Chapter 3: Ruth First's Activist Research and its Challenges

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First and research

Considering the ends, interests and nature of First's research, her concerns principally with the analysis of and for PSPs, especially during her time at the *Centro de Estudos Africanos* (CEA – Centre for African Studies), and given her ideological and political dispositions, commitments and affiliations, her involvement in activist research and her status as an activist researcher is indisputable. First's activist research can be periodised in terms of research that was undertaken in South Africa prior to her exile in 1964 to the United Kingdom, research conducted in the United Kingdom and research between 1979 and 1982 as research director of CEA in Maputo. The research during the first two periods was largely self-initiated and principally undertaken individually as an "independent" researcher, as until 1973, she was not located institutionally at a university or at a research department of any institution or organisation. That changed with the move to Maputo in 1979: her research was then under the auspices of CEA, located at Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo. Here her research topics were either proposed by FRELIMO or determined by what was deemed useful to FRELIMO and research was undertaken collectively as a common endeavour with her comrades who were also academics.

The first decade in exile in the United Kingdom was an 'incredibly productive period' in First's life; the early years saw publishing of research undertaken in South Africa (Williams et al. 2014: 9). There was South West Africa, a book she had researched on and in Namibia (First 1963); a preface to and revision, editing and publication of *The Peasants' Revolt* by Govan Mbeki (Mbeki 1964); *117 Days* (First 1965), an account of her period in solitary confinement and a foreword to Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (Mandela 1973). Other books followed, based on new research while in the United Kingdom: A collection of essays in 1967, *South West Africa: Travesty of Trust*, with Ronald Segal (Segal and First 1967); the editing of Oginga Odinga's, *Not yet Uhuru* also in 1967 (Odinga 1967); *The Barrel of a Gun* in 1970 (First 1970); the 1973 co-authored *The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid* (First, Steele

and Gurney 1973) and in 1974 *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* (First 1974).

The Barrel of a Gun was a 'towering contribution' (Williams et al. 2014: 9) and 'a classic study of military coups in Africa' that demonstrated both First's curiosity about Africa beyond southern Africa and that 'her ability to research, synthesize and compare extensive materials was simply astounding' (Williams 2014a: 23).

While 'the temptation must have been strong to excuse, extenuate, blame only the imperial past' ... (s)he was too honest, and she cared too much' (Segal 1982: 53). First affirms that the book makes 'harsh judgements ... of Africa's independence leaderships' but clarifies that it 'is primarily directed not to the criticism, but to the liberation of Africa, for I count myself an African, and there is no cause I hold dearer' (First 1970: xi). The book was 'a radical departure from ... studies on neo-colonialism that looked at the power exerted over Africa; instead, she focused on the nature of power inside the new states. What was the character of these regimes and the politics and projects that had emerged from independence?' (Williams et al. 2014: 9). It analysed how post-independent African countries were being 'held to ransom by the emergence of a new, privileged African class' (First 1970: 10) and established First as 'the foremost scholarly critic of the failures of national liberation, linking them to the role of the national bourgeoisie and the military' (Williams et al. 2014: 9).

The Barrel of a Gun was 'highly critical of Africa's contemporary leadership (and) was probably one of the earliest works to take a long, hard look at the first decade of post-independence politics. First did not pull her punches, despite her clear acknowledgement of the colonial legacy and her analysis of the continued connections between imperialism and Africa's backwardness' (Marks 1983: 126). First 'asked difficult and provocative questions. What was it about the internal dynamics and weaknesses of decolonisation that led in some cases to successive military coups?' (Zeilig 2014: 135). In Fanonian vein, her response was that 'decolonisation' was a process in which the colonists bargained 'with cooperative African elites' and that power 'was transferred, through virtually unchanged institutions of government, to largely hand-picked heirs' (First 1970: 57). Or as Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it:

> the colonial phase of imperialism (produced) an African elite with the mentality that was in harmony with the needs of the ruling classes of the imperialist countries. And often it was this African elite, nurtured in the womb of imperialism, with the cultural eyeglasses from Europe, that came to power or who held the reins of power during the neo-colonial phase of imperialism. And it means that this class, because of the cultural-mental outlook it took from the imperialist ruling classes, does not see any contradiction between itself and the needs of the ruling classes of the imperialist nations. (Wa Thiong'o 1985: 18–19)

Pertinent to this book, Wa Thiong'o also draws attention to university-educated intellectuals 'who rationalise ... a world view or an outlook which is in harmony with the needs and positions of the dominating nation, race or class' and express philosophical positions that justify domination and view 'history, philosophy and education as a reflection of no need to change' (Wa Thiong'o 1985: 19).

First commented trenchantly that the 'careerist heirs to independence preoccupied themselves with an 'Africanisation' of the administration, which more than even the transfer of political power, gave them openings previously filled by white men. Africanization, like the transfer of power, occurred within the largely unaltered framework of the colonial system' (First 1970: 58). She approvingly quoted Fanon's observation that the 'spoilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of today's governments, they organise the loot of whatever national resources exist' (First 1970: 11). Post-independence leaders who for First 'came to power mouthing the rhetoric of change faced the critical poverty of their countries with frivolity and fecklessness' (First 1963). They exemplified for her 'eloquent, inexhaustible talk about politics, side by side with the gaping poverty of political thought ... Mostly it is about politicking, rarely about politics. Politicians are men who compete with one another for power, not men who use power to confront their country's problems' (First 1970: 9). Marks notes that

> written in 1970, by one who cared passionately about the liberation of Africa, at a time when criticism of Africa's ruling elite was still muted on the left, this took the courage, intellectual integrity and independence of mind which characterised Ruth's approach to politics both within southern Africa and more widely. (Marks 1983: 127)

Here, and especially given the concern with activist research and its connection with politics, it is pertinent to recall Weber. For Weber, 'three pre-eminent qualities' are decisive for political activists: 'passion'—in the sense of 'passionate devotion to a cause'— 'a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of responsibility' (Weber 1964: 115). Passion, however, is insufficient. It must be married to 'responsibility' as 'the guiding star of action' and a sense of 'proportion —both warm passion and a cool sense of proportion [have to] be forged together in one and the same soul' (Weber 1964: 115). Weber (1964: 116) argues that 'striving for power' is an 'unavoidable means' for political activists and 'is one of the driving forces of all politics'. The author, however, also draws attention to the tension between means and ends and distinguishes between 'conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of ultimate ends ... and conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of responsibility, in which case one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one's actions' (Weber 1964: 120). In situations where political activists have profound understanding of the responsibility of their conduct and choose and act on this basis, Weber (1964: 120) observes that 'an

ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements'. The important issue for activist research and activist researchers is what are their 'pre-eminent qualities' and the tensions that they must mediate.

First travelled extensively in Africa, with 'multiple research trips to Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya' (Wieder 2011: 92). In 'each country she interrogated the new regimes, most of which had emerged from recent national liberation movements. Each of her projects was committed to understanding the whole continent' (Williams et al. 2014: 9). This was new territory for her; as Williams notes, 'the study of north and west Africa made Ruth confront an unfamiliar world which she had to find the intellectual equipment to make sense of. She was rare among the exiles in wanting "to know about developments in independent African countries"' (Williams 2014a: 24). However, 'academic parochialism was anathema to Ruth; her work as an activist and scholar was as broad and sweeping as the continent that was her home' (Williams et al. 2014: 9).

Wieder observes that although First 'became very much a part of Britain's academic world in the mid-seventies, ... she never left the world of progressive politics. Often her life as an academic and revolutionary were wed' (Wieder 2011: 94). She 'showed an interest in the rising New Left thinking and activity, and, unlike many in the exile ranks, sought to interact with them to test and refresh her Marxism and understand their viewpoint' (Kasrils 2020). In 1974, together with other left-wing scholars, First helped to establish the respected and extant journal *Review of African Political Economy*, which was 'committed to understand projects of radical transformation' and 'provided radical analysis of trends, issues and social processes in Africa, adopting a broadly materialist interpretation of change' (Review of African Political Economy n.d.).

