Ethnic and Racial Studies Lecture 2009
Race, Consumption and the Idea of Freedom: Revisiting South Africa's Racial History.
Professor Deborah Posel, Director, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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John Solomos:
Welcome everybody to the Annual Lecture of the journal of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. My name is John Solomos and I'm one of the two Editors of the Journal, along with my colleague, Martin Bulmer, who is sitting at the front and who will give the vote of thanks later.

Now the Journal hosts this lecture in a way to promote the study of race and ethnicity, and also because we're part of the sociology community more generally, we get support from the Department of Sociology here at City University and also from City University more generally, and also from our publishers Routledge, who over the years have published the Journal. As you can see we're number one in Ethnic Studies, so we put that there [on the promotional banner].

But the pleasure tonight is for me to introduce our speaker for the lecture, Professor Deborah Posel, who is listed as Director of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, but perhaps will not in that position be much longer, but nevertheless that is her position. She will speak to us today on the topic of "Race, Consumption and the Idea of Freedom: Revisiting South Africa's Racial History".

Professor Posel is a renowned scholar in the field of studies of Apartheid. In fact, she has one of the most wonderful accounts of the history of Apartheid called *The Making of Apartheid* ["The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise", Deborah Posel, Oxford University Press, 1999]. Apart from Directing the Institute of Social and Economic Research since 2000, she has been part of the Sociology Department at Wits as well. She has studied at Nuffield College in the University of Oxford and has a lot of connections to this country, through that kind of studying here.

She has also done major research recently on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including a number of publications in that kind of area. And also she has done a lot of research in the field of sexuality and death in the midst of HIV and AIDS, which is a big social issue in the context of South Africa.

And it's a pleasure, on behalf of the Journal, City University and the Publishers to welcome Professor Posel to speak. She will speak to us and then there will be some time for a few questions. There will be the vote of thanks and then we will move on to the more social bit of the evening, with the Reception outside this lecture theatre at the end of the questions.

Professor Deborah Posel:
Thank you very much for that introduction John, and thank you all for being here. I'd also like to thank Martin and John and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* for the invitation. I'm very honoured to be here.

Okay, so race, consumption and freedom. Early in 2007, Smuts Ngonyama, then Head of Communications in the South African Presidency, official spokesperson for the African National Congress and previously an anti-Apartheid activist, caused something of a political storm. Dark clouds gathered, as evidence was presented, of a shady transaction in Telcom shares, as a result of which Ngonyama had emerged many millions of Rands richer.

He initially denied any wrong-doing, but as the accusations escalated, he declared, very pointedly and assertively, "I didn't join the struggle to be poor". The remark was instantly controversial and has remained so. The man is still routinely pilloried as Smuts "I didn't join the struggle to be poor"

Ngonyama. Many, perhaps too many, have roundly condemned his statement as systematic of what's gone wrong in the new South Africa - a marker of distortion, a moral perversion, born of a crass and shallow materialism - and in many ways it is.

The rampant greed and the litany of corruption in the post-Apartheid era are undeniable. I don't for one moment condone it, nor do I dismiss its damaging impact. And yet we risk missing something profound, I think, about South Africa's past and present, if we leave it at that. Assuming, as I do, that there is no necessary connection between acquisitiveness and corruption, I want to set the issue of corruptibility aside and focus rather on the aspiration to acquire (surely a significant and revealing object of historical study in its own right), and on its articulation with the South African freedom struggle. Indeed, Ngonyama's declaration invites us to revisit the question of the contested meanings, and tell us of liberation in South Africa in an unfamiliar and provocative way. He suggested, with remarkable frankness and clarity, that the struggle against Apartheid was, in part, a struggle not just to transcend poverty, but to become rich. That freedom was expressed, in part, in acquisition.

This has never been the official position, of course; still, the demise of Apartheid has been associated with the dramatic growth of a black elite, albeit still relatively small, accompanied by the openly positive embrace and display of newfound affluence. And included in the ranks of this elite are many erstwhile activists, who were previously within the ANC's Marxist fold and who seem not to experience any discomfort at their sometimes spectacular enrichment. For all the critique of Ngonyama, there are many whose life trajectories and ambitions seem to confirm exactly what he is saying. And among those who remain less well-endowed, the aspiration to acquire and display desirable things, from clothes and cell phones through to cars and houses, is widely and boldly declared, and invested with the iconography of a joyous emancipation.

There is an obvious rejoinder - that these developments are a direct consequence of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the discrediting of Marxist policies. Indeed, it is the case that the ANC's accession to power was associated with the abandonment of a long-standing Marxist orthodoxy and discourse of equality, along with a shift towards a more pragmatic embrace of market realities and the need to affirm some neoliberal principles, in order to attract much-needed foreign investment. No doubt this is an important part of the story, but I don't think it's exhaustive.

