

Portrait of an Engaged Intellectual: Ruth First the Academic, Teacher and Scholar.

Tebello Letsekha.

Abstract

The 17th of August 2012 marked the 30th anniversary of South African sociologist, Ruth First's untimely passing and many in South Africa celebrated and honoured Ruth First the journalist and political activist. This paper narrates the often untold story of Ruth First's intellectual contributions and interventions. As an academic, teacher and scholar she conceived of her work as advocating for a more just world, her scholarly work was informed and sharpened by her political activism. In allying herself with political movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) in London and the Front for Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo), she developed a kind of rationale for her intellectual labour. Engaging with her work as an intellectual and inserting her intellectual contributions, which like those of many African scholars have given way to debates from the global North, into social science curricula would perhaps be the real refutation of the assassin's bomb. This engagement is also crucial because it extends much further than the striking accolades which take the form of buildings and lectures established in her honour.

Key Words: Ruth First, Organic Intellectual, Centre of African Studies, African Politics.

Introduction

Born Heliose Ruth First in Johannesburg on the 4th of May 1925, First was an activist, scholar, friend, comrade to many, a mother to her three daughters and a wife to ANC stalwart Joe Slovo. Beneath it all, however, "she was only flesh and blood; a woman who experienced many of the same joys, and the same frustrations as other women of her time" (Slovo, 2007: 1). Over the years Ruth First has become a struggle icon and a revolutionary hero, and while Gavin Williams (2010) argues that this is to make too much of her, we believe it is to make too little of her. In only celebrating her contributions as a journalist and political activist there is a danger that her other achievements, her intellectual, and scholarly contributions, will be forgotten.

During her lifetime Ruth First combined her activities in the liberation movement with her teaching and research commitments. Trained by experience and credentialed by her numerous publications, First wrote as an investigative journalist, historian and sociologist, dying at the hands of men who represented the apartheid regime which detested all of these pursuits.

First was a loyal member of the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP), but despite these loyalties she never swallowed a “party line”. She always asked questions and drew her own conclusions. She expected those around her to practice this as well, and despised those who did not. Her outspoken manner often frustrated her husband and on one occasion where she had been particularly critical of the ANC he declared in exasperation to daughter Gillian Slovo (2007: 8): “your mother is so impossible... if not for my position in the party; she would have been expelled years ago”.

Her political activism led to her arrest on the 9th of August 1963, under the 90 Day Detention Act. She was the first white woman to be arrested under the act. When she was arrested she knew, on her own admission, “a helluva lot, really an awful lot” (First, 1965: 120) about the liberation movement. As a result the first months of her detention were filled with questions from the Security Branch. And although in the beginning she was “a lot of bother to them” and “really had the whip hand all the way through” (ibid) in the end she felt the pressure and caved in. The government had detained her brother, and her parents and children were under surveillance. First began to worry and at one stage was unable to disentangle her fears from facts. “Hardest of all, I would struggle not to think about the children... I needed all my concentration to handle my own situation... but of course I could not stop thinking about them” (ibid).

When asked by SB detective Nel if she would make a statement, First eventually agreed. This was not a question and answer session as she had expected however. 'Start from the beginning they said'. 'Omit nothing.' She attempted to tell the story of her life without giving too much detail however, in her emotional state this became impossible. She states,

“There was no time to wriggle, to fabricate, to gauge reaction, to probe, to find out anything for myself. I was breaking down my own resistance... I had no idea what they knew, what contradictory information they had wrenched from someone else.

They were giving nothing away; they were already becoming too experienced for that (First, 1965: 121).

Having made the statement her greatest fear was that her willingness to talk would be shared with her comrades. 'I was in a state of collapse not for fear of what would happen to me physically... but for the gnawing ugly fear that they could destroy me among the people whose understanding and succour I most needed, and that once they had done that I would have nothing to live for (First, 1965: 128). Hounded by a sense of dishonour and the feeling that it would be impossible to explain her willingness to talk to her comrades, she attempted to commit suicide by swallowing sleeping pills that her doctor had left with her because of her insomnia. The dose was however, not enough to kill her.