Williams (2014b: 13) notes that 'Ruth combined during her life the practical politics of the movement for liberation with commitments to investigating, researching and explaining'. Her research and writing addressed diverse objects, but had certain core characteristics. Although 'her ideas came from the great store of revolutionary socialist thought ... she continually re-examined, readjusted or reinforced them, by what she saw and learnt – and she was always learning – till there was something of herself in them, and they were enriched as a result' (Segal 1982: 53). She was a Marxist who 'was guided by Marxist theory, but hers was a critical ... approach' with 'political strategies [having] to be based in a dynamic understanding of the present not deduced from teleological dogmas' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 26). Marxist theory was 'analytically powerful', a 'tool for critical analysis' (Gentili 2014: 111), but had 'to explain historical events and institutional structures' (Wieder 2011: 92) and pay attention to the specificities of time, place and space (O'Laughlin 2014b: 32–33). First's 'materialism was always historical'. If her research 'had a contemporary focus', she always elucidated the problems of the present by identifying their origins

in the past. She 'was not concerned with theory for its own sake' and 'did not engage with the dialectical controversies of the 1970s, when intellectuals were concerned to elaborate definitive versions of Marxist theories'. For First, 'theory mattered, but the point of theory was to explain events and to guide political practice.'

Williams argues that for First it was 'not individuals who make history or, at least, when they do, it is the context which makes this possible. She insists that social explanations must go behind the actions and motives of individuals to institutions, interest groups and social classes' (Williams 2014b: 20). Preoccupied 'with the "great social forces", classes or modes of production', Marxists 'abandoned the study of institutions to scholars on the right', forgetting 'that these abstract forces take institutional forms and are shaped by them as, at the opposite level of analysis, are the actions of individuals'. First, in contrast 'wanted to know how institutions worked, and was thus well placed to understand, to criticise and to appreciate the importance of the workings of institutions like armies and bureaucracies' (Williams 2014b: 20).

Three themes, it is suggested, ran through First's research and writing. One was that 'the proper focus of social explanation (was) capitalism, in all its complex forms'. She did 'not discount the importance of religion or nationalism or racism' nor did she reduce them to class or consider them as secondary to class; instead, she considered these 'phenomena are shaped by and acquire much of their significance from their situation in a social structure which has in turn, been moulded by the development of capitalism, in its different national forms, and its international expansion' (Williams 2014b: 21). Then there was 'her commitment to socialism, and her recognition of its problematic relations to nationalism, and to feminism.' Third, there was her:

> view that there are times when the masses are able to seize the political initiative from the hands of their rulers and shape the political agenda. If socialism is to be liberation, it depends on the exploited coming together to bring an end to their exploitation. As Rosa Luxemburg realised, revolutionary politics requires both revolutionary leadership and revolutionary theory, but both must be addressed to the class (or classes) who are to make the revolution. (Williams 2014b: 21)

For First, 'finding a good question was more important in research than finding the right answer'; neither questions nor answers 'could be read off from a fixed corpus of Marxist theory.' Her 'research was thorough; she worked hard to find sources and to get the facts right'. Her writing was always empirical,

about facts (Williams 2014b: 20–21). Influenced by her investigative journalism, in which she 'had high standards for data collection, interviews, document gathering and reviews of previous literature' (Gentili 2014: 106), First sought 'to get to the facts ... The facts are out there. But they won't speak up for themselves. You have to get out and find them out – from interviews and documents, from books and personal observation. Facts have to be interpreted and communicated' (Williams 2014b: 20).

There were other discernible features of First's research and writing. Her friend, Ronald Segal, an accomplished writer and editor observed that:

> she had both the sweep and the closeness of vision to see only the necessary pieces that make up the whole. She never succumbed to the temptation, so strong when there is so much space to fill, of using words for how they sound rather than for what they mean. She had a proper respect for language, and that is why she used it so well. (Segal 1982: 53).

First's texts were 'peppered, at strategic points, with questions, strings of them. She always had more questions than answers and answers anyway raise new questions. There is always more to be known and more to be done ... Consequently, the form of the argument is always open-ended' (Williams 2014b: 20) with 'an open-ended view of things (allowing) scope for a qualified optimism' (Williams 2014b: 20).

An interesting question is how to reconcile 'this tendency to raise more questions ... with Ruth's political activism?'—they are not always reconcilable as activism drives towards action and questions must be suspended. On the one hand, 'we can never know enough to be sure of things, to be certain of the consequences of our actions. There are always gaps between our knowledge and reality. No amount of self-reflection will close them.' On the other hand, 'there are gaps between our goals and the means of accomplishing them. If we are to get things done, there is always a time when we have to decide'. The only resolution is action, practice (Williams 2014b: 20). First's propensity for action and for practice meant that she was not a 'historical determinist'. If 'the future is constrained ... the whole point of social analysis is to identify those constraints. But it is not pre-determined'. One can recognise the tragic failures of post-independent African countries and 'of socialist states without abandoning the commitment to try to realise the possibilities of political liberation and of the construction of socialism' (Williams 2014b: 21).

First had a distinctive style of writing, which sought 'to reach the widest possible audience. This required the interpretive skill of the essayist'. If 'arguments (had to be) built on evidence', they could also be 'presented through illustrations'. She 'enjoyed the narrative form. It structures an account, even when all the causal connections can't be established' (Williams 2014b: 20). She had the ability to write 'with

exemplary clarity, which enabled her to observe, to describe and to explain complexities. Having begun her career as a journalist, her style was distinct and definite. Her writing was incisive and to the point. Consequently her "academic writing" is better than writing by other academics' (Williams 2014b: 14).

The move to the CEA meant having to navigate a new terrain, new political and academic relationships, new ways of working and new responsibilities and tasks. First moved to Maputo:

> without any conviction that socialist revolution was inevitable in southern Africa, but she thought it was worth fighting for ... she was concerned with the ways in which teaching and critical research, empirically grounded in the history and political economy of Mozambique within Africa, could inform a revolutionary process in the region. (O'Laughlin 2014b: 26).

At CEA, First:

> devoted her attention to a multidisciplinary and many-faceted analysis of Mozambique's development strategies, in relation to the subregional economy and South Africa's commanding position. Her great clarity and intellectual vigour, her capacity for seeking out and encouraging younger scholars and directing their talents purposefully, and her persuasive advocacy of what she considered the appropriate course of action, all contributed to what was, by all accounts, an exceptionally creative period in her life and an invaluable contribution to Mozambique's political and economic future (Marks 1983: 127).

Her key task was to establish and coordinate the CEA's 'research-based development course' (Wuyts 2014: 60). It also extended to creatively navigating the PSP goals of FRELIMO and the university and ensuring that there was space for critical research.

For research, an important goal was to analyse the challenges of the inherited colonial economy 'for the transition to socialism in Mozambique' (Wuyts 2014: 60). The CEA sought to analyse the volume and dynamics of Mozambican migrant labour travelling to South Africa, its value and ramifications for the economy, the implications of any reduction and FRELIMO's understanding of these matters in the context of its economic ideals and policies. First had to fight for space and time for this kind of social research, the university rector implicitly questioning the need for such research and why seven months was needed for a project on migrant labour. Wuyts, a CEA colleague, argues that 'the dominant view ... was that applied research concerned filling in the details of an otherwise "known" problem firmly grounded in pre-established premises, assumptions and blueprints.' First was mindful that research had to not only

be rigorous, it had to also be completed timeously if it was to effectively inform FRELIMO PSPs (Wuyts 2014: 61). Equally, she held and defended the alternate view that 'applied research inevitably involved an act of discovery leading to inferences and conclusions that might challenge established assumptions and ideas and, hence, might not always be expected or welcome. Applied research must enter into the domain of contested views about how to define a problem or look for its solution' (Wuyts 2014: 62). An important issue was 'the role of research in a process of transition: whether it involved passive execution or implementation of policy or instead active and critical engagement with policy' (Wuyts 2014: 63).

First persuaded the rector to agree to the 'proposed scope and duration' of the migrant labour research project, the rector taking 'quite a risk in letting the project go ahead because the space for engaged but critical academic social and economic research on the challenges of transition was virtually non-existent or frowned upon within the party and state structures' (Wuyts 2014: 63). Under Portuguese colonialism there was no left critical social science in Mozambique; in this context, completing the first project on mine labour on time became critical 'not just in its own right, but also to open up the intellectual space for a critical engagement with policy through research' (Wuyts 2014: 63). There were considerable challenges in mounting and completing the research project: apart from the time pressure, it was a collective project that had to forge 'into a reasonably coherent team', a 'heterogeneous group of 12 CEA researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds ... and varied levels of research experience' (Wuyts 2014: 64). Various mechanisms were innovated to conceive and implement various aspects of the research, including fieldwork, to discuss findings and undertake writing and editing. First 'did all the coordination and the bulk of the editing, as well as writing a considerable part of the report herself'. Writing and editing 'left a few bruises on the way because the looming deadline allowed for little reference back to authors' and because First was 'an excellent, but also ruthless, editor' (Wuyts 2014: 68). To facilitate insight and use of the research, there were 'one-page summaries, which was about all that she thought many of our readers would manage to digest' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 52).

