Marxisms in the 21st Century

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The African continent has been marked by various and remarkably diverse flare-ups of apparent socialist and quasi-socialist intention – from Algeria in the north to Ghana in the west to Ethiopia in the east, with several stops in between. But it is as one approaches the southern cone and moves ever closer to South Africa itself that the intention becomes most marked, not only in rhetoric but also in practice – albeit a practice not as yet concretely realised in any very sustained way. So the question remains: what are we to learn from this southern African regional experience that can provide serviceable lessons for an ongoing struggle to realise equity, social justice and meaningful development in South Africa?

TROPES OF SOCIALIST DEFEAT

After all, one of the stocks-in-trade of African National Congress (ANC)-thinking since South Africa’s formal democratisation in 1994 has been to present a negative version of African socialist endeavour elsewhere on the continent and, particularly, within the region. For this version is designed, with varying degrees of caricature, precisely to warn against any feckless dream of
a socialist outcome in South Africa itself – however often such an outcome may actually have been invoked by the ANC/South African Communist Party (SACP) itself during the very years of liberation struggle against white dictatorship that it shared with other liberation movements across the region.

Here, one of the favoured tropes – albeit one more often offered in private conversation than in public statement – has been to underscore the lack of realism of the aspiration in general and, in particular, under African conditions and circumstances. This is, of course, a theme sometimes seen in more scholarly offerings. Many decades ago, for example, Roger Murray (1967: 39) queried whether, in Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana, the ‘historically necessary’ (some form of socialism) was in fact the ‘historically possible’. More recently, Giovanni Arrighi would suggest that even in the heyday of ‘liberation movement’ enthusiasm (the 1960s and 1970s) and despite his own direct involvement in one of them (in Zimbabwe) he had himself been appropriately sceptical as to the likelihood or even possibility of socialist outcomes in a liberated southern Africa (Arrighi 2009; Saul 2011: chapter 6). But the ANC variant of a similar argument, as offered in the private conversations and musings of its leaders (it is difficult to find a paper trail of such utterances), is even more dismissive than this. And this reading of recent history serves, in turn, to underpin an assumption as to the impossibility of the ANC’s following any other course than the option of a neoliberal accommodation with global capitalism that it has in fact chosen.

One can see clearly enough the apparently commonsensical nature of this latter choice – evoking, in essence, the explanatory mantra ‘globalisation made me do it’. And yet acceptance, overwhelmingly, of the dictates of the so-called ‘free market’, both locally and globally, has been much more a choice than a necessity: a ‘choice’ made very consciously in favour of capitalism and against socialism. Perhaps it is enough to recall Thabo Mbeki’s own clear statement from the 1980s when he wrote that ‘the ANC is not a socialist party. It has never pretended to be one, it has never said it was, and it is not trying to be. It will not become one by decree or for the purpose of pleasing its “left” critics’ (Mbeki 1984: 609). And this is the same Mbeki who would note, during the South African transition, that the National Party positions were ‘not very different really from the position the movement has been advancing’ – and who, after the liberation itself, could even cavalierly assert, as regards his (and the ANC’s) chosen economic policies: ‘Just call me a Thatcherite’ (Green 2006; Mbeki 1991: 2; Saul 2008).

It thus can come as no great surprise that during South Africa’s transition from apartheid, Mbeki was quite comfortable (as comfortable in taking such a
course as was Nelson Mandela himself, be it noted) in encouraging the ANC to turn its back on any lingering scepticism it might have had as to the virtues of the global capitalist system. Of course, Mbeki also had qualified the argument in his 1984 text suggestively: ‘The ANC is convinced that within the alliance of democratic forces … the working class must play the leading role, not as an appendage of the petite bourgeoisie but as a conscious vanguard class, capable of advancing and defending its own democratic interests’ (612). Here, indeed, was the apparent promise of some continuing commitment to radical class politics. Yet, in retrospect, the latter sentence seems only to have existed as a pretty perfunctory footnote to his, and the ANC’s, continuing rightward turn. Once in power, in fact, he would prove entirely unwilling to work in any way whatsoever to help pull the ANC back onto a leftward track. Quite the contrary.

At the same time, his formulation is suggestive. For precisely the kind of broader class understanding Mbeki purports to acknowledge here may help explain the logic of a formulation of his own which dates from only several years later (although such a statement may now come as a bit of a surprise to those who have lost track of Mbeki’s startling ideological peregrinations over the years). Thus, as early as the late 1980s, he could be found (according to William Gumede) ‘privately telling friends that he believed the ANC alliance with the Communist Party would have to be broken at some point, especially if the ANC gained power in a post-apartheid South Africa’ (Gumede 2005: 38). In Mbeki’s scenario, continues Gumede, ‘the ANC would govern as a centre-left party, keeping some remnants of trade union and SACP support, while the bulk of the alliance would form a left-wing workers’ party’.

‘A left-wing workers’ party’ in opposition to the ANC? This might seem to many of us a possible outcome devoutly to be wished for in the next round of South African history. But what of the choices that actually were made in a post-apartheid South Africa? So careful an analyst as Mbeki’s much-cited biographer Mark Gevisser, for example, affirms that by as early as 1985 Mbeki had concluded that ‘a negotiated settlement [required] a far more liberal approach to economic policy’ than had been the ANC position up to that time. Furthermore, by 1994 ‘[Mbeki] and his government [felt] forced to acquiesce to the Washington Consensus on macro-economic policy when they implemented their controversial Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) programme in 1996’ (Gevisser 2007 quoted in Turok 2008: 57–58; Gevisser 2009). Felt ‘forced’? This is a curious choice of words for explaining the ANC’s trajectory that bears further discussion, needless to say. Yet the truth is we can
also find veteran ANC/SACP activist Ben Turok suggesting something similar in explicitly agreeing with Gevisser as to the ‘necessary’ nature of the deviation to the right that the ANC had taken.

