

Nelson Mandela

Reappraising the Legacy of an Icon

Michael Schmidt

December 10, 2013

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A frail multimillionaire dies peacefully in bed at the grand old age of 95, surrounded by a coterie of those who love him and those with an eye on the inheritance, an event that would in the normal course of events be seen as natural—but the man concerned has been treated internationally as more of a supernatural entity than an ordinary man. The unsurpassed hagiography around Nelson Mandela, who died in the über-wealthy enclave of Houghton in Johannesburg last Thursday night, the famous prisoner turned global icon on a par with Mohandas Gandhi is upheld by most observers of South Africa as a necessary myth of national unity, and not least of the triumph of racial reconciliation of over the evils of segregation.

I had the privilege to meet Mandela several times during my career as a journalist, watching my country's dramatic transition unfold on the ground, with all of its tragedies and triumphs; on most occasions he was all business; I only saw him once in the relaxed and smiling mode in which he was best known and so beloved, for he had taken a huge burden on his shoulders and was mostly all business. He was by turns frighteningly stern and disarmingly charming, rigorously strict and graciously forgiving, a fierce revolutionary and a conciliator, a formidable intellect and a wisecracker, austere and chilled. Though a complex figure, he is justly considered as a colossus of global stature for sacrificing his life to inspire the South African masses to push forward to the irreversible defeat of the last white supremacist regime—and in doing so to inspire other popular struggles against injustice worldwide.

But in a country where the promise of a more egalitarian democracy has decayed with shocking rapidity into an elitist-parasitic project, where those who raise concerns over the loss of our period of grace under Mandela are often silenced by murder, a state sliding inexorably back into a fog of paranoia and forgetting under the control of Stasi-trained “democrats”, I've had to somewhat nervously consider my critique of the deliberate sanitising by all factions of power of Mandela's period in office because his deification has resulted and in the creation of a fanatical de-facto state religion that tolerates no heretics in its pursuit of unfettered partisan power. The slipping of South Africa, once hailed as a lighthouse of progress, in the rankings of several global institutions which monitor public freedoms is of concern to all freedom-loving people, and not just we anarchists.

I need to be explicit: this is not a full obituary of Mandela because his life story is so well-known and has been repeated widely over the past week in the media; rather it is an analysis primarily of his presidency—the five years in which he was directly answerable to each poor woman who paid tax on every loaf of bread she bought—and of the unfortunate cult that has sprung up around him. I do not focus on the unquestionable legitimacy of his anti-apartheid struggle including its armed facet, nor on the long travails of his jail-time, nor even on his latter career as elder statesman, but rather on his presidency because that was the period in which he was responsible to South Africans as a paid civil servant. In other words, all his intentions before and after ascending to power need to be weighed up against his actions while in power.

Mandela's Story and his Legacy

The scion of the Thembu royal house of the Xhosa tribe, nick-named after the British imperialist warlord Admiral Horatio Nelson, he escaped rural torpor and an arranged marriage, becoming trained in the industrial heartland of Johannesburg as a member of the first black South African law firm, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela would have been almost predestined by his class status

for leadership—though that was hardly a given under a system dating back through three hundred years of colonialism that allowed for only a handful of black leaders (apartheid did raise up a clique of wealthy black Bantustan leaders, though Mandela to his credit eschewed that comprador path). The story of the rise of this obscure lawyer to the leading charismatic figure of the century-old “terrorist” African National Congress (ANC), and thence via decades of incredible hardship to the highest office as the country’s first democratic, and more to the point, black, president—in what remains today the world’s most racially divided and economically unequal society—is remarkable, powerful and revealing.

It is remarkable as many personal tales are in this country for its trajectory from ghettoised exclusion to the corridors of power; as a transitional society, there are many personal ties—links that would be highly unusual in more established societies—between the new elite and those who shared their childhoods in dusty townships and Bantustans. It is powerful for its morality tale of the ascendancy, against one of the most militarised Cold War states, of a poorly-armed people with only the justice of their cause and the weight of their numbers on their side. It is sadly revealing for the ways in which the socialist traditions of one of the world’s oldest liberation forces was dismantled in its encounter with the realpolitik of running the state and its capitalist economy.

