

Mandela between fact and fiction

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There are many ways in which the capitalist rulers of the world manage to contain the empowering hope borne by revolutionary leaders: slander, silence, and in some cases outright embezzlement. The latter is the case today with Nelson Mandela.

Here's, among many other samples of the same sort, an excerpt from a BBC News report about the latest African tour of Barack Obama, in the end of June [1]:

"In Pretoria, Mr Obama said Mr Mandela's example of "the power of principle, of people standing up for what's right continues to shine as a beacon". "The outpouring of love that we've seen in recent days [Mandela being critically ill] shows that the triumph of Nelson Mandela and his nation speaks to something very deep in the human spirit; the yearning for justice and dignity that transcends boundaries of race and class and faith and country," he added. (...) He urged them to take inspiration from Mr Mandela, who persevered through a long prison sentence. "Think about 27 years in prison," he said. "Think about hardships and the struggles and being away from family and friends. There were dark moments that tested his faith in humanity, but he refused to give up. In your lives there will be times to test your faith.""

No doubt, this is true *per se*; in a US president's mouth however it is reeking falsehood. And yet, something seems to be missing in this portrait: the militant ethos, the fighter's instinct, the uncompromising revolutionary spirit of the man. A kind of silence that reduces Mandela to the 1993 Nobel-prize figure, first democratically-elected president of post-apartheid South Africa, and partisan of tolerance and national reconciliation. Thomas Friedman best exemplifies this liberal misinterpretation of Mandela's life and work. Here are his conclusive remarks when he considers the Arab revolutions in November 2011 in the *New York Times* [2]:

"We know, though, that there will be no impartial outside midwife to guide the transitions in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. Can they each make it without one? Only if they develop their own Nelson Mandelas — unique civic leaders or coalitions who can honor the past, and contain its volcanic urges, but not let it bury the future."

In short, this is a Mandela-narrative matching the liberal-democratic ideology of the late 20th century's "end of history". Hence the question: who is the true Mandela?

There is indeed a radical difference between the man endorsed by politically-correct liberal opinion, the statesman hailed by national liberation movements and leaders, and, at last, the fighter praised by revolutionary-minded youth and militants worldwide. These contrasting, although often intertwined, interpretations of the same man represent by themselves the inner contradictions of Mandela's lifetime: the 26 year-old Mandela taking part in the launching of the ANC Youth League in 1944 is not really the same as the organizer of the "Spear of the Nation" (or MK - Umkhonto we Sizwe) sabotage group in Rivonia in 1960-61, without mentioning the famous 27 year-long political prisoner of Robben Island and the 1994 newly elected president.

Who's right and who's wrong then? Post-modernism and skeptics of all kinds would retort that there's no right or wrong in such a problem since Mandela's meaning is as diverse as the political

spectrum: to each one his own Mandela. Such relativism is proven false however by history's factual basis. History is based on facts, not fiction, nor political mythology. This applies not only to the remote past. If there is any scientific basis to that field of thought we call history, the supremacy of proof must be understood as being universal, ideology notwithstanding. And the historical record proves uncompromisingly that the liberal-democratic narrative of Mandela is much closer to myth than what is usually admitted.

Mandela's admittance in the West's holy circle of venerable 20th century giants has not only erased his subversive aspects - it has especially taken a lot of time. As late as 1987, at a Commonwealth conference in Vancouver, Margaret Thatcher would dismiss the ANC as "a typical terrorist organization", expressing a common view among British Conservatives. Writing in 1996 [3], *The Independent* journalists Anthony Bevens and Michael Streeter underline that a survey of the Commons record - the Commons Hansard - shows that Nelson Mandela's name has not been uttered in the House until 1983, that is twenty years following the opening of the historic Rivonia trial in which Mandela and his comrades were charged under the "Suppression of Communism Act". Mandela simply did not exist in British mainstream politics up to the eighties.