The final publication:

> was a rich mosaic of arguments, data tables, case studies, life stories, detailed interviews and songs ... This was very much a reflection of Ruth's style of writing. It also reflected her attitude to dealing with theory in writing up concrete research. She read widely and was deeply interested in theory, always questioning, never taking anything at face value ... In her writing, however, she never put theory up front, but it always played in the background. As an investigative journalist she had a nose for getting at stories and insisted that we should keep our writing as concrete as possible. For her, theory was not for display, but a vehicle to bring a story to life. (Wuyts 2014: 69)

O'Laughlin says that the way First organised the 'collective writing was for me both extremely productive and innovative' and although 'a more transparent process of editing might have led to more subtle argumentation', she 'opted for simplicity and timeliness' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 53). She recognises 'that it was the distillation of years of experience of political writing'.

> Revolutionary research must respond to different audiences with different genres– in South Africa Ruth had done different kinds of political writing and editing: investigative journalism, pamphleteering, drafting internal discussion documents ... In exile she extended the kind of writing she did: drafting hundreds of programmatic documents ... She also wrote well-researched and argued books, aimed at broad audiences, on issues in African politics ... In all her writing, Ruth matched voice to audience. She could be terse and economical in preparing submissions, more personal and expansive in her memoir, mocking and sarcastic in some of her popular journalism. (O'Laughlin 2014a: 53)

Significantly, 'her critical perspective' was not sacrificed on the altar of her commitment 'to Frelimo's project of socialist transformation ... On the contrary, she firmly believed that engaged but critical academic research – grounded in theory, but concrete in its analysis – was a necessity'. Mindful that 'the space for this type of research was virtually non-existent when she arrived in Mozambique, ... The Mozambican Miner was the vehicle to open up this space, cautiously but firmly' (Wuyts 2014: 69). For First, the CEA's task was to provide FRELIMO 'a source of hard-headed and independent advice from people who shared the party's socialist goals', to 'make this advice accessible to them, and to see that it was heard, if not always heeded. Her independence of mind, and the frank and direct way in which she expressed her criticisms, were not always welcomed within FRELIMO', however, 'they were always listened to ... she was a militant insider, speaking a language people understood' (Joseph Hanlon as cited in Williams 2014b: 19).

Linked to the activist research, there were innovations such as an interdisciplinary postgraduate course in development 'on issues of socialist transition in Mozambique within the context of southern Africa', with the curriculum built 'around the teaching of research by doing collective work' and aimed at both cultivating graduates and producing research. For First, the course was 'a vehicle to consolidate space for training Mozambican researchers to actively engage in concrete analysis and to explore alternatives about questions of transition, even if it meant raising awkward questions'. Given the limited pool of first-degree candidates, the course was opened up 'to people without formal university training but whose day-to-day work confronted them with the need to analyse problems as they emerged'—

such as cadres who were intimately involved in thinking about and developing PSPs (Wuyts 2014: 71). Her key contribution was 'educating researchers to think independently and critically' (Wuyts 2014: 71). The opening up was controversial: although First was opposed to the university's decision that those without first degrees could only be awarded a "certificate of attendance", she had to settle for that. In a sense, First's and CEA's innovations posed vital questions of the purposes and roles of universities in post-colonial contexts and especially in a transition to socialism.

In 1981, CEA members produced the document '*Strategies of Social Research in Mozambique*'. It principally addressed three key issues: the choice of research problems, the approach to research and teaching and the "analytical unity" that cohered the CEA and guided its research and operations. The CEA was described 'as a research and research-training institute' and social research was located within the context of Mozambique as 'a socialist state, with a Marxist-Leninist party, engaged in a struggle which encompasses many fronts to build a socialist society, to develop a socialist economy' (Members of the Centre of African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University 1982: 29–39). The 'choice of problems for research by the CEA ... focused on problems of transforming production' because 'building a strong material base for a socialist society means above all transforming the systems of production inherited from the colonial economy' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 31).

The CEA's purpose was to provide 'information on the present conditions of production' so that interventions could:

> be devised to implement general strategy. Research problems are chosen, then, not only because they focus on particular problems in socialist development but also because the issues they raise can be drawn upon by organised structures within government and FRELIMO, who can not only respond to information, but also put it to work. (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 31)

It was not just strategy:

> 'in a particular sector of production' but also tactics that required attention. The CEA had come to learn that 'the process of transformation is one of continual struggle. This means that correct tactical positions are as important as strategy, and that good research provides the basis for the definition of tactical positions linked to strategy' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 34).

Given this, the CEA 'felt the need to respond directly in its choice of problems to the tactical questions which FRELIMO must confront in implementing its strategy of transition' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 35).

This clarifies that the priorities and problems of research were defined by political concerns—indeed, 'research concerns must coincide with those issues which are on the development strategy agenda, and within the general plan of action' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 35). Committed to the unity of theory and practice, they raised for the CEA the 'issue of the presentation of research results, and the audience to which they are directed'. There are important concerns if activist research is to serve practical purposes and be 'useful'. As the CEA put it, 'who is interested, and involved, in social research? How will they be able to apply it in practice?' It had 'become increasingly clear that (there) must ... be structures organised to respond to this information' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 35). In the CEA's view, in the Mozambican context social research had to 'play an immediate and active role in the process of socialist transformation' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 35), however, it was acknowledged that there were imperatives and constraints. There was 'often too little time for extended study, for decisions must be taken immediately'. In writing 'up research results', attention was paid 'not to the latest state of theoretical debate on the issue, but rather to the language and expectations of people working to implement FRELIMO line in concrete situations'. The advance of the revolution meant that what needed to be known was in flux. In this context, the CEA's aim was not 'to produce a series of definitive research studies but rather to make social research an acceptable step in the formulation and implementation of policy (Darch 2014: 38-43; Gentili 2014; Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 35).

The CEA noted that while scholars working in Mozambique as an act of solidarity may have possessed advantages in education, training and research experience, they had 'difficulties in contributing to an activist conception of research'. The challenge was 'moving from a work experience which makes critique and opposition the important role of the radical researcher to one in which analysis is critical in form, because it operates within a perspective of social transformation, but has to confront the actual problems of that transformation' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 35–36). The approach of the CEA discussed earlier was clarified as follows:

> To attack both sides of this difficulty in making social research a practical tool of the Mozambican revolution, the Centre decided, firstly to combine research activity within a development course, so that theory and research practice could be undertaken together; and secondly to direct the course at students drawn from government and political

> structures who would remain within their work places at the same time as they underwent their research training. (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 36)

It was acknowledged that 'these linkages of teaching and research, and between research and practice ... are not necessarily easy to conceive, and they are even more difficult to maintain in practice. They confront problems and diverse interpretation in the application of Marxist theory and method; they also confront problems of educational method' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 36).

The CEA's 'ability to function as a collective in teaching, research and publication' was attributed to 'its participants' analytical unity as Marxists', the relevance of its work 'to the process of socialist transformation in Mozambique' and to staff and students sharing a 'common position with FRELIMO' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 37). It was stated that the 'unity' was not based on 'dogmas' or belief in 'invariable laws of history' or commitment to a socialist society; it was, rather, grounded in 'the application of scientific materialist analysis to the problems of socialist transformation in the concrete and specific historical conditions of Mozambique' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 37). Those teaching on the Development Course may have been Marxists, however, 'they saw Marxism as an open and evolving tradition, responding to changing historical conditions and new political struggles' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 54; 2014b: 32).

Strategies of social research were determined by 'FRELIMO's consistent insistence on making Marxist theory serve the particular experience of the Mozambique Revolution' which implied 'discussion and debate based on knowledge of concrete conditions, and ... challeng(ing) received wisdoms'. Concomitantly, engagement within the CEA sought 'to contribute to clarification of line – the definition of strategy of socialist transformation in specific areas and the formulation of tactical measures which will advance the process of transformation'. This meant that 'debate and discussion have limits and must be inserted within organised programmes of change'. It was for this reason that the CEA did 'not operate as a broker for independent research projects, as interesting and well-grounded in Marxist analysis as they may be. The unity of analytical approach is based and controlled, in the last instance, by unity of practice' (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982: 37).

