

Eduardo Mondlane & the Rise & Fall of Mozambican Socialism*

John S. Saul

Reflections in Honour of the 85th Anniversary of his Birth, June 1920

However tempting an exercise it may be when contemplating the abrupt removal from the historical process of so exemplary and important a person as Eduardo Mondlane, speculation as to 'what might have been' had he lived is likely to be an exercise of only limited value. In the present case, this is true even for the analysis of the pre-independence period in which Mondlane both made his political contribution and also died. The tensions within Frelimo had been temporarily papered over at the 1968 Congress, but they were far from being resolved; indeed they may even have helped produce Mondlane's assassination. Had he lived, would he have been able to finesse the Kavandames and the Simangos more deftly and resolve more amicably the key strategic questions that were dividing the movement? And, if this were not possible (I rather doubt it was), would he at least have been able to orchestrate the rising ascendancy of those directly linked to the military wing of the movement (and to the dynamics of popularly-rooted guerrilla struggle) in a positive manner on at least two fronts: to have allowed the military struggle to advance successfully while also to have helped pre-empt the dangers of hierarchy and authoritarianism that the necessary militarisation of the Mozambican struggle seems, in retrospect, to have carried with it?

But if these are impossibly speculative concerns how much more so are questions about 'what might have been' had Mondlane lived to usher Mozambique into independence? True, this latter question has not failed to be asked, and it has not been debated merely as a matter of academic speculation either: it has actually been, from time to time, the stuff of post-independence political propaganda and electoral sloganeering, Renamo itself having attempted from time to time to claim for and away from Frelimo the mantle of Mondlane: that is, the mantle of Eduardo Mondlane the good Mozambican nationalist, the nationalist who would not have been as 'Communist' as Samora Machel and his most immediate political entourage (most of whose members had been Mondlane's own most immediate colleagues and proteges, it should be noted) had proven to be. We have, of course, the countervailing evidence of one of Mondlane's last political statements, preserved on tape by Aquino da Bragança from which tape I myself transcribed it and subsequently translated it into English:

I am now convinced that Frelimo has a clearer political line than ever before ... The common basis that we had when we formed Frelimo was hatred of colonialism and the belief in the necessity to destroy the colonial structure and to establish a new social structure. But what

type of social structure, what type of organisation we would have, no one knew. No, some did know, some did have ideas, but they had rather theoretical notions that were themselves transformed in the struggle.

Now, however, there is a qualitative transformation in thinking that has emerged during the past six years which permit me to conclude that at present Frelimo is much more socialist, revolutionary and progressive than ever and that the line, the tendency, is now more and more in the direction of socialism of the Marxist-Leninist variety. Why? Because the conditions of life in Mozambique, the type of enemy which we have, does not give us any other alternative. I do think, without compromising Frelimo which still has not made an official announcement declaring itself Marxist Leninist, I can say that Frelimo is inclining itself more and more in this direction because the conditions in which we struggle and work demand it.

As Mondlane continued in the same interview, it would be 'impossible to create a capitalist Mozambique' because 'it would be ridiculous to struggle for the people to struggle, to destroy the economic structure of the enemy, and then reconstitute it in such a way as to serve the enemy.' And he also stressed the importance of 'learning from the concrete experience, including the errors, of the socialist countries which since 1917 have worked and lived the socialist experience.'

As I pointed out in my introduction to a new edition of Mondlane's book, *The Struggle for Mozambique*, published in the early 1980s (Mondlane, 1983; Saul, 1983), these statements seemed to reflect accurately the most positive strand of ideological development within Frelimo during the period of armed struggle, the strand that became dominant in the struggle for control of the movement after Mondlane's death (see also Saul, 2005a). It is a strand exemplified in a recent interview with one of Eduardo's proteges, Jorge Rebelo, who was a Politburo member in the early years of independence:

We all agreed that we were going to gain independence, but this was not the ultimate object; that was in fact the creation of a progressive society which would bring an end to misery in our country. This was not merely a slogan. It was inside of us.

As Rebelo (Rebelo, 1995) continued, 'We can't help but be shocked by the distance between that which was our objective and what is the reality today', a comment which raises issues to which I will return momentarily. Here it is important to affirm that this strand of progressive ideological development is also eminently consistent with, is, in fact, a further extrapolation from, themes already developed in Mondlane's book. Of course just what Mondlane thought to be conveyed by the term 'Marxism-Leninism', what he might have seen to be the 'errors' of the 'socialist countries', and how his continued reflection on such matters might have played into Frelimo's post-liberation practice are things we can never know. Nor can we know whether such reflection by him might have spared Frelimo some of the policy errors it undoubtedly did make in pursuit of a socialist future for Mozambique.