Having said that however does not solve the issue at hand: who is really Nelson Mandela? The Friedman-type interpretation is proven anachronistic when we compare it to what Mandela embodied at the Rivonia trial in 1963. Facing death penalty, Mandela entered the court on October 9, 1963, wearing prison clothes of khaki shorts and flimsy sandals. Together with his comrades in arms, he made a clenched fist ANC salute. [4] In his four-hour speech, he makes a statement of his politics. Here is his self-description:

"I have denied that I am a Communist (...). I have always regarded myself, in the first place, as an African patriot. I am attracted by the idea of a classless society, an attraction which springs partly from Marxist reading and partly from my admiration of the structure and organization of early African societies in this country. The land, then the main means of production, belonged to the tribe. There were no rich or poor and there was no exploitation. Yes, I have been influenced by Marxist thought, but so have other leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Nkrumah, and Nasser." [5]

Mandela therefore appears as a fighter against apartheid rule who admittedly shares the same perspective as the anti-imperialist national liberation movements of his time. His nationalism comes from below - from the people - it stems from colonial oppression, orients towards emancipation and remains profoundly universal and internationalist in spirit.

Another forgotten aspect of the liberal Mandela-narrative is his uncompromising commitment to shake off the shackles of apartheid: "by any means necessary" as would have claimed Malcolm X. Obama stressed Mandela's "faith in humanity" and also the "power of principle". Yet, the principles mentioned above were intimately linked with his methods of struggle and a strategy to practically achieve them. His "faith in humanity" has nothing to do with a contemplative attitude towards injustice and oppression. In fact, Mandela, as much as the rest of ANC militants, had in the mid-fifties adopted the perspective of achieving the "Freedom Charter" in their lifetime. [6] Such perspective, put in context of South Africa in the fifties, meant nothing less than a deep-going revolution. This is clearly confirmed by Mandela himself. He writes about the Freedom Charter in 1956:

"It is a revolutionary document precisely because the changes it envisages cannot be won without breaking up the economic and political set-up of present South Africa. To win the demands calls for the organization, launching and development of mass struggles on the widest scale. They will be won and consolidated only as a result of a nation-wide campaign of agitation; through stubborn and determined mass struggles to defeat the economic and political policies of the Nationalist [pro-

apartheid National Party] government; by repulsing onslaughts on the living standards and liberties of the people.” [7]

The 1952 “Defiance Campaign” against the apartheid laws; the fifty thousand ANC volunteers-led popular consultation to write the Freedom Charter in 1955; the adoption of it on June 26 in Kliptown by three thousand delegates, broken up by police on the second day; the mass movement to “defend our leaders” prosecuted in the “treason trials” up to 1961 for their participation in the Freedom Charter process; the Sharpeville repression of a Pan-Africanist Congress-organized demonstration, leading to 69 deaths and the outlawing of the ANC and the PAC - when this deepening dynamic of mass struggle against apartheid rule was met with repression, Mandela and his comrades decided to “answer violence with violence”. [8] According to Denis Goldberg [9], one of the other accused alongside Mandela in the Rivonia trial, the decision to resort to armed struggle made its way gradually while the repeated repression of these mass movements against the apartheid regime demonstrated practically “that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy.” [10] In an almost automatic manner, in a fashion typical of long-matured decisions, MK - Umkhonto we Sizwe has been founded in 1961 by underground militants, after the ANC had been banned the previous year. Its goal would be to carry out “attacks on the economic lifelines of the country”, as to scare off foreign investment and trade, and “sabotage on government buildings and other symbols of apartheid”. [11]

The use of armed struggle was moreover part of what seems to be a broader revolutionary strategy. Mandela admittedly explains this in his Rivonia defense speech:

“Four forms of violence were considered - sabotage, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and open revolution. We chose to adopt the first method and to exhaust it before making any other decision. (...) The fight which held out prospects best for us and the least risk of life to both sides was guerrilla warfare. We decided therefore, in our preparations for the future, to make provision for the possibility of guerrilla warfare. (...) It was in our view essential to build up a nucleus of trained men who would be able to provide the leadership which would be required if guerrilla warfare started”. [12]

When one tries to imagine the debate on strategy among the ANC leaders in the crucial period of 1953-61, the echoes of national liberation coming from Dien Bien Phu (Indochina), Algeria and the Sierra Maestra (Cuba) come in mind as parts of the framework in which this orientation towards guerrilla warfare was chosen. Bearing these facts in mind, we can thus easily understand M. Thatcher’s reluctance - and more broadly the established powers - to recognize Mandela as a legitimate political leader: Mandela was a revolutionary, sharing no relation whatsoever with career-minded, respectful and responsible, “bourgeois” politicians.

