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**From  
Civilization  
to  
Segregation**

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SOCIAL IDEALS AND SOCIAL CONTROL  
IN SOUTHERN RHODESIA, 1890-1934

**Carol Summers**

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## INTRODUCTION

Between the invasion of Mashonaland by the British South Africa Company's pioneer column during 1890 and the election of the explicitly segregationist Huggins government in the general elections of 1933, life in Southern Rhodesia changed dramatically as residents struggled, often unsuccessfully, for prosperity. The construction of Southern Rhodesia as a settler colony, though, was more than just an economic or political process. It also involved the construction, management, and deployment of new systems of understanding and knowledge. The administration, settlers, missionaries, and Africans sought to profit from, induce, or control social change in both African society and the dominant European community. To do so, they worked to develop and use images, ideas, and concepts of their neighbors and their environment, of what was unlikely, possible, probable, or inevitable, and then use that knowledge, along with economic, military, political, and other resources, to remold themselves, and other inhabitants of the region into the building blocks of order, development, and change. Southern Rhodesia's society was not built through the attempts of a single coherent group, be it settlers, missionaries, or Africans. Its plans were not drawn by any particular Native Affairs Commission, or imposed through successful governmental interventions. One crisis after another, a stingy administration, and a multiplicity of individuals and interests, built a Southern Rhodesia that had dreams, and nightmares, of unity but a reality of tension and conflict.

Searching for ways to comprehend and control social change, the inhabitants of Southern Rhodesia struggled and experimented. In 1890 the pioneer column of the British South Africa Company marched through Matabeleland, the kingdom in the southwest of present-day Zimbabwe, and occupied the region known as Mashon-

aland, establishing forts and land claims centered on Fort Victoria (Gweru), Salisbury (Harare), and Umtali (Mutare). The pioneer column and early prospectors both used violence and believed in violence as a way of legitimizing European rule and extracting gold, cattle, and labor from the Africans of the territory. In 1893 the settlers and Company successfully provoked the Matabele war, opening Matabeleland to European occupation, and attacking the Matabele state. But during 1896 and 1897, the Risings, sometimes known as the first Chimurenga, broke out as Africans fought, threatening European profits and control, and proving that Africans could also use violence. European faith in violence faltered, despite the Company's eventual bloody military victory. Violence alone, while temporarily useful as a way of raiding a marginal frontier region, proved an expensive and uncertain way to achieve order or profits. The Risings taught both Europeans and Africans that they could not afford the costs of unrestrained violence.

In the aftermath of the war, Africans, missionaries, officials, and settlers sought a more secure basis for order and profits, and began to develop an image and rhetoric of "civilization" as a strategy for social change. In Southern Rhodesia, ideas of civilization did state societal values. But the values were not static. Instead, the ideas and rhetoric of civilization provided a way to discuss policies designed to promote social change. The Southern Rhodesian idea of civilization had three major policy implications. It called for a cultivation of individualism among Africans. It suggested that conflict between Africans and Europeans could be blocked if Africans learned European culture, whether literacy, English, work discipline, or Christianity. And, finally, this idea of civilization placed an emphasis on the newly liberated individual's acceptance of the economic logic of market capitalism and participation in market-oriented economic activity, as a seller of goods or labor.

Ideas of civilization, though, proved an awkward fit with the economic needs of the region. Employers, nearly all settlers within the region, demanded cheap labor, coerced if necessary—labor for prospecting, for mining, for farming, and for all forms of commercial, governmental, and domestic service. In the aftermath of the South African war, Southern Rhodesia's economy sought to struggle to its feet. The mining sector became increasingly credible as settlers established hundreds of small mines that, requiring little capital and paying paltry wages, produced profits from the small quantities of gold they did mine, and, upon proving their success,

could sell out to larger concerns. Market agriculture developed as well as Africans and Europeans turned toward the extensive cultivation of maize, experimented with tobacco, and fought for access not merely to domestic markets, but also to regional and international markets. Much of the expansion of the European-directed economy, though, was carried on with labor from “nonindigenous natives”—men from Mozambique, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, and even South Africa. And these labor migrants, and the indigenous Africans as well, learned to work the system, selecting jobs, pursuing education, and protesting difficulties—sometimes, thanks to experience on the job or in a school, protesting in English.

