Radical Questioning on the Long Walk to Freedom: Nelson Mandela and the Practice of Critical Reflection

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Nelson Mandela’s autobiography The Long Walk to Freedom describes how an iconic political activist and freedom fighter reflected on, and sometimes modified, four core assumptions at the heart of his struggle to overturn the White supremacist, minority hegemony and create a free South Africa. Critical reflection’s focus is on understanding the dynamics of power (and how to manipulate these) and on uncovering (and combating) ruling class hegemony. Although clearly unaware of adult education’s utilization of the idea of critical reflection, Mandela’s reasoning on tactics and strategy, his awareness of the need to reappraise assumptions that previously were viewed as gospel, and his use of multiple lenses through which to view his actions as a freedom fighter, exemplify the practice of critical reflection. The article does not presume any sort of historical accuracy, conducting instead a thematic content analysis of Mandela’s own personal account of events, which others have challenged.

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Exhortations to be critically reflective, and claims that critical reflection is a distinctive form of adult learning, are common in the literature of adult education (Brookfield, 1995, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Yet, in contrast to the massive amount of empirical work conducted and published under the imprint of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 2006), few actual case studies exist of critical reflection in practice. The major adult educational text on critical reflection (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) focuses on methods and techniques to facilitate critical reflection. So to find examples of critical reflection, even if these are not usually framed in a lexicon familiar to adult educators, we must look to other sources, particularly autobiography. A case in point is the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom (1994), which portrays his life and work.
to fight racism and White supremacy as an extended engagement with critical reflection. Mandela does not use the concept of critical reflection himself, nor does he frame his work as adult education. However, I argue that *Long Walk to Freedom* can be read as an autobiographical case study (with all the contradictions that implies) of critical reflection in practice.

In using critical reflection as the conceptual hermeneutic through which Mandela’s book can be analyzed, I am building specifically on my own politicized formulation of critical reflection as the deliberate uncovering and challenging of assumptions concerning power and the perpetuation of hegemony. Critical reflection is not just thinking deeply about assumptions; rather, it has a specific political purpose. What makes reflection critical is its grounding in the critical theory tradition, a tradition that uses reflection to theorize and strategize how to bring about democratic socialism (Brookfield, 2005). Here, reflection’s focus is on understanding the dynamics of power (and how to manipulate these) and on uncovering (and combating) ruling class hegemony. Mandela’s autobiography, although it contains musings on tribal loyalties, responsibilities, and family ties, is centrally focused on understanding the workings of power and a continuous questioning of assumptions concerning the best way to usher in majority rule.

*Long Walk to Freedom* describes how an iconic political activist and freedom fighter reflected on, and sometimes modified, four core assumptions at the heart of his struggle to overturn the White supremacist, minority hegemony and create a free South Africa. These four core assumptions were either completely upended or significantly altered as a result of being reviewed through various critically reflective lenses—his autobiographical experiences as a freedom fighter, the lens of his colleagues’ (particularly his fellow ANC executive committee members) perceptions, the lens of literature (particularly radical literature on political economy and the raising and training of a guerilla army), and the lens of African National Congress (ANC) members’ eyes. Although clearly unaware of adult education’s utilization of the idea of critical reflection, Mandela’s reasoning on tactics and strategy, his awareness of the need to reappraise assumptions that previously were viewed as gospel, and his use of multiple lenses through which to view his actions as a freedom fighter exemplify the practice of critical reflection. Mandela’s engagement in critical reflection on the four core assumptions analyzed in this article resonated with implications for millions of South Africans and others across the globe engaged in a struggle for liberation against colonialism. It is hard to imagine an example of critically reflective adult learning that has greater significance.

