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Book Review

# Liberation, Then What?

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**IN A LUCID contribution to our understanding of contemporary Africa, David Seddon and Leo Zeilig recently charted that continent's two waves of popular protest and class struggle over the last 40 years, as well as pointing to signs of a nascent third wave.**

*Figures in round brackets refer to book page numbers. Endnotes are in square brackets*

The first wave - often referred to as the "IMF riots" - took off in the late 1970s with its characteristic "strikes, marches, demonstrations and riots." The protests, write Seddon and Zeilig, "usually involved a variety of social groups and categories and did not always take place under a working class or trade union banner or with working class leadership - if this term is used in its narrow sense."

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/1002-workers-strike-in-south-africa.jpg>]

– The broad base of popular forces involved not only challenged the immediate austerity measures being introduced as part of more general neoliberal structural adjustment policies, "but also the legitimacy of the reforms themselves and even, sometimes, the governments that introduced them. They also frequently identified the international financial institutions and agencies that led this concerted effort to further enmesh "the developing world" and the ordinary people who live there, into the uneven process of capitalist globalization in the interests of major transnational corporations and the states that gain most from their operations."

– A second wave, from the late 1980s and into the 1990s, was characterized by greater political coherence and objective. In these new protests, "The charge that national governments had broken the implicit social contract to safeguard not only the material welfare of the people, but also their political rights, led to growing demands for democracy and political change."

– Finally, a third wave, yet to have clearly emerged but breaking onto the horizon in the present day, is one with which Seddon and Zeilig urge activists to engage while drawing lessons from the past 40 years of struggle: "(T)he future success of social protest as the basis for far-reaching progressive social, economic, and political change will depend on serious re-engagement by activists and political movements in Africa in both analysis and action at the grass roots. This will encompass both the practical and strategic needs of ordinary people and exploration with them/by them of new forms of active engagement in the determination of their own futures, as well as with the debates and discussions of the "anti-capitalist movement" in its other manifestations [across the globe]. South Africa has demonstrated some of the ways that this dual engagement is possible." [1]

### **The Revolutionary Prospect**

In *The Next Liberation Struggle*, John S. Saul makes such a re-engagement in ways that are provocative and stimulating, while also careful and analytical. In the best tradition of scholarly activism Saul seeks to draw historical lessons from past decades of liberation struggle to inform and foment a stronger third wave, or as he thinks of it, "the next liberation struggle."

"My central intellectual preoccupation," writes Saul, "remains now, as it was in the 1960s, the revolutionary prospect in Africa. Indeed, it continues to take as a starting point that a "revolution" - both in post-apartheid Southern Africa and in the rest of Africa - is both necessary and possible on that continent." (7)

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## Liberation, Then What?

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Saul has been studying and engaging with revolutionary activity in Africa since the mid-1960s. He spent seven years teaching university in Tanzania, as well as shorter stints teaching in post-liberation Mozambique and post-apartheid South Africa. While back in Canada Saul was an important member of the Toronto Committee for Southern Africa, as well as an editor and frequent contributor to the committee's journal, Southern Africa Report.

During forty years of such engagement Saul has published a large number of books, including classics such as *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (1973), co-edited with Giovanni Arrighi, and *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa* (1979). Mid-career books include *The Crisis in South Africa* (1981), co-authored with Stephen Gelb, and *A Difficult Road: The Transition to Socialism in Mozambique* (1985).

Two of his most recent works are *Recolonization and Resistance: Southern Africa in the 1990s* (1994); and *Development after Globalization: Theory and Practice for the Embattled South in a New Imperial Age* (2005).

Growing out of this deep body of work, *The Next Liberation Struggle* is a collection of essays written over the last decade which seeks to understand the Thirty Years War for Southern African liberation, 1960-90, in an effort to contribute to a fuller, more meaningful liberation of Africa today.