Mandela’s story captivated the world: a man who had served 27 years in prison for treason, breaking rocks in the brutal little prison on Robben Island, tantalizingly close to Cape Town, emerged a reconciler this most bitterly divided society to lead it through its first democratic election in 1994. It encapsulates in one man the dominant narrative of South Africa’s transition from global polecat to “Rainbow Nation”—and in the light of the corruption endemic under fourth democratic-era president, Jacob Zuma, represents what many feel was the apogee of social cohesion across all races and classes. It remains a unifying myth of enduring power that seems to, in the figure of one man, represent the euphoria of the entire world’s post-Berlin Wall epoch which saw the collapse of Red dictatorships in Russia and Eastern Europe, of one-party rule in much of Africa, and of rightist authoritarian regimes in Latin America, East Asia, and not least, South Africa.

And yet behind that myth of racial unity, it is conveniently forgotten that for 74 years until it opened all ranks to all races in 1986, the ANC was a racial-exclusivist party, dedicated specifically to the national liberation of the “Black”-classified majority (alongside the other oppressed races, officially classified into 18 ethnic groups, but in effect, mixed-race “Colored,” and “Indian”). Still, motivated by the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which held out the promise of self-determination for the colonised world, the ANC was the black organisation which, alongside its white (mostly Communist), Indian and Coloured sister organisations drafted the 1955 Freedom Charter, a text of blended liberalism and social democracy which in essence declared for all races access to the country’s resources (land, education, housing, etc). Yet when a young Mandela first came to the fore as an ANC leader, establishing the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944 as a kingmaker faction within the parent party, his orientation was explicitly black nationalist.

We’ve recently seen a worrying resurgence of this de facto racist strain within the ANC: with the right-wing populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) breaking away from the ANCYL this year; with the revival of tribal factionalism within the parent ANC, especially antagonisms between the Zulu ascendancy represented by Zuma, and what was nicknamed “la Xhosa Nostra” represented by Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, ousted by Zuma’s faction in a palace coup in 2008; and with racist relocation threats uttered by ANC leaders against ANC-unfriendly popula-

tions of Indians in KwaZulu-Natal and of Coloureds in the Western Cape. I'm not laying these later developments at Mandela's door, but it is worth recalling that he once thought and acted similarly, helping ensure the longevity of this tradition within the ANC, a tradition recalled in 1999 by Andrew Nash in a piece on for the socialist journal *Monthly Review*: monthlyreview.org

Nash correctly concluded his piece by saying that Mandela's "ideological legacy—in South Africa and globally—is startlingly complex" and this complexity is reflected in the diversity of the leaders who spoke at Mandela's state memorial service today: US President Barack Obama, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, Chinese Vice-President Li Yuanchao, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee and Cuban President Raúl Castro (the choice of Ban probably relates to his international status, while that of Obama seems to be based both on US power and on Obama's own tale of ascendancy over racism, while the India, Brazilian and Chinese choices relate to SA's strategic partners in the developing world—but the Cuban dictatorship appears to be a purely ideological choice).

In traditional black tribal societies here, praise-singers are poets who declaim accolades for their leaders—but praise-singers are not mere propagandists; they also perform the roles of both court jester and protected critic, ensuring that those being praised don't get too big-headed about their achievements. In line with this ethic, it is worth reading some of the more nuanced obituaries written this week, starting with South African writer Rian Malan, author of the seminal and very influential book on his Afrikaner family's intimate role in building and enforcing apartheid rule, *My Traitor's Heart* (1990), in his obituary for *The Telegraph*, available online at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/nelson-mandela/10502173/Nelson-Mandela-he-was-never-simply-the-benign-old-man.html. Malan rightly highlights Mandela's immense courage in standing up to the apartheid authorities, in taking up arms against an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, and of going "eyeball-to-eyeball" with the "fascists". He credits Mandela as being the architect of South Africa's "Rainbow Nation" and in particular of its centrist economic policies, and stresses the often-neglected fact of Mandela's revolutionary fervour. Academic Patrick Bond, author of *Elite Transition*, returns to that book's theme of economic continuity rather than change in his obituary for US investigative journal *CounterPunch*: www.counterpunch.org/2013/12/06/the-mandela-years-in-power .