Not that it is easy to decide what weight such errors themselves had in defining the ultimate failure (or was it a defeat?) of the Mozambican socialist project. Indeed, one of the great debates that attends current scholarly contemplation of the rise and fall of Mozambican Socialism is precisely the relative weights to be attached to the project's *own* inherent weaknesses as against the overbearing negative impact of the hostile environment in which the project was being mounted. Self-evidently, that hostile environment expressed itself most proximately through the sustained programme of straightforward destabilisation inflicted upon Mozambique by, first,

Rhodesia and then South Africa (with whatever other shadowy forces in the wings). Beyond that there was the hostile environment of global capitalism – albeit a global capitalism reinforced in its economic workings after 1980 by the Reaganite political strategy of ‘roll-back’. It is easier to see now than it was in the mid- to late-1970s – which, after all, witnessed a high-water mark for anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist forces in Vietnam, in Nicaragua, and elsewhere – just how difficult it was increasingly going to be to get away with committing a socialism anywhere in the world, let alone in the southern Africa of South Africa’s Reagan-friendly ‘Total Strategy’.

Still, errors there also were, errors in the spheres of social and economic policy where, despite dramatic gains in health and education and even, to some extent, in gender policy, a transformative economic programme never quite got off the ground. Undeterred by the weaknesses of inherited institutions for the purposes they now envisaged and despite the lack of trained cadres, Frelimo entered into the post-independence fray driven by a certain cocky overconfidence carried over from the heroic days of armed struggle. Listen, once again, to Jorge Rebelo (1995) who recalled leaving a meeting at the Ponta Vermelha Palace just after independence and having President Machel say:

Now we have the power and we can finish with misery in Mozambique in two years. Someone said, ‘No, two years is too short a time.’ And Machel replied, ‘Okay, three years then.’ ‘We have to say now’, Rebelo continued, ‘that this was a bit of voluntarism (voluntarismo) on our part. We were imagining things that in reality were not possible. But that’s what we wanted to do.’

Frelimo’s hand was also forced by the precipitate departure of the Portuguese to nationalise things more quickly and more sweepingly than they might otherwise have done. In addition, a considerable price was paid by Frelimo for associating its project (for good reason and bad, I hasten to say) too closely to a particular kind of socialist theory and practice, to the Marxist-Leninist variant proffered by comrades from the then Eastern bloc (with its own ‘errors’, be it noted, seldom mentioned); this was something I learned for myself at close hand while teaching with such comrades (though they weren’t very comradely towards me at the Faculty of Marxism-Leninism at Eduardo Mondlane University where we all worked in the 1980s). Here was a vision that sanctioned a high-tech definition of economic transformation (the importance of ‘the forces of production’, don’t you know) – big projects, tractors and the like – and, equally fatefully, an underestimation of the importance of the peasants (as being not quite proletarian enough!), not least economically, to the transformation of Mozambique.

By the time Frelimo began to learn from its mistakes and understand that subtler transformative policies were more appropriate to its socialist goals – a guarded use of the market mechanism for certain purposes, for example, and a more positive embrace of peasant participation in economic development – the escalation of destabilisation and of western containment policies had begun to shut the door on such possibilities. By now a full-scale and uncritical retreat to the market, world-wide and local and unqualifiedly neo-liberal in its auspices, was all that seemed open to Frelimo: a condition of such relief from the burden of debt as might be forthcoming, a condition of any Western facilitating of the peace process (Saul, 2005c).

It is not, however, the task of this article to evaluate the neo-liberalisation of Mozambique that has been attendant upon the peacemaking process in that country

and that continues to define current policies there. Without downgrading the importance to the lives of ordinary Mozambicans of the fact of the peace, so valuable in its own right, that was achieved once, in Chester Crocker's immortal words, the Frelimo leadership has abandoned its 'Afro-Marxist fantasies'. I will only say, however, that my hunch is to agree with the analysis presented some years ago by the American economist David Plank (Plank, 1993). For the latter argues that Mozambique has most recently experienced a particularly dramatic form of 'recolonisation' (his word) and one potentially even more pervasive and difficult to shake off than was the Portuguese version of colonialism.