It is observed that First was a 'most magnificent example of a thinker/activist', however, was 'also constrained and caught up in (the) contradictions' of national liberation politics (Zeilig 2014: 136). First's leadership of the CEA was marked by some key features. For one, 'she brought to her post at the Centre a rare combination of gifts: a razor-sharp intellect, a flow of language which enabled her to communicate complex ideas simply, a deft organizational talent, an ethic of meticulous preparation, and an approach to teaching which firmly situated the student in society' (Slovo 1988, as cited in Harlow 2010: 58).

Second, it further demonstrated her 'extraordinary commitment to empirical research and fieldwork' informing PSPs, rather than dogmas or theory alone (Zeilig 2014: 143). The 'confrontation between theory and investigative research' meant that First's understandings on various issues surpassed those of FRELIMO and the South African liberation movements (O'Laughlin 2014a: 51). Third, First creatively ensured that there was space for critical research, despite there being 'a tight rope along which we had to walk, and limits to what could be said' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 51). She also asserted 'the right to take a critical and questioning view of the state' which 'put her in the dangerous position of all who "speak truth to power"'. She had to make recourse to 'all her powers of diplomacy and leadership to traverse this difficult landscape' (Williams et al. 2014: 8).

Fourth, First was not entirely complacent about FRELIMO and its policies. 'The Centre's research identified critical problems arising from Frelimo's policies' (Williams 2014a: 17) and 'the criticism of certain matters (was) relentless and very detailed, with the aim of helping FRELIMO to correct its mistakes' (Cahen 1982, as cited in Williams 2014a: 17). As Wolpe (1985: 76) notes, CEA research 'began with Frelimo policy and ended by questioning that policy – for example in relation to the collectivization of agriculture and the policy of large scale industrial development, to mention only two areas'. Another example is that although FRELIMO sought to end migrant labour, First 'struck a note of caution'. This could not be done 'by an appeal to the political commitment of the migrant. If it was to be done, "all its implications would have to be analysed"' (Centro de Estudos Africanos, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane 1998: 2-3; First 1983, as cited in Williams 2014a: 20). Indeed, any elimination of labour migrancy to South Africa that did not seriously and concurrently address the 'fundamental questions [of independent development strategies and mutually-supporting trade patterns] would at best be naïve idealism, and at worst cynical indifference to the needs of the people of Southern Africa in whose name such calls are usually made' (First 1981, as cited in Williams 2014a: 23).

Manghezi provides a further example. When asked by a prominent international visitor about FRELIMO's 'very interesting experiment ... to establish collective or communal villages aimed at ushering in rural development and prosperity for the communities', First's intervention 'was swift, direct, and to the point ... she remarked that the government policy to create communal villages was an unmitigated disaster!' (Manghezi 2014: 89). There was also her courageous public stand 'in a famous debate with Archie Mafeje in ROAPE, that the time had come to ditch the notion of a two-stage theory, even though her work on [other questions] had implied a single and necessary destruction of capitalism for any notion of liberation to be achieved' (Zeilig 2014: 140). As First wrote in 1978 in an article that was influential on my generation of student activists:

> I agree with those who argue against the conception of a revolution having to pass through a national-democratic before a socialist strategy ... The national and the class struggle are not part of some natural order of succession, but take place conterminously ... It is because national demands cannot be met under capitalism that the proletariat is the essential leader of the South African revolution, and the struggle for national liberation, given this political leadership – which has, I agree, to be asserted – will at the same time be part of the struggle for socialism. (First 1978: 98)

Isaacman (2003: 5), critically reflecting on the efforts of activist researchers in Mozambique in the 1970s and 1980s, states that many 'were caught up initially in the euphoria of the day' and 'often failed to problematize and to critique FRELIMO's long-term agenda and short-term practices'. There was insufficient posing of 'critical questions about FRELIMO's capacity to implement a planned economy and whether there was sufficient space for effective democratic practices within a vanguard party' (Isaacman 2003: 5). John Saul weighs in that 'we overestimated the scope of FRELIMO's achievement and underestimated the seriousness of the weaknesses attendant upon its efforts' (Saul 1993, as cited in Isaacman 2003: 5). These self-critical ruminations bring home the challenge of activist research and the need for constant attention to and critical reflection on issues that include the conjunctural conditions in which activist research is conducted, the social relations under which it is produced, the institutional contexts of production, the (changing) nature of the terrain in which it is produced and for whose benefit.

Ruth First, it is clear, grappled with these and many other issues and sought to navigate the ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas of activist research to the best of her immensely creative abilities. A critical and independent spirit, her commitment to national liberation and a democratic socialism, but equally to concrete and organised revolutionary political action and practice instead of armchair theorising, saw her accommodate aspects of liberation politics and specific approaches and practices of southern African liberation movements that could otherwise have resulted in her exclusion or marginalisation from the political arena. First's partner, Joe Slovo, is on record that 'her connection to him protected her against those within the party who thought she should be expelled for the positions she took on a wide variety of subjects' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 49).[1]

Said speaks about 'intellectual's contribution' being the 'the exercise of that critical and relatively independent spirit of analysis and judgment' to avoid being 'a functionary ... completely given up to the policy goals of a government or a large corporation' (Said 1996: 86). While she pushed the bounds

1 See also Gentili who writes that Slovo commented that were First "not his wife she would have been at risk of expulsion many times" (2014: 109).

of possibility at CEA, First unavoidably, if activist research desires to connect directly with political movements and to influence PSPs, consciously took FRELIMO's goals, priorities and general strategies as her own. In doing so, she inevitably compromised the independence and intellectual autonomy that she otherwise valued and personified strongly. It would be a harsh judgement to say that First's choice rendered her a simple "functionary" of FRELIMO. She certainly did not make a virtue out of whatever necessities confronted her, as radical activists sometimes do to rationalise dubious PSPs. She 'herself, considered the period she spent at the Centre to have been one of the most productive and militant in her life, precisely because political struggle was directly integrated into her everyday work of teaching, research, and writing' (De Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984: 162).

Challenges of activist research

There are numerous challenges in undertaking activist research and as part of such research, in maintaining the autonomy of intellectual work. Before turning to the ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas that arise in undertaking activist research on questions of PSPs, I want to first set out the instances where in my view no significant challenges arise for activist research nor for intellectual autonomy.

Where activist research is self-initiated, does not have PSPs as its purpose, is confined to the analysis of PSPs or to the analysis of the conditions in which PSPs must be formulated and implemented, no major problems are posed for the intellectual autonomy of activist researchers. There could, of course, be intellectual and political contestation on the findings that emanate from the analysis of PSPs and of structural and conjunctural conditions. Writing about the United States a decade ago, Piven observed, perhaps too sanguinely, that 'critical scholarship, even reform-oriented scholarship, is not a problem in an academic career, at least not any longer'. Instead:

> the tension between scholarship and activism is likely to arise not when we reflect in scholarly terms about social and political problems, but when we commit ourselves to the more troubling sorts of demands that advance the interests and ideas of groups that are at the margins of public life, the people who are voiceless, degraded and exploited. (Piven 2010: 808)

The tension becomes 'particularly acute' when scholars are committed to 'movements that try to advance the political causes of these groups, when we join our critiques of the institutional arrangements that the movements are trying to change to commitment to the movement itself' (Piven 2010: 808).

Under various conditions it is also possible to undertake analysis for PSPs, including advancing explicit PSP proposals, and to function simultaneously, in the same space and time, as a critical activist researcher. One is where the research is unsolicited and there is no concern whether it is taken up by political actors. Another is where the research is invited or commissioned without any pre-conditions (adherence to values, goals and strategies) and activist researchers are indifferent to whether political actors embrace their analysis and proposals on PSPs. A third situation is where there is a total identity or significant congruence between the values, goals and strategies of activist researchers and the actors to whom the PSP work is addressed; however, as noted, intellectual autonomy is compromised when the foundational theories and analyses that underpin the goals and strategies of political actors are taken as given and not interrogated.