That Thirty Years War, fought on many fronts and in different forms from country to country, was a war against colonial occupation and white minority rule. While much of the book is devoted to exposing the limits of the victories which dismantled the twin prisons of colonial occupation and white minority rule, Saul is nonetheless too careful an observer to miss the indelible significance of those earlier popular efforts:

No amount of concern as to the deeply compromised nature of the outcome of the war for Southern African liberation should blind us to just what was achieved, both within the region and by Africa as a whole, in realizing the basic precondition - that is, the removal of white minority rule - of any meaningful freedom there. (5)

At the same time, to see clearly the way forward for popular struggle today, we need to return again to the parameters of that compromised outcome, and understand how black majority rule has not meant an end to capitalist exploitation and marginalization, nor to imperialist impositions on Africa within the world order. On this, it is useful to quote from Saul at some length:

In the end, then, the positive implications of the removal of white minority rule have been muted for most people in the region: extreme socio-economic inequality, desperate poverty, and disease (AIDS most notably) remain the lot of the vast majority of the population. Unfortunately, too, the broader goals that emerged in the course of the liberation struggles - defined around the proposed empowerment and projected transformation of the impoverished state of the mass of the population of the region - have proven extremely difficult to realize.... In now writing of the Thirty Years War for Southern African liberation I hope that a greater consciousness of the shared war will help to remind Southern Africans of its heroic dimensions and help rekindle some sense of their joint accomplishment - and that this will provide a positive point of reference from which they can work to once again fire the flames of joint resistance in the new millennium. (6)

That next wave of resistance, envisioned by Saul as the necessary and possible "next liberation struggle," consists of "a struggle against the savage terms of Africa's present incorporation into the global economy and of the wounding domestic social and political patterns accompanying it..." (6).

Well aware of the tremendous obstacles - both global and local - to socialist transformation in Africa, Saul nevertheless maintains a "strong sense that a new stage of revolutionary activity is slowly but surely being born in post-apartheid South Africa itself as elsewhere on the continent..." (11)

### Why African Socialism Failed

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Continental Considerations," first deals with Sub-Saharan Africa's position within the global capitalist system, in a chapter co-authored with Colin Leys [2] This part of the book also sketches some of the contours of "African socialism" as it played itself out in the Tanzania of Julius Nyerere's Tanzania African National Congress (TANU) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in Mozambique under the Frelimo movement, led first by Eduardo Mondlane and then by Samora Machel. Frelimo first commanded state power in 1975.

In a very different way, African Socialism is examined through the lens of South Africa's liberation struggle. In the latter case, the analysis is more of "what the situation seemed to promise." As Saul notes, "If there was ever a dog that did not bark in the night for latter-day Sherlocks to reflect upon, it is the absence of a socialist vocation on the part of both the South African liberation movement leadership and, perhaps more importantly, that country's apparently well-developed and assertive working class once apartheid had been defeated." (41)

The chapter on African Socialism is essentially geared towards learning how and why it failed in its various manifestations in order to better forge a new future for socialism on the continent. Toward the same end, the last chapter of Part I juxtaposes really existing "liberal democracy" to Saul's preferred "popular democracy" in the context of Sub-Saharan African politics.

Part II, "Southern Africa: A Range of Variation," presents chapters on the causes and consequences of war and peace in Mozambique, and official "forgotten history" in contemporary Namibia, a situation in which the SWAPO (South West Africa Peoples Organization) government is pitted against the Breaking the Wall of Silence Movement (BWS).

BWS is seeking to force investigations into allegations of human rights abuses by SWAPO leadership against innocent cadres while the movement was in exile, in particular at the SWAPO-run detention centre at Lubango, Angola during the 1980s.

This chapter is also co-authored by Colin Leys. Another, co-written with Richard Saunders, presents a Gramscian analysis of Mugabe's Zimbabwe and popular struggles emerging against that regime. [3] Finally, an entire chapter is devoted to Julius Nyerere's problematic socialism in Tanzania.

Part III, "South Africa: Debating the Transition," is devoted exclusively to an analysis of different stages of South Africa's transition from apartheid to post-apartheid neoliberal democracy. The essays, originally written between 1994 and 2004, grow increasingly cutting in their criticisms of the post-apartheid African National Congress (ANC) government, in correspondence with the ANC's deepening capitulation to the dictates of capital, both global and local.

### The Hard Questions

Among the many positive things I could say about this excellent book, I think the most important is the simplest: Saul confronts the biggest and most difficult questions facing socialists within the African context, and he takes his answers seriously.

