

The Legacy of Nelson Mandela: A Dissenting Opinion

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Global Research, December 06, 2013

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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Offering a dissenting opinion at this moment of a general outpouring of grief at Nelson Mandela's death is not likely to court popularity. It is also likely to be misunderstood.

So let me start by recognising Mandela's huge achievement in helping to bring down South African apartheid, and make clear my enormous respect for the great personal sacrifices he made, including spending so many years caged up for his part in the struggle to liberate his people. These are things impossible to forget or ignore when assessing someone's life.

Nonetheless, it is important to pause during the widespread acclamation of his legacy, mostly by people who have never demonstrated a fraction of his integrity, to consider a lesson that most observers want to overlook. Perhaps the best way to make my point is to highlight a mock memo written in 2001 by Arjan el-Fassed, from Nelson Mandela to the NYT's columnist Thomas Friedman. It is a wonderful, humane denunciation of Friedman's hypocrisy and a demand for justice for the Palestinians that Mandela should have written. [<http://www.keghart.com/Mandela-Palestine>]

Soon afterwards, the memo spread online, stripped of el-Fassed's closing byline. Many people, including a few senior journalists, assumed it was written by Mandela and published it as such. It seemed they wanted to believe that Mandela had written something as morally clear-sighted as this about another apartheid system, an Israeli one that is at least the equal of that imposed for decades on black South Africans. However, the reality is that it was not written by Mandela, and his staff even went so far as to threaten legal action against the author. Mandela spent most his adult life treated as a "terrorist".

There was a price to be paid for his long walk to freedom, and the end of South Africa's system of racial apartheid. Mandela was rehabilitated into an "elder statesman" in return for South Africa being rapidly transformed into an outpost of neoliberalism, prioritising the kind of economic apartheid most of us in the west are getting a strong dose of now. In my view, Mandela suffered a double tragedy in his post-prison years. First, he was reinvented as a bloodless icon, one that other leaders could appropriate to legitimise their own claims, as the figureheads of the "democratic west", to integrity and moral superiority. After finally being allowed to join the western "club", he could be regularly paraded as proof of the club's democratic credentials and its ethical sensibility.

Second, and even more tragically, this very status as icon became a trap in which he was required to act the "responsible" elder statesman, careful in what he said and which causes he was seen to espouse. He was forced to become a kind of Princess Diana, someone we could be allowed to love because he rarely said anything too threatening to the interests of

the corporate elite who run the planet. It is an indication of what Mandela was up against that the man who fought so hard and long against a brutal apartheid regime was so completely defeated when he took power in South Africa.

That was because he was no longer struggling against a rogue regime but against the existing order, a global corporate system of power that he had no hope of challenging alone. It is for that reason, rather simply to be contrarian, that I raise these failings. Or rather, they were not Mandela's failings, but ours. Because, as I suspect Mandela realised only too well, one cannot lead a revolution when there are no followers. For too long we have slumbered through the theft and pillage of our planet and the erosion of our democratic rights, preferring to wake only for the release of the next iPad or smart phone. The very outpouring of grief from our leaders for Mandela's loss helps to feed our slumber.

Our willingness to suspend our anger this week, to listen respectfully to those watery-eyed leaders who forced Mandela to reform from a fighter into a notable, keeps us in our slumber.

Next week there will be another reason not to struggle for our rights and our grandchildren's rights to a decent life and a sustainable planet. There will always be a reason to worship at the feet of those who have no real power but are there to distract us from what truly matters. No one, not even a Mandela, can change things by him or herself. There are no Messiahs on their way, but there are many false gods designed to keep us pacified, divided and weak.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are *"Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East"* (Pluto Press) and *"Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair"* (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net

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