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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CAPE SOCIETY AND ITS HISTORIOGRAPHY: CULTURE, RACE, AND CLASS

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The revisionist literature of the 1970s approached social stratification in South Africa with the insistence that proper 'weighting' of the race and class factors should occur. Arguing that class and not racial consciousness was the key determinant of social structure in pre-industrial South Africa, it concluded that eighteenth century Cape society in certain areas of the colony was characterised by greater fluidity than the caste system of the American South or industrialised South Africa. George Fredrickson's comparative analysis of American and South African history rejects the first mentioned approach but agrees with the conclusion. This article argues that Fredrickson erred by characterising Cape society as being largely based on class and a permeable colour line. The extent to which Cape Town or frontier society can be categorised as such was limited, while the agrarian Western Cape, in terms of manumission rates and the incidence of mixed marriages, was one of the most rigid caste societies in the world. The article concludes by observing that only by studying how political and class relationships reinforced each other can the full complexity of eighteenth century Cape society be revealed.

1. Theoretical Perspectives

In the revisionist literature of the 1970s there was a strong tendency to argue that racism became salient and institutionalised in South Africa only from the mid-nineteenth century on. The crucial developments were: (a) the incorporation of South Africa into world capitalism, and (b) the introduction of the relations of industrial capitalism with its emphasis on free instead of forced labour (Freund, 1976). Because this removed slavery (or serfdom) as the fundamental divide in society racism developed into an ideology first in a response to the campaign to abolish slavery and then as a legitimisation of the operative post-slavery social categories.

According to the revisionists of the 1970s class and race relations in eighteenth century Cape society differed qualitatively from the relations of industrial capitalism. Freund (1976) saw the slave society of the Western Cape as resembling much more Brazil, with its fluid social patterns, than the American South with its rigid caste system. In his view the line between European and black was vaguely drawn and frequently crossed through intermarriage: "Above all, money whitened" (Freund, 1976: 56). Because of this blurred colour line legal and social status did not coincide with ethnic origin in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

A related tendency of the revisionists was to deny beliefs and ideas an independent role in shaping society. Revisionists did not deny

that beliefs and ideas were important. In his justly celebrated essay on class and race relations in eighteenth century South Africa Legassick (1970/1 and 1980) specifically stated that racist ideas, forming part of the colonists' inheritance from Europe, were present from the beginning and served to legitimise the subordination and exploitation of blacks. But these ideas ultimately had to be seen as the product of a specific set of social relations, first of the master/slave (or serf) relationship and subsequently of the patron/client relationship on the frontier. According to Legassick (1980: 55) the racist ideas only hardened into an ideology in response to the nineteenth century challenge to the system of social relations.

Underlying the revisionists' work was their determination to weigh or rank the materialist and idealist factors. As Deborah Posel remarks in her contribution to this issue: class and race were to be ranked hierarchically and invariably class was ranked as the more fundamental variable which could account for the development and functions of racial practices and policies. Posel suggests an alternative mode which does not seek a uniform ranking of one variable over another but rather establish their concrete interrelationships. The challenge in this case is to show how racial ideas and cleavages, on the one hand, and class relations, on the other hand, structured and reinforced each other.

Posel's suggestion represents a determined attempt to break out of the rigid race-or-class conceptualisation which characterised South African historiography in the 1970s. Here she is in good company. Max Weber, as Anthony Smith (1981: 41) recently observed, utilised the terms "ideal" and "material" only as poles of a continuum. To oppose them too drastically and to opt for the logical and substantive priority of the one at the expense of the other when analysing racism, ethnicity and nationalism creates more problems than it solves.

In the early 1980s the revisionists of South African historiography also began to question some of the certainties of the 1970s. Johnstone (1982: 25) spoke out against the assumption "that only one paradigm can be valid, that different ones are completely incompatible, and that you just pick your paradigm and do your work; and, of course, reject, as rather foolish, any glib ideas or implications to the effect that no other approach in the world besides Marxism understands anything". He made a plea for historians, in employing their respective paradigms, to recognise that "there may be some measure of complementarity besides incompatibility" (Johnstone, 1982: 25).

South African historiography can only benefit by a search for the common ground. Instead of an arid race-or-class debate, and by determined attempts to probe interrelationships rather than to rank or weigh dogmatically idealist and materialist forces. What should matter most is to keep the idealist and materialist conceptualisations open to empirical correction rather than impose theoretical categories in a rigid conceptual framework.

The new comparative study of George Fredrickson, *White Supremacy* (1981), of class and race relations in South Africa and the United States is of great historiographical interest not only because Fredrickson is, also by American standards, a major practitioner of the craft. Firstly, Fredrickson, unlike the historical materialists of the 1970s explicitly refuses to rank race and class as determinants of social relations. Secondly, Fredrickson, unlike the historical materialists, locates the development of white supremacist attitudes and policies in pre-industrial settings rather than in industrial capitalism. Lastly, Fredrickson agrees with a historical materialist like Freund in considering late-eighteenth century South African society as a

remarkably fluid one which contrasted with the rigid caste society of the American South. *White Supremacy* provides a good opportunity to review the literature on the nature of eighteenth century Cape society and its historiography.