Speaking for myself, I recognise—as the world at large has (even including a friend of mine who is a former apartheid Military Intelligence officer)—that Mandela's firm commitment to peaceful negotiation, and his magnanimity in eschewing the bitterness that could have resulted from 27 years of incarceration, instead forgiving his enemies so as to build a democratic country, provided the country's people with the watershed required to break with the past. This forgiveness is usually cited as his greatest attribute and the foundation of his status as a great statesman, as was his prodigious memory which enabled him to remember by name everyone he met, laying the foundation of his reputation for intimate knowledge of and care for those he interacted with in an attitude of humility. Regardless of the pragmatism that obviously underwrote Mandela's opposition to igniting a race-war, or a revolutionary war, for that matter—for such a war would be unwinnable and would decimate both sides—this achievement, which enabled a peaceful first democratic election for all races in 1994 is rightly hailed as the high-water mark of my country's history.

The SA Anarchist Movement in the Mandela Era

So what did the re-emergent South African anarchist movement—syndicalists of all races having built the first trade unions for people of colour in 1917–1919—of the mid-1990s have to say about Mandela and his guided transition? This was and remains a tiny minority revolutionary movement far to the left of the ANC, and yet which likewise claims deep roots in the socialist tradition and which worked hard to both ensure the universality of its politics—and its ability to address real local issues. Reduced to a rearguard of democratic socialism during the 1950s, then its syndicalist ethics producing an important “workerist” strain during the consolidation of the ANC-aligned revolutionary trade union movement in the 1970s, the explicitly anarchist movement re-emerged thanks to the alleviation of apartheid repression after Mandela’s release in 1990. Since then, it has always been an active part of the extra-Parliamentary left, with a commendable consistency in its class-line politics, but an increasingly multiracial presence in poor areas, and an advancing sophistication in its praxis.

The foremost point to make is that this small movement welcomed with great enthusiasm—and critical concerns—the coming of democratic governance under Mandela in 1994. While it did not focus on the man himself, it rather focused on ANC policies, in particular its economic developmental strategies. It is worth quoting from the first edition of *Workers’ Solidarity*, journal of the majority-black anarchist working class Workers’ Solidarity Federation (WSF), forerunner of today’s Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front (ZACF), the editorial under the headline 1994 Elections: a Massive Advance for the Struggle in South Africa:

“Legalized apartheid is finally dead. For the first time in 350 years Black South Africans are not ruled by a racist dictatorship but by a democratic parliament. Along with this capitalist democracy came a whole series of rights we never had before. We have guaranteed freedom of association and speech. We have the right to strike and protest. We have some protection from racist and sexist practices. These changes did not come from the benevolent hand of the National Party [apartheid government]. They are the result of decades of struggle. We broke the pass laws. We broke the ban on African trade unions. We broke the racist education system. We broke the Land Act of 1913.

“But free at last?”

“However, the legacy of apartheid is still with us. 2.3 million South Africans suffer from malnutrition. Only 45% of Africans live in houses. Only 2 in 10 African pupils reach matric [the final year of high-school]. Even though South Africa produces 50% of Africa’s electricity, only 30% of the population has electricity. At the same time 5% of the population own 80% of all wealth. Whites on average earn 9 times more than Africans. The ANC’s RDP [Reconstruction & Development Programme] has set itself very limited goals to redress this. For example, it aims to build a million houses over 5 years. This will not ever deal with the massive housing backlog facing Black people. The RDP also places a heavy reliance on the market mechanism. The RDP only aim to redistribute 30% of the land to Blacks. But most of this will be bought through the market. Why should we pay for stolen land? White farmers will also be compensated for land unfairly acquired after 1913 even when this is returned. In any case, the RDP’s ability to deliver is doubtful.

The RDP will not be funded by increased tax on the bosses. Instead the focus is on make “more efficient” use of existing resources...

“The Struggle Continues

“The only way we can force the new government to deliver its promises is through struggle. This is the only way our needs will be heard above those of the bosses who are in a business crisis. It is only through keeping up the fight on the ground that we can force the State to give in to our demands. Force the bosses to deliver! But we need to break out of the cycle in which the needs of the majority take second place to the profits and power of the bosses and their State. We need to attack and destroy the system of capitalism that caused our hardships and racism in the first place. We need a society without bosses or governments. A society based on workers and community councils which puts people before profit. Build for working class revolution!”

By the final edition of *Workers’ Solidarity* in late 1998, the tone had become more critical, as the ANC under Mandela shifted rightwards, with the editorial titled *South Africa’s Transition Goes Sour*:

“In 1994, people danced in the streets after the results of the elections were announced. How far have we come in the five years since that time? Not far enough. The elections were a great victory because they ended legalised racism in South Africa—the oppressive laws created by the bosses to ensure an endless supply of super-cheap Black labour.

