

SOUTHERN AFRICA: IS STRUCTURAL REFORM VIABLE?

A Review of JOHN S SAUL (1993) *RECOLONISATION AND RESISTANCE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA IN THE 1990s*: Between the Lines, Toronto.

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John Saul, Canadian scholar and activist, has been writing about the southern half of Africa for some twenty-five years now. This recent book is neither his most considered or final work; it is part of an ongoing production that includes a set of essays largely published elsewhere. He will undoubtedly go on to publish more; indeed, his Namibian book with Colin Leys, which highlights his fascination with radical dissidents within the insurgent nationalist camp, is already out. This collection contains some of his first substantial essays on South Africa, although much of it deals specifically with Mozambique.

Saul conceptualises his project as the study of (and engagement with) what he calls the 'Thirty Years' War' between colonial and revolutionary forces. Profoundly influenced by the *dependencista* school of the 1960s and 1970s, it is above all a break with Western domination, colonialism and its heritage, that lies at the heart of this war. This is a populist conception; it is the multi-faceted people of the region who are the heroes of the struggle for Saul.

Saul is a very talented commentator on strategy; as ever his prose is peppered with qualifications and counter-proposals that reflect his fascination with historical possibilities and his thoughtful grasp of the historical moment. His discussion of the transition in South Africa in the midst of the process is one of the best so far, remarkably concise and rich in implication. Saul's other great strength lies in the thirty year war concept. It enables him to bind, to contrast, to compare and provide a dimension that the histories bounded by one country tend to lack.

Inevitably, given the look of southern African history in 1993 to a socialist activist, this cannot be an entirely or even largely cheerful account. Saul spends much time reflecting on questions of retreat and defeat at the hands of forces making for 'recolonisation' (12) through 'externally-imposed, imperially-crafted wars of destabilisation' (39). Given Saul's fundamental optimism, there is a defensiveness to some of this book which must be its weakest element. In

particular, Saul's discussions of FRELIMO and its 'historical project' (52-53) are often unconvincing. While Saul was only one of many writers on the Left, often extremely talented, who provided a complex, nuanced and critical view of post-Arusha Declaration Tanzania, then the most progressive state in the region, he is also one of many who thereafter committed himself so deeply to Mozambique under FRELIMO that the critical edge was largely lost. Saul cannot accept the view of Joe Slovo that the Mozambican attempt to create socialism was 'premature and wrong', or the perspective of French writers such as Cahen and Geffray who have dissected the FRELIMO project at various levels, theoretical and historical. For Saul, Mozambican 'socialism had a deeper meaning' than in most cases in Africa (53); the efforts to build social services were 'truly stirring' (9), and much of what went wrong can be understood either in terms of South African destabilisation or the pernicious influence of the Soviet Union (73). To claim, as does Heribert Adam, that the FRELIMO political elite were opportunists well able to adjust their politics in a new direction when the socialist card was no longer playable, is perhaps the worst of offences for Saul.

As a non-specialist, I would at least claim that the jury is still out on the structure and character of FRELIMO. Was this a group of well-intended honest Jacobins with little sense of the possible? Was this a class in the making who needed socialism as a governing ideology when it seemed plausible? Was RENAMO always backed by a large section of the populace for whom it was for a variety of historic reasons legitimate, as their recent remarkably large election support suggests? We don't know the answers yet to these questions, and Saul's large-hearted bona fides are not sufficient by themselves. Certainly a far more rigorous assessment of material realities and political possibilities will need to form the heart of the analysis that finally does provide a convincing answer.

The two substantial essays on South Africa make quite impressive reading still, even if the specifics are now in the realm of history rather than current debates. Saul recognises the successes of the South African state in confining and shutting down the revolution that seemed to be taking off in 1984-85, and the implications this imposed on a potential settlement in South Africa. He also realises that 'barbarism', incredible levels of violence and destruction, might have been the product of head-on confrontation renewed in the early-1990s. In this sense what he wrote is very prescient of the situation that materialised after the assassination of Chris Hani.⁽³⁰⁾ His answer lies in what he calls *structural reform*, an ongoing process of social mobilisation in which a strategically-minded ANC, proceeding legally and constitutionally, can widen the scope of reform and move South Africa peacefully in a socialist direction. Saul recognises that this requires the direct involvement of 'civil society' pushing the state forward. He insists on the need to look beyond and around the level of the state to popular forces, and on

the need to see the transition away from apartheid as beginning well before 1994.

In two ways, this is a difficult position to maintain today. First, while there continues to be a South African belief in 'mass action' as a means of forcing the government ahead (I am not sure whether this is conceptually the same as civil society), in fact, the organs of resistance of the 1980s, whether unions, civics, NGOs or others, have enormously attenuated in the structurally changed situation since the 1994 election. Second, the ANC in classic fashion has less and less real an existence outside of the state which it is busy investing. Popular energies have effectively been steamed away and structural reform has largely given way to specific piecemeal measures encapsulated within the grand umbrella of the RDP, an umbrella so grand as to lack clarity or common features recognisable to all. 'Growth through redistribution' adopted by the Economic Trends Research Group for a time as a key concept and highlighted by Saul, has tended to fade as a realistic political option in the first year of power and critical knives, such as those of Adelzadeh & Padayachee and Ben Fine, are out.

In both Mozambique after 1975 and in South Africa now, the forces pushing new governing parties to incorporate the discourse and structural functions of the existing state have been enormously strong. The gap between a revolutionary ethos dominated by the armed struggle and one that can pursue 'structural reform' is also big, as Saul recognises in places. If Saul tends towards too optimistic a view of revolutionary forces, he is also too dismissive of the stabilising potential of a more conservative order. The South African economy has big problems, but it may be going too far to say that 'the roots of SA's economic crisis run very deep indeed'. (119) There is a need for an assessment of conservative forces in South Africa and its neighbours as something that runs deeper than the idea represented by 'recolonisation'.

Saul's book bristles with insight and provocative notions; interest in it is hardly obviated by the reader's inability to agree with everything. Books that take up the questions Saul raises are necessary.