



Amad Hamid. Foto: Vladimir Unkovic

Looking back on Coloured history, it becomes obvious that ambiguity was always part of the social reality of Coloureds. It affected every aspect of their lives, particularly their relationship with other population groups. Their intermediate position in the racial hierarchy and their proximity to White culture were factors that had strong ramifications in their relationship with their Black comrades.

From Comrade to Collaborator

The perception of the Coloured people inside
the Anti-Apartheid movement

By Amad Hamid & Christoph Marx

This article will reveal, how social perspectives can shift seemingly in seconds, through historical events and with this, strongly affect the lives of particularly those people who throughout their history, have been faced by the threat of marginalisation. The social changes which occurred in South Africa after the end of racial segregation in 1994 showed that the group of people who were exceptionally vulnerable to

these changes were the Coloured people. They fell victim to what South African society had destined them to be.¹

The term “Coloured” has been used for Black people in the United States and beyond. In South African society it became a distinct racial category under the apartheid-regime (1948–1994), in which not “People of Colour” in general were placed, but those who didn’t fit in the neat definition of Black, White or any

other pre-existing ethnic group.

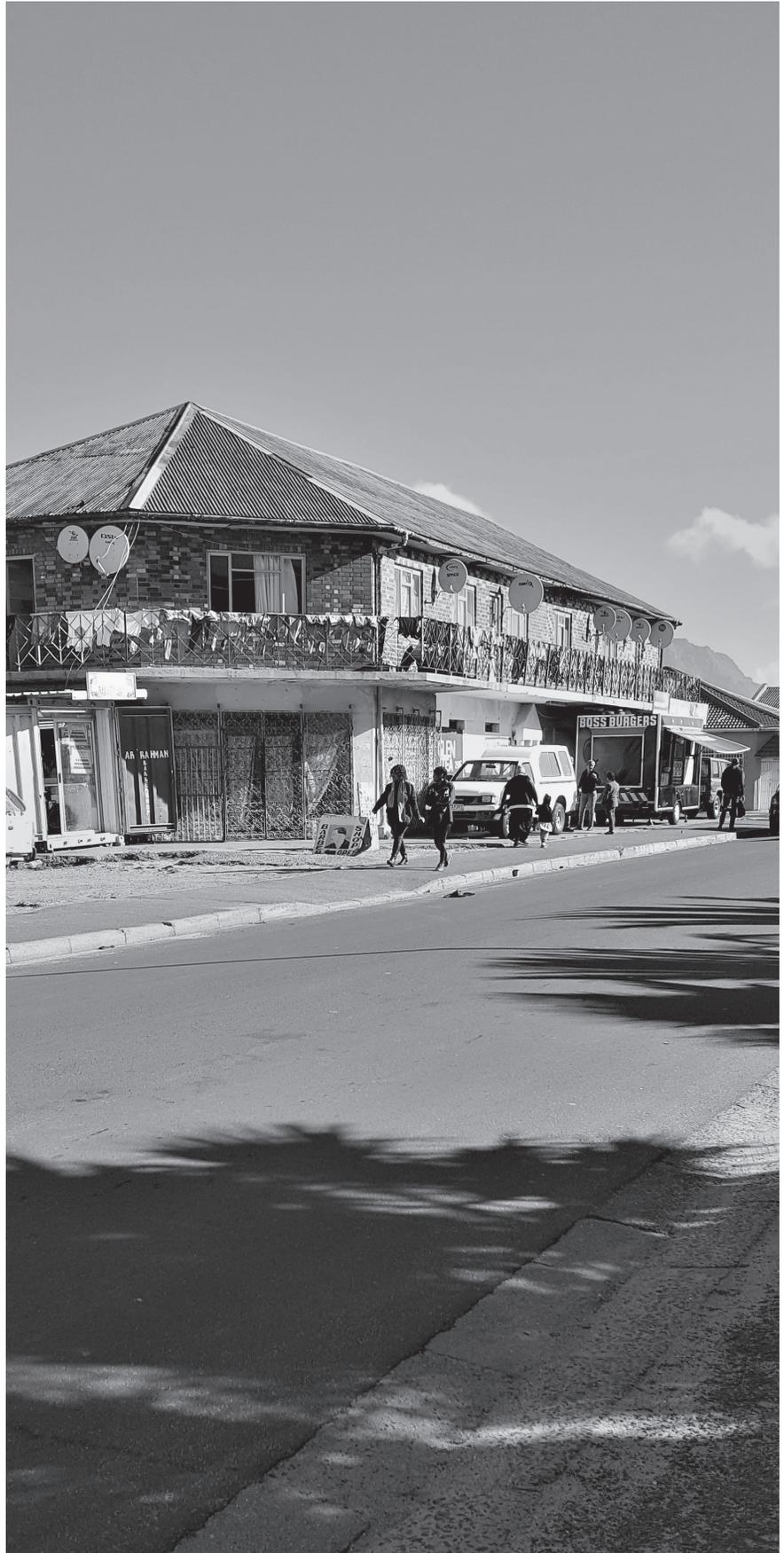
Thus, the major factor that they had in common with each other was their indistinctiveness. The four major racial groups as defined by apartheid where Natives (later Bantu or Africans), Coloured, Asian (mostly from India) and White. It is necessary to take a short excursion into the historical background of the Coloureds to understand the issues which are so particular to them.

