

Mandela's Democracy

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The Tribal Model of Democracy

In his speech from the dock, at his 1962 trial for inciting African workers to strike and leaving the country without a passport, Nelson Mandela described the initial formation of his political ideas:

"Many years ago, when I was a boy brought up in my village in the Transkei, I listened to the elders of the tribe telling stories about the good old days, before the arrival of the White man. Then our people lived peacefully under the democratic rule of their kings and their 'amapakati', and moved freely and confidently up and down the country without let or hindrance. Then the country was ours, in our own name and right. We occupied the land, the forests, the rivers; we extracted the mineral wealth beneath the soil and all the riches of this beautiful country. We set up and operated our own government, we controlled our own armies and we organized our own trade and commerce. The elders would tell tales of the wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland, as well as the acts of valour performed by generals and soldiers during those epic days. The names of Dingane and Bambata, among the Zulus, of Hintsa, Makana and Ndlambe of the Amakhosa, of Sekhukhuni and others in the north, were mentioned as the pride and glory of the entire African nation... The land, then the main means of production, belonged to the whole tribe, and there was no individual ownership whatsoever. There were no classes, no rich or poor, and no exploitation of man by man. All men were free and equal and this was the foundation of government. Recognition of this general principle found expression in the constitution of the Council, variously called Imbizo, or Pitso, or Kgotla, which governs the affairs of the tribe. The council was so completely democratic that all members of the tribe could participate in its deliberations. Chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, all took part and endeavoured to influence its decisions. It was so weighty and influential a body that no step of any importance could ever be taken by the tribe without reference to it... In such a society are contained the seeds of revolutionary democracy in which none will be held in slavery or servitude, and in which poverty, want and insecurity shall be no more. is is the inspiration which, even today, inspires me and my colleagues in our political struggle."

Mandela returns to this theme more briefly in his speech from the dock at the Rivonia trial, and again in his autobiography, drafted on Robben Island in 1974. There he describes what he learned from the proceedings of the tribal meetings at the Thembu Great Place at Mquekezweni. He expands on the earlier account, personalizes it, and draws from it an account of the role of the democratic leader:

“It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption, and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens. (Women, I am afraid, were deemed second-class citizens.)... At first, I was astonished at the vehemence—and candour—with which people criticized the regent. He was not above criticism—in fact, he was often the principal target of it. But no matter how serious the charge, the regent simply listened, not defending himself, showing no emotion at all. The meetings would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all. Unanimity, however, might be an agreement to disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken together as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority. Only at the end of the meeting, as the sun was setting, would the regent speak. His purpose was to sum up what had been said and form some consensus among the diverse opinions. But no conclusion was forced on people who disagreed. If no agreement could be reached, another meeting would be held... As a leader, I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place. I have always endeavoured to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. Oftentimes, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in the discussion. I always remember the regent’s maxim: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.”

These two passages set out the basic elements of a model of democracy which is clearly distinct from those outlined in conventional treatments of the topic. It is not the only conception of democracy to be found in Mandela’s writings, but it is the one most extensively described and most explicitly claimed as his own. According to this model, democracy consists of giving everyone a chance to speak on the matters that concern their conditions of life, and allowing the discussion to continue until sufficient consensus has been reached, with due regard to the standing of the people concerned, for the community to proceed without division. The role of the leader is to interpret the arguments and viewpoints put forward in debate in such a way as to make that consensus possible, drawing from expressions of difference a “tribal wisdom” which reaffirms their essential unity. The model requires that the leader who takes this role should be accepted, but not necessarily elected. What is crucial is that the question of leadership be settled beforehand, and kept separate from the question of how the popular will is to be interpreted.

In calling this the tribal model of democracy, I am seeking mainly to describe a current in the ideological history of modern capitalism, and am not taking a position about the extent to which precolonial Africa conformed to this ideology or not.

The Pre-capitalist Character of the Tribal Model

There are at least four features of pre-capitalist society—all of which distinguish it from capitalism—which are integral to this tribal model of democracy. None of them imply a rigid dichotomy between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, or a linear mode of progression from one to the other. On the contrary, the thrust of the argument that follows is to show how past and present interpenetrate precisely within the context of capitalism, and in resistance to its political forms.

