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# Why was Ruth First in Mozambique?

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*Bridget O'Laughlin\**

Abstract: Given that Ruth First was a life-long and well-known participant in the anti-apartheid struggle, some have questioned why she would come to the small new Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo in a very difficult political and economic context. She came without any conviction that socialist revolution was inevitable in Southern Africa, but she thought it was worth fighting for. With Aquino de Bragança she was concerned with the ways in which teaching and critical research, empirically grounded in the history and political economy of Mozambique within Africa, could inform revolutionary process in the region. For Ruth First research was guided by Marxist theory, but hers was a critical and evolving approach. Political strategies had to be based in a dynamic understanding of the present not deduced from teleological dogmas. The research done with students on the development course focused on issues of production, particularly in rural areas, because she thought there were major lacunae in information and understanding underlying Frelimo's economic development policy.

## Introduction

More than thirty years after the assassination of Ruth First in her office at the Centre of African Studies (*Centro de Estudos Africanos*, CEA), there is still interest on her work in Mozambique. Some, bemused, have asked why she would leave her position at Durham University and her home in London to come to Mozambique. What could have possibly drawn her there? Ironically this question was raised by defence lawyers during my testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearing on the request by Ruth's daughters to refuse amnesty to those who organised her assassination.<sup>1</sup> The lawyers argued that Ruth First was a legitimate target because she would have supported the South African armed struggle when she was living in neighbouring Mozambique. They would not accept my insistence that she was almost totally occupied by her research and teaching at

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\* Bridget O'Laughlin was trained as an anthropologist in the United States but her involvement in socialist politics pushed her towards political economy and then to Mozambique where she taught at Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) from 1979 to 1992. She worked with a wonderful interdisciplinary group of colleagues at the Centre of African studies under the direction of Aquino de Bragança and Ruth First. She taught and did research with students on the development course, focusing particularly on agrarian issues in Mozambique. She subsequently taught at the Faculty of Economics at UEM and then moved to the Netherlands to teach development studies at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague. Since her retirement she has collaborated with IESE, an independent social and economic research institute in Maputo. She is also on the editorial board of *Development and Change*.

<sup>1</sup> See the transcript of *Amnesty Hearing Date: 22nd February 1999*, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Archives:  
[http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans%5C1999/9902220304\\_pre\\_990222pt.htm](http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans%5C1999/9902220304_pre_990222pt.htm).

the CEA and deeply concerned that the work of the CEA would not be politically compromised by charges of involvement with the ANC's armed struggle.

Even for some academic observers Ruth First's commitment to Mozambique appears anomalous, almost picaresque. Why would someone like Ruth, a militant in the struggle against apartheid and life-long communist, but also a cosmopolitan intellectual and writer of international repute, put herself down in a recently established research institute in a small university in an impoverished and newly independent country like Mozambique (particularly one that subsequently became a favourite of the World Bank)? In this paper I would like to challenge some of the answers that have been given to this question before they become fixed canon in a new generation of books and theses on Marxism, communism and social science in Southern Africa. There are two responses that seem to me particularly misleading. The first is that Ruth First was in Mozambique to be physically closer to the liberation struggle in South Africa. The second is that she had found a terrain where she could apply the dogmatic orthodoxies of state-sponsored Marxism to the organisation of social science teaching and research.

I am aware that my response to these arguments will not, and should not, go uncontested. I worked as a researcher and lecturer at the CEA under the direction of Aquino de Bragança and Ruth First (and after their deaths under the direction of Sergio Vieira, at that time a figure of orthodoxy). I recognise that even colleagues and comrades, not to mention scholarly observers of the past, do not look at things in exactly the same way as I might. Yet I think there are better and worse accounts of the reality of those times that matter for the way we think about the politics of social research in Southern Africa today. To learn from the past it is necessary to recall it. In discussions of the CEA today, memory is often skewed. I shall therefore begin with a rough historical sketch of the context within which Ruth First worked in Mozambique in the later 1970s and early 1980s.

### **The uncertain outcome of the crumbling of the imperial order**

Marxists are often reproached for confusing irreversibility with inevitability, but such confusion is a more generalised failing. Colonial occupations were being rapidly terminated in the post World War II period, but the processes were uncertain, irregular and diverse in their outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Most of the colonies of sub-Saharan Africa were granted independence by the mid-1960s, but fascist Portugal refused to follow and confronted armed liberation movements in the 1970s. The major capitalist countries were cautious in their support for shifts in the imperial order, concerned that they might lose access to natural resources and strategic positioning. In Southern Africa, they were particularly reluctant to contribute to any destabilization of the apartheid regime in South Africa, hence they tolerated the settler based Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in then Rhodesia, supported continuation of the South African mandate in Namibia and accepted new Portuguese settlement in Angola and Mozambique. The eventual end of Portuguese

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<sup>2</sup> See the recent work of Frederick Cooper (2009), on the contingency of the decolonization process in Africa.

colonialism in Southern Africa in 1974 was not the result of Western pressure for reform; it linked successes of liberation struggles to the end of fascism and the revolution of 1974 in Portugal. At that point neither the end of UDI nor of apartheid was clearly predictable.

