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The Color of Class

I had arrived in Africa at an exciting moment. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, nation after nation secured its independence from colonial rule. Africa was no longer governed from London, Paris, or Lisbon, but would govern itself, bringing political if not economic equality to all citizens, allowing them to vote in their own elections, giving them access to education, living where their means allowed rather than where their race determined. By 1968, when I arrived in Zambia, colonial orders had dissolved all over the continent except in its southern cone. At that time South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Angola, and Mozambique were the last redoubts of settler colonialism.

Zambia, previously Northern Rhodesia, had won independence in 1964, and four years later the shine was still on; the country was breathing optimism, President Kaunda was preaching Zambian Humanism, a variant of African Socialism. Social scientists debated development and democracy, socialism and revolution. There was an air of hope that Africa would point the way forward beyond the Cold War, escaping the traps of Western capitalism and Soviet communism. This was a utopian moment if ever there was one, but anti-utopian clouds were gathering on the horizon: "dependency," "neocolonialism," "tribalism," and dictatorship.

Frantz Fanon, prophet of the African Revolution and author of *The Wretched of the Earth* ~~([1961]1968)~~, best captures the dialectic of utopian and anti-utopian thinking. Fanon distinguished two trajectories out of colonialism: the National Bourgeois Road that ends with a dependent dictatorship and the National Liberation Struggle that ends with democratic socialism. The former involves the replacement of white by Black, of a colonial administration by an African government, essentially a recoloring of the existing class structure. This was the capitalist road supported by an aspirant Black bourgeoisie largely composed of civil servants, teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses but also a labor aristocracy of wage laborers whose position was more secure than the dispossessed peasantry. Fanon regarded the capitalist road as ruinous. But this was less to do with the attributes of the African successors, and far more to do with the peripheral or dependent capitalism that was Africa's unavoidable fate. Unlike in the West, capitalism in Africa could not support a liberal democracy, could not provide the material basis for redistributive concessions that are democracy's lifeblood. He predicted that any experiment in multiparty democracy would degenerate into a one-party state and then to a one-man dictatorship.

The National Liberation Struggle, on the other hand, would overthrow the existing class structure and introduce a democratic socialism based on the full participation of its people. The driving force behind such a revolutionary regime would come from the dispossessed peasantry led by dissident intellectuals fleeing the towns. The two movements – National Bourgeois Road and National Liberation Struggle – would struggle for hegemony over the remaining classes – tribal chiefs and the urban lumpenproletariat – thereby determining the trajectory of the postcolony. If the National Liberation movement's socialist goal proved to be an elusive utopia, Fanon's anti-utopian anticipation of the capitalist road proved to be tragically prophetic. Nonetheless the two visions, the utopian and

the anti-utopian, fed off each other, defining each other and illuminating the stark reality of Africa.

Fanon's powerful vision was nonetheless limited by his experiences in Algeria, of settler colonialism rooted in agriculture. Zambia inherited a very different class structure, calling for a modification of Fanon's theory. Northern Rhodesia was administered to expedite the extraction of its copper deposits. Agriculture involved a partial dispossession and taxation of the peasantry to create a cheap migrant labor force on the one hand, and food to feed the urban working class on the other. In Zambia, there was no sign of a revolutionary peasantry nor of an independence struggle that would turn into a civil war. There was a smooth transfer of power as the nation eased into the National Bourgeois Road, proclaimed to be Humanism, President Kaunda's version of African Socialism.

The copper industry, as the engine of economic development, and not settler agriculture, became the focus of postcolonial reconstruction. It generated its own politics revolving around mine ownership, the improvement of the conditions of the miners, and who would be managing operations. In particular, how would the racial order in the mines be reorganized? As I have narrated in the previous chapter, historically, the color bar had ruled the industry – so what happens to the color bar in postcolonial Zambia? How does the replacement of white by Black, the rise of an African bourgeoisie, affect the racial order?

When I arrived in Lusaka in 1968, the government had just issued a report on "Zambianization" in the copper mines – the localization of the labor force that involves racial succession. It was a congratulatory report that documented a great success. Below I reproduce the table from that report, capturing the progress made since independence. Sure enough, the number of Zambians in managerial positions had increased five-fold. At the same time the number of expatriates had fallen. Undoubtedly, this was a success story, but was it only a success story?

