Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

> One of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having only lived one.
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> —Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

It was autumn in the southern hemisphere when an unexpected victory in all-White national parliamentary elections swept South Africa's National Party (NP) to power in 1948. The victory signaled the consolidation of the Afrikaner ethnic identity and facilitated the implementation of a series of racist laws that became known to the world as apartheid. These laws provided the pattern for a social fabric, woven by South Africans from their everyday activities. On another autumn day twenty-eight years later, that fabric was punctured in a violent convulsion that released some of the resentment that the normality of ordinary life had effectively hidden from view. Then, in 1994, forty-six autumns after its designs were laid out and eighteen autumns after the unraveling began in earnest, another election placed the African National Congress (ANC) at the head of a government dedicated to severing the last threads that held together the apartheid way of life. In a world still hung over from the Cold War, this transformation struck many as inspirational, even miraculous. Amid the celebrations that accompanied the formal transfer of power to erstwhile rebels, a few warned of the problems that South Africa still faced, but for the most part, South Africans took the opportunity to revel in the success of their negotiated revolution. Miracle did not seem too strong a word. Even ANC leader Nelson Mandela, in his speech claiming electoral victory, referred to the birth of non-racial democracy in South Africa as "a small miracle."

While commentators are still able to find aspects of the transition worthy of being labeled a miracle, the use of the term has become problematic. Analyses published since 1997 tend to position themselves in opposition to earlier journalistic accounts that present the transition through anecdotal stories in which personalities, chance encounters, and transformative moments dominate.[1] Even academic texts published in the years immediately following the elections seem, from this "morning-after" position of "painful sobriety," to have been so caught up in the celebratory atmosphere that they overstated the successes of the transition and mythologized change while downplaying significant continuities and obstacles still to be overcome.[2] By constructing this antinomy, more recent studies are juxtaposed against once-dominant trends in South African analysis and cast as attacking, if not eliminating, the euphoric residue of this "misunderstood miracle."[3] The implication is that the transition has been neither as complete nor as deep as the term *miracle* would suggest.

Aside from apparently overstating the quality of the transformation, using the term *miracle* to describe the end of apartheid carries an implicit theory of super-human agency that deprives South African actors of their role in remaking their social order. This rhetoric of transcendental causation, even as a metaphor, is indicative of the presumption of stability that dominates both formal Political Science and everyday social discourse. We have been trained to think of change as an anomaly, as something that needs to be explained. This book argues that we can gain valuable insights by adopting a perspective in which change is always happening—to societies, to actors, and to the identities of both. Certainly some changes are more important than others. The transformation of the apartheid social order is an important change, and one that might yield valuable lessons if it is understood more fully. One way to understand it better has been to search for its causes, divine or otherwise. But rather than asking *why,* this study seeks to explain *how* the transformation of apartheid society happened. In it, I argue that understanding social change, both in the South African context and generally, depends on examining the political identities of the actors involved.

This book describes the transformation of the South African social order as seen through the window of identity. It traces the demise of apartheid by focusing a gaze on the concepts and words, the labels, that are available for South Africans to use as they struggle to make sense of themselves, their actions, and their society. The protagonists in this story are the shifting networks of ideas that mediate the relationships between South Africans and between South Africans and their social order. I am not concerned with personal identity, with the identity crises of particular individuals or the ways that they have described themselves over time. I am interested in identities as systems of meaning, as intersubjective but malleable tools that people use to build descriptions, explanations, and justifications. This is a study of the power of South Africans' identity labels and how that power ebbed and flowed over the course of broader revolutions in politics. It describes the undulating patterns that have differentiated South

Africans from each other during the last three decades, the changes in those patterns, and the relationship of those changes to the transition in governance.

This focus makes sense for a study of South Africa because apartheid life was politicized by a particular manifestation of identity. Under apartheid, South Africans organized reality (not just social life, economics, and politics, but reality as a whole) through a framework of race; today, if post-apartheid rhetoric is to be believed, they do not. From the perspective of political identity, this state of affairs produces two broad sets of questions. The first set is related to the category (or categories) of identity that has power in post-apartheid society. If race is no longer the most important thing about South Africans, what is? What is the most important type of characteristic for people in contemporary South Africa? A variety of possibilities exists—nationality, class, ethnicity. It is also possible that racial characteristics continue to dominate social relations. However, if a change in political identity has taken place, a second set of questions arises concerning the process by which that shift in categorizing schema was brought about. How did South Africans go about changing the identity structures of their social order?

