TRIBUTE

John Saul, 4 May 1938–23 September 2023

John Saul, who died in September aged 85, was one of ROAPE’s founding editors and a frequent contributor to the Review. This tribute expands on the short one I wrote at the time and that appears on our website (Lawrence 2023). I started that tribute by describing John as

the complete revolutionary socialist: a tireless academic-activist and writer, bibliophile, film and jazz buff, follower of almost every sport I can think of, and a regular contributor to and supporter of ROAPE. He had a prodigious memory of pretty much everything he read, watched and listened to.

He was involved from the beginning in the creation of this journal and contributed an article for the first issue on the revolutionary potential of the African peasantry. He was instrumental in promoting ROAPE and getting subscriptions in North America through his network of contacts as well as encouraging others to contribute to the journal. He himself published often in ROAPE, with over 20 contributions from the first issue mentioned above in 1974 to his two-part Debate, in the first two issues of 2020, on the role of the individual in Mozambique’s liberation struggle and beyond. This is a remarkable record in itself, but over a span of 50 years John published many articles in other journals and magazines (especially those supporting African liberation movements) and 25 books on eastern and southern Africa both as sole author and with others, notably Lionel Cliffe, Giovanni Arrighi, Colin Leys and latterly Patrick Bond. An interview of John, carried out by David MacDonald, was published in 2015 on Roape.net (Saul and MacDonald 2015).

The label John gave himself in an account of his life (Saul 2009) was ‘revolutionary traveller’ and definitely not ‘revolutionary tourist’. The latter he described as people who like to revel in a range of exotics including the hardships and struggles of those in the global South, as they tootle about, yet often the same people can never quite get round to engaging in very much struggle when surrounded by the comforts of home. (Saul 2009, 9)
The revolutionary traveller on the other hand links the struggles of those seeking transformation both nationally and globally. John’s book is the story of one person’s attempt to live solidarity, as he puts it, between those in the global South and North by connecting the struggles against ‘the common enemy: capitalism, both local and global’ (ibid.). And this was the focus of John’s academic and activist life, both supporting the struggle on the ground in whatever way he was asked to do and supporting it in his native Canada by campaigning to get the Canadian government to change tack. Educated at the Universities of Toronto, Princeton and London, he taught at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the Frelimo Party School and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism at the University of Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique, the Universities of the Witwatersrand and of Johannesburg in South Africa and, for most of his academic life, York University in Toronto.

This tribute considers in more detail John’s contribution to radical left analysis of African liberation from colonial rule but now more crucially its disentangling from the global ‘Empire of Capital’, in order to follow a serious development path in the interests of the majority of the people struggling to survive in a world of increasing inequality both between and within nations.1

I first met John in Kampala in 1968 when he emerged seemingly from nowhere, after an overland journey researching marketing cooperatives for his doctorate at Princeton, at a conference on agricultural marketing at Makerere University.2 His erudition and command of an audience put this budding graduate student, just arrived in Tanzania and advised to attend the conference, somewhat in awe of this imposing and fast-talking academic. I got to know him better when we were all back at the University College of Dar es Salaam where it was clear that he was a major figure on the Left, supportive of the emergent radical left student group, the University Students’ African Liberation Front (USARF) led by the likes of Yoweri Museveni (yes, he), Issa Shivji, the late Henry Mapolu and Karim Hirji, among others. This was after the proclamation of the Arusha Declaration and Ujamaa which drew so many socialist academics from around the world to work at the University, among them Giovanni Arrighi, Walter Rodney, Tamás Szentes, Lionel Cliffe and of course John himself.

