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Book Review

Smuts and Mandela: The Men Who Made South Africa

Roger Southall

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Rarely does a nation have two founding fathers from different times and vastly different political traditions. It thus says a great deal about South Africa and its evolution that its two most famous patriarchs should be Jan Smuts (1870–1950) and Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), and that the latter figure made his career and a global reputation by dismantling a political system that was the logical end of the political order, decisions, and indecisions, of the earlier man. Yet, little work has been done to compare the two, and with that their contexts and legacies – until now.

Smuts and Mandela: The Men Who Made South Africa by political scientist and sociologist Roger Southall seeks to close this gap, and does so in a big way. The book consists of fourteen chapters, and is divided into four parts, each examining an aspect of the lives and legacies of the two figures. Importantly, Southall is convinced that the two great men do not only contrast but also have some important similarities or overlaps. He thus looks at their roles as freedom fighters, founders of "new nations", nation builders, and global statesmen.

Comparisons in politics are complex, and require a sophisticated method. It does not help that the country in question has had multiple foundational moments. For indeed *when* was South Africa? The foundations of the country pre-existed 1910, and since that date, there have been at least four new constitutions establishing republics and matters incidental thereto, namely in 1961, 1983, 1993, and 1996. Alongside these you could throw in 1926 (the Balfour Declaration which revised the status of the Dominions), 1931 (the passing of the Westminster Statute and formalisation of sovereignty), and 1948 (the legislative consolidation of the apartheid state). Still, these merely tinkered with the basic questions set by 1910, and ultimately resolved in 1994. Smuts and Mandela, having played disproportionate roles that even the staunchest opponent of the "great man theory" of history cannot deny, deserve comparison.

The task of comparing these two South African figures, attractive as it is, is however not an easy one. It is replete with many methodological and philosophical challenges, a fact not lost on Southall. Indeed, inasmuch as there may seem to be scope for comparison of the two big founding moments of South Africa, noted biographer Richard Steyn has made the case – implicitly if not explicitly – that the ideal comparisons would be that of

Jan Smuts and Thabo Mbeki, and that of Louis Botha and Nelson Mandela.[1] The former pair reflected the technocratic and hands-on practitioners of statecraft, whereas the latter exhibited the more symbolic, charismatic, warm and generous type of leadership that was administratively more laid-back, if not uninterested.

Southall, however, convincingly makes the case for the Smuts–Mandela comparison. It was their ideas and personalities that won the day at the two founding moments of South Africa, when the country reached its final form physically (1908–1910) and constitutionally (1994–1996). There were some parallels, although also some major differences, in their formative years and the breadth of their conception of who is South African (that is, who deserves freedom). Proceeding from the freedom fighter to global statesman arc, weaves the narratives, and presents a circular flow to demonstrate how far the world had moved in the twentieth century: the two men began their political careers fighting for their versions of freedom, and in the end occupied larger-than-life reputations on the world stage. In those few decades – which must however have felt long for those who lived through them – much had changed in terms of the international definition of freedom and who ought to have it. Smuts attained a global role on the back of building institutions and defending high ideals abroad while presiding over racialised oppression at home. Mandela's reputation, in turn, was won by completing what Smuts never did – or never dared to – by overturning a race-based caste system and, to the surprise of the country and the world, embracing those who had oppressed the black population.[2] He led with 'magnanimity', to use one of Smuts' most admired phrases in the political arena.[3]

Southall's work is historically detailed. Each part opens with a short introduction briefly laying out the conceptual debates in the relevant literature before delving into the historical subjects.

Much of the material itself will however be familiar to engaged readers of South African political history. The book does not present new historical material, and the author readily admits to this,[4] but what he does present, is a new interpretation of the available material drawn from other works. According to the author, the main argument of the book is that 'what Smuts did during his political career had a profound influence on what Mandela set out to do and what he did in a later political era'.[5] To some, this may border on the tautological. Of course, an earlier period had an influence on the later tasks facing a leader in a later period. Nevertheless, Southall is able to go into some detail about the specifics to put together interesting arguments, most notably in his analysis of the physical (territorial and demographic) inheritance that Smuts left for Mandela. For, almost to the line, the structure of South Africa today resembles that of the original Union, excluding South West Africa/Namibia, which was always an occupied appendage rather than part of the country. Any attempt to tinker with the map of South Africa was later vehemently opposed by the liberation movement. The idea of the homelands never took hold (with Mandela himself breaking from his cousins, the apartheid collaborating Kaiser and George Matanzima who ruled the "Transkei Republic"). Southall also persuasively points to the constitutional architecture of the country. Smuts advocated for a unitary constitution, with only soft federalist features. It was precisely this that was wired into the 1996 constitution.

