

# Rebels and Riches: Examining Social and Economic Consequences of Settler Protest in the Cape of Good Hope, 1775-1790

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## 1 Introduction

What are the social and economic consequences when political challengers confront the state, make themselves visible targets, and then fail to achieve political power or reform?

In 1779, after a decade of growing dissent, 404 settler farmers signed a petition for greater economic and political freedom from the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the Cape of Good Hope, present-day South Africa. These calls emerged from an international milieu of settler and citizen demands for independence, following the American Independence movement and drawing on political identities and strategies of Burghers in Holland to demand increased power. These dissenters made explicit a set of growing cleavages in the Cape society, which were a threat to VOC rule. Instead of capitulating, the Company largely rejected their demands. What were the impacts of stepping out of line so clearly without any success? More broadly, what happens when political challengers confront the state, make themselves visible targets, and then fail to achieve political power or reform?

This paper examines recruitment into the petition against the VOC, looks at the economic consequences for petitioners after the petition, and explores how social network mechanisms may have shaped both the causes and consequences of this political dissent. We draw on systematic historical tax panel data to compare the social and economic position of petitioners compared to non-petitioners to shed light on the social structures which shaped protest participation. To follow protest consequences we track petitioners and non-petitioners 10 years after the petition and compare their economic outcomes. We find that, surprisingly, those who challenged the state became wealthier in the period following the petition. Finally, we analyse one mechanism of this economic divergence: transformed social and economic networks. Drawing on a second

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novel dataset – public auctions of the assets of deceased farmers – we illustrate how the social and economic network structure of Cape farmer society, and the centrality of dissenters and non-dissenters, transformed in response to public political challenge.

This study offers new insights into the economic and social effects of historical political opposition, sheds new light on the dynamics of political action in settler colonial contexts, and examines how political identification shapes economic and social outcomes for communities well beyond the short *durée* moment of political mobilisation.

## 2 Causes and consequences of protest

Protest movements remain a central topic of theoretical debate in both contemporary and historical studies. Much recent scholarship has outlined a robust framework to identify a range of important drivers of political mobilization. This paper seeks to make two contributions to extend the existing debates.

First, while much work has studied a range of features which enable protest mobilization and action, there are relatively few works that have empirically examined the consequences of such protest action for those who participate (Giugni, 1998; Amenta *et al.*, 2010; Amenta & Polletta, 2019). This study breaks new ground by systematically tracing the economic and social positions of petitioners and non-petitioners years before and after their protest action. In doing so this paper seeks to contribute new perspectives on the consequences of movement participation.

Second, this paper examines the large scale social and economic features which shaped protest participation and seeks to adjudicate between major existing theories by testing them in the empirical context of a settler colonial society. There remains significant and unresolved disagreement between major schools about the large-scale social and economic conditions which produce the discontent that seeds protest action.<sup>1</sup> The Relative Deprivation approach (Davies, 1962) theorises that discontent arises from the relative downward mobility of a social group. Scholars who emphasise class consciousness or ‘structural equivalence’ argue that shared social positions and experiences create shared perceptions of injustice and political identity (Lorrain & White, 1971; Bearman, 1993; Ansell, 1997; Tilly, 2015). Lipset (1971) shows that friction and discontent arise in contexts where there are changes in the structure of economic organisation, whilst others such as Modernisation theory (Smelser, 1963) emphasises that this social friction emerges at centres of rapid societal transformation created by modernisation. Finally, some have argued that political mobilisation does not emerge from large-scale economic or societal structures but instead is best understood through examination of local social connections (Tilly, 1978; Oberschall, 1973; Gould, 1995; Hillmann, 2008). This disagreement offers an excellent

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<sup>1</sup>The focus on the meso and micro dynamics of mobilization (Tilly, 1978; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Johnston & Klandermans, 2004; Jasper, 2011) has led the literature to leave aside the questions of larger societal structures which shape discontent ever since McCarthy and Zald took the ‘extreme assumption’ that “that there is always enough discontent in any society to supply the grass-roots support for a movement” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 1215). Yet more recent work has emphasized the need to return to question of the ‘macro-social’ structures which drive political action (cf. Walder, 2009; Padgett & Powell, 2012; Jansen, 2017)

opportunity to test the validity of these theories in light of new empirical cases. By examining protest in this settler colonial context, we aim to explore how fitting these theoretical approaches are beyond the 20th century European and American contexts which gave rise to them. In doing so, this study offers a window into how the dynamics of a settler colony society might adjudicate, alter, or affirm existing ‘macro-structural’ theories of political mobilization.

### 3 Data and Methods

This paper uses two large novel historical datasets to examine both the sources of political mobilisation in the Cape and the economic and social consequences for those who opposed the colonial state. We use detailed panel tax census data from the Cape of Good Hope Panel data set that links the census returns (or *opgaafrolle*) of households over the 1775 to 1828 period in the Cape Colony (Fourie & Green, 2018; Rijpma *et al.*, 2020). This dataset enables us to examine the economic, class, and social position of those who participated in the petition contrast with non-participants.

We focus on the Stellenbosch district and match the names of 404 ‘Cape Patriot’ petitioners to themselves in the census returns, which allows us to measure the economic position of those who selected to sign the petition relative to those who did not, before and after the petition in 1779. We measure economic position or wealth by evaluating the inputs reported in the returns. We have data on the number of slaves, horses, cattle and sheep owned, as well as the number of vines planted and the grains sown.

To examine these dynamics of mobilisation and economic outcomes, we turn to one mechanism – social and economic networks. We reconstruct the networks of settlers using auctions of deceased estates (MOOC 10). Beyond their economic function, auctions brought together settlers into large social gatherings to meet and mingle over what were often multi-day social events. Often whole families would travel together and auctions became one social hub for both the local community and those travelling from further afield (Mitchell, 2014). In this way, participation in an auction also offers a proxy for participation in settler social networks.