“But while the law has changed, conditions on the ground have not. Working and poor people have been increasingly impatient with the slow pace of “delivery” of the goods and services promised in the 1994 elections. Worried about its election prospects, the ANC has done its best to excuse the broken promises. It has manipulated the loyalty of many workers to blame the failure of delivery on unnamed “forces” who want to return South Africa to the past. It has done its best to label critics anti-patriotic or right-wing. And it has asserted its domination in the Tripartite Alliance, demanding that COSATU and SACP toe the line and stop criticising ANC policies. Of course, there are right-wing forces in South Africa. But the NP left the Government of National Unity years ago. As for the other big conservative group, the IFP, the ANC is hinting of a merger between Congress and the IFP.

“The real blame for the ANC’s lack of delivery lies in its GEAR (Growth Employment and Redistribution) policy. GEAR [an openly neoliberal policy which replaced the RDP] is an attack on the jobs, incomes and social services of the working class. It is based on the idea that the bosses must be allowed to make more profits from cheap labour. So instead of taking money from the bosses and using it to benefit the Black working class majority, the ANC policy tells the bosses to become richer, promising the poor that crumbs from the bosses’ banquet table will fall to them.

“However, we do not see the solution to GEAR as a new party to replace the ANC. The ANC did not adopt GEAR because it was “bad”. ANC adopted GEAR because the bosses—who include many top ANC members and funders- demanded GEAR. We live in a time of class war—war by the employers against the working class. The only solution can be mass struggle, not elections. The Union is your Party, the Struggle is your Vote.”

Separate Development 2.0: Neo-Apartheid?

Since those appraisals during Mandela's 1994–1999 presidency, it is obvious to all observers that (apart from events such as Mandela's death and memorial service), the unity that the Mandela myth was supposed to ensure has rapidly unraveled. South Africa today is riven by entrenched racial hatred, is the world's most unequal society, and is currently ruled by what can only be seen as a syndicate-criminal cartel which is actively blurring the lines between private interest, party and state, recreating and reviving many aspects of the terrifying apartheid securocrat state including the notorious old National Key Points Act and the new Secrecy Act.

The South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) has been campaigning without success for the ANC to honour its 1989 agreement that once in power it would amend or throw out some one hundred statutes that prevented the free flow of information in the country. Only the most obviously odious racist and separatist laws were thrown out.

South Africa shockingly remains a state firmly committed to race-classification, except that instead of apartheid's 18 different ethnicities, the ANC only recognises four: White, Black, Asian—a catch-all of everyone from Indians to Chinese—and Coloured, a mixed-race category into which Obama would fall, were he a citizen; the indigenous Bushmen simply do not exist, despite Bushman cave art dating back at least 30,000 years. As a white man who played his tiny role propping up apartheid as a conscript into the old army, I don't personally give a damn that I'm classified white, but it's a tragedy that our "born-free" children are still forced to take their chances with this racial Russian roulette—victims of a bureaucratic game supposedly tracking "change".

In my first South African book, *Under the Rusted Rainbow: Tales from the Underworld of Southern Africa's Transition* (BestRed, Cape Town, due in July 2014), I will argue that the ANC's primary strategy position, the so-called "National Democratic Revolution" fell so far from the heights of manufactured grace of the Mandela myth to the sleazy swamp in which they now wallow precisely because the ANC was the midwife of continuity rather than of true transition from the apartheid state, despite its vigorous propaganda campaign to the contrary.

I introduce my book with a comparative analysis of the transitions from autocracy to democracy in South Africa and Chile. South Africans have an irritating habit of avoiding learning from such comparisons as to do so would undermine their claim to special status because of their supposedly unique history. But I demonstrate that our "transition" was far from unique: in both countries, it was a socialist-led combine (the Tripartite Alliance in SA, and the Concertación in Chile) that enabled the exploitative structures of the state and capital to make the move to democracy almost unaltered, their repressive and exploitative functions, honed by centuries of colonialism, intact.

Notably, right across South Africa, the geographic separation of apartheid continues to hold sway, with even black-dominated ANC town councils building new housing developments for the black poor literally on the wrong side of the tracks, far from goods, services and jobs. This despite the fact that the working class spends the largest chunk of their pitiful incomes on transport; 40% of the country simply languishes in poverty as their leaders swan about in jet-planes and motorcades. Even "Presidential Lead Projects" like the rebuilding of Alexandra township, east of Johannesburg, have been amputated by the nimby attitude of the new elite who blocked its articulation with bridges to their leafy Sandton suburbs a mere five kilometres away.