Yet Turok also knows something more: the particularly grim outcomes likely to follow from a ‘choice’ so made. In fact, more recently, we can find Turok substantially qualifying his earlier view, now querying just why the ANC government had not ‘given equal attention to empowering the masses as to the elite? And why has the insistence of parliament on broad-based empowerment brought so little success?’ (2008: 174). Of course, Turok (263) already knows the answer to this question – and, in consequence, he himself is even willing (in later chapters of the book from which the passages in the preceding paragraphs are quoted) to back away uneasily from the ‘new’ ANC’s hardline capitalist position, and to come, in his words, to ‘the irresistible conclusion … that the ANC government has lost a great deal of its earlier focus on the fundamental transformation of the inherited social system’.5 Inevitable? Lost focus? Obviously, a core question remains unanswered here: why was there this ever firmer and untroubled opting for a conservative economic programme on the part of the ANC elite in the first place?

Franz Fanon had one explanation of course. What we have in South Africa, he might have argued, is merely the familiar trajectory of virtually all post-liberation movements in power in Africa: a new middle class that now chooses, in its own class interests, to opt for a junior partnership with capital, quasi-colonial and global. Though now updated to embrace the realities of the ever more ‘globalised’ workings of capital, the same sad tale could easily be offered as one convincing explanation of the South African case as well. For here, in essence, we see the self-interested embrace by the ANC and its business-oriented cronies of, precisely, the globalising ‘logic’ of capital; here, in short, is a meek and self-interested submission to the recolonisation of South Africa by diverse capitalists, one facilitated by a new South African elite eager to embrace just such an outcome (Saul 2008 and 2013).6 True, this would make for a dour reading of what has happened in South Africa – but it is a reading that is quite difficult to refute.

Not, to be sure, that this is the way the ANC itself tells the story. Let us look, then, at the tropes the ANC does draw on in explaining its choices. One explanation favoured by the ANC itself in rationalising these choices is the global collapse of any genuine ‘socialist alternative’ – the reference here being primarily to the fading away of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European
wards from the lists of history. This, it is inferred, left ANC socialists and their aspirations beached, stranded in a sea of capitalist globalisation. And the latter system’s stringent global imperatives had therefore, and of necessity, to be taken not merely seriously but as being absolutely prescriptive of policy outcomes in ways they had not quite been in the past. Mark, needless to say, the skewed definition of socialism with which this argument begins, one associated narrowly with the (erstwhile) Soviet style of ‘socialism’. Yet that had been a terribly limited, mechanistic and absolutely undemocratic – in short, ‘non-socialist’ – model if ever there was one and certainly not one that needed to be followed (or relied upon) if a more open and imaginative socialist path were to have been chosen. Instead, even as ruling elites in such countries as China and the new South Africa casually abandoned socialist aspirations, they nonetheless managed to hold to many of the Soviet model’s most questionable attributes, notably its formidably arrogant and elite-serving vanguardist mode of politics.

In this chapter, however, it is another trope, crucial to the ANC’s retreat from ‘socialism’, that will be emphasised. This refers, so it is argued, to the ‘failure’ in practice of any operative socialism elsewhere in Africa. The reference is in particular to those countries in the southern Africa region where ANC personnel, in exile, are said to have witnessed at first hand just such ‘failures’ of socialism, notably in Tanzania and Mozambique. For these were the states in the region where socialist endeavour had been taken least rhetorically and, for a period, most seriously. It is well known that these two countries (although not so very differently from many other African countries of far less militant initial ideological persuasion) have now been reduced to the status of impoverished supplicants, cap in hand, to global capital. Yet, as we will see below, they do remain eminently discussable cases – both in terms of their strengths and of their weaknesses. Through such a discussion we can discover, clearly revealed, many keys to the meaning of socialist practice in Africa and to the lessons that can be learned from it – lessons not at all illuminated by mere caricature. For in these cases we see both the nobility of the aspiration for a socialist Africa but also, crucially and in the cases of both Tanzania and Mozambique, the weaknesses of the ‘socialism’ actually practised – weaknesses that tell us more, however, about what might need to be done to make socialism real than they do about the irrelevance of the intention itself.

Not that we will here search further to document the ANC’s own implied allusions to the ‘failures’ of regional socialism – difficult (as noted) as these are to find on the printed page in any case. Instead, we seek here to query
these regional projects for ourselves, surveying their practice in order to
discover what light their ‘failure’ might, in fact and not in fantasy, actually cast
on the realities of the choice of socio-economic system being made in South
Africa itself.

THE FRONTLINE STATES: THE TANZANIA CASE

To have experienced, some fifty years ago and at first hand (as did the present
author), the power of the ‘Arusha Declaration’ years in Tanzania was to see the
promise, if not yet the fully realised practice, of socialism in Africa etched in
a particularly vivid light (Cliffe and Saul 1972 and 1973; Saul 2013: chapter
2). For there, by the late 1960s, Julius Nyerere – the country’s president and
the man most closely identified with the dramatic moment of the Declaration
itself and the announcement of the country’s ujamaa project – had announced
on behalf of his people the launching of just such a socialist project. Then,
briefly but dramatically (and far more so than any other country along the
already liberated frontline of the dawning southern African struggle), he
and the Tanganyika African National Union (Tanu) held out the prospect of
founding a distinctive socialism in Africa, one that could be a touchstone for
something quite beyond the kind of ‘neocolonialism’ and ‘false decolonisation’
that thinkers such as Fanon had begun to identify as the sobering stigma of
the overall African decolonisation process.

