

Review

“African [Women] a-Liberate Zimbabwe” [1] : Review of *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation* by Horace Campbell, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, South Africa, 2003.

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The crisis of the state and governance in Zimbabwe has divided Zimbabweans, the country's southern African neighbours and the international community. Given Africa's big challenges – HIV/AIDS, trade, debt, food shortages, environmental crises and unending civil wars ravaging failed states – it is striking that such significant symbolic political investment has been made in the fate of a small country (12 million people) with a rapidly declining economy no particular strategic significance.

There is no doubt that the Zimbabwean situation is serious, or that President Robert Mugabe bears responsibility for the deep political crisis pervading the country, state-sanctioned repression and the mismanagement of the economy. The standard of living in Zimbabwe is worse today than it was in 1980. Some 65% of Zimbabweans are living either in poverty or extreme poverty (Campbell, 300). By July 2003, Zimbabwe had a currency shortage and an inflation rate of 450%. Its citizens face long queues for everything from bread to petrol. An agriculturally productive country has been reduced to seeking food aid. Further, Zimbabwe has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection on the continent, giving rise to a staggering 2 000 deaths per week. The pandemic has devastated Zimbabwe's social fabric and its productive and reproductive capacities (4, 169-70, 300), a tragic reality that has been aggravated by the sexist and homophobic public policies and practices of the Mugabe regime.

From international conference halls to grassroots organisations and trade unions, opposing views on Zimbabwe and the source of its troubles have split the continent. These divisions might suggest that the main protagonists are destined to re-enact some version of the pre-independence drama in which indigenous people were locked in an anti-colonial struggle against Western imperial powers, but we would do well to reject this formulation and recall Marx's caution: history repeats itself – however, the second time is invariably as farce.

At the heart of the matter lies the phenomenon that Frantz Fanon pointed to: a venal elite that does the “comprador” bidding of the neo-colonial power centres, while using the politics of patronage, the rhetoric of an imagined nation, the tools of repression available in the security apparatus, and the ideological machinery of a ruling party to intimidate the masses. Horace Campbell's *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of National Liberation* advances this thesis, in one of the most courageous and comprehensive critiques I have seen of Robert Mugabe and his distorted tradition. Furthermore, Campbell attempts to provide a feminist critique of Mugabe's macho militarism.

In *Reclaiming Zimbabwe*, Campbell makes it quite clear why reasonable people will avoid the simplistic labels invoked by Mugabe and his supporters; labels that wrap Mugabe in the mantle of a “liberationist”, while dubbing those who criticise his regime as “imperialists” or “imperialist collaborators”. While it may be tempting to fall back on this easy rhetoric, it does not begin to capture the nuances of the crisis in Zimbabwe. Mugabe's past involvement in the liberation struggle does not legitimate the present state-sanctioned violence against political opponents. Campbell explains why we should look elsewhere, including to the authoritarian impulse of the early liberation movement itself, to explain the crisis of governance and to envision an alternative to the current political disorder in Zimbabwe.

The “liberationists versus imperialists” simplification occludes the profound regional and

continental implications of the Zimbabwe crisis at an historic juncture when continental leaders are building a new global solidarity and partnership for Africa's development. South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria have promoted the idea of an African "peer review mechanism" that would affirm the continent's commitment to good governance. Donor countries and international critics have insisted that Zimbabwe is a litmus test of this commitment (302). Campbell is skeptical of any solution short of Mugabe stepping down, given that the latter's tendency to dismiss or violently repress critics reflects his lack of respect for human life and dignity (302).

Campbell's book is based on over two decades of engaging Zimbabwe's politics, in no small part because as a (Jamaican-born) pan-Africanist, he was once part of Harare's insider intelligentsia. In an easy-to-read style, the book maps the history of the Zimbabwean state from the liberation struggles to the 2002 presidential elections and beyond. He reminds us of the euphoria that accompanied the successful liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. This optimism resonated across the continent and was reflected in songs such as Bob Marley's "Africans a-liberate Zimbabwe". But this euphoria soon dissipated in face of the challenges of rebuilding an equitable society. One stumbling block was the government's failure to redress the injustices of land distribution and the persistence of a colonial racialised class structure. Consequently, "at the dawn of colonialism those who had seized the most fertile land became the bourgeois land owners", while the vast majority of Zimbabweans had to survive on subsistence wages. Notwithstanding this background, Campbell rejects the regime's rationalisations for the war veterans' land grab. He argues that it is nonsensical for liberationists to redress the land injustice "by unleashing new injustices" (75-131).

Another reason for the decline in optimism concerning democracy concerns the manifold failures of leadership. Campbell sees "President Mugabe [as] an excellent example of a leader who has devalued a just cause and the need to repair the injustices associated with the settler seizure of land during colonialism" (303). He argues that Zimbabwe's leaders adopted the repressive apparatuses and practices of the colonial state, as well as creating new intolerances (155-182). A concrete lesson that Campbell draws from the Zimbabwean experience is that it is "not enough to Africanize the structures of domination" – in other words, to simply change the cast of characters in leadership structures.

Instead, Campbell maintains, there must be a fundamental opposition to the "excesses of executive lawlessness, homophobia, military adventure ... and the concepts of peace that reinforce militarism" (310). The Mugabe regime learned to promote the trappings of electoral or procedural democracy even as it undermined the more substantive aspects of democracy – respect for the rule of law, promotion and protection of human rights, freedom of association, freedom of speech and the like (299-312).