Can we at least ask how Eduardo Mondlane might have fared in these heavy seas of 'destabilisation' and 'roll-back' and 'recolonisation'? As stated earlier there are diminishing returns to efforts to speculate about such a question. Still, one must suspect that he would have been pushing, for reasons already discussed, to find room for manoeuvre – within the global economy, within the region, and within the damaged economy and society left behind by the Portuguese in Mozambique itself – to advance more rather than less progressive, even socialist, policies to meet the needs of ordinary Mozambicans. In short, no more recent image of Mondlane as 'neo-liberal' *avant la lettre* – whether that image be wielded by spokespersons for Renamo or, as is quite conceivable nowadays, by spokespersons for the new Frelimo – can really stand up to close scrutiny.

This may be of some significance. As we know, it would be naïve at this late date to argue that the era of the old 'Frelimo state' and its 'left developmental dictatorship' – with deeply compromised economic, social and political policies – did not have its grievous flaws. Nonetheless, reflecting on the first thirty-plus years of Mozambican independence – years marked most recently by destabilisation, by internal war and by 'peacemaking' (Saul, 2005b) – one could still conclude with the observation that what has been lost, most visibly, from the liberation struggle itself but also from earliest period of post-independence Mozambican history is something terribly important. It is, precisely, the loss of too much of the sense of social and public purpose that once prevailed, a purpose premised on the envisaging of society-wide transformations that could actually change the lives of the vast majority of Mozambicans in positive ways. That such commitment to the collective weal has been lost will bring no tears to the eyes of a Chester Crocker (ferocious Cold Warrior and, under Reagan, assistant US secretary of state for African affairs), perhaps. But the fact remains that its loss has been the price both of the kind of war inflicted on Mozambique and of the kind of peace achieved there. If development in any meaningful sense is ever to occur in their country, Mozambicans will eventually have to rediscover just such a sense of purpose, I think. And in doing so they will have to rediscover, among other things, something of the socialist legacy of Eduardo Mondlane.

But what about another question of contemporary resonance, what about the question: 'Mondlane the democrat?' No less speculative than the question: 'Mondlane: socialist or neo-liberal?', this question does nonetheless provoke thoughts about post-independence Mozambique, not least in its socialist phase, that carry us onto especially interesting analytical terrain. For in retrospect it might be argued that, insofar as Mozambique's future lay in FRELIMO's own hands at the moment of independence, the most fundamental flaw in its project, even more fundamental than its weakness in the sphere of economic policy-making, was precisely its weakness in the sphere of democratic theory and practice.

Not that Frelimo ignored this issue altogether. Indeed, the Frelimo leadership revelled in the fact that a great deal of its military success came from listening to and working with the people on the ground as the movement advanced its armed struggle. Moreover, one of its most dramatic policy initiatives in the very first days of its holding power was the attempt to deepen the populace's own sense of fundamental empowerment through the establishment of the *grupos dinamizadores* in urban neighbourhoods, rural villages and in workplaces. But the messiness of such democratic processes-in-the-making did not greatly appeal to those used to the military orderliness of Nachingwea camp. It proved all too easy for Frelimo leaders, in their arrogance of power (albeit often, at least in the early days, with the very best of intentions and full commitment to the popular cause) to convince themselves that they knew best, and absolutely, what was required. Moreover, this was an organisational trajectory that the adoption of official 'Marxism-Leninism' with its stern Stalinist rationale for vanguardism and its firm sense of historical certainty could only reinforce.

For the fact remains that opposition was often merely crushed and that mass organisations (the women's organisation and the trade unions and the like) ostensibly created as mechanisms of popular empowerment all too quickly became more like transmission belts for delivery of the party line. Critical debate that should have been the life-blood of a revolutionary process all but dried up in a stale and predictable media. 'Tradition' (seen to have its negative side in spheres like gender relations and exaggerated deference to old-style authority), religious conservatism, and ethnic and regional sensitivities became, as examples of *obscurantismo*, only so many negative constraints to be overridden from on high, rather than being viewed as the deep-seated social realities they were, to be worked upon politically, balancing leadership against mass initiatives, in much more nuanced and open-ended ways. At its most grotesque this tendency was revealed in the 'solution' to problems of urban overcrowding that became *Operacao Producao*. Here was a prime example of the kind of transformative tactics that, in their negative impact, would ultimately provide hostages to Renamo and also help to rot out much of the high moral purpose that had originally inspired Frelimo.