The moment was indeed one of promise, and even promise in the most
strictly Fanonist terms. After all, Fanon had seen the post-colonial African
political leadership as, in effect, a cadre of usurpers now seen to be working, in
their own interests and in those of global capital, and against their earlier assur-
ances of a sustained betterment in their impoverished people’s political and
economic conditions – a prospect at first presented as being the obvious accom-
paniment to an attainment of freedom from direct colonial overlordship. And
yet here, in Tanzania, there were, in addition to the Arusha Declaration itself,
two easily overlooked but particularly striking portents that a more positive
outcome would indeed occur there.

One of these moments of promise occurred at a large 1967 rally in Dar es
Salaam just after the pronouncement of the Arusha Declaration itself and in
the very first days of ujamaa-inspired euphoria. Then, in a speech reported in
the Nationalist newspaper,
Nyerere called on the people of Tanzania to have great confidence in themselves and to safeguard the nation’s hard-won freedom. Mwalimu [Nyerere] warned that the people should not allow their freedom to be pawned as most of their leaders were purchasable. He warned further that in running the affairs of the nation the people should not look on their leaders as saints and prophets.

The President stated that the attainment of freedom in many cases resulted merely in the change of colours, white faces to black faces without ending exploitation and injustices, and above all without the betterment of the life of the masses. He said that while struggling for freedom the objective was clear but it was another thing to remove your own people from the position of exploiters (The Nationalist [Dar es Salaam], 5 September 1967).

Practical Fanonism in full voice, one might say. Yet there was more. For what of the danger of the successor black elite, now elevated to power, being merely ‘in league with global capital’? Here there is a second illuminating statement by Nyerere to consider, one in which he quite self-consciously expanded the import of the anti-colonial nationalist project beyond the merely political realm and onto the terrain of what he termed ‘economic nationalism’ – and of socialism:

The real ideological choice is between controlling the economy through domestic private enterprise, or doing so through the state or some other collective institution.

But although this is an ideological choice, it is extremely doubtful whether this is a practical choice for an African nationalist. The pragmatist in Africa … will find that the real choice is a different one. He will find that the real choice is between foreign private ownership on the one hand and local collective ownership on the other, for I do not think there is any free state in Africa where there is sufficient capital, or a sufficient number of local entrepreneurs, for local capital to dominate the economy. Private investment in Africa means overwhelmingly foreign private investment. A capitalist economy means a foreign dominated economy. These are the facts of Africa’s situation. The only way in which
national control of the economy can be achieved is through the economic institutions of socialism.

To Tanzania this inevitable choice is not unwelcome. We are socialists as well as nationalists. We are committed to the creation of a classless society in which every able-bodied person is contributing to the economy through work and we believe this can only be obtained when the major means of production are publicly owned and controlled. But the fact remains that our recent socialist measures were not taken out of a blind adherence to dogma. They are intended to serve our society (Nyerere 1968: 264–265).

Not, in other words, some ‘black economic empowerment’ along entrepreneurial lines, but collective action by the overall populace itself (helped to find focus through a measure of ‘leadership’, needless to say, but not of any overbearing, all-knowing, unchecked kind). Meanwhile, linked to such general propositions (genuine popular power, both political and economic) there was a host of more specific initiatives that then attracted wide attention:

- a leadership code that sought to discipline leaders against their following the path of private self-interest into compromising entanglements with the private sector;
- a one-party electoral scheme that sought (albeit within quite severe limits) to open up the dominant party to public scrutiny;
- a programme of rural transformation (ujamaa vijijini) designed to draw peasants together in more organised, cooperative and productive new villages;
- an expanded and transformed education system (‘education for self-reliance’) to meet national needs but also to seek to steer students toward more selfless and responsible citizenship;
- the Mwongozo (Tanu Guidelines) of 1971 that stated its intention to facilitate the attack from below on bureaucratic and politically high-handed actions in the country, stating, in its Clause 15, that ‘there must be a deliberate effort to build equality between leaders and those they lead’ (Tanu 1971). It was this Mwongozo that Walter Rodney once referred to as being an ‘even harder hitting document than the Arusha Declaration’ (Rodney 1975), momentarily seeming to herald, as it did, a genuine popular empowerment from below.
But this latter is one of the most difficult challenges facing those who would create a politics that is at once progressive in import and democratic in substance. There is, of course, a case to be made for the necessity of enlightened leadership – sheer romantic and populist ‘spontaneism’ is no answer. But, at the same time, no ‘leadership’ can long go unchecked from ‘below’ – not if it is to avoid a fall into high-handedness and self-indulgent elitism. Moreover, the resultant contradiction is not one that can merely be ‘resolved’ easily and once and for all – either in principle or in practice. Instead, it is a tension that must be lived and struggled with in a process of ongoing and challenging democratic politics – leadership winning its case through convincing and responsive argument and practice, on the one hand, and an increasingly enlightened and self-conscious mass base exerting its democratic voice ever more efficaciously and knowledgeably, on the other. As happened in Tanzania, however, the failure to realise the promise of *Mwongozo* – a late addition to the Arusha Declaration package and one that seemed to take the tensions alluded to here with the seriousness they demanded – proved to be one of the key failings of the Tanzanian experiment.

