Imagining Independence:
The racialized utopia of Rhodesia in the era of decolonization

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When the prime minister of Rhodesia (formerly Southern Rhodesia, after 1980 Zimbabwe) announced that the country had unilaterally declared independence (UDI) from Britain in November, 1965, he concluded “We may be a small country, but we are a determined people and we have been called upon to a role of worldwide significance.” Rhodesian independence was to be a transcendent project: the state was to transfigure, or at least reverse, the course of world events. Rhodesian independence would do more than preserve Christian civilization; it was defending a way of life against the trend of the late colonial world, political independence through universal suffrage and majority rule. UDI laid down a challenge to “the communists in the Afro-Asian bloc” in a battle against the barbarian east comparable to those of Thermopylae and Lepanto. More often than not Rhodesian officials located themselves in British, rather than African, history. Rhodesians were loyal to the Queen, they liked to say, “as loyal as Ulstermen.” Party hacks likened Rhodesia to Britain at its best, or Britain in the 1940s; Rhodesians were the only true Britons left, they said. That no other country—not even South Africa—recognized the self-proclaimed state simply demonstrated the depths to which the world of the 1930s had sunk. Rhodesian independence, the foreign minister intoned, might be just the kind of example that could “go some way towards redeeming the squalid and shameful times in which we live.”

This project is about these Rhodesian conceits and the political imaginary of a regime that stood fast against the cynical tide of decolonization. The political reality of Rhodesia was perhaps less profound. There was the commonplace joke about UDI that first appeared in Punch: “Rhodesia was a suburb masquerading as a nation.” Rhodesia had been founded on principles of paternalism and racial domination; by the 1950s its politicians were fond of deploying a language of universal civilization that had already vanished from the imperial heartland. Once it had taken UDI, however, Rhodesia’s government of minority rule constrained the rights of its black citizens and expanded the obligations of its white ones, especially as it waged a grueling guerrilla war against two African nationalist armies, a war it lost on the battlefield and at the negotiating table.

Thus the two linked narratives of Rhodesian independence, the international outcast state and the country that was the racialized utopic utopia, require some unpacking. The history of the former is well known, but I want to problematize Rhodesia’s illegal independence (a term that seems to have carried much greater weight in the twilight of the British empire than it did in the twilight of the Soviet one). UDI made Rhodesia the first modern pariah state; mandatory world-wide sanctions were imposed on Rhodesia even when it was unrecognized as a state, and long before such sanctions were imposed on South Africa. But then, as Conservative and Labour Governments kept reminding Rhodesia when it was Southern Rhodesia, South Africa had been sovereign and independent long before it set about stripping its African majority of citizen rights; Rhodesia had taken its own independence in order to specifically do just that. Nevertheless, Rhodesia survived for fourteen years, although no country acknowledged it, no country traded
with it legally, and no one but African guerrilla armies wanted its currency. The second narrative is the main part of the book I plan to write during a fellowship year, an historical inquiry into the Rhodesia that so quickly became a right wing utopia (something South Africa never did) and a site of raced ideas about imperialism and civilization. Middle aged men left London to settle in Rhodesia, seeking a place in Africa “where the Union Jack still flew” and where they would enjoy “freedom from the sorrow of editorials, pundits, trade unions and the UNO.” Several men from Oswald Mosley’s National Front arrived and found employed in Rhodesia’s information industry. During the war, the exiled King Zog of Albania offered 500 soldiers to be trained to fight for Rhodesia. The American novelist Robin Moore, the amanuensis of the Green Berets, arrived and set himself up as “unofficial American ambassador” and tried to recruit Americans to come fight for Rhodesia. He was only occasionally successful, but at his weekly pool parties the young Americans so recruited would tell journalists—including the young Christopher Hitchens and David Caute— that they did not care “about the rich white farmers and their dough.” They were fighting because they were white, and “everywhere” “the white man is on the run.”

And here, in brief, is the predicament of Rhodesia: it was a white man’s country without being anyone’s fatherland. Patria was hardly an issue at all, politics was, and Rhodesia became a locus as much as it was a bounded state in the middle of Africa: somewhere communism had to be stopped, somewhere the white man had to be defended, and Rhodesia was as good as any other place to protect the world from barbarian hordes. All these tropes meant race, of course, and as Benedict Anderson noted years ago, racial slurs and epithets are decidedly un-national: gooks and kaffirs and communist terrorists and even whites, as Robin Moore’s young soldiers understood, can be anywhere; they have no national specificity. Rhodesia’s wartime fiction is filled with young white men who traipsed around the English-speaking world carrying all the baggage of western civilization with them. Such fictive Kenyans or Americans or Australians wanted to fight terrorism, but they did not seem terribly concerned about where they were doing it. As one fictional soldier, a Kenyan living in Australia, explains “It’s a personal thing, I just hate to see people running around killing women and children to get what they want.” Another muses that since he can no longer figure what it means to be an American in the 1970s, “so I guess I’m a Rhodesian.” Rhodesia was a default national identity, a place where the language of standards, of civilization, of responsibility still meant race. All this did not undermine the Rhodesia’s utopian project; instead it fit neatly with the flamboyant self-promotions of the Rhodesian state, that it was anywhere but Africa in the 1960s, that it was just like ancient Greece or their heyday of Victorian England.

