



Transnational governmentality and the 'poor white' in early twentieth century South Africa



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 January 2015

Received in revised form

6 September 2016

Accepted 8 September 2016

Keywords:

South Africa

Poverty

Poor white

Governmentality

Carnegie commission

ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines the anxiety over poor whites that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, positing the 'poor white problem' as a distinctively transnational phenomenon, concerned with the spectre of a racial degeneracy and decline that respected no national borders. Focusing specifically on the Carnegie commission's 1932 report into the condition of poor whites in South Africa, this paper considers transnational theories of racial decline and the transnational team of experts put together to investigate the causes of 'poor whiteism' and to offer solutions to the problem. The Carnegie commission is presented as a form of transnational governmentality, directed at the management of poor whites wherever they were found. Entirely consistently, however, poor whiteism was put forward as the product of different circumstances in different places, to be met with contrasting remedies. The cause was constructed as hookworm in the United States, for instance, and in South Africa as malaria. The Carnegie report's findings are thus transnational both in their racial and biopolitical framing, and in their specifics.

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The 'poor white problem' was a defining social and political concern in South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. Although white poverty was not new to the country, and had been a source of much concern in the previous century, the poor white problem or question was different in that unprecedented white impoverishment occurred in a period of racial anxiety and racial nationalism.¹ Despite its historical importance in South Africa, however, the poor white problem was never confined to a single country. In the United States, for instance, the legacy of Reconstruction (1863–1877) and, a generation later, the Great Depression plunged tens of thousands into desperate poverty, particularly in the southern states. Moreover, in the colonial world of European Empire, right up to the Second World War, poor whites

have been shown to be a concern in, amongst others, Rhodesia, Kenya, the West Indies, and Sri Lanka.² The historian David Arnold has calculated that 'nearly half the European population [living in India by the end of the nineteenth century] could be called poor whites'.³ In the same period there were nearly sixty thousand 'mixed blood' poor white children in the Dutch East Indies.⁴ These

² Although the literature is quite broad, a representative sample includes the following. For Rhodesia and Kenya, see D.K. Kennedy, *Islands of White*, Durham, 1987. On the West Indies, see D. Lambert, *Liminal figures: poor whites, freedmen, and racial reinscription in colonial Barbados*, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19 (2001) 335–350. For India, see S. Mizutani, *The Meaning of White*, Oxford, 2011. For the United States, see M. Wray, *Not Quite White*, Durham, 2006. For South Africa, see E. Bottomley, *Poor White*, Cape Town, 2012; R. Morrel (Ed), *White but Poor: Essays on the History of the Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880–1940*, Pretoria, 1992; and C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886–1914*, volume 1, Harlow, 1982.

³ D. Arnold, European orphans and vagrants in India in the nineteenth century, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7 (1979) 104.

⁴ A.L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's 'History of Sexuality' and the Colonial Order of Things*, Durham, 1995, 108.

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¹ C. Bundy, Vagabonds, Hollanders and runaway Englishmen: white poverty in the Cape before Poor Whiteism, in: W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido (Eds), *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa, 1850–1930*, Johannesburg, 1986, 101–128.

poor whites affected policy across the entire colonial world, for all that the question arguably reached its extreme form, both economically and politically, in South Africa.⁵

The global significance of the poor white question has not been fully recognised, overshadowed as it has been by the framing of the poor white as a problem of South Africa's racial state. The poor white question has largely remained a South African affair. Yet in all these countries and territories the racial concerns of the poor white question were also significant, and inextricably interlinked. A reliance on a national framing of the 'poor white problem' obscures the significant transnational connections, such as shared expertise or racial identity and anxiety, that underlay national responses. The insistence on a national framing has resulted in granularity but limits the field of view. The efforts of an extraordinarily broad group of experts and officials to uplift poor whites by alleviating their poverty should rather be regarded as local interventions in a transnational crisis. These interventions benefited from transnational expertise and shared philosophy but were inevitably tailored to local conditions and concerns. Yet a transnational framing does not mean merely shifting the analytical scale from the local and national to the transnational. Rather it should show how transnationalism was integral to the expression and understanding of a concept. This paper seeks to make a case for viewing the poor white problem in a global frame, and to reinstate the figure of the poor white as a transnational phenomenon. It does this primarily by showing how a definitive report on white poverty in South Africa is both a product and producer of transnational thought. Put differently, it seeks to expand the geography of the poor white problem by considering the ways in which white poverty transcended the boundaries of national histories and experiences.