The assimilationist values and policy implications of the idea of civilization began to lose their appeal to many factions of the Southern Rhodesian population as assimilation appeared to be working all too quickly and all too well, to the point where, in the eyes of nervous Europeans—if not in reality—civilized Africans were threatening European dominance. As the missionary-influenced imperial government and the distinctly rapacious British South Africa Company were increasingly marginalized by a gradual settler takeover of the state which culminated in the establishment of settler “responsible government” in 1923, a new key image, the idea of discipline, began to emerge from debates over social control and to grow into a new theory for guided and controlled social change. The idea of civilization had embodied an image of social change in which ‘progress’ or ‘development’ would grow organically from a mass of African individuals. But by the 1920s, the inhabitants of Southern Rhodesia were attempting to intervene, making ‘development’ less organic than architectural, an enterprise that, far from proceeding fluidly as a natural process, had to be planned and implemented. Attempts to plan for change and to control its results were explicit in the governmental, settler, and missionary debates and intervention in education, and the association, during the late 1920s, of “Native Education” with “Native Development” in an explicit attempt to promote a separate African culture, society, and economy and, indeed, an African civilization removed from rather than assimilated to that of the European settlers.

The new ideas of the 1920s, in conjunction with the very real economic changes and economic crisis of the Depression, led to the segregationist initiatives of the late 1920s and the 1930s. Both Africans and Europeans shifted from a logic of individuals and individual opportunity to one in which the racial community provided

the fundamental unit of social analysis. In doing so, they sought to prevent the blurring of social lines by 'progressive' or 'degenerate' individuals, whether African or European, and added a substantial measure of inertia to an otherwise volatile process of individual cultural learning and identification. The idea of communal solidarity ran directly counter to the very real diversification that had taken place in both the African and European communities of Southern Rhodesia, whether through the prosperity of a few African commercial farmers or the impoverishment of unskilled European laborers. But by making policy for the average African or European and by using state power to reinforce social boundaries, the distinctly shaky state graduated from social engineering policies designed to prepare people for a specific future to using the image of segregation to direct intervention in the social structure of a contemporary society threatened by economic collapse and social contradictions.

The inhabitants of Southern Rhodesia, throughout the period in question, had a variety of interests, values, and perspectives on social change and social control. The key images, types of knowledge, and ideologies that they built reflected this variety, and contained internal contradictions which prevented an easy, stable system of domination from evolving. Instead of providing an ideological framework capable of shaping the hearts and minds of Europeans or Africans within the region, these ideas and images provided words and a rapidly changing language through which individuals and groups could comprehend, communicate, and contend with each other in a complex process of negotiation on the terms of a new society.

The difficult work of creating knowledge and communicating the elements of social ideologies between the social groups, economic sectors and geographical regions was not always coherent or instantaneous. This study examines how knowledge and communication were used, changing over time even as the social, economic, and political context changed. But while it is possible to assign specific dates of political transition—such as the 1923 transfer of administrative authority from the British South Africa Company to the Responsible Government of the settlers' state—such precision is impossible with knowledge and ideological concepts. Both are attached to people, who may continue to hold them long after they have gone out of fashion. Both are connected to specific institutions within society which, though rising and falling in prominence within the regional debates, may continue to exist long after

their moment of influence. This study therefore periodizes ideological change not by looking at sharp boundaries or critical breaks, but by finding clusters of discourse—clusters that frequently overlap and blend in to each other. The ideas of civilization, for example, did not vanish after 1906, though they did, at least temporarily, lose their dominant place in political and social debates. And useful ideas are rarely ever lost entirely: though beyond the chronological scope of this work, Timothy Burke has argued that ideas of civilization made a comeback after World War II,<sup>1</sup> and demands for discipline can be seen in the letters to the editor printed by the *Herald* during the student unrest of recent years at the University of Zimbabwe.

This work is a history of public opinion—of common knowledge, assumptions, and issues—rather than a history that concentrates on the details of what happened in Southern Rhodesia during its formative period. The historiography of Southern Rhodesia, and of today's Zimbabwe, is full of discussions of what happened. Early historians such as Lewis Gann, Colin Leys, and, to some extent, Philip Mason, provided histories that focused on the development of the settler state of Southern Rhodesia and its power over the far larger African population. These historians' willingness to analyze the state and the European community as though the African majority was irrelevant limits their usefulness today. They used a very narrow definition of politics, focusing on electoral politics and formal interest groups rather than contemplating the political implications of daily life or wider social issues. Indeed, it is almost unthinkable that a present-day scholar could begin a study of political history in Southern Rhodesia by asserting, as Leys did, that the African population "was mostly too inexperienced to play much part in politics, even if it had been permitted to do so."<sup>2</sup> These histories, even when acknowledging shortcomings of the European community, as Gann did repeatedly over issues ranging from the formation of reserves to the technologies of European farming, tended to accept European domination of a society divided between Europeans and Africans as natural or legitimate.<sup>3</sup> The early historians did, however, take questions of consciousness seriously, at least in discussing the European population. And they and such careful studies as D. J. Murray's *Governmental Systems of Southern Rhodesia* and Claire Palley's *Constitutional History of Southern Rhodesia* provide formal analyses of the European-dominated state and the settler community that discuss structures, institutions, and laws

