

The Work of Ruth First in the Centre of African Studies

The Development Course

Aquino de Bragança and Bridget O'Laughlin

In March 1976, Ruth First wrote to Aquino de Bragança in Maputo: "Beside a revolution, doing a teaching job is mediocre stuff." She was, at the time, teaching sociology at the University of Durham, and was thinking back on the visit she had made to Mozambique at the time of Independence.

Ruth First and Aquino de Bragança had come to know each other through their work as militant writers, each deeply involved in the struggle for liberation in Africa. Aquino de Bragança was living in north Africa, working as a journalist and doing special jobs for the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies of Africa. Ruth First was living in political exile in London, after her release from prison in South Africa. She was writing and lecturing on progressive struggles in Africa and working for the African National Congress.

Ruth and Aquino had common friends in the liberation movements of Africa—Marcelino dos Santos, Pío Pinto, Ben Barka—and they collaborated in reporting on anti-imperialist

struggles and in analyzing the responses of the imperialist powers. Both were engaged in one of the most difficult tasks of the liberation movements: simply getting the undistorted story into the media. As an editor of *Afrique-Asie*, Aquino had access to a forum where the voices of FRELIMO, PAIGC, MPLA, the ANC—voices unheard in the bourgeois press—could speak. Ruth was a frequent contributor to *Afrique-Asie*.

With Independence, Aquino de Bragança came home to Mozambique. Remembering the importance of the Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA) in Lisbon as a hearth for the development of nationalist thought in the Portuguese colonies in the 1940's and 1950's, *FRELIMO* leadership wanted the CEA to exist once again, this time located within independent Mozambique and with a new focus on the liberation of southern Africa. The CEA was established within Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, and Aquino de Bragança was named its first director. When he answered Ruth's letter in 1976, Aquino spoke of the work he was doing with a group of twelve young history graduates to organize the CEA. At that time they planned to do research on the southern African subsystem, with emphasis on Mozambican history and economy.

Knowing that Ruth First would be the ideal person to organize research on the southern Africa subsystem, and that she herself wanted to get back into the front line of revolution, Aquino suggested that she might be convinced to return to southern Africa to live and work in Mozambique. She came initially in 1977 to direct a study on Mozambican miners in South Africa, and finally left Durham definitively in 1978 to become the Assistant Director and Director of Research of the Centro de Estudos Africanos.

Tributes from her students at Durham make clear that Ruth's teaching was never "mediocre stuff," but in Mozambique the things she did so well—research, teaching, debate—assumed a much more direct revolutionary force. The discussion of the research she directed was not confined to academic corridors; it raised questions of immediate import in the consolidation of the Mozambican Revolution. How will the

accumulation fund for Mozambique's socialist development be generated? How can we extract ourselves from dependence on South African capitalism? How does one bring the peasantry into a program of socialist development? The cadres she trained had to be working Marxists, making strategically informed decisions every day in their jobs.

The Development Course

Outside of Mozambique Ruth First was known principally as a militant in the struggle for the liberation of South Africa, but during her years in the CEA South Africa was never the focus of her work. Rather, she put most of her time, and intellectual and emotional energy, into an experimental course for Mozambican cadres: the Development Course. The course was innovative in its objectives—to teach research by doing it—and in its methods and content. It was also extremely productive in research results. We have chosen to center this retrospective view of Ruth First's work in the CEA on the Development Course because it was as Director of the Development Course that she organized in the practice of the CEA a distinctive and revolutionary conception of university teaching.

The focus of the Development Course was the process of socializing production in Mozambique. Since the starting point was a class structure dominated by semi-proletarianization and small peasant farming, the course attended particularly to the problems of constructing new forms of socialist agricultural production, state farms, and cooperatives. Students studied the development of liberation struggles and the strategy of the enemy in southern Africa precisely because socializing production meant breaking with a regional structure of dependency on South African capital.

The Development Course was taught collectively, without any set disciplinary boundaries, and with all teachers participating in all classes. The crucial step in the training of the student was a month of field research midway through the

course, research done collectively by brigades of teachers and students. The fieldwork was always preceded by sharp debate on the theoretical problematic of the investigation—its political line—and followed by an equally tense discussion of the results and implications of the research. Together, Ruth and Aquino worked to recruit and organize a team of teacher-researchers capable of sustaining both the unity of perspective and the tension of contradiction that such a collectively organized course required.