**PROBLEMATIZING THE USE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

*Long Walk to Freedom* is a document that helps us explore several research questions: How does critical reflection play itself out when the conditions for full and free dialogue are not in place for a majority population? What kinds of tactical and strategic changes can critical reflection lead to when taking action against
minority racist hegemony? What are the emotional costs of acting on decisions based on reflections that have occurred in a context marked by symbolic and physical violence? What kinds of evidence uncovered through reflection are taken most seriously when an activist’s analysis differs from his or her colleagues? Under what conditions is manipulation ethically justifiable? While Mandela’s autobiography has much to say on these (and other) questions, the use of this document as a piece of empirical evidence for the study of critical reflection begs a much larger question; how much credence can we give to an account of events written by the chief actor in those events? What about the authorial tendency to constantly position oneself as the hero in the narrative? How are we as readers able to assess the empirical accuracy of Mandela’s account given his awareness that *Long Walk to Freedom* would be read by millions in South Africa and around the globe as the “true” record of events? And what about the unreliability of memory, the tendency to create a linear historical thread where none exists, the temptation the author faces to imbue actions with a retrospective intent that was not actually present at the time? Finally, if Mandela is capable of omitting crucial information to suit his purpose (as when he kept secret from the ANC the fact that he was talking to the government), how can we be certain that he is not doing the same thing in this document?

The use of biography and autobiographical narratives within adult education (Dominice, 2000), and indeed within educational research generally (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), has become more prominent in recent years, to the extent that a scholarly personal narrative is now being advanced as a legitimate form of dissertation (Nash, 2004). However, the production of autobiographical knowledge explored by these authors usually occurs under the supervision of a researcher. Moreover, the guidelines on narrative research Nash offers highlight some of the difficulties raised above. To take just one example, Nash advises dissertation writers of scholarly personal narratives to present their story following traditional narrative plot conventions, with a beginning, middle development, and final resolution (often as lessons learned or transformation achieved). Imposing such a structure on narrative experience risks ignoring the fragmented nature of reality in favor of a neatly bound, sequentially organized package of authorial “truth.” In this article, Mandela’s book is treated as a problematic, but useful, document that describes his own perceptions of the struggle against apartheid. There is no presumption as to whether or not it represents historical “truth” (itself a problematic construct). It is analyzed, rather, as a reflection on reflection, a record of Mandela’s own meditations on the thinking processes that informed his decisions. I approach this autobiography using a form of thematic content analysis, scrutinizing the narrative for instances of Mandela’s metacognition. This approach is similar to that used in assessing student learning journals in coursework or teacher portfolios in tenure or promotion decisions. In both instances, one takes the data as the person’s best recollection of events and recreation of patterns of reasoning, and then analyzes this data to discover internal patterns and inconsistencies.
The four assumptions extracted from the autobiography are chosen because they meet two criteria. First, they have a degree of reliability in that the process by which these assumptions were subject to critical analysis is evident at multiple points in Mandela’s narrative. An assumption that is presented in the same way at different points in the manuscript is judged to be a more reliable indicator of Mandela’s thought than one mentioned at only one or two points. Second, the assumptions chosen are those that had considerable significance in the wider world in that they led to changes in policy and practice that subsequently affected millions of people.

**Critical Analysis of Mandela’s Assumptions**

Assumptions in this study are defined as the causal understandings about the world that explain its workings to us. An assumption is a belief underscored by reference to direct evidence, often the evidence of personal experience. Of course, evidence derived from personal experience is not by definition accurate or logocentric; after all, experience can be constructed and interpreted in multiple and often contradictory ways. But assumptions are distinguished from beliefs by their emphasis on empirical evidence. A belief can be strongly held despite a lack of empirical evidence. An assumption as defined here is always supported by evidence, even though different people might judge such evidence to be inadequate, flawed, or wrongly interpreted. A causal assumption is also framed in predictive terms—if certain conditions are in place, certain consequences are bound to ensue. The four assumptions analyzed in this section were all explicitly stated by Mandela and constituted an important part of his analysis of the ANC’s situation. They had predictive power in guiding the ANC’s conduct of the freedom struggle, and they were altered as a result of new interpretations of experience. As a leader of the ANC, Mandela’s critical reflection on his assumptions clearly played a major part in determining official ANC policy.