To elaborate briefly on the first two of these points before discussing his work in detail. Fredrickson (1981: xx-xxi) lays his theoretical cards on the table right at the beginning of his study:

The debate over the relative significance of "race" and "class" as determinants of black or brown inequality in societies like the United States and South Africa, has led some scholars to take bold and unyielding stands in favour of "idealist" or materialist explanations. I have not done so. I have sought instead to comprehend the interaction and inter-relationship of "race" and "class" — of ethnic consciousness and economic advantage — without assigning a necessary priority to either. I have concluded that the historical record in these two instances will simply not sustain a final or universally applicable ruling on which is primary and independent and which is secondary and subordinate. In most cases the two sides of the polarity are mutually reinforcing, and where they clearly conflict the outcome is open and may depend on the intervention of some other partially autonomous force, such as a political authority or pressure group that has interests or aims of its own that can be distinguished from those of the dominant economic classes or self-conscious ethnic communities within the local community (xx-xxi).

Secondly Fredrickson does not believe that the origins of racism and racist practices should be located in the relationships which industrial capitalism introduced. As he puts it: "White supremacist attitudes and policies originated in pre-industrial settings where masters of European extraction lorded it over dark-skinned slaves and servants" (Fredrickson, 1981: 199). By the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century disaffected Afrikaners in the cattle-farming interior began to defend their special treatment of black servants by giving renewed emphasis, like the Southerners, to race as the "one great differentiator and by affirming the ideal of a racially circumscribed democracy — with equality for all whites and rigid subordination for all non-whites — that modern scholars have summed up in the phrase "Herrenvolk egalitarianism". (Fredrickson, 1981: 166). As to the impact of industrial capitalism, Fredrickson observes

that discrimination against black workers of course served the interests of industrial capitalists and white workers. However, "it is difficult to account for the specific nature of racial caste or exclusion in industry without reference to pre-existing beliefs about the character, capacity, and social status of non-whites". (Fredrickson, 1981: 205).

This brings us, thirdly, to Fredrickson's analysis of eighteenth century Cape society. While the entire study makes for absorbing reading it is the early chapters of the book covering this theme that will arouse the greatest interest and that will determine the book's place in our historiography. It is when Fredrickson discusses slavery and the rise of a colour line that there is the greatest degree of comparability between the Cape and the American colonies. When it comes to the nineteenth and twentieth century political histories of South Africa and the United States the structure of comparability begins to weaken and Fredrickson (1981: 136) himself concedes that these histories "might seem too dissimilar to offer grounds for fruitful comparison".

There is also another reason why the first half of the book is of considerable significance. Fredrickson's study takes issue with some of the main theses in the literature on comparative race relations. One is that there tends to be a low incidence of inter-racial marriages when a colonial society is dominated by Protestant and commercially-inclined North Europeans with a considerable proportion of white women in their midst. Another postulates that a low degree of manumission tends to be accompanied by a low rate of inter-racial marriages. On both scores Fredrickson's study tries to demonstrate that the opposite was the case in the Cape Colony.

It is useful to discuss Fredrickson's views on pre-industrial social relations under three headings: (1) the nature of slavery — did it develop as racial or heathen slavery? (2) the nature of Cape society — was it fluid or closed? and (3) the colour line — was it permeable and was racial mixing tolerated?

2. *The nature of Cape slavery*

Fredrickson gives a novel interpretation of the rise of racial slavery in the American colonies and the Cape colony. He does not agree with the view that blacks were enslaved because they were black and considered innately inferior. Instead, blacks were

enslaved because they were vulnerable on two levels: legally (they were captives) and culturally (they were heathens). With this as a premise, Fredrickson purports to show that the development of slavery took a different route in the American colonies and the Cape colony. He argues that in the American case slavery underwent a relatively quick change. At first it was based on actual heathen status, and then on heathen descent. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, heathenness was completely associated with blackness and from then onwards racial differences were made the basis of slavery. In the Cape Colony, the attempt to find a legal basis for enslaving baptised Christians was, in Fredrickson's view, a much longer and more agonising process. A major deterrent was the resolutions of the authoritative Synod of Dort which in 1618 laid down that baptised slaves should not be sold, but should "enjoy equal right of liberty with the other Christians". Fredrickson deduces from this that slavery was actually based on heathen status and that considerable uncertainty about the position of Christian slaves plagued slaveholders. The fear that they would lose their slaves was one of the major reasons why so little missionary work was done among blacks at the Cape. This long delay in the full legitimisation of Christian slavery made the white supremacist tradition in South Africa much more dependent on cultural pluralism than the American one. In South Africa it was always necessary to stress that slaves were both "heathens" and "blacks". In a colony like Virginia this was unnecessary because it had already been decided in the late seventeenth century to base slavery explicitly upon race (Fredrickson, 1981: 70-85).