National liberation movements generally found better support in socialist countries than in the West (though liberation support groups had an impact on state policies in the Nordic countries and Italy) and socialists came to dominate leadership in many nationalist movements. They saw and negotiated their way within a range of divergent socialist experiences – the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, Algeria, Nkrumah's Ghana, Tanzania in the *Ujamaa* period. The liberation movements found fora where they could make their case – particularly the United Nations and the meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement. They gained inspiration from the capture of Saigon in 1975.

The split between China and the USSR meant that most movements had to choose between the two. The African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) alliance stayed with the USSR. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) under Mugabe chose the Chinese while the Zimbabwe African People's Union stayed with the USSR. In Mozambique, the Mozambique Liberation Front (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, Frelimo) refused to choose, but this refusal weakened the support it got from the USSR. Once in power Frelimo announced that it was transforming itself from a national liberation front into a marxist-leninist party, but this decision did not of course magically transform the consciousness of its members, its institutional organisation or the way it was viewed internationally. There were some who came to work in Mozambique who saw it as a socialist promised land, but for Ruth First and most of those with whom she worked it was a revolutionary space of uncertain but important outcomes.

Despite this caution, there was a millenarian cast to everyday life, a shared feeling in the CEA and among many in Mozambique that we were living in revolutionary times, a moment when events could change quickly from what they had been, when people could do and say and imagine things that had been impossible only a few years before.<sup>3</sup> Stevedores changed out of old work clothes to their neat street-clothes to take a break for classes in the middle of the day, young students went to the countryside for literacy or vaccination campaigns, manual workers, clerks and managers, doctors, nurses and patients called each other comrade, neighbours got together to clear the rubbish from the streets, artists painted images of workers and peasants on the walls of the city. Production councils kept rural processing and urban manufacturing running though the owners and managers had left. Women, rural and urban, stood up in meetings and criticized those in charge (indeed mainly men) for not attending to their opinions.

Ideas, big and small, were borrowed from across socialist traditions: betterment campaigns (like killing flies) from Mao, dynamising groups from Cuban neighbourhood committees, choreographed May Days from North Koreans,

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<sup>3</sup> This section is adapted from a draft 2011 conference paper: "The politics of production: Labour shortage and socialist revolution on state-farms in Mozambique".

women driving buses and tractors from the Soviets etc. The president, Samora Machel, would announce a new motto (*palavra de ordem*) in a broadcast speech, and all over the country people would offer different interpretations of what it meant, and act upon them in occasionally contradictory ways. This millenarian cast was egalitarian but not necessarily socialist. Later, when expectancy had turned to desperate waiting for the end of the war, I read Robert Darnton's (1989) description of the streets of Paris during the French revolution and remembered the sense of community and possibility in the city of Maputo in earlier days.

The mood was expectant, but not euphoric. We saw concerted opposition to socialist revolution in Southern Africa and thus also lived with a sense of insecurity, conflict and contradiction. Finding food was a constant struggle but everyday life in Maputo was very safe, the evening streets full of people returning from night-classes. We moved freely in rural areas till 1983, carrying out research in most provinces. We were concerned with whether we would be able to feed the researchers and get them home on time, but not with violence. The Mozambican National Resistance (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*, Renamo) then referred to by its English acronym MNR and later as "the bandits", was mainly active in the regions close to its support bases in then Rhodesia. The Rhodesian army attacked suspected areas of ZANU support and bombed Mozambican infrastructures. South Africans raided ANC safe-houses in Maputo and deployed drones above the city. Mozambican soldiers and popular militias were everywhere (though not generally armed). Much of the North American and European press ran critical reports mixing fact and fantasy on Frelimo's abuses and delusions. The strength of the external opposition underlay our reluctance to air in international publications our own critical comment on Frelimo policies.

Our sense of living a period of historical importance was grounded in the ongoing political struggles in the region. We felt that we were a part of the end of colonialism, not just in Mozambique, but in Africa, the end of a system of racial injustice in which where you lived, the school you went to, the kind of work you did, the kind of medical care you received, how you were served in a shop – everything depended on the colour of your skin. We did not think that this process of change would be smooth, but political movements had armed themselves to contest colonialism in Zimbabwe and Namibia and apartheid in South Africa. We affirmed, though perhaps with private doubts, that the latter would not be possible within the confines of capitalism – that it would require revolutionary socialist change. When asked about when this revolution would come, Joe Slovo, a leader of the SACP and then commander of the ANC's military wing, would jest: "As I said five years ago, I think it will take about five years". Yet many felt, perhaps even believed, that history was on our side.

