

## **CLOSING (AND OPENING) POLITICAL DEBATE: “SELL-OUTS,” THE MULT-RACIAL OPTION AND ZIMBABWEAN “HISTORY”**

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Years ago, we all knew who was a sell-out: an African siding with colonialism in the independence struggle. Today, without colonialism, who is a sell-out? ... Today, my definition of a sell-out is: a supporter of dictatorships, the murder, political repression and rape of their own people.... (Bill Saidi, *The Daily News*, 18 June 2003)

South Africa has far more to offer people of all races than Zimbabwe, whose government is now as racist as Ian Smith's was.” (Bill Saidi, *The Daily News*, 18 June 2003)

July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003 – A Zimbabwean working in Johannesburg told a TV reporter interviewing him on Madiba's birthday: “Tell everyone back in Zimbabwe that people live well together here and the economy is good. Be sure to tell them.”

Conversation with a taxi driver in Bulawayo, July 18th, 2003: talking about Zambia selling maize to the Zimbabweans. “It is funny, in the past we sold food to Zambia. They supported the land invasions, but then they took in our white farmers. And now they are selling us food and we are starving. It makes you wonder...”

Any opposition which does not aim to replace what it opposes must not be paid to serve in a democracy. Any government which does not tolerate the official opposition is not democratic. The ZANU PF government is not a democratic government. (letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 3 July 2003)

### *Introduction*

Luise White, in her marvellous new book, *The Assassination of Herbert Chitepo*, argues that the revival of interest in Herbert Chitepo's murder (and possibly Tongagara's) is no accident. It has provided a means “to revive, and rehearse, the political world of the 1970s” (2003:93). The dramatic economic decline and political repression in Zimbabwe certainly have raised questions in many minds, both about the present and the past. Indeed, as always, interpreting/reinterpreting the past is deeply embedded in current and past power struggles.

Participation in the liberation struggles of the 1970s has long been the basis for claims to legitimacy for both rulers and citizens in independent Zimbabwe. As White points out, two new histories/historical narratives of Zimbabwe have been scripted by those seeking to buttress their claims to power and resources in independent Zimbabwe. One narrative claims that Zimbabwean independence was won through the “unified and unflinching struggle for the land white farmers had stolen from Africans in the 1890s” (2003:95).

Those people who participated in the liberation war thus are represented as a united group -- the true and rightful citizens of an independent Zimbabwe. The other narrative focuses on the negotiations at Lancaster House in 1979, when "British perfidy subverted the struggle" (2003:95). It makes Britain central to Zimbabwe's history, effectively erasing the difference between the settler population and British colonialists. This narrative blames Zimbabwe's problems on Britain, suggesting that everything would be fine if Britain had not "stolen" the peace process and subverted united efforts to establish a democratic, prosperous state in Zimbabwe. As White points out, these narratives reinforce the claims of people who fought in the liberation war while at the same time dismissing the rights of white settlers, who are, according to these narratives, colonialists who should return to Britain.

Struggles over citizenship, and its attendant rights, have long roots in Zimbabwean history, and interpretations of the past have played a central role in these debates. Claims and counterclaims have asserted the legitimacy of different players to power, resources and leadership since the settler incursion in the 1890s. Rhodesian whites argued that their key role in Rhodesia's modernization legitimated their control over its political and economic institutions. In the struggle to counter or broaden this claim to power, black Zimbabweans adopted a number of tactics. Some joined white liberals, calling for a multi-racial future for Rhodesia, one that envisioned a more inclusive notion of citizenship and rights. Others increasingly argued that Africa should be for Africans, thus questioning the rights of whites and Asians to citizenship except as the majority saw fit. As the struggle for majority rule intensified, and divisions within the black community heightened struggles over power, the room for difference within the black community narrowed. Increasingly Africans who sided with whites (or aspired to a multi-racial future) were branded as "sell-outs" to the nationalist cause, a label, even when based on the flimsiest of evidence, could bring threats, physical harm or death. Thus, the label "sell-out" became a prime mechanism for disciplining those who refused or seemed to refuse full and unquestioned loyalty to a particular nationalist party and its leaders -- useful both to constrain African moderates, to win power struggles within the nationalist movement and to undermine white claims to legitimacy in the new state.

After independence, the label "sell-out" continued to be a disciplinary force, punishing those regarded as disloyal to the party, its rulers and its interpretations of history. Indeed, the label of "dissidents" or "sell-outs" legitimated the murder of thousands of people in Matebeleland in the 1980s (cite Catholic report). Once again, the language of "sell-outs" is being invoked to deal with the "enemies of the state --ie party." The opposition party, The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is pilloried as a group of "sell-outs," lackeys of the British, deserving no sympathy, no protection and no rights as Zimbabwean citizens. White Zimbabwean supporters of the MDC are labelled as the running dogs of imperialism who should go home (ie Britain) where they belong.

The scale of human rights abuses against the opposition and anyone critical of the current regime is certainly on most people's minds when they think about Zimbabwe. One of the questions facing anyone trying to understand recent events in Zimbabwe is why so many Zimbabweans have accepted and even supported these discourses and practices. Why

have so many Zimbabweans turned their eyes when citizens without the “correct” attitudes, or citizens outside the nationalist definition of citizenship were denied the protection of the state and the law, indeed even killed? Why have so many Zimbabwean people come to believe that anyone who disagreed with them or didn’t support their position/leaders deserved such drastic treatment? These are important questions. The readiness to pillory those labelled as “sell-outs,” even on the flimsiest of evidence, needs to be understood (and challenged).

However, living in Zimbabwe in June-July of both 2001 and 2003, as well as regular perusal of the Zimbabwean press have raised another equally important set of questions. We need to understand not just repression, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the growing resistance to this behaviour and its accompanying narratives. Why have so many Zimbabweans spoken out against government and party propaganda, often at the risk of their health and even their lives? What kind of counter narratives are being put forward in these critiques of the current state of affairs in Zimbabwe? Do these new narratives suggest new ways of thinking about economic and political rights, citizenship and accountability? What are the implications of these new counter narratives for understanding/interpreting the Zimbabwean past? Do they suggest a need to revisit not just the 1970s, but the federal period (and earlier) as well – particularly the role of multiracial liberalism and settler-black relations? These are some of the issues this paper will explore. contested as the economy declines and people question the legitimacy of an increasingly rapacious state

### *Current “Orthodoxy” and the Role of “Sell-outs”*

The rhetoric and behaviour of Zimbabwean government officials, party members and supporters demonstrates the on-going commitment of many Zimbabweans to the narratives of the past (and of rule) mentioned above. Participants (or those who can get away with claiming participation) in the guerrilla struggle are seen as the true and legitimate rulers of independent Zimbabwe. This narrative erases divisions within the black community during the nationalist struggles. The guerrilla struggle is posited as a unified effort of committed blacks against a uniformly evil white racist regime. The power struggles within the black nationalist communities, the backstabbing, murder and sabotage have been erased from the heroic discourse of nationalist struggle, suffering and righteous triumph.

The desire to play-down divisions within the black community in Zimbabwe has been no doubt affected by the very real and deep divisions that have existed, both along ethnic and class lines. This desire also may be another way of legitimating attacks on those people who have (or do) articulated a belief in open debate and differences of opinion – ie liberal notions of democracy. The possibility that blacks could have in good conscience believed in reform within the pre-independence state has been dismissed – that discourse/possibility is something that cannot be thought or discussed. Those blacks that continued to work for reform from within during the Federal and UDI period have been reviled as “sell-outs” of the worst kind. They have received little or no attention from historians of Zimbabwe, who have been all too ready to label these black Zimbabweans

as “sell-outs.” This is understandable when one realises that many of the leaders of the ZANU-PF party were active in Capricorn in the 1950s, and many also worked with white liberals during both the federal and UDI periods.

As Luise White (2003) points out, the other dominant narrative articulated by the government and party and supported by many Zimbabweans, represents whites in Zimbabwe as a uniformly racist group, not citizens but colonialists who should return to Britain. The current problems in Zimbabwe are blamed on British meddling during and after the Lancaster House agreement. The long-standing quarrels between the Rhodesian whites and the British government disappear in this narrative. Rhodesian whites are represented as a unitary, racist group who stole the land of the Zimbabwean people. No mention is made of their contributions to development of Zimbabwe. No mention is made of differences within the community, of the fact that some, indeed many, of the Rhodesian settlers had fought for a multi-racial, broadly inclusive future for the country. Multiracialism is either dismissed as a sham or ignored altogether. Whites are only oppressors, and foreign oppressors as well. The fact that some of these settlers arrived in Zimbabwe only 40 years after the Ndebele is another silence in nationalist and party narratives. It seems some strangers can become citizens, others cannot.

The government and party present themselves as a progressive, concerned state devoted to the modernization of Zimbabwe and the well-being of all Zimbabwean citizens. ZANU PF and Mugabe insist that they are the only group capable of and determined to improve the lives of Zimbabwean citizens—ie its black supporters. The fact that citizenship seems to only be legitimate for the state’s supporters is never mentioned. The Third Chimerega, a label that politicizes the invasions of white commercial farms and to a lesser extent white owned businesses, is held up as proof of the government’s (and party’s) determination to return the wealth stolen by whites to the people who deserve it – ie the loyal black citizens of Zimbabwe. The fact that many, indeed most, of the white farmers under attack are legal citizens of Zimbabwe and many have lived there for generations, has been entirely ignored, as has the very unequal benefits from this program.

Many people in Zimbabwe support these narratives – both that the guerrilla fighters are the heirs and rulers of the Zimbabwean state and that whites both within and without Zimbabwe, are the enemy. For many these narratives are comforting as they support the legitimacy of taking property by force, putting the blame on those who have property rather than those who take it. It is easy to see why those who have benefited from the regime (and they are many, including not only those who have gained land through the land invasions but also the many people who have been able to take the jobs abandoned by people leaving the country in search of better economic opportunities). Those who can travel under the title of war vets have in fact systematically sought to benefit from these narratives of guerrilla entitlement since independence (Kriger 2003). Others no doubt also prefer a story that simplifies life by artificially unifying the black Zimbabwean community while also identifying enemies/ “sell-outs” in both the black and the white community as people with no rights, who deserve to be killed or run out of the country.

The rising tide of criticism of the regime has been met with growing intolerance for debate and increasing determination to convince Zimbabwean citizens to believe the party line. This has involved an intense commitment to “educating” people about the correct version of Zimbabwean history, through schools, the media and state programs such as the youth brigades. These brigades have been set up around the country, with intensive schooling in Zimbabwean history (give examples). The “graduates” of these institutions have then been set on local communities with the task of silencing and threatening any opposition to the party line. The green bombers as they are known, are rightly feared. The government is trying to make the course on citizenship given to the youth brigade compulsory in all universities and colleges. It has been closing down debate by regulating and often deporting journalists, by intimidating members of the opposition party and by systematically subverting any assistance given to MDC supporters for helping with the current economic crisis, including keeping food aid from reaching them (National Youth Service Training, 2003).

### *Challenges to the Current “Orthodoxy” and to Interpretations of the Past*

Despite these efforts to contain and silence debate, the dramatic implosion of Zimbabwe’s economy, the rampant corruption and the glaring incapacity of the government/party to solve Zimbabwe’s economic problems, as well as the increasing concern about human rights abuses and the lack of respect for law and order, has led to ever more vocal critiques of the current regime. My initial concern had been to understand the continuing support for state repression in Zimbabwe, but I have come to believe that it is even more important to consider why so many people are openly critical of the regime, especially given the dangers of such behaviour? What are they arguing for? What narratives of Zimbabwe’s past and future are being contested and reconstructed, and what are the implications of these discourses for the way we think about Zimbabwe’s past (and future)?

Clearly, the continuing and ever worsening economic crisis is one of the key factors fueling these critiques. There is wide agreement that the citizens of Zimbabwe deserve more economic opportunities, and that while the chaotic and inequitable character of the recent land (and business) invasions has been severely criticized, the need for more equitable access to land is widely accepted. However, job-creation and a flourishing economy are seen as equally important. The inability of the government to halt the economic implosion of Zimbabwe (it is the fastest declining economy in the world), the continuing mismanagement and the widening gap between the rich and poor are grist to the mill of regime critics from all walks of life. Implicit in these critiques is a notion that citizens have a right to expect economic opportunity and to a decent life.

The economy’s sorry state has become an entry point for critiquing/questioning the narrative blaming Britain (and local white “colonialists”) for the current economic crisis. As one letter in the Daily News (11 July 2003) lamented, all Mugabe tells the people is that “Zimbabwe will never be a colony of Britain again. This is hardly reassuring.... Are we worried about Britain and America or are we more concerned about the shortage of fuel and the ever-increasing prices of basic commodities?” The author ridicules

Mugabe's past practice of blaming fuel shortages on the white farmers. "What about now, where is the fuel? There are hardly any white commercial farmers any more, Mr. President. Where is the maize to feed the people? Instead we are now importing maize from Zambia! Is it not those same white commercial farmers who were chased away by the war veterans who are farming in Zambia? Can we make everybody a farmer?" (Daily News, 11 July 2003). This narrative is a common lament, as my conversation with a Bulawayo taxi driver made clear. Thus, for many Zimbabweans the economic crisis is undermining the regime's narrative that blames Britain and local whites for Zimbabwe's problems.

Indeed, critiques of the regime's bumbling economic policies are often framed in the language of inclusivity. The opposition calls for a decent life and economic opportunities for all citizens of Zimbabwe, not just those who support the regime. Consequently they are challenging the narrow definition of legitimacy put forward by the ruling party, namely that only loyal supporters of ZANU-PF deserve the rights and protection of citizens. The opposition rhetoric argues for economic rights on the basis of citizenship rather than race or ethnicity. Indeed, as we have seen, many argue that the racist nature of the land reform policies have driven out much needed expertise, benefiting neighbours, such as Zambia and Mozambique, and impoverishing Zimbabwe. Many critics suggest that a more balanced approach, planned rather than fuelled by racial hatred, could have led to a more balanced mix of new and established expertise and avoided the current disaster. Bill Saidi even argues that Mugabe is more racist than the Ian Smith's regime, implying that this behaviour has damaged the economy and the nation (the Daily News, 18 July 2003).

It is a short leap from the economy to governance. In fact, Morgan Tsvangari, the leader of the opposition party (MDC), has recently argued that "The crisis in Zimbabwe is not about land, not about Britain, it is about governance" (*Mail and Guardian*, 8 Oct. 2003). This bald statement highlights the arguments raised repeatedly by critics of the regime, who vociferously condemn the corruption, incompetence and lack of accountability and transparency of the current regime. As Bill Saidi points out, a government's first priority should be the people's welfare, not the survival of its geriatric leadership.... But what is confounding Africans is why some of their leaders believe it's below their dignity to ... respect their people's human rights..." (Daily News, 18 June 2003).

These arguments are often grounded in a more inclusive, liberal notion of democracy – one that is in many ways based on Western notions of liberal democracy, but framed within the Zimbabwean context. These discourses suggest the growth of a political culture among Zimbabweans that questions government attacks on the elected opposition. As one letter to the Daily News (3 July 2003) complained, "We have had a government ... which has not grasped the idea that when the opposition is opposing, they are actually doing what they are paid to do.... But in the Zimbabwean style of democracy, the idea of democracy is described, even by those with professorships ... as treason.... Any opposition which does not aim to replace what it opposes must not be paid to serve in a democracy. Any government which does not tolerate the official opposition is not democratic. The ZANU-PF government is not a democratic government." Another letter

writer put it even more baldly -- Mugabe “was never a democratic leader ... he does not tolerate the idea of an opposition party” (Daily News, 11 July 2003).

Many of the critiques of the present are based on challenges to ZANU PF versions of the past. Some argue that the party leadership has lost its way and should have paid more attention to African cultural practices of governance and social responsibility. It is interesting that some critics of the regime suggest that minority cultural practices offer possible guidance for the way. For example, a publication on the Mzilikazi Commemoration, edited by Godfrey D. L. Ncube, argues that lessons from the Ndebele nation/culture have much to offer those looking for answers to the current crisis. “As a nation we have a preserve and responsibility to foster a culture of social and economic values that are stable, economy, particularly the refusal to accept criticism.” He criticizes the current government for a politics of patronage and the belief that criticism is treason. In the Ndebele culture “the King accepted criticism as a way of shaping his way of governing... The issue of accountability is paramount in our culture,” and this requires effective consultation in the decision making processes” (Nov-Dec. 2000:21). Thus for some, culture is a resource that has been ignored, to the cost of everyone in the nation. This call for paying attention to cultural practices can be seen as a return to an imagined past, but it also condemns the singular version of Zimbabwe’s cultural past and opens the possibility for thinking about Zimbabwean history and cultures in a more inclusive, multiethnic/multi-racial manner.

Current critiques often base their arguments on revisions of nationalist history. The author of the July 11<sup>th</sup> letter cited above challenged Mugabe’s democratic credentials by pointing out that he had refused to tolerate dissent from the beginning of his rule in 1980. He also criticized the war veterans for harassing the very people who helped them liberate the country and for being dupes to Mugabe’s manipulations. He thus questions the narrative of guerrilla unity and the legitimacy of their (and Mugabe’s) claim to rule. Bill Saidi, in an opinion piece for the Daily News (July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003) baldly contradicts the narrative of African nationalist solidarity. He points out that during the nationalist period in Zimbabwe, “Leaders were killed by both the enemy within and the colonial enemy.... The leaders had their little fiefdoms within the party which vied for supremacy, using the standard modus operandi – assassination. These were difficult times, when so-called sell-outs were killed in cold blood, most likely on the flimsiest evidence. Others were killed on tenuous grounds that someone in the leadership did not like the way they were looking at a female cadre – and the way she reacted to that attention.” While acknowledging the heroism of the freedom fighters, he continues to challenge party narratives, arguing that “after independence, very few of the parties could transform themselves into civilian political parties with their sanitised structures. Even where they succeeded in re-inventing themselves, the option of summary execution was literally ever-present.” The party has continued to act as if they were fighting colonialism. “Opposition parties were quite often targeted as the next worst thing to the colonialists.” He chronicles the many ways critics of ZANU-PF have been unjustly accused, undermined and even killed, suggesting that such lies and behaviour are evidence that “he had been right about ZANU PF all along; it is one very nasty party” (*The Daily News*, 2 July 2003).

Thus, Saidi challenges the historical narratives of the party and its supporters, arguing instead that the brutal, divisive and corrupt behaviour during the liberation struggle has continued to characterize post-independence rule. He calls for judgement on the accomplishments and behavior of ZANU-PF rule and suggests that the “amazing whiff of corruption wafting from it [the party]” is not as important as the fact that “to ZANU PF, a party yet to shed its liberation war skin, these methods are perfectly legitimate” (The Daily News, 2 July 2003). Saidi points out that the attacks on the media “are steeped in the same liberation war lore.” This is an assumption that anyone who criticizes the government or party is an enemy of the state. The people in the Department of Information and Publicity in the President’s office act on the brief that those journalists who condemn government policies “are against the party and must be dealt with in the same way that sell-outs were dealt with during the struggle.” He goes on to accuse Moyo (the head of the DIP) of insulting people’s intelligence by “telling blue lies in broad daylight and expecting nobody to question them.”

