Robert Mugabe: The Will to Power and Crisis of the Paradigm of War

Introduction

Over the years, people, black and white, high and low, have struggled to make sense of Robert Gabriel Mugabe, leader of the ruling ZANU-PF party and current president of Zimbabwe. Some people view him as great nationalist revolutionary, a great liberator, and father of the nation while others think of him as a tyrant, a dictator, and the undertaker of the nation (Norman 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009b: 1141). Mugabe has now embraced the politics of resentment and is constantly on a warpath, with his real and imagined enemies threatened with violence and elimination. He identifies the source of his country’s problems as his enemies’ making and the solution to them as the violent elimination of such enemies. The language of enemies, war, guns, violence, and elimination has dominated his political life for decades now. This chapter thus argues that Zimbabwe is entangled in an unprecedented economic and political crisis because of perpetuation of a vicious paradigm of war by Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party, which claims to be the alpha and omega of the political leadership of the country through its declaration that it alone has primal legitimacy deriving not from elections, but from active participation in the epic anticolonial struggle (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014).

A paradigm of war is defined as “a way of conceiving humanity, knowledge, and social relations that privileges conflict or polemos” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 3). In his groundbreaking book entitled Against War (2008), the philosopher and decolonial theorist Maldonado-Torres articulated the core contours of the paradigm of war that are constitutive of coloniality. The paradigm of war, characterized by racial hatred, was institutionalized since the initial colonial encounters in the fifteenth century, genealogically traceable to the emergence of Euro-North American-centric modernity in 1492. It was founded on the politics of racial hatred and denial of humanity of black people, which is part of the darker side or underside of modernity (see Mignolo 2000, 2011). It has the ability to turn those who were involved in the liberation struggle against such monstrosities as imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism, and coloniality to end up becoming monsters.
themselves. Constitutively, the paradigm of war is fed by racism and is inextricably tied to “a peculiar death ethic that renders massacre and different forms of genocide as natural” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: xi).

In his *Will to Power* (1968), the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche articulated the core contours of the paradigm of war, insisting that war was the natural state of things and that human beings were destined to rarely want peace and if they do so it was for brief periods of time. According to Nietzsche, “the world is the will to power.” It is dominated by human beings who are always attempting to impose their will on others. There are no truly altruistic human actions and the idea of selfless action was discounted as a psychological error informed by Judeo-Christian thought (550). “The commandment to love one’s neighbor has never yet been extended to include one’s actual neighbor” (382). Nietzsche ([1909] 1990: 102) therefore posited that “he who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster... When you gaze long into an abyss the abyss gazes into you.” Here Nietzsche was addressing the other important aspect of the paradigm of war—that of dehumanizing its victims and making them to see war as natural, in the process falling into what Frantz Fanon (1968) understood as “repetition without change.” In this case, the “repetition without change” takes the form of embracing the paradigm war in one’s search and struggle for peace and new humanism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014).

The paradigm of war eventually becomes the main obstacle to human liberation and flourishing. This is because it is sustained by an unending reproduction of perpetrators and victims in which today’s perpetrator becomes tomorrow’s victim and vice versa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014). It is opposed to the paradigm of peace that was pursued by humanists like Mandela, which produced political justice. The paradigm of peace transcends the paradigm of war and conceptions of justice such as criminal justice involving punishment of certain individuals as advocated for by the Nuremberg paradigm of justice, which is predicated on the logic that violence should be “criminalized without exception, its perpetrators identified and tried in a court of law” (Mamdani 2013b). According to Mamdani, criminal justice targets individuals whereas political justice affects entire groups. Whereas the object of criminal justice is punishment, political justice seeks political reform. The difference in consequence is equally dramatic. The pursuit of political justice requires that you decriminalize the other side. This means to treat the opponent as a political adversary rather than as an enemy. This makes sense only because the goal is no longer to punish individual criminals, but to change the rules and thereby reform the political community. Morally, the objective is no longer to avenge the dead but to give the living a second chance (Mamdani 2013b: 33).

This chapter is not just an undue obsession with the personal role of Mugabe because such an approach can unscrupulously rebuild the discredited “big men thesis” that prioritized the role of particular “big men” like King Shaka of the Zulu, who are said to have single-handedly built nations and states and also single-handedly destroyed them (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012a: 317). But a study of Mugabe’s life of struggle inevitably enables a critical decolonial ethical engagement with the broader question of the meaning and essence of being human (subject, subjection, subjectivity, and liberation) and conditions that inhibited human flourishing, in this case the paradigm of war, colonialism, and apartheid. This is because among former nationalist liberation movements still ruling in Southern Africa (FRELIMO in Mozambique, MPLA in Angola, SWAPO in Namibia, and ANC in South Africa),