The report fails to mention that the number of expatriates displaced (2,597) is less than the number of Zambians promoted (2,967), which suggests an inflation of the supervisory and managerial ranks. Why might this be the case? To answer that question would require me to study the micro-processes that lay behind these macro figures.

The job evaluation exercise suggested there might still be a racial hierarchy in terms of pay scales, based on a specific set of attributes of jobs, but it didn't tell me what happened to the structure of positions. What had happened to the colonial color bar according to which no white should ever be subordinated to a Black person? This would require an examination of the process of racial succession. How would this be possible? I certainly couldn't openly declare I was studying Zambianization, as that was far too politically sensitive. Had management known what I was about I would have been chased off the mines and that would have been the end of the research.

I had, therefore, to undertake *covert* research, but of a particular sort, research conducted in the time and space of the subjects themselves. Sociologists call this *participant observation* when observation takes priority over participation or *observant participation* when participation dominates observation (Seim, forthcoming). It was important to watch the process of racial succession as

Table 5.1: The Progress of Zambianization

	Total No. of expatriates	Total No. of Zambians in the field of expatriate employment
December 1964	7,621	704
March 1966	6,592	1,138
September 1966	6,358	1,884
October 1967	5,671	2,617
June 1968	5,024	3,671

Source: Government of the Republic of Zambia *(1968: 9)*

it unfolded over time in particular workplaces. To that end I enrolled the help of students from the University of Zambia to work in the mines and follow these processes – a form of observant participation. They were paid by the mining companies to do research on working conditions. We made no mention of Zambianization to management, although we discussed it at great length among ourselves.

Accordingly, as well as collecting data from informal conversations, we undertook a series of case studies of Zambianization – observing what happens when a Zambian replaced a white expatriate employee. Take the position of mine captain – which was the highest level of management working underground, and was just beginning to be Zambianized when we arrived. What happened when a Black shift boss (the next level down in the managerial hierarchy) was promoted to replace the white mine captain? It was as simple as it was shocking: the white mine captain was displaced upwards but not removed. He was promoted into a newly created position on surface – assistant to the manager of underground operations.

This effectively protected the color bar, but at the cost of creating tensions throughout the organization. The new assistant underground manager took with him many of the resources and much of the influence that he previously possessed as a mine captain. This left the Black mine captain with the same responsibilities as his predecessor but not the organizational support to carry them out. The immediate subordinate of the now Black mine captain – the Black shift boss – found his job more difficult because his supervisor was organizationally so much weaker. He came to resent his new Black supervisor, even to the point of wishing for the return of the previous white mine captain. Tensions reverberated all the way down the hierarchy, inspiring hostility to Zambian successors who came to be seen as an uppity class, in thrall to white management. The Zambian successor, himself, led a very insecure existence, criticized from every side as incompetent, thereby feeding

racial stereotypes and making his life even more difficult. He might seek to alleviate his anxiety by pursuing an ostentatious lifestyle, which only intensified class hostility from fellow Zambians.

The lived experience in the mines led workers and managers alike to discredit Black successors, blamed for incompetence, while the underlying reality driving this lived experience lay with the strategies to reproduce the color bar. This raises the bigger question: if independence meant the end of racism, why did the color bar persist? How and why does colonialism continue to unfold within postcolonialism? In particular, why should the color bar continue in the Copperbelt when it was being dissolved in government, where Zambianization proceeded from the top down as well as the bottom up? If the first sociological move was to examine the lived experience in the mines, the second move was to link those micro-processes to macro-forces, extending beyond the everyday common sense of participants to the wider political and economic influences at work.