Fredrickson, like MacCrone (1937), argues that Cape society during the first hundred years and more was cleaved primarily by the European's sense of cultural chauvinism rather than by feelings of biological superiority, which is the main root of modern racism. The MacCrone-Fredrickson thesis implies that at the early stages of the settlement at the Cape racial differences did not mean much to the Europeans. Fredrickson argues further that the justifications for slavery did not turn around the fact that the slaves were non-Europeans but was in face an ambiguous mixture of racial, cultural (especially religious) and legal rationalisations in which the racial element became predominant only later on.

Let us first look at Colonial America to examine Fredrickson's interpretation of the ideological basis of slavery. In his authoritative analysis of race attitudes in Colonial America, Winthrop Jordan states that heathenness was an important component in the colonists' initial reaction to the Negroes. Yet he warns that this can easily be overstressed. The colonists did not distinguish consistently between the Negroes they converted and those they did not. In dealing with people of different colour and culture American colonists referred to "Negroes" and by the eighteenth century to "blacks" and "Africans", but almost never to "heathens", "pagans" or "savages". It was, Jordan stresses, racial, not religious, slavery that developed. But one still would want to know what was the decisive consideration in the act of enslavement: the slaves' blackness or their heathen status? Jordan (1968: 97) gives an answer that is far more convincing than that of Fredrickson.

[The] colonists' initial sense of difference from the Negro was found not on a single characteristic but on a congeries of qualities which, taken as a whole, seemed to set the Negro apart ... What may have been his most striking characteristics, his heathenism and his appearance, were probably requisite to his complete debasement. His heathenism alone could never have led to permanent enslavement since conversion easily wiped out that failing. If his appearance, his racial characteristics, meant nothing to the English settlers it is difficult to see how slavery based on race ever emerged, how the conception of complexion as the mark of slavery ever entered the colonists' mind.

Fredrickson's interpretation of the way in which slavery developed at the Cape is also questionable. In fact the development was unambiguous. It arose as a result of a government decision to import slaves. There was never any fumbling for a legal basis or any discussion of whether slavery should be founded on colour or heathenness. There is no evidence for Fredrickson's assertion that the Cape passed through a slow and agonising process trying to find a legal basis for Christian slavery, or that the resolutions of the Synod of Dort, which supported Christian slaves' 'equal right' to freedom, were ever taken seriously into account. All that happened at the Cape was that a minister or two at the Cape protested ineffectually about the way in which the resolutions of the Synod of Dort were being ignored at the

Cape. But the actual impact of Dort was minimal. As Richard Elphick (1983) remarks, only 8 percent of the slaves manumitted between 1715 and 1791 stated in the application for manumission that they were baptised, which hardly gives the impression that the status of a baptised Christian was indeed considered as grounds for claiming freedom.

Furthermore, the Company itself ignored the resolutions with respect to its own slave labour force, approximately 600 strong. Between 1717 and 1791 more than 90 percent of the slaves it had baptised were not freed. (Elphick and Shell 1979). Clearly there was little that a burgher who had his slave baptised had to worry about. This was the position until 1770, when a regulation was issued which gave the force of law to the resolution of the Synod of Dort by banning the sale of slaves confirmed in the Christian religion. Between 1770 and 1812, when this regulation was abolished, there was indeed an element of uncertainty and strong resistance built up among the burghers to having their slaves baptised. But there was nothing of the sort in the first 120 years of white settlement as Fredrickson's view would suppose. Only some 2000 slaves were baptised during the nearly 150 years of Company rule. This was partly because the Cape church was opposed to baptising adults ignorant about the doctrines of the Christian faith and partly because the few ministers (still fewer than 10 by 1795, when there were already more than 20000 colonists) found very little time to do missionary work among the dispersed slave population. Even without the impediment of the regulation of 1770 the spread of Christianity was extremely slow. The fact that the colonists so often stressed that slaves were both blacks and heathens had little to do with attempts to legitimise slavery as Fredrickson tries to argue. It was merely an observation which closely paralleled the factual situation.

3. The nature of Cape society

We come now to the degree of openness of eighteenth century society in the Cape and the American colonies. In the terms of Tannenbaum (1947) both the Cape Colony and the American South were 'closed' slave systems where restrictive manumission requirements resulted in only a very small number of slaves being manumitted. This was in sharp contrast to Brazil, where slaves had much greater opportunities for legal freedom

and upward mobility. Fredrickson acknowledges this, but instead of building on it tries to establish another major difference between the Cape and the American South. This attempt forms another flaw in the book.

