

Mamdani's Enthusiasms

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Cape Town is 2182 kilometers south of Harare. At the Iziko Gallery, just beside the houses into which much of Zimbabwe's sovereignty has been deposited,¹ one of philosopher-artist William Kentridge's stupendous works is on display. The filmic *I Am Not Me: the Horse is Not Mine* ('a Russian peasant expression', Kentridge explains, for denying guilt) is a combination of Kentridge's take on Gogol's *The Nose* with a disturbing rendition of Nikolai Bukharin's 1937 trials. As Kentridge puts it in his textual accompaniment to the shadows on the walls, the tale of Bukharin's last gasps exemplifies the 'comedy of a world at odds with itself ... of inversion ... where logical argument is a sure sign of duplicity and lying is explained away as strategy'. The trial's transcripts are 'as if a mordant comedy is writing itself out'.² The shadows of dancing, searching, marching, climbing and exegesis were reminiscent of the academic and activist discourse around Zimbabwe. Harare's and New York's renditions of Zimbabwe's crisis bore uncanny resemblance to Kentridge's rendition of the end of the Stalinist — nay, even the Leninist/Bolshevik — dream. And Professor Mamdani may have lost his nose as the dreams of African 'difference' evaporated: only to find it with a higher rank than he.

This short intervention will investigate Mamdani's rendition of the Zimbabwean revolution that is not his. It will then offer an alternative notion of a 'real' revolution in southern African political economy. Finally, a challenge will be offered to Professor Mamdani.

¹ David Moore, 'Now onus is on SA to Deliver: Power-sharing arrangement makes regional sovereign responsible for building a decent dispensation', *Cape Times*, February 3, 2009.

² William Kentridge, *I Am Not Me: the Horse is Not Mine*, Johannesburg and Cape Town: Goodman Gallery, 2008, 19.

Mamdani is known for his expertise in sniffing out the cant and hypocrisy surrounding rural despotism, its transformation into genocidal mania, and American foreign policy. Indeed, I thought he was so good at it that in a publisher's review of one of his books I opined that he might be a new Edward Said. In the case of Zimbabwe, however, his enthusiasm for an apparently pro-peasant, anti-imperialist and 'Africanist' cause has rendered him lacking: in seeking to speak what he thinks is the truth to what he thinks is power, he ignores its seeping from where it ebbs to the peripheral recesses where it has become intricately and intimately imprecated. In response to his critics he has listed phone calls from Washington to its puppets and accused well-meaning liberals of falling into the interventionist human rights trap, as well as foolishly linking economic libertarianism with its political parallels: in short as being caught in the hard grip and soft webs of American power.

As if to confirm Mamdani's views, sometime around the time his version of Zimbabwe's lessons was published George W. Bush woke up and said 'Mugabe must go'. A chorus arose singing that tune. As if in response, a CODRESIA meeting in Yaoundé, at which the man praised in Mamdani's piece for writing the most truths about Zimbabwe was elected president, released a much-debated statement (opposed by most of Zimbabwe's young generation present) supporting Zimbabwe's anti-imperialist pretenses. A South African brokered 'government of national unity' in Zimbabwe vindicated the celebrants of an African diplomatic renaissance just a few weeks later, seemingly to prove the signatories correct. Imperialists were not necessary. Armchair critics from North America and England, along with their civil society comrades around the world should thus take note — and caution. True revolutionaries would have supported Mugabe and Mbeki all along.³ Empire's

³ Particularly notable in this discourse is Eddy Maloka and Ben Magubane, "Zimbabwe: An International Pariah: What are the Revolutionary Tasks of the South African Democratic Movement?" a paper circulated within the African National Congress in early May, 2008 to defend Thabo Mbeki's

mendicants opposing Mugabe and his peasant revolution are tools of neo-liberalism. They are either dupes or cynics.

The trajectory of Zimbabwe's transitional moment remains to be seen. In the case of the scribes, however, Mamdani's case has been taken up by a blogger named Stephen Gowans. Gowans' writing (his corporal person remains mysterious) is known to many academics and activists concerned with Zimbabwe for his venomous attacks on civil society activists he deems funded too generously by imperial philanthropists. His blogs, including one minimizing Zimbabwe's cholera epidemic, are printed ardently by the Zimbabwean state's organ, *The Herald*.⁴ He has labeled Mamdani's detractors as cynics stuck in the ruts of the 'comfortable slogans and prejudices that has marked much progressive scholarship on Zimbabwe'. Besides being liberal imperialists they are elite theorists, believing that Robert Mugabe's 'crude anti-imperialist rhetoric' easily manipulates the masses. This is the mirror image of Gowans' belief that all ZANU-PF's opponents are manipulated by puppet-masters in the evil west, but that is beside the point. There are no puppets; those who forget this soon face blowback. ZANU-PF'S history, shared with most liberation movements, is littered with benign, sanctimonious, misguided and malicious global assistance. Just ask Robert Mugabe: 'who looked after your wife for years in London?' Or, 'who convinced the British election masters in 1980 not to cancel the contest due to ZANU violence?' Thus it is hardly surprising that the National Endowment for Democracy and its ilk try their hands in Zimbabwe now: and the contradictions thereof will be just as intense, and unanticipated, as they were

