

Nelson Mandela and the Politics of Empathy: A New Moral Consciousness in African Cultures and Societies

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Reflecting on the many global crises of the 21st century, Jeremy Rifkin asked: “Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?” Nelson Mandela and the other architects of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission appeared to have given an answer when they argued that the traditional retributive justice, largely based on logic, cannot weld a society together in which victims and culprits have to live together; the empathy-driven “restorative justice” might achieve more. This paper analyzes Mandela’s rhetoric of empathy and its moral-political implications especially in the difficult transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. I argue that Mandela employed a deliberative, rational appeal to the riches of the human experience as a rallying point for the creation of a new society. Empathy is, by no means, a panacea for any society’s problems, but it can help establish conditions for deliberations.

I discuss in particular how the South African TRC has become a trans-regional phenomenon, having influenced other peace initiatives in other African nations such as Rwanda Liberia and Sierra Leon. Besides this, the philosophy that informed the TRC can also be a force for true cultural and social transformations in Africa.