

Rediscovering Nelson Mandela for the Twenty-first Century

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Nelson Mandela's passing has triggered, in the past few weeks, tributes to the man and reflections on his action. The man's outstanding character made of his action much more than just a struggle for a people's emancipation. How can we build a fair and free society in the twenty-first century based on the teachings offered by Mandela in the twentieth century? What geographic scope, what objectives, what strategies and actions would we draw up and what obstacles would we find along the way? This article is intended as a sort of "practical guide" of ideas or proposals to be debated. To prevent the capitalist offensive from transforming the current economic Apartheid into a future political Apartheid, we have several possible options, including, among others, a global peaceful revolution for a democratic transition that will lead to building a permanent World Citizens Parliament.



See also:

[Like a Rainbow Nation](#). Mandela's 1994 inauguration speech set to music.

[Charter of the Peoples of the Earth](#), a global call inspired by the *Freedom Charter*

["Dreaming of Mandela"](#) (Roger Cohen, *New York Times*)

["Sudáfrica"](#) (*Dictionnary of the World Power*) South Africa and global governance (In Spanish only)

Nelson Mandela's passing has triggered, in the past few weeks, tributes to the man and reflections on his action. The man's outstanding character made of his action much more than just a struggle for a people's emancipation. His action was exemplary in its six different stages: he studied then practiced law in defense of the social struggle and against racial discrimination; he moved on to armed struggle when peaceful means were not enough; during his 27 years of prison, he used words as an instrument of emancipation; he negotiated with his worst enemies; he assumed political responsibility in his country's transition to liberal democracy; and finally, he withdrew from political life out of loyalty to the principles of a healthy democracy.

Many are now asking what can be learned for the twenty-first century from Madiba's personal and political life. There will be few answers to this question, and probably none actually up to the challenges of the coming decades, which far outweigh the challenge, seen in Mandela's time as impossible, of overthrowing the Afrikaner Apartheid regime. We will therefore strive here to analyze the South African leader's legacy from a perhaps unprecedented angle, that of the future. A future that in South Africa and beyond, as we argue in the FnWG, will be played out across the planet as a whole. In this perspective of the future, eradicating poverty and fighting against injustices will require a change far more complex than the one Mandela faced and achieved, which was a national regime change.

We will not seek to answer the question: What would Nelson Mandela do if he was born and lived in the twenty-first century? Such speculation would be useless and not do justice to the trajectory of a man who, having "done what seemed impossible," was the protagonist of an extraordinary and unique history. Our questions will therefore be rather: How can we build a fair and free society in the twenty-first century based on the teachings offered by Mandela in the twentieth century? What geographic scope, what objectives, what strategies and actions would we draw up and what obstacles would we find along the way? All of this assuming that we would be able to act upon the same principles and with the same outlook as those of the universal, South African leader: integrity, magnanimity, pragmatism, righteousness, perseverance, generosity, sense of justice, etc.. Granted, this is quite an assumption, but we will use it to focus on analyzing Mandela's political legacy beyond his unequalled human qualities.

A comprehensive view. Just as Mandela set out to free his country from Apartheid and aimed to establish democracy and rule of law for all citizens of South Africa without distinction as to race—which he succeeded in doing—the people and movements of the twenty-first century must have a comprehensive view of the world they want. A world with no room for illegitimate inequalities, poverty, hunger, armed conflict, and ecological destruction, among other injustices. This will require:

1. deploying a global peaceful and democratic revolution that will allow transition to a world of peace, justice, and solidarity in harmony with the environment; to begin this revolution a global political movement is needed, which from the FnWG, we wish to help launch and promote;
2. building consensus on an initial political target, for example setting up a permanent World Citizens Parliament (or in case of major emergency, a world government);
3. this parliament, a first step in building new world governance, could begin to legislate while at the same time the movement as a whole follows a roadmap to economic, political and social transition in other aspects that remain to be determined.

These points are developed below.

Geographic scope of action. Mandela himself acknowledged that as a young lawyer in Johannesburg he would have avoided many a problem if he had not crossed paths with the activist leader Walter Sisulu at a meeting of the African National Congress (ANC), the vanguard of the South African political alternative already in the 1950s. The ANC had set the framework for action at the national level as did other liberation movements, and later Mandela would get the ANC to adopt his vision, a response to South Africa's specificity within the black continent: a draconian and prolonged internal colonization materialized by the institutionalization of Apartheid, or the supremacy of Whites over all others. Before

deciding that he would give his life over to serve his country, Mandela had disobeyed his family, who had appointed him to become, in the Xhosa community, privy councilor to the Thembu royal house, of which he was part. Penetrated by his belief that he had a different mission to accomplish, he survived for some time with very few resources in Alexandra, a township outside of Johannesburg.