support for Robert Mugabe in the wake of his electoral defeat. Just over twenty per cent of the document is borrowed from various English publications such as the *Guardian* in which the 'anti-imperialist' line is trumpeted on Zimbabwe.

⁴ Stephen Gowans, 'Cynicism as a substitute for scholarship', <http://gowans.wordpress.com/2008/12/30/cynicism-as-a-substitute-for-scholarship>, December 30, 2008; 'Zimbabwe: Questions About Zim Cholera Cases', *The Herald*, December 30, 2008, re-published, with telling responses, on <http://allafrica.com/stories/200812300666.html>.

forty years ago.⁵ The issue is not that, although it is important how recipients deal with donors. Rather, it is excessive enthusiasm — shared by the cosmopolitans and the patriotic agrarians.⁶

At least, that's the way Kentridge might see it. His melancholic reflection on the fate of the Russian revolution discusses not only the forced enthusiasm of the marches, May Day parades and accelerated five year plans — in Zimbabwe, the President's birthday parties, in which those sharing that holy date partake Kim Il-Sungian membership in the 21 February Movement, the screaming phalanxes of Mercedes-Benz, the sighting of which commands pedestrians to freeze, and the absurd budgets and annual reports of Reserve Bank Chairman Gideon Gono (cited approvingly by Comrade Mamdani) come to mind — but the genuine hope that is 'beyond self-preserving or strategic'. Mamdani and Gowans express that hope - one assumes they have no interest in maintaining Mugabe and the Joint Military Command's Mauser-like hold on power — as do the libertarians on the other side of the mirror. It is clear, though, that the hope to which Mamdani and Gowans cling is clouded. Indeed, it is covered by Mamdani's banal assertion that the ruling clique in Zimbabwe combines 'coercion and consent' as it contrives a century at the helm: this elides the murders, rapes, tortures and disappearances that mar Zimbabwe's history with some between-the-lines assertion of Gramscian realism. It's a well-trod road, though, by those in the Stalinist tradition of substituting a vague assertion of social rights for the supposed first generation. In addition, though, it allows an extraordinary rendition of sloppy scholarship — and this may be even worse for one whose reputation rests in an ivory tower. We need not worry about Gowans in this case, given his

⁵ David Moore., 'ZANU-PF and the Ghosts of Foreign Funding,' *Review of African Political Economy*, 103 (March 2005), 156-162; 'Today's 'Imperialists' were those who nurtured Mugabe', *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg) January 20, 2008.

⁶ David Moore, 'Marxism and Marxist Intellectuals in Schizophrenic Zimbabwe: How Many Rights for Zimbabwe's Left? A Comment,' *Historical Materialism*, 12, 4 (December 2004), 405-425.

reputation rests only on the popularity of his blogs and the patronage of the Zimbabwean Minister of Information.

Even a casual newspaper reader wouldn't label the National Constitutional Assembly the National *Constituent* Assembly. An informed historian would balk at Mamdani's misrepresentation of labor history. A social theorist would wonder why such an extreme divide would be drawn between 'rural' and 'urban' in Zimbabwe, surely a country with the most mobile 'semi-proletarians' (to borrow a phrase from a Brazil-based ZANU-PF praise-singer) around. An urban geographer would wonder from whence Mamdani derives his guesses about *Operation Murambvatsina*.⁷ One political economist-cum-diplomatic analyst would wonder about the professor's assertions *vis a vis* sanctions while another, more theoretically inclined and with an agrarian bent, would query his take on Ian Scoones et. al's description of what could most optimistically be described as a rural form of petty commodity production in the context of a *possible* process of primitive accumulation⁸, but wonder why then he did not extend his investigations into other realms of crisis driven accumulation strategies such as 'informal' gold and diamond mining harking to the recent histories of Sierra Leone and Liberia.⁹

⁷ Maurice Vambe, ed., *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambvatsina in Zimbabwe*, Harare & Pretoria: Weaver Press & African Institute of South Africa, 2008.