**Assumption #1: The Struggle for Black Liberation Must Be Conducted by Black South Africans Alone**

The first assumption to be analyzed is Mandela’s understanding that the movement for a free South Africa must be one in which only Black South Africans should be involved; specifically, his insistence that the African National Congress (ANC) should not admit Whites as members, nor cooperate with White groups (such as the South African Communist Party), that were also dedicated to the dismantling of apartheid. This assumption was based on Mandela’s judgment that the stain of racism had spread so deeply into African consciousness that Whites, if they were allowed to participate, would inevitably come to be seen as leaders within the ANC and occupy leadership positions. When events (discussed below) forced Mandela to reflect on this assumption, he changed his analysis, a decision that had great ramifications for the future of the country.
During Easter 1944, the Youth League of the ANC was formed, with Mandela a prominent founder. Mandela reports on the passionate discussions the Youth Leaguers had concerning whether or not sympathetic White allies also fighting to end apartheid should be allowed to join the organization. Mandela was one of those who opposed this practice, citing three pieces of evidence to support his assertion that the freedom struggle should be conducted by Black South Africans alone. First, he felt that if Whites were initially involved as equals in the movement, this early equality would quickly be superseded by Whites moving into leadership positions. One reason for this trend, he argued, was the unconscious perception of White superiority held by Blacks who would be subliminally predisposed to defer to White ideas. Hence, “if blacks were offered a multiracial form of struggle, they would remain enamored of white culture and prey to a continuing sense of inferiority” (Mandela, 1994, p. 100).

Second, Mandela was also suspicious of Whites’ intent, particularly White Communists, who he believed “were intent on taking over our movement in the guise of joint action” (Mandela, 1994, p. 108). Third, he had an Africentric skepticism of the relevance of a Marxist analysis to the African liberation struggle. His conviction at this time in his life was that “it was an undiluted African nationalism, not Marxism or multiracialism, that would liberate us” (p. 108). In 1947, the Youth League of the ANC produced a major policy document that called for “a powerful national liberation movement under the banner of African nationalism and led by Africans themselves” (p. 112). Mandela notes that the contents of the document were contested, reflecting “the push-and-pull between two rival theories of African nationalism, between the more extreme, Marcus Garvey-inspired, ‘Africa for the Africans’ nationalism and the Africanism of the Youth League, which recognized that South Africa was a multiracial country” (p. 112). His own position was that “I was sympathetic to the ultra-revolutionary stream of African nationalism” (p.112).

In the decade after the formation of the Youth League, however, Mandela experienced a number of events that caused him to revise his earlier assumption that the liberation struggle should be the preserve only of Black South Africans. The first of these was his numerous conversations with South African Communist Party members such as Moses Kotane, Ismail Meer, and Ruth First. Here the lens of colleagues’ perceptions is clearly described. Mandela tells how Kotane would come to his house late at night and the two of them would debate until morning. As a result of these conversations, Mandela (1994) found that “my long-standing opposition to communism was breaking down” (p. 119) and that “I was finding it more and more difficult to justify my prejudice against the party” (p. 119). He noted how party members who were also ANC members (such as J.B. Marks, Edwin Mofutsanyana, Dan Thoome, and David Bopape) “were devoted and hard-working, and left nothing to gainsay as freedom fighters” (p. 120). This means that Mandela “could not, and no longer did, question the bona fides of such men and women” (p. 120).
His skepticism of communists weakened through conversation and observation, Mandela was prompted to initiate a self-directed study of dialectical materialism. Here, the role of literature as an aid to challenging assumptions is front and center. He describes reading Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao and being stimulated by the *Communist Manifesto* and exhausted by *Das Kapital*. He records how he found himself drawn to the idea of a classless society, which, in his mind, “was similar to traditional African culture where life was shared and communal. I subscribed to Marx’s basic dictum, which has the simplicity and generosity of the Golden Rule: ‘From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs’” (Mandela, 1994, p. 120). Much in the manner of Davis (1974) who wrote how *The Communist Manifesto* hit her “like a bolt of lightning” (p. 109), Mandela found that “dialectical materialism seemed to offer both a searchlight illuminating the dark night of racial oppression and a tool that could be used to end it. It helped me to see the situation other than through the prism of white and black relations, for if our struggle was to succeed, we had to transcend black and white” (p. 120). He documents how the quasiscientific underpinnings of dialectical materialism attracted him because, in his words, “I am always inclined to trust what I can verify. Its materialistic analysis of economic rang true to me” (p. 120). (This, of course, is an assumption in itself concerning the presumed validity of tenets presented in a quasiscientific way.) He also found in his reading of these texts a number of practical suggestions that seemed to him helpful in terms of the struggles he was conducting. Finally, the Soviet Union’s support for anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa explained “why I amended my views of communists and accepted the ANC view of welcoming Marxists into its ranks” (p. 121). As well as holding numerous conversations with Communists and pursuing his own reading in dialectical materialism, Mandela was also prompted to re-examine his assumptions about working with Communists after reflecting on his own autobiographical experiences. The success of the mass action of March 1950, where more than two thirds of African workers stayed at home, was clear to Mandela, and he was forced to acknowledge that Communists had played a significant part in planning and conducting this mass action.