critical to an understanding of how debate was structured within the region.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, from the mid-1970s, revisionist studies of Southern Rhodesia—studies that use a wider definition of politics and consider Africans as actors in the region's economy, politics, and society—have proliferated, exploring the past both by sector of the economy, as Charles van Onselen's *Chibaro* and Robin Palmer's *Land and Racial Domination* have done for mining and agriculture respectively, and by region.<sup>5</sup> This study could not have been written without the background of these and other works. Debates, ideas, plans, and fears acquire meaning from their physical, economic, social, and political contexts—not solely from the texts that provide the sources for my research.

Southern Rhodesia as a whole, however, provides a coherent unit of analysis for more than just structural depictions of the administration. Despite the differences between the opinions and knowledge of miners and farmers, or between the perspectives of Belingwe or Gutu, there were aspects of Southern Rhodesian public opinion and public knowledge which affected the region as a whole, and which call for a synthetic approach. Southern Rhodesia was under a single idiosyncratic and constantly changing administration. Its inhabitants, particularly its European inhabitants, organized on a national level, reading the same newspapers and electing representatives to the same assembly. The region's native policy was also increasingly unified from region to region as Mashonaland and Matabeleland were put under a single chief native commissioner, tax policy was standardized from region to region, the judicial decisions of native commissioners were subjected to a colony-wide appeal process that eliminated appeals to local differences or community standards, and legislation differentiated the Africans of the region not into Shona, Ndebele, or other ethnic or regional subgroup, but into only two categories: "indigenous Natives" and "non-indigenous Natives."

Just as the existence of Southern Rhodesia-wide laws, administration, media, and organization make the region reasonably coherent internally for an examination of ideas of social change, several sharp differences between Southern Rhodesia and its neighbors make it important that its history be examined carefully, rather than merely incorporated into a larger regional history of Southern Africa. Despite extensive debate until at least the 1920s over the



possibility of the union of Southern Rhodesia with the Union of South Africa, the population, society, and economy of Southern Rhodesia differed significantly from those of the Union. The European population of Southern Rhodesia was far smaller, both absolutely and as a percentage of the total, than that of any region of the Union, and had arrived more recently. It was predominantly English-speaking, with a Dutch-speaking minority small enough to be politically isolated even within European electoral politics. And at the beginning of the twentieth century, the sections of the population who formed the middle of the Union's social pyramid were nearly missing from Southern Rhodesia. Asians, "Coloureds," and even educated and skilled Africans were scarce in Southern Rhodesia before the 1930s. "Native Police," "boss boys," clerks, and even qualified mission teachers and evangelists were often immigrants from South Africa. Until at least the 1930s, there were no Southern Rhodesian equivalents for the institutions—such as Lovedale, Fort Hare, or even Tiger Kloof—that provided higher education for a few South African Blacks and shaped South African debates over "civilization" and Native Education.<sup>6</sup> Economically, too, Southern Rhodesia lacked the strength and complexity of any region of the Union. Its mining could not compare to that of Kimberly or the Rand. Its industry and commerce were woefully underdeveloped. And even its agriculture was rudimentary compared to that of Natal or the Cape. During the period before the 1930s, the structure and stratification of Southern Rhodesia was direct and abrupt, an order of magnitude removed from the complexities of South Africa proper. These differences preclude any wholesale importation from South Africa of explanations for Southern Rhodesian Native Policy, Native Education policies, Native Development initiatives, or segregation as a whole.

Yet while its newness and marginality distinguished Southern Rhodesia from the Union, its status as a settler colony rather than a protectorate distinguished it from other British-dominated neighbors such as Bechuanaland (Botswana) and Nyasaland (Malawi) and even, to some degree, from Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). The local European community was substantial enough to override or modify general imperial ideologies or policies. While protectorate officials frequently voiced paternalistic ideals or appealed to theories of indirect rule in favor of enlightened or traditional African leadership, Southern Rhodesian Europeans explicitly and firmly re-

minded policymakers that settlers' interests came first. The existence and power of the settler state and economy differentiated Southern Rhodesia sharply from its nearest neighbors.