Of course, the dramatic thrust of the *ujamaa* project was stymied in a number of ways, these reflecting additional failures that can be briefly elucidated here. One of these was the failure – for all the talk about ‘socialism and self-reliance’ – to move with any imagination towards an industrial strategy that could have serviced such a goal and permitted, in Samir Amin’s (1985) term, a genuine ‘delinking’ of Tanzania from the overbearing ‘il/logic’ of the world of (global) capital. Not that the notion of ‘delinking’ could ever be interpreted, in Amin’s work, as signalling any unrealistic push towards autarky. But – as sympathetic but heterodox economists who had worked in Tanzania such as Clive Thomas (1974) and William Luttrell (1986) argued at the time – what was needed was the forceful assertion of an alternative central focus for the economy, a powerfully internal focus that any external economic links would be expected, primarily, to service.

As Thomas (1974) spelled out the case, this would embody ‘the progressive convergence of the demand structure of the community and the needs of the population’ – the very reverse, in short, of the market fundamentalist’s global orthodoxy. One could then have grounded a ‘socialism of expanded reproduction’ (in the name of genuine accumulation) and refused the dilemma that has heretofore undermined the promise of the many ‘socialisms’ which have proven prone to fall into the Stalinist trap of ‘violently repressing mass consumption’. For, far from accumulation and mass consumption being warring opposites,
the premise would then be that accumulation could be driven forward precisely by finding outlets for production in meeting the growing requirements, the needs, of the mass of the population.

An effective industrialisation strategy would thus base its ‘expanded reproduction’ on ever increasing exchanges between city and country, between industry and agriculture, with food and raw materials moving to the cities and with consumer goods and producer goods (with the latter defined to include centrally such modest items as scythes, iron ploughs, hoes, axes, fertilisers and the like) moving to the countryside. Collective saving geared to investment could then be seen as being drawn essentially, if not exclusively, from an expanding economic pool. Note that such a socialism of expanded reproduction makes the betterment of the people’s lot a short-term rather than a long-term project and thus promises a much sounder basis for an effective (rather than merely rhetorical) alliance of workers, peasants and others – on a democratic road to revolutionary socialism.

But – and here is the rub – this is precisely an emphasis that Nyerere and company chose to turn their backs on. Thus Luttrell (1986), writing quite explicitly within the analytical framework established by Thomas, demonstrates the almost complete failure of Tanzania’s ‘bureaucratic class’ to act in any such way, their continued subservience to the logic of global capitalism and to their own class interest dictating a long-term failure to actually develop the country. He then spells out an alternative track that might have been taken had the elite really wanted to pursue transformation. Moreover, while Luttrell says little about Nyerere himself, another crucial missing link – industrial strategy (to be added to silences about democracy and failures of imagination in the rural sector) – in Nyerere’s presumed socialist strategy here stands starkly exposed.

But what of that rural sector, alluded to above? Unfortunately, an active scepticism towards peasants – as towards any genuinely democratic empowerment of the mass of the population from below, be it expressed by workers, peasants, women or students – ran deep amongst the Tanzanian leadership (as would also subsequently prove true of the Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) leadership in Mozambique).8 Thus, in spite of their many statements about the crucial ‘class belonging’ (as workers and peasants) of ‘the people’, such class descriptors were all too readily collapsed into merely populist categories in Tanzania – instead of their facilitating a view of such ‘classes’ as being potentially empowerable in genuinely radical terms. Any real commitment to an active democracy seems to have been, for the Tanzanian leadership,
the catch here. As Leander Schneider (2003, 2004 and 2006) – one of the most careful and incisive of all scholars of the ujamaa vijijini initiative – suggests, in this central rural policy,

several of the most inspiring strands of Nyerere’s politics flow together – in particular, an exemplary commitment to improving the condition of the poor, as well as his theorizing about the nexus of development, freedom, empowerment, and participation. However, it is also in the field of rural development that problematic dimensions of Nyerere’s leadership become, perhaps, most starkly apparent. Not only did the policy of enforced ujamaa/villagisation fail to improve the material conditions of Tanzania’s rural population, but the adoption of coercive means to further it also points to the authoritarian side of Nyerere’s rule (Schneider 2004: 345).

Nor does Schneider choose the word ‘authoritarian’ lightly, as witness his use of it with reference to the draconian effacing of the Ruvuma Development Association’s experiment in revolutionary rural democracy from below and the conversion of ‘rural socialism’ into an order, from on high, to villagise. For Schneider’s quite self-conscious deployment of the descriptor ‘authoritarian’ lies at the very heart of his argument. Small wonder that he then concludes his analysis of what he calls the ‘statist bent (and the related overtly coercive character observed in 1970s’ Tanzania)’ with the observation that ‘Tanzanian history shows, above all, that turning a blind eye to the tensions of participatory development will neither make them go away nor allow one to avoid the serious costs implied by swiftly reducing participation to near meaningless’ (Schneider 2004). Here then is yet another lesson (and there are similar lessons available from the treatment of workers and of students in Tanzania as well) to be learned by anyone of progressive bent who would care to hear such tidings – one that is at once depressing and also, potentially, most instructive.