First, in pre-capitalist society (including the context which Mandela describes), the place of each person in the system of production is fixed by custom and tradition. Acceptance of such custom and

tradition is essential for the stability of such a society. These customs and traditions will evolve relatively gradually, as a rule. In some cases, their evolution will be circumscribed by what nature allows. For as long as all accept their place within the social order, within certain limits, it will always be possible to achieve some kind of consensus. But it will necessarily be a consensus based on that acceptance of the place of each within production. In the context of capitalist society, in contrast, the major decisions which must be made can have no such common premise of a social order in which all know their place, and there is a place for all.

Second, accepting the customs of the tribe provides a certain security for the individual. With no system of wage-labor, there is also no incentive to cut off anyone's access to the means of production, as there is under capitalism. The chief cannot increase his wealth by removing people from the land; on the contrary, the more people who live on the land, the stronger the tribe in relation to its neighbors, the more tribute is paid to the chief, the more hands are available for collective projects. In capitalism, wage-labor is the principal means of access to the means of production, and profits depend on not paying more for it than the capitalist can help.

Third, the pre-capitalist context provides the basis for an ethic of communal solidarity, in which, for example, the chief makes sure that those in need are helped, and that no one goes hungry while the resources of the tribe are sufficient to prevent that. This ethic helps to make tribal consensus possible, as the well-being of the tribe is genuinely in the interest of its members. Within capitalism, such an ethic is an economic irrationality. Accordingly, huge numbers of people go hungry, although the resources of society are sufficient to prevent it. The consumerist ethic of capitalism works against the very idea that a common wisdom exists and can be formulated through discussion.

Fourth, there is no separation of politics and economics in pre-capitalist society. Those who have any say in the life of the tribe can also discuss what is to be done with its resources. This makes it possible to have a council which, in Mandela's formulation, is "so weighty and influential a body that no step of any importance could ever be taken by the tribe without reference to it." In contrast, capitalism depends on a separation of politics and economics, which ensures that basic decisions about the use that society will make of its productive resources are removed from the public sphere.

Although Mandela's tribal model of democracy is essentially pre-capitalist in character, it is articulated as an alternative to liberal or capitalist democracy. It is a reconstruction for purposes of political advocacy. In some respects, it might be considered as lagging behind bourgeois democracy: leadership is decided by birth not election; part of the adult population is excluded from public debate and decision-making; those who participate do so on the basis of a hierarchy of property and prestige, rather than that of formal equality; there is little prospect of the poorer members of society organizing themselves on the basis of their own aspirations. But it also differs from bourgeois democracy in ways which may be considered as advances on it: it sustains a way of life in which all are concretely involved in deciding the direction of society; it brings all issues concerning society within the sphere of public discussion; its structures of leadership and governance are not distorted and alienated by the creation of a professional layer of politicians.

The Tribal Model as Critique of Capitalism

There might be a sense in which the tribal model "contains the seeds of revolutionary democracy," as Mandela suggests. But this does not answer the question of whether those seeds could sprout in the soil of capitalist society. Although the tribal model of democracy depicts pre-capitalist society, it could not easily have emerged in that context. Indeed, this conception of the pre-colonial past emerged in South Africa only in the 1940s, after the integrity of tribal society itself had been

destroyed, making any real return to its conditions impossible. The tribal model began life as a protest against the exclusion of urban, educated Africans from what they saw as their rightful place in the class hierarchy of capitalist society. At the same time, it served to mobilize a dispossessed proletariat around democratic demands.

The idea of an African past whose heroes transcended ethnic division was first developed by liberal educators and missionaries in the 1920s and 1930s. It was aimed at showing African students the sphere of their own potential contribution to the linear, world-historical march of progress—championed and exemplified by the British Empire. But this idea was put to a very different use by the next generation of African intellectuals. The crucial figure in the initial development of the tribal model of democracy was Anton Lembede, philosopher of Africanism and first elected president of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League. Until his early death in 1947, Lembede's defense of the "glorious achievements of the heroes of our past" was uncontested among that generation, and hugely influential. It was coupled with an argument that "ancient Bantu society" was radically democratic, in that it enabled "any citizen" to participate equally in the affairs of government, and "naturally socialistic," in that "land belonged to the whole tribe." Mandela's later recollections of his childhood experience often follows Lembede's formulations verbatim. Lembede called on Africans to recover this legacy in their own time. This exhortation depended on a cyclical view of history according to which the "ancient glory" of Africa was to be revived.