The Origin of Coloureds

Before the first White settlers arrived in the middle of the 17th Century, the population at the Southern tip of Africa was relatively stable. The indigenous people of that region were the Khoisan, a linguistically distinct group of people, whom the Dutch settlers named “Bushmen and Hottentots” and recognized as a separate racial group. The majority population of bantu-speaking Africans remained outside the White colony until the early 19th Century.² In 1652 the Dutch established a refreshment station halfway to their trading empire in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean. Shortly after white settlement began the first slaves were imported from different regions in Asia, Mozambique, Madagascar and East Africa. Since the Khoisan who didn’t have stable political entities were overpowered early in the colonial period, their status became similar to that of the slaves, although they remained nominally free. For the descendents of this diverse population, indigenous Khoisan and immigrant slaves, the name Coloureds became common.³

This rather complex heritage, in which no straight line can be drawn from any individual back to a conceived distinct racial group, spawned the popular conception which is held till today, that the Coloureds were a “mixed race” born from promiscuity between European settlers and the indigenous and slave population.⁴ This sentiment becomes apparent in this widespread joke on the origin of the Coloureds: “God made the white man, God made the black man, God made the Indian, the Chinese and the Jew – but Jan van Riebeeck, he made the Coloured man”.⁵ Jan van Riebeeck was the first European to settle in South Africa.

Putting it bluntly, most of this misconception relied on visible phenotypes, like the skin-color which tended to be darker than Whites but lighter than Blacks. This placed the Coloureds in an intermediate posi-



Kensington, a northern suburb of Cape Town. A predominantly Coloured neighborhood.

Foto: Amad Hamid

tion between the dominant white minority and the numerically vast African majority. Further, it allowed the continuation of a narrative of a dichotomic society instead of a multi-ethnic reality.

The area where most of the Khoisan lived, later called the Western Cape, was the region with the longest contact with Whites. Therefore, the pressure to assimilate to White culture was most sustained, especially after missionaries started to work amongst Coloureds from the beginning of the 19th Century. As alleged descendents of White colonialists, Coloureds were assigned an intermediate status in South African racial hierarchy. This process was complemented by the effect, slavery had on its victims who had lost their own cultural environment and were forcibly put together with people from very different ones. The Afrikaans language serves as a good example as it developed as a communication tool amongst slaves to overcome their differences in language. In general European culture was accommodated where their own went missing or became inoperable.⁶ This led to an approximation of the Coloured community towards the White population.