⁸ David Moore, "'Intellectuals' Interpreting Zimbabwe's Primitive Accumulation: Progress to Market Civilisation?' *Safundi*, 8, 2 (April 2007), 199-222. More from the Scoones team is in Mavedzenge et. al., 'The Dynamics of Real Markets: Cattle in Southern Zimbabwe following Land Reform,' *Development and Change*, 39, 4 (2008), while more devastating is Fox, Rowntree and Chigumira "On the Fast Track to Land Degradation? A Case Study of the Impact of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme in Kadoma District, Zimbabwe", highLAND2006 Symposium, Mekelle University, Ethiopia, September 19-25, 2006.

⁹ Angus Shaw, 'Police move to curb diamond rush in eastern Zimbabwe', *International Herald Tribune*, September 3, 2007; Showers Mawowa, 'Tapping the Chaos: Crisis, State and Accumulation in Zimbabwe', MA Dissertation, Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2008.

Mamdani's 'lessons' rely inordinately on the work of researchers intent on saving their international academic and 'social movement' reputation as 'leftists' while consulting simultaneously for anyone with foreign exchange or some notion of peasant empowerment (and remember that institutions from the World Bank and USAID to the Swedish International Development Agency did put money on the table during the 1998 land conference). In proving that their long-held desire for land to the tillers has finally been vindicated their work risks self-travesty. Here lies one source of the Zimbabwean enthusiasts. With the failures of 'African socialism' and industrialization projects in the past decades, success becomes measured with a fantastic finality that ignores the travails and tragedies of primitive accumulation — a process that could be celebrated with due respect for its brutally universal history but only if it is encountered honestly. Capitalism may indeed be re-inventing itself in Africa — perhaps with Chinese characteristics — but it's questionable if it should be called something else.

The other mode of enthusiasm is in the anti-imperialist trope, itself not antithetical to the rise of a new bourgeoisie that is continental in scope. Mamdani's support for Mugabe (sure, he makes gestures, writing hastily that 'there is no denying Mugabe's authoritarianism, or his willingness to tolerate and even encourage the violent behavior of his supporters' before going on to bite the liberal hands that feed him), along with many African intellectuals like him, goes back to the alter of the liberation struggles that used force — wielded by poor peasants, workers and noble youth — to take their petty-bourgeois leaders to statehood. The belief that this noble battle was never tainted by compromise with 'imperialists' — or that they were only betrayed by deals made at the *end* of what would otherwise have been revolutions to match those of Lenin and Castro — may well be at the root of this over-reaction to today's imperialism. Real history — and even realistic fiction along the lines of Stanley Nyambfukudza's *Nonbeliever's Journey*, Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*,

Alex Kanengoni's *Effortless Tears* or Charles Samupindi's *Pawns* — reveals the flaws in this selective memory very easily. In the meantime, however, imperial power from Africa's strongest capitalist centre can be ignored. To judge this in Zimbabwe's case, some history needs to be invoked. This enables assessment of the *real* revolution in southern Africa, that being the way in which South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' managed to keep ZANU-PF in power.

Real (Cynical) History, Revolutionary Changes

Such a story brings an infamously noisy diplomat into the history books. Henry Kissinger, an academic turned power broker, who probably lives not far from Mahmood Mamdani, in the northeast part of a country wherein many people think they can change the whole world. In 1976 Kissinger hastened the slow diplomatic process moving Ian Smith out of power and finding the right person to replace him. The person to compare with Kissinger, however, is Thabo Mbeki, oft regarded as a formidable intellectual himself. In the 21st century, the diplomacy that moved the Zimbabwean mountain was orchestrated by the regional hegemon, neither a colonial nor neo-colonial power although some analysts call it a 'sub-imperial power'. South Africa — neither the USA nor the United Kingdom — led the game. Thabo Mbeki, while South Africa's president and even after his unceremonious sacking, held the cards.¹⁰

In 1976 Kissinger and the then British Secretary of State, Anthony Crosland, worked very closely to put a flagging process of Smith-dumping back on track. Their collaboration led to a conference in Geneva lasting from October to the end of that year. As the conference approached an angry Kissinger wrote a letter (suggesting it be destroyed) to his British partner. Quietly diplomatic, Crosland hesitated to follow Kissinger's and South African Prime Minister Vorster's proposal to alter the black

majority on a proposed a transitional council of state. Kissinger advised Crosland to heed Bismarck. Good ideas were useless without force. If they weren't 'timid' the British could succeed. Crosland's power, said Kissinger, rested on the 'the black leaders'' need for the British. 'They can accept your proposals, not Smiths!' Furthermore, they were 'unable to do the job themselves. In short, they look to you to save them.'

