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NELSON MANDELA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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In this talk I propose to consider the 21st century cultural, political and moral legacy of Nelson Mandela (1918-2013). The first president of democratic South Africa, who had he lived would have celebrated his centenary this year. Mandela's was famously a world life, that is, he was a determinedly national leader whose vision and influence also had global dimensions. His biography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) traces one of the most resonant political stories of the past century, of patient onward progression towards justice and democracy, and his example of moral courage, forgiveness and political will-power has served as a model for many leaders around the world.

It is this question of continuing leadership, and of lasting example, on into the 21st century in which he died, that this lecture will explore. In what ways does the story of this passionately nationalist leader, who identified himself completely with his country and his people, *also* appeal to the world? And, as importantly, how might that story go on speaking to the needs, hopes and dreams of the globalised 21st century?

As this implies, my talk will involve considering what it might be to be a world figure – world recognised, world renowned, world respected, world influencing. In all these respects, Mandela certainly did have a worldly and global stature. He became a global symbol of democracy and reconciliation. As some of these images may remind us, he was acclaimed a moral as well as political hero. He lived a life recognised as being significant right around the world, in different political spheres. Aspects of his achievement – the struggle for justice, the fight against apartheid -- resonated with people across many cultures, not only in other societies experiencing racism and ethnic oppression, but also in countries relegated to minority status of one kind or another across the global south. And his story of overcoming the bitterness of 27.5 years in political imprisonment was consolidated with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 (alongside FW de Klerk). Around 2005 or so it was said of his face that it was as recognisable in countries as far apart as China and Chile as are the McDonald's Golden arches. When his statue was unveiled in Westminster in 2006 he was hailed as 'President of the World'.

Moreover, a happy accident for the life that is Mandela's, the later chapters of his story to some extent unfolded in tandem with processes of 'intensifying globalization', as Erica Lombard has written in her account of *Long Walk to Freedom*. Therefore the Mandela we now know is in many ways the successful creation of international communications and media technology, including the many films and videos that have been produced about him: *Goodbye Bafana*, *Invictus*, *Long Walk to Freedom*. As this might suggest, having a world life, or bearing a world life, is not just a matter of historical or symbolic significance or stature. It also is a function of marketing and publicity.

Here the work of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and other trusts and charities that carry his name, and promote his legacy, has been crucial. In the later years of his life, the Nelson Mandela Foundation worked hard to make sure that there were publications in the pipeline about Mandela almost every year, publications in many media that steered a fine line between hagiography, which it was felt Mandela hardly needed, and independent 'warts and all' biography. The latest publication authorised by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, *Dare not Linger* (2017), the so-called sequel to *Long Walk to Freedom*, is typical in this sense. Based on ten chapters on the presidential years written by Mandela himself, it has been rounded out and completed by the novelist Mandla Langa, and the result is a respectful, respectable, but largely unrevealing account, some might say 'flat', certainly more political than personal.

However, when we refer to either national or global representations of Mandela, we are of course referring to a period over 10 years ago now, when he was still alive and even quite active, when his influence and reputation still radiated. The question for us today, as we approach what would have been his 100th birthday, is to consider



whether his one-time mega-watt image continues to have luminosity today. In what ways might his world-wide influence continue through the decades to come, in this age of Putin and Trump, neither of whom have ever to my knowledge explicitly referred to Mandela in political speeches, unlike, say, Barack Obama or Gordon Brown. With the political landscape changing as rapidly as it is, can we continue to speak of Mandela as a President of the World, or is he a past President now, past his media sell-by date? He was never on social media, and he did not tweet. All of his friends, from Fidel Castro through Gaddafi to Barack Obama and Bill Clinton are no longer in power. The ANC under Ramaphosa, who not long ago succeeded the un-illustrious Jacob Zuma, is a very different political party than when Mandela was President. In fact from the vantage point of 2018, Mandela to some degree looks like a figure from another era – as this talk may again have reason to emphasize.

The core question though concerns world stature and continuing political legacy, and in this respect there's probably no more suitable vehicle or subject than Mandela with which to pose that question.

To assume global status as a politician – as well as Mandela, we think here of Obama, Churchill, Aung San Suu Kyi (till recently) – to assume world or global status one appears to need longevity, membership of a dynasty or elite, and a powerful support team. Mandela, as we can immediately see, ticks all these boxes. In Whitman's words, he contained or in any case appeared to contain multitudes. He was complicated, well-connected, and charismatic, in his time commanding respect and adulation simultaneously in the western world and in the global south. But he was also contradictory, enigmatic and often inscrutable. Yet, these, too, may be qualities that go into the making of a global leader, though they may not guarantee lasting influence, on the contrary, as we will see towards the end.

