The Book of Life: The South African Population Register and the Invention of Racial Descent, 1950–1980

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This article examines the project of racial classification under Apartheid through the operations of the population register. It follows, in particular, a shift in the determination of race from the criterion of 'community acceptance' in the early 1950s to a purely administrative and bureaucratic matter of descent derived from the paperwork in the late 1960s. The study shows that the project Eben Dönges called the 'Book of Life' was at the heart of the planning and practice of the Apartheid state, but that it took two contrasting forms. The first, associated with the green identity cards issued during the 1950s and early 1960s, derived identities and races for six million people, with surprising success, on the basis of the returns to the 1951 census. The second, associated with the inconvenient 50-page Book of Life that was issued after 1970, was a pure case of unrestrained panopticism and a simple failure, failing even to re-register the original population captured by the green identity cards.

A population register is actually a book containing the life-story of every individual whose name is recorded on that register. It contains the most important acts relating to such a person. In some cases the life-story of the individual is very short. In the case of a stillborn baby it contains only one entry and one page. In other cases a long life-history has to be recorded in that book. All those important facts regarding the life of every individual will be combined in this book and recorded under the name of a specific person, who can never change his identity. It is only when the last page in that book of life is written by an entry recording the death of such a person, that the book is closed and taken out of the gallery of the living and placed in the gallery of the dead.

Eben Dönges, minister of the Interior, Introduction to the Second Reading of the Population Registration Bill, 8 March 1950[1]

Centralised population registration was the bureaucratic cornerstone of the Apartheid state, the lynch-pin of the Group Areas Act, and of the Dompas (Reference Book).[2]

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1   *Hansard*, 8 March 1950, col 2498, 'Population Registration Bill, Second Reading'.
2   D. Posel, 'Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa', *African Studies Review*, 44, 2, 2001, 87–113; K. Breckenridge, 'Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid', *History Workshop Journal,* 59, 2005, 83–109.

As Muriel Horrell put it in her 1971 assessment of the legal foundations of the state: 'Basic to the rest of the Apartheid legislation was the classification of the population into racial categories.'[3] It was population registration that created the distinctive four-part racial order in South Africa – placing individuals into one of the basic categories of Coloured, Indian, White or Black, creating a social order that shows many signs of persisting long into the era of non-racial democracy. Population registration, as Deborah Posel has shown, became a powerful administrative loom in the fashioning of the enduring South African obsession with racial reasoning.[4] Much of this is now very well known.[5] But the work of racial classification was more intrinsically bureaucratic – in the sense of being about the highly normalised regimes of paperwork that form the focus of this special issue – than the published accounts to date have suggested. In this article I examine the documentary tools used to do the administrative work of creating and populating these racial categories: the 1951 Census, the Identity Card issued between 1955 and 1970, and the Book of Life that replaced it. In exploring this regime of paperwork my goal is, in part, to add to the already substantial scholarship that suggests that South Africa, in comparison with other societies, has been profoundly shaped over the course of the twentieth century by coercive regimes of racialised documentary registration.[6] I want, also, to show (as South Africans begin yet another round of applications for a new identity card) that each generation of official documentation can erase the political purpose of its immediate predecessor. And finally, I want to highlight the paradoxical contradiction between the state's often unchecked enthusiasm for centralised surveillance and its very limited capacities to manage the administrative labour requirements and the compliance of its subjects – something which, if it is not a structural feature of the modern South African state, is certainly a peculiar and unconscious bureaucratic habit.[7] And one which we should finally abandon.

The proposal for a central register of racial identification long-predated Apartheid, but like many of the other plans for social engineering in the first half of the century, it

3   M. Horrell, *Legislation and Race Relations: A Summary of the Main South African Laws Which Affect Race Relationships* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1971), 9.
4   D. Posel, 'What's in a Name? Racial Categorisations under Apartheid and Their Afterlife', *Transformation*, 2001, 50–74; Posel, 'Race as Common Sense'; G. Maré, 'Race Counts in Contemporary South Africa: "An Illusion of Ordinariness,"' *Transformation*, 47, 2001, http://www.history.ukzn.ac.za/ojs/index.php/transformation/article/download/842/657.
5   E. H. Brookes, *Apartheid: A Documentary Study of Modern South Africa* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 19–25; G. Bowker and S. L. Starr, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 195–225 on reclassification appeals in particular; W. G. James, 'T. E. Dönges and the Group Areas Act' (Johannesburg: African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1992), http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/8815 is useful on Dönges.
6   E. Kahn, 'The Pass Laws' in E. Hellman (ed.), *Handbook of Race Relations in South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1949), 275–91; C. van Onselen, 'Crime and Total Institutions in the Making of Modern South Africa: The Life of "Nongoloza" Mathebula, 1867–1948', *History Workshop Journal*, 19, 1985, 62–81; P. Frankel, 'The Politics of Passes: Control and Change in South Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 17, 2, 1 June 1979, 199–217, doi:10.2307/160715; D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961: Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford: Clarendon; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); D. Hindson, *Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987); Bowker and Starr, *Sorting Things Out*, 195–225; U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 'Cat and Mouse Games: The State, Indians in the Cape and the Permit System, 1900s–1920s' in I. About, J. Brown and G. Lonergan (eds), *Identification and Registration Practices in Transnational Perspective: People, Papers and Practices* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); K. Breckenridge, *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
7   Breckenridge, 'Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid'; K. Breckenridge, 'The Elusive Panopticon: The HANIS Project and the Politics of Standards in South Africa' in C. Bennett and D. Lyon (eds), *Playing the ID Card: Surveillance, Security and Identity in Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2008), 39–56.
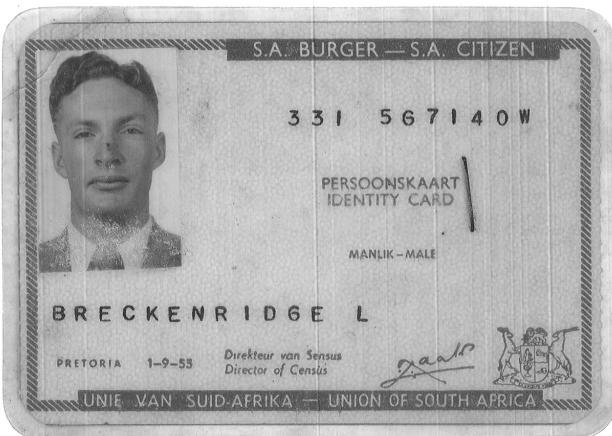
Figure 1: One of the first Identity Cards