What of women – and the entire sphere of struggle for gender emancipation and gender equality – whose liberation is perhaps as urgently needed as is those of any other ‘social category’ in Tanzania (and in the rest of southern Africa)? This was a front of freedom little discussed at the time in Tanzania and, indeed, the record was not an encouraging one. For example, Bibi Titi Mohammed, admittedly no great socialist but a prominent Tanu leader in the early days, underscored some years ago the starkness of the male sense of entitlement that
scarred Tanu in those years, the vital role of women militants in the liberation struggle itself soon being more or less passed over:

When power was transferred to the nationalist government … the story changed. Women’s experience was no longer relevant to the postcolonial struggles against neo-colonialism, imperialism and the management of the state apparatus. In [our] discussion Bibi Titi ironically said, ‘I started smelling fish’ when the first cabinet was named (Meena 2003: 152).9

Indeed, Bibi Titi was so incensed by such facts that, by her account, she actually refused Nyerere’s offer to co-author with him a joint history of Tanzania’s nationalist liberation struggle. Meanwhile, the prevailing silences of that time have continued to scar present-day reality in Tanzania, despite the best efforts of many women activists, then and now, to keep the struggle for gender emancipation alive. But, as we have also seen, the struggle for overall emancipation continues to confront all Tanzanians, male and female, with many of them the poorest of the continent’s (and of the world’s) poor, as well. This latter struggle is, of course, a struggle – for genuine democracy, for nationally focused and people-centric development and much else – that also confronts the vast majority of similarly deprived South Africans.

THE NEWLY LIBERATED STATES AND THE MOZAMBICAN CASE

Elsewhere in the region and beyond the frontline states, as territories became freshly liberated, the newly empowered former liberation movements (now the ruling parties of their respective countries) made many and various pronouncements of their radical intentions.10 The currency of their pronouncements was in part a reflex of such movements’ long-time hotline to military assistance (via such ostensibly progressive regimes as the Soviet Union and China), in part a manifestation of the trendy (and relatively unreflective) ‘leftism’ that marked the period (the era of Vietnam, Cuba and the like). Most regimes in the region (Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe) quickly lost this patina of radicalism and lapsed comfortably into a Fanon-style neocolonial pattern of governance, both political and economic.

Mozambique was, momentarily, the signal exception to this depressing pattern of anti-climax to liberation struggle however – so exceptional, in
fact, that Norrie MacQueen, a careful chronicler of ‘the decolonization of Portuguese Africa’, could firmly state of former Portuguese Africa, that ‘the initial plans of Portugal’s “guerrilla enemies”’ offered ‘a clear alternative to the cynical manipulation of ethnicity and the neocolonial complaisance of the kleptocratic elites who increasingly defined African governance in the 1970s and 1980s’ (MacQueen 1997: 236–237). In sum, he concluded,

Whatever their fate, the projects of the post-independence regimes of lusophone Africa were probably the most principled and decent ever proposed for the continent. They have not been superseded in this regard and seem unlikely to be.

And MacQueen argued so with good reason (although he did err, in my view, in quite so uncritically lumping Angola’s blighted purpose with the much more genuine promise exemplified, however briefly, by Mozambique).

More immediately, the Tanzanian moment was closely linked to the Mozambican moment as well, not merely by immediate geographical propinquity but by the strong and practical frontline state backup offered by Nyerere. For Tanzania was the main launching pad of Frelimo’s cross-border military entry into its own country; Dar es Salaam was the chief nerve centre of the Mozambican struggle throughout the 1960s and early 1970s; and southern Tanzania – Nachingwea camp in particular – was the staging ground for the liberation movement’s dramatic initial incursions into the northern Mozambican provinces of Cabo Delgado and Niassa. Not that such support came entirely easily: Nyerere, in the wake of Eduardo Mondlane’s assassination in 1969, was forced to press the case for it with impressive zeal in order to win Tanu backing for Samora Machel’s progressive Frelimo leadership group, something that had to be asserted against the claims both of a much more opportunist group of alternative pretenders to Frelimo leadership (gathered behind the figure of Uriah Simango) and also of certain senior ‘black-nationalist’ Tanzanian cabinet ministers (Munyanka, Maswanya, Sijaona) who thought to support Simango.

The result: Frelimo, now firmly under Machel’s sway, succeeded in further consolidating liberated zones in the provinces of northern Mozambique adjacent to Tanzania, in also openly contesting fresh areas adjacent to Zambia (in Tete province) and in beginning to press even further south. Moreover, in relatively freed zones the movement would start to build a fledgling social infrastructure of agricultural co-ops, schools and health services. Equally important,
it was able to forge an impressive corps of politically conscious and disciplined leadership cadres (Cabaço 2001 and 2009). And then, with Mozambique's independence, Frelimo also launched its own bold experiment in socialist development. The intention: to implement a society-wide programme that would liberate the country’s economic potential while also meeting the needs of the vast majority of Mozambique’s population.

The movement had clearly matured towards this kind of undertaking – as indicated by the movement's first president, Mondlane (1969 and 1983), shortly before his assassination by the Portuguese in 1969. As he argued, in sketching the direction that the movement was increasingly taking,

> I am now convinced that Frelimo has a clearer political line than ever before … The common basis that we had when we formed Frelimo was hatred of colonialism and the belief in the necessity to destroy the colonial structure and to establish a new social structure. But what type of social structure, what type of organisation we would have, no-one knew. No, some did know, some did have ideas, but they had rather theoretical notions that were themselves transformed in the struggle.

> Now, however, there is a qualitative transformation in thinking that has emerged during the past six years which permits me to conclude that at present Frelimo is much more socialist, revolutionary and progressive than ever … Why? Because the conditions of life in Mozambique, the type of enemy which we have, does not give us any other alternative … [In fact] the conditions in which we struggle and work demand it (in Saul 2008: 185).

As Mondlane concluded, it would now be ‘impossible to create a capitalist Mozambique’. Indeed, ‘it would be ridiculous to struggle, for the people to struggle, to destroy the economic structure of the enemy and then reconstitute it in such a way as to serve the enemy’. To ‘reconstitute [the economy] in such a way as to serve the enemy’: is this not, we might ask, precisely what has happened in South Africa?