In Tanzania he taught political science and was involved in attempts to transform the curriculum to support Tanzania’s socialist ambitions and begin what we would now call the decolonisation of university courses related to the development of the global South and the interpretation of its history. Returning to the university as a lecturer in economics, I taught with John and with Tanzanian and Kenyan colleagues an extraordinary and radical interdisciplinary course taken by all students in their first year. East African Society and Environment (EASE) covered a large part of human history but with an emphasis on colonialism, imperialism and East Africa’s position in the global political economy. It succeeded the Development Studies course which had been directed by John’s close colleague, Lionel Cliffe, and which was intended to orient students to an understanding of Tanzania’s political economy and socialist direction. (In 1967, Tanzanian university students had rebelled against the requirement placed on them to undertake ‘national service’ for five years after their graduation, starting a debate, in which John and Arrighi among others played a prominent role, about how students’ university education needed to be oriented to the country’s socialist future, particularly making them aware of their privileged position relative to the vast majority of Tanzanians.) As John recognised in the final lecture of that year’s course,
EASE would not make the students socialists. It would definitely make those inclined to join the exploiting class better informed. Co-teaching this course with John was quite an experience. He gave me some excellent training in how to run a seminar of more than 20 students ensuring that everyone participated, not to mention lecturing to 600 students without a microphone in the newly built and cavernous Nkrumah Hall!

John’s already well-established radical reputation had him down in the eyes of the University authorities as being behind a pro-Ujamaa student revolt against the administration (Hirji 2018). There had also been some hostility to the new course from both students and staff who objected to its political orientation. Maybe they were concerned that the course was succeeding in its objectives! Not surprisingly, his contract was not renewed (neither was mine).

The excitement of being in a country whose president was embarking on what appeared to be a genuine socialist transformation inspired the revolutionary tourists and travellers to teach and research areas which would assist in developing the country in a very different direction from most post-colonial states. John Saul was at the forefront of that process, always seeking ways in which he and like-minded colleagues could contribute to Tanzania’s socialist development. He worked with Arrighi on the prospects for and obstacles to socialist transformation for economic development both in Tanzania and across the continent. In that early work with Arrighi there was a focus on two crucial factors in the success or failure of a socialist future: class formation and global capitalism, and their interaction. African economy and society were not the egalitarian classless community of peasant farmers. Arrighi and Saul identified class formation in the countryside, as richer farmers employed labour, often smaller farmers who for various reasons needed to supplement their income. In the towns they could see a working class in formation as well as the growth of a self-serving, power-seeking petty bourgeoisie emerging from small business and the higher levels of the government bureaucracy and state-owned enterprise management. As for global capitalism in the form of foreign investment, it was a means through which the surplus produced by agricultural and industrial production could be siphoned off for the greater accumulation of metropolitan capital. For Arrighi and Saul, a self-generated socialist development was the only way forward for African countries. The surplus could be retained for domestic investment in higher productivity, mainly industrial activity which would allow a socialist accumulation in which output would be directed to satisfying the needs of the domestic population.

Indeed, this was the conclusion reached by Julius Nyerere as John himself noted, quoting from a speech the Tanzanian president made on economic nationalism:

> The only way in which national control of the economy can be achieved is through the economic institutions of socialism. (Nyerere 1968, 264)

The begged question was of course what kind of socialism and what kind of socialist institutions were to be adopted. John was impatient with those who wrote off Ujamaa as mild social democracy offering no challenge to global capitalism, while himself being critical of some of the policies pursued by the Tanzanian government which appeared to contradict a commitment to socialism. The way in which Nyerere dealt with the university students’ rebellion of 1971, with the dismantling of the Ruvuma Development Association and with the Mount Carmel Rubber Factory workers’ attempt at workers’ control were examples of presidential high-handedness which appeared to belie a commitment to
socialist democracy. John was too often inclined to see these negatives as evidence of Nyerere’s authoritarianism rather than as political necessities given the balance of forces within government and country. These issues of what constituted democratic socialism, of leaders’ commitment to a socialist transition and of the ultimate betrayal into Fanon’s ‘false decolonization’ were to feature throughout John’s writing on African liberation.

On the positive side, John admired Tanzania’s support for the southern African liberation movements, providing them with a base in Tanzania as well as material support in the face of constant pressure from the US and its allies who saw such support leading to the country falling into the orbit of the Soviet Union and China and out of their imperialist clutches. But John also saw the various ways in which Nyerere sought to avoid Tanzania becoming yet another case of the petty bourgeoisie and state bureaucracy replacing the colonial ruling class – an ‘Africanization of the prevailing power structure’, as he put it (Saul 2009, 126). The leadership code, with its limit on ministerial salaries, for example, was an attempt to ensure that a privileged elite was not economically distanced from the mass of the people.

