

Foreword

Bridget O’Laughlin

The contributors to this collection draw on Ruth First’s legacy to address the ways scholars bring their research to the support of progressive political action. In reading through their reflections, I tried to think about how Ruth brought scholarship, teaching and politics together in the research carried out at the Centre of African Studies (CEA) at Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM). Of course, the context in Southern Africa is very different today. The demise of the socialist revolutionary project was declared in the definition of Mozambique as a market economy in the 1990 constitution. The Third World no longer exists; BRICS do not have an anti-capitalist or even anti-imperialist focus. The hegemony of the modernist-post-modernist dichotomy has relegated Marxism to the realms of outmoded developmentalism. Yet to understand Ruth First’s legacy means thinking about what both revolutionary research and progressive change have been and can be.

4

Research in a revolutionary moment

In Lusaka, 1974, after years of armed struggle, Frelimo was able to negotiate a transitional government followed by independence in 1975. Frelimo planned to transform the small colonial university of Lourenço Marques into an important African university named for the Mozambican revolutionary scholar Eduardo Mondlane (UEM). The old privileged colonial research institute would include a Centre of African Studies (CEA), headed by Aquino de Bragança, Goan by birth, Mozambican by choice, a respected journalist and participant in anti-colonial struggles. Aquino de Bragança was one of the founding members of the *Conference of Nationalist Organisations of the Portuguese Colonies* (CONCP) and had provided strategic in-depth information to Frelimo, including information for the negotiation of the Lusaka independence accord. Aquino was to continue that work as director of the CEA, a place where students and teachers could learn together through research, discussion and debate. One of its first collective projects was to involve students from the history department and teachers from various university faculties in a study of “the Rhodesia question”, the problem of when and how to impose sanctions on Rhodesia that would both support the struggle for Zimbabwe’s independence and minimise the damage to the Mozambican economy.

A second strategic issue Aquino was asked to confront was the sudden rapid fall in the migration of Mozambican miners to South Africa (and resultant decline in remittances and gold reserves). Aquino persuaded Ruth First to take leave from Durham University to organise a collective research project at the CEA to address the mine-labour crisis. Aquino had known Ruth for a very long time. They met as young communists at an anti-imperialist conference in Italy. In political exile, both became progressive internationalist investigative journalists, known for the persistent uncovering of imperialist complicity, building dense international networks of sources of information and political support. Both were also known for discrete resistance to orthodox dogmatism. The collective project Ruth organised included a field-study focused on rural areas in Southern Mozambique and integrated students and faculty from across UEM as researchers. The initial collective report, edited by Ruth and published by the CEA, *The Mozambican Miner*, was insightful, troubling and influential. Ruth was once again persuaded to take leave from Durham University to become the research director of the CEA.

By 1977 some of the euphoria of the first two years of Mozambican independence was fading. Frelimo faced two related questions. One was economic: how would the revolution be financed? The other was political: How would the revolution be defended? The answers, adopted in the Resolution of the Third Party Congress were dramatic, but simplistic: the Liberation Front would become a more disciplined Marxist-Leninist Party and the socialist development strategy would focus investment in state-owned industry and large-scale agriculture while drawing more surplus from small-scale agriculture through cooperativisation of family agriculture.

Making these decisions did not suddenly transform the ways people in and outside the party lived and thought. There was confusion as well as resistance and opposition. It did, however, deepen the presence and influence of the Soviet bloc in the institutions of state and in many aspects of everyday life. Eastern European socialist countries provided much of the new faculty required for a rapid expansion of the university. All students took an introductory course in historical materialism that relied heavily on memorising a fixed set of questions and fixed universal answers with minimal reference to the particularities of Mozambican experience. There was some student resistance to dogmatic Marxist-Leninist thought and within Frelimo itself some sympathy for the more critical versions of “Western Marxism” as well as to greater attention to African political history, including the ongoing liberation struggles in Southern Africa. South Africans of course know from experience, that universities can themselves be a terrain of activist struggle.

Aquino and Ruth resisted dogmatism at the CEA by constructing a course that did not fit an institutional space, but focussed on training researchers to confront development issues arising from the political economy of Mozambique. Ruth became the organiser and director of the “Development Course”, a

diploma centred around a research project that involved all the students and staff. The diploma had no clear pre-requisites other than an interview, no exams and no official equivalent academic status was required at the university. All students were also full-time workers: journalists; people on research desks in ministries; in Frelimo party apparatus; in the political commissariat of the army and university lecturers. All were given time off to attend classes and to participate in the university's "July activities", a month of fieldwork outside Maputo done by all UEM students. Most CEA lecturers were western and South African *cooperantes* (cooperatives), with research experience in Africa. All were socialists, were politically vetted and their applications were assessed by the rector of UEM.