There was not always clarity outside the Centre as to what the Development Course was all about, and particularly as to why Ruth First was putting so much energy into it.

In Mozambique there were those who thought that fieldwork in the countryside was simply an outlet for romantic infatuation with the peasantry, a sentimental and populist attachment to backwardness. “Peasant-lovers,” they said. In Ruth’s case this was rather ironic because, in fact, she always said that the country gave her a permanent headache. Walking from one far-flung compound to another, deciphering the account books of a cooperative, what pushed her on was the importance she ascribed to the transformation of peasant production.

Among comrades in the liberation movement there was also some puzzlement as to the meaning of Ruth’s work in Mozambique. They considered strange her intense interest and decided opinions about questions such as the policy of agricultural mechanization in Mozambique. They thought she was withdrawing from the struggle for South Africa.

Yet Ruth First, herself, considered this period at the CEA 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. She considered her contribution to the consolidation of the Mozambican Revolution to be a direct involvement in the liberation of South Africa. This was possible because she had a clear political vision of her objectives and a sharp analysis of the political context within which she worked. The importance of the Development Course derived for her not only from what it

was in itself, but from where and when it was located—in revolutionary Mozambique during a period of revolutionary conjuncture in southern Africa.

The Development Course altered from year to year as we experimented both with content and with forms of organization, but there were four common principles that always guided Ruth's direction of the course and that are, in fact, touchstones of the continuing work of the CEA. Rather than attempt to provide a total inventory or chronology of Ruth's work in the Development Course, we shall simply describe how these four principles were organized in practice.

1. Implementing revolutionary strategy is a matter of *method*—of using Marxist method to investigate and analyze the concrete and constantly changing situations which the revolution confronts and directs.

The objectives of the Development Course were defined by the importance that Ruth attributed to scientific analysis in revolutionary work. There were those who thought that Ruth First was too critical, tough, even defeatist, in her direction of research. This toughness, in fact, reflected the great confidence in Marxism that she had gained through long years of revolutionary practice. She thought that a revolution must, and can, look directly at its problems in order to resolve them. The revolutionary cadre therefore needs to be extremely rigorous in its methods of analysis.

The objective of teaching theory in the Development Course was not to have the students memorize the basic concepts and laws of Marxism but, rather, to teach them how to apply these in the analysis of the problems they confronted in their work—in the harbor, in the Ministry of Agriculture, in cooperatives, in Party work. This did not mean putting aside the vast universal experience of Marxism; Ruth thought this literature to be essential in teaching programs precisely because it shows how to analyze and how to apply analysis politically.

Ruth thought, however, that the students had only really mastered Marxist science when they knew how to use it creatively in investigation of their own reality. Mozambican students must be able to use the concept of class in an analysis

of the class structure of Mozambican society before they can say they really understand the meaning of the concept. The Development Course thus required every student to participate in a collective research project that applied the method of analysis introduced in course work.

For Ruth First the Marxist method of analysis, precisely because it is scientific, had to be aggressive, critical: Teaching it should wake up the students, oblige them to think. She spoke at the conference on Social Sciences in Southern Africa, held in Maputo in July 1982, of how this perspective was integrated into the Development Course, and of the difficulties we encountered:

The students get the text ahead of the lecture—at the end they have what you might call a book; it's a set of notes. It is not a textbook, because we're trying to say there is never one text, you have to confront theory in such a way that you must learn how to read a text, you must learn how to do textual analysis, but that doesn't mean that one text is going to give you all the answers. We're very interested in provoking. If students don't ask questions then we are failing. . . .

Another problem we have is how do you have genuine student participation in research? How do you organize research in such a way that you do not use students as cheap labour? In other words, we prepare the questionnaires and we prepare the conceptualization of the course, and then we have these 26 people, and they're all ready and they pack their suitcases and they go into the country, and they've just got to fill in so many questionnaires every day. Well, of course, it's a great temptation to do the thinking for somebody who hasn't done it before, because you can think and work faster, and we are better at now more total involvement of students in the actual conceptualization of the project than we were in the beginning. But we're struggling.¹

For this reason Ruth resisted falling into set patterns with the Development Course and pushed staff to think about new ways to organize the teaching and research to overcome these problems. The course was reduced from two years to one, for example, and classes were structured more closely around the problematic of the research project.

