

## Reviews

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# *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*

By Rita Barnard (ed)

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That Nelson Mandela has become an overdetermined signifier is axiomatic. Many scholars sensitive to the risks that inhere wherever this occurs have already pointed to the dangers posed by a diluted, provincial, and glossed-over framing of Mandela. Melissa Steyn and Don Foster (2008), for example, have illustrated how his moral standing has even been appropriated in white resistance discourse, and used in rhetoric aimed at delegitimising restitution efforts. One consequence has been that writers from numerous disciplines and perspectives have devoted much attention to uncovering and describing the man behind established representations and narratives. As this book, edited by Rita Barnard, reiterates at several key junctions, such attempts have often only reified the exceptionality and extraordinariness of Nelson Mandela. One of the reasons for this difficulty relates, as Barnard observes in the introduction, to the way his standing is often conceptualised as a politics of the sublime: “something that exceeds and transcends the structures, constraints, and ordinariness of the present” (Barnard, 2014: 3). This is poignantly borne out in the expansive notion of freedom with which Mandela emerged from his incarceration: the goal to liberate both the oppressed and oppressor – the former from subjugation and the latter from the jailhouse of bigotry and narrow self-interest. This is the understanding of freedom that he advocated and performed in his efforts towards national reconciliation, and which has become synonymous with his ethics. However, this collection of essays, instead of settling on the objective of uncovering, in a reductionist and easily legible fashion, how the man arrived at and maintained this brand of ethics, is instead able to acknowledge and productively work with a recurring set of tensions and contradictions in their subject and his times. These conflicting interests, or antinomies as Bonner terms them in the first chapter, include oppositions between rural and urban life, devotion to politics against

familial obligations, acceptance of collective party authority versus individual initiative. As a vital starting point for the entire collection, Bonner also expounds the vacillation between Africanist and non-racial thought, both in Mandela and his movement. Serious engagement with the way these oppositions persist, rather than suggesting how they are overcome and reconciled, informs much of the cogency of the book. Of particular note, by taking cognisance of these antinomies, the authors obviate the risk of being limited and hemmed in by the dense web of significations already attached to the subject - allowing for a consistent sensitivity to the processes involved in meaning-making.

Prominent though this perspective is to the collective framing of the book, the scope offered by its combination of chapters is far more expansive. Extensive and valid critique has already been raised against lifting the sublime of Mandela's politics (often expressed as a messianic quality) out of its historic setting. Much has been said of how this often ends up being employed for more parochial ends, such as taking him to be the beginning and end of the anti-apartheid struggle, or portraying him as a Western ideation of the modern subject (a point that is thoroughly addressed in chapter 10). Instead, the contributions to this book help to situate his politics and ethics in a far-reaching and meticulously examined set of contexts. These include the history of colonialism, anti-colonial struggle elsewhere in Africa, the evolution of the African National Congress (ANC) and its Youth League, the unique contradictions underpinning apartheid jurisprudence, revolutionary violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and South Africa's position within the geopolitics of the Cold War. In order to pursue this agenda, the authors draw from disciplines that are as multifaceted as their subject: political theory, anthropology, history, sociology, cinema, gender and visual studies, literature and legal studies.

To offer a productive and coherent frame for this multiplicity of perspectives, Barnard suggests that the book be read as an exploration that acknowledges Mandela as both a premodern and postmodern subject. He may be viewed, in this sense, as characteristic of the twentieth century: as a period in which modernity remains in an uneven and emergent state. This perspective enables a rigorous scrutiny of the above-mentioned antinomies.

The first part of the book (The Man, The Movement, and The Nation), initiates the scrutiny of this point. Chapter 1 ranges from Mandela's childhood to the last years of his imprisonment, but is mainly honed on his early political career, and sees Phillip Bonner conducting an analysis of key antinomies. The second chapter concentrates on the years of imprisonment. While the analysis of the first essay is mainly political, the framework of the second is ethical. Using classical Stoicism as a lens, David Schalkwyk, looks into this period specifically in order to trace the control that Mandela was known to have attained over his own emotions. Following this, Debra Posel (in Chapter 3) offers an insightful analysis of the

construction of Mandela's image, his "Madiba Magic", after his release (Posel, 2014a: 70). Situating this within the optimistic expectations of the post-Cold War era, she systematically historicises the sense of the miraculous that attended this moment. This includes examining his own performances of self, as well as the vested interests of the National Party and the ANC. Of central importance to present-day politics, her essay not only illuminates his configuration as a liberator of the oppressed, but also shows how his forgiveness was harnessed to allay fears of retaliation against the beneficiaries of apartheid (fears that have been reignited in recent years; see Posel 2014b). In Chapter 4, Brenna Munro concludes the first part of the collection by taking up his performances of gender. The essay probes into the deft combination of signifiers of masculine blackness as well as moral citizenship. But its primary tangent is to inspect the gendered norms surrounding the heterosexual family and how these structure ideas of nationhood - as a platform for looking into the controversial position of Winnie Mandela.