Beyond those observations, and to the extent that PSP development is a relatively open, accessible and public process, one important question is to which activities (PSP agenda setting, formulation, implementation, etc.) does activist research seek to contribute. PSP development occurs in a variety of spaces and institutions, including the state, government, political parties, political movements and organisations, labour and civic formations, social movements, civil society and the like. In part, the answer depends on the institutional location of the research and the political commitments, expertise, research interests and preferences of activist researchers. Yet, activist research is often state-centric and limits itself unduly by trying to influence only the state, government and political parties and not addressing the PSPs of other important actors or supporting them to engage the PSPs of dominant political institutions.

Although the state, government and political parties are key PSP actors, they are not the only or most important actors in all certain circumstances—this depends on structural and conjunctural conditions and is a matter for empirical analysis. In practice, many other actors could be involved in PSP development and sometimes they, acting individually or in strategic and tactical coalitions, could be key actors. It means that activist research must think carefully about the targets (institutional actors and subject audiences) of its research; there is not always a single key audience for activist research, but multiple and diverse audiences characterised by great heterogeneity and varied interests. This has implications for modes of communication as well as for forms of writing. Activist researchers may be proficient in only scholarly writing, with no or limited ability to write in other genres and to communicate with certain audiences and in a variety of languages.

Another issue is that the development of PSPs is not reducible to policy formulation and adoption, for two important reasons. What materialises in practice may differ from what was adopted officially as text. Popular struggles can shape PSP development as well as their outcomes and modify PSPs embodied in official texts. Crucial to the analysis of the outcomes of PSP development is to ask 'under

what conditions do these struggles occur; what are the conditions which structure them and affect their outcome. Of particular importance in this regard is the question of the form or structure of the political terrain in addition to the question of the form of the state' (Wolpe 1988: 23). In democracies, the different moments of PSP development may be relatively public, open and accessible to citizens and the law and political conditions may facilitate participation through various mechanisms and in various forms. Even in generally authoritarian and repressive contexts, the state and its apparatuses are seldom omnipotent, monolithic and impermeable to contestation around PSPs. Of course, the access and possibilities for participation available to different actors, especially disadvantaged and marginalised social groups should not be overstated. Social actors possess very different and highly unequal resources (specialist expertise, financial resources, strength of membership and organisation, access to institutions and public officials) that inevitably conditions their capabilities and capacities to participate in and shape PSP development.

What about the challenges that activist research and activist researchers face? They are numerous and varied and range from the integrity of activist research to the autonomy of intellectual work, from the differing imperatives of critical and reconstructive work to contestation in the definition of research problems, from the capabilities of activist researchers to communicating with diverse audiences.

Integrity of activist research

Schatzki observes that sometimes the pursuit of 'practical ends' 'can distort the research process and subvert the attainment of truth ... If political-ethical tenets dictate the interpretation of information or which conclusions and explanations are pronounced and propagated, truth is a likely casualty' (Schatzki 2009: 43). Such an outcome is, however, not inevitable because:

> it is one thing for an enterprise to be carried out for the sake of, say, achieving the good society as the researcher conceives of it, and quite another for this conception of the good society to skew descriptions, interpretations, and explanations. Indeed, history teaches that the attempt to bring about a particular vision of the good society is usually promoted, not impaired, by the possession of truth. Only when a conception of the good society rests on false assumptions and ideas can the possession of truth undermine it. Whenever, or to the extent that, this is not so, the sensible and intelligent pursuit of practical ends seeks out truth. (Schatzki 2009: 43–44)

Schatzki concludes that 'the pursuit of practical ends' as in the case of activist research 'need not endanger good scholarship' (Schatzki 2009), on condition that it is undertaken with integrity.

Inasmuch as a 'commitment to political causes can produce ... insights' and catalyse theoretical, methodological and other innovations, it can also induce 'blind spots'; in activist research, therefore, 'like all intellectual work, must ultimately be judged on its own merits' (Isaacman 2003: 30). This means that it must satisfy the scholarly protocols associated with high quality research and publishing. Regrettably, all too often poor-quality research finds traction among political actors, either because it conforms with the interests of political actors or because of the 'entrepreneurialism' of some activist researchers.

Activist research 'can be messy, difficult, and even contradictory. Precisely because it is difficult to do well, it forces researchers to engage in self-reflection and raises the kinds of questions and doubts that are the mainstay of good scholarship' (Isaacman 2003: 30). In Chapter 2, I discussed the importance of critical reflection, self-reflection and "epistemic reflexivity" on the social relations and conditions that shape activist research, on activist intellectual practice, on hidden aspects of intellectual traditions and practices and the use of research in the knowledge-power nexus, for activist researchers to take ethical and practical responsibility for their research and the futures to which they seek to contribute.

Frequently, the rhythms, horizons and time frames of political actors who invite or welcome research on PSPs and those of such research are at odds with one another. The challenge is to retain the integrity and rigour of research, while contributing timeously to PSP development. Activist research committed to PSP-oriented analysis for policy that is located at universities could experience special challenges because of other scholarship and related responsibilities of activist researchers.

Autonomy of intellectual work

Said's statement 'never solidarity before criticism' pithily captures another challenge (Said 1996: 32). Activist researchers involved in or support political movements and causes can unwittingly subordinate their research to the PSPs of movements and causes and in the process, compromise 'the exercise of that critical and relatively independent spirit of analysis and judgment' and become functionaries of political actors (Said 1996: 86). Commitment to effectively realising political goals requires activist researchers to 'keep open analytical space for doubts and to be willing to criticize the causes and movements they support' (Isaacman 2003: 4).

One way that research can be subordinated is when the priorities and PSPs of political actors are accepted as given and not subject to interrogation, either willingly by activist researchers or as a condition by political actors for their engagement with the findings of research. However, activist research must be

able to investigate the philosophical and theoretical foundations and the empirical analyses of political actors that ground their definition of priorities and their PSPs. There are two reasons for this. One reason, Wolpe writes with reference to liberation movements, is that priorities and PSPs are 'based upon social theories and empirical analysis which may be incomplete or even erroneous'; another is that 'theory and analysis, and hence the research priorities to which they give rise in the liberation movement, are always problematic. That is to say, neither the theory nor the analysis of the liberation movement can ever be regarded as settled but are continuously open to theoretical and empirical testing' (Wolpe 1985: 75).

Activist research cannot make a virtue of what political actors consider inviolable and necessary and must investigate other possible frameworks and their implications for PSPs. As Foucault notes, 'in the name of … knowledge' and 'by virtue of being citizens', we 'can and must question those who govern' or wish to govern about their 'ultimate aims, the general choices of their tactics, and a number of particular points in their programs' (Kritzman citing Foucault1990: 51–52). The reality is 'that theory and analysis are a site of contestation' within political formations' (Wolpe 1985: 75). Research could demonstrate that they rest on shaky foundations, with serious implications for goals and practices. As a 'fundamental point which cannot be overemphasised', activist research must treat the priorities and PSPs of political actors 'not as conclusions but as starting points for investigation' (Wolpe 1985: 75). For:

> if the role of research and writing is to be restricted entirely to providing the materials for and confirmation of already defined (PSPs), then this is to reduce research to a purely ideological function and to deny any autonomy or value to intellectual work and hence to the activist yet essential function of such work. (Wolpe 1985: 74)

In short, if activist researchers are to avoid becoming the ideological and political functionaries of political actors, they must be able to challenge the positions of such actors.