1. The CEA thanks Michael Wolfers and Rádio Mozambique for the transcription of Ruth First's comments at the Conference on Social Sciences in Southern Africa, in Maputo, July 1982.

Behind all of this experimentation was Ruth's conviction that scientific intellectual work is indispensable in a revolutionary struggle, although the professional intellectual is perhaps less so. She herself reveled in intellectual life, adored a sharp critical discussion of a novel or film, enjoyed talking about ideas, but was increasingly impatient with and bored by the existential self-torture of many intellectuals. The Development Course recruited students of extremely varied educational backgrounds; some had attended only primary school but had a good deal of work experience. The course aimed not to turn them into professional researchers but, rather, to train revolutionary cadres, seeing social investigation as a necessary part of their work.

2. In a revolutionary context, the University had to take on new forms of training that took advantage of the experience of cadres and responded to the requirements of everyday practice.

Ruth First considered good training in theory to be an indispensable element of political practice, precisely because analysis is the basis for formulating and applying political line. But she also thought that revolutionary practice itself could give cadres the capacity to make great leaps in their theoretical development, using their own work experience as the basis for their analytical training. She recognized the importance of specialized training but, at the same time, thought that a revolutionary university had to remain constantly preoccupied with its openness, with service to the Party and to the state, with its flexibility in contributing to the training of cadres without pulling them out of their work places.

Students from the Development Course therefore included an agricultural credit manager from the bank, an agricultural planner, the director of a workers' school in the port, political commissars from the army, and curriculum planners from the Ministry of Education. We tried to arrange the scheduling of classes and the distribution of texts to allow the students to participate in the course without retreating from real responsibilities in their jobs. The central research project in the course was intended not only to pose a real and important problem in socialist transition in Mozambique, but also to lead the

students to analyze in a similar way the problems they met in their everyday work.

The CEA also used the experience of the Development Course to participate in alternative forms of training outside the University: seminars and short courses for cadres of the cooperative movement, for journalists, for the banks. Texts on Mozambique developed for the course were distributed and used by other teachers both within and outside the University.

These efforts to find new ways of relevant teaching were not invariably successful. Ruth First raised some of the questions the course confronted in breaking with conventional university recruitment at the Social Science Conference:

The kinds of questions I'm referring to, for instance, are the problems of how we teach students who have different histories of education, come from a widely different range of structures, the university, ministries, mass organizations and so on. And I think that whereas we should probably admit that we started off rather romantically about this, saying it's so important to crash educational barriers and break this elitist monopoly, we shall do it with sheer willpower, in the course of teaching we have come to acknowledge that there are problems. I don't think we've resolved them yet. We do record, as I think Aquino said, that some of our best students are not the students who've had the most education, that that's not the only criterion, that involvement in work is very important, that political formation and political experience is extremely important, because understanding the relevance of questions, knowing that you've got to resolve a problem and you must find out how to do that. That in turn arms the student to learn. Now I don't say we've resolved it. We struggle with it.

3. The struggle to build socialism is a struggle to transform the organization of production.

Although the students of the Development Course were recruited from many different sectors, the focus of the research project was invariable: the socialist transformation of production. This was because Ruth First thought that for students to be able to analyze the concrete situations they met in their jobs they had to think strategically. They had to know and understand what they were fighting for—the radical transformation of the organization of production through socialist development—and what they were fighting against—a struc-

ture of underdevelopment molded by colonial capitalism. They needed to understand the difference between socialists holding state power and using that power to socialize the economic basis of society.

When students of the Development Course went to Zambezia Province to study the tea plantations, for example, they looked at family agriculture as well as at the plantations themselves. They saw how the colonial system of recruitment of cheap contract labor had allowed a system of monocropping with sharp seasonal labor demands to be profitable. Since the profitability was based in the backwardness of family production in the labor reserves, socializing production in the tea sector meant breaking the structural link with semi-proletarianization.

A similar pattern of semi-proletarianization underlay the organization of the labor process upon which students did research in the harbor of Maputo. The colonial system handled the irregular movements of harbor traffic by keeping large supplies of cheap labor and exploiting it intensively in peak periods. Contract workers were brought from Inhambane Province, separated from their families, lodged in dormitories, and set to work on a task basis. Now the problem was how to construct an alternative organization of port work based on a disciplined, permanent, conscious, and well-paid working class.