Today, we are a step behind this one, because even though arguments abound to state that the entire planet is the relevant and legitimate field of a pluralistic political movement, there is not enough work to have articulated and made these arguments consistent in a unified theoretical body that would make it possible to visualize the coherence of an approach consisting in building the global movement needed to reflect this reality. We are therefore rather in an initial phase comparable to that of the founding of the ANC in 1912 to defend the rights of the black population in the newly created (1910) Union of South Africa, and even to that of the liberation movements of nineteenth-century Latin America. We do, however, have an advantage today, as the current media allow for a more rapid fertilization of ideas.

Goals. Very broadly speaking, there are two stages in the definition of goals for social and political change: stating what we do not want, and stating what we want. The goal of the ANC, when Mandela joined it, was to overthrow the Apartheid regime, but there was intense internal debate about what society and political power was to replace it. Communists exercised great pressure inside and outside the ANC for the debate to integrate the class struggle as a basis and building a Socialist state as a goal. Mandela managed to impose his pragmatic vision, which was to focus on a more “realistic” goal with freedom, i.e. the establishment of a liberal interracial democracy, as a possible scenario to overcome the political anomaly of a regime based on institutionalized racism in the second half of the twentieth century.

In this area too, the recipe had already been invented and helped Mandela to take leadership of the movement without having to dedicate himself before that to initial work on developing the intellectual foundations of his action. Establishing a minimum consensus between divergent trends within the ANC was possible given that aspiring to “a normal country” (a liberal democratic state with “majority rule” and basic human rights) like many other countries at that time was perceived internally and externally as a legitimate and realistic goal despite the difficulty of having to face the oppression of a regime particularly inhuman in its goals and brutal in its methods.

Back to our current context, we can see that local and international social movements have agreed for almost 15 years on the world they do not want, especially after the Social Forum dynamics of the first decade of this century. Today in 2013, however, we are still waiting for the recipe to be invented for the future world power or governance, and the forums to determine what better society we want are still being constructed and deconstructed. Among the fundamental issues still pending we have:

1. the sense and the nature of building and/or a seizing power at the world scale;
2. what social goals are expected with the emergence of this new governance or new power;
3. like for Mandela, the question of whether or not to set as a priority a concrete political target that can generate consensus, and what that goal should be.

The short question is: Do we, or do we not need to “take power” to build a political model of world organization?

During the early 2000s, the slogan in vogue in the social movements at the Social Forums was “change the world without taking power,” taken from the well-known work of the philosopher John Holloway. It was claimed that a deep and slow mutation of social and economic practices could be the key to social and political transformation. This idea was the antithesis of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which highlighted political change. The truth is that these two extreme views ignore the historical complexity of a real world in which political, social, and economic changes always intermingle. In any case, on the one hand historically, the ANC preceded Zapatista autonomism, Holloway’s main reference. On the other hand, Mandela had already excluded the scenario of dictatorship of the proletariat and its South African version, a black dictatorship that would submit the rich white minority, a favorite among many ANC leaders and activists, whom Mandela was able to convince.

At the world scale, we should speak of the need to “build power” or governance, rather than “seize power.” There is no power in the world that can be “taken” because the world is in the hands of de facto powers, a nebulous body or sea of sharks in constant motion and chaotic struggles, powers made up of financiers, large multinational corporations, imperialist states, mafia networks, and other various and unknown actors. An in-depth democratic reform of the current international institutions could, and in fact should accompany this process, but this would not be sufficient to achieve it because already the largest and most legitimate of these institutions, the United Nations, represents just one type of player in the global arena, i.e. states, which are competing with other more powerful forces: mega-corporations, civil society, citizen networks and many professional or theme-based, global federations, consolidated or emerging. As in any political-regime transition, for example in the North American, French, or Russian revolutions, or in Asian and African independence movements, establishing a new institutional space of governance is an essential step.

This new space must be the global alternative to the present de facto powers. There are at least two paths to building it, a legislative one and an executive one. The legislative path can have as its concrete political goal the establishment of a permanent World Citizens Parliament capable of producing socially innovative global legislation, which would gradually become indispensable to fill the current vacuum produced by the absence of necessary global legal references. Moreover, this parliament would be the kernel of a global legislative body working with existing global institutions, as with the more involved states and civil society. At the same time, this institution will have to be impregnated with a permanent democratization principle according to which one of its main tasks would be to “distribute power” or “create governance” (within the limits of its legislative authority) between citizens and the other global players, rather than to accumulate power and centralize governance. It will need to be representative of the different pluralities of the planet. Initially it could have “virtual” foundations and be supported through a form of citizen funding such as crowdfunding, though later it would need to hold assemblies in physical places and find more solid sources of funding, for example through a form of global taxation.

Starting now and, for example, for the next two or three years, a steering committee made up of actors committed to a political vision of global change could be devoted to laying the foundations for a proper start-up of this parliament. The committee could spread a movement of support from civil society first to get the parliament in motion, then to get it running and settled, thus gradually getting the parliament to assume its central role in the global institutional architecture.