Guided by the Fanonite framework I had adopted, I teased out the interests tied to different positions in the class structure of the postcolony. The Zambian working class – the skilled and semi-skilled miners – laboring in the most dangerous conditions, were not interested in Zambianization, the creation of a new class of overlords, but in improving their own wages and working conditions. White managers – and management was still largely white – were even less interested in removing the color bar, since they wanted to hold on to their lucrative jobs – their skills were often specific to the Zambian mines and not easily deployed in other workplaces. They also wanted to protect their racial enclave, both at work and in the community. Corporate management, on the other hand, found itself in a quandary: on the one hand, it was interested in promoting Zambianization and dismantling the color bar as this would lower labor costs; on the other hand, they did not want to upset the apple cart by

alienating white managers who were not easily replaced, given the special skills they had acquired.

As I discovered – and it was a real discovery – when working in the PRU, corporate management did not have a fixed strategy or plan, but would wake up each morning and assess the direction of the winds. Finding themselves in an uncertain political environment (government and labor relations), economic environment (price of copper), and technological environment (unexpected challenges of exploration and development), which they did not control, corporate management adopted a flexible decision-making process. It let the government take the lead on the matter of Zambianization, which was especially convenient because the government turned a blind eye to the color bar – or so it seemed – for fear of jeopardizing the foreign revenue generated by copper exports. Moreover, from the standpoint of the party-controlled government, having expatriates running the mines was preferable to Zambians, who might form an effective political opposition. Expatriates on three-year contracts could be removed if, in the unlikely event, they ever presented any such threat. In addition, given the colonial legacy, there was a real constraint – a shortage of qualified Zambians to take over the running of the mines. In short, with the exception of the Zambian successors themselves, none of these "class" groupings had an interest in removing the color bar and demolishing the inherited colonial racial order. In moving from micro-processes to their macro-foundations, I was able to identify the class interests behind the postcolonial racial order.

Having undertaken this analysis, unbeknownst to the mining companies but based on company data, informal interviews, and three years of detailed observations of successions, I had to decide whether to turn this organizational pathology into a "public issue" and, if so, how. As an unauthorized exposé, my report could spell the end of social science research on the mines, I realized. So I made an appointment with Anglo American executives in

Lusaka – the ones who had sponsored my research. My report was received with shock and dismay, and a blank refusal to allow publication. But, I pleaded, "It's based on your data." That may be, they said, but we don't agree with your interpretations, especially that management deliberately upholds the color bar. Faced with my insistence that this was too important to be pushed under the carpet, and perhaps fearing I might leak it to the press anyhow, they sent me to the Ministry responsible for the copper mines, on the grounds that the mines had recently been nationalized. My attack on the government was even more scathing than my criticism of the companies, so we both knew that this was a clever deflection of responsibility.

But we were both wrong! The person responsible for Zambianization in the Ministry, ironically an expatriate with experience in the mines, read my report with enthusiasm and instructed me to get it published as quickly as possible. I was astonished. Apart from anything else, his action refuted my claim that the state was a monolithic entity intent upon preserving the color bar – there were clearly differences within the state and I would have to revise my theory.

The report was duly published as a monograph by the Institute of African Studies at the University of Zambia – what had been the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, a leading center for colonial-era anthropological studies. When *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines* appeared in 1972, it received much publicity in newspapers and on television. The discussion did not turn into recrimination against expatriates or government or mining companies; there was a real sense of social constraint, forces beyond the control of individuals. As is usually the case with public debate, it is difficult to assess its influence, but what was important was the opening up of discussion; the silence had been broken.

Most curious was the response of the mining companies. Rather than emitting a battery of denials, they used this Marxist-Fanonian report to discipline their own mine

management, requiring them to get their Zambianization house in order. Public sociology led to internal interventions and became, you might say, policy sociology. But these interventions were limited; the color bar floated upwards perhaps, but the color bar remained.

Once again I had to face my own political naïveté. I was so appalled by this blatant reproduction of racism that I thought if only it were widely known, the force of public opinion would compel reform. I had still to learn that knowledge does not have its own impetus, truth does not have its own power; it can be mobilized and distorted by powerful actors for their own ends. The public sphere is an uneven playing field in which unequally endowed actors compete to have their interests prevail. If class analysis applied to the process of racial succession, it also applied to the dissemination of research, first whether it is ever heard at all, and on those rare occasions that it is heard, the struggle over its interpretation and use.