Fredrickson argues that the American South from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century was fundamentally a caste society consisting of a dominant white caste and a subordinate black caste. Members of the white caste overwhelmingly married within the caste and mixed marriages were considered taboo. The caste line was a racial line maintained by discriminatory legislation applicable to all blacks, whether slave or free. Intermarriage and bearing of arms by blacks were banned. In contrast, Fredrickson views the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as one which, like the South, pointed in the direction of a rigid rural divide. However, eighteenth century Cape society was in a real sense different from either the South or post-1870 South African society. Interrupting the flow of his argument (which is similar to that of MacCrone) that cultural slavery gradually yielded to racial slavery, Fredrickson suddenly latches onto a materialist interpretation of Freund (1976). He writes: "One way to comprehend the social structure of the late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cape is to see it as a class society in which race mattered in the determination of status but was not all-important" (Fredrickson, 1981: 88).

Fredrickson does not give convincing reasons why two societies which were both "closed" in terms of the requirements for manumission (the act of freeing a slave) would have strikingly different patterns of stratification. He also makes a basic error by failing to take into account the sharp regional variations in the Cape Colony as regards social stratification. In their study on intergroup relations at the Cape, Richard Elphick and Robert Shell (1979: 116-123, 160-162) clearly demonstrated the huge difference between the rural South Western Cape, which was very rigid, and the city of Cape Town, which was more open with respect to manumission and intermarriage. Fredrickson did not take this into account, perhaps because he wanted, above all, to demonstrate differences between the American South and the Cape Colony, rather than to accept that these societies were in many respects more similar than not.

It can still be argued with some plausibility, as Fredrickson does, that Cape Town was to a

limited extent a class society which evinced a measure of fluidity. The social hierarchy of the town was composed of a white upper class of Company officials and wealthy colonists, an intermediate group of freemen, mostly white but including some people of colour, and a servile class. However, the interpretation of the Cape as a fluid class society is quite invalid when applied to the agrarian rural districts of the South Western Cape. If ever there was a rigid racial caste society, it was the rural Western Cape. And it was not a peripheral area but the heartland of slavery. In 1773, slaves living in the agrarian South Western Cape made up almost 70 percent of the total slave population, while only 25 percent lived in Cape Town (Worden, 1982: 30).

The reason for the rigidity of rural Western Cape society must be sought primarily in the economic system. It was dominated by farming which was based on slavery as Ross points out in this issue. Even enlightened officials considered it an indispensable evil. Social stratification in these districts was above all determined by racial slavery. The divide between the free and the slaves almost completely corresponded with the racial divide. Very few slaves were ever manumitted. The Cape Colony's average manumission rate per year of 0,165 percent of the slave force (six times lower than that of Brazil and Peru!) (Elphick and Shell, 1979: 136), gave the Cape Colony one of the lowest manumission rates in the world. And of all the manumissions in the colony the rural western districts contributed only a very small proportion. From 1715-1791 a total of 609 private owners submitted requests for the manumission of approximately 1000 slaves. Of these owners only 29 lived outside the Cape district (Elphick and Shell, 1979: 143). Clearly the rate of manumission in the heartland of Cape slavery¹ was similar to that of the rigid North American plantation systems. By denying or ignoring this Fredrickson presents a picture that fails to reveal an essential feature of Cape society.

One must also look at the fates and fortunes of the slaves who were manumitted, for it is the position of these free blacks which indicates the extent to which racial characteristics, as distinct from slave status, determined the social structure. Studies by Worden (1982) and Hattingh (1981) for the Cape district and the Stellenbosch district respectively conclude that there were very few free black farmers. Economic opportunities

for free blacks were extremely limited. In Stellenbosch there had been several free black wine producers and grain farmers but by the middle of the eighteenth century there was no identifiable free black farmer. In Cape Town some free blacks were still able to accumulate considerable possessions, but the rural free blacks apparently lived near to bankruptcy and their plight worsened as the eighteenth century advanced. They could not rely on an extended family network for financial support in times of hardship. And there was not a strong possibility of either inheritance by the break-up of family estates or marriage to a wealthy widow which often enabled a struggling white farmer to overcome his financial difficulties.

Even in Cape Town the position of the free blacks worsened in the second half of the eighteenth century. Until then Cape Town was still fairly open for free blacks. Governor Ryk Tulbagh remarked in 1752 that, "although they do not stem from European blood, the Free Blacks and all other similar persons living here nevertheless enjoy all the privileges and rights of burghers" (Worden, 1982: 391). However, in the second half of the eighteenth century the free blacks suffered increasing restrictions and statutory discrimination. The fact that they were both of non-European descent and mostly poor counted heavily against them. To be free was not an admission ticket to equal treatment with burghers; one had to be white as well. Writing about aspects of life in Cape Town in the early nineteenth century, Shirley Judges (1977) concludes that free blacks were nearer an status to slaves than to whites.