Ruth First was not generally a romantic (she organised rather than hoped), but for her there were two fundamental possibilities in that moment that grounded her commitment to Mozambique: a rupture with capitalism in Southern Africa and moving investigative analysis beyond opposition to the construction of socialist alternatives. She worked flat out herself to advance both possibilities; her commitment was derived from the existence of a political basis for collective action.

### **Revolutionary possibility within a Southern African “system”**

After independence the recently established colonial university was renamed Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) after Frelimo's first leader. Many of the faculty of the colonial university left. Priority was given to programmes thought to contribute to development: teacher training, engineering, medicine, agronomy, law and economics. Disciplines viewed as less important for development were not offered. The faculty of Marxism–Leninism pre-empted the space of social science. Most of the expatriate teachers came under agreements with socialist countries; those from Western countries were usually vetted by solidarity movements. Initially students had no say in what they would study, though by the time I arrived in early 1979 that policy had been abandoned.

During the years Ruth First was at the CEA, João Paulo Borges Coelho, a Mozambican academic and novelist, worked in one of the unconventional corners of the university, an experimental alternative technology project established by the iconoclastic artist and poet António Quadros. Coelho recently sketched insightfully the context within which we worked – a rapidly expanding, reorganising university, a contentious but exciting place. His engaging memoir includes, however, some misleading speculation as to Ruth First's reasons for coming to Maputo:

I daresay that Ruth First accepted the invitation to come to Mozambique because she would be closer to her own country and she could more effectively direct from here the work begun at what I think was known as the Nucleus for the Study of Southern Africa, a sort of observatory of the geopolitical and economic evolution of the region, and of South Africa in particular – if need be providing academic support to the ANC (João Paulo Borges Coelho 2008: 504).

Coelho has here misunderstood Ruth First's motives for coming to Maputo. She was not in Mozambique to be closer to her own country; she came because she thought she belonged to Southern Africa. She of course understood that there were historical specificities and political divisions within the region, but she thought and worked with (and drummed into us) the concept of a Southern Africa as regional “system”<sup>4</sup> historically forged by a distinctive form of capitalist production grounded in migrant labour, concentration of capital in South Africa and racialised political dualism. She knew that most South Africans and Mozambicans did not think about the region in this way, but part of her mission was to explain why an enduring revolutionary project depended on their doing so. The consolidation of a revolutionary process in Mozambique would advance the possibilities for socialist revolution in the region as a whole and in South Africa in particular. Conversely, the failure of the Mozambican revolution would hold back the possibilities of revolution in the region. These were and remain debatable propositions.

Coelho's account is also factually inaccurate on the sequencing and priority of Ruth First's activities at the CEA. As he notes, her initial collaboration with the

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<sup>4</sup> I have put the term “system” between quotes because it is a concept no longer so freely used in social science. It is criticized for reflecting functional integration in processes that are in reality historically shifting, contingent and contradictory. Yet, I would still argue, it captures the historical durability of structural interdependence that must still be taken into account in Southern Africa today.

CEA was on the Mozambican miner, the focus of which was not South Africa but the impact of mine–labour (and hence the possible consequences of its suspension) on the Mozambican rural economy. When she gave up her job in Durham for a permanent post as director of research at the CEA, her first effort was, however focused on Mozambique: getting the Development Course going. The Development Course was influenced by the experience that Ruth First and other CEA researchers<sup>5</sup> brought with them from the University of Dar–es–Salaam where students and lecturers together did important research on the political economy of Tanzania, where experiences from elsewhere in Africa were discussed and where there was sharp debate on political economy.

The CEA's Development Course was loosely defined as a post–graduate diploma, but it recruited students who were also workers and who came with different levels of qualification. The research projects that were embedded in the course focused mainly on Frelimo's strategy for socialisation of the countryside, looking at the relation between state–farms, cooperatives and peasant farming (see the Appendix for a listing of the projects that were embedded in the Development Course). The course had several modules one of which focused on the political economy of Southern Africa and had as its last section a focus on the political economy of South Africa. The others dealt with Marxist theory of political economy (deliberately taught differently to the way it was done under Soviet and German Democratic Republic (GDR) direction in the faculty of Economics), with the political economy of Africa and with the political economy of Mozambique. Ruth First was particularly concerned with making students acquainted with the debates around development in Africa and locating the region within African history. The kind of South African exceptionalism noted by Mahmood Mamdani (1992) bothered Ruth as well; she noted it not just in South Africans but also in many Mozambican intellectuals.