The contributors to this collection address the dynamics of research in progressive activist organisations from states to diverse forms of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). During Ruth's time at the CEA, this political diversity did not exist in Mozambique. There were no authorised independent secular civil society organisations outside the party: production councils were formed in companies but there were no functioning independent trade unions or peasant union; women's, youth and teachers' leagues functioned as wings of the party. Frelimo had formed a classic socialist developmentalist one-party state. The research in the Development Course was commissioned principally by agencies of the state and focused on issues of Mozambican political economy. This does not mean that researchers/lecturers were not engaged in political struggles, but that these struggles ultimately confronted the authority of the party and were mediated by Ruth and Aquino; this practice could endanger the political survival of the CEA.

6

After the Development Course was up and running, two other research groups were organised: The Southern Africa section that focused on long-term strategic issues in the region; and the History Workshop that focused on the history of the liberation struggle in Mozambique. A documentation centre was established to systematise the reports, information and critical documentation from the research on Mozambique to build a collection of classic books on political economy, contemporary politics and history, particularly covering Africa and the Third World. The collection was intensively consulted by CEA and UEM researchers, keeping them theoretically abreast of key debates; it was, however, also open to other researchers. Ruth also established a new journal *Estudos Moçambicanos* (Mozambican Studies) that published scholarly articles on Mozambique and was aimed at a Mozambican readership, but also circulated internationally.

Towards revolution

In retrospect, I would say that five general principles guided Ruth's vision of progressive research at the

CEA. My illustrations are taken from research framed by the Development Course where my work was focused.

First, research is not necessarily a specialised scholarly activity: a capacity for clear, consistent, well-informed judgments is a right and a responsibility for everyone in a democracy, but particularly for political activists.

Students came from different educational levels and work-places. The tutorial groups that followed lectures began with questions intended to facilitate discussion amongst students of different backgrounds. The CEA always asked that a provincial cadre be included as a working member of one of the field-research groups. At the end of each day all researchers met to discuss the results, signal new question and decide what field-notes each one would write. An exploratory round of household surveys concluded with respondents posing questions to the researchers. The CEA research emphasised talking with people, not at them: observation with conversation, visiting fields and other work-places for interviews, attending meetings to listen.

Second, for activist researchers the core problem is finding the right question.

7

Ruth and Aquino both told CEA researchers many times that finding the right question is more important than finding the right answer. They recognised that research questions are embedded not only in different epistemological and theoretical positions, but also in relations of power. Political organisations often have assumptions that are not easily open to public discussion. The Development Course focused its research on agrarian political economy because Ruth felt that Frelimo's agrarian policy needed contestation and that this demanded observation and confrontation with the conditions of everyday life in rural areas. She thought that the priority the Frelimo policy gave to investment in state farms was dangerously wrong, economically and politically. The Ministry of Agriculture agreed to research on peasant farming and cooperatives, but was averse to the CEA research raising questions that looked critically at the planning and everyday operation of the state-farms. The question the Ministry of Agriculture wanted the CEA to answer was usually applied research: 'how should we implement what we have already decided'.

On state-farms, for example, Frelimo officials and company directors asked the CEA to find out why, if there was unemployment in rural areas, they were unable to hire casual labour when they needed it. They wanted the CEA research to discover how casual rural labour could solve the weaknesses of accumulation in state enterprises. The CEA had to negotiate hard to include the functioning of state-

enterprises themselves in the research questions: to see what the patterns of labour demand and recruitment were and to gain access to administrative records, pay-slips as well as to observe the organisation of work in fields, on docks and in ship-holds to establish why the patterns of labour demand were so irregular.

There were many good questions that were not asked, some precluded by the research capacity and some by Frelimo distrust. Questions on rural politics, for example, were sensitive. Trust would have required longer-term, probing field-studies using local languages that did not fit with the short-term field-research format of the Development Course. The colonial system of traditional chiefdoms had been abolished by Frelimo at Independence. Rural fieldwork showed that parallel, sometimes overlapping political authorities were at work in most districts, however, the CEA did not try to understand their basis of legitimacy.

Ruth thought that in Southern Africa most good questions of political economy have regional dimensions. Despite its lusophone bent, this point may be obvious in Mozambique; it is a long, narrow country bordering on many Southern African countries, however, Ruth also considered South African exceptionalism to be analytically indefensible. Hers was not an argument about similarity, but about interconnection. South Africa's long-term patterns of labour recruitment, racialised conditions of work, use of water, sourcing of raw materials and organisation of transport, affected the development of countries of the region, however, they have created a dualism that hobbles innovation and growth in South Africa itself.

