

The Imaging of Africa by Gates: Meanings of the 2016 Nelson Mandela Lecture

Prof Tinyiko Maluleke

Advisor to the Principal and Vice Chancellor: University of Pretoria

Greetings

On behalf of the Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Pretoria, Prof Cheryl de la Rey, it is a great honour and privilege for me to share a few thoughts on the 2016 Nelson Mandela lecture.

Voice of the Born-Frees

I am particularly privileged, if also somewhat intimidated, to speak after the gutsy Ms Shaeera Kalla, one of the most articulate student leaders of our era. To listen to Shaeera is to listen to one of the most authentic voices of the current generation of students. This is a generation that has outgrown and complicated the imposed born-free tag, which has been thrust upon them. To understand the meaning of the words and actions of the so-called born-frees, we need to read and listen to the likes of Shaeera Kalla, Malaika wa Azania, Panashe Chigumadzi, Thando Njovane, Philani Dladla, Khaya Dlanga and many speakers and writers of this age set. This is a generation that sings songs that disturb our peace and speak truths that are uncomfortable to our consciences.

Magic of NMF-University Collaborations

I know I speak on behalf of all universities when I put on record my gratitude to the NMF for collaborating with universities over the annual Nelson Mandela Lecture. Having successfully lobbied the NMF to collaborate with two South African universities in the preparation and staging of the annual Nelson Mandela lecture, I have first hand knowledge of the immense value of this lecture to South Africa and the world at large. Every university in this country, nay, every university in the world, deserves its moment of glory, to bask under the shining light of the Nelson Mandela brand, even if only for one day.

Gratitude of University of Pretoria

This year was the turn of the University of Pretoria – a university of 50'000 students. If the Vice Chancellor of the University of Pretoria was here, she might have reminded you, amongst other things, that the University of Pretoria, boasts the largest engineering faculty in the land, a faculty that produces 30% of the country's engineering professionals.

She might have also told you also that this is a university whose facility at its High Performance Sports Centre, is part of the reason South Africa does as well as it does in the Olympics. Almost all our Olympians spend time at the UP High Performance Sports centre.

What an honour it was, for the University of Pretoria to partner the Nelson Mandela Foundation for the 2016 annual lecture!
There is magic in the combination of the Mandela brand and the brand of one of the top five universities in South Africa – one of the top ten on the continent.

The Unique Position of the NMF

The Nelson Mandela Foundation, as keeper of the Mandela name, preserver of the Mandela memory and bearer of the Mandela standard, is a unique institution in South Africa and in the world.

I can confirm that there is something *Mandelaisque* in the manner in which the dynamic and highly motivated staff members of the Foundation go about their duties. Their enthusiasm is palpable and their energy is infectious. What a pleasure it was to interact with each and every one of them throughout the planning process up to and including the day of the lecture. My special thanks go to Mr Sello Hatang the young, dynamic, talented and yet compassionate CEO of the Foundation. When he revealed that the University of Pretoria is his *alma mater*, I was not surprised.

Finally, I make few remarks about the lecture of 2016, which was delivered by well-known philanthropist and computer magnate, Bill Gates.

But not yet.

The Lecture Before the Lecture

For me the 2016 Nelson Mandela lecture actually started in a lecture room a short distance from the arena-like hall where the main lecture was later delivered by Bill Gates. To be honest I believe that what happened in the lecture room, before the main lecture was delivered, is truly what the Nelson Mandela lecture is all about. What happened in that room is true to the character and the essence of the man after whom the lecture is named – Madiba.

When I was asked to comment on the 45 minutes long speech of Bill Gates, I asked myself, but why should a day so rich and varied, be reduced only and mainly to the 45 minutes of formal speech? What if the actual lecture happened before and besides the main lecture? Could it be that as we choose to focus mainly and only on the main stage, we are also choosing to marginalise and not to see the significant things that happened off stage, before, besides and behind the main event?

An hour before the lecture commenced, I joined Gauteng Premier, David Makhura, NMF Board Chair, Prof Njabulo Ndebele and NMF CEO, Sello Hatang in a remarkable engagement with families from the Mamelodi who have lost loved ones in the struggle against Apartheid. These are the victims of the Apartheid system. Mostly old, with a few younger persons, they filled that lecture room to near capacity.

I looked into their faces and wondered as to which one of them had lost a son, a husband, a daughter, a father, a mother a limb and a livelihood.

Victims of Victims

After a few words of humility and invitation by Professor Ndebele, and under the compassionate facilitation of Mr Sello Hatang, members of the Mamelodi families stood up, one by one and spoke. The more they spoke, the more I realised that these were not merely the victims of Apartheid. They were also the victims of the victims of Apartheid – much like Edward Said once described Palestinians as ‘the victims of the victims’. In many of their interventions the families spoke of how they felt forgotten and re-victimised. Clearly, the families represented in that lecture hall, were not the ‘celebrity victims’ (a term used by one of them).