The Nucleus for the Study of Southern Africa was only set up after the Development Course was functioning well. It was never the particular priority of Ruth First's work; she focused on the operation of the CEA as a whole. The notion of a regional observatory was in fact as important to our director, Aquino de Bragança, as it was to Ruth First. He had led a CEA study on the struggle for Zimbabwe in which Immanuel Wallerstein was involved and he had a broad network of regional contacts with whom he kept in touch. The CEA was involved in various regional initiatives. After Zimbabwean independence in 1980, for example, we met with a group of economists from the University of Zimbabwe around a regional transport project. We attended the first meeting in Lesotho of a regional research network set up to support the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (now Southern African Development Community, SADC) initiative. Both Aquino and Ruth were concerned that the work of the CEA give Mozambicans a better understanding of their place within Southern Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> Among the other CEA staff and collaborators who had worked at the University of Dar-es-Salaam were Colin Darch, Jacques Depelchin, Anna Maria Gentili, Dan O'Meara, Phil Raikes, Wolfgang Scholler, Dave Wield and Marc Wuyts.

Nor was providing academic support to the ANC a central part of Ruth First's motivation for coming to Maputo or of her everyday activities at the CEA. Once the Nucleus for the Study of Southern Africa was established and working well (Rob Davies was there from the outset with Dan O'Meara coming later) she did recruit two promising ANC cadres to work as apprentices. Ruth also worked on programmes for political education of ANC cadres while she was in Mozambique. It should be remembered, however, that her Marxism was regarded as excessively unorthodox by many within the SACP;<sup>6</sup> she was not given *carte blanche* to reform ANC political education. Through an agreement between Frelimo and the ANC, all South Africans coming to work in Mozambique were vetted by the ANC, but Ruth challenged the boundaries. It took a long time (and many heated discussions), for example, before she finally gave up trying to invite the iconoclastic trotskyst South African historian, Martin Legassick to the CEA. Part of her concern with preparing ANC cadres to grapple with the world in which they lived, rather than with an imaginary ideological construction, was that they should not just pass through Mozambique but understand South Africa's relation both to it and to the region. Conversely, she thought Mozambicans needed to understand that apartheid was more than a system of racial discrimination ending at its national boundaries.

The question of the regional positioning of South Africa remains an area of insufficient debate among South Africans generally and most importantly within the tri-partite alliance behind the ANC government today. In the first post-apartheid years, there were some solidarity organisations that recognised the historical debt that South Africa owed to those countries of the region for their support in the struggle against apartheid. The moral considerations of solidarity have long been effaced, however, by the deepening of South Africa's own long-term structural unemployment. In times of xenophobic outbursts of violence, ANC response has been slow and sometimes ambiguous at both national and community level. Human rights organisations have been more militant in their responses than either the unions or the SACP. Furthermore a continuing theoretical dependence on the rhetoric of revolutionary stages grounds an acritical tendency both towards national capital and the supposed necessities of "globalisation". COSATU remains dependent on a shrinking formal industrial labour force. There is not sufficient challenging of the kinds of enterprise restructuring that lie behind casualization, loss of formal benefits and the growth of sub-contracting of migrant labour in South Africa and the region. These processes and their political consequences would be interrogated by Ruth First today.

### **Marxism as a critical and evolving theoretical approach in political struggles**

Both Aquino and Ruth repeated to us constantly that finding a good question was more important in research than finding the right answer. Neither thought that either questions or answers could be read off from a fixed corpus of Marxist

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<sup>6</sup> Listen to the Don Pinnock's interview with Joe Slovo on this point (online at: <http://patriciaschonstein.bookslive.co.za/blog/2012/05/13/don-pinnock-and-the-ruth-first-interviews/>)

theory. Ruth saw Marxism as a critical, evolving and analytically powerful way of approaching the specificities of socialist struggle in different times and places. That Ruth was a Marxist is unquestionable. The way she understood that changed over time in ways that were not considered acceptable by many communists (including her own parents), either those aligned with the Third International or those of the Second. Today, however, in the post-Soviet world, the critique is less strident but perhaps more demeaning. There is a current in the academic literature that indicts her for Marxist dogmatism. Her research in Mozambique is said to be ideologically compromised by its engagement with the institutions of the Frelimo party/state.

The most prominent contemporary critic of Ruth First's Marxism is Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2012) who has emphasised her dogmatic orthodoxy and taken pains to contrast her position with the more flexible theoretical position of our director Aquino de Bragança.<sup>7</sup> Santos is important both for his work as a theorist of social movements and for his particular influence among intellectuals in contemporary post-socialist Mozambique. He takes as an example of Ruth's dogmatism the editorial she wrote (First 1980) for the first number of *Estudos Moçambicanos*, the biannual CEA journal she established and edited (including the no small task of finding the paper on which to print it) to provide original research on Mozambique in Portuguese<sup>8</sup> for a broad Mozambican audience. According to de Sousa Santos:

O editorial de Ruth First afirma uma total confiança epistemológica e teórica no marxismo, que entretanto, depois do III Congresso da FRELIMO em 1977, se transformará na doutrina oficial da libertação nacional, do novo estado e da nova sociedade em construção (Boaventura de Sousa Santos 2012: 31). [The editorial by Ruth First affirms a total epistemological and theoretical confidence in Marxism, which had, after the Third Congress of Frelimo in 1977, become the official doctrine of national liberation, the new state and the new society in construction.]