Behind bar, Mandela gradually becomes between 1964 and 1990 a worldwide emblem of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Up to 1994, this will be Mandela’s prevailing meaning, embodying the principles stated in the Rivonia trial. Among his followers in the South African population during that period, one can notice, around Mandela, the rebirth of a messianic myth: the comeback of the “hidden chief” will be the sign for ultimate liberation for all the oppressed. As for Mandela, it is worthy of notice that he refused in 1985 to disavow “violence” in exchange of (South Africa’s president) Pieter W. Botha’s offer to set him free. A sure sign that the man remains faithful to the 1953-61 mass struggle politics. For that matter, this fits correspondingly with the catalyzing effect exerted by Mandela-the-symbol on the struggles of the seventies such as the Soweto uprising in June 1976.

What about Mandela from his release up to now? This period seems to find a deeper echo in Friedman’s liberal portrait of the man as a sound nation-builder. Yet, a closer attention to the key

aspects of Mandela's political achievements as the first elected president in transitional and post-apartheid South Africa would without a doubt show that the opinion-makers of today are again only showing what fits them of the man. Moreover, the nineties have revealed themselves quite disappointing for the mass of the South African people. Even though apartheid has been definitely abolished, the Freedom Charter remains to this day more a revolutionary promise to be fulfilled – less and less related to the politics of the ruling ANC leaders – than an accomplished agenda. The reasons for such a disillusionment far exceed the limits of the question dealt with here. But it is nonetheless useful for our understanding to underline that Nelson Mandela's work while in power partly contradicts his work as a revolutionary, in the same manner as most 20th century revolutionaries' arrival in power clashes with their preceding "heroic" period of struggle and persecution.

"Mandela" thus reveals himself most often as a false abstraction of ideology-driven discourse and politically-correct opinion. Anyone trying to reduce this historical figure to some unique essence, be it tolerance, nation-building or violence, is closer to mythology than historical truth. Quite natural however is the need to sum up the life and work of such "great man". Mandela-the-fighter overwhelms by his weight and scope in world history Mandela-the-statesman of the late nineties. What would be, *mutatis mutandis*, the life and fate of the militant ANC clandestine leader of 1961 today? He would without a doubt go unnoticed from US presidents and ideologists, in the same way as thousands of rank-and-file militants of social justice and freedom face a deafening silence from mainstream media and politics. Moreover, a man whose commitment to freedom is as radical and uncompromising in face of oppression and injustice – such a man would be at odds with the world surrounding him. The representatives of the established order would sing the same cynical song that his dreams do not stand any chance to be fulfilled and so on, just as their peers did in Mandela's "heroic" years. This is why the story of Nelson Mandela – the true one – is more than ever actual and needed. After all, there is a multitude of Nelson Mandelas arising in the world out of each wave of mass struggles stemming from below and trying to shake off domination. Their fate and their memory is decided in struggle.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-23109574>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/opinion/sunday/Friedman-in-the-arab-world-its-the-past-vs-the-future.html?ref=thomasfriedman&_r=0

[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/from-terrorist-to-tea-with-the-queen-1327902.html>

[4] N. Mandela, "An ideal for which I am prepared to die", Johannesburg, 20 April 1964 in Brian MacArthur, ed., *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches*, Penguin Books, 1999 (2nd edition), p. 338.

[5] N. Mandela, "An ideal for which I am prepared to die", p. 340.. The statement as reproduced on the ANC website is available on ESSF (article 29665), [Statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial \(South Africa, 1964\)](#).

[6] See N. Mandela, "[Freedom in our Lifetime](#)", June 30, 1956. Available on ESSF (article 29667).

[7] N. Mandela, "Freedom in Our Lifetime", ESSF (article 29667), [Freedom in our Lifetime](#).

[8] N. Mandela, "An ideal for which I am prepared to die", p. 339. On ESSF (article 29665), [Statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial \(South Africa, 1964\)](#)

[9] Interview of Denis Goldberg published in the French Humanité, July 18, 2013, p. 6. Available in French on ESSF (article 29668), [« Mandela et Joe Slovo, artisans de la lutte armée »](#).

[10] N. Mandela, "An ideal for which I am prepared to die", p. 338.

[11] N. Mandela, "An ideal for which I am prepared to die", p. 339.

[12] N. Mandela, "An ideal for which I am prepared to die", p. 339-340.