Having been released after 90 days only to be re-arrested outside the prison gates, First refused to believe the prison official who came with her release orders 117 days after her arrest. When she finally arrived at home her mother and three children were horrified at her condition. Daughter Robyn (cited in Pinnock, 2007: 147) remembers that her mother looked 'absolutely terrible' and that she was 'horrified at the state of her and the fact that she seemed to have lost power and was... unsubstantial.' Her time in South Africa had clearly run out and, even though she had previously dismissed her husband Joe Slovo when he appealed to her to get herself and the children to London, on March 14, 1964, she left South Africa for what was to be the last time.

The Birth of an Intellectual: Ruth First at Durham University and the University of Dar es Salaam.

Ruth First's reputation in South Africa as an investigative journalist, an anti-apartheid activist, and former political prisoner preceded her arrival in London in March 1964. It was a reputation she would uphold, and elaborate, during the years she spent in exile. The means of economic survival when she arrived in London became those activities that she been arrested for in South Africa: her research and writing, and these means were also connected to the larger end: the liberation of Southern Africa. Her intellectual biography is underwritten by these conflicting agendas.

The means to economic survival also launched her career as a teacher. In 1973, she began lecturing at Durham University on the Sociology of Underdevelopment. First was an

effective teacher, respected and appreciated. During her time at Durham University when the Sociology Department was alive with conflicting theories she could bring her colleagues down to earth. Gavin Williams (2010: 4) recalls that she responded for instance, sharply in defence of a fine piece of empirical research that was being critiqued by colleague Derek Sayer by observing that “he should therefore do it himself”.

At the requests of her students, First agreed to take responsibility for a course on the Sociology of Gender. At the end of the year, students published 'What is to be done?' a guide to final year courses, and thus to their teachers. The entry for the Sociology department simply read, 'Ruth rules. OK'. It was she pointed to Gavin Williams “an ambiguous comment” (ibid).

Chris Gerry (1983), a former student of First's describes her as a teacher who always saw straight to the heart of the matter, particularly if she viewed the work as progressive regardless of whether it was her field or not. Her special skill was to assist her students argue cogently against views they intuitively disagreed with and to defend their own views with confidence.

“She was tough in her arguments and wanted students to become similarly tough.... She did not allow people to get away with ungrounded or sloppily argued assertions even if she agreed with them. This sometimes involved a process of challenging students and seeming sharply critical, giving way to encouraging them as they became more rigorous and perceptive” (Hilary Wainwright cited in Anne Scott, 1983: 216).

On leave from Durham University, Ruth First spent the fall semester of 1975 teaching in the Department of Economics at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. This was during intensely energetic years throughout recently decolonised Africa, and not least so in the universities. The semester in Tanzania coincided with the presentations, seminars, debates, and colloquia across the social science faculty of intellectuals—now luminaries, such as Terence Ranger, Walter Rodney, Mahmood Mamdani, John Saul, Jacques Depelchin and Archie Mafeje. While 1975 was an active year in post-colonial African intellectual history, it was also a turning point in First's intellectual career.

Her visiting semester at the University of Dar es Salaam is crucial both to her own intellectual biography as well as the early efforts toward post-colonial academic exchanges that “sought, however haphazardly, as well as hazardously, to redress even then the distortions of divisions of intellectual labour that have vexed programmes in international studies ever since”.

The letters written to her family and friends while in Tanzania provide a provocative, dramatically punctuated and scrupulously scriptural, account of her academic activities and an analysis of the general challenges of academic exchange. In a letter to her husband Joe Slovo she wrote 'after 24 hours of searching for him, Professor Guruli (the chair of the Economics Department) who got me out here, dropped his entire course in my lap, and I start Monday.' In the same letter she also describes an occasion when Terrence Ranger- who has been dubbed the founder of the so-called Dar es Salaam school of history- was put on the chopping block. 'I must say he deserved it, for a woolly ambiguous treatment of so-called peasant consciousness though the attack was ferocious. Apparently the calculated murder- in-public of liberal ideology is part of class struggle, but even my stony heart was moved by Ranger's plight' (Ruth First, 15/08/1975).