Opening the next part (Reinterpreting Mandela), Zolani Ngwane makes an anthropological study of tradition. It is underscored as a critique of modernity, as a resource for addressing the denial of selfhood that is integral to colonialism. This becomes a lens for revisiting the role of tradition in Mandela's leadership. In Chapter 6, Adam Sitze turns to the repercussions that the post-World War II period heralded for the combination of Roman and British common law in South Africa. Its chief focus centres on the repercussions for the law of persons, and the erosion of the gradations of personhood against the emergence of universal human rights. Mandela's comprehension of the underlying incoherence this generated in South African jurisprudence is then approached as prominently shaping his thinking as a legal scholar and his contributions to the ANC Youth League Manifesto. Jonathan Hyslop, in Chapter 7, reads the post-World War II years for its effects on politico-legal thinking around warfare. This encompasses the influence of the Soviet Union's support to Third World revolutionary movements. To expound Mandela's thinking on the way this era interpolated war, revolution and politics, Hyslop treats the lessons that Mandela gleaned from Carl von Clausewitz (the Prussian general active in the Napoleonic Wars). Hyslop meticulously traces how Mandela's readings, as well as his experiences with military training and revolutionary movements in Algeria, shaped his thinking about the possibility of a negotiated settlement and the role that violence can play in diplomacy. Following this, Sifiso Ndlovu returns to the question of tradition, but investigates its role during the presidential years. Treating African paradigms as at the heart of Mandela's triumphs, the essay looks especially into the burdens that confronted the new democracy: problems, not simply of taking over from another party in an established democracy, but of reconstructing an entire civil service bureaucracy from its narrow favouring of select populations. The race cognisant, rather than colour-blind, nature of this worldview is also forwarded as a basis for

interrogating efforts to package Mandela into Western and de-politicised notions of general decent behaviour. Through these he has often been pictured as one of the few sound-minded African leaders amid the many despots to emerge after colonialism, and Ndlovu offers a penetrating critique on this point.

The complexity and diversity with which the collection approaches its subject also advances critical reflection upon our own historic location. In the last part (Representing Mandela), this is achieved through four studies on the processes involved in the construction of his national and global image. Attention is paid to such varied media as literature, film, portraits, photographs and comic books. One of the strongest features in common among these chapters is a critical sensitivity to the way his iconic status can obscure and impede thorough contemplation of his relevance to the present. The particular significance of this matter derives in no small part from the problems involved in setting out what Mandela's legacy entails in a time when its ideals are more typically honoured in the breach. To probe this issue, Daniel Roux initiates the final part of the book by reading *Long Walk to Freedom* as a bildungsroman. Without seeking to fit the text into an academic taxonomy, Roux suggests that such a reading sheds new light on the techniques along which cause and effect are established in Mandela's life. In Chapter 10, authored by Litheko Modisane, film renditions are scrutinised. The mediating influences involved in translating Mandela's life to fit the narrative conventions of Western cinema constitutes the primary topic. It illustrates how contradictions and tensions in the man and his country, and the broader history of the anti-apartheid struggle, are ironed out to suit to these norms. In doing so, Modisane addresses the current dearth of scholarly attention to filmic portrayals of Mandela. Lize van Robbroeck's contribution (Chapter 11), shifts its analytic gaze to portraiture. This includes Paul Emsley's portrait, as well as the official comic book rendition of *Long Walk to Freedom*. Her inquiry interrogates the pedagogic attributes of these portrayals, especially as they foreground constructions of the model citizen. Linking with Posel, van Robbroeck's essay contains a caution about the weakening of this pedagogic potential as a result of the trivialisation of Mandela's image - notably in its commodification in consumer culture. In the final Chapter, Sarah Nuttal and Achille Mbembe contemplate mortality, examining Mandela's own reflections on loss and death in *Long Walk to Freedom* and *Conversations with Myself*. Here they provide insights into the fragmentation of family, not only as caused by death, but by the added repercussions of separations imposed by apartheid. Moreover, in analysing images of the elderly Mandela, this concluding Chapter takes up the question of the relevance of his legacy. Like *Long Walk to Freedom*, and like many of the earlier contributions, this essay takes a future-orientated stance by probing into the decline of euphoric optimism that abounded around Mandela's presidency. As Derek Hook's (2013) contrapuntal reading of Steve Biko stimulates a reading of his subject's work for its present-

day relevance, this facet of the book raises a similar challenge to readers, but advanced from a wide and yet well-integrated and coherent array of disciplinary optics. As such, it provides a stimulating call and a surprising collection of directions for future inquiry.

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