



# On the Question of Political Belonging

By Sean Jacobs



Mahmood Mamdani's work is always provocative. In August 2017, I watched with some glee as Mamdani told an audience at the University of Cape Town (UCT) that "it is no exaggeration to say that Afrikaans represents the most successful decolonizing initiative on the African continent," and that the language was in large part the product of a vast affirmative action program. Mamdani's point was to explain why no postcolonial government elsewhere on the continent had elevated indigenous languages to languages of science or humanities, beyond what he described as "folkloric." So I expected that Mamdani's new book would at least get us talking.

I first encountered Mamdani's work as a graduate student completing a master's degree in political science at Northwestern University in 1995. (I have one clear memory of him speaking about *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, upstairs at the famed Red Lion Pub; the owner's mother had been an African Studies scholar.) By the time I returned to South Africa one year later, Mamdani had been appointed as director of UCT's Center for African Studies (CAS). What happened there is now well known—just search for "the Mamdani affair," the name given to his clash with the university over its core curriculum. Mamdani had proposed a new curriculum that challenged the university and South Africa's relationship to the rest of the continent. At the time, African Studies essentially meant studying black South Africans. (At one point, Mamdani referred to CAS as the "new home for Bantu education.") Mamdani eventually left UCT to take up a tenured position at Columbia University in 1999, but while he was still at UCT, he gave an inaugural lecture organized around this question: "When does a settler become a native?" And as he writes in

his new book, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, his answer was the same then as it is now: never.

Mamdani has been returning to this question of political belonging repeatedly in his books covering South Africa, Rwanda, and Darfur (he is quite prolific; he seems to write a new book every 3 to 4 years). In his latest book, he expands the canvas to include the United States and Israel. He also returns to his earlier focus on Sudan and South Africa.

By way of summary, Mamdani's book makes three main contributions. One is the obvious contribution to revisionist political history: Mamdani makes settler colonialism and the story of native peoples in the United States central to any understanding of the country in a way that few similarly synthetic accounts do. He identifies the US as the first settler colonial state (which many US scholars still fail to do) and highlights the colonial status of native people in the United States: they are still stuck outside the polity, reduced to bantustan status in their "reservations."

Since the book's publication, a number of prominent Native American scholars, most notably Dina Gilio-Whitaker (author of *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*) and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (author of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*), have pointed to the importance of Mamdani's contribution in this regard.

Mamdani also offers insights into the study of comparative politics. Here, I am referring to his taking up the challenge of making the connections between the US, Germany, South Africa, and Israel obvious, a comparison in which he uses the US—usually the exceptional state—as the norm. This presentation of the world from a non-Western-centric perspective—in a discussion of the US, no less—is even more impressive given that Mamdani is a Third World scholar (or, as some prefer, a scholar from the Global South).

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But the book's overarching contribution is how he brings South Africa back into the discussion. For Mamdani, South Africa represents an interesting starting point for imagining ideas about the nation other than permanent majorities and minorities. And here it is important to note that Mamdani is not saying that post-apartheid South Africa is a utopia (in fact, he spends some time engaging with that criticism of this aspect of his argument), but rather that it points to the terms of a viable political future. South Africa is not perfect, but it prevented one civil war in 1994 and—for all its problems since—it is not currently in danger of falling into another.

Mamdani's framework of "the lessons from South Africa" for Israel is especially useful. I say this partly because South Africa dominates my own scholarship and it is a country in which I have a personal stake, but also because I think he is right about South Africa's potential for imagining ideas about the nation beyond those of permanent majorities and minorities.

And this is also where I think Mamdani's work challenges us.

The first challenge Mamdani offers relates to his notion of survivors. Mamdani proposes that all victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries, bystanders, and exiles be included in an expanded political process; here, Mamdani refers to the usefulness of constitutional negotiations and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. This goes against much of the contemporary

debate in South Africa, in which the TRC is just reduced to a “betrayal” or “sellout.” Mamdani is also not enthusiastic about the use of criminal prosecutions (the Nuremberg option) as a way out of cycles of violence.

Mamdani is right that during and since the negotiations to end apartheid rule, the idea that South Africa belonged to “those who already lived in it” was the one issue on which the white minority and the liberation movements already agreed. In the view of both parties, the struggle against apartheid was contested by South African nationals, and the nation to come belonged to those who had declared it for themselves during that struggle. This was the case whether they were victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries, bystanders, or exiles.

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So it follows, then, that what binds black and white South Africans together is a kinship based on their shared experience of colonialism and apartheid. But here’s the catch: that kinship doesn’t extend beyond the nation-state’s borders or to any new arrivals. It manifests as xenophobia toward these new arrivals, especially Africans from elsewhere on the continent. As South African writer Sisonke Msimang, [writing on this site](#), has put it so well: For South Africans, “foreigners [in South Africa] are foreign precisely because they cannot understand the pain of apartheid, because most South Africans now claim to have been victims of the system. Whether white or black, the trauma of living through apartheid is seen as such a defining experience that it becomes exclusionary; it has made a nation of us.” (Moreover, that tag of “foreigner” in South Africa is applied exclusively to black migrants from elsewhere on the African continent. Increasingly, South Asian migrants—Bangladeshi or Pakistani traders who have opened informal stores, spazas, in black townships in the last fifteen years or so—have been added to the mix.)