By the 1950s, Mandela had overturned his earlier assumption that the ANC struggle was best conducted by Black South Africans alone, and that Whites, particularly White Communists, would inevitably take the movement over. He had found there to be no contradiction between African nationalism and dialectical materialism. In his view, “our problems, while distinctive and special, were not entirely unique, and a philosophy that placed those problems in an international and historical context of the greater world and the course of history was valuable . . . I found that African nationalists and African Communists generally had far more uniting them than dividing them” (Mandela, 1994, p. 121). By the time of his statement at his trial in Rivonia in 1963 and 1964, he had come to a fully elaborated rationale for his decision to work with the Communist Party. In explaining why the ANC viewed Communist Party members as friends, Mandela stated:
To us the reason is obvious. Theoretical differences among those fighting against oppression are a luxury we cannot afford at this stage. What is more, for many decades Communists were the only political group in South Africa who were prepared to treat Africans as human beings and their equals; who were prepared to eat with us; talk with us, live and work with us. Because of this, there are many Africans who, today, tend to equate freedom with communism. (p. 366)

Twenty years later, when engaged in secret negotiations with the government, which was insisting he cut ties with the Communist Party, he repeated the same argument: “I said, no self-respecting freedom fighter would take orders from a government he is fighting against or jettison a longtime ally in the interest of pleasing an antagonist” (p. 538).

**Assumption #2: Nonviolent Struggle Was Most Likely to Bring About the End of Apartheid**

The second assumption concerns Mandela’s initial understanding that a nonviolent strategy for political change that focused on mass civil disobedience was the most effective weapon in the struggle against apartheid. Mandela’s approach to the struggle was always dictated by a pragmatic concern to experiment with whatever means might speed the end of apartheid. To that end, his first years as an activist were spent pursuing various paths of nonviolent resistance. These included strikes, boycotts, contraventions of the pass laws (that determined where Black South Africans could travel), and stay-at-homes. Mandela analyzed the situation facing Black South Africans and determined that tactical considerations, rather than a moral commitment to nonviolence, dictated this strategy. Writing about the various discussions he had held on how best to put pressure on the South African regime, he summarizes his position: “We should approach this issue not from the point of view of principles but of tactics, and (that) we should employ the method demanded by the conditions. If a particular method or tactic enabled us to defeat the enemy, then it should be used” (Mandela, 1994, p. 127).

From Mandela’s (1994) view, “stay-at-homes allowed us to strike at the enemy while preventing him from striking back. I argued that the confidence of the people in our campaigns had grown precisely because they realized that we were not reckless with their lives” (p. 266). This desire to avoid bloodshed governed much of Mandela’s early thinking and was the chief reason why he put so much emphasis on nonviolence. In his view, “the state was far more powerful than we, and any attempts at violence by us would be devastatingly crushed. This made nonviolence a practical necessity rather than an option” (p. 127). To Mandela, then, nonviolence was a tactic to be used as long as the situation demanded it. Once it ceased to be effective, by implication, it would be replaced with an approach that made more sense in any new circumstances. There was none of the moral commitment to nonviolence that one associates with Gandhi or Martin Luther King. To Mandela, if something worked, it would be used and, if not, it would be abandoned.
In the face of ever more repressive action by the South African apartheid regime, Mandela was forced to rethink his whole strategy for the establishment of democracy in South Africa, a period of questioning that ultimately led to him spending most of his adult life in prison and wrecking any chance of his enjoying a normal family life. Claiming that the government’s actions had forced his hand, Mandela moved reluctantly to urge the ANC to take up arms, in particular to conduct a campaign of sabotage against power stations, arms depots, and communications networks. On the wider political stage, the move to begin a campaign of sabotage against government and military targets ushered in an era of even greater repression and the deaths of many on both sides of the struggle. This new assumption that the armed struggle was now the most effective tactic for achieving long-term political change was subject to critical reflection many years later.