lay unrealised in the face of administrative indecision and parsimony.[8] That changed in 1948. The Population Registration Act of 1950, which preceded both Group Areas and the Bewysburo (Bureau of Proof), required every South African to secure an Identity Card – a laminated certificate that contained a photograph submitted by the applicant, recorded an address, a simple identity number and a racial classification. The 'most important aspect of the identity card', as Eben Dönges – the minister of the Interior, and moving spirit behind the project – put it, was 'the identity number'.[9] It served as a numerical index linking all the other registration events. The first (of four) national identity numbers that South Africans have adopted over the last century, this one consisted of the last two digits of the person's year of birth followed by the census district number, and then the birth registration number within that district. Initially, race was indicated discreetly by the final digit – a letter – of the identity number, but from the mid-1960s race was stamped on the cards in bright red ink. Other than the photograph, this information was initially all confirmed – in an extremely labour-intensive manner – against the returns on the forms of the 1951 census. The primary – indeed ultimately the only purpose of the first round of population registration – was the racial classification of the individuals identified. All South Africans, whatever their race, were issued with one of these laminated cards: Africans had them glued into the covers of their Reference Books; Whites, Indians and Coloureds were issued with wallet-sized cards that were roughly half the size. The cards were decorated along their borders with distinctive, and significant, iconography. Those for whites, Indians and Coloureds had the legend 'SA Burger – SA Citizen' (and no mention of the population register) while those for blacks had 'Bevolkingsregister – Naturelle : Population Register – Natives'.

On the distinction between Citizen and Native much turned under Apartheid, yet, to begin with, the actual procedures of classification were, as Jan Smuts objected

8   Posel, 'Race as Common Sense', 98.
9   'Population Registration Bill, Second Reading', col 2517.

at the time, astonishingly ad hoc, 'left to quite ordinary and untrained persons, who are not trained for this job to say who is a White Person, who a Coloured person, and who a Native' – life-altering decisions that were, at once, arbitrary and contradictory.[10] The reason for this casual disinterest in the volumes of sociobiology that determined the meanings of race by the 1950s was very clear, and explicit at the time: many white families were descended from black ancestors. This meant that assessments of racial descent were politically unacceptable. Once the surface assessment of the census agents had been recorded, 'objections founded on ancestry will not even be referred to the judicial Board', Dönges explained to parliament: 'Such objections will immediately go to the wastepaper basket where they belong.'[11] A generation later, by the middle of the 1960s, the population register had restored the place of ancestry in the determination of race. The processes of race classification had become intrinsically bureaucratic and archival, determined by the existing recorded responses on the census form, birth registrations and the documents that individuals used to apply for identity documents. In this sense racial classification under Apartheid was determined by a new kind of descent, one that was bureaucratically formed, and fundamentally incurious about biology or history prior to 1951.

From the outset an ambitious project of biopolitical surveillance lay behind the Nationalist Party interest in Dönges' Book of Life: 'All those important facts regarding the life of every individual will be combined in this book and recorded under the name of a specific person, who can never change his identity.' For the population register to work as a 'living book' it should be 'kept up to date', recording the 'address of the individual concerned' and all further changes of address. Also present at the beginning of the project was a naïve faith in the labour-saving and surveillance powers of automation technologies. The Book of Life, Dönges explained, would mean that 'I merely take the [individual punch] cards, put them through the machine which can deal with thousands per hour, and I present [the minister of Defence] with a list containing not only the registration numbers of [conscripts] but also their names, mechanically typed, not by typists, but by the machine itself.' Yet there were also clear limits to this biopolitical curiosity between 1950 and 1970. The first was racist: although Dönges believed that the state should be investigating the lives of Africans in a similar way, he carefully excluded them from the requirements and expectations of the Book of Life. The second was administrative: the project of race classification so overwhelmed the resources of the Bureau of the Census that Dönges' 'living book' – maintained by the continuous recording of addresses – was not begun. Instead the project of race classification in the first generation of Apartheid hinged on the identity document itself and the static records of the population register. The green Identity Card (*Persoonskaart*) was the totem and instrument of the original Population Registration Act,[12] working as a certificate that the individual had submitted to race classification and proof of the state's approbation.

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10   *Ibid*, cols 2526–7; Bowker and Starr, *Sorting Things Out*; Posel, 'Race as Common Sense'.
11   'Population Registration Bill, Second Reading', col 2521.
12   *Government Gazette*, 'Act No 30 of 1950 Population Registration Act', 7 July 1950.