In the longer term this proved to be in the interest of the White ruling class because it divided the subjugated people. The few privileges that were granted to the Coloureds further drove a wedge between them and the Black majority. Finally, in the late 19th century during sweeping social changes that came through the onset of industrial mining, Coloureds and Africans were thrust together in the capitalist economy creating a highly competitive environment. Coloureds were driven to assert for themselves a separate identity from Africans and emphasize their assimilation to Western culture and adjacency to the European colonists.⁷ This left traces in the self-perception of the Coloureds until today as can be seen in the answer of a Coloured woman from Cape Town, who was interviewed in

2019 when she was in her mid-60s. When asked where the Coloured ancestry lies, she only mentioned the European side: "That is ... let's put it this way; most of the Coloured people, they have their ancestors are White. Where are my ancestors? In Ireland."⁸

As she continues to describe the origins of the Coloureds, it is striking that she completely omits the role of any other group.

So if you go up to look at the family tree, where do we come from? we come from the Whites. [...] you know. But later on the Coloureds intermingled. Like they had a white mother a white father and a Coloured mother. [...] They meet another family and then those Coloured would get married and produce more Coloureds, real Coloureds. But if you question, where they actually stem from, where the ancestors come from – come from the White man.⁹ After being asked directly whom Coloureds were closer to, she responded "closer to the White than to the Black".¹⁰

The Problem of Affiliation

This Coloured woman was not an isolated voice, the Coloured community has always been associated with the White ruling class. Mikyl, a Coloured man in his late 50s, sweeping the streets in Observatory, a well-off neighbourhood inhabited mostly by students and tourists, emphasized repeatedly big cultural differences between Coloureds and Blacks, and sometimes revealed even open hostility towards Africans.

You must also understand that the psychology of apartheid, apartheid in the Coloured community ... it was successful. That we ... a Black was a Black ... he was below you, whether he was educated or whatever, like they are now, they are upper class now. But those days – you're Black you're Black – you are inferior to me.¹¹

Because of their close cultural affinity towards Whites, many Coloureds held an underlying conviction that the situation was going to improve for them, and that segregation was actually merely based on a misunderstanding. However, election after election Whites in ever increasing numbers voted for the pro-apartheid National Party and Coloureds lost more and more of their rights, most notably in 1956 the right to vote in parliamentary elections. Many privileges that had placed them above the Blacks were abolished. But still, the feeling of a cultural and historical bond between themselves and Whites remained.

In the 1960s and 1970s a new generation of Coloureds was growing up, who did not share this feeling of proximity as their parents had. Their main experiences with White people were oppression and dehumanisation. They were growing up with a new attitude that was shaped by the powerlessness of their parents and their own experience of state violence. A future under the same conditions threatened to become a future without prospects for them. However, political awareness and activism were not widespread within the Coloured community. For many politics was just not an issue. It also seems that a knowledge of the history of resistance against racism and apartheid was lacking. Bonny, a woman in her mid-40s, told how she became aware of the resistance of Black people only when speakers of the resistance movement visited her school in the 1980s: "That was when I used to hear about Nelson Mandela, and I didn't know who all these people were because it wasn't spoken about at home".¹²

But within this environment a new ideology emerged in the early 1970s. A movement was led by Black students with radical new ideas that weren't only political but challenged the whole perception of history, culture, and identity. Most importantly it gave the young people a platform

to participate in the resistance and provided them for the first time with a sense of control over their own future. The broader *Black Consciousness Movement* (BCM) emerged out of the *South African Student Organisation* led by Steve Biko. It radically challenged old Eurocentric perceptions and emphasized the alternative of being proud to be Black. One essential feature of Black Consciousness was a new reading of African culture and South African history. This was the first step of getting rid of internalised conceptions of White supremacy¹³ and an essential precondition to achieve unity amongst the oppressed. Biko very cleverly turned racial notions around by defining “black” not as a race concept, but as a political one, because for Black Consciousness “black” was synonymous with being oppressed. He recognized that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”¹⁴ By turning “black” into a positive identity, the Black Consciousness ideology offered a new and different identity to Coloureds as well.¹⁵ This was a call for unity to those who were suffering under apartheid. It gave the young generation of Coloured people an ideological framework to distance themselves from their European cultural heritage and find a new identity in remembering their own indigenous, African, or Asian roots. However, it also gave way to resentment between the generations. Uncle Mark, a Coloured day labourer in his 50s from the Cape Flats, recalls: “Then I know my mommy never had the courage to do that and my daddy – you know? [...] But I’ve got that courage at least today. To stand up”.¹⁶