In questioning his earlier assumption on the use of mass civil disobedience, Mandela argued that the conditions faced both by Gandhi and King were strikingly different from those faced by freedom fighters in South Africa. India was ruled by an overstretched colonial power that had accepted the ultimate inevitability of self-rule. The United States was a democracy with constitutional guarantees of equal rights, even if these were abused in practice. No such guarantees were available in the police state of South Africa. In his view, “non-violent passive resistance is effective as long as your opposition adheres to the same rules as you do. But if peaceful protest is met with violence, its efficacy is at an end. For me, nonviolence was not a moral principle but a strategy; there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon” (Mandela, 1994, p. 158). From this point on, a repeated theme in Mandela’s work was the way in which his tactics—particularly the move to armed resistance—was forced on him by the government’s actions. This perception springs entirely from his examination of the struggle through the critically reflective lens of autobiographical experience. This taught him “the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor. At a certain point, one can only fight fire with fire” (p. 164). In 1985, when the government secretly tried to pressure him to declare the end of the armed struggle “I responded that the state was responsible for the violence and that it is always the oppressor, not the oppressed, who dictates the form of the struggle. If the oppressor uses violence, the oppressed have no alternative but to respond violently. In our case it was simply a legitimate form of self-defense” (p. 537). The experience of being despised as an outlaw also taught him how the external forces define the dynamics of the freedom struggle. His own outlaw status was not one he sought, but one forced upon him, because “when a man is denied the right to live the life he believes in, he has no other choice but to become an outlaw” (p. 256).

The decision by the ANC in 1961 to move to armed struggle as a matter of policy was one of the most significant of his life. The way in which Mandela examined and changed his assumption regarding the effectiveness of nonviolence
illustrated his capacity to alter his exercise of leadership in response to changing circumstances. On the one hand, he frequently articulates the need for a form of collective responsibility similar to Ella Baker’s (Grant, 1999) notion of developmental leadership from the grass roots. Hence, one reason he gave for the move to armed struggle that was the fact that this was happening anyway as Black South Africans were forming their own military units. Consequently, the ANC needed to be the organization directing their actions. In his view, “we have always maintained that the people were ahead of us, and now they were” (Mandela, 1994, p. 272). On the contrary, however, he also argued that leadership sometimes involved individual leaders moving against an already agreed-on and articulated collective policy. An example of this was the deliberate break he made with ANC policy when he gave a statement to the local and national South African press in May 1961 stating that the ANC was now closing the chapter on nonviolent policy and moving into a different phase of the struggle—armed resistance. As Mandela (1994) acknowledged, “it was a grave declaration and I knew it. I was criticized by our executive for making that remark before it was discussed by the organization, but sometimes one must go public with an idea to push a reluctant organization in the direction you want it to go” (p. 270). This readiness to forge an individual path against the wishes of ANC colleagues was also evident, as we shall see, in his later willingness to open secret negotiations with the apartheid government when there was no ANC mandate to do so.

The questioning and then reframing of the assumption regarding the effectiveness of nonviolence led to the formation of the Umkhonto we Sizwe group, (in English translation “Spear of the Nation”) often referred to by Mandela as MK. Mandela and the ANC then had to consider the exact nature of the armed struggle they had just initiated. Four options were open to them: (1) open revolution, (2) terrorism, (3) guerrilla warfare, and (4) sabotage. Mandela (1994) summarized these options as follows:

For a small and fledgling army, open revolution was inconceivable. Terrorism inevitably reflected poorly on those who used it, undermining any public support it might otherwise garner. Guerrilla warfare was a possibility, but since the ANC had been reluctant to embrace violence at all, it made sense to start with the form of violence that inflicted the least harm against individuals: sabotage. (p. 282)

The strategy adopted by the ANC was to attack military installations and transportation links; “targets that would not only hamper the military effectiveness of the state, but frighten National Party supporters, scare away foreign capital, and weaken the economy. This we hoped would bring the government to the bargaining table” (p. 283).