My attempts to answer these questions have produced an interpretive, empirical analysis of the power of South African identity labels, the ways that they organize social activity and the changes both the labels and their power have undergone during the course of the transition away from apartheid. This is a rigorous study, but it is not an attempt to measure the causes of the South African transition. Changes to identity are neither a cause nor an effect of the move from apartheid to post-apartheid reality in the sense of variables. Large-scale social transformations are very complex phenomena. Institutions of identity influence and are influenced by larger social transformations in intricate and interesting ways. Cause, at least in this case, is not unidirectional, but multilayered and complex, and when a social order is explicitly changed in revolutionary rather than evolutionary ways, the presumption of widespread stability that roots the very idea of most traditional social science fails us. Control groups for large-scale social change are very difficult to come by. Instead, such change is best studied using an interpretative approach that is open to the possibilities of creative agency. Following the course of the transition by paying attention to questions of identity yields particular insights into the dynamics and politics of social transformation generally, just as focusing on economics or political institutions would. This, then, is a study of the process by which society makes and remakes itself.

It is difficult to fit this approach into a single disciplinary field. This book is being published in a series on Global Politics. I take this term to encompass the study of relationships that would conventionally be the purview of International Relations, those for which Comparative Politics would claim to speak, as well as those large-scale phenomena that do not fit comfortably in the analytical lens of either disciplinary tradition. For better or for worse, this book seems to fit best into the latter group. The conflicts that make up the case studies are primarily domestic South African contests, although I have done my best to embed them within larger global dynamics. What makes this book a contribution to Global

Politics is its challenge to the disciplinary boundaries of Political Science. By beginning with a very broad definition of society and providing scholars with a much more precise mechanism for representing the distribution of agency within it, the constructivist theory of political identity alters the framework within which the "level of analysis problem" makes sense. By removing agency from entities and placing it in the social environment, we can gain insights into the process of social transformation that are not limited to a single type of social arrangement or agent. Whether this will be borne out by a more expansive application of the theory has yet to be seen, but the challenge from Global Politics is that important analysis can take place across the disciplinary boundaries of International Relations and Comparative Politics. In order to differentiate these various academic disciplines from the phenomena they study, I have adopted Onuf's practice of capitalizing the names of the disciplines (International Relations) and leaving the activities themselves in lower case.

Every treatise on apartheid, it seems, begins with an obligatory disclaimer acknowledging the contested nature of the identity labels used in the text and lamenting the impracticalities of the various strategies—using quotation marks or the word *so-called*—for honoring those complexities. This purpose of this book is to deal with those complexities deeply, but there is still the matter of how to refer to the subjects of the study. One of the principal points I hope to convey is that this is a decision fraught with implications for power. To try to honor that power, I refer to people using labels that fit the immediate political context of the discussion. Often this will be *South Africans,* a label that groups people according to the globally dominant understanding of geographic boundaries and large units of governance. Apartheid, as a series of laws, took place in the context of a nation-state and often the best way to talk about the people most affected by it is by using a national term. Other times, the most practical way of referring to the group is with apartheid's racial labels. These labels—*White* or *European, Native* or *African, Indian* or *Asian,* and *Coloured*—are neither clear nor unproblematic, but they carried a kind of functional consensus in everyday apartheid life that had a solid definitional center even if they did not have well-defined boundaries. Also, following the anti-apartheid pattern, I will use *Black* to refer to Africans, Coloureds, and Indians collectively, and the more specific labels when that is necessary. As explored later, however, during the years encompassed by this study the label *Black* became a site of political struggle. Therefore, in some quotations, especially those of the government or its apologists, *Black* may be used to mean only African. Because these labels are no more natural or primary or basic than any others, even if they are sometimes more politically powerful, it only seems logical to capitalize them, to use them as formal, proper nouns rather than as a description of some natural fact about the people to whom the labels apply. The capitalization of White, Black, African, and other similar labels is intended, therefore, to convey their politicized nature. I have not, however, altered quotations from other authors.

While the use of first person singular pronouns is not standard protocol in a work like this, I have, at certain junctures, felt it necessary to refer to myself and

to claim my opinions. The epistemological implication of a constructivist ontology, understood deeply, is that "truth" must be treated as contextual and interpretive. We may certainly be able to state transcendental truths about the universe, but we have no way of knowing when we do. We can, however, make claims of truth that are appropriately circumscribed by acknowledging their context. In my case, that context is a particular perspective on the intersection of identity theory, understandings of social change, and the material reality of the South African transition from apartheid. Failure to acknowledge that context would be to assert a certainty that may be highly prized, but to which I have no claim. The epistemology behind this disclaimer will, I trust, become more clear as I describe and analyze the constructivist approach to politics.