Listening to the narratives of the Mamelodi families, it dawned on me that our biggest reconciliation, redress and rainbow instruments - TRC, BEE, and Employment Equity, you name it – which we constructed since 1994 were made mainly with the victims of Apartheid in mind. There are almost no interventions designed to assist the victims of the victims, that is, those victimised and/or re-victimised since the dawn of democracy.

Who or what would take care of the victims of the victims? I am talking here of the people to whom, 22 years of democracy has not delivered jobs, houses and security.

In a very real way, the Mamelodi families were both the reality and the metaphor of the victims of victims. In this regard, their struggle resonates with the struggles of the born frees. To both groups, the democratic era has not delivered. Both groups share an affinity with a growing number of South Africans who are becoming unhappy with their lot in this country.

Struggle Credentials Reloaded

There is another thought, which the Mamelodi families triggered in my mind. If there is a growing cohort of victims who have been newly victimised or re-victimised since democracy, should we be developing a new set of struggle credentials? Until now we have tended to frame our understanding of struggle credentials in terms of exile, prison, underground activities or armed struggle. But what about those who have been waging struggles, since democracy, and paid a heavy price, including the ultimate price, since democracy 1994?

Surely we cannot continue to airbrush and whitewash the mounting struggles of the poor and marginalised in post-Apartheid South Africa by insisting that these should be judged against pre 1994 criteria? If we were to re-write the script of struggle credentials in light of post-Apartheid activism, what would they look like? I want to suggest that post-Apartheid struggle heroes would include the likes of Thuli Madonsela, Andries Tatane, the massacred Marikana miners and the #Mustfall activists. A time has come for us to rethink struggle credentials.

Finally, let me say a few things about the Gates lecture proper.

The Human Bill Gates

In my mind, I struggled to imagine a human Bill Gates, perhaps because I have not been able to visualize a human being as rich. Maybe it is the legend of his entrepreneurial flair and his programming prowess. To see him walk into the holding room, shaking hands, including mine, was quite poignant. There was something sobering about the ordinariness of Bill Gates at close range.

Gates used the first part of his speech to reveal more of his humanity. He did this through anecdotes in which he was subjected to the impact of Mandela. He who has impacted so many people, by putting personal computers in every office and every home, spoke of his awe of Mandela. 'As a boy, I learned about him at school', says Bill Gates of Mandela. Because for a long time, Nelson Mandela was classified a terrorist both in the UK and in the USA, I wonder what they taught Bill of Mandela at school and how Bill interacted with the knowledge received. Bill also recalls, as a boy, seeing 'reports about the anti-Apartheid movement in the evening news' – whatever those reports said, and whatever impression the reports made on him! Did they speak of the ANC and the PAC as terrorist movements?

In his speech he took his audience to his childhood, noting that he was 9 years old, when Madiba went to jail. Like so many of us, he used Madiba's arrest and Madiba's release as markers and milestones in his own life. Like so many of us, mere mortals, Bill Gates made himself small in relation to Nelson Mandela. At no stage did he project himself either as a peer or as greater than Mandela, even though a man with his means, could easily be tempted to.

Africa of Bill Gates

Tourist Africa

In his speech, Bill Gates invites his audience to catch a glimpse of his very first visit to Africa in 1993. He went on holiday in Africa - East Africa. He does not specify where in East Africa he went. Elsewhere he writes that he 'went to Africa for a vacation to see the animals'. So I was left wondering whether he went to the Maasai Mara National Reserve, or to Lake Nakuru in Naivasha. I imagined a younger Gates on Safari in safari suits, during a game drive, camera in hand, exploring Josef Conrad, heart of darkness, Africa.

I pictured him at the foot of the Ngong Hills of Kenya – whose peaks bewitched and inspired Karen Blixen to pen the now immortalised 'Out of Africa'. Like so many American and European tourists, by his own admission, Gates came to 'Africa' on vacation to see animals, and landscapes, not people in the first instance. This then is the first picture of Africa which Bill encountered physically. He must have seen plenty of animals. But it was also his 'first encounter with deep poverty'. Should we conclude that as Gates was seeing African animals and landscapes, African people, and their poverty, interrupted him rudely?

This is how Gates put it: '... the landscape was beautiful. The people were friendly. But the poverty, which we were seeing for the first time, disturbed us. It also energized us'.

Africa of Mandela

According to Gates, the next encounter with Africa he recounts was through a telephone call from Madiba in 1994. As I sat listening to the lecture, I tried to replay their telephonic conversation between Madiba and Gates in my mind. Did Madiba start informally 'Hey Bill' that is, as he is supposed to have been with the Queen of England calling her by her first name? And what was the reaction of Gates? What was their chit-chat? Did Madiba, typically ask: 'How is Melinda and the children'? I can almost hear Madiba's famous, 'how are you'?

At what point in the course of the phone call, did Madiba make the pitch and how did he put it? Did he say, 'Bill, we need some money to run the first democratic elections, can you help'. I doubt if Madiba used the Bob Geldoff's approach to fundraising for the poor, with Geldoff's now famous, "Give me the f#&king money now!"