Thus even for Cape Town there are serious doubts about Fredrickson's interpretation that the Cape Colony was a class society in which race mattered in the determination of status but was not all-important. For the rural Western Cape, the heartland of slavery, this proposition is clearly incorrect.

What was the situation on the frontier to the east and the north of the settled areas? On an open or pioneering frontier where there was a relatively small white population and abundant resources, some people of colour, whether they were free blacks or nominally free Khoikhoi, found opportunities to do intermediate jobs like hunting, driving wagons or bartering.² In a sense they were an intermediate class between the free and the unfree. Some marriages took place between poor whites and members of the intermediate

class. However, when land gave out on the frontier, whites threw obstacles in their way on the grounds that the intermediate jobs were "burgher trades". Technically, a baptised Bastaard could qualify as a practitioner of a burgher craft or occupation, but on closing frontiers they were effectively squeezed out. Their colour, as much as their poor and powerless condition, was responsible for the intermediate class being squashed. What remained was a stark line between those who were white and free and those who were non-white and unfree. (Giliomee, 1979 and 1981). Thus the frontier tended to turn steadily into a society that was rigidly stratified along the lines of race, leaving only Cape Town to fit, in a limited sense, Fredrickson's characterisation of the Cape as a class society.

4. *The permeability of the colour line*

Fredrickson's main proposition about race mixture and the rise of a colour line can simply be summarised as follows: the American South was characterised by a restrictive pattern, while the South African pattern was permissive, especially in the early stages (the first century or so of settlement). In America legislation was soon passed to prevent miscegenation and the growth of a class of free people of colour. Although some miscegenation still continued, this usually involved sexual exploitation of slave women by masters or other whites. The basis of society was the racial caste principle which held that all whites were members of an exclusive and privileged community by virtue of their racial origin. Children from unions between whites and blacks were stigmatised for life as an "abominable mixture and spurious issue", as one statute phrased it, and had little chance of being assimilated into the dominant group. Laws and social pressure limited inter-racial marriages to a bare minimum.

In Fredrickson's view, the Cape Colony manifested a striking contrast. According to him there was a "surprising frequency and social acceptability of legal intermarriage" (Fredrickson, 1981: 114). No less striking than what Fredrickson calls the "comparatively high incidence of intermarriage", was the tendency at the Cape, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for the "white" or European population to absorb some of its mixed offspring. Fredrickson (1981: 119) concludes that

“substantial infiltration of the white population by those of non-European origin obviously occurred, contrary to the myth of the Afrikaner race purity that later developed”.

One hesitates to take issue with Fredrickson lest one is suspected of defending the myth of Afrikaner racial purity. However, purely on methodological grounds he must be severely faulted. His conclusions, as far as South Africa is concerned, are unsound because his focus and method produced a distorted picture of the colony taken as a whole. Firstly Fredrickson tends to extrapolate from data about first-generation or founding marriages (*stamvaderhuwelike*) to conclude that the rate of inter-racial marriages was high. Using the data of Heese (1971), Fredrickson calculated that about 24 percent of the first-generation marriages taking place between 1688 and 1807 involved one spouse who had some known degree of non-white ancestry. However, it must be stressed that first-generation marriages represent an atypical sample and are not a good indication of the established mores of a society. Curiously enough, Fredrickson recognises this where he writes about first-generation marriages by German immigrants at the Cape, noting that the low status of new immigrants put them at a disadvantage with established colonists in competing for a limited number of women. However, he does not recognise that this is true in general for first-generation marriages and that one cannot make any reliable inferences from these marriages about the rate of inter-marriages in the second and succeeding generations.

A second methodological fault must be noted. Fredrickson cites with approval an article by an anonymous writer who concluded in 1953 that 10 percent of all marriages at the Cape were clearly mixed. This study is apart from being anonymous also polemical and must, for these reasons, be treated with great circumspection (Fredrickson gives the unconvincing explanation that the author concealed identification because of the sensitive nature within South Africa of the question of white racial ancestry). This study, furthermore, investigated the marriage registers only of a Cape Town congregation. So did one of the other studies cited, that of M.C. Botha (1972), who calculated an interracial marriage rate of 6-8 percent for the period 1757-1766.