The shuttle diplomat told his fellow traveler that his prevarications simply encouraged 'radical Africans'. The Russians would meddle. Chaos would ensue. Since 'the whole enterprise ... only makes sense as a firebreak to African radicalism and Soviet intervention' Her Majesty's Government daren't hint at 'different minds' between the Atlantic powers. If the British failed, Kissinger concluded, it would confirm 'the general fear that every potential peaceful Rhodesian settlement is built of sand'. Crosland replied that he would not 'cramp your style' but the continental crusader should be 'tolerant of our difficulties'. He pleaded: 'if you can pull this off where we have so often failed, it will be a major coup.'

The Geneva conference's chair, Ivor Richard, admitted in late 2008 the October to December 1976 conference's failure. The British wanted to annul it, but Kissinger's masters faced an election and so wanted to be seen active in Africa. In fact the conference served only to help the relatively unknown Mugabe. In the hotels and halls of Geneva — paid for, of course, by the imperialists — he patched together an alliance of Zimbabwean nationalists and convinced the west he controlled ZANU's soldiers. In 1977, with the failure of the conference and the newly elected Carter regime in confusion about matters Zimbabwean (they thought Muzorewa was worthy of support) the British tried to start an election. However, Mugabe was busy eliminating his perceived opposition within the ranks and was hard to find.

¹⁰ The following paragraphs constitute a much revised version of my *Cape Times* article noted above.

This is the history against which SADC's negotiators measure. If Mamdani and Gowans are gauging the power of a new revolution, they must start here. Their yardstick may be 'success' in the short and middle term, but the question the global humanitarians must ask is: has the South African brand of diplomacy improved on Kissinger's?

Has Kissinger's perception that 'the black leaders' can't manage their own affairs been altered? The South Africans say 'this was a Zimbabwean solution'. The regional powerhouse replaced imperialist intervention. Yet 'imperialism' is weak anyway. Bush was bluster; Obama uncertain still. Yet the local kingpins trust the Zimbabwean *people* no more than did their *realpolitik* mentor. Otherwise, elections since 2000 would not have been stolen, legitimized by Mbeki's obsequious 'observers', and finally replaced by negotiations entrusting few. SADC has managed an easy way out for the ZANU-PF ruling class, while the Americans and British eased it in.

The 'radical Africans'? For African nationalists, Mugabe is as radical as he was for the Cold War Kissingers. Thinking in terms of generations, though, Mugabe & Co. resemble Smith and the Rhodesian Front. Now, young democrats threaten the formerly red pretenders. SADC may have only temporarily slowed history. Are Mamdani and Gowans then on its wrong side?

Peaceful settlements? Mugabe and the Joint Operational Command wage low-level war. A war mode of production looms. The temporary cement of force has been central for ZANU-PF under Mugabe, from the liberation war, the *Gukurahundi* campaign killing an estimated 20,000 Matabeleland residents in the 1980s, and notably political violence from May 2008. Peace (let alone justice) remains a dream unless the recently abducted civil and political activists are released.

Foundations of sand? The Geneva conference in 1976 failed to produce a transitional state. Now there is a Joint Monitoring and Implementation

Committee. Facilitated (JOMIC) by the local Kissingers' minions, it is 'guaranteed and underwritten by the SADC Facilitator (still Mbeki), SADC and the African Union'.

There goes Zimbabwe's sovereignty. The myth has collapsed alongside its economic guarantor, its currency. JOMIC means South Africa is the regional sovereign. It must take that responsibility to its heights. Thabo Mbeki and his temporary heir are the Kissingers on the block. If they don't guarantee a decent Zimbabwean dispensation the political economy of Zimbabwean lives will tumble to unfathomable depths. South Africa's regional hegemony will sink into cholera infected sewerage, not just sand.

Mamdani and Gowans demonstrate an uncanny enthusiasm for the mechanisms of local power as the American form of imperial power dwindles.¹¹ They are representatives of a Kissingerian *intelligentsia*. As Kentridge quotes Mayakovsky, 'Comrade Mauser, you have the floor.'¹² While we hope they do not share his fate, we have to remember that contrary to Cabral's touching faith, the petty bourgeoisie do not commit class suicide: they reinvent themselves, often with a brutality as extreme as they are ideology crude, along the new contours of power and accumulation.

And the challenge...

Let Professor Mamdani and me choose our guides in Zimbabwe to lead us together through a documentary film, produced by an independent filmmaker or television network — al Jazeera perhaps — charting Zimbabwe's contradictions.

About the Author

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¹¹ John Gray, 'A shattering moment in America's fall from power', *The Observer*, September 28, 2008.

¹² Kentridge, *I Am Not Me ...* 23.