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DEBATE

Nelson Mandela and the politics of South Africa's unfinished liberation

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Mandela: the saintly moderate?

The death of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela on 5 December 2013 provoked unprecedented emotional outpourings: newspaper columns swelled with obituaries, politicians lined up to praise this iconic figure, and his passing has been mourned by people from all corners of the globe. And little wonder: Nelson Mandela inspired generations of political activists around the world. He is one of the most revered politicians in world history.

One dominant narrative that emerged in the tributes to Mandela was his famed capacity to moderate between competing social forces during the transition. While Mandela had been vilified by successive Western heads of state in the 1980s, Western politicians have since fallen over themselves to praise (and be pictured alongside) the great 'moderate' Mandela. Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair praised Mandela for having:

> a very clear vision before he left prison that his mission was to unite his country and not simply to dismiss apartheid. And that political skill that he had is what people don't get about him. He was a *masterful* politician. (BBC 2013)

Echoing these sentiments, former US President Bill Clinton recently reflected: 'when he could have embraced the politics of resentment, he chose the politics of inclusion.'[1] In a similar fashion, President Obama mourned the loss of one of 'the most profoundly good human beings that any of us will share time with on this earth'. He praised Mandela for his style of leadership, most notably the manner in which

> Mandela taught us the power of action but he also taught us the power of ideas, of reason, of arguments and the need to study not only those who you do agree with but those who you don't agree with. (Telegraph 2013)

Above all, Western leaders celebrated Mandela's compassion, forgiveness and love of peace. A common sentiment was that Mandela had the humility to understand other people's points of view and, through this understanding, was able to mediate and reconcile between forces that could destabilise or subvert a transition to democracy. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained: 'He transcended race and class in his personal actions, through his warmth and through his willingness to listen and to empathise with others' (Guardian 2013). It is a sentiment shared by his biographers. Richard Stengel argues:

> the seventy-one-year-old man who emerged from prison turned out to be far more subtle than people anticipated. He understood white fears and black frustrations; he anticipated the pull of tribalism and the power of modernism; he saw the

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> appeal of nationalisation and the allure of the free market; he understood the Afrikaner's love of rugby and the freedom fighter's abhorrence of it. He always saw both sides of every issue, and his default position was to find some course in between, some way of reconciling both sides. In part it came from his deep-seated need to persuade people and win people over, but mostly it came from having a non-ideological view of the world and an appreciation of the intricate spider's web of human motives. (Stengel 2009, 121–122)

This notion of Mandela being 'non-ideological' or being able to 'transcend' ideological differences in order to find common ground, agreement and reconciliation has been frequently referred to in obituaries, but how true a reflection of Mandela is it? Mandela was not, after all, a man without fault and was publicly scolding of those who would attribute him the status of a modern-day saint. As he once famously declared:

> I am an ordinary human being with weaknesses. Some of them fundamental. I have made many mistakes in my life. I am *not* a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying. (Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University 2013)

Mandela was not always the 'moderate' he has since been characterised as, nor did he always exhibit this famed leadership style of hearing all voices and moving with consensus. In his early political career he had been one of a group of young Turks who had galvanised a more radical strategy for the African National Congress (ANC). Mandela was also, of course, a leading voice in the call for the ANC to take up the armed struggle, for which he was widely branded a 'terrorist' both at home and in the Western world. He was once – by his own admission – a firebrand nationalist, while new sources suggest that his association with the South African Communist Party (SACP) before imprisonment was closer than had been previously thought. None of these facts suggest Mandela was always the great moderate so revered today, and none of this sits comfortably with the manner in which he has been carefully sanctified by Western leaders.

This highlights both the historical contingency of the label 'moderate' and the political expediency which lies behind its deployment. In this case, it will be argued that the construction of Mandela as a sanctified 'moderate' served the interests of the ANC as a party and also the interests of Western politicians and the international business community, who stood to profit both materially and ideologically by claiming ownership of a carefully sanitised Mandela image. First though, it is important to understand how and why political 'moderates' are constructed.

Who (or what) is a 'moderate'?