The older generation of Coloureds was sceptical of the new movement. Embracing African culture seemed difficult when your culture was not inherently African but closely linked to European. To them Black Consciousness again created a hierarchy of races where Coloureds would find themselves once again in the wrong

place. But more than anything else, the ever-growing Black majority was a menace for Coloureds. The fear of being marginalised in a post-apartheid future made many rather stick with the evil they knew.

Ambiguity in Coloured Politics

Another issue the Coloured community faced was their political representation. One striking element about Coloured politics was that its approach was as diverse as the community itself. The first Coloured political organisation, the *African People’s Organisation* (APO) founded in 1902, walked a fine line between fighting for a non-racial South Africa and simply representing the Coloured elite. An indication for this is when the APO switched the wording in their mission statement from “coloured races” to “coloured people” after the 1929 elections, whilst their leader Abdurahman was still giving speeches endorsing “black” unity.¹⁷

The deliberation for a separate Coloured struggle was persistent in the Coloured community. It was either due to a pragmatic consideration based on higher levels of oppression experienced by the African community which could hinder Coloured advancement or, like in the case of the *African National Bond*, a conservative Coloured organisation from the 1920s, it was simply the conviction of Coloured superiority.¹⁸

In 1948 again an opportunity was missed when the Trotskyist influenced *Non-European Unity Movement* (NEUM), which was the dominant Coloured organisation in the 1940s, was not willing to work with the wider Black resistance due to ideological differences with the Stalinist *Communist Party of South Africa* (CPSA).¹⁹

Many in the Coloured community were fed up with *all talk and no action* and wanted to see real change. After the apartheid government started to create political bodies whose purpose was to deal only

with Coloured affairs and in which Coloureds could participate, like in the *Coloured Council* 1956 or the *Coloured Persons’ Representative Council* (CRC) in 1969, a group of Coloured intellectuals formed the Labour Party (LP) in 1965 in anticipation of the CRC. The LPs main objective was to get back on the common voters’ roll, which the Coloureds had been dropped from through the Separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951. Nevertheless, they tried to use apartheid structures like the CRC to undermine apartheid, but without any success. When they carried on anyway, they created a legitimisation problem for themselves and were accused by other Coloureds of being stooges and collaborators, preferring their salaries to real resistance.

In its beginning the Labour Party was a supporter of the Black Consciousness Movement and of a united resistance. Allan Hendrickse, one of the party’s founders and later its chairman was a strong proponent for the Black Consciousness Movement. According to his son, the party was one of the first political organisations to adopt the main tenets of Black Consciousness.²⁰ Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko himself seemed to have held high hopes for the Labour Party: “In fact the growing consciousness of possibility of political action among the Coloured people is due to the Labour Party”.²¹ 1972 Allan Hendrickse officially declared that liberation for the Coloureds could only be achieved by liberating all oppressed people.²² However, this attitude didn’t sustain within the LP, because after 1976 the welfare of the Black population had to yield to the interests of the Coloured community. Hendrickse found himself in a minority and consequently the Labour Party distanced itself from the BCM and for a time even co-operated with the conservative Zulu nationalists of Inkatha. Interestingly, in 1975, one year prior to their adoption of the Coloured First approach, the LP had



Philippi, the biggest Coloured township in Cape Town.
Foto Amad Hamid

won the majority in the CRC and had taken over the executive.²³ One can conclude that their success made them drop the non-racial approach.

