

## INTERVIEW

# He was a bourgeois hero

South African Marxist Hillel Ticktin discusses the role of Nelson Mandela with Peter Manson

## How would you assess Mandela in terms of the balance between positive and negative?

Well, it's hard to go along with his status as hero. I would say that, given how things have turned out, there isn't much of a positive legacy. In political terms Mandela was a liberal and in the context of capitalism a market liberal. The fact is that as from 1994 onwards the policy has been one of market fundamentalism - involving, for instance, the privatisation of nationalised assets, the relaxation of protection and allowing large firms to move their headquarters to London and have a large part of their operations outside the country.

There has effectively been deindustrialisation, continuing high levels of unemployment and a desperately low standard of living for the majority. It's not at all surprising that there have been waves of strikes. That is his legacy - one cannot get away from it. The basis of all this was actually agreed in the negotiations leading up to 1994 and what the African National Congress government under the presidency of Mandela himself was involved in implementing.

Of course, Mandela is revered for the abolition of forms of discrimination under the ANC, but it's not as though he was the only one, and, of course, many of the discriminatory laws had been repealed before 1994. There were a series of parties and mass movements involved in that fight. So it is difficult to go along with the adulation.

One can say that Mandela devoted his life to the anti-apartheid cause. One can admire him for that, and as far as it goes that is true. But the ANC was led *de facto* by the South African Communist Party, to which he belonged at a certain point. But it was really a series of other people who led both the ANC and its military wing, so it's hard to say that Mandela's role was the crucial question. One would have to say in any case that the system of racial discrimination had run its course; it was a system that big capital did not like, so it is not quite so simple as putting it all down to one man.

The very fact that there is so much adulation, so much reverence all over the world is an indication of what he stands for. Because, of course, that was not the case before the mid-80s or a bit later. So one can only say that he was supported precisely because he was for the kind of democracy that capital would be happy with, precisely because he did go along with a rightwing government trajectory.

In one respect it is even worse, because in his period as president he did not do much about Aids. If in that period there had been a campaign, of the sort that took place in Britain in an earlier period, there might not have been the epidemic that hit South Africa. You could say that perhaps Mandela did not understand Aids and what it represented, but the ANC as a whole is certainly to blame because of its role in government.

**Just going back to the policy of privatisations, and so on, the SACP blames Mandela's successor as president, Thabo Mbeki, for what they call the '1996 class project'. Of course, during the time that Mbeki was actually president the SACP did not criticise him, but it did exonerate Mandela after the event.**

That is true, but it doesn't make sense. The fact is Mandela was president of South Africa from 1994-99 and



Winnie and Nelson Mandela with former SACP leader Joe Slovo

head of the ANC on the ground, once he was released in February 1990. Ronnie Kasrils in a recent article blamed Mandela for the rightwing line adopted by the first ANC government.<sup>1</sup>

Kasrils served in the South African government as defence minister at one point, and was part of the leadership of the SACP, and therefore of the ANC, at the time. Mandela was involved in the negotiations that he nominally led from 1990 to 1994. He accepted the conditions for the International Monetary Fund loan - privatisations and so on - so they didn't come out of the blue. The whole package had already been agreed before the ANC took over - there had been negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States (for example, in Geneva in 1985). The *de facto* economic tsar of South Africa, Harry Oppenheimer, head of Anglo-American, had also been in discussions with the ANC. Clearly he was interested in stopping the nationalisation of the mines and that was agreed, as well as the preservation of the Afrikaner bureaucracy.

It is clear that the right liked Mandela because he did concede to them, but the argument up till now used on the left - that he prevented a possible civil war - is itself doubtful. He did play a part, but the main role was played by capital itself. Oppenheimer persuaded Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Zulu chief, to back down and accept ANC rule. After all, it looked like capital and the government were using a possible Zulu revolt as a threat, and they had the influence to stop such a revolt.

The Communist Party line wasn't that militant, however, and it is not clear that the SACP, and earlier the USSR, would not have made the same concessions anyway. Mandela might in fact simply have repeated the line already agreed. The CP abandoned its own programme, encapsulated in the Freedom Charter, officially the programme of the ANC, which included the nationalisation of the mines. I gather that there had been a long argument about whether nationalisation should be included in the Freedom Charter in the 50s. The CP had moved to the right in that period, when it was reconstructed underground following its banning under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, and the nationalisation sections were easily dropped in the later period. In reality, it is in the nature of Stalinism that it would argue for a series of stages to get to socialism and then concede almost completely to the right in what it might call the first few stages.

In a certain sense, Mandela isn't to blame at all, because he was really a front man, who understood little of what was going on, or perhaps didn't care. The issue was largely decided by the end of 80s. The Soviet Union did not regard South Africa as part of its

sphere of influence and so did not want the SACP to take control. After the USSR ceased to exist, the Communist Party lost its *raison d'être* and moved deeper into the view that socialism was a multi-stage process to be completed many years hence.

The fact that the SACP today blames Thabo Mbeki has no credibility. There is no evidence that they fought for nationalisations, whether of the mines or of housing or of anything else, still less for global socialism. It is clear that Mandela either did not understand what he was doing or else allied himself with the right, as implied by Kasrils.

**While he's revered now by the bourgeoisie, that wasn't the case back in the 1970s and 1980s, was it? So surely that tells us that there was a positive side to the struggle?**

Well, yes. The actual struggle against racial discrimination was obviously positive, but that was conducted by a number of organisations and the majority of the population as a whole, among whom were people and groups who stood for socialism. The real history of that period has yet to be written. It has to be remembered that the stupid tactic of throwing bombs at pylons, which ultimately led Mandela to be arrested, was a desperate attempt by the Communist Party to outflank the nationalist pan-Africanists.