Constructivism and the theory of constructivist political identity are laid out in chapter 2. The social theory of constructivism provides a particularly useful foundation for studying social change, in part because, in contrast to the vision of reality in more mainstream social and political science, constructivist reality changes continuously. When combined with a more specific theory of the power of identity labels and how they facilitate the process by which social reality is constituted, the theory of political identity becomes a powerful tool for studying social change. While the constructivist theory of political identity precedes the empirical evidence spatially, it would be misleading to leave the reader with the impression that these more abstract parts of the analysis were clearly solidified prior to or in the absence of the case studies of South African politics that follow. Instead the relationship between the substantive text and the theoretical context is best thought of as cyclic, complex, and recursive. Not surprisingly, these same themes are at the center of the theory of social constructivism.

Chapter 3 provides the background necessary to make sense of the case studies that follow. There is a brief overview of the history of the area that is now South Africa. It is necessarily oversimplified, but it does provide some useful context for readers unfamiliar with South African politics. Also in this chapter is an examination of the academic discourse surrounding South African identity, some thoughts on methodology, and an exploration of the practical considerations of translating the constructivist theory of political identity into empirical research.

The theme of chapter 4, the uprisings in Soweto in 1976, constitutes a study in popular resistance. The instigators of the uprisings were schoolchildren, not even high school students but junior secondary students—thirteen-, fourteen-, and fifteen-year-olds—although the demographics of the participants quickly diversified. This chapter analyzes contemporary newspaper reports, student interpretations, academic analysis, government propaganda pamphlets, and ANC and popular commemorations of June 16 in order to understand how systems of identity were used to describe and explain events, how identity labels framed the understanding of actors on both sides, and how social boundaries were redrawn through action, precipitating the end of apartheid's relative stability.

The second conflict, the political debate that raged over the constitutional changes proposed in 1983, was another significant watershed in the transformation

of apartheid, and the discourse that surrounded it centers chapter 5. The reforms were presented as an expansion of democracy, but failed to capture the imagination or respect of the vast majority of South Africans or the international community, primarily because Whites maintained an effective veto and Africans were still completely excluded from central power. As a result, their most significant effects were changes in how people opposed apartheid, including the coalescing of a significant internal opposition movement and the forging of a practical, mobilized, non-racial identity. Because identity was such an explicit factor in this debate, it serves as an excellent indicator of where the institutions of identity were in the mid-1980s and a prime example of how identities were mobilized for political purposes.

As one of the most important social problems in contemporary South Africa, crime forms the basis for the examination of post-apartheid identity in chapter 6. From a theoretical perspective, crime is one of the common symptoms of the loss of social order, of the dissolution of a broad social agreement on rules. This anomic violence may seem natural as South Africans search for new rules around which legitimacy can coalesce, but from the very practical perspective of living in an urban area (and especially in Johannesburg), the specter of crime influences almost every activity. It has redrawn many of the old social boundaries as the crime that has always pervaded townships extends into the traditionally insulated, traditionally White urban and suburban areas and as crime in general becomes more violent. As such, the politics of crime provides a very useful mechanism to explore dominant perceptions of social categories.

Each empirical chapter begins with an historical description of a conflict of the transition and its social and political context. This description is followed by an examination of the discourse of the conflict, presented through its artifacts. These artifacts differ from conflict to conflict, with the first two cases relying more on archival and other printed material and the third supplementing printed texts with a substantial number of interviews. In order to provide the reader with as much of the relevant texts as possible and to try to let South Africans speak for themselves, these pages often contain substantial blocks of quotations. Following each section representing the discourse, I analyze the texts for the identity labels through which participants and observers understand and explain the events of each conflict. Each chapter analyzes the power of identity labels at a different stage in the process of transformation. The chapter on the events in Soweto in 1976 demonstrates the power of agents to disrupt the dominant social order by stepping out of the identities prescribed to them by that order. In the constitutional reforms of 1983 to 1984, politics shift from resisting apartheid identities to building alternatives. Chapter 6, on contemporary crime, analyzes the role of political identity in helping to solidify a post-apartheid social order. Finally each chapter concludes with analysis of the discourse's implications for the broader process of transforming South African political identity.

The conclusion summarizes the changes to South Africa's social structures of identity and assesses the general applicability of that experience. The transition away from apartheid makes apparent the complexity of contemporary political

identity, the processes of remaking a social order, and the value of a constructivist understanding of identity that can help us understand both. The argument is that labels are a valuable key to how people organize social power. The remainder of the book builds that idea into a way to mine insights from the processes of social change. My goal is to weave together a coherent story about identity and social change, to make sense of the transformation of the South African social order by focusing on one aspect of human interaction. Regardless of whether the transition from apartheid to the New South Africa has been miraculous, it certainly has been evocative. I hope that, in the process of narrowing the negotiated revolution to talk about identity, I have accentuated rather than obscured its power to make us wonder.