In any case, Frelimo then did launch a number of exceptional programmes, not only in spheres such as education, health and women’s affairs (see essays by Marshall, Barker and Urdang in Saul 1985), but also in the importance it attached – despite its clearly stated preference for a one-party structure – to
practices designed to ensure a genuine voice and presence pressing from below. In this latter respect, it looked to such things as the creation of grupos dinamizadores in urban areas and of village committees in the rural areas, these being designed, at the local level, to generalise participation and to concretise an important measure of democracy. It also looked, in workplaces, to Production Councils and such initiatives as its ‘Political and Organizational Offensive’ in an attempt to counter hierarchy, bureaucratisation and, quite specifically, tendencies towards class formation. In fact, the leadership – despite its above-mentioned commitment to a one-party state, undoubtedly a most debilitating commitment in the longer term – debated strenuously the inevitable tension (recall our discussion of Tanu’s Mwongozo in the preceding section) it admitted to exist between the vanguard role of the party on the one hand, and ‘popular power’ intended to find expression from below, on the other.

However, any sense of a creative contradiction that existed and had to continue to be resolved between the respective claims of leadership on the one hand and mass action on the other, did not last long. True, Frelimo distinguished its own practices sharply from the perceived shortfalls of Tanzania’s project, privately criticising Nyerere for what it considered to be his all too wispy and romantic evocation of a specifically ‘African socialism’ – a cultural determinant said to spring relatively unproblematically from the sheer ‘Africanness’ of a social setting and claimed to serve as guarantor of a benignly univocal and widely shared collective sensibility. Frelimo, in contrast, saw itself as having, thanks to its Marxist–Leninist predilections, a much tougher sense of class contradictions than that. Yet the differences between these two contrasting experiments in post-liberation socialism tended to fade as, in the Frelimo case, the vanguard mode of the armed struggle became the framing carapace of politics during the ‘building socialism’ period. It thus found itself merely repeating many of the errors – a virtually non-existent domestic industrial strategy, a high-handedness towards the peasantry and workers and a self-righteous leadership style – of Tanzania’s socialists.

Take, for example, the area of overall economic strategy, where the choice of an unsuitable Soviet brand of technology-heavy projected industrialisation very soon manifested itself. In Mozambique, as in Tanzania, little was heard of anything like the kind of internally focused and internally driven industrial strategy advocated by Thomas, one that would have been designed to twin more effectively the interplay of rural and urban sectors and to prioritise the meeting of popular needs. And little was heard, either, of genuine peasant empowerment
in the rural areas. Instead, the focus was too exclusively on nationalising and rendering productive the abandoned settler estates – throughout the southern part of the country in particular – with, it is true, some allusion to possibilities of a more active kind of workers’ control there that were, however, never substantially realised in practice. Meanwhile, a variant of forced villagisation – not unlike that in Tanzania – was the dominant format in the peasant sector per se, one driven forward, as ultimately had also been the case in Tanzania, in a top-down spirit that did anything but inspire confidence.

What then was the reason that Frelimo – and with it, socialist Mozambique – came to stumble? Of course, the likelihood of such a negative result was cruelly overdetermined. The country’s inheritance from colonial domination was certainly a poor one, reflected in such weaknesses as the paucity of trained indigenous personnel and an economic dependence that pulled the country strongly towards subordination to global dictate, despite efforts to resist it. There was also the ongoing regional war that made Mozambique the target of destructive incursions by white-dominated Rhodesia and South Africa and of a long drawn-out campaign of terror waged so callously and destructively by these countries’ sponsored ward, the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) counter-revolutionary movement. But lastly there were, despite Frelimo’s own apparently benign original intentions, the movement’s own sins once in power, sins of vanguardist high-handedness and impatience and of an arrogant oversimplification of societal complexities and challenges (religious, ethnic, regional). These self-inflicted weaknesses created obstacles of their own to further progress.

Thus – not having the expression of their own voices effectively institutionalised within the space allowed by the vanguardist political model Frelimo had chosen for itself – a popular, self-conscious force from below could, quite simply, not be expected to arise to help effectively stem any eventual drive to elitist opportunism and greed on the part of Mozambique’s Frelimo-linked elite. Never really invited to take actual, concrete, democratic ownership of its own revolution, the mass of people remained all too passive in its defence of Mozambique’s osten
dible revolution, as first – after Machel’s death at the hands of the South Africans – Joaquim Chissano and then Armando Guebuza (like Chissano, concerned to enrich both himself and his family in a burgeoning private sector) became president. In fact, such dramatic examples epitomised the overall leadership’s turn to the very brand of self-aggrandisement that Fanon had feared – a trajectory that would also have been unfathomable to either Mondlane or Machel.14
Indeed, what we now had, in Alice Dinerman’s perfectly accurate description, was nothing less than a:

rapid unravelling of the Mozambican revolution, with the result that Mozambique, once considered a virtually peerless pioneer in forging a socialist pathway in Africa, … now enjoys an equally exceptional, if dialectically opposed, status: today the country is, in the eyes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, a flagship of neoliberal principles.

Moreover, as Dinerman concludes:

predictably, many of the leading government and party officials rank among the primary beneficiaries of the new political and economic dispensation. Those who enthusiastically promised that Mozambique would turn into a graveyard of capitalism are now the leading advocates of, and avid accumulators in, capitalism’s recent, full-blown resurrection (Dinerman 2006: 19–20; Pitcher 2002 and 2006).

Not unlike many amongst the ANC’s top brass and their circle, we might again be tempted to add.