Among white people, there was some opposition to the cards – the Springbok Legion protested that the law robbed the 'individual of that anonymity which is his security against victimisation' and pointed out that similar cards in Europe were closely linked to rationing or social welfare, neither of which were present in South Africa.[13] Jan Smuts, in the last weeks of his life, also fought the Bill determinedly. He predicted that the project had little, in fact, to do with the registration of white people (who were otherwise already abundantly registered) or with Africans (who were practically ignored by the Act); its real purpose was 'to deal with the Coloured situation' and to provide a basis for eliminating the Coloured franchise.[14] And he warned that Dönges' living book would fail – South Africans of all races, unlike Europeans, would not comply with the requirement for continuous registration, creating, like the pass laws he had written, reasons for widespread 'flouting of the law and … evasion.' Smuts and his United Party colleagues also warned of the growing danger of international isolation at the United Nations that would follow from the coercive registration of Indians in particular. They saw the implications of antagonising the 'non-European nations of the world whose total population exceeds half the total population of the world' at the United Nations.[15] But the main product of Smuts's bitter denunciation of the Population Registration Bill was condensed, at the time and for decades afterwards, in two claims: that the Nationalists were trying to 'classify the unclassifiable' and 'trying to do what is impossible to do.'[16] It was the refutation of Smuts's claims that South Africans would not comply and that race classification was impossible that motivated Nationalist hubris during the 1960s.

For there was startlingly little in the way of meaningful opposition or noncompliance to the first round of population registration. The universally available census data were key to this success. The selection of civil servants as the first recipients of the cards, and the use of certified professional photographers as agents of the application process including the distribution of racially specific forms, also worked very efficiently, at least for those confident of their status as whites. The police records on the distribution of the *Persoonskaart* in the early 1950s suggest that they were much more animated by the dangers of *slenter-fotograwe* (crooked photographers) than with any problems of dissent or resistance.[17] For whites, the answers they gave to the enumerators in the 1951 census were captured on punched cards, retained by the Census Bureau and used to confirm the racial status that they claimed when they submitted application forms for ID cards after 1953.[18] For Coloureds and Indians the process was much more contested: data on the census forms were usually incomplete or officially suspect, which meant that the application for the identity card was itself the

13   National executive committee of the Springbok Legion, 'Statement on the Populations Registration Bill', *Fighting Talk*, March 1950.
14   'Population Registration Bill, Second Reading', col 2524.
15   *Ibid*, cols 2529, 2542; M. Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Lawrence Stone Lectures (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 178–89.
16   'Population Registration Bill, Second Reading', col 2534.
17   SAB (Sentrale Argief Bewaarplek, now the National Archives Repository) South African Police (SAP) 477, 2/44/50, Persoonskaarte, 1963.
18   Bureau of Census and Statistics, South Africa, *Report of the Director, 1951* (Pretoria, 1951); Bureau of Census and Statistics, South Africa, *Report of the Director, 1952* (Pretoria, 1952).

key moment of race classification. Following a tradition that dated back a century, the Apartheid state utterly mistrusted the biographical information provided by Indians, forcing them to apply in person for their identity cards, using a state photographer.[19] At these interviews, Census officials were careful to insist that the applicants (most of whom were descended from indentured labourers who had arrived a century earlier) provide an original nationality.[20] The registration of Coloured people was even more contested, with only a trickle of voluntary applications for identity cards. From 1956 municipalities, mostly in the Transvaal, began to coerce Coloured people to present themselves for racial classification. Applicants for the identity cards were compelled by the forms themselves to accept one of the four basic racial categories – sometimes, it is clear from the records of later reclassification appeals, without an understanding of the implications.[21] The late 1950s marked the high moment of the humiliating bureaucratic ordeal of racial classification, with over 100,000 'border-line' individuals and their families being forced on to terrifying life trajectories at the discretion of the Bureau of Census officials.[22] By the end of the 1950s regional offices in each of the provinces had been established to issue identity cards and undertake 'the classification of persons of doubtful race'.[23]

In comparison with the many other registration projects of twentieth-century South African history, what is most striking about the identity card system was its success and efficiency. The first cards were issued in significant numbers from 1955, and – despite some opposition and some administrative delays after the announcement[24] – by early 1958 the minister of the Interior reported to parliament that the register contained the names of 95 per cent of Coloured, Indian and White people. Much of the work of persuading people to apply for the cards was done by making them requirements of other social benefits – of, for example, teacher training (1956), government pensions (1959) and nursing registration (1958).[25] But it is also clear that the ideological enthusiasm and determination of the officials in the Bureau of the Census for race classification (of which more below) was another important motivation. By February 1963 the state was confident enough to impose the deadline requiring its white citizens to show their identity cards to the police.[26] Yet more significant than this practical success is the fact that by the end of the 1960s the combined processes of population registration – the 1951 census and the applications for identity cards – had completed Smuts's impossible task of allocating all South Africans to one of the four arbitrary Verwoerdian racial categories. It was at this point of success that the officials in the state began to lobby for the much more elaborate, panoptic, Book of Life, one which reanimated Dönges' original plans but which very quickly proved

19   M. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985); Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 'Cat and Mouse Games'.
20   Bureau of Census and Statistics, South Africa, *Report of the Director, 1957* (Pretoria, 1957).
21   SAB MBN 34, B13, *Rasklassifikasie*, 1971.
22   M. Horrell, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1956–1957* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1957), 39.
23   Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Report of the Director, 1957*.
24   Horrell, *Survey of Race Relations: 1956–1957*, 39; Kompol, Pretoria to Alle Afdelingskommissarisse, RSA en SWA, 'Persoonskaarte – Proklamasie 268 van 26/10/1962', 1 February 1963.
25   Horrell, *Survey of Race Relations: 1956–1957*; M. Horrell, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1957–1958* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1959).
26   URU, vol 4433, 1962, *Toon van Persoonskaarte Ingevolge Artikel Veertien van die Bevolkingsregistrasiewet, 1950, Soos Gewysig.*

to be an administrative disaster. The main result of this second phase of population registration was that it seems to have clouded official and popular memory of the work of race classification that was done by the issuing of the identity cards.

