Review


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John Saul’s collection of essays on southern Africa from the past decade is organised into three main parts. The first part consists of some of Saul’s reflections on capitalism, socialism and democracy in Africa. The second part considers the reasons for the failure of the various left or progressive state projects on the continent since the first years of decolonisation. The third part provides some more detailed insight into South Africa’s own transition.

Saul begins by outlining the history of what he calls the ‘thirty years war for Southern African Liberation’. This starts with the banning of the liberation movements in South Africa and the rise of Tanzania as a base for launching armed struggles for liberation in the early 1960s, and ends with the liberation of Namibia and the unbanning of the South African liberation movements in 1990. He sets out his basic thesis here: that capitalism cannot deliver in Africa, either materially or politically, and that socialism – however unfeasible in may appear to be – is the only alternative. In sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa), Saul says, ‘there is some capital but not a lot of capitalism. The predominant social relations are still not capitalist, nor is the prevailing logic of production’ (17). Saul makes a powerful argument in this regard, showing that Africa is dominated by capitalism but that the vast majority of the population accrue very few of the material benefits of that system. This is a structural problem that cannot be resolved within a capitalist framework, especially where the ideologically dominant perception of Africa is that it ‘is not so much a system of states, still less a continent of people in need of a better life, [but] simply a geographic – or geological
— terrain, offering this or that opportunity to make money’ (18). Saul does not hold out much hope for the survival of liberal democracy on the continent, given that ‘the class and productive bases for a stable hegemonic bourgeoisie are just not there’, and in reference to the debt that exploded following structural adjustment, ‘democracy cannot sustain the debt, the debt cannot sustain democracy’ (29).

Given the unlikelihood of liberal democracy rooting itself in the region, a question of the alternative arises. The task the left has ahead of it is to build a popular democracy as the necessary political form to support any future socialist economic reconstruction. Saul characterises popular democracy as the creation of institutional guarantees for free and open political interactions, the definition of a possible place for market mechanisms while simultaneously reasserting social control over the economy, confronting the reality of gender and racially based oppressions, and incorporating the legitimate claims of ethnic and religious diversity and the imperatives of environmental sensitivity. Leaning heavily on Issa Shivji’s writing on popular democracy, Saul points out the centrality of rooting any approach to popular democracy in positions on imperialism, state and class, and class struggle (162).

Whether this is possible or not is an open question. As Saul says, ‘the “historically necessary” is not always the “historically possible”’ (79). Building popular democracy is a painstaking job but can be done on the basis of the myriad examples of popular resistance and grassroots organisation found in contemporary African society, even if these are not necessarily constructed on the basis of a socialist consciousness at the outset. From these it may be possible to begin the process of ‘build[ing] certain alternatives within the capitalist framework that will tend to undermine the capitalist logic’, as Saul approvingly cites veteran South African trade unionist Enoch Godongwana (82).

Given his historical involvement in the liberation struggles of southern Africa as an ‘activist-academic’, Saul has many insights into the reasons for the failure of progressive statist projects in Africa during the 30 years war. He seeks to strike a balance between external factors and internal factors. Of primary importance from an external point of views was the global neo-liberal ‘counter-revolution’ (to borrow from Arrighi) in the 1980s, which forced African states into structural adjustment programmes on the back of unpayable debt. This eliminated most of the material advances in health, education and other social services these states had made, and reinforced authoritarian tendencies in ruling parties.
Chief amongst the internal factors that led to the demise of the progressive projects, even if only in hindsight, was that most of the first round of post-colonial leaders were not socialists as such, and nor was socialism a deeply rooted ideology in the liberation movements. While they employed socialist rhetoric, sometimes with good intent, the philosophy was mostly a mixture of nationalism, traditionalism, and left-populism. Socialism and Stalinism were almost entirely intertwined during that era, resulting in attempts at socialism manifesting as authoritarianism. Despite his sympathy for Nyerere and Tanzania’s attempts to build a progressive current, Saul reveals the extent to which Nyerere played – through the ‘Club of Presidents’ – a role in stifling ‘often in the most brutal possible way, the seeds of any dissent that could grow outside a very limited circumference of acceptable discussion’ (151) in the region’s liberation movements. The Club operated as a faction that used its access to power to prevent other factions from functioning freely. In at least one case this power was used to eliminate a potentially radical current in the liberation movements.

Saul cites an article he wrote in 1977 – three years before it took power - describing the Zimbabwean liberation movement’s leadership as being characterised by ‘the same old wasting kind of petty-bourgeois political infighting – centred upon personalities, intrigues, and the mobilisation of constituencies around ethnic identifications, all long-time features of a Zimbabwean exile politics untransformed by effective struggle’ (130). This highlights the fact that class interests apart from those of the workers and peasantry played a dominant role in the liberation movements from the outset, and these came to the fore on taking power.

Saul considers Mozambique to have offered the greatest potential for a radical alternative to emerge. But externally-initiated destabilisation using Renamo as a proxy, first through Rhodesia and then through apartheid South Africa, not only closed down the space for the implementation of progressive policies, but also enhanced authoritarian and vanguardist practices internally (39). On the other hand, Saul points to the genuine sacrifices that the Mozambiquean and later Zimbabwean movements in power made in the name of solidarity with the South African liberation movement. Their principled stand in the face of overwhelming odds significantly contributed to their inability to carry out a progressive agenda internally. Those were the days when principle and solidarity really had tangible meaning. It is only more recently that expediency and self-interest started dominating politics in the region – more specifically, since the onset of neo-liberalism. In this light, Saul
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shows intellectual honesty and courage in highlighting the weaknesses of these historical movements that he and millions of others have invested so heavily in.

