**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 18: SOL PLAATJE ON RACE AND EMPIRE**

**1..Sol Plaatje in the context of South African history:** Sol Plaatje (1876-1932) was the first secretary-general of the ANC and its most talented spokesman. Although he was a prominent figure in South African history, he was soon forgotten after his death. Perhaps this was the price of his not fitting the dominant pattern of the black political elite: he was Tswana, rather than Xhosa or Zulu; educated by German missionaries rather than British; interested in literature and linguistics, rather than theology and law. His political thought was more creative than that of his contemporaries, but not systematic; explorations rather than programmes. His interest in global issues was less tied to the imagery of British politics. Plaatje was also the most prolific black literary figure of his generation and a founding figure of black South African literature.

**2. Race, empire and the politics of petitioning:** Plaatje represented black South Africans on many deputations and did what he could to develop the argument that the British Empire had a historical responsibility to protect the interests of black South Africans, precisely because they were excluded from equal rights in a political order created by British law (*Selected Writings*, pp. 256, 259). It was easy for British leaders to express their “sympathy and respect” for black South Africans (p. 257) or their recognition and gratitude (p. 264). But the British had, in a sense, less ability to prevent black oppression in their own dominions than in the Belgian Congo—an example Plaatje stressed. Plaatje’s participation in the Pan-African Congress of 1921, convened by W.E.B. du Bois, took up mthe other side of global solidarity based on race, proposing an African counterweight to the white-dominated League of Nations (p. 264).

**3. The momentum of racial inequality:** Plaatje differed from his black contemporaries in being fluent in Dutch and Afrikaans and sceptical of British claims to be more civilized than the Dutch. His obituary for General Louis Botha, who died in 1919, praises the prime minister for good intentions he could not fulfil (pp. 241-47). Plaatje looks back both to the Cape Colony during the lifetime of Queen Victoria and to Kruger’s Transvaal as preferable to the harsh regime of racial inequality in unified South Africa, especially after the Native Land Act of 1913 (pp. 266-67). Because black South Africans have no political rights, there is constant pressure to create new forms of inequality and oppression. The democratic power of white South Africans ensures that black South Africans are “assigned to a lower level than that occupied by negro races in the rest of the civilized world or even in Africa itself” (p. 265). Plaatje pokes fun at the laws against interracial sex in a booklet he published in the United States in 1921, but also shows how social conventions make it easy for white hypocrisy to triumph over black honesty (pp. 280, 282, etc).

**4. “Whether our loyalty has not been the cause of our undoing”:** In many contexts, Plaatje is quick to spot the inconsistency or hypocrisy built into the racial order: its “civilized tyranny” (p. 267); its “squint-eyed policies” (p. 281). This theme is suggested in Plaatje’s writings, without developing it—as far as I know—into a full-blown argument, or systematic examination of the consequences of black loyalty to the values of the British Empire and black hopes for just uses of its power. From the standpoint of the present, the logical conclusion of such an argument would be rejection of the politics of petitioning. But what would come in its place? Perhaps the absence of an answer is what prevented Plaatje from a more clearly-defined perspective.