the burden of the past is unequally divided among Afrikaners. Theoretically, I discuss the difference between cultural and emotional mechanism in the theory of cultural trauma. Finally, in the epilogue, I suggest ways in which primitive shame can become moral shame to encourage the moral transition of Afrikaners, and what the role of public policy is therein.

Let us begin, then, with a song about an old Afrikaner general that served as a national focus point for the confusing but passionate cultural debate about the position of Afrikaners after apartheid, 15 years after the democratic transition.