

## White Masculinity: Jan Smuts, Race and the South African War

*In his lifetime, Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870–1950) was not only widely recognised as an exceptional scholar, soldier and scientist, but was also South Africa's outstanding white statesman. For all his international achievements, however, he was incapable of anything but the rankest opportunism in relation to South Africa's racial problems. In an extract from her Raleigh Lecture delivered on 2 November 2000, Professor Shula Marks FBA, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, addressed this contradiction, ascribing his liberal internationalism at least in part to the influence of a group of remarkable radical and feminist women. In this extract, she considers the roots of Smuts's powerful racial fears.*

In October 1918 Sir Charles Wakefield, formerly Lord Mayor of London and later Lord Wakefield, offered the Academy a sum of money to commemorate the tercentenary of Sir Walter Raleigh. From this fund, the annual history lecture was founded. Since 1974 the subject has been drawn on a regular rotating basis from the medieval, early modern and modern periods.

In a recent comment, Saul Dubow has remarked, 'only by taking the intellectual discourse of scientific racism seriously is it possible to fully comprehend its strength and appeal'. Supporting this view, Peder Johan Anker has argued that Smuts's racial attitudes and repressive policies were underpinned by his philosophy of holism, especially in its ecological and evolutionary forms. According to Anker, Smuts sincerely endeavoured to 'let scientific knowledge guide his political decisions', and these 'were fully consistent with his holistic philosophy of science.' He illustrates this well with an analysis of Smuts's 1929 Rhodes lectures in Oxford in which he advocated the expansion of white settlement in the climatically suitable highlands of East Africa, because black and white communities represented separate 'wholes' and could and should therefore live in separate ecological 'bio-regions'.

Yet this ostensibly ecological analysis is followed by what can only be described as the most hoary of settler nostrums: that 'the easiest, most natural and obvious way to civilize the African native is to give him decent white employment. White employment is his best school; the gospel of labour is the most salutary gospel for him .... even more from the native point of view, the policy of African settlement [i.e. by whites] is imperatively necessary.' For all his scientific sophistication, much of Smuts's thinking on race would seem to draw on forms of nineteenth-century 'colonial knowledge' which missionaries and settlers constructed to legitimise the colonisation of Africa. This in turn seemed to rest on the notion of 'the masterful Western [male] subject as a repository and arbiter of civilisation,' rather than on Darwinian explanations of racial difference.

Even more striking is the way in which this highly intellectual man, who had his finger on the pulse of scientific advance in the first half of the twentieth century was also liable to erupt into a far

more overtly racist discourse. Even in lectures, designed for his Oxford audience, the sense of menace escapes into the text:

From time immemorial [Smuts proclaimed] the natives of Africa have been subject to a stern, even a ruthless discipline, and their social system has rested on the despotic authority of their chiefs. If this system breaks down and tribal discipline disappears, native society will be resolved into its human atoms, with possibilities of universal Bolshevism and chaos which no friend of the natives, or the orderly civilization of this continent, could contemplate with equanimity.

Notwithstanding Anker's fascinating analysis of scientific philosophy at the heart of Smuts's politics, the contradiction remains between his essentially optimistic scientific vision, his liberal internationalism, his self confidence in his manly prowess – and his almost visceral racial fears. As Bill Schwarz has noted, 'His was a culture which lived in a kind of permanent emergency, peculiarly attuned to apprehensions of its own destruction.'

These apprehensions punctuate his correspondence and speeches from the 1890s to the late 1940s. If much of this may be ascribed to Smuts's childhood experiences as the son of a landowner on a farm in the western Cape – about which we know remarkably little in fact – the really formative event seems to have been the South African war, an event which was deeply etched on Smuts's consciousness, and which made it almost impossible for him to transcend these earlier experiences. The profound meaning of the war in crystallising Smuts's racial angst can, I think, be seen in the emotionally charged letter which he wrote to the British pro-Boer journalist W.T. Stead in January 1902. In it he bitterly castigated Britain's 'baneful policy' of employing 'Natives and Coloured people as armed combatants .... not in small insignificant numbers, but in thousands ....'