I think we need to dwell a little longer on what Ngonyama was saying and what it reveals about a more complex articulation of race, consumption and freedom in South Africa's past and present. In this lecture I want to argue for an historically constitutive relationship between the workings of race and the regulation of consumption. My focus in the lecture is specifically on South Africa, but I think, in fact, that it's a story that does have relevance and resonance elsewhere in post-colonial Africa. I want to suggest, in the South African case which will be my focus, that race was, in part, a way of regulating people's aspirations, interests and powers as consumers. The desires and powers to consume were racialised, at the same time as they were fundamental in the very making of race, and arguably, this interconnection, in turn has a profound bearing on the genealogy of varied and contested meanings of freedom.

I want to stress at the outset, that I see these intersections as heterogeneous and conjunctural. There is no necessary or linear relationship between particular racial positions and histories of acquisitiveness, nor with versions of freedom, of course.

My manner of argument is transcendental rather than causal. [That is, I am] considering the historical antecedents of Ngonyama's position, or putting this more generally, the conditions of the possibility of a racialised politics of consumption, which produced the idea of freedom as acquisition, as one of its contested legacies.

Although this line of argument has not been taken in the study of South Africa to date (at least not to my knowledge), it draws inspiration from some path-breaking studies that have recently opened up questions of consumption and their relationship to practices of subjection and subjectification. I'm

thinking here for example, of work by Jean and John Comaroff, Timothy Burke, Ann McClintock, Zine Magubane. In the main however, South Africa's history of consumption remains largely unwritten, which in my view, also leaves significant gaps in the analysis of the history of race, racial regulation and struggles for freedom.

With relatively little then, by way of an established scholarly discourse to draw on, this lecture is therefore an argument for the field of study itself, as much as it is an exercise in historical analysis.

So before turning to the historical case, I want very, very briefly, to set out some basic theoretical premises, and then a theoretical hypothesis.

Firstly, just some conceptual clarification. I am using the term 'consumption' avowedly loosely, to refer to the acquisition and use of durable and non-durable goods, along with the cultural, political and psychological antecedents and effects thereof. In other words, I am thinking of consumption as a regulatory regime and the agency that this both enables and constrains.

Consumerism. I also need to define what I mean by that term, and I'm limiting myself here to modern consumerism (which Peter Stern calls "full-blown consumerism"), mindful that there have been elements and versions of consumerism in pre-modern societies, including in Africa, and indeed in South Africa, but I'm not going to have any time to go into that.

Consumerism, as I understand it, is a specific form of consumption, associated with three defining elements. Firstly, the consumption of commodities and the market relations that go with it. Secondly the valorisation of these processes of consumption as sources of value, in psychological and social senses, as much as in the economic sense of value. In other words, as an aspiration, closely linked to the making and performances of selfhood. And thirdly, consumerism is associated, historically, with the emergence of mass markets, straddling class lines, along with similarly mass aspirations to, and desires for, consumption. And in this, globally the 1960s is the critical decade.

And then in respect of the question of race. I'm not going to spend too much time on it conceptually. I understand race analytically to refer to the social construction of bodily differences. In the South African case there is always the tricky issue of terminology, given that race gained the official definition that it did during the Apartheid regime.

The Apartheid regime named and identified four distinct races and I'm using these all in inverted commas; "Whites," '"Coloureds," "Indians," and "Natives." The latter term, "Native" has a much more pejorative connotation than the others, and most scholars, therefore, substitute for "Natives", "Africans," and I'm going to do likewise. And indeed, the focus of much of this discussion is on "Africans." Although some of the general argument is actually equally applicable to all those who are "Non-White".

And just very briefly, the theoretical premises from which I am starting. Archaeologists and anthropologists have shown that in all societies, people's relationship to things is symbolically dense. In modern societies there are close and constitutive relationships between the meanings given to various consumer goods and practices, and notions and performances of the self.

As the now burgeoning literature has shown, how these relationships work and their effects on the self are historically situated and particular, inseparable from other regulatory dynamics of class, status and gender.

Consumerism has also been a powerful vector of global connectedness, both materially and in the imagination; one of the critical repertoires by means of which modern subjects situate themselves and their societies in wider worlds of experience and aspiration. These positionings go beyond simple binaries of resistance and submission, which is also why contemporary scholarship on consumerism seeks to transcend what Victoria de Grazia calls, "a moralising debate about whether commercial

culture and consumption more broadly, is emancipatory or stultifying, liberating or repressive". This pertains as much in the domain of collective action, as in the intimacies of daily life, where the quest for things can be an expression of care and support for others, as much as a crass self-absorption.

Now much, if not all of this, accords with the writings of many contemporary scholars on consumption. What has surprised me though is the limited extent to which this literature has factored in an analysis of how race works, as an integral part of the consumption story. If there is any theoretical novelty in this lecture, it is the hypothesis that in modern societies, the dynamics of race are as thoroughly insinuated into local and global histories of consumption, as those of class, status and gender.

How, and with what particular effects, as I have already suggested, is a historical, rather than a theoretical question. So let me turn, very briefly in the time I have, to the South African case.

Jean and John Comaroff, amongst others, have drawn attention to a long history of the politicisation of consumption in sub-Saharan Africa, and the emergence of a long-standing tension that intensified, along with the region's trajectory of racialised industrialisation and modernisation.