While in Tanzania, John had followed the liberation struggle in Mozambique and developed a close relationship with some members of the FRELIMO leadership based in Dar es Salaam. Writing about FRELIMO and Mozambique around 1970, he was clearly interested in the movement’s revolutionary credentials and the struggle between its petty bourgeois nationalists who were looking to benefit economically from the fruits of liberation and the more left wing grouping that sought a radical transformation and was actively pursuing this strategy by mobilising peasants and workers in the liberated areas against Portuguese imperialism. Before leaving Tanzania to return to Canada, he was invited by Samora Machel to visit the areas of Mozambique liberated from Portuguese colonial rule and controlled by FRELIMO. In order to be able to cope with the physical demands of walking many miles of northern Mozambique with FRELIMO combatants, John went into serious training, running around the athletics track at the University and walking the eight miles or so from the campus to the centre of Dar es Salaam, all this in the guise of doctor’s orders to lose weight: the trip had to be kept a secret until it was over.

The visit itself did indeed involve some 70 miles of walking but gave John an impression of what liberated Mozambique might look like: a collective division of labour in the rural areas, a radical change in the role of women, an awareness of the dangers of elitism and the need for basic democracy, and an attempt to avoid the necessary militarism of the armed struggle dominating the politics of a democratic liberation. For John, writing in the first ever issue of this journal, FRELIMO’s liberated areas showed how the careful political work of the movement’s cadres helped to convince peasants to support the revolution against the Portuguese. In that article, too, he made comparisons with Tanzania, arguing that contrary to Mozambique, the more conservative elements of the ruling party were winning out; there was an advantage to being forced into armed struggle against a repressive colonial regime as it required the mobilisation and support of the peasantry and the creation of a leadership committed to a revolution for the benefit of the peasants and workers. John was, though, aware of the pitfalls of a militaristic vanguard leadership developing out of such a liberation struggle and defining post-liberation relations between party and people.

Returning to Toronto, John deepened his solidarity with FRELIMO (and the MPLA and PAIGC in Angola and Guinea-Bissau respectively), co-founding the Toronto Committee
for the Liberation of the Portuguese Colonies (TCLPAC). John and his comrades saw their role in Canada as exposing the country’s economic and military connection to Portugal and campaigning to have the government sever them. Portugal’s revolution by its armed forces against the fascist regime in 1974 precipitated FRELIMO’s victory and Mozambique’s independence the following year, the celebration of which John and others in TCLPAC attended. John and his comrades’ attention then shifted to the remaining liberation struggles in the rest of southern Africa, with the renamed Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa (TCLSAC).

Southern Africa had by then become the focus of John’s academic and activist work. He wrote about the liberation struggle in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe with a critical and rather prescient view of Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union. He returned in 1981 to the now liberated Mozambique to teach at the Frelimo Party School and at the Eduardo Mondlane University’s Institute of Marxism-Leninism (‘Try putting that on your CV!’ he joked). John described his task as developing ‘syllabi and teaching materials that would help overcome’ what FRELIMO’s leaders called ‘revolutionary verbalism’ that did not ‘clarify … the situation which presently exists in our country’ (Saul 2009, 171). This task resulted in *O Marxismo-Leninismo no contexto Moçambicano*, which was written in Portuguese with the help of Mozambican colleagues (Saul 1983). John was under no illusions about the effectiveness of his work in Maputo, noting that South Africa’s proxy, RENAMO, was not surprisingly making some headway to undermine FRELIMO’s efforts to transform the country. This view was tragically underscored on the day of his farewell party when Ruth First, who had also been working in Maputo supporting FRELIMO’s educational efforts, opened the letter bomb that ended her life, sent from the South African security police agent Craig Williamson.

Back in Canada, continuing with the day job of teaching political science at York University in Toronto, John continued his activist work with TCLSAC. Campaigning for the Canadian government to shift its position on South Africa was a key part of this activism but there was also campaigning against Canadian bank loans to South Africa and demonstrations against sporting tours. Trying to get Canadian governments, both conservative and liberal, to think of boycotting South Africa in various ways was very hard, as indeed it was throughout the global North, but John recounted how Canadian activists were managing to get through, especially to the country’s Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney.