Like first-generation marriages, Cape Town marriages represent an atypical sample. Cape Town was the home of passing sailors and of a large number of unmarried servants of the Dutch East India Company who had little chance of competing successfully with the burghers for wives. With its inns, a well-known brothel (the Company slave lodge), the emphasis on services rather than production, and its seaport social mores Cape Town was markedly different from the rest of the colony. It is significant that Stellenbosch burghers who took black wives chose to get married in Cape Town. A spot check by Elphick and Shell (1979: 131) of the Stellenbosch church records of the eighteenth century revealed no obviously inter-racial marriages at all. In an article in which Heese (1981) strongly criticised Fredrickson for the way in which he misinterpreted his data, he calculated that in the Western Cape congregation of Swartland (Malmesbury) only 7 marriages out of a total of 508 were mixed in the period 1800 to 1840 — a percentage of 1,2 against 15,9 percent for Cape Town in the same period. In his study of the rural Western Cape, Worden (1982: 401) concludes that miscegenation had little impact on the structure of society and the offspring of such unions were assimilated into the slave class. In this it resembled the North American slave colonies. Even on the Eastern Cape frontier, where one could expect less rigid morals and racial attitudes than in the rural Western Cape, the rate of inter-racial marriages was low. Of the 689 couples listed in the Graaff Reinet *opgaaf* of 1798, only 5-6 percent can be described as “mixed” in that one of the parents had a grandparent who was not a European (Giliomee, 1979: 324).

One of the best indications of the incidence of inter-racial marriages in the entire colony is a study by De Bruyn (1976) who found that of a sample of 1 063 children baptised in 1807 in all churches only 5 percent had a grandparent who had some known non-European ancestry (at least one non-European grandparent). Inter-racial marriages which did occur were largely confined to lower-status whites such as lowly-paid Company servants. Ross (1975) observed that as a result of disproportionate sex ratios about 10 percent of adult, Cape-born white men failed to find legitimate wives. They entered into unions with women categorised as “coloured”. The result, in the words of Ross (1975), was the following:

Generation by generation, so it would seem, the poorer and less well-connected male members of the Christian community were paired off into the mass of "non-white" underlings, for no doubt it was these people who were least able to acquire white wives. So began the process of equation between economic and racial stratification that has bedevilled South Africa ever since.

There is also little evidence for Fredrickson's assertion that the offspring of inter-racial marriages had a reasonable chance of being recognised as white. Ross concludes that the male offspring, at least, were almost certainly ostracised from the dominant group. Some light-skinned "coloured" girls did manage to become accepted in white society by marriage to a white man. However, given the evidence cited above about the incidence of inter-racial marriages, this could not have been a widespread phenomenon at all outside Cape Town, and it occurred predominantly among the lower classes of whites. As the eighteenth century progressed there was increasingly less evidence for Fredrickson's view (1981: 120) that race mixture at the Cape could be described as "selective incorporation through hypergamous intermarriage".

How tolerant was Cape Town really in racial matters? To answer this question one should not be misled by the high incidence of miscegenation in and around the city. Miscegenation outside wedlock is not in any way proof of racial tolerance for, as Schermerhorn (1978: 114) has put it: "miscegenation (which overwhelmingly takes the form of concubinage) is simply the sexual aspect of superordination where dominant-group men exploit subordinate-group women". It is mixed marriages that form the crucial yardstick of racial tolerance. The fact that mixed marriages were legally permitted at the Cape (and not in the American South) may lead one to believe that the Cape was a racially permissive society. How is one to account for the legal sanction given to mixed marriages at the Cape? One important factor was the impact of the Company's racially-integrated possessions in East India. The East India heritage, of which Fredrickson gives an excellent account, undoubtedly influenced Company officials at the Cape in their attempt to structure society, but one does not know how much the colonists were influenced by it. The place where this influence would make itself felt, was the Matrimonial Court set up by the government to give official

sanction to all proposed marriages. Prominent burghers served on this court and there is no evidence that they ever refused permission to mixed couples. But one does wonder whether the Company, which until the 1770s followed a strictly colour-blind policy, would ever have permitted a refusal based purely on racial grounds.

Perhaps the question of the racial permissiveness of the Cape should be couched in different terms. Why, given the fact that the Cape in the eighteenth century clearly developed into a racially segmented society, did the authorities and the burghers continue to permit mixed marriages? There can be no doubt that if mixed marriages had somehow threatened to disrupt the prevailing social order the Company would have had no compunction in banning them regardless of the East Indian heritage. The key to this problem surely lies in the extremely low manumission rate. Because slaves could not marry this meant that a very limited number of mixed marriages could take place. Those which did take place were not a matter of great concern. With the fundamental division of slavery kept firmly in place by a low manumission rate, there was no fear among the dominant class that inter-racial marriages would erode the social order. A ban on inter-racial marriages would have been superfluous. The restrictive manumission regulations effectively served the purpose of keeping the existing divide intact.