With respect to 'commitment to a movement' being balanced 'with intellectual independence' as in considering the priorities and PSPs of political actors 'not as conclusions but as starting points for investigation' and not being 'confined to them as an answer', Friedman contends that 'the task is impossible' (Friedman 2015: 83). I (the author) concur, however, the way that Friedman sets out the question makes his response far too blanket and unnuanced. I have suggested that it is possible for activist researchers to balance "commitment" and autonomy when it comes to certain kinds of PSP research and when they are not especially concerned whether their research finds favour or not or is used or not. As an aside, there is no reason movements should privilege activist academic research over activist research produced by non-academics and 'other movement activists [could] treat … claims to

academic authority with a good deal of skepticism (sic)' (Piven 2010: 809). Regardless, the task becomes 'impossible' only when activist researchers are and seek to remain active members of movements (as First did). Friedman recognises that in this case:

> while it is easy to dismiss (the idea of balancing autonomy and membership by using movement priorities and PSPs as departure points for investigation rather than as conclusions) as a convenient excuse for being both an independent academic and a loyal movement member, it [does] address a real problem – the need for intellectuals who are committed to a movement to accept limits on their role lest they be seen to dictate to it. Many political choices cannot be resolved by academic analysis – since there are no right or wrong answers, they are best made by those with a mandate to make them. (Friedman 2015: 83)

A good example of accommodating party lines was the telling silence generally within the southern African liberation movements, around patriarchy and gender, which had profound consequences. Prominent South African Communist Party (SACP) stalwarts 'were very suspicious of Ruth First's association with feminists in Mozambique' and activist researcher Elaine Unterhalter observes that 'there was some criticism of the work we were doing on gender because for quite a few people women's place was supporting the struggle' (Friedman 2015: 199). If discussion of gender could have been viewed 'as a diversion from the tasks of the movement', it 'was a collective failure ... but that does not reduce its damage to attempts to build an inclusive democracy' (Friedman 2015: 199). It is precisely through critique and contribution to open public debate that activist research manifests its value as a public good. If research is not approached in this way, activist research risks becoming entrapped, as in the case of Stalinism, in being 'a mere political instrument, never producing any knowledge ... since it is already a political ideology' (Buci-Glucksmann 1980: 15). However, research, as Antonio Gramsci insisted, 'must produce knowledge for politics, without cutting itself off from the objective and scientific investigation of the world' (Buci-Glucksmann citing Gramsci 1980: 15).

The CEA's important efforts were scrutinised by Wolpe. Accepting that activist researchers would, in the name of academic freedom and on other grounds, oppose any attempts by states, institutions and universities to restrict critical research, Wolpe posed: 'Does this mean, conversely that where the regime is a regime of national liberation and perhaps, socialist in orientation, intellectuals and institutions of research and learning must give up their role, restrict their research and writing to practical and other problems defined by party and state?' (Wolpe 1985: 73). His response is ultimately in the negative.

However, Wolpe appreciated that for the CEA 'the priorities defined at the political level became also the priorities of social research.' Most projects were 'at the request of various government departments and in all cases had to have the approval of the provincial governor concerned to carry out fieldwork' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 37). Wolpe also recognised that 'the specificity and contribution of the CEA' lay in the priorities not being treated as 'conclusions but as starting points for investigation' (Wolpe 1985: 75).

As has been pointed out, the CEA's own concern was somewhat different and more limited: 'How can social research inform a process of socialist transformation in a context where socialism is a possibility?' First was attracted by the CEA because:

> there was a revolutionary process to be consolidated in Mozambique – a process that was unpredictable, that could fail. She thought that the education of knowledgeable cadres and the production of solid and timely research would be crucial for continuing momentum ... [W]hereas Wolpe's question was about limits, Ruth's was about possibilities. (O'Laughlin 2014a: 50)

The theory, problems, topics and priorities activist researchers pursue that are conditioned by social and institutional contexts. Wolpe's question about 'the relation of intellectuals to Marxist liberation movements is one of power not of teleology ... Does entanglement with power necessarily compromise the integrity of research?' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 37). Another who engaged this question was 'Geffray ... an anthropologist who worked in Mozambique and was familiar with the work of the CEA' (Geffray 1988: 71-86; O'Laughlin 2014b: 37). Geffray recognised 'the rigor and scientific value' that First 'assured in the CEA research' but criticised the CEA's rural work for having as its objects only certain issues, 'which precluded analytical recognition of realities that did not fit in a frame of socialist transition and worker–peasant alliance' (Geffray as cited in O'Laughlin 2014b: 37).

While there were good reasons for the CEA's focus, and 'all research focuses on some topics and excludes others' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 39) and not every problem can be researched, Geffray contended that CEA research enjoyed legitimacy because it subordinated 'the definition of the object of research to the priorities defined by the political line of the party' (Geffray, as cited in O'Laughlin 2014b: 38). Geffray also claimed that the CEA's influence 'was derived not from the connections' that its leadership had with FRELIMO leadership 'but rather from the support their research gave to the discourse of power and scientific credibility' (Geffray, as cited in O'Laughlin 2014b: 39). O'Laughlin, a CEA researcher, accepts that their 'research shared the discourse of power' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 39) and by implication that it wittingly accommodated itself to certain givens. On the matter of 'connections', links 'to leaders or ability to play

the political game matter much more than effective theorising and analysis and 'convincing argument. Arguments are often won not by who has the best logic and evidence but by who has a constituency'. Activist researchers rarely have a constituency' (Friedman 2015: 24–25).

Regarding analysis for PSP development and certain analysis of PSP that involve political formations to which activist researchers belong or whose ideals they share, such bodies may view the rationale for activist research as principally to justify and confirm PSPs, to provide them scientific respectability, effectively reducing activist research to an instrument of politics and activist researchers to policy appendages. Equally, activist research could unwittingly become PSP propaganda if it fails to distinguish between the vocations of science and politics and their different imperatives (Weber 1964). However, analysis of PSPs and even analysis for PSPs directed at or undertaken for political actors does not need to reduce activist research to a simple policy appendage and propaganda. It depends on the terms of engagement and on activist research ensuring that there is no unacceptable or significant compromise of scholarly values and intellectual autonomy. A necessary condition to defend, sustain and promote activist research and its integrity is the uncompromising assertion of the values of academic freedom and intellectual autonomy and their guarantee by political actors.

Increasingly, given political pressures and the intrusion of the market and the concomitant corporatisation, commodification and commercialisation of knowledge, such values must be asserted equally at universities. Over 60 years ago, C. Wright Mills noted the tendency to reduce scholarship to 'liberal practicality' – an 'a-political ... kind of democratic opportunism' in which 'the political' is 'identified with the proper functioning of the political status quo' and the 'political order itself is seldom examined; it is merely assumed as a quite fixed and distant framework' (Mills 1959: 88). Under neoliberalism such opportunism has grown, as has as the reduction of knowledge to largely instrumental and utilitarian ends. In addition, today the obsession with institutional rankings, the drive for 'third stream' income, the privileging of research in the natural and medical sciences, engineering and technology, parochial notions of "relevance" and growing transactional commissioned and consultancy research all impinge negatively on critical arts, humanities and social science research and on critical and activist research. It is vital that these conditions are challenged and that the value of activist research is promoted and defended. Indeed, activist researchers must 'work to fashion the environment that will nourish [their] activist commitments' (Piven 2010: 809).

Universities, moreover, generally approve, disapprove, emphasise and materially reward and punish through tenure, promotions and other "incentives" certain kinds of activities. Piven offers the salutary counsel that 'in the contest between scholarship and activism, the personal commitment to activism must be passionate and paramount if it is to survive the tension created by the dual path' (Piven 2010:

808). A commitment to activist research, therefore, generally entails simultaneously struggling around the purposes, goals and roles of universities and reclaiming universities from the neoliberal, managerialist and obsessive and dangerous new performativity prescripts that increasingly define them.

As opposed to inviting and seeking engagement with activist research, key political actors could evince a disregard for, or a lack of interest in activist research. It is contended that within a decade post-1994 South Africa, 'from the point of view of the intellectual project of radical transformative change, of theory and practice', there was an 'end of reflection and theorizing', the growth of 'demands of immediacy and pragmatism' and the 'steady subsumption of the ends of politics to the means of administration' (Motala 2003: 3–4). The 'separation of politics and administration' is said to explain the drift on the part of the state to weak 'consultancy research and report writing' (Motala 2003: 6). Activist research, therefore, faces the challenge of both asserting the value of activist research and contesting consultancy research, with its often-dubious prescriptions and proffered 'solutions'.

Critical and reconstructive work

Earlier, I noted O'Laughlin's acceptance that CEA research accommodated itself to certain givens. While O'Laughlin's acknowledgement is honest, it is also about the difficult choices and trade-offs made by activist researchers like herself. As much as First and her other CEA colleagues sought to function as 'critical reconstructors', 'in their persons' they did not 'resolve the tension between critique and reconstruction' (Muller 2000: 278). It is not, as Muller notes, that activist researchers may not perform:

> both critique and reconstruction work, but that in their critiques and their reconstruction work respectively, the tension between the two modes is not held in dynamic balance, except perhaps where policy work if of a very general nature, or in exceptional cases. The more the policy work drives towards planning and implementation, the less can it entertain doubts about its constitutive grounds. Or, in Weberian terms, ends have to be accepted for means to be technically elaborated. And yet, just as planning must be practical and strategic, so critique is only coherent when it undertakes a systematic interrogation of those constitutive grounds. (Muller 2000: 278)

Muller adds that 'the argument is not about conceptual incompatibility so much as it is one about the social conditions that enable or constrain specific forms of intellectual work' and concludes that 'critics and reconstructors can only ... comport themselves in separate and separated fields of endeavour'

(Muller 2000: 278–279). I concur with Muller that when the PSPs of political actors are not interrogated critically and used as the point of departure, it is not possible to undertake analysis for PSP that involves the production of PSP options and the design of PSPs and to function concurrently, in the same time and space, as a critical researcher.