The short thematic biography that I published on Mandela some years ago, in 2008, at the time of his 90th birthday, posited at its opening the intentionally provocative question: who or what is Nelson Mandela? It then set out to consider the many personae that constituted the charisma of this remarkable man, an exercise that soon began to show that Mandela's achievements were at times under-recognised, even in his life-time, because he often appeared in a contradictory light. To some, he was perceived or seemed to come across as a self-styled Edwardian gentleman and an Anglophile, yet he was also a fierce African nationalist and a political radical; he was a democrat, and a freedom fighter, yet his political style was autocratic: he liked 'to lead from the front'. Among supporters, he was sometimes regarded rhetorician, notorious for his often wooden manner of delivery. He was a man of substance, yet in love with media frippery and glamour, addicted to the buzz and glamour generated by his own fame. Zelda LaGrange, his long-time assistant, gives many examples of this in her respectful and loving book *Good Morning, Mr Mandela* (2014).

In terms of style and image he appeared therefore to send out mixed messages, yet also as a political leader he often acted in inconsistent ways. In part these mixed perceptions rise from his longevity and the fact that he underwent several political changes of heart across his extended career, in particular, from passive resistance to armed struggle in the 1950s, and from supporting revolution to advocating reconciliation in the 1980s. Moreover, though his achievements as a leader rested on qualities of character and a fine talent for negotiation and arbitration, these features were combined with and calibrated by his people skills, his ability to find and draw around him outstanding (male) collaborators and friends, themselves astute political minds, particularly Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, and Ahmed Kathrada.

Weighing these seeming contrasts and contradictions, my sense is that the multiple, sometimes conflicting facets to Mandela's character and achievements are reconciled in his nationalism and so in fact contributed to his stature as a world leader, and to his global reputation. Crudely put, there was something in Mandela's national example and leadership that could appeal to many people, many publics – South African, American, Cuban, British; old, young; black white; male, female. Indeed Mandela was well-known, and sometimes criticised, for trying to be all things to all people. On the campaign trail he dressed to appeal to the audience he was about to meet, to put them at ease. He artfully combined freedom-fighter celebrity with middle-class respectability, for example, drinking tea with Mrs Verwoerd in a sober suit, but then on the same day donning an open-neck shirt to meet with a group of young voters. For him, the most significant political moments were to be captured in some appropriate costume, to the extent that in certain instances, as in his wearing the traditional green-and-gold Springbok rugby-shirt and cap at South Africa's 1995 World Cup victory, the costume at once consecrated and memorialized the moment.



We might observe how in all these examples, Mandela is most consistent when appealing to core national values, yet, in so doing, is seen as the more admirable, the more trustworthy in the eyes of the world: the global stature rests on the national. And his chameleon qualities, laced as they are with his nationalism, during his presidential years largely enhanced rather than detracted from his global influence and reputation.

Paradoxically, however, some of the core ingredients to his global stature have, as the new century has progressed, contributed to compromising Mandela's status as a world figure, or make it difficult for us to make claims for his *lasting* world renown and global influence, not so much now as into the future. The first aspect relates, once again, paradoxically as I said, to his nationalism or, more accurately, his nation-centredness; the second relates to his failures or partial failures as a leader, and the ways in which these have been represented and interpreted in his nation, South Africa, since his death. In short, can we claim global influence for Mandela, when in the country with which he is so closely associated, he is now often discredited for a host of reasons – for having pressed for reconciliation instead of justice, especially economic justice, in the interests of 'saving the nation', for having made compromises with neoliberal big business, for having tacitly participated in AIDS denialism, until his own son died of the illness—in short, for having supported in effect the wrong kind of nation, a rainbow nation rather than an irredeemably racialized one? In South Africa today, writes the journalist and academic Hedley Twidle, the Mandela years are not only perceived as a closed-off era, as 'last century', but its de-racialization project is also increasingly dismissed as a folly and a dream, the negotiated settlement as a delusion (266). Even Mandela's undying devotion to his African National Congress across his lifetime, despite growing evidence of corruption and cronyism, now speaks to many of something inward-facing and deeply conservative. Indeed, we may now be seeing a situation develop, in respect of Mandela, where his reputation, though initially built on a nationalist platform, may now in fact be supported and sustained by his international reputation for non-racial leadership, even as he is discredited for the same qualities at home.

But now I should pause for a moment, and make a short detour, to remind us of some of the key pillars of that stature and character. I would like to touch on three main areas, lineage and networks, metropolitan status, and political vision. And in outlining these, I will also, as you will soon see, attempt to give something of a potted biography of Mandela as I go.