In another letter to her husband after a month in First expressed her frustrations with the general working conditions in the Economics Department.

'Had been running out of paper till today (the econs dept has nought: I ordered 2 lead pencils, 2 file covers and some paper and gem clips and the list came back with crosses against all items) when a friend showed me round the White elephant of a fishery institute next door this hotel. Its Dutch money and expertise all down the drain. The huge freezers are empty; the building deserted; rather like an Antonioni film. But the cupboards are full of stationery so I'm in stock again' (Ruth First, 18/ 09/ 1975).

The letters also suggest that First enjoyed her semester in Tanzania where she contributed to what was then the emerging curriculum in political economy such as the second- year course, Economics 202: 'Political Economy of Underdevelopment and Planning'. She described her students at the University of Dar es Salaam as 'demanding' and expressed that she would be sorry to be back among her English students in Durham, which she described as 'lumps'.

The semester also gave her an opportunity to learn and according to her the course she taught hit a few good high spots- and some low- but her students were hipped on the analysis of under-development, and she found their reactions intriguing when they had to apply the methods they had learned to Tanzania. In the same letter she also wrote about her collegial interactions stating ' My relations with people that matter remain very good. I've not quarrelled, only argued! Of course I've been blackballed by that silly crowd at the university which clusters like a cabal round the GDR staff and trainees' (Ruth First, 01/ 11/ 1975).

“The Quest for an Emancipatory Epistemology”: Ruth First in Mozambique.

In 1975 while still in Tanzania Ruth First received a letter from Aquino de Braganca, inviting her for a short visit to newly independent Mozambique, to discuss the possibility of joining the Centre of African Studies. First and de Braganca had a number of common friends in the revolution, the likes of Marcelino dos Santos, Pio Pinto, Ben Barka and as journalists they were both engaged in getting the undistorted story of the liberation movements in Africa into the media.

On 15 October 1975, while in Tanzania an excited Ruth First wrote to husband Joe Slovo informing him of the invitation.

“Mozambique. I've heard that they (the University people planning a Centre of African? Southern African? Studies (I'm not sure which) want me to come to LM [Lourenco Marques] for a short visit. I may say that I'm thrilled to bits. Tanzania is one thing, but Mozambique! Wow” (15/10/1975).

Mozambique's independence on June 25 1975 gave rise to a scholarship of engagement which was focused on Frelimo's socialist project. The Centre of African Studies was established within Eduardo Mondlane University and provided intellectual support to the Mozambican revolution (Cross, 2011). The Centre of African Studies was established in January 1976 in cooperation with Mozambique's national university, Eduardo Mondlane University, to develop and oversee social science research on southern Africa.

In March 1976, First, who had returned to Durham University, wrote to de Braganca in Maputo: “beside a revolution, doing a teaching job is mediocre stuff” (de Braganca &

O'Laughlin, 1984: 159). This statement she made after thinking to the prior visit she had made to Mozambique during the time of its independence in 1975.

Responding the letter that Ruth First had written to him in March 1976, de Braganca mentioned the work he was conducting with a group of 12 young history graduates to organise the CEA (de Braganca & O'Laughlin, 1984). The group according Yussuf Adam¹ who was one of the graduates was called the History Workshop. The main aim of the History Workshop was at the time of its establishment, to conduct research on the southern African subsystem, with particular emphasis on the history and economy of Mozambique.