What had occurred in Mozambique, Gretchen Bauer and Scott D. Taylor (2005) suggest, was the extremely rapid growth and dramatic spread of corruption (more or less unknown in the initial days of independence) in Mozambique, as well as a fevered ‘pursuit of individual profit [that has undermined] much of the legitimacy of Frelimo party leaders, who [have taken] advantage of market-based opportunities, like privatisation, to enrich themselves’ (Bauer and Taylor 2005: 135). In short, as these authors then observe,

the election of Guebuza [as the new president in 2002, and since], holder of an expansive business network and one of the richest men in Mozambique, hardly signals that Frelimo will attempt to run on anything but a globalist, neoliberal agenda – regardless of the abject poverty suffered by most of its electorate.

Is this then a failure of socialism or rather, a sad surrender of Frelimo’s once much-trumpeted version of such a project – and a victory for elite-assisted
recolonisation? The second of these conclusions seems, to many observers, to be an all too accurate one, unfortunately; it is this kind of sombre conclusion – and sobering outcome – that I have had occasion, albeit with heavy heart, to write about elsewhere (Saul 2009 and 2013, chapter 3).

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The logic of genuine ‘economic nationalism’, of the refusal of any abject, unqualified surrender to the forces of global capital and of the necessity to link socialism to any such successful refusal was quickly lost on the ANC, that movement/party being able (wilfully or otherwise) to see only the negative dimensions of Tanzania’s and Mozambique’s failed attempts at a more humane and progressively transformative political economy. But the imperatives of genuine and empowered democracy, of a progressive (non-vanguardist) resolution of the tension between leadership and popular control and of a non-dogmatic economic self-reliance were even more quickly lost on the ANC than they had been, in the long run, on Tanu and Frelimo (Saul 2013: chapter 4; Saul and Bond forthcoming [2014]). As was soon clear, the ANC’s momentary toying with the modest measure of transformation that the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) represented soon slipped into Gear and the movement’s extremely brief flirtation with the promise of some sustained popular purpose and some sustained popular takeover of the process of transformation was lost.

Indeed, as Michelle Williams (2008) helps make clear, the latter outcome was never really on offer – even from the SACP, much less from the ANC. Thus, in carefully contrasting the South African instance with that of Kerala, she suggests that in the latter case the Indian state’s Communist Party premised its activities on what she calls a ‘counter-hegemonic generative politics’ and ‘a reliance on participatory organizing’ – a politics that has sought, precisely, to genuinely empower people. In South Africa, on the other hand, the preference of the ANC/SACP grouping has been for ‘a hegemonic generative politics’ and a reliance on mere ‘mass mobilizing’ (Williams 2008: 91) – to, in effect, draw a crowd to popularly hail its ascendancy. Small wonder that a saddened, older ANC/SACP cadre like Rusty Bernstein could, shortly before his death, bemoan the fact that when, in the 1980s,
mass popular resistance revived again inside the country led by the UDF, it led the ANC to see the UDF as an undesirable factor in the struggle for power and to undermine it as a rival focus for mass mobilization. It has undermined the ANC’s adherence to the path [of] mass resistance as the way to liberation, and substituted instead a reliance on manipulation of administrative power … It has impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished and allowed the weed of ‘free market’ ideology to take hold (Bernstein 2007:144).

A grim balance sheet, in short, albeit one not so very different from that of the recolonised (by the worldwide reach of capital) residues of colonial empires that its neighbours have also become. Indeed, despite its rather higher starting point (thanks to its mineral riches) on the world economic table, the South African populace is firmly lodged well down the world poverty table. For South Africa, in the absence of the imaginative planning that might have sought both an effectively self-centred (but, to repeat, not autarkic) economic model and a possibly transformative developmental future, remains primarily a ‘taker’ of economic signals from the global corporate world. Its record in terms of providing opportunities for urban employment and rural renewal, in terms of housing, electricity and water supplies, in terms of education and health services, in terms of a progressive package of environmentally sensitive measures and its record in terms of facilitating the growth of social equality more generally, is not markedly better than the records of its neighbours in southern Africa.

In fact, the principal lesson to be learned from recent southern African history, including that of South Africa, is not so much ‘what not to do’ as it is the high cost to be paid for choosing ‘not to dare’ – not to dare to be self-reliant and economically imaginative and not to dare to be genuinely democratic and actively committed to the social and political empowerment of the people themselves. For not to so dare is, in our contemporary world, merely to wallow in a stagnant pond of self-serving vanguardism and in a post-Fanonist pattern of elite aggrandisement – even if such attitudes are, in South Africa, sustained within what is now a formally democratic process. And it is to accept passively something else, that ‘something else’ being most readily epitomised in one harsh, hard and unyielding word: recolonisation. All that struggle, carried out so nobly, against apartheid – and, throughout the region, against a full panoply of arrogant colonialisms – to have come to this: a callous recolonisation, by
global capital and, as aided, domestically, by southern Africa’s own ostensible once-liberators. Sad, sad, sad.

Not that South Africa has escaped the grim politics of polarisation that the ANC’s choice of direction has willed for it. Although the ANC continues to win power (with a roughly similar high percentage of what is nonetheless an increasingly smaller turnout of eligible voters), it has to deal with an increasingly discontented population. As Peter Alexander has noted,

Since 2004 South Africa has experienced a movement of local protests amounting to a rebellion of the poor. This has been widespread and intense, reaching insurrectionary proportions in some cases. On the surface, the protests have been about service delivery and against uncaring, self-serving and corrupt leaders of the municipalities. A key feature has been mass participation by a new generation of fighters, especially unemployed youth but also school students. Many issues that underpinned the [initial] ascendancy of Jacob Zuma also fuel the present action, including a sense of injustice arising from the realities of persistent inequality … [Moreover,] while the inter-connections between the local protest, and between the local protests and militant action involving other elements of civil society, are limited, it is suggested that this is likely to change (Alexander 2010: 25).

