



Ilana Mercer's "Into the Cannibal's Pot": A Review

Ilana Mercer's, *Into the Cannibal's Pot: Lessons for America from Post-Apartheid South Africa*, is an unusual book. Yet it is unusual in the best sense of the word.

At once autobiographical and political; philosophical, historical, and practical; controversial and commonsensical, *Cannibal* succeeds in weaving into a seamless whole a number of distinct modes of thought. This is no mean feat. In fact, its author richly deserves to be congratulated for scoring an achievement of the highest order, for in the hands of less adept thinkers, this ensemble of voices would have fast degenerated into a cacophony. By the grace of Mercer's pen, in stark contrast, it is transformed into a symphony.



Mercer (pictured, above left) is a former resident of South Africa. She is intimately familiar with her native homeland in both its apartheid and post-apartheid manifestations. Yet it is precisely because she is all too well aware of the latter that she is now one of its legions of emigrants.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from Mercer's flight from South Africa to the United States that she had ever been any sort of champion of apartheid. Not only has she never supported these (or, for that matter, any) racially themed institutional arrangements, Mercer's "paleo-libertarianism" — a variant of the classical liberal tradition — positively precludes any such sympathy with its affirmation of "natural rights" and "individualism."

Still, as she amply demonstrates, not by any social indicia does "the New South Africa" even remotely approximate the old as far as quality of life is concerned. As is more often than not the case with revolutionary-like innovations, the transition from apartheid to democracy has visited upon the residents of South Africa — especially its white residents, the Afrikaners — all manner of evil that, ostensibly, were not envisioned by those legions of Westerners for whom "change" of any kind can only be a benefit.

For one, far from being "the post-racial" idyll to which the abolition of apartheid was supposed to lead, the ruling African National Congress — the party of Nelson Mandella — is no less "committed" to "restructuring society around race" than were the "apartheid-era Afrikaners." There is, however, one critical difference between South Africa under majority black rule and South Africa under minority white rule: "More people," Mercer informs us, "are murdered in *one week* under African rule than died under the detention of the Afrikaner government over the course of roughly *four decades*."

Mercer's verdict upon the New South Africa is blunt and decisive: "Dubbed the 'Rainbow Nation,' for its multiculturalism, South Africa is now, more than before, a '*Rambo Nation*.'" (Emphasis added.)

Indeed. The first chapter of *Cannibal* is a gripping — and grisly — account of the scourge that crime has



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become in post-apartheid South Africa. While her discussion is not utterly devoid of numbers, Mercer refuses to reduce the victims of barbarism to statistics. Her eschewal of abstractions in favor of concrete details, however ghastly they may be, is both admirable and effective. Mercer's treatment of this subject compels the reader to reckon with the stone cold fact that the thousands of white farmers who have been brutalized since the end of apartheid, like those who have mercilessly preyed upon them, are flesh-and-blood human beings.

Mercer relays the heart-wrenching episode of the Williams family. After the Williams lost their 12-year-old daughter Emily as she stumbled upon an armed robbery in progress at a friend's house while traveling to school, her parents decided that their country had become an intolerable place to remain. They have since relocated to the United Kingdom.

The reader is also introduced to people like Rene Burger, a young and promising medical student who was kidnapped and gang-raped at knife-point by three degenerates at a "well-patrolled" hospital where she was taking classes, and Sheldon Cohen, who died in front of his young son after being gunned down by three predators.

Mercer identifies others — including a not inconsiderable number of her own relatives — who have suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of South African thugs. She also definitively establishes that to no slight measure, this crime epidemic is motivated by an animus toward whites, a deep seated racial hatred that is both encouraged and, particularly in the case of the legions of white Afrikaner farmers who have been forced from their lands, sanctioned by the African National Congress.

In keeping with the subtitle of her book, Mercer is at pains to spare her adopted country — America — from the destructive folly that engulfed her native homeland. The judgment of one reviewer to the contrary aside, I do *not* believe that it is essentially the perils of "diversity" against which Mercer warns her American compatriots. It is true that in drawing parallels between the New South Africa and trends in the United States, the author goes to great lengths to signal to the citizens of the latter that from the union of massive Third World immigration and a system of racial preferences as comprehensive as ours, nothing short of self-destruction will spring.

However, as I read her, Mercer is more concerned with reminding us that such "political abstractions" as "democracy" are nothing more or less than conceptual devices, ideals that we have distilled from our own culturally and historically specific traditions. In other words, political institutions are not inanimate objects that can be moved about at will; rather, they are long-settled, if never perfected, habits or customs that have been centuries in the making.

Thus, it isn't just so-called "affirmative action" and Third World immigration at home over which Mercer sounds the alarm. She is at least as concerned over the doctrine of "American exceptionalism" that is now the reigning orthodoxy that informs America's view, not just of herself, but of her role vis-à-vis the world. Actually, it is with a remarkable degree of clarity and concision that Mercer reveals the inextricable intellectual link between America's domestic prescriptions and her foreign policy. This link, she convincingly argues, is the fiction — "nonsense on stilts," as Jeremy Bentham would have said — that America is a "proposition nation," the only country in all of human history to have been founded upon a bloodless, lifeless, abstraction.

It is hard not to be impressed with Mercer's skill at preserving the integrity of the thread that unites her analysis of the flawed metaphysical underpinnings of contemporary American orthodoxy with the nit and grit of the everyday reality of South Africa. Not only is a discussion of "American



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exceptionalism” germane to any critique of democratic South Africa, considering that the United States figured prominently among the nations of the world in agitating for a shift from apartheid to democracy in South Africa, no critique of the New South Africa would be complete without an examination of the prevailing ideology of “American exceptionalism.”

