

[Home](#)[About](#)[Books](#)[Authors](#)

2020

[Blog](#)

nts

[Events](#) **ng Mandela to Absolve Rhodes**

## Rahul Rao on how Nelson Mandela is used against the 'Rhodes Must Fall' Campaign



When Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Oxford activists first demanded the removal of a statue of settler colonist Cecil Rhodes from the façade of Oriel College in 2016 as part of a manifesto calling for a decolonisation of the curriculum and improved representation of black and ethnic minority students and staff, the Chancellor of the University of Oxford [Chris Patten](#) suggested that if they were not willing to embrace ‘freedom of thought’ they might ‘think about being educated elsewhere’.

Four years on, following the unceremonious dunking of the statue of Bristol’s Edward Colston into the River Avon and amidst the new terrain of debate



- Home
- About
- Books
- Authors
- Blog
- Events

...seems to have changed when speaking on a segment of [BBC Radio 4](#) programme on which I also appeared, Patten invoked Nelson Mandela's support for the work of the Rhodes Trust to defend the revered colonist. He described how when Mandela signed the agreement that established the Mandela Rhodes Foundation—a joint philanthropic initiative of the Mandela Foundation and the Rhodes Trust—Mandela reportedly looked at a photograph of Rhodes and said ‘Cecil, you and I are going to have to work together now.’

For Patten, provided the clinching argument for an acceptance of Rhodes's iconographic endurance: ‘if it was alright for Mandela then I have to say it's pretty well alright for me.’

Even as I began writing this response to Patten's disingenuous invocation of Mandela, which I was not given an opportunity to rebut on air, Mandela came to be conscripted repeatedly in public discourse to protect Rhodes. The day after the Radio 4 interview, Oxford Vice Chancellor [Louise Richardson](#) also invoked Mandela to push back against RMF's demands, suggesting that he would have ‘firmly disagreed’ with the aims of the campaign given his collaboration with the Rhodes Trust.

Meanwhile, a [Guardian investigation](#) published two days later revealed that Historic England, the body responsible for advising on which statues and memorials should be protected through listing, had backed proposals to protect a Rhodes memorial plaque affixed to the Oriel-owned house in which he had lived in 1881, when demands for its removal were first raised in 2016. The then director of listing Roger Bowdler recommended offsetting the negative publicity that might result from being seen to support Rhodes by announcing ‘pro-African’ listings at the same time. In an email to colleagues, he writes ‘Now there's a challenge—put your thinking cap on! Apparently there is a bust of Mandela on the South Bank [in London] for starters...’ Historic England eventually recommended against listing the Rhodes plaque. Nonetheless, its internal discussions provide yet another instance in which Mandela was thought handy for the purpose of safeguarding Rhodes.

Even taking Patten at his word in his recollection of Mandela's attitude towards Rhodes, it is impossible to know the exact proportion in which it might have been animated by pragmatism and principle. Whatever that balance, his nod to ‘Cecil’ was less a reference to the man himself than to the white minority community that continued to own a disproportionate share



the viability of the post-apartheid state in a global capitalist system.

Home

Thoussaint L'Ouverture onwards, virtually every leader of a liberation

About

we have bumped up against the structural constraints of the world

Books

and been forced to decide how much they were willing to

Authors

condemned them. There is something ugly in the spectre of their

Blog

pillars—pillars of the racial capitalist system against which they battled

Events

framing these tortured compromises as evidence of their own absolution.

But forgiveness is the appropriate term for what Mandela did, the loud and insistent proclamation by the colonisers that they have been forgiven betrays an anxiety that the door to the colonial past has not been shut firmly enough.

But what exactly follows if Patten and Richardson are correct that Mandela might not have approved of RMF? It is salutary to recall that RMF Oxford was (and remains) a gesture of solidarity with the movement that first bore this name, which had erupted in the University of Cape Town (UCT) a year earlier. That movement also took aim at a statue of Rhodes that sat brooding at the entrance to UCT, which it succeeded in toppling besides also drawing attention to the lack of progress on racial justice in South African universities following the end of apartheid.

It is instructive to note that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was meant to have aided the country's transition to democracy, never turned its attention to universities even as it scrutinised the complicity in apartheid of other social sectors, arguably perpetuating the racist status quo in educational institutions insofar as the curriculum and the racial demographics of staff and students were concerned. As RMF gathered strength, it morphed into a national movement that would be called Fees Must Fall (FMF), leading currents of which are deeply critical of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) on account of its rapprochement with neoliberalism. In the context of the university, this has manifested itself in struggles against fee hikes, inadequate student housing and the outsourcing of core services amongst other things.

More generally, the great divide in South African politics between those who support the non-racial, neoliberal order inaugurated by Mandela and the ANC, and those like Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) who



Home  
About  
Books  
Authors  
Blog  
Events

consciousness articulated by Steve Biko than they are to the  
 ilitary politics of Mandela. As many of them explained, ‘when we say  
 1st fall we mean we want the land back.’  
 ke Mandela to shut down RMF Oxford, as Patten and Richardson  
 attempted to do, when Rhodes Must Fall and its successor movements  
 h Africa were spurred largely by disappointment and disillusionment  
 e legacies of Mandela, is there profoundly ironic. Of course Patten and  
 lson are entitled to takes sides in the South African debates. It  
 wouldn’t be the first time that colonisers have listened to the native voices  
 they most want to hear.

Bowdler’s invocation of Mandela in Historic England’s discussion of the  
 politics of listing is of a different order. Here we are presented with a crudely  
 utilitarian calculus that assumes that the offence felt by some as a result of  
 the honouring of figures associated with colonialism and apartheid might be  
 assuaged by giving equivalent recognition to their opponents. It is the  
 heritage industry’s version of Trump’s infamous observation in response to  
 the violence that white supremacists inflicted on antiracism activists during  
 protests against Confederate statues in 2017 that there were ‘very fine people  
 on both sides’.

**Rahul Rao** is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at SOAS University of London. He  
 is the author of *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (2020) and  
*Third World Protest: Between Home and the World* (2010), both published by  
 Oxford University Press. He is a member of the Radical Philosophy  
 collective.

Tagged South Africa, Rhodes Must Fall, British Empire

1 Comment

Sort by **Oldest**

Add a comment...



**Iain Crawford**

'structural constraints of the world system'? What is the 'world system' ?  
 What is its 'structure'? In what way is that structure 'constrained'?

I graduated in politics and have no idea what he means, neither here nor at

many other points. Certainly he's not heard of Orwell's advice to never use a long word where a short one will do.

Login

Like · Reply · 1d

Home [Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

About

Books

Authors

Blogs

Events

**V**  
V E R S O

Sign up for our email newsletter

Subscribe