**What was Mandela's relationship with the Communist Party back from the beginning of the struggle?**

I don't know exactly when he was accepted into the Communist Party. In the earlier period when he was young he was involved in the ANC youth movement and I don't think he had anything to do with them at that time, in the 40s. That was the period when the CP took a more leftwing line and supported the general strike of the African mineworkers, leading to the trial of Jack Simons and other leading communists. Contrary to the general legend put about by the bourgeois newspapers, Mandela joined the CP in his middle age, not his youth. The CP opened its doors to African nationalists in the 60s and I presume that he entered in that period, but I do not know.

**That's the case for so many of the leading ANC figures, who just haven't admitted it.**

Yes. Exactly what that means is not clear. Mandela's real role was within them or around them. Well, he clearly isn't a Marxist.

**I've heard him described as "that rare species, a bourgeois revolutionary". What do you think about that?**

Well, I suppose you could call him that, although under the conditions of today I don't know how many ordinary black workers in the mines would wish to call him a revolutionary.

**I would have thought that, actually, a lot of them might say something along the lines of 'If only Mandela was still president'.**

That's possible, but it wouldn't make much sense. They are saying that not much has changed since 1994 - the implication is that he didn't do anything.

But, yes, you could be right: there could be a half-consciousness about it. It is very hard to take a view that is critical, given the propagandist histories and adulatory media. And, of course, if one simply tries to look at him within the context of a man within a particular society then there is no question that one could admire him for not giving in, as it were, and for spending 27 years in prison and not cracking; and not conceding to those who tried to break him and get him to speak for them in one way or another. That would be the context if you want to call him a bourgeois revolutionary.

Nonetheless, if one wants to look at the question from the point of view of a revolution, starting from the Marxist argument of what constitutes a revolution, which is a change in class, there was no such change in class. The bourgeoisie did not support apartheid, or racial discrimination. They wanted cheap labour and they got relatively expensive labour. That was a result of the very high salaries for white workers and the inefficiency consequent on the protection of white labour and the superexploitation of black labour, and the settlement suited them. We can see that clearly today, now that the working class has begun to break with the ANC. Mandela did not stand for a change in class - that is clear. If anything he was a bourgeois hero.

**I suppose the phrase might be used in the narrower sense of a revolution against the current order - against the apartheid regime specifically.**

In that sense a non-socialist can admire him, but in a more general context he didn't stand for the working class or the overthrow of the capitalist system and towards the end he was controlled by the big companies.

**How would you describe the attitude of the international bourgeoisie towards apartheid in the early period? After all, for a while it seemed to be keeping capital in control.**

Yes, it was ambiguous. A rational explanation is that it made the economy less effective from their point of view, less efficient, as I have said. Although it was the mineowners who introduced the pass laws in South Africa, after all, and lower wages for blacks in the 1890s, nonetheless they did try to replace white workers with black workers in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution in the early 1920s. However, they conceded to racial discrimination for the sake of stability, thereafter - although from the 1920s onwards it would have made a difference to their profits.

Internationally, however, it wasn't hard to see that it stabilised the system in South Africa, stabilised capitalism in South Africa, so they generally supported it until the mid-1980s, when David Rockefeller announced that banks would no longer lend to South Africa. That was the point when it was clear that apartheid was finished.

**So there was a growing attitude amongst the international bourgeoisie that apartheid had to go. No doubt**

**they thought, here is a man who can be entrusted to carry out the transformation.**

That's very true. The deal had already been struck, both during the negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States in Geneva, and, of course, in the period 1990-1994. So basically they knew what they were getting and Mandela was very much involved after 1990. From their point of view it was great, because he's this wonderful icon, isn't he?

**But you also have to say that in the eyes of the South African masses he is regarded as an icon too. The defeat of the old system has to be celebrated, even though it brought with it that transformation to a more stable system for capitalist exploitation. But the masses up until now seem to have only acknowledged the first part of that equation - although perhaps that has started to change over the last year or so.**

Well, it has definitely started to change in the sense that there have been unofficial grievances that have not been supported by the CP and all over South Africa there has been a series of strikes and occupations, from mining to farming. But it's hard to believe that all those people have only now suddenly become aware of their disappointment. For many it is clear that their standard of living has not risen since Mandela came in. A lot of them must be angry and bitter.

One of the major promises was that there was to be a massive house-building programme for all, yet, of course, we still have millions living in shacks. But today's written history of South Africa, and its vocal recital, particularly the last 50 years, makes an understanding of what happened very difficult. It is hard to grasp that the working class the world over suffered an immense defeat thanks to Stalinism, and that the local Stalinist party played its part in diverting the population from trying to overthrow the whole system of exploitation.

One might say that a fictional account of the life and works of Mandela might make a people who were oppressed and exploited on the grounds of colour feel better, but that should not be the attitude of a Marxist. **What really sickens me is the role of the SACP, which seems to have a considerable influence over the working class.**

Well, yes. It isn't as if they ever changed their minds. Once they had decided on a programme, when the right wing took it over in the mid-1950s, and they actually set up the new underground party, the path to a nationalist programme was clear. They were consistent and undeviating, and loyal to Moscow to the end - they even supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia before the event. If Moscow didn't want them to take power then they wouldn't. Loyalty has its place, but the problem was that Stalinism is not Marxism.

However, we can hope that the South African working class will continue the present process of breaking with what amounts to an institutionalised Stalinism. We now hear that the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa has declared its opposition to Stalinism ●

## Notes

1. R Kasrils, 'How the ANC's Faustian pact sold out South Africa's poorest' *The Guardian* June 24. See also [www.enca.com/south-africa/kasrils-takes-mandelas-leadership](http://www.enca.com/south-africa/kasrils-takes-mandelas-leadership).