

Review: Luise White, Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization (2015)

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Book Reviews

Luise White (2015), *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ISBN 9780226235196 (paperback), xvi+343 pp.

The legacies of Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from 1965 to 1979 continue to inform Zimbabwe's political debates today. They are a constant source of reference for the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) regime in its claim to justify its continued rule on the basis of “its” armed struggle that “liberated” the country. President Robert Mugabe has held on to power since 1980, arguing that only he and some of his inner circle can defend the country's independence against Western detractors and internal “enemies.”

Zimbabwe's post-independence political and economic experiences have been characterised, among other things, by increasing authoritarian rule, intermittent violence, and poverty. Instead of pursuing nation building by really redressing inequality and promoting economic growth and inclusion, the nationalism of ZANU-PF has resulted in challenges to historical interpretation by way of a patriotic narrative that “flattens history” and reduces it to something that privileges certain political voices while silencing others. Such versions of history have also divided a continuous timeline into separate thresholds, as Luise White argues: the colonial period, and the postcolonial period in which the postcolonial state defeated an evil colonial system (1). Her work provides not only a critical reference point for those wanting to understand the dynamics of the period from which the current regime draws its legitimacy, but also retrospective insight into what constitutes the country's history. It comes at a time of different pseudo-political movements such as #thisflag and #tajamuka, which began as popular social media campaigns but translated into actual protests that questioned the failures of a supposedly “elected” government.

White emphasises how (Southern) Rhodesia's colonial status was historically exceptional as the only British possession that was granted responsible-government status but ultimately failed to gain dominion status. This resulted in Rhodesia's UDI in 1965, only the second in history, the other being that of America in 1776. It was the first country/rebellious colony to ever be labelled a pariah state, and it was the first country upon which comprehensive mandatory UN sanctions were imposed. Regarded as a threat to global peace, Rhodesia inspired much

scholarly attention, which has been sustained since the 1960s. White's examination may not be pioneering in its study of the UDI, as much work has been done and continues to emerge on this, but it offers new views on late-colonial Zimbabwe from the perspective of franchise and the vote. Through its deconstruction of the critical junctures, the book makes the question of the vote as a consequence of negotiations with the UDI regime relevant to the unfolding events in the country.

Rhodesia illegally seized independence from Britain on 11 November 1965, while Zimbabwe legitimately attained it on 18 April 1980. Rhodesia's "unpopular sovereignty" lasted close to 15 years although it was subject to international sanctions and a protracted liberation war against Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front (RF) government. Following the attainment of majority rule, ZANU-PF "flattened" independence to a political, nationalist victory against racial discrimination, colonial authoritarianism, and socio-economic exclusion, claiming that it would correct all of these. Yet authoritarianism and political exclusion have endured under the ZANU-PF government, resuscitating questions about the meaning of independence through the continuous examination of the legacies of the UDI, such as the one White has undertaken in this book. The study of Rhodesia's illegal independence and the history of decolonisation in Zimbabwe have become increasingly relevant to the unfolding events. The book provides an important background to understanding the extent to which the nationalist struggle against the UDI state centred on the desire to achieve universal suffrage. The nationalist movements had to ultimately wrench the rights of all black adults from the rebel Rhodesian state through the barrel of the gun. It is this very right that the ZANU-PF regime now denies its citizens, as it rigs elections and doctors results (as in 2008), creating an uneven playing field – just as the UDI state did before the Lancaster House conference, which negotiated a transition towards internationally recognised sovereignty. Mugabe now claims that the country's independence was won through the barrel of the gun and cannot be lost through the use of a pen – that is, through elections. In this case, the sword is presented as mightier than the pen.