The historical sources for this material are copious: my own interviews conducted in Zimbabwe, England, and South Africa over the last ten years, Parliamentary papers, the oral history collection in the Zimbabwe National Archives, personal paper collections in Rhodes House Library, Oxford, the Rhodesian Cabinet papers deposited in Rhodes University in South Africa, the Rhodesian Army papers deposited in the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, Rhodesian propaganda films and TV commercials and a body of white writing—novels, memoirs, polemics and parodies—that is in volume unlike anything else in Africa. In every novel, memoir, autobiography, polemic, parody, poem, and regimental history individual Rhodesians grappled with the meaning of their independence and the quality of their sovereignty. They made nation building a cottage industry, imagining a Rhodesian nation that the state never dreamed of. This writing actively debated the politics of race and place in ways that consistently opposed the Rhodesian project. Read as history, this literature describes another Rhodesia altogether, in which a classic liberalism and its rigid control of subject peoples outweighed racial privilege.
Read as nationalism, this literature describes another, atopic place, one that was never quite a colony and is never quite a discreet nation state. The Rhodesia described in memoir after memoir was what might be called post-imperial but could never be called post-colonial, a place that took up the mantle of empire when the British cynically cast it aside. Easily half a dozen autobiographies quote the 1961 encounter between the Conservative Commonwealth Secretary and an otherwise mild and moderate Rhodesian MP: “You see,” said Duncan Sandys, “Britain has lost the will to rule.” “But we haven’t,” replied the Rhodesian.

That will to rule, to lead, to be responsible when the British— or the Commonwealth, or the UN, or the newly independent Congo— were not was perhaps the most prominent feature of politicians memoirs and commanders’ memoirs of the war. The Rhodesian Army was particularly influenced by liberal ideas about strategic inclusions. They argued for years that the qualities of African soldiers could only be nurtured and promoted by the leadership of whites; they argued in vain against the expansion of all-white regiments during the war. The Rhodesian Army obsessed over the ratio of African soldiers to white ones. There were two African volunteer battalions serving Rhodesia, whereas most whites served under extraordinary conscription and reserve duty. By 1977 white men 18-25 were conscripted for two years of national service after which they were liable for 190 days reserve duty a year, six weeks and six weeks off. The wartime ratio of Africans to whites in Rhodesia’s security forces was 2.5:1, a figure the army pointed to with considerable pride. As the prospects for majority rule drew near, and as whites clamored for the conscription of African youth, the Rhodesian Army struggled to find the optimal ration for the army of the country when it would be ruled by its African majority. If Africans who had been to secondary school were conscripted, the new ratio would be 204:1, which was simply dismissed out of hand. And while commanders allowed that a ratio of 20:1 would be “acceptable to whites” they insisted that such proportions could not produce good soldiers, and for much of 1979 they juggled numbers to achieve the figure of 15:1. The memoirs of young conscripts had very different concerns. They opposed the Rhodesian project, or at least racial segregation (especially in school sports competition), but all served their countries because their parents talked them into it: draft dodging would disgrace their families. Parents presented it as a good career move: fighting for Rhodesia would “stand you well later in life.” In memoir after memoir, sons delay admission to universities abroad to become ambivalent conscripts in the Rhodesian Army. These young men serve, they fulfil their reserve duties, because it was personal: “I’m fighting for a way of life; if the government starts wrecking those standards, I’ll fight the government instead. Or go to Spain.”

