

Review: Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, The Decolonial Mandela: Peace, Justice and the Politics of Life (2016)

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Book Reviews

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016), *The Decolonial Mandela: Peace, Justice and the Politics of Life*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn, ISBN 9781785331183 (hardcover), xxii + 162 pp.

The immensely productive and often thought-provoking Zimbabwean historian Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni has published a philosophical essay on the legacy of South Africa's first post-Apartheid president, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918–2013). The volume is dedicated to a young colleague, Sentime Kasay, who passed away in 2013, and the members of the Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN). Thus, the essay follows a clear epistemological and political agenda. On strictly activist, postcolonial terms, Ndlovu-Gatsheni offers an interpretation of the meaning of Mandela not only for the country, but also for the continent – challenging the many traditional liberal, Marxist, or nationalist interpretations of Mandela and his life that have been published in the last two decades.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (51) is a full professor in the Department of Development Studies at the University of South Africa in Pretoria (UNISA) and also head of the Archie Mafeje Research Institute for Applied Social Policy Research (AMRI), which is named after the exiled scholar who had taught and researched at many African universities before returning to his country of birth and joining UNISA in 2002, where he remained until his death in 2007. According to the institute's website, Mafeje's name is strongly associated with the development of "alternative and transdisciplinary discourses on the African condition," and the institute is committed to "building an epistemic community of African scholars dedicated to creative thinking about critical African policy challenges."¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni is also editor of the journal *Africa Insight*, published by the Africa Institute of South Africa in Pretoria, and deputy editor of the *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, which claims to practise "multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity." His recent books include *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (published in 2013 by CODESRIA) and *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (2013, Berghahn), in which he develops an alternative notion of "civil-

1 See <[www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges/Graduate-studies/Schools,-Institutes-&-Research-Chairs/School-of-Transdisciplinary-Research-Institutes-\(STRI\)/Archie-Mafeje-Research-Institute-\(AMRI\)](http://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges/Graduate-studies/Schools,-Institutes-&-Research-Chairs/School-of-Transdisciplinary-Research-Institutes-(STRI)/Archie-Mafeje-Research-Institute-(AMRI))> (16 January 2017).

isation” to the dominant Euro-American “modernity” and what he refers to as the “coloniality of knowledge.”

Against this backdrop, one can clearly read the essay on the post-colonial Mandela in the tradition of Archie Mafeje and a specific, not necessarily South African, version of postcolonial studies. In analysing Mandela’s role in South Africa during the transition from Apartheid to democracy, his presidency (1994–1999), and his continental and global resonance, Ndlovu-Gatsheni attempts to develop a “critical decolonial reflective and interpretive study of the ‘Mandela phenomenon’ as an idea, symbol, signifier, voice, expression, representation and resource in a political rhetoric of decolonization” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016: x). In his interpretation, Mandela is in one line with other “African decolonial humanists” such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Mahatma Gandhi, Frantz Fanon, Thomas Sankara, and Stephen B. Biko. In the words of Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1993), Mandela’s contribution to accommodating “black humanity” is discussed in terms of “‘moving the centre’ while remaining unrepentantly ‘universalist’” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016: xi). The aim of this ongoing intellectual and political project is to decolonise being, knowledge, and power against the dominating legacy of “Hellenocentrism, Westernization and Eurocentrism.” The agenda is clearly reaching beyond South Africa and has transregional ambitions.

The leadership role of Mandela is mainly analysed with reference to South Africa’s pacted transition, epitomised in the CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) negotiations, that began in December 1991 at the World Trade Centre in Johannesburg and led to CODESA II in May 1992, which, however, failed in an atmosphere of increasing levels of political violence due to unresolved constitutional issues. It was only later, in 1993, that leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) and the ruling National Party (NP) resurrected talks and managed to bring the transition back on track. The Mandela factor is also discussed with regard to a new paradigm of political justice in which political reform and social transformation were privileged over a Nuremberg-style transitional justice of retribution – as expressed in the spirit, proceedings, and report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which between 1996 and 2000 operated under the auspices of Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu and promoted an ideal of restorative justice.

To summarise, Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s essay on the meaning and legacy of Nelson Mandela is part of an intellectual search for non-Western *épistèmes* – “pluriversalisms” – and a forceful thrust for re-positioning Africa in the world. It indeed offers fresh intellectual perspectives that go far beyond the essay’s original topic, advocating against a “racist/imper-

ial/colonial/apartheid” environment (1652–1994) that has its own legacy in South Africa as exemplified most visibly in the recent #RhodesMustFall campaign and in other debates about the memorialisation of South Africa’s past. This essay on Mandela as the “decolonial humanist” is not only an extremely convincing call for encounters in inter- and trans-, or better, post-disciplinarity within and between the Global North and the Global South, but also an important intervention in current South African debates around identities and interests.

- Ulf Engel