Using a wide range of sources gathered from different archives and libraries in Africa, Britain, and the United States, as well as historiography and fictional narratives on UDI Rhodesia from the 1960s onwards, White's book focuses on the "history of Rhodesia's independence and its place [...] in what was everywhere else postcolonial Africa" (4). Disrupting accepted before-and-after historical junctures of "colonies becoming nation-states," the book avoids lists of acronyms, abbreviations, and place

and currency names, choosing instead to discuss them in four narrative pages before the first chapter. It outlines “a history of how Rhodesia and its several names disrupt that narrative and show how awkward and uneven it was” (4). White insists that such narratives “suggest that transitions are instantaneous, as if a threshold has been crossed” and is concerned “about a notion of before-and-after in history: a list of place names and their changes suggests a two-part transformation from colony to nation, from bad to good, from minority to majority rule” (4). She asks crucial questions about Rhodesia’s colonial status inasmuch as she interrogates the question and trajectory of the country’s unpopular sovereignty. In this history of “a nation that no longer exists,” White anchors her discussion in the overlapping history of states and votes as a way of historicising sovereignty in the context of Rhodesian independence and the challenges it wrought for African decolonisation (viii).

White’s work is among the latest of innumerable studies in a range of disciplines on Rhodesia produced in the last 50 years. This literature was initially spurred by the international attention on the Rhodesian rebellion. Starting with reports produced on the eve of the rebellion by, among others, civil society organisations and business groups in Rhodesia on the consequences of severing ties with Britain, subsequent studies introspectively followed the unfolding events. Those written after 1979 tended to be retrospective, driven by scholarly attempts to explain how a peripheral colonial state managed to challenge imperial and UN authority and survive as a pariah for some 15 years. White provides a fresh assessment of how the RF’s defence of its franchise frustrated the imperial power and an international organisation which failed to defeat “a rebellion by a population the size of Portsmouth” (105), amounting to fewer than 300,000 highly transient whites, no more than 5 per cent of Rhodesia’s population.

Rhodesia’s history is well published. Many studies focusing on different facets of this history gave White a rich historiography to engage with. But her work provides a new dimension, especially as it examines the overlapping history of states and the franchise/votes while also addressing questions of colonialism and nationalism and how these were informed by, for instance, imperial interests and developments, the racist RF ideology and the African nationalist response, the economics of rebellion and sanctions, and international political factors.

White begins her discussion of unpopular sovereignty not with the UDI in 1965, but with the 1957 Franchise Commission. She focuses on how it influenced the rise and electoral victory of the RF in 1962. Indeed, she correctly notes, “the history of the Rhodesian Front and the

history of independent Rhodesia are very much intertwined” (11). The RF’s victory produced a “seismic shift” in colonial politics, ultimately allowing it to fulfil election promises (12). White outlines the trajectory of imperial–colonial power relations, particularly how they were informed by Southern Rhodesia’s unique responsible-government status from 1923. The colony was virtually self-governing except in matters of currency, financial policy and, theoretically, African affairs. As such, “whatever the claims to [imperial] loyalty, being Rhodesian was a local matter” (27). Even with the legal inconveniences of London’s claim to imperial authority, Southern Rhodesia viewed itself as never having been a colony in the strictest sense. It did not benefit from any colonial development or welfare funds, and white settlers argued that they had built up the country by themselves. Salisbury’s relationship with London was not entirely based on loyalty or the “imperial effect,” but it accommodated imperialism only until ties were severed under the UDI. White then interrogates ideas about identity and belonging among the leaders and supporters of the Rhodesian state. RF legislators argued that Rhodesians represented “the last good white [men] left” following the retreat of the British Empire (30).

White covers the political negotiations between London and Salisbury in 1961, 1965, 1969, and 1979, the last leading to the drafting of the Independence Constitution. Her analysis also partially covers British and UN sanctions, as well as Rhodesia’s response to them. She engages with related issues of international and diplomatic relations, Rhodesian demographic politics, economic sanctions, and the detention of nationalist leaders and fighters. Her monograph is a must-read for anyone interested in gaining a fresh perspective of the history of Rhodesian franchise from 1965 to 1979.

■ Tinashe Nyamunda