The Next Liberation Struggle represents an attempt to be realistic without being passive or cynical, to be a revolutionary socialist perspective while avoiding the mere rhetorical flourishes of ultra-leftism, and to be cognizant of

the dramatic obstacles in the way of socialism in Africa while always seeking to highlight the popular forces from below whose growth might help shift the balance of forces in ways more favourable to the realization of socialism.

While recognizing the difficulties for a socialist alternative, Saul convincingly demonstrates the irrationality of seeing in capitalism a future for meaningful and just development. He shows how the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continue to follow a dogmatic market liberalism which they promote in Africa through aid conditionality; how these institutions have failed to respond in meaningful ways to demands for debt relief; and how the United States and other imperialist states - including his own, Canada - continue to make independent African initiatives vulnerable through a whole host of interventionist mechanisms.

From the perspective of capital, there is "optimism, even excitement," in the "oil, natural gas, and minerals industries" because Africa's resources remain "substantially untapped, with many existing discoveries yet to be developed and many new ones still to be made." (19-20) As Saul and Leys argue, however, "Africa's development, and the dynamics of global capitalism, are no longer congruent, if they ever were."

An economic profile of Africa drawn from this [global capitalist] perspective would pay relatively little attention to countries or states, except as regards the physical security of fixed investments and the availability of communications and transport facilities. Instead it would highlight a group of large transnational corporations, especially mining companies, and a pattern of mineral deposits, coded according to their estimated size and value and the costs of exploiting them (costs that technical advances are constantly reducing) - and a few associated African stock exchanges worth gambling on. (20, 21).

Democracy is another theme that runs throughout *The Next Liberation Struggle*. On the one hand, Saul provides a searing critique of liberal democracy, and the essential impotence of normative claims about "democracy" in Africa so long as the continent and its people are both exploited and marginalized within global capitalism.

At the same time, Saul sees the lack of democratic practice and theory historically in the African socialist experiments as one of the roots of their failures. Among the failures of African socialist practices with regard to democracy, Saul underlines "the intellectual arrogance of newly ascendant elites; the cumulative precedents of nationalist movement practices elsewhere in the continent...; the inherited hierarchies deemed necessary to movements and liberation forces previously engaged in intense struggles, sometimes armed, against colonial masters; and the "progressive" vanguardist discourses learned from overseas parties in the "successful" Marxist-Leninist tradition."

For Saul, the cases of Tanzania, Mozambique, and South Africa illustrate "the pattern of smothering (however often "with the best of intentions") the kinds of mass political activism that could have helped sustain the democratic and socialist charge repeated over and over again." (52).

### **After the Cold War**

Conscious of the imperialist dynamics of the global order, Saul charts the effects on national liberation movements of Cold War power-plays in Africa, and the obstacles and opportunities for the next liberation struggle in the post-Cold War international scene.

On the one hand, there are surely "long-term benefits of the passing of the Soviet bloc and the discrediting of its bankrupt legacy (both in theory and in practice) to the freeing up of space for the renewal of radicalism in Africa. Yet "the present world-wide context - of neo-liberal market mania and monolithic capitalist globalization - is at least as hostile (if in novel ways) to progressive aspirations in Africa as was the old Cold War world." [4]

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While the international left lends its attention to the Middle East, with the ongoing occupation and to Latin America, with the proliferation of inspiring struggles against capitalism, I urge us to stay informed (or become informed) of struggles in Africa. For those of us based in North America, such knowledge will draw our attention to new areas to which we must add our anti-imperialist energies. Saul's latest book is an important tool for advancing this struggle.

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[1] David Seddon and Leo Zeilig (2005), "Class and Protest in Africa: New Waves," *Review of African Political Economy* No. 103: 9-27.

[2] . Colin Leys is another important long-time commentator on African affairs. He is author, perhaps most famously, of *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism* (1975). More contemporary works of Leys' include, *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory* (1996) and *Market Driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest* (2003). Currently he is co-editor, along with Leo Panitch, of *Socialist Register*.

[3] Richard Saunders teaches at York University in Toronto. He is the author of *Dancing Out of Tune: A History of the Media in Zimbabwe* (1999).

[4] David Finkel takes up this question of the transition of Cold War to post-Cold War geopolitics in terms of its importance for progressive aspirations world-wide in an important recent article. David Finkel (2006), "The Legacies of National Liberation," *New Socialist* 55 (Feb-March): 12-17.