Aware that First wanted to get back into the front line of revolution, de Braganca suggested that she might be convinced to return to southern Africa to work and live in Mozambique. According to her CEA colleagues, First's earlier work as an investigative journalist in South Africa and books she wrote while in exile made her the ideal person to conduct research on the southern Africa subsystem. First was also an ideal candidate for the position due to her teaching and research experience at Durham University and her commitment to understanding the relationship between South Africa and Mozambique². She took up the position of research director of the centre in 1977.

By 1979 Ruth First was leading a strong team of international researchers which included Belgian macro-economist Marc Wuyts, American political scientist Bridget O'Laughlin, South African sociologist Alpheus Manghezi, documentalist and analyst Colin Darch, Italian historian Ana Maria Gentili and Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin. This team of researchers was assembled on the basis of their analytical unity as Marxists capable of making their work relevant to the process of socialist transformation and applying a scientific material analysis to the problems of socialist revolution. Their biographies shared some common features:

1. a history of political activism;
2. first-hand experience in Mozambique that enhanced their scholarship;
3. written for an audience beyond the narrow boundaries of the academy;
4. helping to transform the terms of scholarship and intellectual debates in Mozambique;
5. challenging the dogmatic euphoria and the orthodoxies.

¹ Interview April, 2011.

² Interview with Teresa Cruz e Silva April, 2011.

The Centre of African Studies brought in what could be labelled “an activist conception of research” or what Isaacman (2003: 4) describes as “engaged scholarship”. Isaacman defines engaged scholars as intellectuals who challenge existing social hierarchies and oppressive institutions as well as the truth regimes and structures of power that produced and supported them. Not content simply to critique the status quo, these scholars seek to change it. “Their insurgent work is thus organically and inexorably intertwined with their scholarship (ibid).”

In this context political engagement can take many forms, including promoting human rights, global justice, and peace, involvement in anticolonial and anti- imperialist campaigns grass roots organising, or speaking out as public intellectuals. They are driven by a mutually reinforcing intellectual and political agenda and according to Isaacman (2003) at the core of this agenda are two major initiatives. One, to render audible the voices and concerns of the powerless and simultaneously to recover the experiences of the disadvantaged and underrepresented which are routinely ignored, forgotten, or cast into shadows of history. And two, to support their struggles aimed at ending exploitive practices and dismantling institutions of oppression.

In the context of the Centre of African Studies during First’s tenure as research director there were several dimensions to such a conception. First, it was research that was not aimed to produce “definitive research studies but rather to make social research an acceptable step in the formulation and implementation of policy”. Second, it was research that was “conducted from the perspective of social transformation and had to confront the actual problems of that transformation, or more specifically, research that was a tool of the Mozambican revolution”. Third, it “placed emphasis on the link between theory and practice, particularly in the application of Marxist theory and method” (Cross, 2011: 16).

Although a large number of the Centre's research outputs have been in Portuguese, the Centre has had an admirable record of converting the results of research into policy recommendations or into teaching materials for the country's programme of educational expansion. A number of the literature on Mozambique such John Saul's introduction to a re-issue of Eduardo Mondlane's *The Struggle for Mozambique*, built on work done under the auspices of the Centre and provides the English reader with an opportunity to access something of what has been accomplished.

Under the leadership of First and de Braganca, Centre established a journal, Mozambican Studies, which was aimed at publishing open academic enquiry and commentary by researchers working on Mozambique. Ruth First and Aquino de Braganca were concerned with bringing basic academic research to the people of Mozambique. This is why Ruth First put a lot of her time and energy into the establishment of the journal.

The journal contains not only work done by the CEA but also articles by scholars who were writing on Mozambican issues such as Jeanne Penvenne and Kurt Habermeir. Drawing on both her academic training and experience as a journalist First organised the translation of the journal articles from Portuguese to English and vice versa, editing and reading proofs. The CEA published the first issue of the journal in 1980 and the individual and collective research conducted both privately and in affiliation with other organisations has added important dimensions to our understanding of Mozambican history.

The Development Course: “Producing People who can Produce Knowledge”.