Using the names of those who purchase at auctions, we construct a two-mode network where settlers are linked to auctions, and thus linked to each-other through co-attendance at auctions. We analyse the auction networks in three periods, the five years before the petition (1775-79) and the first and second five-year periods after the petition (1780-84, 1785-89). We match on average 200 petitioners and 2 420 non-petitioners in each period, with an average of 111 auctions in each period.

### 4 Economic causes and consequences

Studying approximately 2 700 individuals in the Stellenbosch region over the 1775 to 1779 period, we determine who selected into signing the petition. Preliminary linear probability model results suggest that across different types of farming in the Stellenbosch region, with the exception of vines, the ownership of slaves is positively associated with the likelihood of

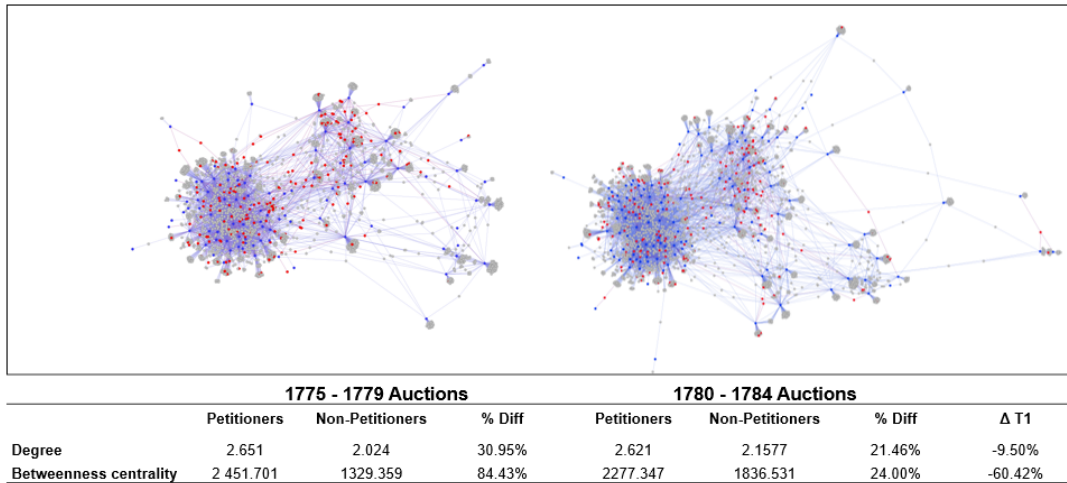
signing the petition and joining the Cape Patriots. Farmers engaged in grain and wine farming were also more likely to select into the protest movement, whilst the ownership of moveable assets such as cattle, sheep and horses, is either insignificant or negatively associated with the likelihood of signing.

We then estimate a difference-in-difference with year fixed effects model to evaluate the economic consequences for these petitions after they signalled their discontent. In line with our petition selection estimation, petitioners are positively associated with increased vines planted and grains sown pre-petition relative to non-petitioners. Non-petitioners are also associated with a decrease in these farming inputs relative to petitioners, who were relatively unaffected. Preliminary findings furthermore indicate that petitioners (relative to non-petitioners) are associated with higher slave, horse and cattle ownership pre-petition and also experienced higher growth in these moveable assets after the petition.

## 5 Network analysis

In this section, we seek to understand the social and economic consequences mediated through network mechanisms. Preliminary analysis of these networks speaks to both the capacity for political action of petitioners in the pre-petition period, and show significant social consequences in the post-petition period. We illustrate auction networks in Figure 1.

Figure 1: How changing social and economic networks shaped petitioners’ outcomes



*Note:* Figure illustrates network analysis auctions pre-petition from 1774 to 1779 (left), and post-petition from 1780 to 1784 (right). Grey nodes denote non-petitioners, red nodes denote petitioners, and blue nodes denote auctions.

We find that petitioners were far more socially connected and important than non-petitioners in the period prior to the petition. Of note, they attended (30%) more auctions than non-petitioners and were also key ‘bridges’ between communities, linking groups who would otherwise be disconnected (with a betweenness centrality score 84% greater than non-petitioners).

This suggests that, on average, petitioners were more socially central than non-petitioners in the settler network, having a greater capacity to move across multiple local communities, with the accordant recognition and social status that such a position entails.

This adds a social dimension to the already discussed economic dimension of the distinctiveness of petitioners. In addition to being more likely to be members from the more established economic strata (grain and wine farmers), they were also more likely to be socially influential individuals who were welcome in diverse social communities. This position of relative social authority may have buoyed the willingness of these members to challenge the VOC based on their established social importance.

In the period after the petition, however, we see marked decrease in the social standing of these figures in the auction networks. Although they remain more socially influential than non-petitioners, preliminary results suggest their social standing took a significant knock. They declined in all measures of social importance from the first period, with the largest decrease seen in the role that they play in linking across different social communities.

## 6 Discussion

These results suggest that participation in the petition brought to the fore social cleavages in Cape society and that taking a strong stance against the VOC reduced the ability of petitioners to move as widely in Cape society. The paper will go on to examine how this affected the social ties within the petitioners' community. A 'Recruitment' hypothesis seen in the protest networks literature would suggest that strong petitioner networks are necessary before the petition: here those willing to sign the petition would be more likely to be socially proximate to other signatories, thus strengthening their willingness to participate in collective action. An alternative 'Consolidation' hypothesis predicts that petitioners develop stronger social ties to each other after the petition. Here petitioners may be isolated from non-petitioner communities, strengthening their within-group ties, which may explain their economic success through increased in-group cooperation.

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