I have reread the editorial many times to see just where de Sousa Santos found an affirmation that would be so inconsistent with my own experience of Ruth First's critical approach to Marxism. I cannot find it.

De Sousa Santos carries his indictment of Ruth First's rigid Marxism into his skewed interpretation of the tensions that surfaced in the UNESCO sponsored social science conference at UEM organised by Ruth at the behest of the rector just before her death. De Sousa Santos, who was not present, claims that John Saul's critique of the explicit or implicit dogmatism in many Marxist studies provoked a confrontation with Ruth First. De Sousa Santos adds (2012: 37) that Saul later affirmed that:

...o modelo de investigação dominante no CEA tende a reproduzir um modelo verticalista, top-down, mesmo se o topo é um topo revolucionário, não está imune à distância entre liderança e massas e à auto-censura do investigador (John Saul 1985: 191). [the dominant research model at the CEA tends to reproduce a vertical top-down model, even though that

<sup>7</sup> His paper also repeatedly contrasts the orientation of the CEA's research under Ruth's direction with the more critical post-modernist position he applied in the Social Research Institute (CES) he established in post-revolutionary Portugal.

<sup>8</sup> The first four numbers of the journal were subsequently translated into English.

top is revolutionary, it is not immune to a distancing of leadership from the masses or to the self-censorship of the researcher.]

Auto-censorship and distance from mass-movements are certainly relevant concerns about the functioning of the CEA, but the bibliographic reference provided by de Sousa Santos refers to a collection edited by Saul on the transition to socialism in Mozambique (Saul 1985). The page cited (p. 191) falls within a contribution by Judith Marshall and contains no reference to the CEA research. Nor could I find any such description of the CEA's research in Saul's introduction to the book.

In his conference paper, Saul was reflecting on the year he had spent, at the request of his friend Jorge Rebelo, then secretary for ideology of the Frelimo party, attempting to breath some life into the teaching of Marxism in the faculty of Marxism-Leninism. Though Luis de Brito was the reluctant director of the faculty,<sup>9</sup> most of the teaching staff were from the GDR. The great ideological cleavage in the university at that time was between the Soviet approach to Marxism and the varied group of "Western Marxists", among whom the CEA was classified. One must recall the rigidity of the Portuguese Communist Party under Álvaro Cunhal and its influence in those days on some lecturers and students at UEM. Aquino and Ruth spent very little time discussing the fine points of their different approaches to Marxism. They were far too occupied negotiating autonomy for CEA research and protecting us from accusations of counter-revolutionary agitation. This expression may seem quaint today, but we were viciously accused of being "peasant-lovers", determined to keep Mozambique in a state of underdevelopment, for insisting in our rural research that the socialisation of production was a process that had to be embedded in existing forms of rural livelihood.

There was indeed tension at the 1982 conference, but its roots were not in relatively minor differences of approach between beleaguered "revisionist" Marxists. The UNESCO funded regional social science centre was to be transferred from then-Zaire to somewhere else. An influential group of Mozambicans were negotiating for it to come to UEM. Ruth First thought that this was a mistake, that the inevitable confrontation with the Soviet/GDR alliance then controlling the teaching of social sciences and economics at UEM would destroy alternative ventures such as the CEA. In her presentation at the conference she argued that the establishment of such a regional social science centre in Maputo was premature. The Mozambican delegation came out against her, which hurt – she had thought that Aquino de Bragança would support her call for delay. Was she right or wrong? The following Tuesday she was assassinated in the parcel-bomb attack in her office at the CEA so that question was never answered.

In an earlier version of his paper, given at a conference in Maputo in honour of Aquino de Bragança, de Sousa Santos cited Immanuel Wallerstein, who did attend

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<sup>9</sup> De Brito, then a member of the Frelimo party, had been ordered by the rector and the party cell at UEM to take the job. He was expected to somehow mozambicanise the teaching of Marxism-Leninism. He subsequently resigned and was refused an alternative university post. Then during "Operation Production" he was sent off to a state-farm in Niassa because he was unemployed.

the 1982 conference, as his source for his interpretation of the conflicts in the conference. That seemed to me unlikely, so I wrote to Wallerstein to check. His e-mail response to me included the following generous and historically grounded assessment of Ruth First's relation to Marxism and communism:

Ruth was by no means an "orthodox" traditional Marxist. Indeed, I clearly remember at that meeting her exploding to me privately after one ultra-orthodox Mozambican participant (I don't remember who) had intervened. She said to me something like: "You see what I have to put up with?". Ruth considered herself, I believe, a communist (with a small "c"). And she remained, as far as I know, a member of the SACP as well as the ANC, but a quite independent one. So, after all, was Joe [Slovo, her husband], who engineered quite some shift in SACP's line.