By 1967, a generation after the passing of the initial Act, almost all adults had been captured in one of the population registers – maintained either by the Native Affairs Department or the Census Bureau. For the three million successful whites this meant that the temporary enumerators of the 1951 census had not disputed their self-selected race on the census forms. And, after 1955, officials had not queried their race on the basis of the photographs submitted along with their identity card applications. For many of the one million people who were registered as Coloured, racial classification involved a much more humiliating and frightening official examination, where the legal criteria of racial acceptance and appearance were decided by officials of the Department of the Interior. And for the 10 million Africans registered by the combined efforts of the mobile teams from the Bewysburo and the coercive requirements of influx control, the process was often degrading and sometimes terrifying.[27]

It is important to notice that the very successful Population Register that was developed during the 1950s was built on the cheap. Most of the work was undertaken in five military huts that had been attached to the main offices of the bureau in Pretoria. They suffered from severe shortages of staff, very high rates of staff turnover, and broken and worn out tabulating machines. By the end of the decade most of these problems had been addressed, with new buildings, additional staff and new tabulating machines.[28] But, in that year, the population register was transferred out of the poorly resourced Census Bureau and directly into the Department of the Interior, where population registration was adopted as the department's main business. From there, close to the centre of state power, the project of racial registration proceeded with increasing complexity and confusion.[29]

For whites and Coloureds, the officials built up most of the population register by carefully extracting racial selections from the responses to the original 1951 census on to punched cards. This use of the Census data was illegal, a violation of the prohibition in the Census Act on the use of response data in 'any legal proceedings' and an obvious breach of the promise on the forms that 'no Government Department or any private person' would have access to the responses. But the census data used in compiling the population register were quickly obscured by the applications for identity cards that required a similar act of self-classification; before 1967, where the race claimed on the identity card conflicted with either the respondent or the enumerators' assessment from the census, officials were licensed to apply the practical appearance and acceptance tests. In that year the law was amended to make racial classification a matter of bureaucratically determined descent, and some of this was

27 *Hansard*, 17 March 1967, 'Population Registration Amendment Bill, Second Reading'; Horrell, *Survey of Race Relations: 1956–1957*, 64–6.
28 Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Report of the Director, 1951*; Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Report of the Director, 1952*; Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Report of the Director, 1957*.
29 Department of the Interior, South Africa, *Annual Report for the Calendar Year 1972* (Pretoria, 1972).

completely invisible to the individuals being classified.[30] The population register grew steadily from the early 1950s, expanding by about 100,000 individuals annually from birth registration events gathered – mostly from hospitals – for whites, Coloureds and Indians, silently allocating all individuals to a racial group. 'Every person is classified at birth,' the minister explained, 'but they only become aware of their classification when they apply for an identity card after their 16th birthday.'[31] By the end of the 1960s the population register had done the impossible job, as the government constantly boasted, of allocating all South Africans to one of the four basic racial categories.

It was as the first cohort of 16-year-olds who had not been classified during the 1951 census began to apply for identity cards, that the state moved to embed a new form of racial descent into the operations of the population register. In the determination of race before 1967 the law had been carefully crafted to avoid racial genealogy (which had been used, for example in segregationist Natal, Nazi Germany and the US).[32] Instead, for the first decade the Act relied on pragmatic, and arbitrary, tests of communal acceptance and appearance.[33] To be more precise: during the 1950s the law specified that whiteness was determined by community acceptance; after 1962 it required both acceptance and the much more capricious test of physical appearance. Initially, as I have said, the leaders of the National Party were anxious not to make the test of whiteness a matter of descent because they were well aware, as H. J. 'Bronkie' Bronkhorst reminded them in parliament, that few 'amongst us can beat upon his breast and proclaim he is of pure white descent.'[34] But by 1967 a new logic of descent had been changed by the work of the population register. As the minister explained, those who were applying for identity cards after that date would have to answer a simple, chilling question: 'How were your parents classified?'[35]

The idea of determining race by administrative descent – of relying exclusively on already-existing data on individuals', or their parents', race in the Bureau of Census records – came from a surprising source, one that reflects the unusual combination of authoritarianism and dependency that often influenced the Apartheid state's decision making.[36] During the first half of the 1960s the minister of Coloured Affairs was P. W. Botha, the future prime minister and state president. Before he adopted the mantle as champion of the South African military, Botha served as the first minister of Coloured Affairs and as the patron of the conservative faction of Coloured politics.[37] It was this group, acting through the Coloured Affairs Advisory Board, who began to lobby from 1964 for race classification to be based on the returns of the 1951

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30 'Population Registration Amendment Bill, Second Reading', 17 March 1967.
31 *Ibid*.
32 J. Caplan, 'Registering the Volksgemeinschaft: Civil Status in Nazi Germany 1933–1939' in M. Steber and B. Gotto (eds), *A Nazi 'Volksgemeinschaft'? German Society in the Third Reich* (London: German Historical Institute; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 116–29.
33 Posel, 'Race as Common Sense'; Bowker and Starr, *Sorting Things Out*.
34 'Population Registration Amendment Bill, Second Reading', 17 March 1967.
35 *Government Gazette*, 'Act No 29 of 1970 Population Registration Amendment Act of 1970', 21 August 1970.
36 S. Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 116–26.
37 D. Y. Saks, 'The Failure of the Coloured Persons' Representative Council and Its Constitutional Repercussions, 1956–1985' (Unpublished MA thesis, Rhodes University, 1992), 38–50, http://eprints.ru.ac.za/1024/.

census. The board also lobbied for other stiffenings of the processes of classification,[38] but it was only this amendment – already a part of the practical work of the Bureau of the Census – that became law in 1967, and the exclusive basis of race classification.[39] Public and scholarly awareness of the adoption of a new kind of racial descent has largely disappeared in South Africa, because it coincided with another very elaborate expansion in the goals of the identity document issued to citizens.