So if Mamdani’s book leaves us with a challenge, it is how to move to an understanding of South Africa that extends beyond the nation-state. For me, this involves treating colonialism, apartheid, and capitalism in South Africa as transnational phenomena. Capitalism in South Africa was always a multinational affair; South Africa was never exceptional, it was also part of a regional capitalism that started with slavery and moved through mining capital, industry, and agriculture. These industries are all built on multinational workforces. At times, even apartheid had to come to terms with this. In the late 1980s, apartheid South Africa had no choice but to extend resident status and even citizenship to those workers from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Namibia, and Zambia who had worked its mines and industry, thus confirming the multinational nature of local capitalism. It is also no revelation that workers from elsewhere Southern Africa were equally at the heart of the three major strikes of the twentieth century in South Africa—the strikes of 1946, 1973, and 1987—that played a significant role in ending apartheid.

Similarly, resistance to apartheid involved the whole region. The African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) camped out in Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Botswana, and Angola. Countries on South Africa’s border paid the price for its support of the liberation struggle; think of the brutal attacks by the South African military on Mozambique, Botswana, and Lesotho. Namibia was basically a South African colony, and the apartheid army occupied parts of southern Angola for long stretches. South African writer William Shoki puts it bluntly: “There are no truly indigenous South Africans; there conceptually cannot be any. What we now call the nation-state of

South Africa is a modern invention that has always been a land of foreigners.”

But it is perhaps Mamdani’s rereading of the 1970s in South Africa that stands out the most to me. Here, his argument is that anti-apartheid resistance took a creative turn in the 1970s: that period was the first time that resistance did not reproduce the architects of apartheid inside the resistance itself. Before that, resistance to apartheid and racial capitalism was organized through separate organizations for different racial groups: the ANC for Africans, the Indian Congress for Indians, the Coloured People’s Congress and the white Congress of Democrats, and so on. (Not to belabor the point, but it is not much talked about these days that the ANC maintained these racial lines in its own organization into the mid-1980s. For example, only in 1985 did the ANC open its national executive committee to people of all “races” other from “Africans.”)

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Mamdani’s argument is that the key initiative came from the student movement. Black students broke from the white student movement and went to reorganize themselves collectively as the Black Consciousness Movement, reinventing blackness as a political identity that was dynamic, contingent, and rooted in material conditions. They also revitalized township protests, which had gone dormant after the state clamped down on internal resistance by the mid-1960s and forced the major liberation movements into exile. Radical white students broke with the white National Union of Students and went to organize workers to develop transhistorical identities subject to struggle. We can then read what followed—the 1976 student uprising, the broad left politics of the 1980s of the United Democratic Front, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions with its alternative media, its theater groups and its sports associations—as the formation of new identities based on shared struggles. Mamdani may overstate the ontological break of the early 1970s, but his point holds. (By the way, some critics may take Mamdani to task for treating the UDF in two paragraphs, but, as he has during one of the launch events for the book, he had to leave some things out.) That popular energy of Black Consciousness, the 1973 strikes and later the UDF, the unions, and the student movement, would all eventually cede leadership of the struggle (and with it leadership during formal negotiations with the apartheid government) in pursuit of reimagining the basis of postapartheid South Africa. But it can’t be denied that they contributed considerably to rethinking the idea of political community.

While the ANC, like most postcolonial states and ruling parties, has tried to corral these energies (when the ANC was unbanned, it stood at the lead of negotiations with the apartheid state and demobilized the UDF), it hasn’t been entirely successful. The sporadic upheavals, organizing, and mass protests evidenced by the social movements of the early 2000s (the AIDS treatment movement, the various anti-privatization movements, shack dwellers, and others) and, more recently, Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall from 2015 to 2017, suggest that some of that tradition is still alive. What’s interesting about all of these new social movements and student uprisings are that they’re all concerned with crafting new political subjectivities and doing so from below.

It is here that I think Mamdani is onto something, and we should think about ways to describe it in more dynamic terms.

What continues to fascinate me about South Africa is how resistance plays out. For me, what is promising is the way that South Africa and South Africans reinvent the political community through struggle. And struggle is crucial for this because it is an education in exercising control over your

life and having the power to remake your world. Genuine self-determination is a revelation, not just what's promised as an empty abstract ideal by most nationalisms.

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To consider how this happens beyond state forms and legal structures would bring in questions of mass movements, of culture, of popular culture, and it would expand the terrain on which the forms of solidarity that Mamdani describes—or wishes for—can become possible.

Earlier this year, we saw nascent signs of this new kind of politics again. Young people across university campuses in South Africa revived the protests of Fees Must Fall (and, by extension, of the “education crisis committees” of the 1980s, the Soweto uprising, and Black Consciousness) to demand that all eligible students—even those with historical debt owed to the university—are allowed to enroll. The protests are over for now. Police intimidation and repression were a big part of their dissolution. At one demonstration outside Wits University in Johannesburg, one person was shot and killed by the police.

What is striking, however, was how a prominent slogan of the protests was “Asinamali,” which in isiZulu means, “We have no money.” This slogan plays a starring role in Mamdani’s account of the epistemic break of the 1970s. Students were central to the movements of the 1970s just like they are now.

The protests failed of course, but as Shoki argued at the time about these kinds of pop-up protests: by adopting this symbol, “the protesters demonstrate their potential to not only address the barriers to entry of the increasingly commodified university, but the barriers to living in an increasingly commodified world.” And as Shoki adds, many have called the first #FeesMustFall protests from 2015 to 2017 the most serious challenge to the post-apartheid political order while also pointing out that their vital limitation “was an inability to connect to broader working-class struggles.” But those links may still be forged again in a way that wasn’t there before. For Mamdani, the question of belonging is not who is a settler or who is a native. Instead, he suggests that rather than imagined, the political community ought to be a concrete one of our own making. The South African story at least gets us some of the way there. What South Africans, and others, can learn from Mamdani’s book is that only through collective action can the nation-building project be restarted or put back on a more fulfilling path.

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