The idea that people's modes of consumptions are integral to their senses of self and sociality and therefore, a critical site for the exercise of power, is long-standing; as the Comaroffs put it, "as old and as global as capitalism itself". In the case of colonial regimes, including South Africa's of the 18th and 19th centuries, the regulation of consumption was avowedly integral to the civilising mission and its efforts to produce God-fearing subjects, who were both docile workers and disciplined consumers. The inward transformation brought by the acquisition of civilisation, was deemed inseparable from the outward transformation manifest in the acquisition of new modes of dress, deportment, domesticity and housing.

If actively and zealously engineered however, these transformations were simultaneously the site of heightened suspicion and anxiety on the part of white colonial subjects. It's a dualism that points to a profound tension at the heart of the colonial project, which would endure through to Apartheid's demise. On the one hand, "uncivilised blackness" was deemed offensive, as the epitome of undisciplined affect, from lust to violence. On the other hand, "civilised blackness" threatened to erode the racial boundary, risking an inadmissible racial proximity. The figure of a well-dressed, mannered black person, closely approximating his or her white counterpart, was thus deeply unsettling. Indeed, if wearing the accoutrements of western respectability was a mark of black people's acquiescence to western Christian norms and values, it also gave them a language with which to speak back to whites; as the Comaroffs put it, "an assertion of confidence, the refusal of the posture of civility".

With the creation of a unified South African state in 1910 and the advent of the segregationist era, white ambivalences about black "civilisation" were more fully adumbrated within one of the dominant ideological disputes of the time, namely how to manage the rising tide of African urbanisation (African people coming to towns), and the threat of racial proximity that this produced.

From one perspective, the prospects of what was called African "de-tribalisation", that is the abandonment of traditional tribal ways and the embrace of modern Western values, was considered dangerous, producing potentially unruly communities with rising standards of living linked to aspirations to racial equality. The competing position held, on the other hand, that white supremacy was most effectively bolstered through the stabilisation of urban communities of African people, who aspired to a respectable and orderly way of life, predicated on disciplined regimes of work, saving and consumption.

The matrix of laws shaped by this controversy produced a rather inchoate mix of the contending positions. On the one hand, the abiding discourse of urban policy hailed that Africans living in the cities should remain what were called "temporary sojourners," their presence justified solely

according to the extent to which they ministered to white economic need. A so-called civilised labour policy, which protected the better paying and more skilled jobs for whites, buttressed the regime of cheap black labour, initially established in the mining sector and extended to urban industries and commerce. Urban African townships became, in the main, places of grinding poverty, over-crowding and ill health. Simultaneously however, the segregationist regime acknowledged limited privileges for 'civilising' Africans, such as exemptions from the pass laws that restricted movement into the cities, predicated in turn on an acceptance of the burgeoning economic stratification and cultural differentiation within urban African communities. And African education remained the preserve of mission schools, whose versions of civilisation continued to valorise the acquisition of various symbolically-loaded goods as the benchmark of respectability and social standing. More generally too, the workings of race became inseparable from the symbolic logics of material acquisition and deprivation.

The segregationist era saw the beginnings of a long process of the ubiquitous racialisation of experience; with the proliferation of any number of laws designed to insinuate racial categories and boundaries into all spheres of life, from the most public through to the intimate. In this period, that's the period from 1910 to 1948, three distinct races were recognised: "Europeans," "Coloureds," and "Natives." Albeit with no single uniform or binding definition thereof. But overall, official practices of racial classification were predicated on a shared and binding acknowledgement of what race was. Race, officially and in popular commonsense, was considered a judgement based on the lived experience of hierarchical difference, rather than a matter of biological ancestry. And the locus of this judgement was first and foremost the body, as the subject of both biological and social readings.

South Africa never had an American, "one drop of blood" version of race. It was always officially and popularly recognised that judging a person's race, naming them as a member of one race rather than another, drew on a combination of anatomical features and bodily displays of social standing and status. Such as, how did the person dress? How did they speak? How did they walk? Also considered relevant were related judgements about a person's mode of living, such as the standard of their housing and their social habits.

This acceptance of race as an avowedly social reading of difference was manifest, for example, in the possibility of upward racial mobility on the grounds of superior education and evident social standing. Indeed before 1948, it was legally possible for a "native" male to be declared a "non-native," if interalia (and I'm quoting now from the legislation), "he conformed in regard to his standards and habits of life, to the standards and habits of life of Europeans". And I just want to flag here that there are very interesting questions of gender that arise in this attempt to think through the constitutive relationship between the regulation of race and the regulation of consumption, but I must simply flag them; I'm not going to have the time to go into them.

Equally revealing of the constitutive connection between readings of race and what the law called "standards and habits of life", was the ways in which the problem of so-called "Poor Whiteism" was rendered and tackled. The exposure of often dire poverty among whites during the late [19]20s and early 30s - that's during the depression years - provoked very high levels of political and social anxiety. Both official and popular diagnoses of the problem identified the "immorality" and racial "degeneration" of "poor whites" as the effects of the indignities of their poverty, and the risks of miscegenation as a consequence thereof. So redeeming the racial purity of "poor whites" was seen, quintessentially, as a matter of eliminating their poverty, along with their education, into racially appropriate modes and standards of dress, domesticity, along with discipline, work and family life.