However, it is noteworthy, that right from the beginning the LP was inconsistent in its stance on apartheid. The Coloured community were well aware that apartheid institutions like the Coloured Persons Representative Council would not allow for real improvements for the Coloured population.²⁴ Nonetheless, the LP urged Coloureds to vote for them in the CRC '69 elections. They promised to boycott the CRC and do everything in their power to obtain direct representation in the central parliament.²⁵ However, they were never able to fulfil their promise and when they received their own parliament within the apartheid system they again were prepared 'to work against apartheid' while actually participating in its political structures. In 1982 prime minister P.W. Botha, who was under pressure from an increasingly frustrated "black" population, nationwide protests, a sustained economic decline and international isolation, propo-

sed a tricameral parliament as a last effort to save White minority rule in South Africa. This new structure gave Whites, Indians, and Coloureds each a segregated parliament to handle their "own" affairs. Decisions with a nation-wide impact were made by all three houses together. But the apartheid government made sure that the Whites still would be in authority, since their *House of Assembly* had 178 members, whereas the Coloured *House of Representatives* had 85 and the Indian *House of Delegates* merely 45 members.²⁶ The MPs of the ruling NP alone could out-vote the white opposition and both other parliaments combined. On top of that the newly created office of an executive, all-powerful *state president* could dissolve the entire parliament and rule by executive order. The African population was excluded completely and the tricameral parliament was just a smoke-screen for reformed but continuing apartheid, and it only functioned as a handy tool to undermine any attempt to reach unity within the population majority. Although aware of this, the Labour Party put

up candidates and won the majority in the first election for the tricameral parliament in 1984. However, voter turnout was extremely low with only one in five people voting. The Labour Party became the target of radical criticism, their politicians were denounced as collaborators and opportunists. However, Allan Hendrickse remained convinced that the best way to dismantle apartheid was by turning its very institutions against it: "In spite of the flaws and built-in white dominance, for the first time people other than whites were going to be part of the decision-making process".²⁷

But even in the early 1990s when the transition from apartheid had already started, the Labour Party was still captive to this ambiguous political situation. After the National Party turned multi-racial and opened up to non-Whites, 35 of 75 MPs left the LP to join the NP in 1991²⁸ and the Labour Party lost its absolute majority in the House of Representatives by 1992.²⁹ The LP was finally dissolved in 1994 and the remaining members led by Allan Hendrickse joined the ruling

African National Congress of Nelson Mandela.

Coloureds in the “Struggle”

From the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black students started organising against the racialised education system. The 1976 local mobilisation of students in Soweto led to a nationwide uprising which gained tragic notoriety due to the bloody reaction from the apartheid state. However, its mainspring had spread, and student organisations were forming nationwide.

In 1980 the resentments of the students erupted in the biggest student protest in the history of the Western Cape. It was led by the so-called *Committee of 81*, 81 representatives of “black” students, the majority of them being from Coloured working and middle-class background. It achieved boycotting classes in every educational institution in the Western Cape, that included African, Coloured, and Indian schools in rural and urban areas. This was the beginning of a transracial resistance. It also prepared the ground for politicising students and pupils. As they took over the educational institutions they implemented their own counter-curriculum, which included the history of Black people’s struggle in South Africa, political organisations and leaders in that struggle, South Africa’s ‘real’ history, the system of inferior, segregated education, the exploitation of Black workers, the political situation in the country and Black people’s oppression, non-collaboration, and how the struggle should be taken further.³⁰

It also made the students experience the repression of the state and spreading awareness of the oppressive nature of the apartheid state. Nikki van Driel, the Bridgetown High representative, who proposed the formation of the *Committee of 81* went missing for 7 months. Her sister Esther van Driel recounts that she became a victim of violent assault:

[...]and then my sisters Nikki was missing for seven months. She was missing. We couldn’t find her. [...] You know what, the security police would come. they would come three four o’clock to your house, right? [...] So what was happening was that the Coloured students were always on the run, living in different places [...] So my sister was one of them and then when she disappeared my mother fought and looked for her and then eventually somebody came and told them that she was .. um you know what Roeland Street? Midtown? [...] that was Roeland Street police and that’s where they used to keep them [...] she was kept there for seven months [...] and she was ... she was changed after that actually.³¹