With its view of America as the one and only country on all of the planet to have been erected upon a “principle” or “ideal” — a *proposition* — the logic of the doctrine of “American exceptionalism” leads inexorably to the conclusion that other countries too can be made, with sufficient time and pressure, to transcend the contingencies of time and place from which they have derived their identities. In other words, since America, the “proposition nation,” is supposed to be a “democracy,” it is America that is supposed to remake *the rest of the world* in the image of democracy.

Mercer astutely, and forcefully, identifies this not just as a fiction, but a particularly invidious fiction at that, for “American exceptionalism” has had disastrous effects for Americans, South Africans, Middle Easterners, and, for that matter, anyone else upon whom it has been imposed.

This book is immensely important. It is just as engaging. However, for all of its virtues, it is not immune to criticism.

Throughout the pages of *Cannibal*, there is a discernible tension between, on the one hand, the thrust of Mercer’s main argument and, on the other, some not insignificant nods that she makes in the opposite direction. This tension never finds resolution.

Mercer meticulously, even flawlessly, substantiates her thesis that the New South Africa is as corrupt as it is oppressive. Yet her relentless critique of the innumerable ways in which the ruling African National Congress has ruined her beloved country is underwritten by an equally scathing critique of the philosophy that informs these ruinous policies. Although she never calls it by name, this philosophy is what others have called “Rationalism.”

Rationalism is an intellectual disposition with a pedigree stretching back at least as far as Plato. But beginning in the modern era, during the Enlightenment especially, it assumed a robustness that its ancient and medieval counterparts never could have anticipated. Although it admits of variations, what unites most expressions of modern Rationalism is the conviction that *Reason* supplies *moral* “principles” or “ideals” to which *all people at all times* have access. From this perspective, the morality that Reason establishes is as comprehensive and universal as is Reason itself.

Wherever and whenever one utopian scheme or another has been tried, this rationalistic conception of Reason and morality, whether overtly or covertly, to some degree or another, has attended it. Of this, Mercer shows a keen awareness, for her critique pivots upon the West’s folly of supposing that non-Western peoples can, at will, organize their societies around the same “political abstractions” to which the West has grown accustomed.

At the same time, however, Mercer’s commitment to “paleo-libertarianism” leads her to invoke “natural rights.”

It is between her denunciations of Rationalism and her affirmation of “natural rights” that the conflict exists, for as conservative theorists from David Hume and Edmund Burke onward have noted, the popular doctrine of “natural rights” is the product of the Rationalist mind.

“Natural rights” are supposed to be rights that all people have just by virtue of their humanity alone. What Mercer and other adherents of the classical liberal tradition refer to as “natural rights” their



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contemporaries of other political persuasions — and in some instances, libertarians themselves — call “human rights,” and their predecessors described as “the Rights of Man.” Propositions affirming such “rights” are invariably treated as if they were axiomatic, and “the rights” themselves as if they were dispensations from either nature or God.

I see at least two objections to Mercer’s inclusion of “natural rights” talk in *Cannibal*.

First, the notion of “natural rights” undergirds the fashionable — and, as Mercer brilliantly demonstrates, fundamentally wrong-headed — idea that democratically arranged institutions alone secure liberty and justice. It is, if you will, the Mother of all contemporary “political abstractions.” As Burke said, against “natural rights” or, as he put it, “the Rights of Man,” “there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding; these admit no temperament, and no compromise: any thing withheld from their full demand is so much fraud and injustice.”

Between *abstract, universal* “natural rights” and *concrete, particular* cultural traditions there can only be an adversarial relationship.

Secondly, Mercer needn’t *reject* “natural rights” in order to see her argument through. But neither does she *need* to affirm them. Her case in *Cannibal* doesn’t depend upon her saying anything at all about them. We would do ourselves a good turn here to turn once more to Burke.

Burke did *not* deny what he termed “the *real* rights of man.” Yet he believed that when attending to the arrangements of civil society, such talk of abstractions that are supposed to exist in advance of civilization are entirely superfluous. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke wrote: “Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it; and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection: *but their abstract perfection is their practical defect.*” (Emphasis added.) In politics, it is “the civil social man, and no other” — i.e. not man in some “natural state — with whom we must concern ourselves. “If civil society be the offspring of convention, *that convention,*” — and not something that is held to transcend all convention — “must be its law.” (Emphasis added.)

These criticisms that I offer arise not from any distaste on my part with *Cannibal*. To the contrary, they are the function of my affection for it. And the allusions to Burke — “the patron saint of modern conservatism” — are apt for more than one reason.

Not only does Mercer, like Burke, emphasize the importance of the cultural pre-requisites of a flourishing political order over rationalistic, universalistic abstractions; like Burke, Mercer succeeds in intertwining the personal, the political, and the philosophical into one compelling argument.

Yet there is one final reason to call on Burke while assessing Mercer’s *Cannibal*.

Burke had famously said that the only thing that was necessary for evil to triumph was for good men to do nothing. Though Mercer is not a man, sadly, she is in much greater supply of that “manly virtue” that Burke prized than are many — even most — male writers today. Burke unabashedly identified the wickedness of the French Revolutionaries for what it was. Similarly, Mercer courageously, indignantly, exposes the evil that is the African National Congress and its collaborators. In fact, her book may perhaps have been more aptly entitled, *Reflections on the Revolution in South Africa*.

It is tragic that Ilana Mercer was all but compelled to leave the country that for much of her life was her home. Yet South Africa’s loss is America’s gain. As her work makes obvious for all with eyes to see, the richness of Mercer’s intellect is as impressive as the soundness of her character.



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[*Into the Cannibal's Pot*](#) is mandatory reading for all who care about truth, justice, and liberty.



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