

Nelson Mandela: The Reluctant Revolutionary

On Nelson Mandela's inspiring achievements and tragic failures

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So it has finally come to pass that Nelson Mandela has succumbed to the inevitable and will be buried like every other mortal being. He is being praised, rightly, for his inspirational ability to rise above the brutal racial prejudices of his time. He is being characterised as the most famous victim of the old Apartheid regime, who, despite his 27 years of imprisonment, never sought vengeance against his oppressors but rather led an historic reconciliation process that transformed South Africa into a relatively peaceful, non-racial democracy.

To many, especially in this era of small politicians obsessed with petty issues, Mandela symbolises something profound: an individual willingness to devote one's life to a grand and good cause. He has come to symbolise mankind's desire to take a stand against repression and injustice and to create a freer, more equal world.

Alongside these nods to Mandela's commitment to the cause of challenging Apartheid, with many news channels now playing the court recording from the early Sixties in which he said racial equality was an ideal 'for which I am prepared to die', Mandela is also being discussed as a kind of redeeming victim: the victim who inherited the world - more specifically, South Africa - and who prevented a bloodbath and charted a new moral path based upon reconciliation and compromise.

On one level, it is quite legitimate to describe Mandela as a victim of Apartheid. As we will see below, all blacks living in South Africa in the postwar period were victims of racial prejudice. But victimhood, suffering through oppression, is not the same thing as consciously resisting one's oppression. To do that, what is needed is not the moral high ground that comes with victimhood, with accepting one's lot, but rather ideas and politics that are capable of inspiring and mobilising one's fellow victims to change their lot. We owe it to Mandela to assess his qualities as a politician and leader, and his true impact on South Africa, rather than simply remembering what was done to him by others.

Karl Marx, reflecting on the history-making potential of mankind, famously observed that men make their history but not in circumstances of their choosing. Nothing better sums up the political life of Nelson Mandela. It is useful to start with a brief outline of the conditions in which the young Mandela found himself in the early 1950s, in order to understand the circumstances that shaped his political choices and career.

Apartheid and victimhood

The common understanding of Apartheid is that it was an irrational system of racial discrimination introduced by the newly elected Afrikaner Nationalist Party when it came to power in 1948. But Apartheid was not irrational. It was a very rational response to the conditions the National Party found itself in at the time.

Up to the Second World War, South Africa was a colony of Britain. British influence restricted the development of the South African economy, centring it around the production of things Britain needed: gold, diamonds and other raw materials. This was good for Britain, but it thwarted the ambitions of the emerging indigenous capitalist class in South Africa. The National Party government elected in 1948 was strongly influenced by the independent outlook of the Afrikaners, the descendants of the early Dutch settlers. It was committed to promoting the independent development of the South African economy under the direction of local entrepreneurs. Earlier attempts to wrest control over South Africa's gold and diamond wealth from Britain, half a century earlier, had led to the Anglo-Boer War, when Britain invaded the then independent Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State - but now, in the postwar period, Afrikaner nationalists were in control.

The indigenous white South African capitalists set about creating the conditions in which a carefully controlled labour force might produce wealth on a scale that would allow South Africa to compete on the world market. They inherited a host of racist institutions from the British administration. And they took full advantage of this existing pattern of racial discrimination to streamline the economy and realise their capitalist ambitions. A high rate of exploitation had the added advantage of attracting much-needed foreign capital.

This is what gave rise to Apartheid, the subjection of all aspects of black people's lives to stringent and discriminatory regulation. In 1952, a new law extended influx controls, making it necessary for every black over the age of 16 to carry a 'reference book' - the notorious 'pass'. Another law proclaimed that blacks had no right to live in urban areas. The tribally based homelands for blacks - covering less than 13 per cent of South Africa's total land space and based in remote and barren areas (initially established by British colonialism) - were now constituted as the only places where blacks were legally entitled to live and own land. 'Separate development' was enshrined in law.

Apartheid reduced the lives of blacks to a totalitarian nightmare. The homelands transformed every black in South Africa into a migrant worker. The rigorous implementation of the pass laws and other notorious laws, like the Suppression of Communism Act, created a state of terror for all blacks in the early years of Apartheid. Migrant labour, based upon a more efficient and brutal implementation of the old British system of labour bureaux, ensured a steady flow of labour from black homelands and townships to the white-owned mines, factories and farms. Black workers were herded into compounds or hovels in townships and denied any say or control over their meagre existence.