The thing to say is that for a long time, and certainly since 1956 (because of Suez, Hungary, and above all Khrushchev's speech to the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), the whole world of Marxists and marxisant intellectuals has been in intellectual turmoil and evolution. To describe anyone's thought – say Aquino's or Ruth's – one would have to ask of what year are we talking? Everyone was in evolution – to a revised version of Marxism, away from Marxism altogether, etc.

I suppose, on a continuum of worldviews, of those at the CEA in 1982, Ruth was a bit more "Marxist" than Aquino. But I certainly never felt that she was keeping her distance from me or from my project with Aquino. Rather, this was Aquino's project and she wasn't going to interfere with it. I felt perfectly comfortable with her, and she I think with me. Ruth had been at Binghamton, and stayed with us. And it was all extremely friendly – both personally and intellectually (Immanuel Wallerstein, personal e-mail communication, May 31, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

The point that Wallerstein makes here about both Ruth and Joe's relation to the SACP and ANC is that political struggle takes place in discussions between comrades within social movements as well as in confrontations with their opposition. This is an issue for contemporary social movements as much as it was for those who functioned within the tightly disciplined communist parties aligned with the Comintern, though the questions, terms and penalties are different. Belonging to an organisation means finding a basis of unity with many whose viewpoints on many issues does not correspond precisely to one's own. The practice of struggle itself leads to learning, debate, changing of positions. Ruth pushed constantly at boundaries, risking expulsion, but she did not put herself outside the organised institutions of the anti-apartheid movement. There are, unfortunately, no fixed infallible criteria for determining when a revolutionary movement has definitively become its opposite, nor for predicting whether or not it will do so.

### **The distinction between teleology and strategy**

Ruth First gave particular importance in her teaching at the CEA to the role of analysis framed by theory in political strategy. She was reacting to the many Frelimo documents of the time that gave long lists of objectives but defined no ways of how, in the existing context, they would be reached. It is important to

<sup>10</sup> I've kept the non-capitalization of Wallerstein's e-mail style to maintain the informal status of the text.

remember that most of our students were middle-level Frelimo cadres working in government or the party involved in writing such policy documents. Ruth's concern with formulating strategies for achieving socialist goals is viewed by some academics today as teleological.

Barbara Harlow writes on the literature of resistance. She has written sympathetically and insightfully on Ruth First's life and writing (Barbara Harlow 2002; 2004; 2011) and is currently working on an intellectual biography of Ruth First. In what she has thus far published it is clear that she is somewhat uncomfortable with Ruth's concern with strategy. An earlier version of the 2011 article, presented at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, is explicitly entitled "A Teleological Problematic: Ruth First to/from Dar es Salaam and Maputo". The distinction Ruth drew between growth and development in her lecture notes and exams concerns her. She also refers (Harlow 2011: 60–61) to Aquino de Bragança and Jacques Depelchin's (1986) critique of the teleological way Frelimo's history was written by the party itself. Let us look carefully at what they say:

At the level of reflections and analysis of the victory of the armed struggle, the texts are dominated by a teleological problematic. This means that the proof of the victory is in the victory itself and that, therefore, there is no necessity to introduce new questions which put this fact in doubt...In other words, despite the fact that the leaders of Frelimo suggested that there were limits to their victory, the historians of that victory preferred to focus on the victory and not on the problems "left pending" from the armed struggle (Aquino de Bragança and Jacques Depelchin 1986:166).

In short, de Bragança and Depelchin were not speaking about the work of the CEA under Ruth, but were underlining the tendency of some historians of the Mozambican revolution to confuse irreversibility with inevitability. At the level of popular mobilization it is encouraging to say "Victory is certain", though in fact it is not certain at all, perhaps in retrospect, not achieved at all. This is a critique of teleological explanation, the belief that the present is simply the unspooling of that which was bound to happen.

Why Harlow attaches the question of teleology to an assessment of Ruth First's research at the CEA, becomes clearer in her discussion of Harold Wolpe's (1985) references to the CEA in his essay on the question of the political role of the intellectual and intellectual work in liberation struggles. Wolpe observes that it is clear in opposition work that the state attempts to control fundamental and critical research, but so also are liberation movements themselves suspicious of internal critique. He takes the case of the CEA to pose the question of whether once a movement has taken state-power, intellectuals must restrict their research and writing to practical and other problems defined by party and state. He notes that CEA position on this is somewhat ambiguous (indeed we avoided making statements of principle on this question), but attempted to maintain critique while addressing the actual problems thrown up by the transformation process. He makes the important point that this process through which priorities are defined at a political level is collective, not individual.

