The Daily Reality: Living Under Apartheid

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Pass laws, forced removals, and Bantu education

The Pass Laws: Control of Every Movement

The pass laws were, in the daily experience of Black South Africans, the most invasive and most humiliating instrument of apartheid control. Every Black South African over the age of sixteen was required to carry their reference book — the dompas — at all times. It contained the holder's photograph, ethnic classification, employer's name, residential permit, tax payments, and permission — or lack of it — to be in particular areas at particular times.

A Black South African who left home without their pass, whose pass was not properly endorsed by an employer, whose permit had expired, or who was found in an area after curfew could be arrested on the spot. The penalty was a fine most people could not pay, leading to imprisonment; upon release, the cycle would begin again. Between 1916 and 1981, approximately seventeen million people were arrested for pass law violations — an average of over a quarter of a million arrests per year for the crime of being in the wrong place without the right papers. Police 'pass raids' on townships, workplaces, and public spaces were occasions of deliberate humiliation: men stopped on the street, publicly questioned, sometimes strip-searched, the message unmistakable — you do not belong here; your presence requires our permission; you are a subject, not a citizen.

District Six and Forced Removals: Destroying Communities

District Six was a vibrant, mixed-race, working-class neighbourhood in Cape Town — a community of musicians, traders, craftsmen, and families that had existed for over a century and produced a distinctive Cape cultural identity in music, cuisine, and social life. In 1966, the apartheid government declared District Six a 'white area' under the Group Areas Act. Over the following decade, sixty thousand people were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to barren, windswept townships on the Cape Flats — far from the city centre, far from established social networks, far from the culture they had built.

Their homes were bulldozed. The neighbourhood was razed. Nothing was built on the land for decades — no white community wanted to move there, because the land was cursed by the injustice done to clear it. District Six became a symbol of apartheid's most personal violence: not the violence of guns and prisons, but the violence of bureaucratic order, of forms and classifications and official decisions, systematically destroying the accumulated texture of human lives. Sophiatown in Johannesburg — another vibrant, mixed community, the birthplace of South African jazz and a remarkable literary culture — was demolished and replaced by a white suburb deliberately named 'Triomf' (Triumph).

Bantu Education: The Attack on the Mind

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 is, in the retrospective judgment of most scholars of South African education, the most damaging single piece of legislation in the country's history. Its effects on the intellectual and professional development of generations of Black South Africans are still being felt today, decades after apartheid's formal end.

Hendrik Verwoerd, who introduced the Act as Minister of Native Affairs, was refreshingly candid about its purpose: 'There is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd.' The Act transferred control of African schools from missionary organisations — which, whatever their colonial paternalism, had provided genuine academic education — to the state, which deliberately impoverished the curriculum.

The results were predictable and intentional. Black schools received a fraction of the per-pupil funding of white schools; teacher-to-pupil ratios were catastrophic; the curriculum was stripped of academic content and refocused on vocational training and the compulsory learning of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. It was this last requirement — imposing Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, as the language of education — that would trigger the most explosive act of resistance of the apartheid era, examined in the next lesson.

Daily Life Under Apartheid: Key Facts
Pass law arrests, 1916-1981: approximately 17 million — over a quarter of a million arrests per year.
District Six removals: approximately 60,000 people forcibly relocated after the 1966 'white area' declaration.
Bantu Education: Black schools received a fraction of the per-pupil funding of white schools.
Verwoerd's stated purpose of Bantu Education: to prevent Black South Africans from aspiring 'above their level.'
Sophiatown: demolished and replaced with a whites-only suburb named 'Triomf' (Triumph).

Key Takeaways

The daily reality of apartheid was defined by constant, bureaucratic humiliation: the pass laws criminalised ordinary movement for millions; forced removals under the Group Areas Act destroyed entire communities like District Six and Sophiatown; and Bantu Education deliberately impoverished the intellectual and professional development of generations of Black South Africans, with its architects explicit about that intent. The next lesson turns to the landmarks of resistance this daily reality provoked.