On the eve of Apartheid therefore, the close symbolic and political connection between the workings of race and the performance of social standing, in turn closely linked to regimes of consumption, was well-established.

With the advent of Apartheid social engineering, these associations deepened - along with a more systematic, rigid and totalising approach to the business of race, and with increasingly contradictory positionings on the part of the state in relation to black consumption and emergent consumerism.

The Apartheid state, as you probably know, rapidly set out to produce a more uniform and inflexible system of racial classification than had marked the previous segregationist regime. It was now the case, after 1948, that every resident, black, white, whatever, had to be racially classified by an authorised classifier. This would produce a classification which would be fixed and binding, noted in an official identity document that would apply across all facets of that person's public and private life. [After 1948], there would no longer be any 'passing for white' or upward racial mobility for the educated or affluent.

The epistemology of race under-girding this process however, reiterated what had become the racial common sense of South African society during preceding decades. Once again the practice of racial classification - the capacity to recognise who was of which race and the racialisation of experience consequent upon it - was very explicitly linked to the racial etiquettes of everyday life. What Norbert Elias would call "manners". And I must say, I found it astounding that in his book, *The Civilising Process,* Elias never mentions the question of race, which I think is an extraordinary omission.

Even more deliberately than before, whiteness was a judgement of more 'civilised' manners; evident in a combination of factors read off from a person's body, sociality and social standing. Conferring the judgement of whiteness in these ways would then offer a lifetime of social, economic and political privileges, whereas being classified black was tantamount to the unremitting exclusion from a series of social, economic and political opportunities.

So in this way Apartheid entrenched the long-standing circular logic in terms of which superior socio-economic status, standing and privilege were considered key markers of racial superiority, at the same time as racial superiority was considered grounds for elevated socio-economic status. Racial hierarchies ratified and legitimised the social and economic inequalities that were in turn, held up as evidence of a hierarchy of racial differences.

Now this discursive racial schema was evident in many ideological declarations and policy objectives, and I want to focus here specifically on some of those that pertained in particular to the African population.

The African population in the cities was ideologically officially designated as a labour reservoir, a merely temporary presence, there at the behest of white economic interests. As had been the case in preceding decades, the political discomfort with African urbanisation, with the prospect of a large, growing African population settled permanently in the cities, went hand-in-hand with an ideological rendition of the African person as a labourer, and with that, someone of modest means, basic needs and servile social status. The notorious policy of Bantu education, which after 1948 supplanted mission schooling for Africans, was explicitly premised on the intention of training new generations of menial workers and setting a ceiling on their upward social mobility.

Strategies of African township development were intended to ensure that township life remained sparse; that these would not become spaces of longing or aspiration, because that would bring floods of unwanted people from rural areas to towns. Houses were small and meagre, with no fixtures or fittings. Apart from very basic small, local shops selling necessities, shopping facilities in townships were prohibited, along with leisure facilities such as cinemas for example. Statutory restrictions were imposed on black earning and purchasing power, with wages racially pegged and job reservation measures intended to bar black people from higher-paying and more skilled work.

During the 1960s, as the initially somewhat more pragmatic approach to Apartheid gave way to more ambitious and aggressive efforts of racial social engineering, the onslaught on African acquisition was

more sustained and deliberate. Not coincidentally, this coincided with a period of buoyant economic growth and increasing socio-economic stratification within in all black communities.

During this decade, all African businesses, which already had to operate via official permission only, were required to relocate from what were considered, 'white' cities to self-governing homelands, purportedly to contribute to the development of these dinky economies, but thereby also to distance white communities from the affront of African wealth.

In those areas abutting white communities, sophisticated or affluent blackness was deemed a form of racial mimicry, regarded as an affront. As the successful businessman Richard Maponya put it many years later, "the aspiration to luxury, let alone its performance, was a racial offence". [In his words],

> "If you had a licence to trade, you were even restricted on the goods you could sell. You were expected to sell necessities, such as sugar or maize or bread or rice. If you were found selling asparagus, you were punished as it was called a luxury. "

Hence the dominant racial etiquettes of everyday life. For example, the insistence that African people, in work places or white households, should use tin cups and plates – and I think any ex-South Africans in this audience will know exactly what I mean – tin cups and plates, as distinct from the china or porcelain used by whites. White expressions of suspicion and distaste, in the presence of well-dressed black people or black people driving cars (other than as chauffeurs for white owners), as exceeding their proper social station. Denying black people entry to smart establishments, including upmarket shops and holiday resorts, irrespective of their social status.

Yet, if Apartheid was served by the logic of homogenous black deprivation, it also simultaneously reproduced a contradictory interest in a more economically differentiated social status-conscious version of blackness. By 1948, urban African communities were already internally stratified, with rising symbolic and material investment in hierarchies of class and status, and mounting frustration at the ceilings placed on African advancement. During the 1950s and particularly during the 1960s, economic growth pushed all wage rates up, even if to racially differentiated degrees, and as the labour requirements of the burgeoning economy grew more differentiated, African workers were able to make some inroads into more skilled, proportionately better-paying types of work - job reservation policies notwithstanding. The increased purchasing power of African consumers was reflected and targeted in the country's advertising and marketing sector, which was beginning to take off during the 1960s, and which profiled a discerning, status-conscious and cosmopolitan African consumer.