Further legislation dictated the terms of black exploitation in industry. In 1953, the government passed the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act. This declared all strikes by black workers illegal. Blacks had already been excluded from the definition of 'employee' and banned from joining trade unions by the Industrial Conciliation Act of the 1920s, during the British administration. The new regime amended that act in the 1950s to further institutionalise job reservation; it gave the labour minister the power to reserve jobs for whites.

Discrimination was not restricted to the workplace. To enforce Apartheid rigorously in urban areas, the authorities were obliged to regulate all forms of contact between black and white South Africa. Hence, they introduced the so-called 'petty apartheid' regulations - the restrictions on black access

to restaurants, beaches, hotels and public transport and on racial inter-marriage. Far from being irrational, however, 'petty apartheid' played a critical role in forging an alliance between the South African regime and the white working classes.

Alongside benefiting South Africa's indigenous capitalist class, the Apartheid system gave white workers important privileges, with the result that they were fully integrated into the racist system of domination. The extension of segregation from every workplace to every church, every neighbourhood and every household and bedroom in the country guaranteed that every white, regardless of his class, had a stake in the system. Job reservation and marriage restrictions enshrined the principle of racial superiority in law, and strengthened the allegiance of white workers to the capitalist class.

The fundamental point to grasp about Apartheid was that, far from being irrational in the way that it is discussed today, it was the very condition that allowed South African capitalism to grow at the remarkable levels that it did in the late 1950s and 60s.

The oppression of the black masses created the conditions in which South African capitalism could take advantage of global postwar economic expansion. The state provided industry with cheap black labour and encouraged domestic manufacturing through a wide range of subsidies and import restrictions. In the 12 years up to 1960, real gross domestic product (yes, without measuring 'happiness') grew by 67 per cent. South Africa became an investor's paradise - the rate of return on capital invested during this period stood at 19.9 per cent; manufacturing profits averaged 24.6 per cent. The repression of black workers and the inflow of capital transformed the economy. The rate of mechanisation rose rapidly and the structure of the South African economy began to resemble that of the advanced capitalist nations of the West. By 1969, the share of gross domestic product tied up in industrial holdings was 23 per cent - in West Germany it was 24 per cent, in France 25 per cent, and in Italy 20 per cent. Apartheid was no obstacle to capitalist development; on the contrary, it was the very mechanism which promoted it.

These were the circumstances in which Nelson Mandela and others were forced to make history. This is the context within which we need to examine Mandela's politics, and assess his political legacy.

Oppression, resistance and African nationalism

It is important to be clear that Apartheid was not merely a system of economic exploitation - it was a system that required systematic coercion to guarantee its survival. Apartheid may have provided super-profits, but it could not avoid provoking the resistance of the black masses, whose super-exploitation was the secret of the white minority regime's high profitability. And this constant threat of black resistance forced the regime to deploy its repressive apparatus. Repression and terror were an integral part of Apartheid.

For anyone who did not experience Apartheid, it is almost impossible to grasp what life for blacks was like. It was brutal, humiliating, dehumanised. Whites' fear, arrogance, opulence, conspicuous consumption and living standards way beyond that experienced by ordinary working-class people in other countries, alongside their callous indifference to the plight of their fellow human beings, reinforced the daily injustices and loss of dignity suffered by the majority of South Africa's people. It was considered normal for white children to refer to their black servants as 'boy' or 'girl'. These servants were charged with cleaning up after white children while their own children were left with elderly grandparents in a rural backwater which could barely support human life. These well-fed, clothed and educated white kids were called 'Madam' or 'Baas' (Afrikaans for 'boss') by their adult

servants. To be black in Apartheid South Africa was akin to being a slave; there was the denial of the most basic human rights.

Not surprisingly, this system bred resistance. Mass struggles against Apartheid broke out from the earliest days of the new system. The African National Congress (ANC) and later the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) - a more radical, strictly black nationalist group - led mass movements of civil disobedience. These movements pursued their aims through non-violent action, attempting to realise their objectives through legal channels.

The state responded with naked force. When 8,500 blacks volunteered to be arrested in defiance of the pass laws in 1953, government authorities stepped in and crushed the anti-pass campaign. The state's response to continuing passive defiance of Apartheid laws was to unleash a wave of terror, culminating in the killing of 67 unarmed demonstrators in Sharpeville in 1960. No concessions were to be made to the democratic aspirations of the black majority. After Sharpeville, the ANC and PAC were outlawed, and black nationalist leaders, including Mandela, were imprisoned.