In choosing sabotage against power stations, arms depots, and communications systems, the ANC was strategizing for what would happen after apartheid was removed. The choice of sabotage was deliberated and considered, based on the assumption that a strategy involving the smallest loss of life would have the widest favorable reception. Mandela (1994) wrote:
Because it did not involve loss of life it offered the best hope for reconciliation among the races afterward. We did not want to start a blood feud between white and black. Animosity between Afrikaner and Englishman was still sharp fifty years after the Anglo-Boer war; what would race relations be like between white and black if we provoked a civil war? Sabotage had the added virtue of requiring the least manpower. (pp. 282–283)

In testimony during his 1964 trial he denied that the ANC had been preparing for guerilla war, but he did not deny his planning of sabotage. As always, he referred back to his assumption that external forces had impelled strategic choices in the fight for freedom. For him, this decision was one forced upon him by the government: “I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by whites” (p. 364). The intention “was to begin with what was least violent to individuals but most damaging to the state” (p. 274) and key to this campaign was the issuing of “strict instructions . . . that we would countenance no loss of life” (p. 283).

Assumption #3: The ANC Will Neither Compromise nor Open Negotiations With the South African Government Until the Government Itself Ceases Its Use of Violence

The third assumption to be examined concerns Mandela’s judgment that because the ANC was a collective no one person should step away from ANC policy to pursue a maverick course of action. Mandela began to question this assumption as the armed struggle stalled in forcing the apartheid regime to call full and free democratic elections. As a result of his reflections, he embarked on a series of secret meetings with members of the South African government, which he chose not to reveal to his fellow prisoners or the ANC executive. This practice, which Long Walk to Freedom maintains was essential to opening the dialogue the armed struggle was fought to achieve, directly contradicted Mandela’s own assumption concerning the collective nature of the antiapartheid movement. In this instance, the end was seen as justifying the means, a strategy condemned roundly by adult educators such as Eduard Lindeman (Lindeman & Smith, 1951).

During 1981 and 1982, the armed struggle escalated as the South African Military Defense Force attacked the ANC offices in Mozambique and an ANC outpost in Lesotho (killing 13 and 41, respectively). Spear of the Nation retaliated by setting off explosions at the under-construction Koeberg nuclear plant outside Cape Town and in a car bomb in Pretoria (killing 19). Both sides were locked into a public posture in which neither would agree to talk to the other until the other declared its renunciation of violence. The country seemed set on course for a long and increasingly bloody civil war. With things in a state of total impasse, Mandela concluded that the only way to break the logjam was to open secret negotiations with the government. In his own words:
I had concluded that the time had come when the struggle could best be pushed forward through negotiations. If we did not start a dialogue soon, both sides would be plunged into a dark night of oppression, violence, and war. My solitude would give me an opportunity to take the first steps in that direction, without the kind of scrutiny that might destroy such efforts. We had been fighting against white minority rule for three-quarters of a century. We had been engaged in the armed struggle for more than two decades. Many people on both sides had already died. The enemy was strong and resolute. Yet even with all their bombers and tanks, they must have sensed they were on the wrong side of history. We had right on our side, but not yet might. It was clear to me that a military victory was a distant if not impossible dream. It simply did not make sense for both sides to lose thousands if not millions of lives in a conflict that was unnecessary. They must have known this as well. It was time to talk. (Mandela, 1994, p. 525)

Here is an episode of critical reflection—a questioning of accepted assumptions regarding the operations of power and hegemony—that could not be more significant, involving as it did the future lives of thousands, even millions. Yet, in contrast to my own model of critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995), it did not involve any of the external lenses I stress. It was a wholly internal process, guided only by Mandela’s personal analysis of a drastically worsening situation and the appalling future it presaged. It was also a situation characterized by serious impediments to any negotiations. Both sides viewed opening discussions as a sign of weakness and even betrayal of their cause, and neither would come to the table until the other made significant concessions. The apartheid government had consistently labeled the ANC as communist terrorists, saying it would never negotiate with them, and the ANC had branded the government as fascist and refused to talk to its representatives until the ANC was recognized as legal and all political prisoners were released.

A simple change of cell location gave Mandela the chance to open secret communications with the government. After routine surgery for an enlarged prostate, he was moved to a new cell on the ground floor of Pollsmoor prison. The isolation of his new cell (his fellow political prisoners were on the 3rd floor, but could just as well have been in another city), gave him the degree of freedom and privacy he needed. While he acknowledged that the decision to open talks should have been made in the ANC’s Lusaka headquarters, and authorized by Oliver Tambo, the ANC’s head in exile, Mandela concluded he had neither the time nor means to consult with the ANC executive. He reasoned that if news of the talks leaked, or if they failed, the ANC could truthfully claim that it had not authorized these, and that Mandela’s isolation had caused him temporarily to take leave of his senses. In his words, “my isolation furnished my organization with an excuse in case matters went awry: the old man was alone and completely cut off, and his actions were taken by him as an individual, not a representative of the ANC” (Mandela, 1994, p. 526).