Southall evaluates the different levels and sources of power enjoyed by the two figures as freedom fighters and as leaders of their precarious new nations. While Smuts could draw on the state military, whose forging he personally oversaw as minister of defence, Mandela could mainly draw on moral persuasion. Indeed, it is fascinating to contemplate that while Smuts led from the front in battle – from the 1899–1902 conflict to the internal rebellions and the two world wars – Mandela, although he received military training, never personally fired a shot. Once in power, they went on to have different relationships with organised labour; Smuts oppositional and violent, Mandela cordial and aligned.

What do the two careers tell us about the future of South Africa as a project? For one, Southall argues that the 1910 founding was equally confident that it would last forever – that it represented "the end of history" – in much the same way some have viewed the triumph of democracy over racially exclusive rule. In this line of thinking, *Smuts and Mandela* risks falling into the now all-too-familiar category of works, which anticipate an imminent fall of South Africa:

> In retrospect, we can credit Smuts with forging a new country that survives still today. Yet we now view his achievement as fatally undermined by its racial exclusivity. With the wisdom of history, we now say it was always destined to fail. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how it shaped the present and how, in all its essentials, it was to last over eighty years. Today, our present conceit is to assume that Mandela's democracy, because it was founded upon a basis of racial equality and political inclusivity, will endure. But Smuts might smile at such sophistry and riposte that in 1910 the founders of his South Africa were similarly optimistic.[6]

As a political scientist and sociologist, Southall could have pursued this argument further, or not moot it at all. His last point must also be challenged. Sabotage, including self-sabotage, against the Union was readily apparent in the 1910s, if not 1910 itself. Almost from the onset, JBM Hertzog and his followers broke rank, forming the National Party in 1912, while the government of Louis Botha (by then in his triple capacity as prime minister, minister of agriculture, and minister of native affairs) and Smuts also worsened relations with the black population by enacting the 1913 Natives Land Act. The following year saw the Maritz Rebellion, a civil war that took hundreds of lives, simultaneously symbolising and deepening divisions in white politics. There have yet to be forces that can genuinely be said to be undermining the democratic state that emerged in 1994. Certainly, if there are, they have not done so with as much vigour.

It must also be said that *Smuts and Mandela* tends to neglect the works of some key scholars, particularly on Mandela. For example, in his round-up of books and edited volumes on which it has drawn – and which he bills 'valuable interpretations of Mandela's life and how we may understand it' – Southall omits to even comment on the likes of Xolela Mangcu's *The Meaning of Mandela*[7] (consisting of chapters by Wole Soyinka, Henry Louis Gates Jr and Cornel West, and prefaced by Mandela's close friend and political ally Archbishop Desmond Tutu), and Busani Ngcaweni and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Nelson*

R. Mandela: Decolonial Ethics of Liberation and Servant Leadership,[8] while at the same time enlisting the criticism of Mandela for supposedly being insufficiently 'decolonial' as one of his motivations for writing the book now.

For a large part of the text, there is almost no interaction between the two subject figures, leading to the book reading as if it were two separate works that have been stapled, rather even than stitched, together. These early parts serve as material that will later provide the basis for the more interactive comparative analysis in Chapter 14. A more seamless approach might have been for the author to establish the common variable – i.e. South Africa itself and what he means by it – and then to consider and assess various aspects of how the actions of the two men and their colleagues contributed to the making of South Africa.

In the end, *Smuts and Mandela* develops along two key genres of comparison: of the lives and careers of Smuts and Mandela (from freedom fighters to global statesmen), including what motivated them and the methods they used, and of their contributions to the making of South Africa (holding together the terrain and helping shape the present-day constitution). The reader can expect to navigate these two streams, which finally merge in the final chapter, which deals with 'Smuts, Mandela and the Making of South Africa'.

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Endnotes

1 R Steyn, *Jan Smuts: Unafraid of Greatness* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015), 51.
2 R Southall, *Smuts and Mandela: The Men Who Made South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2024), 342.
3 Steyn, *Jan Smuts*, 47.
4 Southall, *Smuts and Mandela*, 17.
5 Southall, *Smuts and Mandela*, 18.
6 Southall, *Smuts and Mandela*, 83.
7 X Mangcu, *The Meaning of Mandela* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006).
8 B Ngcaweni & SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni (eds.), *Nelson R. Mandela: Decolonial Ethics of Liberation and Servant Leadership* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2018).