High Apartheid took its pure form in the years between the assassination of Verwoerd in 1966 and the international oil and domestic labour crises in 1973. Foreign investment, most of it from the US, surged back into the country after fleeing in the wake of the Sharpeville crisis. With the wages of migrant labourers locked at historically low levels by the combined operations of the Dompas and massive sub-continental migration to the mines, the rates of return on investment in South Africa were amongst the highest in the world. The Nationalists crushed the United Party in the 1970 elections, winning 70 per cent of the parliamentary seats, and they were very aware of the fact that they no longer faced any significant opposition.[40] The long boom of the 1960s had lifted white prosperity dramatically in real terms and relative to black people. And Afrikaner capital, for the first time, had secured its place at the high table of the mining economy.[41]

It was in this comparatively short window of self-confidence and affluence – which stands in contrast to the much longer periods of parsimony and hesitation before and chaotic reform afterwards – that the grandest technopolitical projects of the Apartheid state were born.[42] The most uncompromising and ambitious political and social engineering projects of the Apartheid period were initiated in the years between 1967 and 1973. It was in 1970, for example, that Prime Minister Vorster announced the project for the domestic enrichment of uranium, leading to weapons capacity.[43] The plans for the massive dams of the Orange River Development Project, which sought to rearrange the climate of the subcontinent, were first drafted by the great imperial dam builder William Willcocks in 1903, but they were only finally built in the early 1970s.[44] And, critically for this story, it was also in 1970 that the Department of the Interior relaunched the population register, powered this time by one of the new IBM computers, a determination to capture all forms of civil

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38 The board was lobbying the Ministry of the Interior for much stricter criteria and procedures for the reclassification of Africans as Coloureds. In 1965 they appealed (unsuccessfully) for the withdrawal of all Identity Cards issued to Coloured people, and a return to the original classifications of the 1951 census.
39 SAB MBN 38, B16/4, *Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie*, 1967.
40 See the confidence of the Nationalist MPs in the debate during 'Population Registration Amendment Bill, Second Reading' (*Hansard*, 27 July 1970).
41 F. Wilson, 'Unresolved Issues in the South African Economy: Labour', *South African Journal of Economics,* 43, 4, 1975, 311–27, doi:10.1111/j.1813-6982.1975.tb00460.x; D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948–1994* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1996), 173–7. On Anglo-American's sale of General Mining to Sanlam, see *ibid*, 120–4; H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003), 534–47.
42 P. N. Edwards and G. Hecht, 'History and the Technopolitics of Identity: The Case of Apartheid South Africa,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 3, September 2010, 619–39.
43 S. Polakow-Suransky, *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 73.
44 W. Willcocks, *Mr Willcocks' Report on Irrigation in South Africa*, British Parliamentary Papers (BPP) CD 1163, Further Correspondence Relating to Affairs in South Africa (In Continuation of [Cd 903] January 1902) (Daira Sania Co, Egypt, 1901); T. Emmett and G. Hagg, 'Politics of Water Management: The Case of the Orange River Development Project' in M. Khosa (ed.), *Empowerment through Economic Transformation* (Pretoria: HSRC, 2001), 299–328.

registration in a single purpose-built high-rise in Pretoria, and an ominous name – the Book of Life.

The use of this phrase – the Book of Life – dated from the first parliamentary debates over population registration in 1950. In explaining the purpose of the register to his colleagues, the minister of the Interior, T. E. Dönges, had said that 'a population register is actually a book containing the life-story of every individual whose name is recorded on that register.' And it was from that date that the Afrikaans phrase *lewensboek* began to enter the vocabulary of the bureaucracy.[45] But the Book of Life project that emerged after 1967 was in its most important respects a very different instrument from the population register and the Identity Card that preceded it.

In the first instance, the project was funded on an entirely different scale to the modestly resourced effort that had been run out of temporary offices by the Census Bureau. A 30-storey black monolith, called Civitas, was built in Pretoria at the extravagant cost at the time of R10 million, with a special IBM computer room in the basement.[46] And it was staffed lavishly: over 500 clerks and data processors worked in the central office, with 100 each in the Johannesburg and Cape Town offices, and 50 in Durban. These officials worked exclusively on the population register, with much smaller establishments devoted to the work of issuing passports and registering voters.[47]

The South African project was modelled on the Israeli and Swedish population registers, which officials in the Department of the Interior saw as the most advanced globally.[48] The Swedish system, which dated from 1947, had used an identity number, a personal paper file and a raft of benefits to support very fine-grained, and largely self-reporting, surveillance of the reproductive, tax and employment histories of every resident.[49] But in one key respect the South African register was different: the architecture of the Swedish system was decentralised, using computer registers after 1967 based separately in each of the 300 municipalities. Two historical imperatives drove this decentralisation. The first was the enduring tradition of church-based civil registration in Europe, which made parishes and then municipalities the site of registration, welfare and taxation;[50] and the second was the compelling interest in preventing a repetition of the data-driven genocide of Nazi Germany.[51] Over generations the Swedish state specifically opted *not* to allow the development of a single, centralised database of civil identities.