In establishing good questions, staff researchers brought with them their own theoretical baggage, but also consulted the CEA's growing documentation centre/library to find relevant studies of, for example, cooperatives in Tanzania, rural politics in Botswana or land reform in Latin America. Short texts were translated into Portuguese and mimeos distributed to students as course reading. Later, these copies came to be copied and recopied by students from many faculties. Ruth and Aquino invited researchers visiting Mozambique to join seminars at the CEA that raised new questions. A Cuban economist consulting the Planning Ministry, for example, explained how the urban food-rationing, then being introduced in Mozambique, set a political block on the flexibility of Cuban planning. Robert Linhart, A French researcher who had studied plantation labour in Brazil, drew The CEA's attention to the similarity between Lenin's interest in "Socialist Emulation" in the Soviet Union and Taylorist methods of increasing efficiency through labour intensification.

The right questions often emerged only during the course of research itself, when reality challenges assumptions and demands reflection. A good question is one that has more than one plausible answer,

and those we often only came to understand during fieldwork. Some good questions were missed and others just did not ask.

Third, a collective approach to research allows trained researchers and activists to discover together the right questions and to learn how to find and analyse the information needed to answer them.

In the Development Course, a collective approach was used for both carrying out research and writing up results. Research topics were worked out in seminars at the CEA. One or two people would do background research, collect relevant information and literature and then present a proposal in a discussion seminar. The researchers' debate sharpened the central research questions; methods were worked out and time horizons settled. The proposal team would then do a scoping visit, obtain official permission(s) and prepare research documents and instruments to be discussed in seminar groups and tutorials for all the researchers. Groups of five or six researchers, including students from the Development Course, some interested knowledgeable UEM staff, with guidance from one of the CEA staff, were placed in different localities for a month. The researchers met mid-month to share observations, information and problems with Ruth who was also the "mobile brigade" driving between groups with Salomão Zandamela, the CEA driver (and with Alpheus Manghezi, a collector of work songs). This division of labour meant that the scale of research could be wide allowing researchers to generalise results while registering variation. By doing so, it also meant that practical research skills could be taught.

Ruth and Aquino insisted that research at the CEA was interdisciplinary, not multi-disciplinary. CEA researchers included sociologists, anthropologists, economists, historians, political scientists, a veterinarian and at least one engineer. Researchers had different research skills, however, all worked together on defining common questions and finding the methods needed to collect the information that would answer them. Statistical analysis cannot be learned in a short interdisciplinary course, however, how to organise statistical information and read it critically, can be. Engineers trained in observing labour processes can teach others how to see what is going on in a particular work-place. Sociologists, anthropologists and oral historians are trained to look for, hear and record divergent views, and to teach others how to do so.

The drafting of the research reports was based on the field-notes and was usually done by the CEA researchers guiding each group (then called a brigade). The melding together of these reports and documentation into a single coherent report was usually done by Ruth and those who drafted the

research proposal. Ruth taught me how to cut and paste, how to make sense out of variation, how to keep length under control and how to construct arguments that would be accessible to an informed, but busy reader. These reports came out under the name of the CEA. The names of all the participants were mentioned in the preface of the report, however, some individual writing got lost or its interpretation altered. A good journalist checked over the language for coherence and style in Portuguese. Aquino read the final versions for both content and style.

One of the advantages of this collective inter-disciplinary approach was its efficiency, particularly the speed with which results could be presented. Ruth thought it was important to get research reports out quickly. After all, she said, you cannot ask people to attend to that which they have never had the opportunity to read. And, she thought, progressive movements, including socialists in power, have limited time to correct poor practice.

There were some limitations to the collective approach. Students did not engage in the experience of writing a report from beginning to end, though they learned how to organise information, write field-notes and bring insights and arguments into the group discussions. There were, however, also tensions. Some thought the loss of individual authorship was not democratic and flattened important divergent opinions. Others noted that future academic job promotion depended on named publications in CVs. Speed, unanimity and brevity could lead to superficiality. Yet writing collectively was also liberating; one knew that someone else would read and challenge interpretation and conclusions drawn in different drafts of the reports. Ruth hoped the CEA's research reports would quickly influence Frelimo policies and expected that their impact would be transient. Yet copies of these reports were circulating decades later among university students and in the informal street-corner second-hand book market in Maputo.