Political moderation is one of the most widely talked about concepts in contemporary political life. Whether it be the spectre of Islamic extremism, extremism within the Republican Party of the United States, or far-right politics in Eastern Europe, the need for, and value of, a political moderacy has been vociferously debated within international media, public politics and civil society.[2] And yet, there has been little or no attempt to articulate a working definition of the concept. While political commentators are fond of attaching 'moderate' and 'immoderate' labels to various actors, they seldom critically interrogate the underlying assumptions that lie behind these labels.

So what are moderates (or, for that matter, 'immoderates')? Moderates are popularly characterised in a variety of interrelated ways as people who: occupy the ideological centre ground or the 'soft end' of a political extreme; reconcile competing political views or ideological standpoints; and/or defend and maintain the political and economic status quo. Calhoon, for example, defines political moderates in a

fairly narrow sense as being 'persons who intentionally undertake civic action, at significant risk or cost, to mediate conflicts, conciliate antagonisms, or find middle ground' (Calhoon 2008, 6).

In this respect, political 'moderates' have been lauded for centuries as a political force that mediates between competing extremes. In his seventeenth century piece, *The Character of a Trimmer,* George Savile employed the analogy of a boat: the job of moderate 'Trimmer' was to keep the boat balanced while other, more 'radical' and self-interested, parties might attempt to weigh the boat down perilously on one side or the other, and thereby overturn the vessel. As Billig notes (1982, 206), the underlying normative philosophy of such definitions 'is basically a justification of the spirit of compromise between extremes', whereby the need for stability – keeping the boat afloat, so to speak – transcends the need for politics to be guided by consistent principles and unfaltering ideals.

Mandela has been constructed as the sanctified 'moderate' in the mould of that defined by Savile. Born again from jail to plot a compromise path for South Africa between competing extremes, and social forces that could otherwise overturn the transition to democracy. This discourse not only ignores the ambiguities, contradictions and tensions within Mandela's leadership, ideals and agency: it cherry-picks certain elements of Mandela's leadership that reify the ideological hegemony of Western liberalism.

We should, therefore, not attempt to assign a particular essence to political moderation, nor to those that supposedly practise it: the moderates. Moderate politics should not be understood, as it so often is, as pertaining to an ideologically neutral middle point on the political axis, or the 'soft end' of a political extreme. Nor should it be seen simply as a reconciliatory posture aimed at mediating between competing political extremes, or as a defence of the status quo. Instead, it is important to understand the very notion of 'moderation' – and that of 'moderates' – as malleable, power-laden discourses, which socially construct actors to serve political ends. Both 'moderate' and 'radical' labels can be used to celebrate, deride, marginalise or sanctify political actors.

This paper does not seek to offer a clear definition of 'moderates', and instead examines the manner in which individuals and political collectives – such as Nelson Mandela and the ANC – alternate between the rhetorics and identities associated with being a 'moderate' or a 'radical', and how in doing so they subvert binary distinctions between the two. Rather than affixing an essence to moderates, it therefore explores the social and political functions that the discourses of moderation and radicalism perform, most notably the manner in which they are used by individuals and political collectives to assert a sense of self and identity, rationalise their individual and collective agency, and/or accrue political and social capital.

The ANC's radical moderation

Commentators tend to draw attention to moderate and radical elements or factions *within* a political party, movement or organisation, which can be identified by their position with regards to a particular set of policy preferences and/or their distance from the political 'centre' of the political collective itself. However, we generally characterise political collectives in their totality as having an identifiable collective identity – whether 'moderate' or 'radical' – despite the existence of contestation and contradictions within them. The ANC, however, has a more complex Janus-faced collective identity; as had Mandela himself.

On the one hand, the ANC positions itself as a revolutionary 'non-racial and non-sexist and democratic liberation movement' (ANC 2012a) charged with radically transforming South African society as part

of an ongoing (and seemingly infinite) 'National Democratic Revolution' (NDR), rather than simply a party of government elected to serve a term of office (see Darracq 2008; Lodge 2004). The ANC's constitution sets forward an ambitious set of 'Aims and Objectives', including to:

> 2.1 Unite all the people of South Africa . . . for the complete liberation of the country from all forms of discrimination and national oppression. . . .
>
> 2.4 Fight for social justice and to eliminate the vast inequalities created by apartheid and the system of national oppression. . . .
>
> 2.8 Support and advance the cause of national liberation, development, world peace, disarmament and environmentally sustainable development. (ANC 2012a)

The ANC's discussion documents are replete with references to maintaining the 'revolutionary character' of the movement. In some of its most recent policy documents, for example, the party discussed the need for a 'Second Transition' in South Africa to focus on socio-economic transformation and replace the overly cautious and conservative 'First Transition' (ANC 2012b). The document bemoans the presence of a 'new global ruling class' promoting neoliberalism, which, it argues, can only be overcome through the 'revolutionary alliance' with its trade union and communist allies.