Indeed, Moeletsi Mbeki (2011), Thabo’s brother, recently speculated on the possibility of an ever more forceful eruption from below of a genuine, Tunisia-like spring of discontent being likely, eventually, to mark South Africa (he sets the likely date as 2020). Small wonder that even Zwelinzima Vavi, despite the fact that his own trade union central (Congress of South African Trade Unions [Cosatu]) continues to be mired in a demobilising political alliance with the ANC and SACP, can observe: ‘We have a constitution which grants people certain rights. Yet in practice millions are denied those rights, especially socio-economic rights, in what has become the most unequal nation in the world’ (Vavi 2011).

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In short, overall, many of the ingredients for the emergence in South Africa of an effectively counter-hegemonic politics – and, one might hope, for a politics of active, participatory mass empowerment – seem to be in place. In
this way South Africa may actually offer a much more promising picture than its fellow, now distinctly anti-socialist, ‘false decolonisers’ elsewhere in the region: Tanzania and Mozambique. For in South Africa, movements such as the Democratic Left Front give signs of eventually making good the hopes of Fanon himself (and, as quoted above, of Williams). As Fanon (1967: 253) put the relevant point:

The Third World [including the countries of Southern Africa] today faces Europe like a colossal mass whose project should be to try to resolve the problems to which Europe has not been able to find the answers.

Fanon is still waiting, of course. Indeed, at the moment, the ‘answers’ (capitalism, growing inequality and extremely straitened structures of democratic aspiration and active participation) of Europe and North America are the structures southern Africa has taken as its own. Nonetheless, as Fanon (1967: 255) tells us, ‘For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man [sic]’.

Clearly, the struggle to realise such an outcome continues.

NOTES

1 For a more sceptical view of my good friend Arrighi’s account of his own views in the 1960s (reflecting my own rather different memories of the time and of our discussions), see chapter 3, ‘Arrighi and Africa: farewell thoughts’, in Saul 2011: 53–54.

2 In Saul (2008) see chapter 5, ‘The strange death of liberated southern Africa’, where I have also cited some of the quotations presented in these pages and a more extended version of a related argument.

3 Recall Mandela’s apparent hailing, in 1994, of the free market as a ‘magic elixir’ in his speech to the joint session of the Houses of Congress in Washington. And his strident statement, in arguing in favour of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy to replace the mildly more radical Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), that Gear was, as per its august invocation from on-high, ‘non-negotiable’!

4 Gevisser (in Turok 2008: 58) also reports that Mbeki’s first instructions to Trevor Manuel, upon the latter’s taking over as finance minister in 1996, was for a policy that ‘called precisely for the kind of fiscal discipline and investment-friendly tax incentives that the international financial institutions loved and that Manuel already believed in’!
As Turok (2008: 264–265) continues this thought ‘much depends on whether enough momentum can be built to overcome the caution that has marked the ANC government since 1994. This depends on whether the determination to achieve an equitable society can be revived.’


For my more detailed retrospective reflections on the Tanzanian case see, *inter alia*, Saul (2012) and Saul (2005), specifically chapter 7, ‘Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania: Learning from Tanzania’. I have drawn directly on some of these materials in preparing this section of the present chapter.


The interview with Bibi Titi, on which this article focuses, was carried out by Ms Meena in 1988.

Once again, I have drawn on some of my own previous writings in preparing this section of the present chapter: notably Arrighi and Saul (1973); my chapter 8, ‘Frelimo and the Mozambique revolution’ in Saul (1985); the various Mozambique-related sections in Saul (2009); and Saul (2011).

See the chapter by Sketchley on Production Councils in Saul 1985 and also, those on urban and rural/agricultural realities, by Pinsky and Dolny respectively, in the same volume.

Buyer beware – and see the volume which I edited, *A Difficult Road* (1985). In that volume I myself struggled in its overview chapters (chapters 1 and 2) to evaluate this issue accurately, torn as I was between the claims of Frelimo’s apparently benign, even progressive vanguardism on the one hand and the claims of struggle from below on the other. I now feel much more strongly than I did 30 years ago that any stark assertion of the presumed virtues of ‘vanguardism’ are very questionable indeed – although mere spontaneism is also a weak reed upon which to build a revolution. The fact is that there is definitely a role for leadership – sagacious, clear and forthright – but it must be held, absolutely and openly, democratically accountable. The health and safety of any revolution that seeks to better the lot of the vast majority of the populace is dependent upon that.

While teaching, in the early 1980s, in both the Frelimo Party School in Maputo and the Faculty of Marxism–Leninism at the University of Eduardo Mondlane I was shocked at the rigidity of the kind of Marxism that was being urged on Frelimo there by cooperants dispatched from the Eastern bloc countries. This was a ‘Marxism’ very different in texture from the progressive perspectives I had known within Frelimo in earlier years – although, truth to tell, it fitted all too comfortably with the leadership’s own vanguardist and technocratic propensities.

Unlike that of Mondlane, Machel’s style was indeed far too overbearing for the revolution’s own health but there was no sign of corruption; instead, indeed, every sign of his benign dedication to long-term popular well-being; the assassinations of both Mondlane and Machel were costly blows to the country’s prospects.
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