In anticipation of Mandela's death, I was interviewed last year by the journalist Carlo Annese for GQ Italia on this question, I said: "Today there is a class division that replicates the racial

division of the past... It is truly economic apartheid, in which the poor are getting poorer, the townships that were to have disappeared are still there, the workers do not earn enough to buy what they produce, and the white elite of the 45-year regime has added a wealthy black middle class of no more than 300-thousand people.

“This is not only the effect of the government in recent years; even Mandela bears responsibility, but few want to see it. His figure was almost beatified as a new Gandhi, so that all he has done is sacrosanct, whereas criticism would help to restore a human dimension, beyond the myth: Madiba was a party man who succumbed to compromise...”

South Africa and the world, I argued, would benefit from a judicious assessment of Mandela as a realpolitik politician, an analysis made impossible by the fanatically rabid insistence by his Pavlovian acolytes that he be treated as a demigod. There is a foolish argument on the South African Left, that replicates the delusional Trotskyist argument around the dictatorial succession in Russia, that Lenin was cool and right-on, but he was supplanted by treachery by Stalin who was an outright bastard—and only Trotsky stood up to him as a critic of the decay of “real, existing socialism”.

The SA Lefty argument goes similarly: Mandela was cool and right-on, but he was supplanted by Mbeki who was an outright bastard—and only Zuma stood up to him as a critic of the decay of “real, existing democracy”. Unfortunately for these partisans of wishful thinking, it was Lenin, not Stalin, who reintroduced capitalism via the New Economic Policy, Lenin who established the Cheka—and it was Trotsky who ordered the Kronstadt Revolt and the insurgent Ukraine, which for almost five years defended Red Moscow from the White reactionary forces, destroyed.

Likewise, sadly for ANC allies the tiny South African Communist Party (SACP, membership about 14,000 at the time of the 2008 split in the Alliance) and the massive Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu, membership about 1.8-million) who tried without success to find a “socialist” in current SA President Jacob Zuma, it was Mandela who scrapped the quasi-socialist RDP and substituted it for the outright neoliberal GEAR policy, the same Mandela who, it was only admitted after his death after 50 years of denials, was a member of the SACP’s Central Committee at the time of his arrest. So Mandela, who served as ANC president from 1991–1997, having joined the party in 1943, was simultaneously a communist revolutionary, a social-democrat and an outright neoliberal?

True Believer or Opportunist: What are “Mandela’s Values”?

How are we to make sense of such a personal/party political *mélange*? Where did Mandela truly stand ethically, politically and economically; what did he believe in? This is of pertinent interest today and not merely a historical curiosity, because South Africans are continually exhorted to “live by Mandela’s values”. His birthday on 18 July, unofficially nicknamed Mandela Day, when such exhortations reach fever-pitch, is likely to be made a public holiday. So what are those values; what does the hagiography obscure?

Of assistance in cutting through the fog of the myth is a recent debate in the letters pages of *The New York Review of Books* between Rian Malan and reviewer Bill Keller. In essence, Malan, who Keller calls “the heretic,” argues that the influence of the SACP on the ANC has been grievously underestimated, and that an abiding centralising instinct and Stalinist anti-democratic practice has been its most damaging legacy: “during the struggle years (1960–1990) the SACP reeked of

Soviet orthodoxy, and the ANC reeked of the SACP. As a journalist, you had to be very careful what you said about this. The civilized line was the one ceaselessly propounded in *The New York Times*—Nelson Mandela was basically a black liberal, and his movement was striving for universal democratic values. Anyone who disagreed was an anti-Communist crank, as Keller labels me...

But, Malan continued, “New research by historian Stephen Ellis shows... that SACP militants found themselves in an awkward position in 1960, when their secret plans for armed struggle encountered resistance from South Africa’s two most important black politicians—ANC president Albert Luthuli and SACP general secretary Moses Kotane. Rather than back down, these militants co-opted Nelson Mandela onto the Communist Party’s Central Committee and tasked him to ‘bounce’ the mighty ANC into agreement with their position. The result, said veteran Communist Roley Arenstein, was tantamount to ‘a hijacking’ of the mighty ANC by a tiny clique of mostly white and Indian intellectuals.”