Then during the 1970s and 80s, as a period of economic decline set in, the political and economic lure of a growing African middle-class, [along] with enlarging domestic consumer markets, grew. The advent of new reformist policies in this period was an explicit acknowledgement of the regime's need to enable, and to capitalise on, greater degrees of affluence within African communities, now seen as a route to political acquiescence, based on what was called "having a stake" in the system.

By the late 1980s then, as the Apartheid regime teetered, many of the old restrictions on African accumulation were eroding, and the stratification of African communities on class and status lines - particularly in the cities - was more prominent than ever.

So let me just sum up my very scant historical sketch thus far:

I have argued that throughout South Africa's history of colonial rule and white supremacy, regimes of race have co-produced regimes of consumption. With whiteness as a racial identity closely bound up with the redemption from poverty and the education into appropriately mannered ways of life, blackness was, in part, a judgement about being deemed unworthy of certain modes and orders of consumption. Yet the very system that pronounced this judgement simultaneously created the dynamic that saw acquisitive desires and associated versions of status take root and deepen within

African communities, fostering aspirations and ambitions to upward mobility, at the very same time as attempting to thwart them.

What then of freedom? Most scholarly discussions on this question in South Africa's history will focus on the very obviously central issue - and that is the issue of a freedom manifest in the eradication of racial injustices, exploitation and discrimination and with that the concomitant restoration of human dignity and equality - all of which makes perfect sense.

Yet I think, and I think it should be obvious on the basis of what I've been saying, that one strand of what the restoration of human dignity might entail has been missing from much of this discussion. So I want to conclude by returning to that one version of freedom that Smuts Ngonyama posited so defiantly in 2007.

In that same year, 2007, the very first shopping mall in an African township was officially opened. It's called the Maponya Mall and it's in Soweto. On the day of its opening in 2007, there happened to be an ANC political meeting, also in Soweto, being held nearby. But it was the opening of the Maponya Mall that drew far bigger crowds than the ANC political meeting nearby, which underlined the extent to which the mall, and all that it signified, had become a prominent locus of politics in itself.

Maponya Mall was the first of its kind in any African township in South Africa. It was the brainchild of a businessman who had made good through Apartheid, working with and against the system in various ways. Richard Maponya and others reporting on the mall's opening, used the language of struggle to document his accomplishment. For Maponya, the mall was rendered as the culmination of his long personal struggle as a freedom fighter. The racial politics of Apartheid saturated his account. I am quoting him now:

> "When I wanted to open a shopping mall in the townships 20 years ago, I was reminded by the powers that be at the time that I was a "temporary sojourner" in the city of Johannesburg. I was reminded that I belonged somewhere else in a corner of South Africa."

He and others declared the opening of the mall a moment of liberation. I am quoting again: "While politicians fought for the liberation of the country, I was fighting for the liberation of the economy," Maponya said. He stressed the symbolic significance that his mall: the very first black owned mall in a township was built in Soweto, place of the 1976 uprising - the place that is seen, iconically, as the root of the rebelliousness that ultimately unseated the Apartheid regime. And if any of you have ever been there, there is a statue in the forecourt of the Maponya Mall that is a sculptural rendition of the famous iconic photograph of Hector Pieterson, the 12 year old boy who was shot dead by police during 1976 while trying to flee. Reiterating this symbolic reading of the event, the mall was officially opened by none other than Nelson Mandela himself. So it's not surprising that the BBC for example, in its news clip on the occasion, declared the mall (a quote), "a new monument to South Africa's liberation".

If the Maponya Mall was very deliberately configured as a symbol of freedom, the logic of my argument is to suggest that this is an explicit assertion of a process that tacitly has a wider purchase. The mall had become a site of racial politics, because the history of race in South Africa linked it, inextricably if unevenly, to the regulation of consumption. If consumption has long been saturated with racial meaning, then there are strong and dense historical reasons why the performance of racial identity in the present could be so closely connected to practices of acquisition.

I started with Smuts Ngonyama and I've ended with Richard Maponya. Two black South African men with very different biographies. Ngonyama was an ANC stalwart with a long history of anti-Apartheid activism. Maponya was a self-styled black tycoon, entrepreneur, trickster (because that's what being a black tycoon in the apartheid years entailed), who made good despite all the restrictions thrown at him by the Apartheid regime.

I have tried to show the political logic that brings them onto the same page, concurring in the emancipatory significance of black acquisition. And let me reiterate that there are many black people and white people [generally], who despise this version of freedom as a travesty of the liberation struggle. My point has rather been to consider how, if blackness was produced as in part a restricted regime of consumption, the politics of enrichment could readily adopt the discourse and symbolism of emancipation. And not, I stress, as a gesture of mere false consciousness on the part of a co-opted elite. If the workings of race were profoundly inseparable from the deliberate indignities of material deprivation, then we can surely appreciate the [historical] possibility of a very powerful symbolic connection between the struggle to reclaim dignity and a sense of self-worth, with the aspiration to acquire.