On the other hand, for all the radical rhetoric to be found in its discussion documents, the ANC also utilises discourses of moderation in order to define its political character. It positions itself as a 'disciplined force of left': a moderate governing party carefully balancing the competing interests of society, embedding a non-racial society and following a 'responsible' macroeconomic strategy (ANC 2012c). After his release from prison Mandela himself carefully cultivated the image of himself as the balancing moderate, captaining the ship through dangerous and unpredictable waters. During the transition period, for example, he argued that:

> The masses like to see somebody who is responsible and who speaks to them in a responsible manner. They *like* that, and I want to avoid rabble-rousing speech. I don't want to incite the crowd. I want the crowd to understand what we are doing and I want to infuse a spirit of reconciliation to them . . . . I have mellowed, very definitely, and as a young man, you know, I was very *radical* and using high-flown language, and fighting everybody. But now, you know, one has to lead . . . . (Mandela 2010)

Mandela's capacity to instil a spirit of reconciliation within South Africans has received great attention, and his call for moderation and reconciliation between races, particularly during times of crisis – such as Chris Hani's murder – was extremely effective.

Perhaps an element of Mandela's moderacy that receives less attention was his outreach to the business community. He built upon the work of ANC leaders in exile, who had already begun negotiations with large mining capital during the 1980s, to augment the image of the ANC as a moderate pro-market government-in-waiting, with Mandela the trusted captain. This required, Mandela argued, the ability to balance the competing pressures the ANC was under from its black constituency, demanding a better life after apartheid, and the international investor community, who pressured the ANC to adhere to neoliberal macroeconomic orthodoxy. Upon his release from jail in 1990, Mandela clearly favoured a mixed economy approach with a heavy presence of the state in crucial economic sectors, famously declaring that: 'nationalization of the mines, banks and monopolies is the policy of the ANC, and a change or modification of our views in this regard inconceivable' (quoted in Peet 2002, 71). However, following an ideological barrage of pressure from the World Bank,

the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and both national and transnational capital, ANC leaders gradually embraced the 'inconceivable', along with a range of other concessions to the diktats of market power (see Peet 2002).

In a clear illustration of his discourse of 'moderation' at the time, Mandela addressed a banquet of the South African Chamber of Business in 1994, telling the business leaders present to understand that the government was 'committed to act methodically and wisely in finding a truly optimum path for the achievement of each of the objectives which together make up our goal of a better life for all in this country'. He went on to implore them to recognise the duties the government had to promote the interests of all South Africans, while assuring them that the government would adhere to strict 'self discipline' to reduce the deficit by restricting expenditure and embracing conservative fiscal and monetary norms (Mandela 1994). What had become evident was that the extreme imbalance of power between the social forces which Mandela claimed to moderate between; an imbalance most evident in the adoption of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme in 1996. In the face of opposition from the left towards GEAR, particularly from the ANC's trade union allies, the limits to Mandela's famed moderation became clear. He declared that:

> There are matters where we will agree. The second category is matters where we disagree among us, but compromise. The third category is where there is no agreement at all and the government will go on with its policy. (Quoted in Buhlungu 2005, 710)

ANC leaders framed this at the time as part of a pragmatic recognition of the global 'balance of forces', in which transnational finance capital predominates; an attitude most succinctly summarised by Bond (2003, 135) as 'globalisation made me do it'. Billig warns, however, that such discourses of moderacy can actually serve to conceal highly unequal power relationships in reality because:

> Their frame of reference is the individual obeying with good spirit the dictates, not of a deity or of a dictator, but of 'circumstances', whose demands are unquestioned by both the theory and the sort of behaviour it wishes to promote. Some sort of iron law of situations is accepted as being the scene in which the balanced response can occur … Thus, the unbalanced situation of economic power is presented with an image of balance, which supposedly, and none too convincingly, suggests that the ship (to revert to the metaphor of Savile) has not been built with a permanent list to one side. (Billig 1982, 213)

The discourse of 'moderation' employed by Mandela and the ANC therefore present the organisation as a neutral, benevolent sea captain, objectively surveying the 'balance of forces' and attempting to ensure, above all else, that the ship remains afloat. In doing so, they have served to mystify asymmetries of power between transnational capital and domestic constituencies, as well as the considerable private economic power wielded by capitalist ANC elites.

What we can see is the political function that these discourses of moderation perform. The ANC does not invest in either a radical or a moderate identity alone, but instead attempts to synergise these two seemingly irreconcilable positions into a hybrid collective identity which, although apparently paradoxical, is a central element of both the party's internal coherence and its broad electoral appeal. It is therefore important to move beyond trying to neatly pigeonhole the ANC as either a radical or moderate movement, based on the party's position vis-à-vis the status quo, its position on the ideological spectrum, or the content of its public pronouncements. Instead, it is more fruitful to examine the functions that this Janus-faced

deployment of both 'radical' and 'moderate' identities performs. First, the ANC employs discourses of radicalism as a means of reaffirming its collective identity as a 'movement' engaged in a radical struggle to tackle South Africa's many socioeconomic and political challenges. This allows the ANC to maintain its strong grassroots organisation as a 'mass party' (Darracq 2008) and also allows the party to reaffirm its (self-styled) position as the ultimate guarantor of the black majority's aspirations. Second, by presenting itself as a 'disciplined' party of the left, the ANC has sought to make itself attractive externally to the international business community. It has also created a business climate in which a new black elite (many of whom associated with the party) have been able to enrich themselves from the new opportunities available.

The ANC's disciplinary moderation

There is also another important political function that such discourses of moderation can play, namely to marginalise opposition to the ANC government. As Johnson notes, the ANC government defines its role in state power as that of a neutral arbiter, impartially balancing the competing interests of society, and that:

> By virtue of its impartiality, the democratic state is seen as the only legitimate expression of the interests of the whole nation, becoming coterminous with the "national interest" or the "public will". At the same time all other demands or proposals for social change emanating from outside the state are viewed as partial, subjective or sectarian, regardless of the legitimacy of the demands. (Johnson 2003, 218)

When confronted with criticism from its left wing allies and civil society, the ANC government has often reverted to some extremely reactionary discursive defences of its position. It has, for example, regularly stigmatised dissenting voices as a means to marginalise these struggles from public influence (Bond 2000, 140; Gumede 2005, 264). This reflects the manner in which liberation movements in government across Africa have utilised what Dorman has referred to as 'liberation discourses' to affirm their credentials and close out the space for oppositional forces to emerge; painting themselves as the only legitimate custodians of the 'revolution' (Dorman 2006, 1098). Such discourses are profoundly threatening to South Africa's democracy. Positioning oneself as a political moderate therefore has an important function: by situating themselves in relation to a (discursively constructed) 'radical' and uncompromising 'other', self-styled moderates reaffirm their own identity as the balancing, utilitarian force. Mandela exhibited such discourses when he addressed parliament in 1995 to denounce the ongoing wave of worker and student protests, warning that:

> Let it be clear to all that the battle against forces of anarchy and chaos has been joined. Let no one say you have not been warned . . . let me make it abundantly clear that the small minority in our midst which wears the mask of anarchy will meet its match in the government we lead. (Quoted in Bond 2000, 223)

As Billig notes, this can contribute to a 'moderate conspiracy theory of politics' in which challenges to governing orthodoxies 'cease to be seen as genuine expressions of dissatisfaction, needing to be taken into account' (Billig 1982, 231), and instead constitute radical or extremist demands emanating from an immoderate fringe of society who are impervious to reason. Such discourses were continued by Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, who regularly dismissed critics of his government as 'ultra-leftists' bent on destabilising the country (see Lodge 2004, 202). This highlights a dangerous trend in which critics

of the ANC government are discursively stigmatised as immature, self-interested actors who are bent on upsetting the delicate balance of South Africa's democracy and who therefore invite upon themselves immoderate responses of government in the form of political marginalisation, censorship and, in the worst case, state repression through police brutality.