The Development Course looked at the class interests that grew out of the structure of production of colonial capitalism, and that did not simply fade away with the flight of the Portuguese settlers at Independence. In Angonia, a rich agricultural area on the Malawi border, students saw, for example, that dispersed smallholder production gives rise to a petty-bourgeois trader class if the state itself is not in a position to organize small-scale retail trade.

Because socialist development in Mozambique implied sharp structural changes in the agrarian economy, the Development Course placed a great deal of emphasis on understanding family agriculture, not in order to preserve or rationalize it but in order to transform it along socialist lines. In the cotton-

growing areas of Nampula Province, for example, students found that the biggest bottleneck in peasant cotton production occurred at the time of weeding. Cooperatives that introduced tractor ploughing without handling the problem of weeding thus did not really represent an advance in terms of the organization of family agriculture; they incurred higher costs without being able to realize higher output.

Ruth First always insisted that the answers to such problems of transformation of the family sector were never to be found in peasant production alone but, rather, in the interdependence of new forms of production that break with the old pattern of semi-proletarianization. This point she made particularly sharply in the introduction to *Black Gold*, the book that grew out of the CEA's study of the Mozambican Miner:

Frelimo has repeatedly committed itself to the ending of migrant labour, and to the integration within a transformed and autocentric economy of that part of the Mozambican working class which has been exploited by South African capitalism, and whose skills have been drained from Mozambique. But if an economic process as old, as deeply laid and as widespread as mine labour export is to be dismantled, all its implications must be analyzed. It cannot be combatted on an ideological level alone, by an appeal to the political commitment of the migrant. This would be to dismiss the system of migrant labour as an act of will by a host of migrant workers, to miss the essence of a deep-seated economic system that has promoted the political economy of the countryside of southern Mozambique. . . . Eight decades of the system of migrant labor made it a structural necessity for rural producers living under colonialism. . . .

If the ending of labour export, and by extension the subordination of the Mozambican economy to South African capitalism, is a necessary prerequisite for the creation of a material base for the construction of socialism, the re-integration of this workforce within an autonomous economy moving towards socialism could take two complementary forms. The first would be the use of the workforce and the skills it has acquired in Mozambique's industrialisation programme, especially in the heavy industry, transport and mining sectors. The second would be the re-integration within the agricultural sector of this formerly exported labour. But it could not, of course, be an unchanged agriculture. . . .

The phasing of Mozambique's agricultural policy, the relative weight given to the development of communal villages (*aldeias comunais*)

with co-operative production as their material base, and to the state farm sector, these issues and their contingent policy decisions continue to be formulated within the political structures of Frelimo and the government. The purpose of this study, which was undertaken within two years of Mozambique's independence, was to assist in the elaboration of a socialist alternative to a system of labour use which grossly exploited the working class, and which disfigured agricultural production in the southern regions of the country (1983: 3-5).

In accord with this perspective, out of the work on the miners came two further studies by the CEA in southern Mozambique. Both looked at the relationship between cooperatives, state farms, and a family sector heavily dependent on wage-income. They saw the transformation of agricultural production as a necessary element in the resolution of the problem of migrant mine labor.

Since the research projects of the Development Course were oriented so strictly toward the details of production, Ruth First had to answer the almost inevitable charges of economism and reductionism: Students were not engaging with the ideological struggles that make up a necessary part of socialist construction.

The Development Course began, however, with the assumption that people's consciousness is necessarily the product of the material organization of their lives. Thus, one can never abstract ideological struggle from its material context, in our case the struggle to organize new forms of production. The study in the harbor, for example, focused a great deal of attention on ideological problems—the ways in which different groups of workers conceptualized the problems of the working day in the harbor, and the ways in which these conceptions were reflected in their forms of struggle in the workers' councils.

The focus on production was thus, for Ruth, a matter of determining priority in the order of analysis. In a revolutionary context one cannot simply do a critique of ideology; the researcher must analyze what it will mean to transform the material conditions of production within which consciousness is rooted. In the case of the harbor, for instance, creating a

common class consciousness depends on breaking with an organization that stems from the colonial system of cheap labor recruitment and pits different categories of workers against one another.