This leaves the question of the attitude of the white colonists towards mixed marriages. Fredrickson argues that, as a result of the preponderance of white males over females, mixed marriages at the Cape were much more frequent than in the American colonies, where adult females were not so greatly outnumbered by males. There is something in this, but not too much should be made of it. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the sex ratio of the white population in Virginia was 100 women to every 400 men; that of South Carolina was 100 : 148; while in New England there was parity and even a surplus of women in some colonies. By the end of the eighteenth century the sex ratio of the entire white population of the United States stood at 100 : 104. (Moller, 1945: 113-153). In the Cape Colony the sex ratio declined from 100 : 260 in 1690 to 100 : 140 in 1770 (Elphick and Shell, 1979: 128). The relative shortage of white women at the Cape made possible a greater incidence of mixed marriages than in the

American colonies, particularly in the first phase of the settlement. However, halfway through the eighteenth century white women in the Cape Colony seemed to have reached that critical proportion where they could exercise a decisive influence against mixed marriages.

The influence of the attitudes of white women on racial attitudes in general is largely omitted in Fredrickson's account. Yet several studies of race relations stress this. In his major comparative study Davis (1966: 279) formulated it as a general rule that moral indignation about inter-racial intercourse was more intense where large numbers of white women and a high valuation of marriage made illicit sexual relations less tolerable. Here a distinction should be made between women of Northern European descent who settled in North America, South Africa, Australia, etc., and those of Southern European descent who went out to South America and particularly to Brazil. The former had a relatively stronger social position and status in family and public life and were much more able to prevent their sons from marrying non-whites or their husbands from legitimising the offspring of their extra-marital affairs. Degler (1971: 232-239) in his comparative study sees this as one of the factors responsible for the harsher form of racism of North America compared to the milder form of Brazil. Studies of other colonial societies where North Europeans settled confirm these impressions. Schermerhorn (1978: 115) cited this observation about India by two leading historians: "It must be confessed that the growing number of English women who began to settle in India with their husbands increased the tendency of the white population to form ... a caste. H. Moller (1945) in a study of colonial North America (which Fredrickson does not cite) concludes that the emergence of racial antipathies in the American colonies was, to a large extent, due to the presence and influence of white women. Women, Moller observes, generally tend to refrain from matrimonial and social relations with men of a social and cultural stratum lower than their own. In the colonies this attitude worked against Europeans marrying people culturally and racially related to slaves. Undoubtedly this attitude would also have expressed itself in severe pressure exerted by women on their children to marry within the white group.

One expects that at the Cape, where all the white women were of North European descent, a similar development took place and that the resistance to mixed marriages stiffened with every generation. Fredrickson errs by attaching too much importance to the high incidence of inter-racial marriages in the first generation. It is only in the marriages of the second generation and onwards that women could exert their influence. Thus even in race relations it is sound practice to keep in mind the rule of *chercher la femme*. The way in which the influence of white women on the evolution of South African race relations has been ignored represents one of the greatest flaws of the male-centric South African historiography. Some remarks by an astute observer of eighteenth century Cape society suggest that the social influence of Afrikaner women should not be underestimated. Mentzel (1925: 68) commented on their natural dignity and added: "South African women look to me more intelligent as a whole than their menfolk. The majority among them understand more about what their husbands do than the men themselves."

5. Conclusion

Fredrickson's study has made a major contribution by shifting the investigation into the origins of racial stratification and racism back into the pre-industrial period. Another important contribution is his identification of slavery as the wellspring of white supremacist thought and action (Fredrickson, 1981: 93). Some of the other conclusions of Fredrickson with respect to eighteenth century Cape society must be doubted. According to him, cultural slavery only gradually yielded to racial slavery; late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Western Cape society remained fluid and resembled more a class than a caste society; and it was the frontier and conquest of Bantu-speaking Africans which imparted a rigid racial division (1981: 131).

Fredrickson's interpretation in some respects is not fundamentally at odds with that proposed by MacCrone (1937) nearly fifty years ago. Two central assumptions of MacCrone were that the original cleavage was a religious one and that baptism offered a slave freedom and a higher status. This has recently been proved incorrect by Elphick and Shell (1979) who showed that it is wrong to depict Cape slavery as originally based on culture. It is also incorrect to characterise the Western Cape as primarily a class society "in

which race mattered in the determination of status but was not all-important" (Fredrickson, 1981: 88). The low manumission rate and incidence of mixed marriages make it impossible to accept this interpretation. The relative degree of fluidity of Cape Town must not obscure the essential features of the larger society. A system of strict endogamy and a mixed marriage taboo among people of European descent arose, particularly in the agrarian Western Cape, in the eighteenth century and had hardened by the end of that century. It was the Western Cape which exported these racial norms to the frontier. Citing Owen Lattimore, Legassick (1980: 67-68) correctly states that one must look to what settled society did to the frontier, not what the frontier did to society.

Fredrickson's study is an important contribution to the attempt to transcend the arid race-or-class dichotomy and probe the way in which racial and cultural factors interacted with class factors in shaping the social structure. Fredrickson failed to capture the true essence of eighteenth century Cape society not because he failed to use the "right" paradigm, but because of methodological errors and missing vital connections. For instance he attaches far too much importance to the Dutch ethos of colonisation and the ideology of the Company officials (inherited from the East Indies). This induces him to exaggerate the "fluid" and "permissive" nature of Cape society and ignore the way in which the slave system steered Cape society in different direction.