Whatever Madiba said to Bill on that telephone call, I think we can be certain that it was a lot more diplomatic than the Geldoff style. What then, is it about the world we live in, that made it possible for Geldoff to approach charity fundraising in that vulgar and self-entitled way but does not afford, even someone as great as Nelson Mandela, the same privileges.

I wish to suggest that the telephone conversation between Madiba and Gates in 1994 was an opportunity and yet another chapter in the encounter between Gates and Africa. What picture of Africa was this that Gates encountered in that telephone call? Clearly, Madiba made a huge impression on Gates. But did Gates transfer the greatness of Madiba to Africa as a whole and to other Africans or did he see Mandela as the exception that proves rule?

I assume that over the years a much more nuanced and human relationship developed between the two men, for Bill says 'when I started coming to Africa regularly ... I came to know Nelson Mandela personally'.

Africa of Poverty and Disease

What comes out very clearly from his lecture overall, is that the Africa of Bill Gates is the Africa of landscapes, animals, disease and poverty. He notes how friendly the people were. But from his own words, repeated not just in the 2016 Nelson Mandela lecture, but in several other platforms, what touched him deeply about Africa, and what 'energises' him about Africa is the high levels of poverty. Africa or concern for the human toll of poverty in Africa, may not be the only motivation, but it seems to take pride of place, in Bill and Melinda Gates's decision to start a foundation. If this is true, then Africa has 'done' a great thing, or has it not?

Yet as other scholars and observers have contended, we should be critical of the place and role of aid, charity and philanthropy in Africa. As Dambisa Moyo has argued in her book titled *Dead Aid* – aid can kill more than it heals. The framing of development in Africa around philanthropy is a distortion of what development was supposed to be. If development is freedom, as Armatya Sen suggests, in what ways can charity, aid and philanthropy really lead to the full attainment of social and economic freedom?

There is something remarkable about extremely rich people who choose to give some of their wealth away. There is something fundamentally noble. But while the Gates narrative is to explain the founding of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as a response to poverty, what then is the relationship of the Foundation to their business empire? Is the Foundation only the charity wing of the empire or is it also part of the marketing and brand management?

Did Bill Miss the Point Again?

Bill Gates' visit to Soweto in 1997 seems to have made a huge impression on him. We hope that his visit to Mamelodi in 2016 will have a similar effect. In a few crisp remarks, Bill narrates his encounter with Soweto. At that time his life Bill was an ambassador for Microsoft and an evangelist, of sorts, who preached healing and salvation in the name of personal computers. But Soweto was to stop him dead in his tracks. It might not have been his Damascuan moment of epiphany, but it was certainly one of his most memorable.

This is how he narrates it: 'As I walked into the community center, I noticed there wasn't any electrical power. To keep the computers on, they had rigged up an extension cord that connected to a diesel generator outside'. At that moment Gates realised that his glorified computers were of no use if they could not be turned on due to lack of electricity. More importantly, he realised that 'computers could not cure diseases'. He seems to imply in his speech that it was shortly after this Soweto episode that Gates started the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

For me the punchline of Bill Gates' encounter with Soweto is captured in Gates' own assessment of the impact of his speech at the community centre he visited. He says, 'as I read my prepared remarks about the importance of closing the technology gap, I knew I was missing the point in some way'.

This is a massive admission.

Clearly the point Gates feels he missed in Soweto the reality of the lack of the basics that make the ownership of computers meaningful. This is the point he was missing. But are there other points he was missing, of which he was not aware?

More crucially, is it possible that in his lecture in Mamelodi Bill Gates still missed some points? If computers cannot heal diseases, as Gates realised in Soweto, is he sure that charity and philanthropy cure poverty? How can philanthropy be leveraged in ways that seek to cure rather than palliate the reality and effects of

poverty? This is the question that needs to be answered not only by Bill Gates but by all of us.

In the context of his lecture, during the visit to Mamelodi, has Gates been able to encounter an Africa different from the one he encountered as boy in his hometown in the USA, in East Africa in 1993, on the phone call from Nelson Mandela in 1994 and in Soweto in 1997?

Conclusion

The challenge before us is not merely the problematic nature of philanthro-capitalism, its undermining of the power of states, its distortion of the notion the processes of economic development but also its impact on how we imagine ourselves. From the lecture of Bill Gates, and some of the events that happened around it, I have attempted to gain an impression (the sources) of his imagination of Africa. The more pertinent question is; how do we as Africans, imagine ourselves? When we look in the mirror who do we see? Do we see an African and what kind of an African? Do we see ourselves in the kids who burn? Do we see ourselves in wars which rage? Do we see ourselves in the mimicry and the dependency that reigns all around us and all over Africa? Do we see ourselves as creators of our own future? Philanthro-capitalism is not only about charity and aid, it impacts on and speaks of, our self-imagination and our self-projection as a people.

With these, my humble musings, I wish to thank you all, from the bottom of my heart, for listening to me.