4. The struggle for national liberation in South Africa is strategically of a piece with the struggle to build socialism in Mozambique.

Ruth First's work on the Development Course did not represent for her a deviation from her life's work as a South African revolutionary. On the contrary, she considered the transformation of production along socialist lines in Mozambique to be a decisive step in the struggle for national liberation in South Africa. The Mozambican students she trained thus represented for her cadres in the struggle against Apartheid.

Her view derived in part from the way South African racial capitalism dominates the regional economy in a system of uneven development. Despite considerable divergence in political orientations and strategies of development, the states of the region have a common material interest in the struggle against Apartheid.

But the unity between FRELIMO and the struggle for national liberation in South Africa surpassed, for Ruth, that of the regional alliance. This was because she saw the struggle for national liberation in South Africa as, at the moment, objectively a struggle against capitalism *per se*. The construction of socialism in Mozambique, by defining an alternative to the system of racial capitalism in the organization of production, is the most important form of support that can be given to revolutionaries working within South Africa. Conversely, it is to be expected that South Africa will strike with particular force against *socialist* Mozambique.

For these reasons, the regional context was a central stream of the Development Course. Students explored the character of South African racial capitalism and analyzed the various class positions advanced in the struggle against it. They looked at the basis of the regional alliance, in country studies and in the organization of SADCC. Ruth thought they needed to be

able to analyze the tactical positions that Mozambique must define in a long-term strategic struggle.

This was the perspective toward withdrawal from South African capitalism developed in the first CEA project directed by Ruth, "The Mozambican Miner." At the time, (1977) some argued that all miners should be immediately and unilaterally withdrawn from South Africa. The miners study, instead, posed the problem in strategic terms: how to transform the system of production within Mozambique itself to develop a long-term alternative to migration to the mines of South Africa, either in industry or in a more productive agriculture.

Similar preoccupations underlay the CEA's research on transport in southern Africa, a study undertaken in collaboration with the Economics Department of the University of Zimbabwe. The regional alliance formed by SADCC aims for economic reorientation of the region through the development of bilateral or multilateral projects that grow out of common material interests. In the case of transport, the rerouting of Zimbabwe trade, channeled through South Africa in the UDI period to the harbors of Mozambique, should be beneficial to both countries. Since the restructuring will depend, in part, on the increased efficiency of the ports and railways in Mozambique, students in the Development Course took on this part of the joint research. Ruth thought that research collaboration in southern Africa, and the sharing of information, would grow out of such joint ventures reflecting shared interest in a common and prolonged struggle.

Answering South Africa

Ruth First was not daunted by the prospect of a prolonged struggle. She was constantly analyzing contradictions, sorting out the principal from the secondary. She put energy into areas where it was possible to move ahead by forcing a contradiction; she worked to maintain alliances in areas where unity was more important than difference.

This taste for struggle, and her confidence in its results, Ruth First communicated to those with whom she worked and brought into the organization of work in the CEA. When our ways of working began to stagnate, when we were no longer consistently coming into contradiction with our own practice, she forced us to react, to criticize, to move ahead. She thought it normal that there would be very rapid development during this phase of the Mozambican Revolution, and she wanted the CEA to be able to respond by organizing new ways to make its work more useful to FRELIMO. She looked forward to the Fourth Party Congress of FRELIMO, expecting that we would enter a new and probably clearer phase of struggle. She wanted time to reflect on the role that teaching and research in the CEA should assume in this new period.

The murder of Ruth First by the South African regime was a blow against Mozambique and against the liberation movement in South Africa, which we still feel in almost every moment. But Ruth left us a mandate to rethink and criticize our work: the organization of the CEA, the principal lines of research, our forms of teaching. Without her the CEA cannot be what it was, but she had already told us that we must change and move ahead. And she left us with a secure material base from which to begin: an innovative organization of collective work based on unity of political line; methods of teaching accessible to worker-students; methods of research-training based on doing research on immediate and important questions of socialist transition; written materials on Mozambique and southern Africa that were both the product of past development courses and the teaching material for new courses; and Mozambican cadres trained by Ruth to analyze and act strategically in the struggle for socialist liberation in southern Africa.

Reference

First, Ruth (1983). *Black Gold*. Sussex: Harvester.