Recently, Ian Phimister has made a new attempt at a national history, using the region of Southern Rhodesia as his unit of analysis and taking the new revisionist, heavily materialistic, research into account. His *Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe* is an eminently useful book, laying down coherent descriptions of the economic and social changes Southern Rhodesia experienced from conquest to 1948.<sup>7</sup> Even more than the more specialized materialistic studies, though, it leaves the reader asking questions—questions about who knew what, when, questions about whether people made choices, and if they did, on what basis, and questions about meaning (What was the significance to various members of the society of changes in capitalism, economic development, or state formation?). My work, in its focus on perception, interpretations, subjective knowledge and choices, is an attempt at a constructive antithesis to Phimister's work.

Recently, as the political situation in Southern Africa has become increasingly complex, yet another type of analysis of domination and accomodation has begun to emerge from works such as Dane Kennedy's *Islands of White*, which uses anthropological theories of the creation and maintenance of cultural boundaries to attempt to understand the dynamics of separation and power, and Jean and John Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution*, which asks how that domination was understood and mediated through cultural knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Neither of those works focuses exclusively on Southern Rhodesia, as Kennedy's compares settler communities in Southern Rhodesia and Kenya, and the Comaroffs' work centers on a Tswana region of South Africa. Yet both studies, though entirely different in methodology and theoretical perspectives, work to reintroduce culture, and questions of cultural engineering, into Southern African studies.

This study, using the background of earlier political, economic, and cultural studies, examines the dynamics of social change in a region marginal both economically and politically to the larger world on which it was increasingly dependent. Others have looked at economic or political change. Instead of repeating or directly challenging that work in a reexamination of events through current notions of how economies develop or societies change, this study selects specific issues which the historical actors themselves con-

sidered potentially decisive for the future of the region, and debated vigorously—issues such as Native Policy, Native Education, Native Development, and segregation. These debates ranged across economic sectors, and up and down the social hierarchy and were broad enough to occasionally incorporate smaller more focused controversies over such issues as family law, criminality, health policy, or even conservation. The arguments actors used in these society-wide controversies, and the policies that were debated or implemented, help to uncover both how those actors perceived change, believing it could be induced, shaped, or controlled, and the communities' patterns of logic and values. These were not peripheral debates. Issues such as native policy, education, and development were perceived by the inhabitants of Southern Rhodesia as issues that mattered. These debates were not merely rhetorical. Ideas were constantly challenged by economic realities. Statements of how the world should work were upset by the actions of those who had other ideas. And not all of the opinions which shaped policies were set down in words on paper. Many were expressed by African men who left Southern Rhodesia in search of higher pay on the Rand or at Kimberly, African women who moved to cities or missions and stayed, African children who made difficult choices between herding and school, and those Europeans who ignored the admonitions of their community's leaders and gravitated toward the African community either to live within it or to prey on it.

This, then, is a study of social discourse in the sense that it examines what was said about a society and how that society defined itself. But it incorporates to some degree an examination of social praxis, as the ways in which ideas and policy changed during implementation provide clues to the nonverbal statements of a social debate that was not confined within the European community. In the Southern Rhodesian context, Ian Phimister has objected to examinations of discourse, dismissing a notable attempt to understand the logic of ideas about conservation and development by arguing that "by its very nature, discourse's signification does not admit of external appeal," and asserting that without that possibility of "external appeal"—or context—such studies are not history.<sup>9</sup> This study attempts to retain its links to history through an aggressive contextualisation of discourse, an understanding of discourse as characterized by internal debate and struggle rather than timeless hegemony, and a steady awareness that rhetorical systems change over time, responding to both pressures from their con-

texts, and to their own internal contradictions.<sup>10</sup> Throughout this integration of social thought and social policy, the focus remains on change rather than continuity, and on struggles, and the failure of containment, rather than on an ideal construction of effective systems of social control.