At the same time, racial prejudice played a far more important role in social relations from the mid-eighteenth century onwards than Fredrickson suggests. These prejudices were related to the class order but also to the nature of the Calvinist church and to the high standing women of North European descent enjoyed in the family and social life compared to their South European counterparts in a colony like Brazil. Without bringing into account the influence of white women and the church one cannot adequately explain the low incidence of inter-racial marriages particularly outside Cape Town. This made for a fairly rigid racial order and not for a class society. (Gillomee and Elphick, 1979).

Fredrickson's study is nevertheless so challenging and sophisticated that it will force South African historians to rethink both the eighteenth century and the race-class debate.

The first step in such an inquiry is to realise that the terms of the debate have occasionally been incorrectly formulated. Johnstone (1976: 8) in his general discussion of the debate conjures up an idealist straw man as foil for his historical materialism. This is an idealism which has "a tendency of seeing and explaining social realities solely or essentially in terms of mental and psychological factors, such as attitudes, ideas, beliefs, values and ideology". There are in fact very few historians who operate on such naive assumptions. Even MacCrone (1937), who as a psychologist emphasised the role of attitudes, did not say that the Afrikaner frontier farmers acted the way they did because of some nasty prejudices. It was the *anarchic frontier conflict situation* which prompted them to define rigid in- and out-groups. Put in theoretical terms, MacCrone's argument comes down to the view that the origins of the racism are frequently found in conquest and frontier conflict rather than class imperatives. MacCrone would today be supported by sophisticated cultural pluralists who argue that "the polity is often prior to the economy" (Van den Berghe, 1981).

What this means is that historians interested in the casual connections between idealist and materialist forces must closely investigate how that polity is constructed. An analysis of eighteenth century Cape society will show that the political identification of the colonists went far beyond being an expression of their place in the production system. It confirms the point elsewhere made by Fredrickson (1984) in the American context that "the politics of state building and nation making can be shown to be a powerful autonomous force" which to an important extent is distinct from the politics of class. A proper investigation of the construction of a polity means a much greater concern with ethnic sentiments, the concerns of governmental elites and bureaucracies than "even the most flexible adherents of Marxism have thus far managed to do" (Fredrickson, 1984).

Accordingly, an analysis of eighteenth century Cape society must, apart from the focus on the vital importance on class relationships, also concentrate on the polity. This polity developed around both a legal and a customary conception of society. Officialdom defined four legal status groups — burghers, Company servants, slaves and indigenous aliens. Anyone who has done

primary research on the eighteenth century would know how pervasive this categorisation was in the thoughts and actions of those living at that time (Elphick and Giliomee, 1979). Drawing on a common medieval heritage the colonists themselves added a customary definition of man's rank in society according to the estate in which he was born. Primordial loyalties in terms of language, religion and culture, together with honour and style of life, were the main determinations of an estate (Ross, 1982; Hughes, 1979). It was on these legal and customary conceptions that subsequent mobilisations and identifications of class and colour built. Only by studying how political and class relationships and identifications reinforced each other can the full complexity of eighteenth century Cape society be revealed. An exclusive focus on race or class or of how race derived from class will not probe deep or wide enough.

NOTES

1. The Cape district comprised both Cape Town and rural divisions along the Western coastal belt. By 1770 roughly half of the slave population lived in this district.
2. Legassick (1980) argued that if there was an important shift on the South African frontier it was the trend away from the master-slave class relationship of the Western Cape to a chief-subject or patron-client relationship. These relationships did not make the frontier the scene of greater hostility but of greater fluidity than the slave-holding Western Cape. Elsewhere (Giliomee, 1981) I argued that on what could be called the "open" or pioneering frontier, characterised by an abundance of land and lack of a single controlling authority, people were often forced to seek allies across racial lines. However, in what I called the closing frontier, where competition for scarce resources was getting ever fiercer, fears and hates were intensified in a conflict which from the start had cultural and material dimensions. The frontier which Legassick knows best, the Northern frontier along the Orange River, remained open for a prolonged period while, except for the first decade (1775 to c. 1785) the eastern frontier was a rapidly closing society. Cross-racial alliances and relationships tended to be so brief and fragile that it is difficult to see the chief-subject or patron-client relationship as a general phenomenon. The assertion that "the stereotype of the African as enemy cannot be traced to the eighteenth century" (Legassick, 1980: 68) must be seriously questioned. The documents abound with evidence of a white frontier society which was insecure and fearful of the Africans who were often portrayed as formidable competitors and foes. Military alliances or co-operation were tactical rather than strategic. Nevertheless Legassick's article remains the single most important revision in the South African historiography of the 1970s.

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