Thus, supposedly eschewing ideological dogma for a more pragmatic course, the ANC has consistently reaffirmed its position as the sole organisation mandated with the responsibility to act as this balancing force promoting social transformation. As Mandela himself remarked during his closing address at the 1997 ANC congress, the ANC was 'the only movement that is capable of bringing about that transformation' (Mandela 1997). The ANC has thus employed discourses of moderation to marginalise critical voices and to close out the space within which these voices can challenge the government or the party itself.

Conclusion: unfinished liberation

Nelson Mandela will rightly be acclaimed as one of the most influential and inspiring political leaders of all time. His greatest achievement in South Africa was his contribution to the establishment of a stable democracy and the promotion of reconciliation between races. However, as Mandela himself would admit, he was not saint. The dominant Western narratives that have emerged following his death have been those celebrating his 'moderacy', but as we have seen, these power-laden discourses present an extremely selective representation of Nelson Mandela, his ideals, life and political practice. This cherry-picked aesthetic caricature of Mandela serves to celebrate the elements of his leadership that resonate with Western ideals while silencing those facets of his life that challenge the notion that this freedom fighter was 'one of their own'.

As we have seen, the very notions of what it means to be a 'moderate' need to be critically interrogated in order to reveal the political functions that such discourses serve. Mandela, as leader of the ANC during the transition, was confronted with the task of not only mediating between different racial groups, but also between competing class interests, in particular between domestic constituencies and the combined ideological and material power of transnational capital. While Mandela was able to reconcile the former, it was far more difficult for him and his government to moderate between the unequal power relations between classes. The ANC has recorded some notable achievements in certain areas, such as the extension of access to social grants, pensions, sanitation, housing and many other basic services, achievements that account for some of its continued popularity (Beresford 2012). However, even in many of these areas the ANC has fallen short of even its own targets, let alone the aspirations of the black majority. Furthermore, growing inequality, high unemployment, poverty and uneven development have contributed to what Bond (2004) has identified as 'class apartheid' rooted in wealth inequalities and uneven access to services, land, housing, security and employment. As Zizek (2013) points out, the 'universal glory' bestowed upon Mandela by Western leaders following his death 'is also a sign that he really didn't disturb the global order of power'.

Within this context of an unfinished liberation, the discourses of moderation have served distinctive political ends. First, the cultivation of a 'moderate' identity by Mandela and ANC elites in the 1990s was a 'strategy of extraversion' (Bayart 2000): a way in which they could present an outward-facing picture of neoliberal self-discipline to a nervous and twitchy international investor community, whose resources the new government was keen to attract. Second, in order to reconcile

this uneven compromise with transnational capital, the ANC simultaneously discursively reaffirms its credentials as a 'radical' revolutionary movement: an identity which is central to both its internal cohesion and its electoral appeal. Third, the combination of these moderation discourses can also be deployed to try to quell the resistance that results from the contractions that result in the ANC's class politics, presenting opponents as 'spoilers' who are not only deaf to 'moderate' rationality, but who also unreasonably challenge the moral authority of the revolutionary liberation movement.

Obama argued that 'a free South Africa at peace with itself' reflects Mandela's greatest legacy, one which was 'an example to the world' (Politico 2013). However, this surface 'peace' does not reflect the reality of the continued structural violence (Galtung 1969) that plagues South Africa, rooted in class and gender inequalities. Mandela was, in many respects, an example to the world, and one that has inspired generations of political activists. But to sanitise his life, politics and legacy in this manner is also to do it a disservice: the long walk to political freedom may have been accomplished, but this is only a part-freedom, reflecting an unfinished liberation.

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Notes

1. CBS News 2013: http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/pres-clinton-remembers-his-friend-nelson-mandela/
2. A discussion of these issues can be found within the intellectual rationale for the 'Rhetorics of Moderation' conference series organised by Alex Smith. See: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/events/rhetorics-of-moderation/intellectual-context.aspx.

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