The intention is not to suggest that the Western, particularly Anglo-Saxon, world struggled with issues of white poverty and white prestige in the same ways and at the same time but rather that the concept was intelligible throughout the settler colonies, the British Dominions, and the United States. It was helpful that the term poor white was so vague that it could be applied nearly indiscriminately. Although the term poor white (from the American and later South African use of the term) is generally accepted and used today, this ill-defined group was called different things in different places: domiciled whites in India, poor burghers in the Transvaal Republic and 'po' whites, mean whites, lubbers, dirt eaters, crackers, and poor white trash in the United States. This extends to even broader terms such as indigents and undesirables in the African settler colonies and older terms such as redlegs and redshanks in eighteenth century Barbados.⁶ When they talked about poor whites and even so called poor whiteism, self-identified white inhabitants of Australia or Kenya or South Africa had in mind a transnational population made up of different types of person, a population which ranged problematically across the colonial world and was attended by a host of moral, economic, medical, and political concerns. This paper contributes to the range of work carried out on conceptualising transnational colonial identity along the lines of whiteness, the civilisation/savagery binary, and class ideology.⁷ This paper's specific concern, however, is the governance of racial identity as a transnational phenomenon.

Geographers have recently begun paying sustained attention to

the links between society and modern super philanthropy, and this paper contributes to understanding the geographies of knowledge that linked these organisations.⁸ It does so by drawing explicit attention to the role of these philanthropies in maintaining the global colour line, by linking the experiences of impoverished white men and women to a global narrative of racialised anxiety. Scholars in historical disciplines have made great use of a transnational framing, leading to innovative analyses of the role that networks of education, humanitarianism, town planning and sport, among others, played in the early twentieth century.⁹ The goal, as historian Jonathan Hyslop puts it, is not to assume the nation-state as unit of analysis but to 'shake up our understanding of the stability of the units to be analysed'.¹⁰ Consider the transnational discourse on the rescue of vulnerable white children in the nineteenth century.¹¹ Geographers and historians have similarly pointed to how philanthropic organisations in England, Canada, Australia, and South Africa were fundamentally concerned with redeeming and upholding the virtuous and white status of these children. This racially redemptive narrative is also crucially important to understanding the concern over poor whites.¹² Transnational racial narratives such as fears over white slavery or assaults against white women filtered through to a national level where they were adapted to local conditions and refocused on local concerns. Understanding the transnational status of the poor white complements existing national-scale analyses and provides fresh insight into the motivations, preoccupations, and anxieties involved in the racial politics of individual countries.

Extending Michel Foucault's thinking on governmentality, the paper argues that the transnational conception of the poor whites, as well as attempts to manage and discipline them, constitutes a distinctive example of what has recently been identified as transnational governmentality, a rationale of government or governance in which the biopolitical role of the state is taken up by transnational organisations as well as transnational networks of experts such as doctors and missionaries.¹³ Crucially the lead was taken in this transnational governmentality, and its racialised biopolitics, by the newly hegemonic United States, so aptly described by Ian Tyrell as a 'transnational nation' in his analysis of the moral imperialism

⁵ J. Taylor, 'Our poor': the politicisation of the Poor White problem, 1932–1942, *Kleio* 24 (1992) 40–65.

⁶ Lambert, *Liminal figures*, 346.

⁷ M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge, 2008; K. Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism*, New York, 2013; J. Hyslop, *The imperial working class makes itself 'white': white labourism in Britain, Australia, and South Africa before the First World War*, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12 (1999) 398–421.

⁸ I. Hay and S. Muller, Questioning generosity in the golden age of philanthropy: towards critical geographies of super-philanthropy, *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2014) 635–653. See also C. Brooks, 'The ignorance of the uneducated': Ford Foundation philanthropy, the IIE, and the geographies of educational exchange, *Journal of Historical Geography* 48 (2015) 36–46. D. Nally and S. Taylor, The politics of self-help: the Rockefeller foundation, philanthropy and the 'long' Green Revolution, *Political Geography* 49 (2015) 51–63.

⁹ J. McLeod and K. Wright, Education for citizenship: transnational expertise, curriculum reform and psychological knowledge in 1930s Australia, *History of Education Review* 42 (2013) 170–187; R. Skinner and A. Lester, Humanitarianism and Empire: new research agendas, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40 (2012) 729–747; L. Beekmans, Editing the African city: reading colonial planning in Africa from a comparative perspective, *Planning Perspectives* 28 (2013) 615–627; M. Taylor, The global ring? Boxing, mobility, and transnational networks in the Anglophone world, 1890–1914, *Journal of Global History* 8 (2013) 231–255.

¹⁰ J. Hyslop, Comparative historical sociology and transnational history: a response to Julian Go's *Patterns of Empire*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34 (2014) 610–617.

¹¹ S. Swain and M. Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850–1915*, Manchester, 2010.

¹² S.E. Duff, Saving the child to save the nation: poverty, whiteness and childhood in the Cape Colony, c.1870–1895, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37 (2011) 229–245; D. Beckingham, Scale and the moral geographies of Victorian and Edwardian child protection, *Journal of Historical Geography* 42 (2013) 140–151.

¹³ See, for instance, M. Collyer, Transnational political participation of Algerians in France: extra-territorial civil society versus transnational governmentality, *Political Geography* 25 (2006) 836–849.

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