But in this version, the tribal model of democracy remained in a fundamentally ambiguous relationship to capitalism. While it rejected capitalism, it could never provide a real analysis of it. Instead, it saw capitalism as the product of the philosophical outlook of European civilization, against which an African philosophy of harmony and unity might prevail. Invoking a pre-capitalist past as the basis for a call for racial equality within the capitalist present, it was unable to generate a real critique of capitalism, on the one hand, or to reach an effective accommodation with it, on the other.

Mandela's Transformation of the Tribal Model

Soon after Mandela arrived in Johannesburg from the Transkei in 1943, he met Lembede and fell under his influence. But by the 1950s, Mandela had abandoned his Africanism, and become one of the ANC's main proponents of non-racialism. His writings of the 1950s look to the African townships, not the pre-colonial past, for inspiration. It is likely that Mandela shared the view articulated by Chief Luthuli in 1952 that "tribal organisation is outmoded and traditional rule by chiefs retards my people." There is, then, nothing self-evident in Mandela's exposition of the tribal model in his speech from the dock in 1962. And yet we can see how that exposition transformed the tribal model in such a way as to make it an ideological instrument for a democratic accommodation with capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

First, Mandela emphasized the moral basis of tribal political institutions, rather than the institutions themselves, and did so in a way which mostly drew them closer to the formal ideals of Western liberalism. Thus, "all men were free and equal and this was the foundation of government" "all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens." The hereditary position of the chief is lost from view in this version of tribal democracy, and his tolerance of criticism and commitment to open debate comes to the fore.

Second, Mandela's evocation of the tribal past is made to serve as the basis of the moral stance taken by himself as an individual. It formed part of a moral dramatization of the South African conflict of in which Mandela was both a central protagonist and an active interpreter. For Lembede,

by contrast, the tribal model of democracy had served as a source of values for the ideal society. Mandela repeatedly traces his own political vocation to his hopes, as a boy listening to the tales of the elders, that he could continue the legacy of the African heroes. In his trial speeches, in particular, he sets out the moral requirements of that vocation: he and his comrades must “choose between compliance with the law and compliance with our consciences” they must act as “men of honesty, men of purpose, and men of public morality and conscience” “if I had my time over,” he declares, “I would do the same again, and so would any man who dares call himself a man” above all, as he states in the final words of his speech from the dock at Rivonia, he is “prepared to die” for the ideal of a free and democratic society which animates “the struggle of the African people.” Through all of this, the tribal model is extended significantly, in such a way as to make it a model of the democratic virtues, and in some moments a model of democracy constituted by such virtues.

Third, at the same time as stressing the need for these democratic virtues, Mandela constantly returns in his speeches and writings to the collective context in which his major decisions are made, and in which these virtues are generated. His position as volunteer-in-chief in the Defiance Campaign, as convener of the organizing committee of the national strike to protest against the white referendum on the Republic; his decision not to surrender himself after a warrant for his arrest had been issued; his decision to leave South Africa illegally and return; the decision to form the armed wing of the liberation movement, Umkhonto we Sizwe—on each occasion, the display of virtue is made to depend on the collective decision. The democratic virtues, in effect, are embodied in the courageous and self-sacrificing leader, who embodies them only on behalf of the larger collectivity. The moral integrity of the leader (whether it be an individual or an organization), rather than the principle of heredity, becomes crucial in legitimizing the interpretation of the larger consensus, allocated to such a leader by the tribal model.

Fourth, to a greater degree than any other African leader appealing to the tribal past, Mandela’s model of that past is differentiated. Its essential harmony is achieved not through the negation of differences, but through the development of moral codes for overcoming them. In his accounts of the tribal past, he switches at crucial moments from the singular on which Lembede’s Africanism depended (“the African people,” “the fatherland”) to the plural (“under the democratic rule of our kings” “our own armies”). This recognition of different African communities raises the question of their relations with each other. Within the Africanist framework, this is not insignificant; for as long as the organic solidarity of “the African people” was presupposed, no such question could occur. Once it does occur, it leaves space for an account of the role of the democratic leader in enabling different communities to reconcile their differences harmoniously.