A second path is to create a kernel of executive power, or democratic world government. The advantage of this approach is that, if successful, it will be more rapid in providing resources to solve the most serious crises of the planet: poverty, inequality, the environmental crisis, and violence in civil and international conflicts, among others. These resources would be specifically aimed at regions of the world most affected by these problems. This could compensate for the huge gaps in the current system of international cooperation, provided that this action came with a serious effort of transparency and fought corruption at every level. This is, however, a path with a higher risk of accumulation of power and for this reason, it might be less acceptable in the eyes of non-state actors at the local and global levels, and even less so in the eyes of states, some of which might be willing initially to work with a world parliament.

This path could be seen as a Plan B, which might be needed to face a scenario of rapid aggravation of the current crisis. It needs to be understood that the absence today of large organized resistance forces (intellectual, economic, civic, political, or even armed) against the current world powers allows us to imagine the final achievement of the multidimensional crisis that we are suffering, a collective suicide of humankind as we know it today, and in the best of cases, within a few decades, dystopian scenarios featuring two separate human species as described in recent science-fiction films such as *Hunger Games* (2012) or *Elysium* (2013), which are built on the assumption, precisely, of a future institutionalization of global Apartheid. Faced with this risk, we need to organize responses and projects right now.

These approaches to global objectives as well as the strategies described below could be achieved without resorting to the father of the modern South African nation—or using him for legitimacy, critics might say. Still, we should say that there is a thread connecting Mandela's past with our future, giving sense to the proposals below. This thread claims to contain the essence of the leader's legacy: a fair and bold choice of principles and inalienable goals; integrity, courage, and determination to defend them; the wise combination of firmness and flexibility shown by Mandela; and finally, his immense generosity and empathy for others, including his enemies. Not to mention the above-mentioned risk of future global Apartheid, which calls on us to develop preventive strategies now.

Strategies. Defining one or more goals determines, with a pragmatism that the South African leader can inspire, the type of strategy to be developed. For the ANC, the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 ruled out the Gandhian path once and for all and sanctioned armed and violent resistance as the “only alternative” through the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) movement, led by Mandela himself. To prepare this form of resistance and win support, he travelled to several countries and received military training in Ethiopia and Algeria. Nonetheless, after his arrest on return from this trip and after having his initial death sentence in the Rivonia trial commuted to life imprisonment, Mandela, during the 27 years he spent in prison, matured his thinking radically and reorganized what would be its corresponding strategy. With international support growing for his cause, Mandela paved the way for peace and reconciliation as a substitute for the pursuit of conflict and revenge. Thus in the 1980s he took the chance of starting secret negotiations with his worst enemies.

After the transition had taken place and once in power in 1994, Mandela oversaw the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC, a body of restorative justice, started its work in 1996 and was indispensable to ensuring stability and peace in the country (we need to remember the serious massacres and violence during the transition in the early 1990s) through each and everyone's confessions and collective pardon. The amnesty granted to Apartheid

officials who had confessed, however, the fact that some of them did not take part in the process, and that economic injustices continued and were made worse between a white minority elite and a black majority society, suggest that the TRC only fulfilled its mission halfway and failed to achieve genuine reconciliation, for which it might have been necessary to accompany this moral process, then or later, with real trials and real culprits and imprisonment. Perhaps the absence of trials, like in 1978 in Spain, where there has never been any trial, and unlike in 1945 in Germany, is due to a balance of power still too favorable to the losing party, which was not the case in Nuremberg because the winning Allied powers weighed heavily on the other side of the scale.

A scenario of world political regeneration in the twenty-first century would certainly open the Pandora's Box of the multiple resentments accumulated over the recent centuries of our history. They will require their respective processes of reparation and justice. Beyond those arising from different local, national, or regional conflicts, three conflicts can be highlighted globally, two of which would necessarily be candidates for justice, truth, and reconciliation processes, while the third would require another type of process, perhaps symbolic, besides, of course, steps to put an end to the "conflict" itself:

1. the colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism practiced by Europe, the United States, Japan and others over the past five centuries;
2. the exploitation of the majority of the poor and destitute of the planet by powerful minorities, and the complex role of the middle classes in this process;
3. the accelerated and unprecedented aggression against Mother Earth, namely the environment, especially since the second half of the twentieth century.

Which of these reparation and justice processes would a global political movement be prepared to assume in its program of goals? Time will tell, if ever this movement materializes.

In all cases, a change in mindsets will be necessary to put an end to ignorance of others as a sometimes unconscious strategy of the perpetuation of privileges. This attitude is described by Cohen in the article linked at the top on black servants in the white houses of Apartheid, and we also see it in rich countries against migrants dying on the beaches, slave workers from Bangladesh, China, and Ethiopia, refugees and the dead in Syria, and in places hidden from "public opinion" but open to extraction markets, such as West Papua. Bringing closer all the cultures and all the peoples of the planet, breaking the mental barriers of indifference and insensitivity, and developing a universal empathy are of the essence. All projects for transition to the world we need—moral, political, economic, cultural, etc.—are inseparable.

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