The CEA gave effect to this approach by carrying out research which began with Frelimo policy and ended by questioning that policy – for example in relation to the collectivization of

agriculture and the policy of large scale industrial development, to mention only two areas (Wolpe 1985: 76).

In summing up Wolpe's reflection, Harlow (2008: 75) observes: "Journeys, objectives, goals, products, struggle. A teleological problematic indeed". Indeed not, I would answer. Harlow has misconstrued the basis upon which Ruth First defined her relation to collective struggle, either in opposition as in the ANC or SACP or as as director of research at the CEA. In neither case did she think that the organisation deserved her loyalty because it assured the ultimate achievement of some kind of socialist reality. Rather there was a basis for struggle, collective unity around central questions and a capacity to learn from critical research. She did not think that there was any assurance whatsoever that either Frelimo or the ANC (or the SACP) would remain on a "socialist path". To invoke the metaphor of a journey was to recognise the importance of strategy – socialist transformation was a process that began with diverse existing realities not with the decision to implement a fixed set of institutions.

The importance of collective processes in socialist politics has made distinguishing factionalism from critique a torturous issue in organisational democracy. Certainly in South Africa today there must be members of the SACP who wonder whether they belong in the governing alliance. The looser horizontal organisation of new social movements avoids some of the dilemmas of splits, but one could argue that the "Occupy" movements have failed to move ahead because they could not agree on the answer, or perhaps even on the need to ask, to Lenin's central strategic question: 'What is to be done?'

### **The politics of production**

The fundamental question that Wolpe raises about the relation of intellectuals to Marxist liberation movements is one of power not of teleology. In principle one can see that socialist strategies should be based in understanding what is, but in practice the history of socialism is littered with the suppression of inconvenient truths, even with the detention or execution of those who tell them. Does entanglement with power necessarily compromise the integrity of research?

This question was raised in relation to the CEA in the 1980s by the late Christian Geffray (1988), an anthropologist who worked in Mozambique and was familiar with the work of the CEA.<sup>11</sup> Though his article includes some errors of fact, it is a thoughtful reflection on the problems of applied social research in a context where critique is not rooted in political opposition. Geffray recognises the rigor and scientific value Ruth's direction assured in the CEA research, but he criticises our rural work for its focus on marketed exchange, exploitation, accumulation and rural classes, which precluded analytical recognition of realities that did not fit in a frame of socialist transition and worker-peasant alliance.

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<sup>11</sup> There was no functioning anthropology department at the time, but some ethnographic and archaeological field research was on-going. Geffray returned later to do path-breaking research (at the request of the Frelimo government) on the reasons for Renamo expansion in Nampula province (Geffray 1990).

Indeed, Geffray argues (1988: 74), it was the subordination of the definition of the object of research to the priorities defined by the political line of the party that gave the CEA research its legitimacy. The influence of the CEA was derived not from the connections that Ruth First and Aquino de Bragança had with members of the Frelimo Politbureau but rather from the support their research gave to the discourse of power and scientific credibility (Geffray 1988: 85).

Geffray is generous in his assessment of the quality of our research on Mozambique, but it is useful to recall how it was organised in considering both its strengths and its limitations. It always had two objectives: to teach students how to carry out and assess research in their normal work; and to produce issue-oriented research reports that would inform debates on strategies of socialist transformation (and debate there was both within and outside the Frelimo party). Participation in a research project was an obligatory component of the CEA’s Development Course, set up to provide tertiary level training in research to worker/students from a broad range of state and party institutions, most of whom had secondary school education and perhaps some technical training but had not attended university. The objective was not to make the students professional researchers but to give them an investigative cast of mind, to present revolutions as processes constituted by real experiences of real people, and to provide them with a broad analytical understanding of Mozambican society within Southern Africa, within Africa and within capitalism. The instructors on the Development Course were Marxists of varied orientation and disciplinary background.

As Geffray suggests, we undertook most of our projects at the request of various government departments and in all cases had to have the approval of the provincial governor concerned to carry out fieldwork. We always negotiated the topics, however, and sometimes refused to take on a particular proposal. These negotiations were based on seminars in the CEA itself, which involved both background research and theoretical debate, though theory did not appear as such in the reports. To give one example, our research on labour process in the port of Maputo in 1981 initially came from a request that we look at the difficulties faced by the port in assuring a regular supply of labour from rural areas around Maputo. In our counter-proposal we drew from our reading on the changes in the organisation of port-work in Southern Africa and elsewhere, on theoretical reading on Taylorism and “socialist emulation”, discussions with Robert Linhart (1976) who was invited to the CEA by Ruth and Aquino, and by our preliminary interviews with port-workers that indicated that by 1981 most of them were living in urban or sub-urban areas and that the reasons for labour shortages in the port had little to do with the seasonal demands of peasant production.