When he finally did meet his fellow ANC Pollsmoor prisoners to talk about his transfer to a ground floor cell, he deliberately concealed his plans. This is an
astonishingly confident (critics would say arrogant) application of critical reflection to leadership. Mandela’s decades of leadership practice had been premised on the rock of his commitment to collective leadership. He had always argued that the ANC was a collective and that no individual was bigger than the organization. Yet here he was, if not deliberately lying to his closest, most trusted colleagues, at least not being entirely open or truthful with them. His justification was as follows: “I knew that my colleagues upstairs would condemn my proposal, and that would kill my initiative even before it was born. There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading people the right way” (Mandela, 1994, p. 526).

Mandela secretly then met with Kobee Coetsee (the government’s Minister of Justice) to discuss possible common ground that could be established as a basis for opening negotiations. Again, he told no one of what he was doing. He wanted the process of negotiation to be under way before any ANC members learned of it. In his reading of the situation, it was necessary to take a giant leap ahead of the organization in order to move it in the direction that he felt it must go: “sometimes it is necessary to present one’s colleagues with a policy that is already a fait accompli. I knew that once they examined the situation carefully, my colleagues at Pollsmoor and in Lusaka would support me” (Mandela, 1994, p. 531). Even when he met his colleagues again after the talks had begun, he only mentioned the idea of opening talks with the government, with no mention that these were already under way. In his words, “I had resolved to leave out a few details; I would seek their counsel about the idea of having talks with the government without mentioning that an actual committee had been formed” (Mandela, 1994, p. 534). When Walter Sisulu, one of his three ANC colleagues imprisoned at Pollsmoor, declared it was the government’s responsibility to start negotiations, Mandela replied to Sisulu “that if he was not against negotiations in principle, what did it matter who initiated them? What mattered was what they achieved, not how they started. I told Walter that I thought we should move forward with negotiations and not worry about who knocked on the door first” (p. 535).

Assumption #4: Having Moved to Armed Struggle, This Should Never Be Renounced Until Democratic Freedom Was Assured

After his release in 1990, Mandela was convinced by Joe Slovo (a long time colleague and member of the South African Communist Party) that it was necessary for the ANC to make the bold gesture of renouncing the armed struggle if negotiations with the government were to move along. Although initially resistant to this, Mandela considered his colleague’s analysis seriously and was eventually persuaded of its accuracy. He then had to convince the ANC membership to forswear (albeit temporarily) their commitment to armed struggle—a commitment that had enormous symbolic resonance to the ANC rank and file.
Assumption #4 is clearly connected to assumption #3. Both assumptions were paradigmatic (framing, unquestionable assumptions that shaped a whole worldview and strategy) as well as causal (connected to the conditions that would ensure the triumph of the ANC). Paradigmatic assumptions are like the foundation stones of a skyscraper—loosen or remove one and the whole structure of one’s worldview is likely to topple. In the case of South Africa, the critique Mandela applied to what had for him been previously unshakeable assumptions did indeed cause the structure of the ANC strategy to topple. In contrast to the private introspection Mandela undertook regarding assumption #3; however, reflection on assumption #4 followed a more typical pattern with the lens of a colleague’s perception being used to challenge what had previously been taken for granted. The colleague in this case was Joe Slovo, a long time ANC comrade and member of the South African Communist Party.

Even after the much ballyhooed release of Mandela by the government in 1990, the ANC still remained committed to the armed struggle. When Slovo proposed its cessation, Mandela’s first response was to reject the idea. Slovo argued strongly, however, that F.W. de Klerk, the South African Prime Minister, needed some sort of dramatic success to demonstrate to his far right supporters that negotiations had achieved something significant. Up to this point, Mandela had always refused to allow the government an easy “out” by helping them solve their own political problems for them. As Slovo made his case, Mandela became more open to rethinking his position. The credibility Slovo brought to the conversation was crucial in changing his mind. After all, “Joe, whose credentials as a radical were above dispute, was precisely the right person to make the proposal. He could not be accused of being a dupe of the government or of having gone soft” (Mandela, 1994, p. 586).