Source limitations have restricted this analysis of ideology and policy primarily to a discussion of European ideas, conflicts, and strategies. It is also, substantially, restricted to public sources—either published or widely circulated—rather than drawing on private internal communications of the administration, settler organizations, or the African community, though I did gain access to the holdings of the National Archives of Zimbabwe during the final stages of the revision process. The sources I have used in this study are sources emerging from and contributing to contention. None are neutral. The most staid perspectives I have encountered emerged from official documents of the administration of the region. Mission materials, either unpublished or public propaganda, have been invaluable as sources of both details and arguments. Settler perspectives have been readily available, often in vitriolic form, through Legislative Council (or Legislative Assembly) debates, personal memoirs or reminiscences, and the newspapers, which conveyed not merely reports of public meetings, but editorials discussing varieties of settler opinion, and letters to the editor, reflecting some of the more extreme viewpoints held by individual settlers. All of these sources, in addition to providing insights into their authors, can be sifted for the opinions, knowledge, and hopes of other groups within the region. In a society that, however antagonistic, was never as wholly separated into racial or cultural communities as many of its inhabitants wished, commentary on others was constant. No analysis even of settler ideology, let alone the debates that went on in official or missionary circles, would be complete without some understanding of the many ways in which Africans' actions, and Africans' understanding, shaped the sets of possibilities invoked by articulate debaters within the colonial context.

Through an analysis of the key images used to understand society, and a discussion of the many threads woven into the social debates of the colony, this study attempts to evoke and understand the hopes, plans, fears, and decisions of those who lived in Southern Rhodesia from the turn of the century to the early 1930s, emphasizing that the society was not static, monolithic, or even, for many of its participants, immediately and permanently comprehensible.

## NOTES

1. Timothy Burke, "Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Colonial Zimbabwe" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1992) especially chapter 7.

2. Colin Leys, *European Politics in Southern Rhodesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) 1. See also L. H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1934* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965) and Philip Mason, *The Birth of a Dilemma: The Conquest and Settlement of Rhodesia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

3. Gann described the multi-racial society as rather like a slice of Neapolitan ice-cream—clearly in contact, distinct when intact, but capable of melting into a mess about the edges. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia*, 172.

4. D. J. Murray, *The Governmental System in Southern Rhodesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) and Claire Palley, *The Constitutional History and Law of Southern Rhodesia 1888-1965* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). Another, notably weaker, book from this period of research was William J. Barber, *The Economy of British Central Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

5. Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro* (London: Pluto Press, 1976) and Robin Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1977). For examples of regional studies, see Per Zachrisson, *An African Area in Change: Belingwe 1894-1946* (Gothenburg: U. of Gothenburg Press, 1978); Benjamin Davis and Wolfgang Doepcke, "Survival and Accumulation in Gutu" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14 (October 1987) 64-98 and Terence Ranger's work on the Makoni District. Currently, a popular approach is to use a specific region as a basis for a discussion of a specific topic within Southern Rhodesia as a whole. See, for example, Elizabeth Schmidt's work on Goromonzi district, "Ideology, Economics and the Role of Shona Women in Southern Rhodesia, 1850-1939" (Ph.D. in History, U. of Wisconsin, Madison, 1987).

6. See C. T. Loram, *The Education of the South African Native* (London: Longmans, Green, 1917); E. H. Brookes, *The History of Native Policy in South Africa* 2d edition (Pretoria: van Schaik, 1922, 1927) and E. H. Brookes, *Native Education in South Africa* (Pretoria: J. L. van Schaik, 1930). For a secondary discussion, see Saul Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36* (New York: St. Martin's 1989). Both Loram and Brookes were influential in discussing the meaning of education, but the specific issues under discussion, ranging from practical training to ideas of civilization, acquired different contexts, and thus both different constituencies and different implications, as they were moved north.

7. Ian Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe*,

1890-1948: *Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle* (London: Longman, 1988).

8. Dane Kennedy, *Islands of White* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987) and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* v. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

9. Phimister is referring to William Beinart, "Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 11:1 (October 1984) 52-83. Ian Phimister, "Discourse and the Discipline of Historical Context" *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12:2 (April 1986) 263-275, esp. 275.

10. Thus, my understanding of consciousness and knowledge in Southern Rhodesia differs markedly from the Comaroffs' understanding of consciousness in the Southern Tswana regions of South Africa. While for them, the principal element of consciousness seems to be the question of cultural identity and ultimately the creation of an ideological hegemony through contacts between missionaries and Tswana, the central issue of consciousness which I see in Southern Rhodesia is cultural change—the possibilities of training and learning, education, progress, and development. This difference between the Comaroffs' work and my own has three probable sources: first, our differences in theoretical perspective and attitudes toward time, second, substantial differences between the sources we have drawn on, and third, a difference in the power of the dominant states and classes of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia.