

Preface

Very few political figures in the late twentieth century evoked hope in the way that Nelson Mandela did. In conventional representative politics, figures fleetingly emerge who inspire the possibility of the new and then flicker before adjusting to the “real world.” It is not that Mandela did not adjust. (For example, after his trip in the 1990s to Davos and the world economic conference, he proposed changing the ANC’s economic transformation program to a market-based one.) Rather, it is that no matter what adjustments were made, one got the sense his reasons were tactical, not overarching and strategic. Moreover, it is clear that as a political figure he embodied the possibility that justice could be done differently. Whether that is so is still an open question. Mandela faced several conundrums: Would power yield itself without radical confrontation? What would be the consequences of such confrontations? How to create profound social and political change and usher in the new order, and on what grounds of politics could this occur within the complex logic of making attempts to effect change by acting in humane ways? For historical and contingent political reasons, he may have acted in a way that made an attempt to find a novel way, but his commitment of using force of a different kind to make a new society resonated with many in a world where the mythos of the unencumbered self and market fundamentalism is the common sense of our times.

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No other figure of the last twenty years of the twentieth century drew to his cause and commitments so many people across the world.

The personal and political vignettes represented in this dossier are a very modest attempt to think about the man and his time. They range from poetry to explicit political reflections on this figure. The collection ends with a poignant piece from a young person who, told about our efforts, was moved to write and send us her pages. While this dossier does not cover everything, two things are clear. First, that Mandela was an iconic figure in the world. We are aware how power re-creates and attempts to absorb such figures, gutting them of their radical meaning. This has happened, and continues to happen, with Mandela. But, second, in our contemporary moment, current struggles are still deeply linked to the struggle for which he spent twenty-odd years in prison—the struggle to be treated with dignity and equality as a human being. It is the latter which will shape the complex legacy he left behind.

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