

Book Reviews

Saul, John S. (2011), *Liberation Lite: The Roots of Recolonization in Southern Africa*, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, ISBN 978-1-59221-835-6, 133 pp.

John Saul qualifies as one of the almost legendary “old hands” – the first generation of postcolonial Western scholars engaged in African Studies for whom African societies and people were far from being simply a subject of study; rather, these scholars were themselves part of a socio-political process of engagement that involved their own personal encounters and local interactions with the social realities on the ground. These were the days of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when – in stark contrast to today – a scholar who wanted to obtain academic recognition in African Studies or Development Studies spent at least a year, if not much longer, teaching and undertaking field research at a reputable African university. The University of Ghana in Legon and Makerere University were among those legendary institutions that provided the opportunities for such rites of passage, along with the University of Zambia in Lusaka and the institution “on the hill” – the University of Dar es Salaam – during the days of *ujamaa* socialism. Many who passed through these institutions later on became the cream of the crop among internationally renowned Western scholars in African Studies, often with a markedly anti-imperialist orientation. Several never returned for good to their countries of origin, but remained for most of their professional lives at institutions on the continent.

John Saul’s personal history reads like a classic of this generation. Though he returned to Canada, he never turned his back on the social struggles for emancipation in Africa in which he, as a young scholar, actively engaged at the University of Dar es Salaam. Saul contributed some of the finest critical postcolonial reflective volumes to the debate of the 1970s. Along with Lionel Cliffe, and in academic and political interaction with numerous local young scholars, most prominently among them Issa Shivji, he was responsible for large parts of the intensive debate on Tanzania’s socio-economic and political developments. He later on established a long-standing collaboration with Colin Leys – and these are just a few of the colleagues with whom he closely worked. It is no coincidence that he has dedicated this small collection of essays to the memory of his old friend Giovanni Arrighi. Now a professor emeritus at Toronto’s York University, Saul has remained active in the solidarity movement and supported the liberation struggles, especially in Southern Africa, even beyond the boundaries

of his tangible work. His own personal engagement makes his sobering assessment of the limits of liberation even more credible and gives it a moral legitimacy often denied to those looking from the outside in.

The book's subtitle is somewhat misleading for two reasons: First, whether what is happening in South Africa is indeed a process of recolonization instead of a neocolonial continuity (I would tend to argue for the latter) and to what extent the roots of such a process are a reference point are debatable. Second, the essays focus in particular on South Africa, and much less so on the region of Southern Africa. The subtitle might therefore be more a product of the publisher's desire to attract the interest of an audience, which I would assume the title already manages to do. "Liberation lite" is indeed a catchy way to characterize the lack of truly emancipatory social reconstruction in the former settler societies of Southern Africa.

The deliberations present often very personal reflections on the individual experiences and encounters of the author, in an almost autobiographical way. This makes it a rather intimate engagement with history and its lessons, and less a compilation of purely rigorous academic analyses. The essays are based in most cases on individual papers and lectures presented earlier in different contexts, hence the volume's relative lack of coherence. But at the same time it provides noteworthy insights into the contradictions South Africa has faced on the path to becoming a postcolonial society – a society which, upon closer examination, has not really left the past behind.

Far from what could be ridiculed as a "dinosaur" narrative, Saul's book reminds readers of the schools of thought, political convictions and ideological orientations which guided earlier struggles for emancipation – or at least were claimed by scholars to have done so. Regarding the postcolonial orders' focus on equality, one might have second thoughts as to whether these expectations and related claims were our own projections, visions, wishes and hopes, or indeed the programmatic statements in which the anti-colonial movements and their leadership truly believed. If the latter is the case, then *Liberation Lite* reminds us of cases of betrayal, where the masses were lured into believing promises never seriously planned to be implemented. This harkens back to the harsh and sobering insights presented by Frantz Fanon in his 1961 manifesto, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which in a chapter entitled "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" summarizes the initial frustrations of an anti-colonial African Left involved in the struggles for emancipation in the face of West African elites occupying state power in the newly independent countries mainly for the sake of their own gains.

Complementing his own critical observations, John Saul adds as documentary evidence a long letter he received in 2001 in response to some of his earlier writings from the long-time South African ANC and Communist

Party militant Lionel “Rusty” Bernstein. The letter having been written a year before his death, Bernstein adds a perspective “from within” that affirms Saul’s critical diagnosis. He sees the origins of the limits of liberation in the shift from the emphasis on popular resistance to an agency seeking to obtain political power. This turned political activism “into a career opening to public sector employment and the administrative ‘gravy train’” (111).

Evidence that Saul’s essays are not ignored or taken lightly by those in power is documented by responses to articles he has published. Most recently, they were refuted and dismissed by one of the intellectuals in the leadership of the Communist Party of South Africa. This suggests that John Saul’s attacks touch a raw nerve. After all, the criticism is not that of a disappointed, radical “grumpy old man” alone, but in fact represents a growing awareness that the post-settler societies of Southern Africa have more in common with the structures and mindsets of a past that is influencing current society than those accountable in government are willing to admit.

- Henning Melber