[Let me stress:] I'm not setting myself up here as an apologist for rampant consumerism. There are legitimate and important questions to be posed and publicly addressed about the appropriate limits and conditions of acquisition. But it would be equally misplaced to dismiss the realm of material desires and aspiration as simply shallow or false and wholly illegitimate.

Thank you.

[Applause]

John Solomos:
Okay, we have a few minutes for discussion and there are actually two microphones. I should say when you get the chance to ask a question, can you say who you are and then ask your question succinctly? The person right at the front first.

Question 1 - Ian Mordant:
I know you had very restricted amounts of time, but I would've thought that the best, in some ways, the best period that you stress, history and historical situations etc at the beginning, would have been the Second World War. The country can't import because of the War effort and has to go ahead and push up massive amounts of black employment, and your thesis would be nicely illustrated if you argued that that's what led to the defeat of the Smuts Government in 1948, was precisely the sight of black people, quite suddenly not just surviving on the sweat of an oil rag. We're actually showing signs, and the reverse of that would be that brown bread was the only kind of bread you could often get and the white people had to eat it as well and this was a grumble against the Smuts Government of the day and helped them lose the '48 election.

The second point is, your definition of consumption is purely individual. What about social consumption, e.g. provision of electricity (which is fairly notorious), provision of transport, things like that, as a form of black enrichment by the areas which it is made to serve?

John Solomos:
Perhaps take another one or two. Is there somebody just there?

Question 2 - Deborah James (LSE):
I'm interested in the one thing which you didn't mention and that was, the way in which some of the kind of, the black middle-classes in the interim period you were talking about, actually started identifying with sort of role models from America, you know, the jazz age and that kind of stuff. And I was particularly struck by that just recently because I think alongside the modern consumption you're talking about in South Africa, there's an interesting move towards kind of connecting to these kind of churches, these Pentecostal type churches and I suddenly was struck by the contrast between the kind of '50s model from black America, of the sophisticated black urban middle-class, and suddenly instead of black people joining these churches, it seems to be with a kind of a bit of redneck,

you know, American model. So I just wondered how America featured into the story that you're telling and, obviously the race question as well.

John Solomos:
Let's take somebody at the back.

Question 3 - Brett St Louis (Goldsmiths):
In terms of where you ended up in the talk, about trying to think about how we might specify the appropriate limits of consumption and not simply dismiss that desire for consumption out of hand. I just wondered whether you might want to say something about what the role of value might play in that, in terms of the different kinds of value attached to the object or items of consumption. So you know, symbolic value, use value, exchange value. It seems to me that the notion of use value might offer a notion of certain forms of consumption, as being actually quite edifying, as having certain kinds of humanistic aspects to them, as separate from those previous you know pernicious racialised forms. So for example, the opportunity to buy an X Box® is not the same as the opportunity to buy a book.

John Solomos:
Shall we also take Michael's quick question and then Deborah will respond and then we'll see if there's more time.

Question 4 - Michael Banton:
It can be misleading to interpret the history of earlier periods in the right-up of modern conception of race. The Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg was founded, I believe, in 1928 and in its founding document, which says what the new institute is going to do, it refers to the 'races' and 'sectors' of the population. Now I asked Muriel Horrell, who was one of the stalwarts of the institute, when they adopted this document, what did they mean by the word 'race'? One possibility is that the 'races' of South Africa were the Afrikaan-speaking and the English-speaking "whites" and that the 'sectors' of the population were the "Europeans" and the "Africans". As Smuts of this time, when referring to "Africans", was not referring to them as a 'race' but as a 'type'. So, I do suggest that if one is to discuss these earlier periods, one must take account of the words that the people at that time were using to describe other groups, and that if one wants to use a later conception (and I believe that the architects of Apartheid were quite loathe to use the word 'race'), if one wants to use this later conception, it does need re-justification.

John Solomos:
Deborah, do you want to respond?

Professor Deborah Posel:
Okay, thank you.

Question 1
Ian, the first question about World War II - Was the National Party brought to power by the prospect of black upward social mobility and rising consumption? I mean I think that, as you say it would make my case very nicely, but I think it was more complicated than that. I mean it seemed to me that World War II was just as much about being confronted with the prospect of this mass of disaffected, poor black people in townships and the prospect of, as was in the nomenclature of the time, "die swart gevaar", the "black menace". So I think that it is true that the War did see a period of more exaggerated social stratification, but I don't know that that in itself fed in to the defeat of the Smuts Government.

You know, is my definition of consumption individual rather than social, and would electricity be considered something consumable? I think the definition does encompass it. I haven't spoken about it in this lecture. As you say it's a question of what one can cover in 45 minutes, but it seems to me that, what I didn't say for example about township development, was that a whole series of

consumable goods like electricity were withheld for a long time and, as you probably know, it's only recently, it's only post-1994 in fact, that many townships have been electrified. So a kind of deliberate deprivation of what we now call social services, of which our consumable goods would be encompassed, could be, if the discussion was extended.