Of course, activist research can and does oscillate between scholarship that is unconcerned with PSPs, and that concerned with analysis of PSPs and analysis for PSPs and between the social functions of "critics" and "reconstructors" and there is value in such movement. By undertaking high quality analysis of PSP and analysis for PSP, activist research that has PSPs only as an object and not as a purpose could obtain greater access to information and insights and enhance its rigour. In turn, analysis of PSP, and especially analysis for PSP could benefit greatly from high quality activist theoretical and empirical scholarship that has PSPs only as an object or is unconcerned with PSPs. If activist researchers are willing to and capable of oscillating between different kinds of research and fully comprehend the dilemmas of certain kinds of PSP research for the autonomy of intellectual work, notions of 'critical reconstructors' (or reconstructive critics) are perhaps gratuitous. If activist researchers and critics must 'comport themselves in separate and separated fields of endeavour', there are still good grounds for consistent principled engagement between those who undertake research for different purposes and occupy different institutional settings (Watson 2002: 7–8).

Politics of problem definition

PSPs are concerned fundamentally with the 'politics of daily life – with issues of power, control, legitimacy, privilege, equity, justice and the dimensions of values generally' (Lankshear 1987: 231–232). Given this, they are necessarily characterised by conflict and struggles; to assume that they could be 'the result of simply identifying and choosing the alternative that is "best" (i.e., relevant ... and enhancing) ignores the obvious political fact that the "best" has to be determined in the political crucible of competing interests' (Sroufe 1985: 119). Contestation may not be confined to only the moments of PSP formulation, adoption and implementation. It could be present from the outset, with conflict around what constitutes problems and priorities and how to define the social structure and conjuncture.

As noted, in analysis for PSPs 'defining the problem is both an interpretive and inherently politically loaded activity. Practitioners are frequently confronted with the dilemma of serious incompatibilities between rival accounts or interpretations of what constitutes "the problem";' indeed, 'for the entire duration of the ... research process the stage of defining the problem is never surpassed' (Peters and Marshall 1999: 72–73). Challenges are acute 'when practitioners are faced with interpretations of a

problem proposed by policy-makers on the one hand and those of recipient populations on the other'. It is 'only by beginning with a problem and the search for a well-defined problem (i.e., one that is identified and defined within the full socio-historical context) can (activist researchers) analysts defend themselves against criticisms of serving centralist and bureaucratic values, or of being motivated by a technocratic imperative' (Peters and Marshall 1999: 72). The inclination to formulate 'solutions' to problems 'with inadequate problem definition' occurs typically when political authorities and researchers 'reduce complex societal changes to a simplified set of "actionable" policy problems in their own domain', when other domains that impinge on problems and PSP choices are not taken into account and when there is insufficient consideration of the challenges posed for countries, states, political formations and PSPs by conditions associated with globalisation (Mundy 2005: 7).

Activist researcher capabilities

The ability of activist researchers to produce high quality research that is either unconcerned with PSP issues or encompasses only analysis of PSP, does not mean a capability to produce good quality analysis for PSP or to generate PSP options or design PSPs. Likewise, an ability to produce good quality research for analysis for PSPs, such as analysing structural and conjunctural conditions, does not imply an ability to undertake other kinds of analysis for PSPs, such as producing imaginative PSP options or actual PSPs. A 'mastery in the discourse of critique does not necessarily transfer to mastery in the discourse of reconstruction ... each discourse has its own grammar, its own language game' (Muller 2000: 265).

Analysis for PSP may also require activist researchers to possess political insights that they could lack and to become involved in politico-strategic calculations and institutional and organisational design issues for which they may be poorly equipped. Of course, capabilities are not innate or immutable and can be developed.

Research and writing

'Creative inquiry and the exploration of new methodologies' (Isaacman 2003: 4) of the kind associated with First is another challenge for activist research. Today, it means critical questioning of Eurocentric epistemology and its universalising ambitions and serious blind spots, drawing on the insights of the "decolonial" school and advancing theorising from different epistemic, social and geographical locations. It also 'entails listening carefully to those whose voices the privileged and powerful strove to silence. It necessitates the discovery of buried or little-used sources, demands a critical reading of texts and an

appreciation of the politics of memory' (Isaacman 2003: 4). The use, for example, of oral histories and neglected written materials of social movements, grassroots organisations and coalitions are important antidotes to simple and unnuanced master narratives (Alegi 2020: 560). Such data sources are critical for reinserting into historical accounts important ignored, forgotten, neglected or marginalised social actors as makers of history. The valuing, collection and preservation of more diverse voices ensures that it becomes 'a discursive space in which non-elite actors have the power to show their scholarly interlocutors that local voices, experiences, and memories must take their rightful place in the larger historical narrative' (Alegi 2020: 562). They also help to expand and reconstitute the archive, which is fundamental for decolonising history (Alegi 2020).

Regarding activist researcher writing for political causes and political formations, Suttner comments about Wolpe, a close comrade of First who shared much in common with her, that his 'inaccessible style did not help. If an activist with an academic background had no time to read dense theoretical texts, how much more would this apply to those unfamiliar with the academy? By contrast, First, a journalist, was accessible and this enhanced her credibility' (Suttner as cited by Friedman 2015: 78). Thus, 'intellectuals may be ignored not because political organisations are intolerant or anti-intellectual (although they can be both) but because academics give no thought to how to ensure that their ideas make an impact on busy people with much else on their mind' (Friedman 2015: 78).

Four points are pertinent here: (i) The form of writing, such as its style, tone, precision, idiom, specificity and so forth, will be shaped by factors such as the nature of the target audience, whether the object is PSPs of a substantive, symbolic, material, procedural, distributive or redistributive nature, the degree of change in PSPs that is envisaged, etc. (ii) The form of writing—a tone of exuberant, confident certainty versus a more circumspect, restrained and cautious one—may be shaped by issues like the extent of confidence or compunction about the PSP analysis being advanced, the speed and time frame proposed for changes, etc. (iii) The PSP text's status will be a further determinant of the form of writing—discussion documents tend to be 'writerly' texts, while actual policy documents strive to be 'readerly' texts (Barthes 1974). (iv) Written texts on their own could have limited efficacy in influencing the development and outcomes of PSPs. Oral communication in real time with opportunity for meaningful engagement is often critical for winning support for PSPs.

Reform and revolution

It is noted that ostensibly radical PSPs seemingly committed to social transformation 'often obfuscate ... the reality of power and historically entrenched privilege' (Motala 2003: 7). When activist research

must advance PSPs framed by macro-political and economic orthodoxies that leave the structural bases of power and privilege largely untouched, as has been the case in post-1994 South Africa, dilemmas obviously arise. There are no simple or easy formulas for mediating the dilemmas, since they may involve choices, decisions and trade-offs related to matters of values, goals and complex strategic and tactical considerations.

Abrams (1982: 3) emphasises that 'what we choose to do and what we have to do are shaped by the historically given possibilities among which we find ourselves'. Between the social reproduction of existing societies and their social transformation there is often considerable scope and opportunities for reforms that can erode the status quo, advance social transformation and create a new terrain for its pursuit. It is infantile to not struggle for reforms, especially when confronted by authoritarian and repressive political regimes and deeply entrenched and pervasive economic and social inequalities. A century ago, Rosa Luxemburg posed: 'can the social democracy be against reforms? Can we counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reform?' (Luxemburg 1970: 8). The author's answer was an unambiguous 'certainly not' instead, 'the daily struggle for reforms ... within the framework of the existing social order is a means of working towards the "final goal". Between social reforms and revolution there exists for the social democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is the means; the social revolution, its aim' (Luxemburg 1970: 8).