In 1983 the *United Democratic Front* (UDF) was formed as an umbrella organisation for civic groups, trade unions, church groups and many others who were aligned to non-racialism and ending apartheid. The UDF continued with mass protests, stay-aways and boycotts and for the first time it created a common organisation for Blacks, Coloureds, Indians and a small minority of Whites, mostly university students. For a few years the apartheid government effectively lost control over many Black, Coloured and Indian townships. It finally led the NP to realize that apartheid could not be saved and that a transition had to become a priority to avoid further bloodshed and an economic meltdown.

The Fate of the Coloured Comrades

The election of 1994 marked the beginning of a new era in South African history. For the first time all adult South Africans had the right to vote. The *African National Congress* (ANC) won with a sweeping 62.65%. South Africa became the “Rainbow Nation”, a term coined by former Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu. It expressed unity in

diversity, but it emphasised common values of a new South African nation.³²

However, behind this noble idea of a rainbow nation deep-seated power differences between the different population groups remained. While South Africa was trying to establish an image of a colour-blind society the reality of racism prevailed. A spectre haunted the “comrades” of the anti-apartheid struggle – the spectre of being recategorised as “Coloureds” yet again. Allan Boesak, a church leader and initiator of the *United Democratic Front*, addressed this phenomenon:

In 1994 the ANC is back, they introduced, reintroduced, racial categorization. The ANC and Mandela began to talk about the Coloured. For the first time I was referred to as a Coloured leader. I never was a Coloured leader. I was just a leader of the people. [...] And the Coloured category was born back by the ANC. [...] So, the language, the old apartheid language, was brought back and re-established by the African National Congress. Alienation for the so-called Coloured people, especially the activists.³³

This experience was shared by many Coloured activists. Richard Dudley, long-time political activist and president of *New Unity Movement*, found out in a meeting with Nelson Mandela that the ANC leader addressed him as a Coloured leader and wanted him to use his influence to secure the Coloured vote for the ANC.

He [Mandela] said that I was a very prominent . . . political coloured political leader and so on, [...] So I said to him, now look, in the first place I am not a coloured person. I said that other people have classified me as that, but I am not a coloured person. I am not a coloured leader.³⁴

Omar Badsha, political activist, documentary photographer and

artist, also took issue with the way the ANC evolved after 1994. He was particularly bitter about the ANC having abandoned the grassroots movement that had been built up during the years of campaigning and protesting. These structures could have had served in building up democracy within local communities. Badsha refused to be part of the government and wanted to continue with work in the communities.³⁵

According to Boesak the disbanding of the UDF had a very negative impact on the Coloured community. The UDF served as a conduit for a large proportion of the Coloured community towards the ANC. The UDF had become an institution of Coloured resistance. While Black people could draw on a long tradition of resistance, the Coloureds could not.³⁶ So, disbanding it disaffected the Coloureds further. It was unacceptable for radical Coloureds, that former collaborators with the apartheid regime and Labour Party politicians were now becoming MPs of the ANC and were elevated to positions in the new government. On top of that ANC leaders hand-picked those people from the UDF who were compliant to them, but abandoned all the others.³⁷

*They isolated us. They find ways to making life difficult to us. I went to prison; Winnie Mandela almost went to prison. Because we disagreed fundamentally with things that they did.*³⁸

These were the conditions that led to the Coloured community's estrangement from the ANC. Among other things, this disassociation manifested itself in the National Party winning the majority in the Western Cape in the 1994 elections. Half of the population in the Western Cape is Coloured while they only constitute 9% of the total population.³⁹ So, it was quite evident that the NP won the Coloured vote. This came as a shock to their Black comrades. In the meeting with Dudley, Mandela "found

it very difficult to believe that the people could actually vote for a political party that had in the past been responsible for all the discriminatory legislation that had harmed the so-called coloured people for so long".⁴⁰

