

Apartheid never died in South Africa. It inspired a world order upheld by force and illusion.

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The murder of 34 miners by the South African police, most of them shot in the back, puts paid to the illusion of post-apartheid democracy and illuminates the new worldwide apartheid of which South Africa is both an historic and contemporary model.

In 1894, long before the infamous Afrikaans word foretold “separate development” for the majority people of South Africa, an Englishman, Cecil John Rhodes, oversaw the Glen Grey Act in what was then the Cape Colony. This was designed to force blacks from agriculture into an army of cheap labour, principally for the mining of newly discovered gold and other precious minerals. As a result of this social Darwinism, Rhodes’ own De Beers company quickly developed into a world monopoly, making him fabulously rich. In keeping with liberalism in Britain and the United States, he was celebrated as a philanthropist supporting high-minded causes.

Today, the Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University is prized among liberal elites. Successful Rhodes scholars must demonstrate “moral force of character” and “sympathy for and protection of the weak, and unselfishness, kindness and fellowship”. The former president Bill Clinton is one, General Wesley Clark, who led the NATO attack on Yugoslavia, is another. The wall known as apartheid was built for the benefit of the few, not least the most ambitious of the bourgeoisie.

This was something of a taboo during the years of racial apartheid. South Africans of British descent could indulge an apparent opposition to the Boers’ obsession with race, and their contempt for the Boers themselves, while providing the facades behind which an inhumane system guaranteed privileges based on race and, more importantly, on class.

The new black elite in South Africa, whose numbers and influence had been growing steadily during the latter racial apartheid years, understood the part they would play following “liberation”. Their “historic mission”, wrote Frantz Fanon in his prescient classic *The Wretched of the Earth*, “has nothing to do with transforming the nation: it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism rampant though camouflaged”.

This applied to leading figures in the African National Congress, such as Cyril Ramaphosa, head of the National Union of Mineworkers, now a corporate multi-millionaire, who negotiated a power-sharing “deal” with the regime of de F.W. Klerk, and Nelson Mandela himself, whose devotion to an “historic compromise” meant that freedom for the majority from poverty and inequity was a freedom too far. This became clear as early as 1985 when a group of South African industrialists led by Gavin Reilly, chairman of the Anglo-American mining company, met prominent ANC officials in Zambia and both sides agreed, in effect,

that racial apartheid would be replaced by economic apartheid, known as the “free market”.

Secret meetings subsequently took place in a stately home in England, Mells Park House, at which a future president of liberated South Africa, Tabo Mbeki, supped malt whisky with the heads of corporations that had shored up racial apartheid. The British giant Consolidated Goldfields supplied the venue and the whisky. The aim was to divide the “moderates” – the likes of Mbeki and Mandela – from an increasingly revolutionary multitude in the townships who evoked memories of uprisings following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 and at Soweto in 1976 – without ANC help.

Once Mandela was released from prison in 1990, the ANC’s “unbreakable promise” to take over monopoly capital was seldom heard again. On his triumphant tour of the US, Mandela said in New York: “The ANC will re-introduce the market to South Africa.” When I interviewed Mandela in 1997 – he was then president – and reminded him of the unbreakable promise, I was told in no uncertain terms that “the policy of the ANC is privatisation”.

Enveloped in the hot air of corporate-speak, the Mandela and Mbeki governments took their cues from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While the gap between the majority living beneath tin roofs without running water and the newly wealthy black elite in their gated estates became a chasm, finance minister Trevor Manuel was lauded in Washington for his “macro-economic achievements”. South Africa, noted George Soros in 2001, had been delivered into “the hands of international capital”.

Shortly before the massacre of miners employed for a pittance in a dangerous, British-registered platinum mine, the erosion of South Africa’s economic independence was demonstrated when the ANC government of Jacob Zuma stopped importing 42 per cent of its oil from Iran under intense pressure from Washington. The price of petrol has already risen sharply, further impoverishing people.

This economic apartheid is now replicated across the world as poor countries comply with the demands of western “interests” as opposed to their own. The arrival of China as a contender for the resources of Africa, though without the economic and military threats of America, has provided further excuse for American military expansion, and the possibility of world war, as demonstrated by President Barack Obama’s recent arms and military budget of \$737.5 billion, the biggest ever. The first African-American president of the land of slavery presides over a perpetual war economy, mass unemployment and abandoned civil liberties: a system that has no objection to black or brown people as long as they serve the right class. Those who do not comply are likely to be incarcerated.

This is the South African and American way, of which Obama, son of Africa, is the embodiment. Liberal hysteria that the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is more extreme than Obama is no more than a familiar promotion of “lesser evilism” and changes nothing. Ironically, the election of Romney to the White House is likely to reawaken mass dissent in the US, whose demise is Obama’s singular achievement.

Although Mandela and Obama cannot be compared – one is a figure of personal strength and courage, the other a pseudo political creation – the illusion that both beckoned a new world of social justice is similar. It belongs to a grand illusion that relegates all human endeavour to a material value, and confuses media with information and military conquest with humanitarian purpose. Only when we surrender these fantasies shall we begin to end

apartheid across the world.

John Pilger's 1998 film, Apartheid Did Not Die, is available at www.johnpilger.com

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