Shifts in the political strategies and thought of the ANC during the 1950s helped to fill this newly-created space. Cooperation between the ANC and the South African Indian Congress, then the establishment of allied organizations for coloreds and whites, required a move away from the Africanist idea of national identity being rooted in a distinctive philosophical outlook. The fundamental premise of the “four nations” thesis of the Congress Movement was the possibility that identities could change and develop along lines that were “national” in a larger sense. While the tribal model never explicitly informed the ANC’s ever more inclusive nationalism, it increasingly formed Mandela’s own role within it—and, through his example, the model of democratic leadership within the ANC.

Fifth, as the result of the conceptual shifts and developments outlined above, the tribal model of democracy comes to be removed from the cyclical conception of history in which Africanists had most often—though never quite consistently—located it. The tribal past served as personal inspiration for the heroic individual, not as a summons to the African people to relive their former glory. Mandela appears never to have doubted that the larger historical process was linear and progressive. His admiration for the African past presented no barrier to his admiration for the

Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, British Parliament and the American Congress. These did not belong, as for Lembede, within a fundamentally different philosophical outlook. In this sense, Mandela can be said to have returned the conception of the unified African past to its liberal and missionary origins.

The result of this fivefold transformation was to create a moral framework for South African politics in which Africanist and Western liberal elements were integrated in so instinctive and original a way that Mandela himself could probably not have said where the one ended and the other began. This framework had disabling effects in some respects, and enabling effects in others. Although it was a powerful mobilizing tool, it set limits to political clarity.

Mandela on Capitalism and Socialism

Above all, this moral framework required a fatal ambiguity on the question of capitalism and socialism. For to the extent that this question divides society, the leader who is to take on the consensus-interpreting role required by the tribal model of democracy can give his allegiance to neither, without endangering the tribal model itself. The need to avoid such allegiance is, I believe, the only way to explain the extraordinary and persistent confusion of Mandela's views on capitalism and socialism. A brief account of his economic views will show how the tribal model made room for the capitulation of the ANC to capital.

This capitulation is often located in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the collapse of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In Mandela's case, the ground for it was laid in his earliest economic writing, a defense of the nationalization clauses of the Freedom Charter, published in 1956. The Freedom Charter, Mandela argued, was "by no means a blueprint for a socialist state but a program for the unification of various classes and groupings amongst the people on a democratic basis... [It] visualizes the transfer of power not to any single social class but to all the people of this country, be they workers, peasants, professional men or petty bourgeoisie." The curiosity of the argument is that it neither avoids the existence of classes (as would a liberal democrat, emphasizing individual rights instead) nor draws any conclusion about their relationship (as would a Marxist). It acknowledges the existence of classes, but assumes that each can pursue its aims in harmony with the rest. The model of democracy which enables class relationships to be harmonized is surely the tribal one; just as the chief extracts a consensus from the differing opinions of the tribe, so the democratic state extracts a consensus from bosses and workers, enabling each side to pursue its interests without impeding the interests of the other.

The same premise is needed in order to understand the views on capitalism and socialism set out in Mandela's autobiography. On the one hand, he praises Marxism as a "searchlight illuminating the dark night of racial oppression," and socialism as "the most advanced stage of economic life then evolved by man." He is fiercely critical of the "contemptible" character of American imperialism. But at no stage does he draw the conclusion that it is necessary to fight against capitalism or imperialism. And on his release from prison, when George Bush telephones to tell him he has included him "on his short list of world leaders whom he briefed on important issues," Mandela immediately accepts his bona fides; the entire problem of imperialism is undone at a stroke. For the tribal model can be extended across the globe, as long as leaders can find a way of recognizing each other's proper status, and allowing them to speak for their followers.

Mandela's shifting positions on economic policy since his release from prison are well-known. His memorandum to P.W. Botha of March 1989 reaffirmed the words of his Rivonia speech on "the need for some form of socialism to enable our people to catch up with the advanced countries of the world

and to overcome their legacy of poverty.” Until the meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in 1992, he continued to defend nationalization as an instrument of economic policy. But on his return from that event, he noted: “We have observed the hostility and concern of businessmen towards nationalization, and we can’t ignore their perceptions... We are well aware that if you cannot co-operate with business, you cannot succeed in generating growth.” The policies of the ANC moved rapidly towards privatization, fiscal austerity, and budgetary discipline. By the time he addressed the Joint Houses of Congress of the United States on October 6, 1994, Mandela was ready to proclaim the free market as the “magical elixir” which would bring freedom and equality to all.