The question of this project is two-fold. How does the utopian Rhodesia come into being, and how does that utopia make, or unmake, the independent state of Rhodesia? The intellectual origins of Rhodesia, in which 19th century liberalism met Carl Schmitt, linked the right wing of the Conservative Party to local politicians. The right wing Tories had long tried to slow the tide of decolonization in Africa and had sought an audience in settler colonies for years; they may have helped shape the idea of a utopia of responsible, racial domination but the one they imagined was to be firmly located in Africa. It was Rhodesian politicians who favored the rhetoric that placed Rhodesia everywhere else. The physical, if illegal, state of Rhodesia, beloved of young men who nonetheless wanted to escape to Spain, was made concrete by the writings of its citizens; even the most dubious of these men re-located Rhodesia in Africa every time they debated the meaning of white rule there. These authors debated the obligations of their citizenship and spoke to each other and to a community of nations they insisted they belonged to. In this way, these autobiographies, novels, memoirs, and parodies, read with archives and private papers, disavow
the master narratives of white nationalism or settlers’ love of the land. Instead they suggest complicated ideas about race and place and offer a window into the history of late colonialism and early decolonization. Besides, for Rhodesia’s illegal independence there are no other sources. A rich and analytical literature on white politics vanished with UDI in 1965. After that, Rhodesia became too charged to be studied as anything more than a racialist anomaly. Rhodesia was a racialist exception, of course, but not as great as its opponents argued, it was also a state practice based on long-outmoded ideas about liberal strategies of tolerance and exclusion; Rhodesia was to be the place where responsible men should govern those who had not yet demonstrated responsibility. These ideas were indeed tropes that meant race by 1965, but they also had specific genealogies in their own right.

These genealogies are critical to bridging the gap between a scholarly literature of the 1950s and today’s theories of post-colonial states. The critiques of the last twenty years do not adequately describe the spacey, utopian character of the Rhodesian project. Print capitalism, creolized bureaucracies, or a modular form of the nation born in Europe all fail to adequately describe the imperial fantasies of a Rhodesia said to be spread around the globe, out of Africa and the Anglophone world, comparing Rhodesian independence to the battles of Thermopylae and Lepanto. Moreover, these theories do not account of the ways that so much Rhodesian prose scoffed at this narrative. With this project I want to look at the racialized utopia of Rhodesia as a way to interrogate the workings of decolonization in the broadly theoretical frame.

Bibliography

In terms of published material, I’m using three discrete bodies of texts. The first is histories of white-rulled Rhodesia and theoretical works on modern states, for example Colin Leys, European Politics in Southern Rhodesia (Oxford, 1959), Richard Hodder-Williams, White Farmers in Rhodesia, 1890-1965 (London, 1967); James Berber, Rhodesia: The Road to Rebellion (London, 1967); Patrick O’Meara, Rhodesia: Racial Conflict or Coexistence? (Bloomington, 1968) and a great number of articles from about 1959-67. I am also very much influenced by recent work in African history that has challenged the master narrative of decolonization, most especially Jean Marie Allman’s Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in Emergent Ghana (Madison, 1993), and the two most recent works of Frederick Cooper, Decolonization and African Society (Cambridge, 1996) and Africa since 1940 (Cambridge, 2002). More broadly I have relied extensively on Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (London, 1991); the essays in Homi Bhabha’s Nation and Narration (London, 1990), Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments (Princeton, 1993) and Prasenjit Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation (Chicago, 1995). John Gray’s various writings on liberalism have been very influential as has been Uday Singh Mehta, Liberalism and Empire (Chicago, 1999), although both authors leave militarists out of their analyses. This current project is very much influenced by John Kelly and Martha Kaplan, Represented Communities (Chicago, 2001) and Manu Goswami, Producing India (Chicago, 2004).

The third set of sources are Rhodesian autobiographies and memoirs. The best known of these are Peter Godwin’s Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa (London, 1996) and Alexandra Fuller, Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight (New York, 2001); Mukiwa is fully within the genre of Rhodesian autobiography while Fuller is an outlier. Although there had been settler memoirs since the late 1890s, independent Rhodesia began to manufacture its own historical memory.
industry with a series of chatty autobiographies published in Bulawayo throughout the 1970s, “Men of Our Time.” Rhodesian memoirs fall into two distinct categories, those published during UDI and those published after. Of the former, the titles say it all: A. T. Culwick, *Britannia Waives the Rules* (Port Elizabeth, 1965); James Barlow, *Goodbye, England* (London, 1969), and James MacBruce, *When the Going was Rough* (Salisbury, 1980). After UDI memoirs tend to be more confessional or accusatory, as authors’ either claim to reveal the secrets they have held so long or to fix blame for Rhodesia’s demise. Again, the titles are instructive: Ron Reid-Daly, *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War* (Alberton, South Africa, 1983); Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly: Rhodesia’s Intelligence Chief on Record* (London, 1987), and Ian Smith, *The Great Betrayal* (London, 1997). There is also a great many of soldiers’ memoirs and war novels; I count forty-five in my study as I write this. These are intertextual in the extreme; they owe more to each other—and some selected war movies, *Patton* especially—than they do to the classics of war memoirs, such as Robert Graves or Siegfried Sassoon. Almost all depict young men conscripted to the war, made into men not by their national service but but the depths of their disillusion, either because of the excesses of white politics or the excesses of black politics, or both.