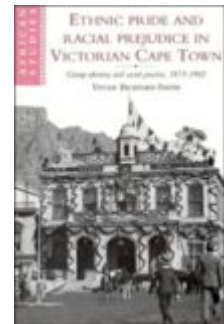


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Vivian Bickford-Smith. *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xix + 281 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-47203-6.

Reviewed by Keith Tankard (Rhodes University, South Africa)
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Urban segregation began to take on importance as a theme in South African history during the 1970s, partly because of the introduction of the neo-Marxist interpretation of the link between the rise of capitalism and the evolution of segregation. The two mining towns of Kimberley and Johannesburg became the focus of attention because they were regarded as early centers of “capital accumulation” in the late 19th century, although apartheid itself would only assert itself as a form of social engineering during the mid-20th century.

In 1977, however, Maynard Swanson produced his seminal paper which linked urban segregation to what he called the “sanitation syndrome” which explored the idea that segregation happened at such pre-industrial towns as Cape Town at the turn of the century, and quite independently of capital. (M. Swanson, “The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909” in *Journal of African History*, XVIII, 3, 1977, 387-410. An assortment of papers then emanated from the University of Cape Town which further explored this theme.

Vivian Bickford-Smith rightly points out that, although these papers are critical to the analysis of urban segregation, especially in Cape Town, there is nevertheless a lack of cohesion. There is therefore a need for a monograph to draw all these threads together. This current book attempts to do just that.

The author conducts an extensive and thorough examination of economic fluctuations and urban growth in Cape Town between the years 1875 and 1902 during which time, he argues, the seeds of segregation germinated and took root. The common perception, he says, is that Cape Town was a “unique city in its racial integra-

tion” until the post-1948 apartheid regime forced segregation upon a “reluctant liberal-minded” citizenry. The truth, however, is that de facto segregation came to Cape Town between 1875 and 1902 and de jure segregation followed after that. His book sets out to demonstrate this view by a comprehensive analysis of the economic, legal, political and social milieu during those years.

The opening chapters present a chronological analysis of Cape Town, taking the themes of economic prosperity (1875-1881), recession (1881-1892) and renewed prosperity (1892-1902). He provides a thorough analysis of demographic growth and employment opportunities from the mercantile elite at the top of the social ladder to the fishermen and washer women at the bottom. He then shows how the cycles of prosperity and recession affected each group within this hierarchy.

The essence of Bickford-Smith’s argument is that demographic growth during times of prosperity led to a seizure of power by the elite, “White, bourgeois and mainly English” who based their philosophy upon such principles as the “moralizing efficacy of hard-work and cleanliness”. At the same time, the growth of power of an Afrikaner clique within the wider colonial structure, emerging as a political party (Afrikaner Bond) in the late 1870s, saw the ebbing of “traditional liberalism” within the colonial government itself.

It was now also fifty years since the liberation of both the Khoikhoi (Hottentot) people and the Cape slaves. By now these two groups were forging themselves into a unity (to be known as the “Malays”) and their freedom was being emphasised by stressing their difference from the White population in such ways as choice of Islam instead of Christianity as the religion and their dedication

of Saturday instead of Sunday as their day of worship. They were also now beginning to make inroads into the economic world and were therefore becoming an economic threat to many of the Whites.

At the same time, the importation/migration of African people from the eastern Cape and Mozambique would create new problems in urban attitudes. They were essentially poor and radically different from the White community and were perceived as “immoral” with “filthy habits” which made them a natural scapegoat to explain outbreaks of disease, especially smallpox in the 1880s and bubonic plague in 1901.

Bickford-Smith maintains that the years between 1875 and 1900 saw the gradual evolution of racist attitudes amongst the White community toward both the “Malays” and the African population. Already in the 1880s there was talk of urban segregation but the sheer expense of such a move prevented its accomplishment. The African community, on the other hand, was different because its essential otherness and poverty made it a natural target for economically attainable segregation. By the late 1890s the means was available: it merely required the incentive to accomplish it and that was provided by the bubonic plague pandemic.

The major weakness in this study, I find, lies in the concluding chapters which break away from the chronological thread and appear to lose some focus. At the same time the author puts most of the blame on “bourgeois hegemony” of what he consistently calls the “dominant class”: the development of segregation was a distinctly “class” thing. Yet analysis of voter apathy in other Cape municipalities (like East London) does indicate that the “dominant class” was not necessarily in control of municipal politics. As a result, the book does not fully evaluate to what extent the “dominant class” did in fact maintain power through politics or whether, for that matter, they controlled through some other means. One is therefore left with the feeling that, when all is said and done, the essential question of what led to urban segregation has not yet been fully answered.

Nevertheless, Bickford-Smith’s book is essential reading for any researcher interested in urban segregation, especially the South African variety. It is thoroughly researched, very readable and his arguments have to be taken seriously. As a first book on this subject, he succeeds in tying up many of the threads left loose by earlier historians and he exposes “liberal” Cape Town of the late nineteenth century in a way never before seen.

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