It appears both to those who praise Mandela as a realist, and those who denounce him as a traitor, that he had abandoned all he had stood for before. But there is no betrayal in his record. He has simply remained true to the underlying premise which had animated his economic thought all along: the need for the leader to make use of his prestige to put forward as the tribal consensus the position which was most capable of avoiding overt division. Once it became apparent that “the hostility and concern of businessmen towards nationalization” was more than even the prestige of Mandela could alter, his prestige had to be used for the cause of privatization. The capitalist market had become the meeting place of the global tribe! Even then, Mandela would continue to claim impartiality in the conflict of ideologies, holding in a lecture delivered in Singapore in March 1997 that South Africa was “neither socialist nor capitalist, but was driven rather by the desire to uplift its people.” For him, the character of the economy, and through it the movement of history, is defined on the basis of the consensus which the leader can interpret at a given moment. A hidden consistency in his political thought holds together a dual commitment to democracy and capitalism, and legitimates a capitalist onslaught on the mass of South Africans, who sustained the struggle for democracy for decades.

Mandela’s Democracy

The new South Africa—inaugurated by the election victory of Mandela’s ANC in April 1994—is, to a greater extent than is often realized, what Nelson Mandela has made it. To some extent, the limits of social change in South Africa were established by the global context. But the tribal model of democracy which I have outlined here was crucial at an ideological level in legitimating the negotiations process which led to democratic elections, the negotiation strategy of the ANC and the settlement which emerged from it.

Mandela’s transformation of the tribal model had legitimated the ANC’s role as interpreter of the African consensus on the basis of the sacrifices of its leaders, in a context where the original principle of heredity no longer applied. By the time the apartheid regime was ready to negotiate, it was Mandela himself, the world’s most famous political prisoner and the living symbol of sacrifice, who had adopted that role. This is already evident in his letter to P.W. Botha in July 1989, proposing negotiations between the ANC and the National Party as the country’s “two major political bodies.” Mandela emphasizes that he acts on his own authority, not that of the ANC, and implicitly confers the same authority on Botha.

Once Mandela had been released from prison and negotiations had begun, the crucial idea which made it possible for the ANC to organize the oppressed majority around the tribal model was that of society being made up of “sectors”—youth, women, business, labor, political parties, religious and sporting bodies, and the like—each with a distinctive role to play. This idea has emerged from the organizational needs of the struggle against apartheid when repressive conditions prevented them from mobilizing around directly political demands. It was now used to insulate the leadership of the liberation movement from critical questioning. In this vein, Mandela explained to the Consultative

Business Movement in May 1990: “Both of us—you representing the business world and we a political movement—must deliver. The critical questions are whether we can in fact act together and whether it is possible for either of us to deliver if we cannot or will not co-operate.” In calling upon business—and, in their turn, labor, youth, students—to act within the limits of a “national consensus,” the question of the basis of that consensus could be removed from sight. In effect, the “tribal elders” of South African capitalism were gathered together in a consensus which could only be “democratic” on the basis of capitalism.

The tribal model of democracy has come to form the ideological contradictions of the new South Africa. It is nowhere to be found in the constitution of the new South Africa, nor in the programs and policies of the ruling ANC. But it informs many of the institutions of the new South Africa, and above all the real relationships of power behind the facade of formal democratic procedures. In its many institutional embodiments, and above all in the hugely symbolic presence of Mandela, it calls upon the oppressed majority, in particular, to sacrifice in the cause of building a new society. They respond with a recognition of the ties of solidarity and common struggle which that call presupposes, and which they so immediately recognize in the record of Nelson Mandela himself. But the society they are called upon to build—the basis of the only consensus which can preserve the role of the chief intact—is one which will respect the cash nexus, rather than any other ties.

Mandela has played a crucial role in forming these contradictions and sustaining them. They will live on long after he has left active politics, and outside the South African context in which he has been most active in forming them. His ideological legacy—in South Africa and globally—is startlingly complex. He has provided inspiration for the struggles of oppressed people throughout the world, and he has made himself a symbol of reconciliation in a world in which their oppression continues. To understand his historical role, and come to terms with his legacy, we need to see how his greatness and his limitations stem from the same source.

Andrew Nash

P.S.

* The Monthly Review, April 1999, Volume 50, Number 11:
<http://monthlyreview.org/1999/04/01/mandelas-democracy>

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