Ruth also recognised that social activism and activist scholarship demand reflective, longer-term comparative and historical research. She herself took on the revision of the initial version of *The Mozambican Miner*. Ruth rewrote and reorganised much of the text. Other CEA researchers added more careful analysis of the recruitment data and collected new material including the rural women's work-songs that helped to make *Black Gold* a special book. Researchers in the Southern Africa section maintained a detailed chronological data base on political and economic events in the region, wrote memoranda on regional issues and detailed studies on the contemporary history of both South African politics and South African impact in the region. The History Workshop produced both an historical bulletin, *Não vamos esquecer* (we shall not forget) and drafted individual academic theses. During her first year at the CEA, along with Ann Scott, Ruth finished the biography of Olive Schreiner, a nineteenth century South African white feminist writer. Olive Schreiner's politics had focused on the intersections of race and class in South Africa, however, the awakening of feminist academia in the 1970s made her

realise, as do contributors to this collection, that long-term intersections between contradictions of race, class and gender cripple progressive projects in South Africa.

Fourth, the framing and interpretation of research findings should consciously reflect both the political judgements of the researcher and political differences within the movements that activist researchers are attempting to influence.

In this collection, the Durham collective discusses the complexity of what objectivity means in progressive research; they explain why impartiality is not a sustainable stance for a social researcher. What the CEA experience showed is that silence is an important part of the field of struggle over objectivity in research.

Frelimo, like many other decolonising socialist countries, declared itself to be a Marxist-Leninist party with a state based in a worker-peasant alliance. The flexible political meaning assigned to the worker-peasant alliance came up constantly in the CEA's research. In one of the 'Development Courses', Ruth gave a special class on class and class alliance. She outlined the difference between defining class as a social relation and class as an identity. She discussed class alliance as the outcome of a negotiated and possibly transient agreement between different classes aligned by common interest in a common struggle. In a small tutorial group after the class, one of the participants asked Ruth what class they belonged to. Ruth looked carefully around the room and answered 'As far as I can see, we are all part of the *'pequena burguesia'* (petty bourgeoisie). The group, that normally disagreed among themselves on almost any topic, was outraged. All agreed that Ruth and I might well be petty bourgeois, but Frelimo's socialist revolution made them all workers. The group rejected our counter argument that Frelimo was based on a class-alliance supported by common interest in the liberation struggle, but vulnerable to class struggles over issues such as the priority given to investment in industry and large-scale agriculture after independence. This was an issue discussed within Frelimo, but not aired in public debate.

This unsettled question over the durability of the peasant-worker alliance came up in CEA discussions of the centre's rural fieldwork. One of the CEA external researchers said he felt that CEA reports did not give enough attention to the importance of the differentiation among peasants that he encountered in his research in the countryside in Southern Mozambique. Ruth did not challenge his data, but opted for silence; in the research report she omitted his findings on the importance of rural differentiation. She thought that the group within Frelimo that saw large-scale production as inherently more efficient than small-scale production, would avoid seeing the extent to which rural differentiation was being fuelled by goods starvation resulting from planning preferences for state farms. This group, she said, appropriated even more irrigable peasant land for mechanised agriculture in the state sector.

Ruth did not claim infallibility or expect that political decisions are always clear. She agreed to remove a photograph of children picking cotton on a state-farm from a report intended for public consumption. The minister of agriculture argued that the photo would bring down the wrath of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and compromise untied Nordic financial support to Mozambique. The written description of child-labour remains clear in the report, but yes, a picture can be worth a thousand words.

Ruth saw revolution not as a single cathartic moment—a spontaneous uprising, victory in an armed struggle or a massive electoral victory. Rather it is a contradictory process, not unilinear, not inevitable, not irrevocable, but vulnerable not just to external assault, but to its own contradictions. Was our (the CEA) silence, in relation to both the questions asked and the results observed, too cautious?

Fifth, since socialist revolutions are non-linear processes not moments, all activists including researchers must be concerned with endurance, with reproduction of self as well as with propelling revolution.

12

Ruth worked harder than anyone I have ever known, however, she knew how to take breaks and to organise them for others—conversation, a trip to the beach, a party, reading a novel, listening to music or seeing a film. She also delighted in sensual pleasures—good food, a fine wine, an aromatic coffee, well-tailored clothes, having beautiful objects around her. On the day she was murdered she came to the CEA for a going-away drink for John Saul, who had spent a hard year trying to collaborate with the faculty of Marxism-Leninism at UEM. I met her at the entrance, carrying a box of sparkling wine-glasses she had borrowed somewhere and a bright red blazer lent by a friend that she had worn to keep up her spirits all through the thorny international conference she had organised the preceding week.

There were tensions and failures in this care for self. Ruth felt guilty about being so far from her daughters when they needed her counsel—available only through a telephone that made strange noises, never knowing if it was infested by cockroaches or otherwise bugged. When Ruth opened the parcel the apartheid security services used to assassinate her, she was still wearing that beloved bright red blazer. Yet, this collection documenting Ruth's legacy amongst activist researchers today and the description of the struggles with which they have been involved in South Africa clearly says one important thing: the struggle does continue, *a luta continua*, we can change history, though not always as we wish.