Campbell suggests that the patriarchal model of liberation in Zimbabwe has reached its apex. Patriarchy is a system of social structures and everyday practices that enables male domination and the subordination and exploitation of women. Campbell draws our attention to "the militaristic conception of liberation and the gender prejudices" held by early liberation leaders, how this was incorporated into the modern African state, and the ways in which African patriarchs "energised a national opposition movement that brought out male violence and greed ... hiding behind the masks of economic nationalism" (2).

It is worth noting that Zimbabwe's political and military liberation leaders are presently involved in regional destabilisation and war profiteering. While invoking the principle of state sovereignty to reject international intervention in its own affairs, Zimbabwe has sent its army to intervene militarily in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Through direct ownership and investments in banking, mining and diamond companies, both Zimbabwe's Defense Forces and ZANU-PF are engaged in extracting resources from the DRC and in

accumulating wealth for personal benefit, while ordinary Zimbabweans and Congolese suffer (230-246). In light of this kind of masculinist exploitation, Mugabe's liberation credentials of two decades ago offer cold comfort.

Given that these patriarchal values characterised the Zimbabwe liberation movement from its inception, appeals to this same liberatory tradition as a means of resolving the current crisis of the state are misguided. Instead, Campbell offers a critical meditation on how ordinary Zimbabweans and their allies can build “new indices of democratic politics”, “reclaim Zimbabwe” and bring about a more inclusive social order. The book looks beyond specific individuals, and the tired leadership of Mugabe, to envisage alternatives to “the masculinist basis of state power that has been inherited from colonialism.”

Here Campbell turns to movements such as the women's movement in Zimbabwe, asking what practices these can offer as an alternative to the patriarchal model of liberation. As Campbell rightly observes, the trajectory and terrain of women's organising in Zimbabwe is rich and deep. Women's participation in the nationalist struggle for independence served to provide the impetus for post-independence demands that sought gender equity and disrupted pre-existing gender relations and cultural norms. These demands were responsible for the most tangible gains for women in the first few years of independence, particularly in the form of legislative change. The most significant of these reforms was the passing of the 1982 Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA), which saw women being granted majority status at the age of 18, paving the way for their further political and economic empowerment.

Campbell's analysis however suggests that after a brief spell of lip-service to gender equality, patriarchy reconfigured itself in the post-independence context, and the political will to meaningfully address gender inequality in Zimbabwe diminished rapidly, being replaced instead by the age-old desire to regulate and control women in both the private and public sphere. Women's political engagement in the new state was systematically eroded not only by the espousal of the development discourse (which often blunted the radical edge of the women's movement), but also through the very sophisticated and powerful invocation of counter-revolutionary nationalist and cultural discourses that tended to interpolate any women's organising as feminist – and feminism as being anti-nationalist pro-imperialism. I would argue that Campbell sometimes glosses over the subtlety and power of the latter narratives.

Although Operation Clean Up [2] was perhaps the most blatant example of this discursive move, it was by no means the only one. Further examples include the repeated attempts to repeal LAMA, and the denial of property and inheritance rights to women under customary law. Yet another example involved the public stripping of women who wore mini-skirts. All these manoeuvres were met by concerted and direct action from women activists, but as Zimbabwe plunged into socio-economic and political upheaval in the late 1990s, the conditions under which women were organising had become increasingly challenging. By this time, the state's unvarnished hostility to gendered discourses meant that women activists became the target of state-sponsored violence. Meanwhile, what feminist analysts refer to as “the deeply uncivil nature of civil society” with regards to gender meant that alliances across sites of struggle in order to further women's rights-based agendas were tenuous, and had to be carefully negotiated. Campbell misses this reading.

All the same, in mining social justice movements and the women's movement in this way, he attempts to envision a more radical democratic order shaped by social movements that reject intimidation, violence and the climate of fear that permeates Zimbabwe's body politic at present. This takes us beyond the simplistic notion that Mugabe and his supporters are struggling against Western imperialists, a false polarisation that detracts from the harsh

realities of everyday life in Zimbabwe.

Ultimately, Campbell's book is a reflection on the resilience of the people of Zimbabwe (especially its women), and the peace and social justice movements that continue to struggle for an alternative order characterised by social inclusion: "African women, especially those connected to the various organised movements for democracy and women's rights, have emerged as the force with the strongest claim for a new liberation process in Zimbabwe" (309). In his conclusion, Campbell recalls Walter Rodney's assertion that we need to "have confidence in the capacity of our people; if they could have breached the gates of colonialism through their own effort, then it seems to me that they have brought into the neo-colonial period a capacity to breach the walls of imperialism" (311). To this, one must add, the capacity to resist new forms of domination and exploitation.

Footnotes

[1] Lyrics from the song "Zimbabwe" by Bob Marley: "[We all] gotta right to decide [our] own destiny, And in this judgement there is no partiality. So arm in arms, with arms, we'll fight this little struggle, 'cause that's the only way we can overcome our little trouble. Natty Dread it in-a (Zimbabwe); Set it up in (Zimbabwe); Mash it up-a in-a Zimbabwe; Africans a-liberate (Zimbabwe), yeah."

[2] Over the weekend of 28-30 October 1983, soldiers and police swarmed through the major city centres of Zimbabwe arbitrarily arresting women. The purpose of this operation was to round up single women who had the temerity to be out alone, and charge them with being prostitutes.

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