The brutal crushing of black resistance in this period expressed a stark reality - that black nationalism, even moderate black nationalism, could simply not be accommodated in conditions where Afrikaner nationalism was playing the historical role of developing indigenous capitalism. The tragic historic accident of South Africa is that the success of Afrikaner nationalism meant African nationalism, of the kind articulated by Mandela and the ANC, could not be accommodated at any level. So even though many of the African nationalists were as pro-market as the Afrikaners, they could not be brought on board by the system: the system was too thoroughly reliant on the super-exploitation of blacks and the corresponding institutionalisation of white racial superiority in all areas of public and private life.

This had disastrous consequences for the small emerging black middle class: their actually quite moderate demands for equal participation, articulated by Mandela and the ANC, fell on deaf ears. As an educated elite, they inevitably became the voice of the black majority, which meant that their measured, pro-capitalist worldview came to dominate black nationalist politics. The Apartheid regime's intransigence even towards these moderate nationalists had a strange effect - it forced Mandela and the ANC to seek more radical alternatives, more radical outlets, which eventually led them to make an alliance with the South African Communist Party. This key shift needs to be understood if Mandela's politics and legacy are to be fully explained.

The moderation of the anti-Apartheid struggle

Mandela was always a very moderate, even conservative politician. Born in 1918, the eldest son of the royal family of the Transkei, groomed for respectability, status and privilege, Mandela eventually trained as a lawyer and became a representative of a small emerging educated black middle class in the 1940s.

The law practice he established in Johannesburg, having fled his home to avoid an arranged traditional marriage, brought him into sharp contact with the living hell of ordinary black people as they struggled for any modicum of justice. But like many of his fellow professionals at the time, Mandela grew frustrated with the extreme moderation and passivity of the old guard of the ANC, which had been founded in 1912 and which had petitioned the British Crown for change for years as racial discrimination became increasingly institutionalised in colonial South Africa. By 1944, Mandela and some of the 'Young Lions' - the name given to the increasingly frustrated younger black middle-class professionals joining the ANC - established the Congress Youth League, which would eventually radicalise the ANC and set it upon a course of mass defiance before it was banned

after Sharpeville. That the league had fewer than 200 founding members exposed the lack of social power this small group had in South Africa at the time.

Yet while Mandela and the new frustrated black professionals were seen as radical in contrast with the older ANC guard, the writings of Mandela in this period, indeed much of his defence during the numerous trials he was subjected to before being imprisoned for life, reveal just how pro-capitalist and conservative his politics really were.

During the Rivonia Trial, for example, Mandela went to great lengths to explain that the Freedom Charter, the most important political document adopted by the ANC, was 'by no means a blueprint for a socialist state'. Its call for redistribution, not nationalisation, of land was justified on the basis of accepting the need for 'an economy based on private enterprise'. For Mandela, 'the realisation of the Freedom Charter would open up fresh fields for a prosperous African population of all classes, including the middle class'. This vision, he explained, actually corresponded with 'the old policy of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party which, for many years, had as part of its programme the nationalisation of the gold mines which, at that time, were controlled by foreign capital'.

To make things even clearer, Mandela stated that 'the ANC has never at any period of its history advocated a revolutionary change in the economic structure of the country, nor has it, to the best of my recollection, ever condemned capitalist society'. Mandela was even prepared to countenance some form of qualified franchise rather than black majority rule, as a means of placating white concerns about the ANC's political aspirations at the time.

As an insignificant social force, removed from the black working classes and poor, Mandela and the ANC stood little chance of generating any meaningful political pressure that might affect change. They needed the black majority; they needed to find a way to mobilise the black masses in order to agitate and press for political change. To do this, they could not simply project their own, rather narrow political and pro-market aspirations on to poorer blacks, who were overwhelmingly made up of urbanised wage labourers and would have had little enthusiasm for a campaign that was basically about improving the lot of black professionals within the system of South African capitalism. This is why they turned to the South African Communist Party.

The SACP was able to give the ANC the radical credentials it needed in order to mobilise the black masses. Caught between its own insignificance as a social force and the uncompromising Apartheid regime, the ANC felt it had no choice but to embrace Stalinism. This quite opportunistic linking-up of two divergent forces would have immense and disastrous consequences for the black masses. Tethered to a movement that appeared to be radical and represent their interests, little did they understand that the ANC's programme was never about overthrowing capitalism but rather was a pragmatic campaign to try to bring the regime 'to its senses' and negotiate a reform of Apartheid.

It was only with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the final discrediting of 'African socialism', that the political climate in South Africa radically altered. Now, in a post-Soviet world, with socialist movements in disarray, the Apartheid regime could contemplate bringing the ANC into government, where its pro-market roots could be teased away from its pragmatic embrace of state socialism. In short, the ANC used the SACP in order to connect with the black masses and give its moderate demands a cover of urgency and radicalism; but once invited into the corridors of power, the ANC could jettison these connections and return to its openly pro-market, narrowly reformist roots. It was a betrayal of the aspirations of the majority of black South Africans.