Keller’s riposte was that: “I part company with... Mr Malan on the significance of this evidence. Malan... seems to believe that it discredits Mandela, and that the alliance with the Communists damns the ANC as a Stalinist front. That is simply Red-baiting nonsense. Nelson Mandela was, at various times, a black nationalist and a nonracialist, an opponent of armed struggle and a practitioner of armed struggle, a close partner of the South African Communist Party and, in his presidency, a close partner of South Africa’s powerful capitalists. In other words, he was whatever served his purpose of ending South Africa’s particularly fiendish brand of minority rule.”

In a country where the sources of political party funding are not required by law to be declared, the ANC’s shady connections to a varied range of dictatorial regimes (not least those of the late unlamented Muammar Gaddafi, of the Castro brothers, and of ascendant corporatist-capitalist China) need to be investigated in order to properly critique the ruling party’s supposedly democratic credentials.

Mandela reportedly personally received funding from General Sani Abacha, the military dictator of Nigeria (1993–1998) despite the fact that Abacha was a friend of Louis Farrakhan, leader of US race-hate group the Nation of Islam, and that Abacha’s regime was responsible for gross human rights violations. Writing in London’s *The Guardian* newspaper, David Beresford claimed Abacha had in 1994 donated £2,6-million (R35,7-million) to the ANC, with *The News of Lagos* reporting the following year that Abacha donated another \$50-million.

Mandela blithely took the cash, despite Abacha’s bleak human rights record, being responsible for the execution in 1995 after a rigged military tribunal of writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists, for the suppression of free speech and association, and for the charging in absentia of world-famous writer Wole Soyinka with treason. Abacha is believed to have siphoned between \$2-billion and \$5-billion out of Nigeria’s treasury during his five-year tenure, which begs the question of what the ultimate source of Mandela’s money was, and how much went into party coffers and how much possibly into his own back pocket; none of this has ever been subject to public audit, but with mansions in Houghton, Qunu and Maputo, and with his children squabbling publicly over their inheritance, he certainly did not die a poor man.

In 1997, President Mandela reached what should have been internationally condemned as the ethical low-point of an already chequered career, giving South Africa’s then-highest order, the Star of Good Hope, to neo-fascist dictator Mohamed Suharto of Indonesia, whose bloody rise to power at the head of what became his militarised “New Order” state (1967–1998) was facilitated by the mass murder of between 500,000 and 1-million people during his coup and purge over

1965–1966 (a 2012 documentary puts the death toll at between 1-million and 3-million). This bloodbath, orchestrated by Suharto’s army and carried out by interahamwe-like civilian militia, was profoundly both anti-Communist and anti-Christian, but also had elements of genocide in that ethnic Chinese were also targeted for slaughter. Rivers in parts of Indonesia were so choked with bodies that their flow was dammed.

Suharto’s regime still engaged in bouts of mass-murder of thousands of people well into the 1980s, so Mandela’s endorsement of a man who ranks down there with Pol Pot is hard to understand: until one realises that in honouring Suharto, Mandela was thanking him for a cash donation to the ANC (not to the SA state) of some US\$60-million; the ANC admitted only that Suharto “gave generously”. Suharto is estimated to have embezzled a staggering \$15-billion to \$35-billion during his reign, so the cash given to Mandela can only be seen as blood money. In this light, the most honest monument to Mandela is his face’s slightly mocking grin and hooded eyes on the new Rand bank-notes.

Even in those early days after his 1990 release from prison, there was something Janus-faced about Mandela, who spoke a hard, revolutionary line to a hungry black majority, and who performed a blackface act for the whites who commanded the heights of the economy, charming them with his informal zoot-suit style, his trademark slow “Madiba jive” dance, and perpetual toothy smile. That’s how the white elite liked their blacks: smiling, dancing, entertaining—and he cynically played the role perfectly, while all the time flexing an iron fist on the levers of state, a state barely altered in its essentials from the apartheid state (no-one should have been surprised that our remilitarised police force committed the 2012 Marikana Massacre of 34 striking miners).

So I can only agree with Keller in that it simply does not matter whether Mandela was ever a Communist, the most telling point being rather that he was a consummate opportunist, with a lawyer’s nose for the money. Initially an anti-Communist youth, feared for illegally using his boxer’s training to beat up Reds and break up their meetings, Mandela was also in turn a virulently racial black nationalist who argued fervently against fighting apartheid arm-in-arm with other races in the 1940s, but then swung over to the Communists in the 1950s and 1960s, when the USSR was offering funding; and then he flipped again in the 1990s, becoming fascist-friendly, when Indonesia’s New Order gave him money. That’s a tough set of values of live up to, if only because I’m sure most of us are not personal friends with any communist oligarchs or neo-fascist dictators.