When Slovo’s proposal was put to the ANC Executive Committee, Mandela supported it. His argument was that “the purpose of the armed struggle was always to bring the government to the negotiating table, and now we had done so. I argued that the suspension could always be withdrawn, but it was necessary to show our good faith” (Mandela, 1994, p. 586). As Mandela recognized, renouncing the use of arms was highly controversial within the ANC. The commitment of freedom fighters to the armed struggle carried enormous symbolic power, even if its tactical value was diminishing. The notion of taking up arms in defense of freedom was one that “had a popularity out of proportion to what it had achieved on the ground” (p. 586) so to rescind it was close to the equivalent of betrayal for many rank-and-file ANC members.

Predictably, ANC members were critical of Mandela and complained that he was engaging too much in personal diplomacy and not keeping the rank and file sufficiently informed of his maneuvers. Although acknowledging the legitimacy of these complaints, Mandela reiterated his sense of confidence in his own judgment. In his words, “I agreed that we had been remiss in keeping the entire organization informed about the course of the negotiations. But I also knew the delicacy of our talks with the government; any agreements that we arrived at depended in part on
their confidentiality. Although I accepted the criticism, I believed we had no alternative but to proceed on the same course” (Mandela, 1994, p. 590). As talks stalled, Mandela briefly considered returning to the armed struggle but ultimately resolved that “there was no alternative to the process. It was what I had been urging for so many years, and I would not turn my back on negotiations” (p. 604).

CONCLUSION

In addition to the prison writings of Antonio Gramsci (Hoare & Smith, 1971) that have had such an influence on adult education (see Coben, 1998; Holst, 2002; Mayo, 1998), we now have another document authored by a political prisoner that is rich with implications for those interested in understanding how adult critical reflection happens. However, comparisons between the two figures are limited by history. Gramsci was a Communist (a founding member of the Communist Party of Italy); Mandela at first rejected both Communist thought and allies and even when working with Communists never became one. Gramsci for a time before his arrest was a lawfully elected official (a deputy for the Veneto); Mandela was barred from holding meaningful political office. Mandela had a degree of negotiating power with captors who could see it was ultimately in their interest to open secret conversations with a leader of armed resistance; Gramsci lacked any such power. Gramsci died soon after release, his fragile health broken; Mandela went on to become President of the new Republic and an elder statesman on the world stage.

As mentioned earlier, a content analysis of autobiography must always include an element of justifiable skepticism regarding the author’s version of events. However, I maintain that—with one important caveat—autobiography is as valid a source of data as life histories collected in adult education research. *Long Walk to Freedom* can be analyzed as a life history narrative in the same way as students’ life history narratives of their experiences as learners are often the focus of doctoral dissertations. As the opening section of this article made clear, published autobiographies are problematic sources of data, but no more problematic than unpublished memoirs and life histories frequently found in adult education research. In qualitative interviews, as in autobiographical life histories, researchers deal with subjects’ framing of their experience and with their tendency to present themselves as the heroic figure at the center of a narrative. The crucial difference is that in an interview the researcher can circle back, return to a subject’s presentation of an experience, and check its accuracy with additional questions. Notwithstanding this caveat, I believe that because *Long Walk to Freedom* has the advantage of recording events that are a matter of public interest and that have consequently been documented by others, comparison is made easier than is the case with the experiences of private individuals.

I contend that *Long Walk to Freedom* represents a rich case study of critical reflection in action, with particular resonance for popular adult education and theoretical work on the pedagogy of ethical coercion. It fleshed out Horton’s oft-quoted
tactical distinction between adult education and community organizing. Although Horton (1990) presents this distinction in general terms, Mandela’s autobiography presents an extended example (particularly in the section where Mandela opened secret negotiations with the apartheid regime) of just how political expediency trumps adult education’s emphasis on democratic transparency. It also adds empirical meat to the bones of Baptiste’s (2000) emerging theoretical work on a pedagogy of disempowerment, that is, the conditions under which concealing information, coercion, and manipulation are consistent with adult educational principles. Mandela’s reflection on his own strategizing is one contribution that should be considered as we look for material that speaks to Baptiste’s call for adult educators to research how to improve one’s manipulative capacities. Through studying ethically justified manipulation, something Mandela (1994) seems to have employed, adult educators can “build a theory that can legitimize and guide our use of coercive restraint” (p. 49).

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