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45   *Hansard*, 8 March 1950; see also *Hansard*, 15 March 1950.
46   S. Leeman, 'Sad Saga of the Book of Life,' *Pretoria News*, 14 July 1983, section 2; Department of the Interior, South Africa, *Annual Report for the Calendar Year 1973* (Pretoria, 31 December 1973).
47   Department of the Interior, *Annual Report for the Calendar Year 1972*.
48   SAB MBN 38, B16/4, Adjunk-Sekretaris (Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie) to Sekretaris van Binnelandsesake and Minister, 'Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie', Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 11 November 1968; SAB MBN 38, B16/4, *Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie*, 1967.
49   Jack Clarke, interview by Keith Breckenridge and Paul Edwards, 20 April 2004.
50   S. Szreter, 'Registration of Identities in Early Modern English Parishes and Amongst the English Overseas' in K. Breckenridge and S. Szreter (eds), *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History*, Proceedings of the British Academy 182 (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 67–92; P-A. Rosental, 'Civil Status and Identification in Nineteenth-Century France: A Matter of State Control?' in Breckenridge and Szreter (eds). *Registration and Recognition*, 137–65.
51   F. H. Cate, *Privacy in the Information Age* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 44; International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics (IIVRS), *The Impact of Computerization on Population Registration in Sweden*, (Bethesda: IIVRS, December 1996).

Centralisation was the object of the South African project.[52] In addition to birth, voting and death certificates that had long been issued and held in Pretoria, the personal file for each individual in the population register at Civitas contained marriage certificates, gun and driver's licences that had previously been retained in local magistrates' and municipal offices. An overweening and naïve surveillance goal was at the heart of the new system – the Vorster cabinet minutes from February 1968 specifically record that the object of the project was to 'provide the State with better control over its citizens and to give effect to better national security.'[53] Like the Swedish system and the Nazi *Volkskartei*,[54] the population register was supposed to be a continuously updated register of domicile for all whites, Coloureds and Indians – but the South African project was an instrument of policing. This unrealisable surveillance ambition, the effort to exercise control through the proliferation of linked registration functions, was the Book of Life's undoing.

The project also had roots (at least in the Department of the Interior) in the belief that the Apartheid state was sustained by its technological supremacy, that legitimacy was derived, in part, from the ability to deploy globally precocious forms of social engineering.[55] This technopolitical imperative was manifest from the first criticisms of the 'backward' static population register that had been built after 1951. And it certainly formed a major part of the public justification of the scheme, beginning with the new minister, Lourens Muller, declaring during the second reading of the Bill announcing the Book of Life that the South African state 'is keeping pace with developments in the world.'[56] Later in his speech the Minister invoked the justification that runs through the history of universal registration projects in the twentieth century: the project was an 'almost indispensable instrument' in a 'progressive country and modern state'. The mystique of the new IBM computers was at the heart of this desire to act progressively. 'We are living in an age of mechanization and automation,' as the minister put it, in 'the world of the computer.' The promise of massive efficiencies – exactly like those promised by the Census Bureau – that would follow from the integration of the separate drivers', firearms, marriage and birth registers provided a third public justification.[57]

Behind the scenes the reasoning for the Book of Life was different but also conventional: an almost routine example of the administrative will to know combined with a powerful but secret national security imperative. The project began in 1966 with an investigation by the Public Service Commission which argued for the centralisation and automation of all forms of registration. Key to the original idea was

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52 SAB MBN 38, B16/4, Adjunk-Sekretaris (Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie) to Sekretaris van Binnelandsesake and Minister, 'Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie', Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 11 November 1968; 'Clearing up the Book of Life Confusion,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 December 1977, http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/cgi-bin/getpdf?year=1977&refno=5157&topic=5.

53 'die Staat mag benodig vir die uitoefening van beter beheer oor sy burgers asook vir die veiligheid van die Republiek, te bewerkstellig', SAB MBN 38, B16/4, Adjunk-Sekretaris (Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie) to Sekretaris van Binnelandsesake and Minister, 'Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie', Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 1967, 11 November 1968.

54 G. Aly and K. H. Roth, *The Nazi Census: Identification and Control in the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 45–55.

55 See Edwards and Hecht, 'History and the Technopolitics of Identity' for a discussion of this.

56 See SAB MBN 38, B16/4, W. J. Nijgh (Juris Doctor Leyden en Paris) to Le Roux, Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 30 January 1967.

57 'Population Registration Amendment Bill, Second Reading', 27 July 1970.

the idea of a massive improvement in efficiency from a centralised and continuously updated register of addresses – the working *adresburo* that was specified in the original Population Registration Act but never implemented. This emphasis on efficiency altered the following year as the worked-out proposal reached the cabinet. At that level the main supporters of the project were those departments '*wat alga met landsveiligheid gemoeid is* [charged with National Security]' – the police, Defence and Civil Protection. By the time the instruction came from Vorster's office for the bureaucracy 'to move ahead speedily' with the project, its primary raison d'etre was for the '*uitoefening van beter beheer oor sy burgers asook vir die veiligheid van die Republiek* [exercise of better control over its citizens as well as for the safety of the Republic]'.[58] It was only after this coercive justification was clearly established that the other departments (at an interdepartmental meeting in August 1968) began to add to the proposal for a compulsory *adresburo* the many different forms of compulsory registration that entailed the grand biopolitical project of the Book of Life: the recording of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, widowing, naturalisations, applications for passports, drivers' licences, firearms, immunisations, professions and education.[59]

What is particularly interesting about the planning for the Book of Life is that it was opposed, with real foresight, by the officials who had undertaken the massive task of race classifiction over the previous decade. Director Botha, of the Census Bureau, had been in charge of the population register since 1951, and he was responsible for the successful registration, and racial classification, of six and a half million people. He warned that the Book of Life was a dangerous risk, and he reminded his superiors that the purpose of the register was the making and preservation of Apartheid. Identification was only a secondary objective where the main goal was the 'identification of a person's Race'. Where, he asked, was this new project to find a new body of source documents ('*brondokumente*') equivalent to the four million records that had been so successfully generated by the 1951 census? The extraction of racial categories from those documents had been '*werklik 'n ontsaglike taak* [really an awesome task]' but the new law made no provision for generating a similar set of documents. A new round of applications would require the cooperation of every photographer in the country, which was 'politically dangerous' and left open the possibility that people would 'cross the line' unless all available documents were examined, something which was an enormous task. Unlike the other, younger officials, Botha warned that his experience of computers in administration had been 'bitter' and that they usually did not justify the enormous expense. Finally he warned his bosses – in language that echoed Smuts and was antithetical to the enthusiasm for West European bureaucracy that informed the public debate – that South Africans would not adopt the norms of the old forms of decentralised registration that worked so well in Europe.[60]