Armed by the British, he continued, ‘these ... fiends’ had ‘committed horrible atrocities on fugitive or peaceful women and children ... the world will be surprised to find that almost as many women and children have perished at the hands of barbarians in this war, by the connivance or general instigation of British officers, as were done to death by Dingaan and Moselekatze at the dawn of the Republics in South Africa ...’

It is difficult in a short extract to capture the almost hysterical language used by Smuts in this outburst. And while he was undoubtedly exaggerating for Stead’s benefit – and it is interesting that he thought such a letter would appeal to British readers – there can be little doubt that what he wrote was deeply felt. For thirty passionate pages he pronounced on how shocking it was ‘to employ armed barbarians under white officers in a war between two white Christian peoples,’ both in view of the ‘numerical disproportion of the two peoples engaged in this struggle’ and ‘from the point of view of South African history and public policy.’ What really endangered ‘the continued existence of the white community as the ruling class in South Africa’, Smuts maintained, was the involvement, by Britain, of the ‘coloured races’ in a dispute between whites, thus allowing them to ‘become the arbiter in disputes between ... [them] and in the long run the predominating factor or “casting vote” in South Africa.’

Dark indeed is that shadow! [he proclaimed] When armed Natives and Coloured boys, trained and commanded by English officers, ... [pursue] the fugitive Boer and try to pay off old scores by insulting his wife and children on their [lonely] farms; when the Boer women in the Cape Colony have to cook for and serve the brutal Coloured scouts, ..., and are forced to listen to their filthy talk; when they hear these Coloured soldiers of the King boast that after the war the latter will be the owners of the [Boer] farms ... and will marry [their] widows ...; when, to escape violation and nameless insults at the hands of their former servants, now wearing the British uniform, Boer women and girls seek refuge in the mountains of the native land, as I have seen them do – a wound is given to South Africa which Time itself will not heal.

For Smuts, British war policy portended ‘an eventual debacle of society’ in which the white population would ‘have to bow before a Native constabulary and soldiery’. This ‘Frankenstein Monster’ was, he asserted, far worse than ‘the utter desolation of South Africa and the unprecedented sufferings of the whole Boer people in field and prison camps’, and ‘would soon cause South Africa to relapse into barbarism ...’

One’s initial instinct is to dismiss this letter as propaganda premised on paranoia; the Manichean opposites of civilisation and savagery are only too familiar to students of nineteenth century racist discourse, and there is no evidence that white women were raped or even molested by ‘the coloured races’ on any scale during the war, despite lurid articles in the press and the taunting of masters and especially mistresses by former labourers. Indeed the handful of women who had been captured by Linchwe’s Kgatla people in the eastern Transvaal after the Battle of Derdepoort in November 1899, an episode at the heart of many of the more blood-curdling rumours, all remarked on the kind treatment they had received from the chief and his followers! Looking at the evidence one is forcefully reminded of Norman Etherington’s astringent comment on the so-called ‘black peril’ scare in Natal in 1870: ‘during the rape crisis’ he says, ‘everyone was scared and practically no-one was raped.’ One cannot, however, leave the matter there. As Etherington continues:

... fear of losing control was a constant under-current in the thinking of the settler minority. This substratum of anxiety rose to the surface in the form of a moral panic whenever disturbances in the economy or the body politic were severe enough to unsettle the mask of composure worn by the face of public authority. In a patriarchal society, where women were part and parcel of the property to be defended against threats from below, fear of rape was a special concern of white males ...

White masculinity in general and Smuts’s in particular were at stake in the inability of the Boers either to defend their women and children or, indeed, to control them. During the war Smuts felt his entire social world beginning to crack, and this catastrophic vision seems to have haunted him for most of the rest of his life.