Lineage and networks

As is now quite well-known, Mandela's status was to some extent inherited. He was brought up in a relatively sheltered rural environment of well-off peasant farmers in the one-time Xhosa homeland of Transkei in the 1920s and 1930s. At a young age he went to live with a relative who was a member of the local aristocracy – this was the keystone on which his innate and infectious confidence in himself rested. For Mandela in the context of apartheid, a sense of entitlement and self-possession drawn down from this Thembu lineage was something he could take for granted. He never felt that sense of inadequacy that Frantz Fanon diagnosed as the dehumanizing syndrome of the colonized or 'the black man' in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1986).

For Mandela in his homeland of the Transkei, growing up in his guardian Chief Jongintaba's courtyard, black institutions of authority operated with success despite colonialism. Moreover, he was effectively a member of not one but two overlapping elites, his Thembu extended family *and* the African middle-class elite fostered by the mission schools. He also received in the context of the time an elite education and was one of only a handful of black students to proceed to tertiary education at this time. Mandela learned to use his inner sense of aristocratic self-assurance in an instrumental way, building on the confidence his background gave him, in order to project a broader cultural and political self-assurance for his country South Africa the future. There were few in South Africa at the time, whether in the 1940s or the 1950s, who concretely believed, as Mandela so palpably did, that South Africa belonged to all who lived in it, black and white.

Metropolitan status

In 1941 Mandela moved to Johannesburg to study law, and by the late 40s had become involved in ANC youth politics, and then in the 1950s in the Defiance Campaign, all the while conducting himself, in the words of Raymond Mhlaba, 'in such a way as to attain [the] status [of leader]'. In this he shares some similarities with another



1990s mediatised figure, David Beckham (whom Alex Ferguson in 2016 in fact criticised for having ‘actively sought fame’). Already in his twenties, Mandela would seem to have intuited that status was projected through look and through style – this feature too sheds light on at once his national and his international appeal.

Throughout the two decades leading up to his incarceration for treason, Mandela actively courted the media, especially newspapers, to transmit his message, in ways that were incredibly farsighted for the time. Whether he was mobilising within the YL to gain control of ANC executive, or organising days of protest and mourning, whether he was involved on the frontline of the ANC-SAIC Defiance Campaign while at the same time under a banning order, or passing his professional examinations as an attorney, or elected ANC deputy-president, or charged with high treason, or organising underground, in South Africa and across the continent - throughout he was always turned outward to the party and the South African public, black but also white, mobilising his politics by actively dramatizing his moral and political values, as he continued to do after his 1990s release.

Political vision

At the time Mandela entered prison he was a hot-headed, opinionated young leader, given to pedantry, full of derivative ideas - as is reflected in several of his letters to Winnie Mandela in the early 1970s. He emerged from these secluded years reflective, disciplined, able to force a consensus and yet to draw the humanity out of his enemies by sheer conviction and persistence. This prison-forged humanism is probably the strongest plank on which his 21st century reputation must rest, his ability to draw relations of reciprocity out of conflict.

On Robben Island Mandela was noted for the patience with which he pursued discussion with an interlocutor, relying on his capacity for listening and avoiding judgement, corroborating the other speaker’s position with occasional remarks, pushing them gradually to concede common ground. Across the years he learned to carry out this kind of discussion even with his warders, learning Afrikaans and asking about their interests in ways that he would later adapt for his discussions with P.W. Botha and F.W. de Klerk.

Once, when inducting the SWAPO leader Toivo ya Toivo into how argument worked on the Island, Mandela provocatively advised him to ‘engage all and sundry in conversation, during which he could make political points’ (2008:151-62). Particularly difficult debates, as between the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress, or, later, with Black Consciousness adherents, Mandela liked to imagine literally in 3-D, as a drama played out in a theatre. This capacity to focus at length deepened over the years, as he learned a new sensitivity to others’ needs. As this suggests, Mandela’s ethics undermined the oppositions between Africanness and humanity, and between rationality and modernity, on which the colonial and apartheid ideologies were based.

Yet, if his ability to see the world from the other’s point of view, and to practice ubuntu, forms the ground of his world-wide reputation, it is paradoxical once again that the ethics of ubuntu were first developed and publicised not by Mandela, moral architect of the New South Africa, but by Tutu – though it was Mandela who came to extend this relational philosophy or African humanism also to white South Africans, writing ‘the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed’. For him, an ethics of reciprocity and humanism was interesting only in so far as it could be mobilised for national unity. It is small wonder then that many groups and communities in South Africa do still identify with Nelson Mandela the national unifier. As a sign of this, the Mandela icon is still everywhere to be seen in the country – on banknotes, fridge magnets, memorials, giant murals on the sides of urban buildings.

