

South Africa: Some pieces to think with

Political History in South Africa

South Africa has a long and rich history. Have a look [here](#) to explore the different populations that lived in country over the centuries. Since the 17th century, this political life in South Africa has been shaped by colonialism by the Dutch and the British. [Colonialism](#) describes a form of domination that one group of people exercise over another in a particular territory. In South Africa, this colonialism laid the foundations for apartheid. You can read more about it [here](#).

Apartheid was a system of racial segregation that the National Party introduced from 1948, which lasted until the mid 1990s. It determined where people could legally live and work and who they could marry. You can read more about it [here](#). There is a long political history of resistance against apartheid, which you can read about [here](#). Many people will have heard about Nelson Mandela, but why not have a read about other figures in the struggle such as [Winnie Mandela](#) or Steve Biko? The latter was an activist and key philosopher in the Black Consciousness movement. Later on we will be talking about the importance of solidarity that is based on equality. Biko thought a lot about this, writing about what was necessary for equal relationships in the resistance in articles like [this](#).

Questions for Discussion: What are some of the key milestones in South African history? How and why did political change come about? What impact might political history have on people's everyday lives today?

Economic Inequality in South Africa Today

Post-apartheid South Africa has remained a deeply unequal society, with a large gap between rich and poor. In fact, according to the most common measure of income inequality, the Gini Coefficient, South Africa is the most unequal of the world's major economies, with a score of 62.5 compared to the UK's 32.4 (the UK ranks 116 out of the 157 countries for which these data are available, compared to South Africa ranking 2nd, behind its neighbour Lesotho). These inequalities also remain racialised, with black people tending to have lower incomes and white people tending to have higher incomes.

Since the end of apartheid, reducing inequality has been the key challenge for public policy. One of the major policy discussions around this in recent years has been over the introduction of a national minimum wage. Unlike the UK, South Africa did not have a minimum wage until legislation was passed over the last year. This [paper](#) is from a University research project on the minimum wage, and presents statistics on the structure of the South African labour market as part of the effort to make the case for why a minimum wage was

necessary. You may find it interesting to browse the charts, which will give you a sense of the levels of inequalities which define South African society.

While you will see signs of wealth when you travel around South Africa – shiny shopping malls, expensive German cars – it is important to bear in mind that more than half of South Africans live below the poverty line, and the numbers of people living in poverty has been rising over recent years. [This report is from StatsSA](#), the South African equivalent of the UK's Office for National Statistics. If you browse chapter 2, you will get an overview of the scale of poverty in South Africa, and how this is mediated by race and gender.

Questions for Discussion: Why is South Africa an unequal society? How might that kind of inequality be addressed?

Building Solidarity

When we think about our relationship with other people, movements, and countries today we need to think about the terms of those relationships. Our aim should be to build connections with each other in ways that respect the humanity and dignity of everyone involved. Sometimes, the people that we are forging relationships with are experiencing really tough times and we want to help. When we're doing so, we need to make sure that we are listening to those people, allowing them to tell us how they understand their situation, whether they would like our help and, if so, what form they would like that help to take.

We also need to think about the bigger factors - both historical and current - that may have helped to create the tough situations that other people are facing. Our world is interlinked and we need to think about the ways in which our life choices shape the life chances of other people across the world.

That means, for example, that when we think about South Africa need to think British colonialism, reflecting on how this has shaped inequality in the country today. We need to think about the ways in which different different groups within the UK supported or resisted apartheid. And today, we need to think about the ways in which our political, social and economic relationships with South Africa - and Africa as a whole - are shaping people's everyday lives.

In doing so, we need to be aware that the associations that we have with different people and places might not be accurate. All too often in the media, for example, coverage on Africa makes big generalisations across the continent and draws on problematic stereotypes, as [this satirical piece by Binyavanga Wainaina](#) reminds us. This can shape the way that we think about the challenges people face and possible solutions to those challenges.

Discussion: Think about the images you have seen in the past of South Africa, or Africa more broadly. What do they make you think about the people,

countries and continents? What do they make you think about the challenges people are facing and the solutions to those challenges? Do they tell you anything about the rich arts and cultural scene across South Africa? Do they tell you anything about the inventions and accomplishments emerging from South Africa?

Films

Dear Mandela: The struggle against apartheid was driven by the idea of political and economic equality. This aspiration for equality was captured in South Africa's constitution, which was finalised in 1996. According to the constitution, South Africans have the right to housing. Today, many still live within informal settlements - sometimes called shack settlements - facing the risk of eviction. Dear Mandela follows the struggles of a social movement called Abahlali baseMjondolo which is fighting for housing and dignity. [This film](#) follows the movement as it takes the government to court to fight a housing policy that undermines both their housing and their dignity.

The Future Sound of Mzansi: South Africa has a really rich electronic music scene. [This film](#) is a great introduction to the history and the future of the electronic music scene in South Africa, led by the famous musician, Spoek Mathambo. Gqom - a form of minimalist house music - that emerged from Durban also gets a shout out in this film and is definitely worth checking out.

The bloody miracle: this film was produced by one of the big South African TV channels ahead of the 2014 general elections, to mark 20 years since the country's first democratic elections in 1994. It looks back on the turbulent events leading up to the 1994 elections, which were marred by high levels of violent conflict. Through this, it tells the story of the birth of a new nation, and the severe obstacles which had to be overcome to achieve this. It includes many first hand accounts of the events with key protagonists, many of whom went on to be leading politicians in democratic South Africa. You can watch [part one here](#) and [part two here](#).

Miners Shot Down: During the Marikana Massacre on 16 August 2012, 34 miners were killed as the police shot at those on strike for better working conditions. This was the largest use of lethal force against civilians by the South African security forces since 1976. [This film](#) explores the lead up to this event, which tells you both about the fight for a living wage at the mine and the broader battle for justice in post-apartheid South Africa.

Additional Films:

- eLollipop
- The Gods Must Be Crazy
- White Wedding
- Tsotsi
- Jock of the Bushveld
- Louis Theroux's documentary is a great watch – it looks at the key issues surrounding the aftermath of Apartheid. It's on BBC iPlayer at the moment: www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00b996d
- Cry Freedom - about Steve Biko in 1970s South Africa.
- Long Walk to Freedom
- Invictus
- Searching for Sugarman - focus on white opposition to Apartheid but shows the oppressive nature of the state. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKXewWDh1og>

Additional Books:

- The Bang Bang Club
- Trevor Noah's autobiography- Born a Crime
- Text used with AH students (it gives a good overview):
https://www.amazon.co.uk/Short-History-South-Africa/dp/1785902938/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1547814231&sr=1-1&refinements=p_27%3AGail+Nattrass