This is not to be wise after the event. Writing in the early 1980s in an introduction to the new edition of Mondlane's book, *The Struggle for Mozambique*, mentioned earlier (Saul, 1983), I had already evoked such thoughts, seeing them as being as relevant to contemplating the then still (somewhat) open future of Mozambican socialism as they may now be to writing that socialist experiment's epitaph. I noted a number of 'danger signs' that threatened the vigour of the emancipatory process that Frelimo professed to value, including considerable 'inertia in facilitating mass action and self-organisation by the workers and peasants'; 'the over-valuing of top-down interventions and administrative solutions'; and 'the adoption of an 'official Marxism' whose 'sterile definitions' could serve 'to deaden Marx's emancipatory message'. Such tendencies seemed to me to cut against the profoundly democratic thrust both of Mondlane's book and of his political proclivities more generally. As I then wrote in concluding my introduction, Eduardo Mondlane's own socialist, even 'Marxist-Leninist' premises (as expressed to Bragança in the interview cited above), remain 'framed by his book, by its insistence that Frelimo's political project cannot exist outside of or above the Mozambican people itself' and that 'as long as the sensibility that informs Mondlane's book remains at the centre of Frelimo's practice, there is a strong likelihood that the country's goals will be achieved'!

Once again, we cannot say for a certainty what would have become of Mondlane's own highly developed democratic sensibility under the pressures that sprang from the kinds of regional conflagration, institutional disorder and economic difficulty that his successors had to face, not to mention from the temptations of power that ensnared so many of his African counterparts (to go no further afield). What we can say is that these successors, the Frelimo leadership, did not manifest nearly enough of this democratic sensibility in their socialist years (or more recently, for that matter), as a number of the old militants from that period have confessed quite ruefully to me in recent interviews. To be sure, it is difficult to isolate out this one factor, the failure of democratic sensibility, from all the other relevant variables. Nonetheless, the costs of its absence were probably quite high.

Of course, even if this point is granted, it does not follow that formal democratic institutions now in place in Mozambique are any more empowering for ordinary Mozambicans than were the political structures established by socialist Frelimo. Thus, for me, there was a particularly sad irony in the recent observation of a Mozambican friend, a journalist and a firm supporter of freedom, not least of the press, in his country. He wished for no return to the bad old days of government dictation of the 'party-line' to his newspaper. Yet, he confessed, he cannot escape the feeling that the workers and peasants in Mozambique had actually had more power under the 'old' Frelimo regime. Then, he said, the leadership took their interests more seriously (even if it never found ways to institutionalise a genuinely 'popular democracy' in any very effective way), and their voices were actually heard more clearly than they are now, under liberal democracy: in the present system their votes are merely canvassed in a competitive manner that has little to do with advancing their life chances or helping them to clarify their socio-economic options.

Thus, perhaps, the witches' brew that the potent combination of formally liberal-democratic institutions and socio-economic recolonisation can produce, a proof that even if the existence of multiparty elections is one necessary condition for democratising a country it is very far from being a sufficient one. Harken then to contemporary efforts to rebuild the Mozambican polity from the ground up, to help empower civil society, not least those of its members who are among the poorest of the poor, to make the kinds of demands on the Mozambican state that may ultimately force it to recover something of its founders' social vision, the vision of, among others, Eduardo Mondlane, as I have argued here. It is no accident that two widows of two former Presidents of Frelimo, martyrs both, have often been engaged in such work. I speak, of course, of Graça Machel and Janet Mondlane. In their work, and in the work of others in Mozambique similarly engaged, can we doubt that we hear echoes of the voice, the democratic voice, of Eduardo Mondlane.

John S. Saul, e-mail: johnsaul@yorku.ca.

* An earlier version of this paper, written and presented to the memory of Eduardo Mondlane, first president of Frelimo, was given at a workshop in his honour at his alma mater, Oberlin College, on 3 October 1998. Not coincidentally, this event occurred very nearly 30 years from the day of Mondlane's assassination on 3 February 1969 in Dar es Salaam by agents of the Portuguese colonial power in Africa, a day particularly difficult to forget for those of us who knew Eduardo and who were also living in Dar at the time. This moving Oberlin workshop was attended by his widow, Janet Mondlane (see Manghezi, 2001) and various others members of his family, as well as by numerous friends, former comrades and admirers. It also bears noting that June of this year (2005) will mark the 85th anniversary of Mondlane's birth in Manjacase, Mozambique, in 1920 (see Anon., 1972 and Shore, 1983); hence the timing of the present publication, to mark Eduardo's birthday.

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