Beyond simplifying manoeuvres

Activist research undertaken for designing PSPs could be confronted with intractable paradoxes and tensions in reconciling dearly held values and goals. In such situations, as Morrow argues, recourse could be made to various 'simplifying manoeuvres'. One simplifying manoeuvre is to refuse to acknowledge that there are any dilemmas—a kind of moral blindness. A second simplifying manoeuvre is to elevate one value or goal above all others and use that value or goal to guide PSP choices. A third simplifying manoeuvre is to rank values and goals in advance so that if there is a conflict between them one will take precedence. In the latter two cases, the effect is to privilege one value or goal above another (Morrow 1997). There is a fourth path: for activist research to reject simplifying manoeuvres; to strive to pursue values, goals and strategies that may be in tension simultaneously; to creatively mediate paradoxes, balance competing goals and formulate PSPs that satisfy multiple imperatives. It means openly and honestly confronting difficult social dilemmas and choices and making unenviable decisions. Trade-offs that become inevitable are made transparently, deliberatively and with full consciousness of the implications for values and goals. This creates "public space" for debate and contestation on PSPs

intellectual and policy debate. The function of such "public space" is 'not to institutionalise' actors beyond the state and political parties or to reduce activist researchers to ideological functionaries but to 'enable society to hear their messages and translate these messages into political decision making' while those actors and activist researchers 'maintain their autonomy' (Melucci 1985: 815).

Repression

Finally, activist research, especially in authoritarian and repressive contexts, can exact a considerable cost. Ruth First's brutal murder in 1982 by apartheid security forces was the most dramatic and tragic exemplification of the dangers and consequences of activist research. Other researchers have also paid considerable prices for their activism, in the form of physical attacks and dismissals, denial of tenure, ostracisation, witch-hunts and the like on the part of states and political actors as well as universities.

Conclusion

In Chapter 2, I located Ruth First politically, epistemically and socially on the understanding that, contrary to Eurocentric epistemology, 'the persona of the scholar' in epistemic activity is highly relevant, that it is necessary to focus on the 'knower' because the 'knower is always implicated, geo- and body-politically in the known' and that we speak and act from distinct social locations 'in the power structures'. I also sketched my take on activist research in terms of its ends, interests and commitments, briefly delineating ambiguities that arise in undertaking activist research. In this chapter (Chapter 3), I examined First's activist research, periodising it based on self-initiated and independent research undertaken in South Africa in the 1960s and in the United Kingdom in the 1970s and thereafter, the directed research at the behest of FRELIMO conducted at CEA between 1979 and 1982. I also analysed activist research's theoretical and methodological approach, central themes and key features. Finally, I identified the challenges faced by activist research and discussed how First and the CEA attempted to navigate various tension and dilemmas related to their research in the service of FRELIMO.

As noted, Ruth First was complimented for enhancing 'the intellectual and moral level of (left-wing) discourse' (Saul 2014: 122). Her political commitment shaped what she researched and wrote on; it provided the questions to be researched, but not the answers. Her 'work on Africa is still of vital importance today. Her questioning of democratic and revolutionary change, the role of nationalism in social movements and the failure of earlier experiments in development and radical change (in some of which she directly participated) are also our questions'. We would indeed 'benefit enormously from

returning to Ruth's extraordinary work and research' (Williams et al. 2014: 10), taking it as a starting point and enriching it through the rigorous activist research with which she was associated and that she undertook with great thought and flair. We would not only take the political priorities and PSPs of political movements as points of departure, however, depending on location and the bounds of possibility, would want to also critically interrogate the foundational philosophical and theoretical premises and the analysis that informs those priorities and PSPs. Drawing on the lessons of the CEA and of activist research in South Africa and elsewhere, there is a dire and urgent need 'to examine alternative paths to radical and pro-poor transformation in Africa from the devastation and debris of neoliberalism, austerity and crisis' (Williams et al. 2014: 10).

Belonging to a tradition that sought to not just interpret the world, but to change it (Marx 1845). First recognised that longing for, and hope in a more radical and just future 'is not the same as certainty'. She understood that 'we learn from documenting, critically analysing and discussing attempts to change the world' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 40). For First, the harbinger of a different, egalitarian future was political and intellectual activism and struggle and direct and practical involvement in political movements. 'Involvement in collective organisation, uniting and connecting struggles, was central to (her) conception of a revolutionary process' (O'Laughlin 2014b: 48). O'Laughlin makes the important point that:

> belonging to an organisation means finding a basis of unity with many whose viewpoints on many issues does not correspond precisely to one's own. The practice of struggle itself leads to learning, debate, changing of positions. Ruth pushed constantly at boundaries, risking expulsion, but she did not put herself outside the organised institutions of the anti-apartheid movement. There are, unfortunately, no fixed infallible criteria for determining when a revolutionary movement has definitively become its opposite, nor for predicting whether or not it will do so. (O'Laughlin 2014b: 34)

Gillian Slovo refers to First as 'the critic, the outsider who questioned orthodoxy …' (Slovo 1997: 111). To my mind, she was, more accurately, an insider outsider: a respected liberation movement militant for almost four decades, but simultaneously one possessed of an independent and critical intellectual disposition. This position was paradoxically an asset and a constraint. It allowed First to push the bounds of possibility in terms of critiquing shortcomings within the liberation movement and pursuing critical activist research. However, even though she subscribed to the idea 'of the agency of "popular forces", it is suggested that she was somewhat muted in rejecting 'socialism from above' (Zeilig 2014: 142). Hostile to dogma, First remained, ultimately, loyal to the liberation movement and her 'disagreements with the

South African Communist Party were not public' (Williams 2014b: 32). And no matter how creatively she undertook activist research at CEA, for it to be "useful" she accepted (had to accept if she wished to be involved in the liberation movement) as a given, FRELIMO's PSPs, a limitation that meant, whatever her misgivings may have been, those PSPs and the theory and analysis that informed them were not interrogated.

Saul rightly observes that regarding post-1994 South Africa, 'we can never know' what First's views would be; however, to pose the question of what would she say, is to recall 'how courageous, independent-minded and strong a writer-activist she was', and how much 'her clear and principled voice' is missed (Saul 2014: 124). Kasrils suggests that 'while there is much Ruth First would have been thrilled about, she would have been appalled at the state of the ANC and country today ...she would have raised her trenchant voice against the corruption, mismanagement, appalling conditions of unemployment, poverty, and violence against women' (Kasrils 2020). Suttner observes that while 'her independence of thought is beyond doubt', First 'did not always see the way to manifest her views or her disagreement as best served by "speaking out" beyond the organisations to which she belonged.' She understood 'that there is a time to speak and a time to hold one's peace where more harm can be done by articulating a view in a particular way at a particular moment in time' (Suttner 2017: n.p.). The author adds that First 'did not raise her views publicly because it would have endangered the unity of a liberation movement and SACP under siege' and that her conduct 'was justified and necessary at the time'. Suttner, however, emphasises that First's conduct 'does not make the invocation of unity a justified basis for suppressing dissent at all times and certainly not now, at a quite different time' (Suttner 2017: n.p.). On the same question of what First's views would be today, another liberation movement stalwart, Albie Sachs, rightly says that this 'is a pretty fruitless enterprise'; her life, however, is a 'continuing reminder ... to be alert, to be critical, but critical in an engaged way, critical ... with the view to improve, advance' (Wieder n.d.: 1).

Segal writes that 'Ruth First's life was essentially a political act. And her death was, of course, a political act as well, of a hideously different kind. She would have wanted our celebration of her life, and our grief and our rage at her murder, to be, above all, a political act' (Segal 1982: 52). A fitting 'political act' is to strive to 'advance' in the spirt of First—'to rethink old orthodoxies', renew 'Marxism as an open creative revolutionary tradition', without imagining that in the age of neoliberalism 'contemporary capitalism is a completely new animal' or that 'old questions about how to contest the power of the capitalist state are irrelevant today' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 57) or that "identity politics" disconnected from social structural conditions that sustain and reproduce racism, patriarchy and other oppressions is a sufficient response. It also means popular struggle of all kinds on many fronts that coalesce, so that struggles do not remain parochial and isolated, but are universalised. If contemporary activist research and activist researchers

seek to contribute to such an advance, they must address similar ambiguities, tensions and dilemmas that confronted First and summon the same indomitable spirt, political commitment and creative and fertile engagement with research that characterised her person and life.

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