Finally, when affirmative action was introduced in South Africa through the Employment Equity Act of 1998, the Coloureds were increasingly marginalised in the workplace, too. Even though affirmative action was introduced to rectify the disparities that resulted from centuries of oppression and discriminatory laws and practices,⁴¹ its outcome was the disappearance of Coloureds from leadership positions in politics and the economy. Boesak neatly lays out the disassociation that took place in the Coloured community:

*When it came to affirmative action, they used the language of Black Consciousness. That Black people would be given privilege in terms of positions [...]. But all of a sudden, Coloured people found "No, Black doesn't mean us". So, they lied in the law, and the application of Black - then they all of a sudden say that you are Coloured. Or then they would do something like, for this position can you speak Xhosa? [...] So, if you put all of this together, that is where you get the idea from our: 'Yesterday, I was not White enough, now I am not Black enough.' That is the thing. That is now growing and growing and out of that grows the furious rumours that Coloured people were not as dedicated to the struggle, it is almost as if they were never in the struggle.*⁴²

Final Thoughts

Looking back on Coloured history, it becomes obvious that ambiguity was always part of the social reality of Coloureds. It affected every aspect of their lives, particularly their relationship with other population groups. Their intermediate position

in the racial hierarchy and their proximity to White culture were factors that had strong ramifications in their relationship with their Black comrades.

It is important to understand that Coloured and Black resistance came from very different trajectories. The Black freedom struggle had a long-standing history and had become an integral part of Black South African culture. Coloured resistance as a political movement against the state had not existed for so long and it was ambiguous all the time for there were coloureds working within apartheid structures and others openly fighting against them. The anti-apartheid, non-racial stance of the resistance movement was the unifying factor of the Black and the Coloured struggle for just about one decade, the 1980s.

However once apartheid had been overcome, unity dissolved. The concept of "black" as a collective expression for all victims of White oppression lost its meaning once this oppression had been overcome. In the end it is conceivable, that Black and Coloured unity as a transracial concept could not exist outside of an oppressive system. Only in the context of apartheid did it become a unifying factor.

Zusammenfassung

Wenn man auf die Geschichte der Farbigen zurückblickt, wird deutlich, dass Ambiguität immer Teil ihrer sozialen Realität war. Sie wirkte sich auf jeden Aspekt ihres Lebens aus, insbesondere auf ihre Beziehungen zu anderen Bevölkerungsgruppen. Ihre Zwischenstellung in der Rassenhierarchie und ihre Nähe zur weißen Kultur waren Faktoren, die sich stark auf ihr Verhältnis zu ihren schwarzen „Genossen“ auswirkten. Es ist wichtig, dass der Widerstand der Farbigen und der Schwarzen auf sehr unterschiedlichen Wegen

zustande kam. Der schwarze Freiheitskampf hatte eine lange Geschichte und war zu einem festen Bestandteil der schwarzen südafrikanischen Kultur geworden. Den farbigen Widerstand als politische Bewegung gegen den Staat gab es noch nicht so lange, und er war stets zweideutig, denn es gab Farbige, die innerhalb der Apartheidstrukturen arbeiteten, und andere, die offen gegen sie kämpften. Die Anti-Apartheid-Haltung der Widerstandsbewegung, die nicht rassistisch ist, war nur etwa ein Jahrzehnt lang, in den 1980er Jahren, das verbindende Element des Kampfes von Schwarzen und Farbigen.

Nach der Überwindung der Apartheid löste sich die Einheit jedoch auf. Der Begriff „schwarz“ als Sammelbegriff für alle Opfer weißer Unterdrückung verlor nach der Überwindung dieser Unterdrückung seine Bedeutung. Letztlich ist es denkbar, dass die Einheit von Schwarzen und Farbigen als rassenübergreifendes Konzept außerhalb eines Unterdrückungssystems nicht existieren konnte. Erst im Kontext der Apartheid wurde sie zu einem verbindenden Faktor.