South African imperialism – Mandela style

In 1998, I covered two stories that demonstrated the capitalist and imperialist values of the ANC under Mandela’s presidency. The first was the weird tale of the Mosagrius Agreement, signed in May 1997 by Mandela and his Mozambican counterpart Joaquin Chissano, which paved the way for hundreds of white South African farmers to settle in Mozambique’s largest and poorest province, Niassa. The deal was promoted by the South African Chamber for Agricultural Development in Africa (Sacada), but engineered by the white right-wing Freedom Front (FF) party. In terms of the agreement, the Mozambican government granted a 50-year renewable concession for 220,000 hectares for agriculture, cattle-ranching, fruit-farming, and ecotourism to the farmers who also got tax exemptions to bring in supplies like farming equipment and medicines.

The entire agreement was worked out in secret and “rammed through”, said reports. The head of rural extension services in Niassa province admitted locals were not consulted: “But the ministers who design national policy know local people’s needs”. Alarmed Niassa peasants disagreed and organised themselves in response to what they feared was outright land-theft, enclosure and dispossession by Mandela’s cohorts. They feared that they would end up as landless labourers or tenant farmers, dependent on white farmers for food and housing where previously they had been self-sufficient. The agreement amounted to grand theft terra in the old British imperial tradition of the enclosure of the land and the indenture of the peasantry; a more reactionary land policy is hard to envisage.

The other 1998 story was the invasion of Lesotho in August of that year by SADC forces comprising armoured columns, helicopters and paratroopers of the SA National Defence Force, supported by a small Botswana motorised force, supposedly to “restore democracy” (tell me where you have heard that chilling phrase before?). According to South African Foreign Affairs, a story maintained to this day, a faction within the Lesotho Defence Force staged a coup attempt, so SA and Botswana intervened under SADC mandate to crush the coup and restore the elected government.

But that just wasn’t true: I was in Lesotho at the time, covering the invasion for Sunday Times, and it was clear that there had been no coup attempt, but rather a pro-democratic mutiny, not aimed at seizing power, but rather at ousting corrupt military brass whose allegiance had been bought by politicians with gifts of farms in the Free State. Although the mutineers put up brave resistance, we killed 40 of them for the loss of eight paratroopers.

Mandela was conveniently out of the country at the time, with Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) leader Mangosutho Buthelezi as Acting President, but the invasion had been planned three months in advance and as Commander-in-Chief, Basothos were well aware that it was Mandela who bore ultimate responsibility for an action that had more to do with shoring up SA water and investment interests in our weaker neighbour, and that in doing so, Mandela had supported the corrupt status quo. On another visit to Lesotho in 2003, I was intrigued by the expressions of utter hatred expressed for Mandela, voiced by everyone from taxi-drivers to nurses, people who assured me that the weapons taken by the mutineers were well-cached and would be used again one day.

Fast-forward to 2013, and a democratic South Africa that in 1994 foreswore aggressive military interventions in Africa is still to be found embroiled in firefights abroad, this time in the Central African Republic (CAR), allegedly, according to some sources, to prop up Mbeki’s private uranium-mining interests. The corruption and anti-working-class violence of the current SA government stems directly from Mandela’s compromise. I will argue in *The Rainbow Regime* that the Mandela regime (and those who got stupendously wealthy off it including Tokyo Sexwale, Patrice Motsepe and Cyril Ramaphosa) was the logical culmination and realisation of the strategy of the old PW Botha regime: that so long as real, structural apartheid kept the unwashed poor apart from the precious classes—and the continuity under the ANC of Group Areas-styled town planning is breathtaking—the Nationalists had achieved in Mandela and the ANC what they were incapable of achieving themselves because of their lack of a popular mandate under apartheid. In the ultimate recognition of their doctrinal similarities, the New National Party (NNP) was absorbed into the ANC in 2005.