This is not the Mandela legacy that will be discussed in the mainstream press in the coming days. The tragedy was that in the Fifties and Sixties, Mandela and the ANC failed to understand the circumstances they were in and what they were dealing with. Driven by a pro-market predisposition,

their political programme was a pragmatic one, aimed at putting pressure on the regime to institute reforms that would open the economy to the aspirant black middle classes. With the power of hindsight, it can be viewed as one of the most hopelessly naive political programmes in history. The so-called 'armed struggle' the ANC launched in the Fifties and Sixties, which aimed to sabotage infrastructure in order to frighten foreign capital from South Africa, was probably the most poorly organised armed struggle in the history of national liberation movements. Indeed, Mandela, during the Rivonia Trial, defended his actions by explicitly suggesting that these gestures were consciously aimed at containing more radical elements in the ANC's ranks, who were clamouring for a real armed struggle to be unleashed. Nothing better summed up their parlous amateurishness than when the entire ANC political leadership were captured in a police raid that also secured ANC membership lists and its blueprint for the structure of Umkhonto We Sizwe, a new armed wing.

Mandela paid the price for this naivety and amateurishness. So did countless others, many of whom lost their lives. The cavalier attitude often displayed by the ANC's leadership towards its own supporters expressed a depressing reality: that these supporters were seen largely as a stage army to be used by the ANC leadership in its pursuit of its narrow political ends. This cast a shadow over South African politics for decades, resulting in the ANC being forced into exile to be sustained by external support while falling almost into total obscurity inside South Africa. There was never any real accounting for the defeat and failures of the ANC. Instead, the myth of Mandela grew stronger the longer he remained in prison, particularly outside of South Africa.

But it was not the ANC or Mandela who, later on, put the issue of black liberation back on to the South African agenda. Rather, it was the black working class - the same black working class that had been mobilised in a half-hearted manner by the ANC in the Fifties and Sixties, before being brutally repressed by the regime. It was they who took centre stage with the emergence of the black trade union movement, and increased militancy, in the 1970s. They forced something of a reckoning in 1970s and 80s South Africa. And once again, Mandela was called upon to play an historic role in circumstances not of his own choosing - this time to be a figurehead of reform to placate the radicalised masses. Released from prison, Mandela, together with the ANC, effectively abandoned its mass base in order to get a piece of the action and oversee change in South Africa that fell far short of black majority rule - the democratic principle at the heart of the historic struggle against Apartheid [1].

The walk to freedom goes on

The tragedy of Nelson Mandela is that in the 1950s and 60s he articulated, in fact embodied, a great moral blow to the idea of white superiority, yet his politics made him incapable of making good on this vision and winning equality for all South Africa's blacks.

Again, it is difficult for those who never experienced Apartheid to understand just what an impact Mandela had when he articulated the universal case for human freedom. He shook white South Africa and all those who believed in the natural superiority of the white race. He did not simply challenge the white status quo and its Western backers; he challenged something much more fundamental - the very foundation of the moral framework of white superiority, with its assumptions of a natural order in which whites had the right, indeed the duty, to civilise the black man. He represented the personification of everything the white regime said the black man was incapable of. Even worse for Apartheid's rulers, he injected dignity into the hearts and minds of black South Africa. His articulation of the plight of the oppressed masses revealed that blacks were perfectly capable, able and willing to fight for and enjoy freedom, equality and human dignity. His clarion call for political action, even for taking up arms to fight the oppressor, let the history-making capacity of

the black majority out of the bag, to which it would not return - until, ironically and tragically, it was curtailed by Mandela himself and the organisation he helped to build, the ANC, when they were brought on board in the 1990s to front the reform of Apartheid that left vast swathes of South Africa's blacks still in poverty.

The tragedy of South Africa is that Mandela's politics would ultimately disallow him even from making the moral vision of racial equality a reality. Yet despite this, he remains in the hearts of black South Africa. This is not because the black majority are stupid or have been duped. They owe a debt of gratitude to a man whose articulation of their aspirations helped to initiate their long walk to freedom. But that walk to freedom is not complete. South Africa remains a deeply divided, in some ways still 'apartheid' state. Burying Nelson Mandela's political legacy, his early narrow political programme and his later canonisation as 'reconciler', might well prove to be the first step towards finally making freedom and equality for all in South Africa a reality.

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P.S.

* http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/the_reluctant_revolutionary/14386#.UqWbpM3kTYI

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 30558), [South Africa: still an apartheid state](#).