Question 2
Deborah, the question that you asked me, again is something that, firstly I think I didn't have time to go into the different ways in which aspirant, upwardly mobile black people defined the benchmark of their status and you're absolutely right, there are different repertoires thereof and the identification with that. That it was coming from America was one, but it wasn't the only one, as you know, and it's something that I think needs to be studied. There hasn't been any kind of social history of status in South Africa's history. There haven't really been studies under the period of Marxist hegemony, where there is middle-classes, and in particular lower middle-class and its upward mobility, particularly now actually. We still don't have a terribly well-established sociology or anthropology of the process of elite formation or, indeed, of social mobility in black communities. So I think that there's much more work to be done there, but I think what I am saying really, is that with a number of different possible meanings and with a number of different possible trajectories, we have to take seriously the fact that, from the colonial period really, there were black people who were very seriously invested in their upward social mobility in ways that were very profoundly linked to regimes of consumption that had particular racial meanings. I'm at the moment, just making that generic point.

The point you're making about Pentecostal churches and consumption now of course, is spectacularly interesting, because there now is another whole justification for reasons to become richer and they're nothing to do with liberation at all. It's very much about the present and about these new evangelical ways of serving God.

Question 3
Brett, I want to be more controversial than I think you are. Of course 'use values' are these nice benign things that one can sort, you know. I want to be more provocative than that.

I've got one of the things that I wasn't able to read. When this Maponya Mall was built, there were a series of blogs about it. About what it meant and this idea of it being a sort of symbol of liberation, and I was very struck by one of the bloggers and what he had to say. He noticed, he was responding to one other person and I don't know whether this was a black person or a white person, but very cynically saying that this tells you everything about the modern state of humanity. All everyone needs is a mall, Facebook® and a Lotto ticket, and then this person says,

> "Only people who have malls can pretend to sneer at them. People frequent malls because it improves their lives. It also improves the perceived quality of life of residents. Haut Couture is neither a necessity in life, nor a panacea for unhappiness. However it is short-sighted, patronising and hypocritical for rich liberals to sneer at the poor when they get to enjoy some of the convenience, efficiency, choice and luxury that wealthier people take for granted."

So, I don't know what the debate is like in the UK, but in South Africa there are a number of people who, I think, now see dignity for example, in the fact that they too have a mall. Whatever anyone says about malls, they too have a mall where they too can go and shop and they can go and shop in ways that were completely denied to them in the past, where they'd have to get on a bus and pay large amounts of money, drive a huge distance to go to something in a white area.

So my point is really that even the commodity itself, okay, even the exchange value has a meaning which we have. Whatever one's squeamishness about rampant consumerism, it seems to me that there's a politics of consumption and consumerism itself, given this country's history, which makes the debate more complicated.

Question 4
And Michael, you are right that the word 'race', that the actual word 'race' has a very particular history and genealogy in South Africa, and that in the early part of the century, the word was used to refer to the differences between English and Afrikaans, but I don't think that that actually does any damage to my argument, frankly. Because it is also the case that what I am referring to as 'race', that is as I said the social construction of lived bodily difference and the names that were given to it, are what I'm talking about as the workings of 'race'. So the fact that in the 19th century missionaries may not have referred to black people as 'of a different race' from them, doesn't seem to me to alter the point that there were socially constructed readings of bodily difference at that time, and that those were very much linked to the regulation of consumption.

Indeed the Apartheid government did not say in its legislation that define the races, that these were 'races' - it called them 'population groups', okay. But it seems to me analytically, if one defines by 'race' the social construction of bodily difference, that that is what they were. And so I am using it analytically, even though phenomenologically that word 'race' didn't necessarily appear in the vocabulary of the social actors that I am talking about.

But it is also the case, I want to tell you, that even the popular experience is more ambiguous. So for example, at roughly the same time as that South African Race Relations launch, the so-called Civilised Labour Policy does actually make reference to the difference between blacks and whites as a racial issue anyway. So I think there's also more fluidity. These were categories that were evolving through the segregationist period into the Apartheid era.

John Solomos:
One last question.

Question 5 - Anon:
Where are the white people in this story which you are telling? This is what I really wanted to know because it takes me to a wider issue, which always puzzles me. Why it is that academics, especially white sociologists and other people, always like to talk about black people all the time? It puzzles me, not just because I am making a cheap point, I am not really trying to make a cheap point here, which I could, but my point is this: I, as a black person, don't know a thing about white people in South Africa. It's not only academics, for instance, and sociologists, it's writers, painters, the media. I mean whenever you see a story about South Africa, you always see a story about black people, whether it's positive or negative – it doesn't really bother me at all. But it seems to me that, talking about black people as if white people in South Africa didn't exist, it seemed a very odd thing, to me. I mean I just wondered if you could explain this to me because I have always been puzzled by this actually?

Professor Deborah Posel:
Well there are many ways of answering your question. I mean you may think that, in the media now, all you see in media coverage of South Africa, all you see are black people. Well you may not have thought that in the 1960s, where there was a much greater visibility in the representation of Apartheid of white people. But be that as it may, you're asking me a question about my paper.