John thought it was important in the post-Soweto period to see apartheid working at first hand and so he went to South Africa in 1979. His account of that trip starts by affirming that, as he characteristically put it, ‘things in South Africa are as bad as all that’ and indeed, getting worse (Saul 2009, 145). He could see for himself the overcrowded impoverished Bantustans and the rural slums housing black urban workers, and the other horrors of apartheid that we in the global North had seen in films and read in the anti-apartheid literature. But he could also see the signs of change as sections of capital found the rigidity of apartheid labour laws inconsistent with the necessary flexibility of market capitalism. Workers were getting restive, going on strike, and some of the residential racial barriers were beginning to break down.

Nine years later, John was back in South Africa, this time illegally, as he was not surprisingly denied a visa. He saw things were still as bad as they were in 1979. But what he also observed during a month’s travel around the country was a much stronger movement
of resistance, exemplified in the defiance of the residential apartheid of the Group Areas Act as well as the various boycotts (schools and rents especially) and stay-aways of millions of workers at a time. This was the period of the rise of the United Democratic Front inside South Africa, but also of the talks that were taking place outside the country between the African National Congress (ANC) and senior white South Africans from state and business. John also talked to ANC representatives in Lusaka on his way home, noting the difficulties in balancing military against civilian resistance as well as internal resistance against external diplomacy assisted by the various liberation support movements. Within these movements there were always tensions between those who saw the dismantling of apartheid and its institutions as the ultimate objective and those who saw a more radical, socialist South Africa as the endgame. John was clearly on the side of the latter, although always careful to consider the position of the former if not a little mockingly, often quoting ANC leaders’ statements about the ANC never having been a socialist movement. Indeed, as in previous cases about which John had written, he could see the ANC split between those pushing for socialist policies and solutions and those looking to replace a white bourgeoisie with a black one. While it was clear that there was a strong socialist current in the ANC and its allies, especially the South African Communist Party, to which many of the ANC leaders often secretly belonged, the ultimate common goal was to end apartheid and build a non-racial South Africa. For them, the realities of global capitalism meant that a socialist South Africa was a long way off. John, along with many South African activists in the social movements and in academia, disagreed and saw this as a betrayal of the majority of the population who had been forced into grinding poverty by apartheid and deserved a very different future that could only be achieved through a socialist programme.

Meanwhile, only two years after John’s 1988 trip, Nelson Mandela was released and the transition to a democratic South Africa began. In 1992, John returned to the country, this time with a visa, as an invited speaker at the annual Ruth First Memorial Colloquium, now held for the first time in South Africa. This must have been an extremely emotional moment not only for John, who had witnessed her assassination, but for Ruth’s family members who were there along with Mandela himself. As John noted, this was a time when the South African state and its president, F. W. de Klerk, still did not want to move to a democratic country with universal suffrage, and so Mandela’s speech centred on the continuing state repression of those who sought this change. But the change did happen, though not without much blood being shed not only at the hands of the white South African state but also its allies ruling the Bantustans, most notably Buthelezi’s Kwazulu.

John was an observer at the 1994 and 1999 elections on behalf of a Canadian NGO and in 2000 he was back teaching for a short period at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. John had extended his work on South Africa to a study of the armed struggle to free Namibia, co-authored with Colin Leys (Leys and Saul 1995). Frequent visits throughout this period followed, culminating in the award of an honorary doctorate at the University of Johannesburg in 2016 with his family in attendance. Luckily, I was in Johannesburg at the time and was also at the graduation ceremony where students were also getting their degrees, combining the quaint academic pomp associated with British academia with the joyful singing and chanting at an African occasion. As the University reported:

Professor Saul will receive a UJ Faculty of Humanities honorary degree, Doctor Honoris Causa Philosophiae, for demonstrating commitment to academic excellence in pursuit of social justice. This honorary degree is in recognition of the remarkable contribution he has
made to social science in South Africa and the wider region. (University of Johannesburg 2016)

This was also a period when John sharpened his critique of the ANC and its policies after 1994. As noted above, he saw the ANC as increasingly betraying its mass base and firming up the emerging black bourgeoisie whose display of conspicuous consumption contrasted with the poverty and squalor of the townships. As John was hearing, the central issue in South Africa had changed from race to class, resulting in a Fanonist conclusion to the freedom struggle rather than a transformative socialist one led by the kind of cadres produced by FRELIMO in the early years that John had documented in his accounts of his visits to the liberated areas of Mozambique.