Mandela’s earlier rapprochement with the Nationalists in the 1990s, albeit a thorny path with many switchbacks, meant he was not always a unifying force within the ANC. I well remem-

ber the murderous faction-fighting in Bhambayi, KwaMashu, on the outskirts of Durban on the eve of the 1994 elections between pro-Mandela “exile” and anti-Mandela “internal” factions of the ANC—the last assignment of photojournalist Ken Oosterbroek outside of Joburg before he was killed on the East Rand. The two sides were at each others’ throats over what the internals perceived to be the hijacking of the struggle for democracy by exiles who had lived comfortably abroad while the internals died in their thousands at the hands of the police and proxy forces, exiles who moreover were committed to the rescue of the apartheid capitalist state which had lived for 46 years off the cheap labour of a black underclass it considered to be little more than draft animals.

On 26 July 1990, barely months after the icon’s release from prison, a secret signal from Ambassador Bill Swing at the US Embassy in Pretoria informed US Secretary of State James Baker III that a US intelligence source reported that in an interview with SACP leader Mac Maharaj on the very morning before he was arrested for Operation Vula, Maharaj confessed that “Plan B” of Vula, should it fail to insert an insurgent leadership into South Africa, was “to assassinate Nelson Mandela to provoke a national insurrection.” Maharaj flatly denied this to me in person, but it was clear to all observers at that time that Mandela’s conciliatory approaches towards the Nationalist government were deeply distrusted by many in the SACP and ANC. It is ironic not only that the ANC and NNP merged but that Maharaj was the gatekeeper who presided over Mandela’s final days.

Between Mandela’s 1990 release and the first democratic elections in April 1994, some 15,000 people were killed in an orgy of internecine violence, largely between the ANC and its black opponents—and no, I don’t mean only the Zulu nationalist IFP, but also progressive forces such as the Azanian People’s Organisation (Azapo), and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). We all recall with a chill Mandela’s wife Winnie Mandela endorsing terror by the ANC’s favoured “necklace” method of torture-murder, placing a rubber tyre around the shoulders of a victim, pouring petrol over them and lighting them up like a Roman candle. My anarchist comrade Bobo Makhoba, who lived in Dlamini, Soweto, a former Azapo stronghold, told me of walking to school, terrified by the corpses of Azapo members left lying at the roadside after the previous night’s bloodletting by the ANC. In some areas, the party literally murdered its way to power, and members still regularly resort to murder in holding on to such power-bases.

Black Anarchist & Shackland Youth Today on Mandela

So how are we to assess his legacy? Listen to the voice of one of our non-voting youth, Tina Sizovuka, writing this year: “Nelson Mandela has become a brand, ‘Brand Mandela,’ his image, name and prison number used to generate cash and to promote the legend of Mandela. In July 2012, for example, the 46664 clothing line was launched (all ‘Made in China’). ‘Brand Mandela’ is more than just an opportunity to sell stupid trinkets to tourists and celebrities. It is also a dangerous myth, based on Mandela-worship, promoted daily in the public imagination to serve far more sinister interests. The myth of Mandela is used to give the vicious South African ruling class credibility by association, and to legitimise the ruling African National Congress.”

Sizovuka challenges the ruling party’s “using the image of Mandela as a living saint,” saying that the Madiba myth “has been a decoy to obscure the far less heroic story of the ANC in power... Like any other nationalist propaganda, Brand Mandela has been used by the rich and powerful

to perpetuate a rotten class system—a system the ANC helps maintain through its neo-liberal policies, elite ‘empowerment’ deals and police massacres. A system that has caused misery for the millions of poor South Africans Mandela is said to have ‘liberated’.”

In their June 2013 Youth Day press release, Abahlali base Mjondolo (Movement of Shack-dwellers), wrote that “Freedom and Democracy was supposed to be for everyone. Today it is for the rich. Rich people are getting the multi-racial education and the poor still have the third-rate education which back then was known as Bantu Education. Rich people get jobs. They have cars. They have nice houses. They can get married and move on with their lives. They are safe. This is Freedom to them. The poor have to survive as we can. We go in circles and not forward.

“We live in shacks. We live in shit and fire. We are evicted. We have no safe and easy transport. The police treat us as criminals. They beat us if we try to organise. If you are young and poor you are treated as a threat to society and not as the future of society. Hector Peterson, Chris Hani, Steve Biko and other comrades who died for our Freedom and Democracy did not die for this. We do not respect their sacrifice by accepting that this is Freedom.” Sizovuka ended her piece saying that it is important to put the record straight: “Mandela was not the one-man author of the country’s liberation—even if he played an important role... For the advances made in 1994, the black working class majority and its allies of all races, have only themselves—their own collective strength and solidarity—to thank.”

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