58   SAB MBN 38, B16/4, Adjunk-Sekretaris (Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie) to Sekretaris van Binnelandsesake and Minister, 'Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie', Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 1967, 11 November 1968.
59   SAB MBN 41, B25, Die Sekretaris (Deur die Adjunk-Sekretaris DR, PV, en BI), 'Wetsonwerp op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 1967', 8 August 1968; SAB MBN, 1968 Kabinetsmemoranda, vol 41.
60   SAB MBN 38, B16/4, L. Botha, Direkteur van Statistiek to Adjunk-Sekretaris van Binnelandsesake, 'Bevolkingsregistrasie en -identifikasie', 21 October 1968, Wet op Bevolkingsregistrasie, 1967.

The project was plagued by the intractable problems that Botha had warned about from the outset. To begin with, the construction of the intimidating new skyscraper was delayed. The new IBM computers were moved into Civitas in May 1971, most of the staff took possession of their offices a year later, but work continued on the building well into 1973. When the department began accepting applications for the new Books of Life in February 1972, they were quickly overwhelmed. Within weeks the department restricted applications to voters in specific districts and to 16-year-olds who had no other forms of ID. After the excitement of the first year the project never recovered its momentum; fully six years into it, nearly half of the target population of 7.5 million people had still not received their new books. In that year the processing of applications was so delayed – processing of a new application was taking over two years – that the books could not be used for the registration and authentication of voters.[61] As late 1983, over 100,000 registered (Coloured, Indian and White) voters had still not yet applied for Books of Life.

The new scheme also uncovered (and exacerbated) the regulatory problems around controlling driving in South Africa. The original plan was to strip local authorities of the ability to issue licences, primarily for the surveillance benefits that would accrue to the central government in Pretoria. But the results were catastrophic. Year after year during the 1970s, extensions were required for the compulsory replacement of local licences with the Book of Life.[62] Belatedly the state realised that all black drivers would also have to reapply for new licences.[63] From 1978 onwards the Department of the Interior was forced to continuously postpone the deadline for drivers to have their licences inserted by the delays in the processing of books.[64] And, in a pattern that, ever since, has threatened the regulatory fabric of daily life in South Africa, the slips of paper that were eventually stuck into the Book of Life were easy to forge, opening the floodgates to illegal drivers.[65]

Yet, notwithstanding the bureaucratic delays and confusions associated with the project, what is most striking about the books themselves is how little they seem to have been used. Aside from the pages of Marriage and Drivers licensing, most of the Books of Life consist of 60 pristine blank pages. Occasionally an especially conscientious person may have filled in the date of a tetanus innoculation on the pages for Diverse Immunisations but, in general, the books were not used, at all. People tended to hold on to them (especially after the identity number was changed to remove the racial classification from the last two digits) because they provided the only official record of marriage registration. But otherwise their significance lay in the mute testimony of a failure to engage the state. And the contrast with the embellishment on an ordinary Dompas – with its monthly stamps for permission to seek work and medical inspections – is compelling.

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61 D. Levin, 'Book of Life: Bad Decisions Cost SA R35m', *Sunday Times*, 20 May 1979.
62 '3 Million Must Still Get Books of Life', *Pretoria News*, 18 April 1978.
63 'Licences Warning to Blacks', *Eastern Province Herald*, 25 January 1978, http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/cgi-bin/getpdf?year=1978&refno=166&topic=42.
64 Pietermaritzburg Bureau, 'Drivers' Licences Must Be in Book of Life by 1982', *Daily News*, 13 June 1978.
65 'Rybewyse Is die Boek se Swak', *Beeld*, 4 July 1978.
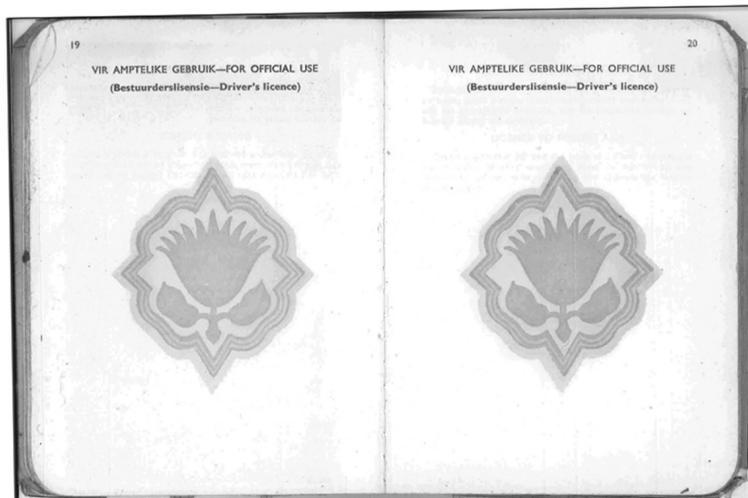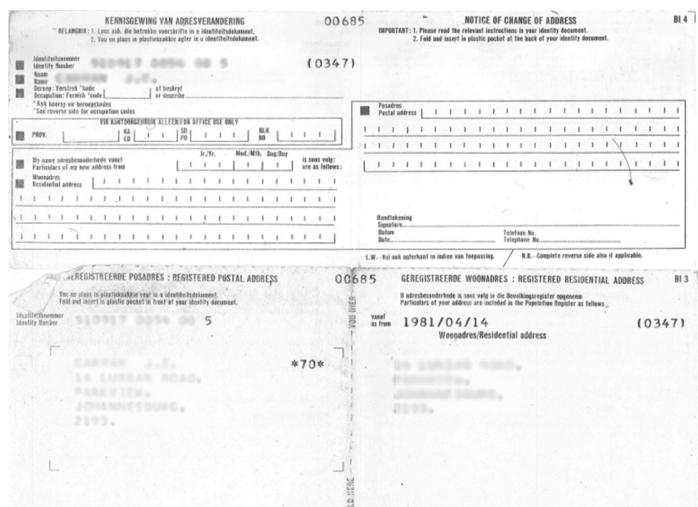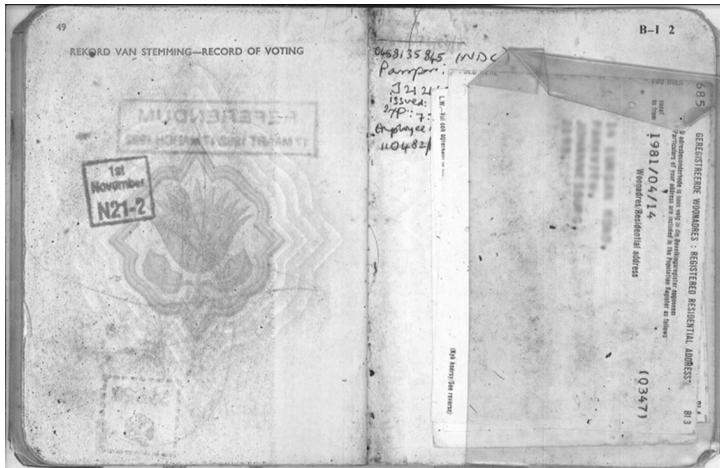
Figure 2: Pages from the Book of Life