Annotations

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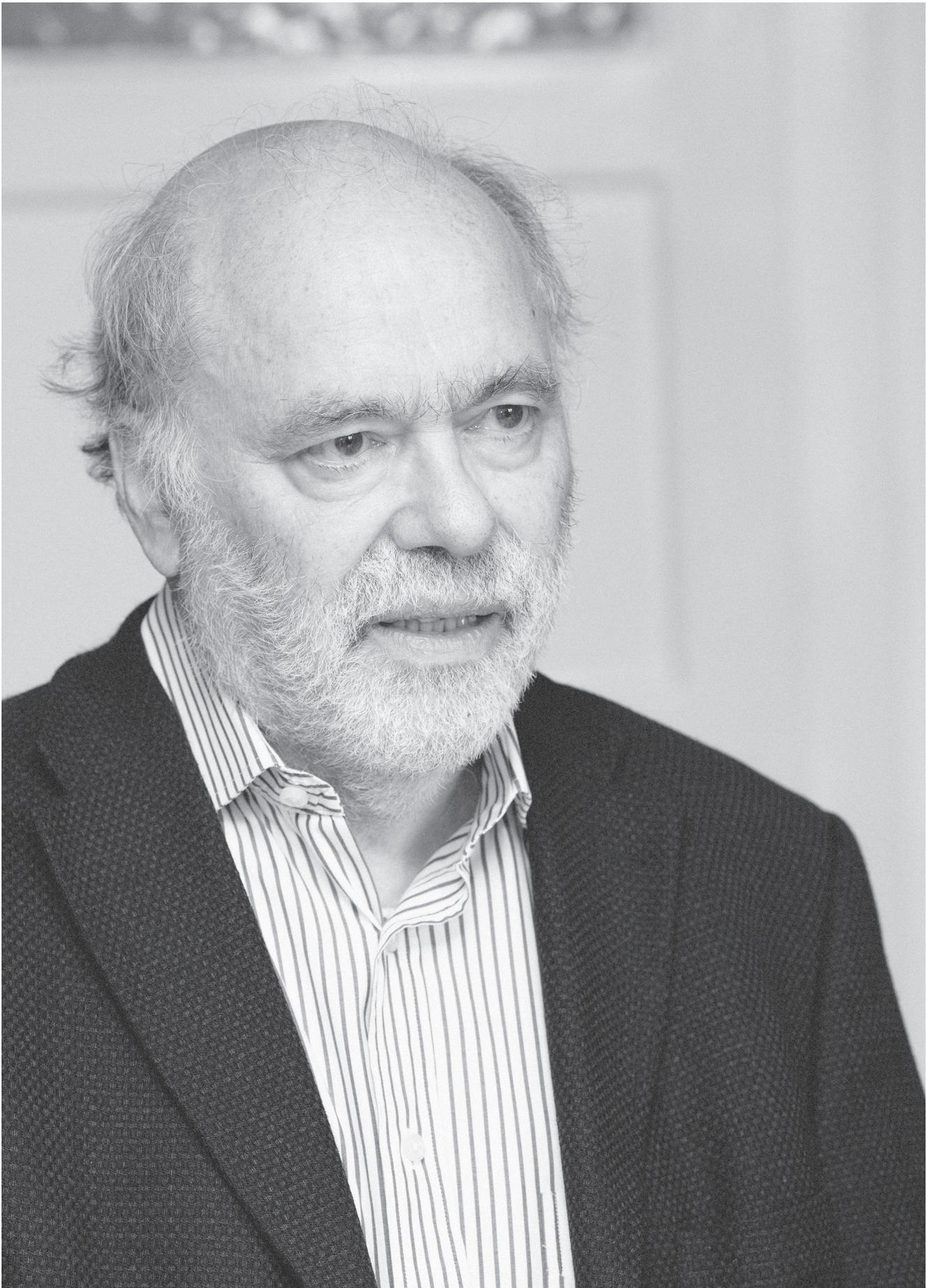
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