And so we move on to South Africa in the third part of the book. Saul and his contemporaries have long invested in the hope that South Africa’s liberation would provide the material basis for the expansion of a radical project into the region. Based on ‘an infrastructure of popularly rooted groups and organisations quite beyond anything seen elsewhere in Africa’ (177), with a strong degree of internal democracy and a broad process of mobilisation, South Africa’s liberation movement seemed to offer real hope for a continuation of struggle beyond formal political democratisation. Saul tracks his growing disillusionment with the ‘South African miracle’, showing how elite pacting between business, the old political establishment and the liberation movement led to the demobilisation of popular forces. Without taking a purist stance, Saul suggests that an alternative could have been for the Congress Alliance leadership to have done more to embrace the popular struggles to help ‘facilitate more direct and unmediated expressions of popular energies and class demands’ (180). Popular democracy was gradually eliminated from the equation, and the choice narrowed down to one between liberal democracy on the one hand and nationalist authoritarianism on the other (184). Anyone who has read South Africa: Limits to Change by Hein Marais or Elite Transition by Patrick Bond will not find much new insight in Saul’s chapters on South Africa. The critique of the post-apartheid state and movement is of the same vein, albeit with some interesting skirmishes with intellectual luminaries from the Congress movement along the way.

The later chapters of the South African section were written in the early 2000s around the period of the rise of the new community movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Anti-Evictions Campaign (AEC), the Concerned Citizens’ Forum (CCF) and the Landless People’s Movement (LPM). The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg in 2002 was a point of convergence not only for participants and members of these movements but also the apex of a series of struggles rooted in communities but organised across communities. A radical socialist leadership characterised these movements and led Saul – like most of the middle-class participants at the time – to overestimate the potential of these movements, not only in South Africa but on the continent as a whole. The mood was one of great possibility. At one point Saul even argues that ‘the groups driving such initiatives…have begun to redefine the South African
political landscape’ (237).

But just a few years later, little is left of these movements. The various leaderships were unable to build on the success of the mobilisations at the WSSD to expand outwards and the result, almost across the board, has been one of infighting and organisational decay. How is it that a seasoned activist-academic like John Saul was not able to sound a note of warning about the pitfalls and dangers, the weaknesses and limits, of the types of formations that were being built? Part of the problem seems to lie with Saul’s apprehensive desire to see some hope amidst the carnage and destruction and the failure of the progressive potential of the liberations struggles in Africa over the past 30 years. The left is blinded by ideological rigidity. Throughout the book, Saul shows he is eminently capable of exposing the reality of the state of the left in Africa for what it is. But the solutions he presents don’t always align with the story he tells.

Like many contemporary Africanists based in the North, Saul is actually fighting a contemporary intellectual battle against ‘Afro-pessimism’ which sees little hope for the future of Africa, at least in the short and medium term. His own pessimism about the possibilities of some ‘way-station’ of capitalist growth and liberal democracy on the route to socialism is countered by an unshakeable conviction that socialism remains a possibility and a necessity in Africa. Unfortunately, Saul’s arguments in this regard are far less convincing than his critique of actually existing capitalism. In fact, one gets the distinct sense that he is struggling even to convince himself. What scraps of evidence are advanced for the suggestion that socialism remains a possibility in Africa at present? The popular struggle against Shell in Ogoniland, the mass struggles against autocratic regimes in Zambia and Kenya in the celebrated ‘second wave of democratisation’ in the 1980s, the Movement for Democratic Change’s (MDC’s) mass mobilisations against the increasingly fraudulent Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s, the new community movements in South Africa also in the early 2000s. Saul recognises that in Kenya the movement ‘collapse[d] into squabbling, often cast in ethnic terms, between rival opposition leaders’ (30) and in Zambia was hijacked in neo-liberal and authoritarian directions once in power. The chapters were written too early for Saul to witness the implosion of the MDC into squabbling camps, or the decline of South Africa’s new community movements with a rapidity only equalled by their rise. But he holds out hope that a new generation of activists will emerge from these struggles with greater consciousness and fortitude to take up the struggle for the ‘next liberation’.
Unfortunately, Saul does not interrogate the character of the popular protests or movements in any depth. Instead, the fact of the protests is taken as an indication of a growing hostility to capitalism and the nation states that act as conduits for it. In more than one place Saul goes so far as to suggest that it is ‘plausible to argue that we are standing on the brink of a crucial new phase of African history…akin to that of 1945’. Without any really solid evidence we are wished into an era of mass struggles against capitalism. Saul himself recognises this when he poses the question towards the end of the book: ‘Certainly, we must continue to ask ourselves whether the relatively upbeat picture of contemporary resistance that I have presented here might again be too much a reflection of an “optimism of the will”, even if it does mesh with activities that are indeed visible and marked with genuine potential. Would a “realism” that dictated a more “pessimistic” response of “the intellect” to the severe difficulties of building and sustaining resistance under African circumstances be more appropriate?’ (267). Given the history that Saul himself provides throughout the book – from the damage wreaked on Africa by capitalism to the subjective weaknesses of the left to the current conjuncture and balance of forces – the latter approach would seem to be more honest and appropriate.