I mean on one level the answer is simple, that I was interested in and intrigued by something that Smuts Ngonyama said, and he was talking about black people. I was interested in trying to understand the logic of his position. But the lecture, the version of race that I am outlining in this paper makes it, I think, perfectly clear that these categories were always relational. That one of the ways in which the racial classification and definitions of blackness were, was by juxtaposing it with what whiteness was.

I mean it seems to me that that's been a theme of the lecture throughout and in fact, I didn't have time to go into this in great detail, but it's absolutely profoundly important how whiteness was defined and,

in particular, how the problem of "poor whites" was resolved. One has to understand that in order to understand why the regulation of blackness was so closely tied to the regulation of consumption.

Anon:
Isn't it fair to ask whether the word 'race' is just a codeword for black people?

Professor Deborah Posel:
No, I don't think so. I mean I don't think so at all. I think that there are serious questions to be asked about whiteness for example, and I'm not systematically engaging them in this paper, but what I am saying here is that we can't understand the dynamics of how blackness was regulated in South Africa, without simultaneously understanding the counterpoint with whiteness. These things are constantly relational.

John Solomos:
I think some of the conversation, I am sure, will continue socially outside, but before we stop, Professor Bulmer will give a vote of thanks to our speaker.

Professor Martin Bulmer:
Yes, I am very pleased to move the vote of thanks. I would like to begin by thanking City University for hosting this event, which is extremely welcome and it strikes me that, it has a slight resonance with the history of City University. There is a separate series held, I think, in this lecture theatre of the Burleigh Lectures, but of course a lecture on South Africa does connect, in a way, with Sir Robert Burleigh and his association with the University because of involvement at an earlier stage in South Africa.

I'd also like to thank the Publishers, to whom we are very grateful for supporting this event in various ways and for making the results of the lectures available on their website and so on, as well as for publishing the Journal.

But of course, my main thanks are to Deborah Posel as the speaker. I've just been thinking, as she was talking, about the ways in which one has experienced contemporary South Africa and, if you like, the larger than life nature of contemporary South Africa, and I just thought of three or four ways in which this could be pointed to.

South Africa has a new President and I was struck, reading in the paper, it said "the new President was the father of 17 children". There are not many Heads of State in the world who have as many children as that.

When I was in South Africa from 1994 onwards, I was very struck, teaching a variety of students from different races doing a Masters Programme in Social Research, to learn about a very large religious gathering which takes place every Easter in the Northern Province. And there's been reference to Pentecostalism and to Evangelicals and, as I understood the nature of this gathering, that at Easter approximately a million people gather in a rural area in Northern South Africa for purposes of worship, and that seems to me to be a very striking phenomenon.

The speaker has alluded to the extremes of wealth and poverty and another colleague of mine, who also taught on this same programme, came back in a very negative frame of mind because she was so appalled at the vast visible economic differences, particularly between black and white in the country. To some extent the failure to deal effectively with the economic circumstances in the shanty towns, but it seems to me this lecture is addressed to those issues.

And the fourth observation I made was of changes in South African universities. Perhaps there have been fewer changes at the level of staffing and organisation, but certainly in terms of student composition, compare South Africa with what happened in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement, there have been very striking changes, in terms of white universities becoming

predominantly black universities, of Indian universities becoming mixed universities and so on. And it seems to me to be a sign that things are changing in South Africa in significant ways, although precisely what the significance of that is, is sometimes quite difficult to grasp.

I'd like to highlight four points in Professor Posel's lecture, which I think are significant:

One is the theoretical framework in which the lecture was placed and her attention to the history of concept, formulation of the inter-connectedness between issues about race and issues about contemporary consumption.

Secondly the historical context in which it was set and I think that was a theme running right through the lecture. I was struck actually that in her quote at the beginning, about "I didn't join the struggle to be poor", there was mention of Telecom Shares I think. I thought, well what about our own former Prime Minister, who in the course of his political career got involved in what some of you will recall as the Marconi Scandal? David Lloyd George, in the course of his rise to becoming the British Prime Minister during the Second World War, was involved in some very dubious transactions involving shares in the new Marconi Company, which he managed to cover up and it didn't ruin his political career, but these sorts of things come round again, don't they?

But also, in relation perhaps to the last question as well; it seems to me that what's happened as it were, between "poor whites" or the treatment of "poor whites" and South Africans in the 1920s was very significant in this regard, in relation to the question that Professor Posel has been examining. Because it was at that point I think, if I remember the history of South Africa correctly, that a sort of hardening of the racial arteries began to take place and sharper distinctions began to be made, between the black working class and the poor white group, in a sense to protect the poor white group.

The third point I wanted to allude to was the rise of the African middle class and the extent to which that was a sort of theme through the lecture and I think could be developed further.

And linked to that, a fourth point about black upward social mobility, which of course has become much more salient since 1994. In that connection I thought also, it would be interesting to look at other groups in society, perhaps particularly South Africans of Indian origin and ask questions about what has happened to the Indian population and where they're located in this structure.

But I would like to thank Professor Posel for a very stimulating and interesting lecture, which has given rise already to a lot of questions and I am sure will lead to more. And just say that we look forward to reading the written version of the lecture when we publish it in the Journal, early in 2010.

Thanks very much indeed.

[Applause]

Recording ends