

Foreword

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Ruth First was murdered by the apartheid regime on 17 August 1982, immediately after hosting a conference on the role of research in supporting liberation struggles and regional integration in Southern Africa. In addition to the transformative challenges faced by governments formed by former liberation movements and those of organisations still contesting racist minority regimes, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) had recently been established with its main stated objective being to ‘reduce the dependence’ of its members ‘particularly, but not only, on apartheid South Africa’ (Southern African Development Community n.d.).

A major theme of discussion in what tragically became the final intellectual endeavour of Ruth First’s life was the meaning and significance of the concept of “critical support” as a *leitmotif* for research seeking to contribute to the advance of the liberation project in Southern Africa. This concept had been developed to guide the work of the *Centro de Estudos Africanos* (CEA – Centre for African Studies) founded by Ruth First, who became the centre’s Director of Research, and Aquino de Braganca, who was Director until he died in the plane crash that also killed President Samora Machel on 19 October 1986. The CEA underpinned both the Development Studies course offered to senior officials in state institutions and the conduct of research projects, particularly those undertaken during the tenure of Ruth First.

Key to the concept of “critical support” was a view that research should support the overriding goals and objectives defined by liberation movements that were not in doubt. This then spoke to a rejection of notions that research could, or should, be *value free*. However, the dialectic of support also being critical, spoke to the idea that the best contribution serious research could make to advancing the cause of liberation was to offer rigorous and critical insight into policies and practices, with the objective of improving their impact.

A related element was to see Marxism (then the official ideology of Mozambique’s Frelimo Party as well as the unifying theoretical paradigm of CEA teaching and research) as a tool of analysis of concrete reality rather than a dogma cited to validate existing policy positions and practices. Fighting for the space to pursue critically supportive research had not been easy. Several Frelimo leaders as well as *cooperantes* from the then “actually existing” socialist countries of Eastern Europe were wary. Ruth and Aquino,

however, had the political gravitas and respect to be able to carve out space for this endeavour.

Ruth First regarded Frelimo's attempted socialist transition as a fragile project embarked upon in one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world, located in a highly contested and conflictual region. Ruth was convinced that advancing this project, as well as that articulated by SADCC, would contribute even to the advance of the struggle for national liberation in South Africa. She saw the struggles for socialism in Mozambique, developmental integration in the region and liberation in South Africa as inextricably interlinked. This derived from her understanding of Southern Africa as a region, meaning much more than a geographically contiguous group of countries. Apartheid and colonialism had forged powerful economic ties that had shaped key dimensions of the existing politico-economic reality and thus, needed to be an arena of struggle for transformative change. First was strongly focused on her intellectual work regarding these issues during her time in Mozambique, something many an ANC cadre passing through Maputo found hard to understand.

The two chapters in this volume authored by Saleem Badat convincingly argue that the totality of Ruth First's intellectual endeavour, including that during her time at the CEA, can be subsumed under the broad concept of "activist research". Badat and Vasu Reddy offer a "loose" definition of this— 'research connected with political and social movements and projects' (See Chapter 1 and 2).

2 More than four decades have passed since the reflections on "critically supportive" research at the Maputo conference hosted by Ruth First, and much has changed since then. While foundational documents of liberation movements, such as the Freedom Charter continue to offer, in my view, a high-level vision of in what direction a liberation project must go, much of contemporary policy making by now "long in government" former liberation movements are a much less certain anchor of progressive transformation and are also much more contested. Battered by a combination of neo-liberalism and kleptocracy, the heirs to the liberation stalwarts now govern societies with widening inequality, growing distance between "elites" and ordinary people and a diminishing influence of the working class and the poor. Other organisations, including trade unions and community-based and research organisations have emerged offering alternative, and frequently more progressive positions on a range of policy choices. Besides issues, whose importance was not as evident forty years ago, are now widely recognised as vital and even existential. These include the threat of catastrophic climate change, and the associated challenges of defending communities and infrastructure against an inevitable cascade of increasingly severe and extreme weather events through ambitious "adaptation" programmes, while promoting equity and inclusive development as economies necessarily and inevitably transition to lower carbon products and technologies. Beyond this, are the impact of a myriad of "external shocks" emanating

from an increasingly contested global order enmeshed in a myriad of deepening interlocking crises, increasingly widely dubbed a polycrisis.

Several chapters in this volume begin the important task of problematising the concept of “activist research” in the spirit of “critical support”. Dale McKinley points out quite correctly that ‘...activist research can certainly be carried out by those in the centre and on the right side of the political spectrum’ (See Chapter 7). He also makes a distinction between “activist academics” and “activist intellectuals” rooted in organisations. This raises the critical question: under the circumstances of today where there is much less evident and much more contested anchor of the values and principles of progressive transformation that qualifies as “activist research”—or at least, “activist research” seeking to locate itself in the spirit of the legacy of Ruth First?

The Chapter by Nancy Cartwright et al. on OBFAR (Objectivity for Activist Research) raises another important set of questions. Research capable of supporting progressive change must be rigorous and I would add, rooted in scientific method. We live in an age of highly contested notions of evidence and proof, and this requires not only a pursuit of rigour in “activist research” itself, but an ability to critically unpack and assess statistical and other methodologies used to establish points and conclusions in a broad swathe of competing advice.

Beyond this are several more practical questions. There is an evident distinction between “activist research” and policy research, advocacy or consultancy reports. Ultimate agendas of organisations purporting to carry out “progressive” research are not always transparent. Not every NGO is a Community Based Organisation (CBO). Not every NGO or CBO is organically rooted and home grown. Funding shapes agendas. How do all these factors affect and shape the quest for progressive “activist research”?

This volume is certainly not the last word on this subject; however, it is a very important contribution. It convincingly argues the case for forging a practice of “activist research” that both speaks to the challenges of the present and build on the rich legacy of Ruth First.

Reference

Southern African Development Community. No Date. *Towards a Common Future*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.sadc.int>