Figure 3: Pages from the Bewysboek

The Book of Life also changed the architecture of registration for the much larger population of black people who had fallen under the Bewysburo. Paired with the new centralised population register, the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 set up the process of stripping all black South Africans of their citizenship, allocating them to one of the emerging bantustans.[66] After the 1976 Soweto Uprising, the state began to use the rhetoric of independence to shift governmental responsibility onto these bantustans. Late in 1977, after representations from the chief ministers of the three pseudo-states of Lebowa, Ciskei and Bophutatswana, Vorster announced that all Africans would receive new identification documents 'similar to the Whites' Book of Life' and that entry to and travel in the white territories would be regulated by 'work permits'.[67] At the same time the Department of the Interior began to flesh out a special Kafkaesque nightmare of the bantustans, setting up separate population registers in the three that had been pushed into formal independence.[68] And then building a handful of immigration posts for the 'control of aliens' at arbitrary points on the thousands of kilometres of border linking the bantustans to the old white provinces.[69]

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66   Republic of South Africa, *Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act*, 1970; L. Gevers, 'Black Sash and Red Tape: The Plight of the African Aged in KwaZulu and Natal, 1979–1990' (Unpublished Honours thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012), 41.

67   'Reisdokument Gaan Pasboek Vervang', *Volksblad*, 23 July 1977; J. Theron, 'Influx Change Expected Soon', *Citizen*, 3 November 1977; Editor, 'Bewysboekstelsel', *Transvaler*, 4 November 1977.

68   BAO, vol 12/94, *Transkei, Binnelandse Sake, Bevolkingsregistrasie*, 1968; KGT, vol 28, *Kommissaris-Generaal, Xhosa Volkseenheid, Staatsdepartemente, Republiek van Suid-Afrika, Justisie Landdroskantore Byhou van Bevolkingsregister*; BAO, vol 11/76, *Venda, Bevolkingsregistrasie, Sensus en Statistiek*, 1979; BAO, vol 11/98, *Ciskei, Bevolkingsregistrasie*, 1981.

69   Department of the Interior, South Africa, *Annual Report for the Calendar Year 1977* (Pretoria: 1977).

By the end of the 1970s, P. W. Botha had overthrown the Vorster faction and begun to impose a new, more market- and military-oriented reform strategy on the state. A constitutional fantasy about the possibilities of decentralisation was one part of this reform project. In this plan, municipalities and a host of other formal and informal institutions would take on the onerous work of maintaining the population register that the Department of Interior had failed to manage.[70] Constitutional gymnastics formed one part of this new ideological brand of reform; Thatcherite contempt for the state was another. The contrast between the late 1960s view of the capacious and sinister state, one that would not shrink from ambitious projects of social engineering, and the widespread public and academic contempt for the bureaucracy in the late 1970s, is striking. Key to this view of the state as a bloated and incapable source of employment for millions of lazy officials, as the *Sunday Times* observed, was the publicity disaster of the Book of Life project, 'bogged down hopelessly to the degree that the citizenry have been begged to stop applying for their documents.'[71] In fact, of course, the Book of Life project showed off both aspects of power in South Africa: how limited goals and bureaucratic and ideological tenacity and the power of the census data could achieve the impossible, on one hand; and how bad planning and administrative and national security overreach, irrespective of resources, could produce disaster. This is a lesson that the state, here and elsewhere, seems determined to learn in every generation.[72]

70   'New Plan to Keep Tabs', *Pretoria News*, 17 April 1980.
71   I. Wilkins, 'A Nation of Clerks', *Sunday Times*, 16 July 1978.
72   I would like to offer exceptional thanks to Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie for her tenacity and kindness in assembling this special issue of *Kronos*. Watching from afar it has seemed a thing of wonder.