As I already intimated, however, in Mandela’s case, certainly after 1990s, the consolidation of his national reputation went hand in hand with the building of his international renown. Across the Robben Island years, the ANC in exile and the Anti-Apartheid Movement actively promoted Mandela’s image as a figurehead, and his story offered an alternative African history to that of enslavement, apartheid or colonialism. It was also a compelling story in conflict and racially-divided situations right around the world – this story of overcoming, of hope, of seeming reconciliation despite wars and divisions, though it was also in many ways a partial and a compromised story, as we began to see. However, it was a compelling enough story to provide Mandela with some protection from criticism, even when during his later presidential years and after he was attacked by some for moral negligence and economic compromise. Despite a number of crises his presidency confronted – the Rwandan



genocide, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria, HIV/AIDS denialism and his government's non-redistributive Growth, Employment and Redistribution economic policy — the story on the international stage remained relatively untarnished. John Simpson, the BBC journalist who covered the Mandela years in South Africa, observed on his retirement in December 2016 the following, using terms that many others would support. For Simpson, the most profoundly affecting experience of his career, was reporting on the Mandela years. Writing about Nelson Mandela as a model for peaceful change, of human reform over time, had shown the world a new way, he wrote one that he, for one, continued to believe in, despite charges to the contrary that at the time (and now) close in on Mandela's reputation.

What of those charges? Some South African historians and politicians have accused Nelson Mandela, with some reason, for having 'sold out' black South Africans during the negotiated transition to democracy by giving in to the demands of global (white) capital both at home and abroad. The theorist Slavoj Žižek captures these doubts about Mandela's compromised impact in his trenchant observation: Mandela's 'universal glory is ... a sign that he really didn't disturb the global order of power'.

In the realm of politics rather than economics, Zakes Mda in his *New York Times* obituary in December 2013 rightly observed that there is an increasingly vocal segment of black South Africans that feels that Mandela sold out the liberation struggle to white interests. 'Rhodes Must Fall' activists emphasize this sell-out aspect: they believe that Mandela's reformist approach ultimately served the material interests and moral exculpation of white South Africans. The poet-activist Koleka Putuma powerfully captures this feeling of betrayal in her poem '1994: a love poem', for example, when she calls for someone to love her adoringly, even abjectly, 'the way that white people look at / and love / Mandela' (CA 101). Even *Dare not Linger*, the respectful authorised sequel to *Long Walk to Freedom* concedes in its Epilogue that 'perceptions matter', and therefore, as the *context* of Mandela's consummate talent for symbolism was sometimes unclear, his message of reconciliation, such as when he met Betsy Verwoerd, was read by many black South Africans as betrayal (289). That Winnie Mandela's message was much clearer meant that her popularity among ANC voters despite the many scandals she faced remained undimmed (as the obituaries in April this year showed).

In short, the two seemingly redeeming concepts associated with Mandela, forgiveness and reconciliation, and the Rainbow nation, did not survive his presidency, at least at home.

What then of his global status, if his status at home, in the country he led, is so eroded? For all his mistakes on home ground, Mandela is, as Shaun Johnson, Hedley Twidle and others have written, 'the man who outgrew his country and who wanders like a ghost or a giant, throughout the world, forever' (120). He is, as David Beresford wrote, South Africa's super-hero (Winnie Mandela obituary).

For a response to my question, I turn again to his political and moral vision, as did John Simpson, and to a predominant aspect of it, that might link the national and the international stories – the power of political generosity and friendship, what might even be called love, a word that JM Coetzee, the novelist, once said was in short supply in South Africa during the apartheid years.

Beyond the contradictions, in the gaps between the speeches, through the long years in prison, Mandela turned himself into a sensitive as well as strategic ethical thinker, as we saw: the achievements in negotiation in 1990-1994, his lawyerly commitment to the negotiated Constitution, as Colin Bundy writes, could not have been possible without this capacity not only for disciplined ethical thought, but for something else, for taking emotional risks, for learning to see the potential for friendship in the other person, who is not at first a friend, and in privileging love over hatred and resentment. Love is a strong word there, but it is one I feel that Mandela's practice of intense identification calls for; no other word is adequate.

Mbembe and Nuttall in their 2016 essay 'Mandela's Mortality' describe Mandela's approach as one of ceaseless transfiguration across his life (285), a constant recasting of his inner and outer lives, repeatedly projecting his own difference into the other. This description is interesting and useful, if a bit abstract, because the restless production and reproduction of difference and then identification effectively involves the ceaseless transformation of the self into the position of the other. Yet, what is this constant breaking down and collapsing together of the core binaries



of self and other that govern western ethics but a kind of love? Or, more precisely, as it requires effort, the *work* of love? For the work of love, Mandela will, I predict, be remembered for some years yet on the international stage, a period perhaps prolonged because it contrasts as it does with the hatred and anger that characterise these Trump years. And on the national stage – who knows? In a country of deepening animosity and division, a little love, and a lot of Constitution, may offer the only way forward.

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