Students followed the preparatory steps of a practical research process: negotiating the focus with the institution sponsoring the research, gathering preliminary information, writing a research proposal, deciding where small research groups of 5–6 would be located (called, in the parlance of the day, brigades), carrying out the field research, discussing the results, drafting reports. The CEA staff, however, wrote the actual research proposals and the final reports. The field research was only one month, as much time as we could expect their employers to let students be away from their work. Reports were quickly and

collectively written. Ruth usually edited the last draft and Aquino checked the final versions. Both, as former journalists, attended to clarity and directness of language. All reports were published by the CEA in mimeo in Portuguese, some with limited distribution. Theory informed our research and the writing of these reports, but there were no explicit theoretical discussions in the text. The reports were focused on practical questions and reaching audiences that did not spend much time reading.

All research focuses on some topics and excludes others. Geffray is right to say that our research shared the discourse of power. In a general sense the topic of every Development Course research project (not in all CEA research) was “the socialisation of production”. We indeed focused our reports principally on production, consumption and exchange. Some of the reasons for this focus in our rural research were simply practical – a month with novice researchers speaking many different Mozambican languages but often not the one of the area where the research was carried out is not a good way to capture the nuances of politics, religion and cultural representation, particularly in a context of contestation. Didactically we wanted to get across to the students a number of basic points: that understanding cooperatives and state-farms within a strategy of socialist transformation meant locating them within but the lives of those rural people they pretended to reach; that small-scale peasants in Mozambique were not subsistence producers but people whose livelihoods were systematically related to markets; that politically relevant research consists of listening and observing, not telling people what to do; and finally that such research addresses real questions and thus must be organised to explore counter-explanations and alternative definitions of problems encountered.

Our focus on production was, however, not just a practical expediency; it was theoretically informed by the assumptions of Marxist theory. We presumed that socialist revolution meant a fundamental shift in relations of class and the ways in which production was organised. We thought that socialisation of the countryside would be a lengthy process, not to be achieved simply in an instant by the construction of new forms of living – the communal villages – and working – the state-farms and cooperatives, even if these were not formulaic imitations of Soviet or Chinese models. This process was the real focus of our rural research and the area where we tried to contribute to critical reflection within Frelimo itself. It was salutary for me to read Geffray's observations on the influence of the CEA; at the time it seemed that what we mainly received was criticism. Perhaps our greatest contribution was to maintain debate.

The questions of self-censorship raised by Wolpe (1985) are also relevant to any reflection on the politics of CEA research. Our fieldwork gave us information, for example, on internal differentiation of the peasantry. In writing research reports we were almost as cautious about this topic as we were about our descriptions of political and religious institutions. Not all researchers attached to the CEA agreed with this reticence (cf. Jelle van den Berg 1987). Our caution was related to Ruth's fears about how our information might be used in struggles within Frelimo over what should be done in the countryside. Sometimes the forced collectivisations described in Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don* did not seem so far away.

Contemporary anti-globalisation movements are more concerned with the politics of difference than with the politics of production. The language of class analysis has been displaced by the language of human rights and rights are usually conceived as individual rather than collective. Yet the questions posed for the researchers of the CEA in Mozambique still holds: you know what you are fighting against but what are you fighting for and how do you propose to get there? The answer Ruth First gave to this question: “Focus on the transformation of production”, came from Marxist theory and practice, but it embraced no general recipes for socialising production or suspending the logic of markets. Yet this focus gave some starting points and troubling issues of continuing relevance for social movements today.

So what is the answer to the question, ‘Why was Ruth First in Mozambique?’ She was there because she was a revolutionary and she saw an opportunity to contribute to a revolutionary process in a place that was her home – Southern Africa. Revolutionary optimism fugues easily into teleological millenarianism, but Ruth First always recognised that the possibility of revolution is not the same as certainty. She also knew, however, that we learn from documenting, critically analysing and discussing attempts to change the world.

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### **Appendix: Research projects embedded in the Development Course**

1979: Relations between state farms, cooperatives and family agriculture in the Baixo–Limpopo region of Gaza province.

1979: The transformation of cotton production in the Province of Nampula.

1980: Food and export–crop production in a regional economy: Cotton and tea in Lugela, Zambézia province.

1980: The transformation of local administration in Lugela, Zambézia province.

1981: Tea estates, labour reserves and peasant cash–cropping in Upper Zambezia province.

1981: Labor– process, productivity and stabilization of the labor–force in the Port of Maputo.

1982: Peasant differentiation and cooperative development in Angónia district, Tete province.

1982: Productivity, labour process and labour recruitment in the state sector: the Agro–industrial complex in Angónia.

1983: Rural trade circuits in Marracuene, Province of Maputo.