John’s prolific output in his last years was centred on what he called his ‘Southern African Liberation trilogy’, which started with a volume on the North American campaign for southern African liberation in which he wrote not only about the activities of TCLPAC/TCLSAC in Canada but also about the solidarity movements in the US (Saul 2017). In a very sober assessment of their achievements, he emphasised the limitations of the defeat of racial apartheid and the continuing need for solidarity with those forces in southern Africa that were struggling against the ‘recolonization….. (of) the region as a whole’ (ibid., 195) in the interests of global capital and for a ‘meaningful democratic empowerment’ of those in ‘class-bound penury’: ‘the next liberation struggle’, as he put it (ibid., 223–224). And, as the final chapter reminds us, we are all in it.

This volume was followed four years later by Revolutionary hope vs free market fantasies, subtitled ‘Keeping the southern African liberation struggle alive: theory, practice, contexts’. It exemplified John’s commitment to the interaction of theory and practice, not only giving readers an insight into his theoretical framework of analysis, but also through southern African case studies into how this combination of theory and practice informs his work and indeed his conclusions.

The third volume in the trilogy, The 30 years’ war for the liberation of southern Africa, was delayed by his increasing infirmity, but that and Covid-19 did not deter him from completing it. He sent it off to Cambridge University Press not long before he died. It is a history not just of the armed liberation struggle from his time frame of 1960 to 1994, but also of the colonial and pre-colonial history which made the present, which had been at the core of the history of South Africa he had co-written with Patrick Bond (Saul and Bond 2011). These last books were clearly John’s way of making sense of the liberation struggles and their aftermath for himself as well as his readers, but perhaps also a way to look back and make sense of his own life spent as a Canadian activist campaigning and writing in support of the struggles for liberation in southern Africa.

While the award of an honorary doctorate at the University of Johannesburg was probably his most prized, he surely also appreciated becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2004, receiving another honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the University of Toronto, in 2010, and then being given the Lifetime Achievement Award in African Studies by the Canadian Association of African Studies in 2011.

Throughout this life of commitment and revolutionary solidarity with the liberation struggle and its aftermath, John enjoyed the love and support of his family. His wife Pat, who died in 2022, was an educator herself working for the North York Board of Education and then seconded to York University to teach Urban Education as well as supporting the activities of TCLSAC. While in Mozambique she wrote new curricula for
the Ministry of Education. Their son, Nick, is a food activist turning food banks into community centres where food is grown as well as consumed. This is now a major movement across Canada of which Nick is CEO. Their daughter, Jo, co-founded the Type bookshop in Toronto, now two bookshops which host events and activities for local communities, in both cases continuing their parents’ community work. John and Pat were justly proud of their children’s achievements.

John’s frequent parting phrase was ‘the struggle continues’. He ends the second volume of his trilogy asking whether the struggle of popular forces from below can continue. In answer, he quotes Lenin quoting Napoleon – ‘on s’engage, puis on voit’ – and he continues:

So – and have we any other choice? – we will just have to work (“s’engager”) to make sure the struggle does continue. And if it does, then: we will see. (Saul 2017, 232)

Another regular parting phrase was: ‘we carry on’ with – in his also often repeated and famous phrase from Gramsci – ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. And indeed, inspired by John’s example, we will carry on and then we will indeed see!

Notes

1 As far as I can discover, the term ‘Empire of Capital’ originated with the title of Ellen Meiksins Wood’s study published in 2005. John used it widely without a reference to that work that I can find so I can only assume that the phrase also originates independently with him!
2 John took some pride in having his PhD dissertation rejected by Princeton. As he put it in accepting the doctorate from the University of Johannesburg,

I had been in Tanzania too long and lived with its dream too intensely to conform to the models of modernization theory and other fetishes of American political science to comfortably write the kind of dissertation my professors wanted from me. So, of course, they flunked me. (Saul 2021, 109).

3 John Saul’s acceptance speech can be found in Saul (2021).

References


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