Thus Saidi holds narratives about loyalty, “sell-outs” and narratives about the past up to scrutiny and finds them of little use today. He also suggests past dangers and excesses by those who used the term to identify and punish detractors and enforce loyalty. In the past, he points out, “we all knew who was a sell-out: an African siding with colonialism in the independence struggle. Today, without colonialism, who is a sell-out?” He suggests that to call those who oppose African dictators “who promote the murder and rape of their people ... is a sell-out is itself being a sell-out.... Today, my definition of a sell-out is: a supporter of dictatorships, the murder, political repression and rape of their own people.” It is interesting that he has not abandoned the use of the term, and indeed MDC leaders use it as well. At a large public meeting, Morgan Tsvangari told his followers that he “knew most of you will not sell out because you are behind us....” But at the same time he reassured the audience the “We will never agree on anything without consulting you.... We should never allow a party and party leader to treat us like children because if we do not do that our grandchildren will not forgive us for having let the country degenerate to such a level” (Daily News, 15 June 2003).

Thus, the term “sell-out” keeps popping up. It seems a deeply embedded notion of loyalty, useful to so many in so many different ways. At the same time, the need to rethink the past, especially demands for unthinking loyalty surface repeatedly in letters, speeches, editorials and other analyses by critics of the current regime. As one author wrote, “It would be difficult to find a more irresponsible statement by a head of state entrusted with upholding constitutional liberties...” than Mugabe’s recent speech to the police, where he told them that it was their patriotic duty to fight against an opposition that made “irresponsible use of ... [our] democratic space ... to sell out our independence and sovereignty.... Mugabe’s likes and dislikes are irrelevant here. He does not have the right to abridge the rights of others in order to secure for himself a further purchase on power. He cannot make puerile claims about the opposition being ‘puppets’ driven by ‘foreign agendas’ and then order the police to act against them” (Zimbabwe Independent 4 July 2003). Brian Raftopoulos, a historian, scholar and MDV activist points out as well that “It is worth remembering also that ... democratic principles were an important part of the past of nationalist parties on the continent....” He goes on to express the hope that



many Zimbabweans can see through south Africa's argument that ZANU PF's nationalist credentials are the country's "best bet" (Daily news 6 June 2003). The need to rethink the past in order to redesign the future is clearly a major priority for most critics of the current regime. As Chido Makunike stated recently, "It is both Mugabe the person and the failed system of governance that he stands for that need to be overhauled. We don't just need a fresh face at the presidential palace; we need a fresh way of doing things." He goes on to describe a government attentive to the people, a president who wants to be respected rather than feared and someone who is not a rigid ideologue, afraid to change (Independent 4 July 2003). I would suggest that such changes will also require rethinking Zimbabwe's past in ways that move beyond the two narratives of rule currently in favor and in search for a more nuanced, inclusive and balanced history – one that questions the label "sell-out" rather than accepting it at face value.

#### *Implications for Rethinking Zimbabwean Interpretations of the Past*

I think three possibilities for re-examining the past would be of interest

##### *The Capricorn society.*

##### *Debates over rights to public debate/disputes in the African Home News*

The Africa Home News has much to tell us about debates over who has a right to speak and who are the legitimate citizens of Zimbabwe.

##### *The Discourse and Practice of "Sell-outs" – ie Black MPs before 1980s*

#### *Conclusion*

This will discuss the three case studies in relation to each other and the argument that a new approach to the history of settler societies is needed in Zimbabwe and other similar cases.