Outside Mozambique Ruth First was known principally as a journalist and anti-apartheid activist in the struggle for African liberation. However her CEA colleagues maintain that while in Mozambique, South Africa was rarely the focus of her work. She put most of her time, intellectual and energy instead into an experimental course for Mozambican cadres known as: The Development Course.

O’Laughlin³ describes the Development Course as,

A perhaps utopian attempt envisioned by Ruth First, the research director of the CEA, to provide tertiary level training in research to workers/students. The idea was that policies and the ways they are applied should be based in knowledge of the reality one is proposing to affect, not in assumptions about what that reality is.

According to former CEA lecturer Marc Wuyts⁴, method and approach are the bread and butter of what knowledge production is all about, particularly in a context where, as was the case in Mozambique, the space for research was highly constrained, both in terms of scope

³ Interview August, 2011.

⁴ Interviewed by Carlos Fernandes, 2010.

and its initial conditions. The path that led to the CEA Development Course was therefore as much about method and approach as it was about content.

Taught by lecturers of varied Marxist orientation including Ruth First, the course was innovative in its objectives, method and content, the course was helping civil servants understand the problems that were being faced by newly independent Mozambique. While they underwent research training these students remained within their individual workplaces to ensure that these students would in turn be able to integrate the tools of investigation into their work, and thus train others as well through common practice. The students recruited to participate in the course were of extremely varied educational backgrounds; some had only attended only primary school but had a good deal of work experience⁵.

The Development Course was initially conceived as a Masters level course in 1979 intended for Bachelor of Arts graduates from Eduardo Mondlane University's history department. The proposal was rejected on the basis that the course was too economic for history students. At First's insistence the course was offered at postgraduate level within the CEA even though it was later accredited with diploma status⁶.

As “an interdisciplinary” course with “own” students, the course was structured each year around a collective problem-oriented, policy-inspired and highly focused research project, based upon fieldwork preceded by research design. This was followed by analysis and write up; and supported throughout by wider- ranging course work that paid attention both to substance and to method (de Braganca & O’Laughlin, 1984).

The course did not seek to confront the professional preoccupations of each of the students, which would be clearly impossible in an interdisciplinary training of this character, but rather to identify those issues of production to which specialists could ultimately bring to bear their particular training, given an initially acute analysis of the problems and processes of transformation⁷. The linkages between teaching and research, and between research and practice was the product of several years of work and were not necessarily easy to conceive, and they were even more difficult to maintain.

⁵ Interview with Carlos Castel Branco May, 2011.

⁶ Interview with Luis de Brito May, 2011.

⁷ *ibid*

For First constructing a socialist Mozambique and in turn creating an alternative to the system of racial capitalism in organising production was the most important form of support that could be given to revolutionaries working within apartheid South Africa. The struggle for national liberation in South Africa was in her view, a struggle against capitalism and it was therefore to be expected that South Africa would strike with particular force against socialist Mozambique. The regional context was therefore a central part of the Development Course (CEA, 1982). Exploring the character of South Africa's racial capitalism and analysing the various class positions advanced in the struggle against it became a necessary part of the course.

The Development Course was important to First not only because of what it was in itself, but also for when and where it was located: in revolutionary Mozambique and at a revolutionary conjuncture in southern Africa. The course was also significant due to the importance that First attributed to scientific analysis in revolutionary work which also defined the objectives of the course. Implementing scientific analysis in this context meant using Marxist method to investigate as well as analyse the concrete and constantly changing situations which the Mozambican revolution needed to be confronted and directed.

Ruth First and Aquino de Braganca both believed that Marxism was a living tradition of analysis, rather than a fixed dogmatic system and above all they were both strongly committed to the success of the Mozambican revolution. First thought that Marxist literature was essential in teaching because it showed students how to analyse and how to apply this analysis politically. She also thought that students would only really master Marxist scientific analysis when they knew how to use it creatively in investigating their own realities. In the Mozambican context this meant students should be able to use the concept of class in an analysis of Mozambican class structure before they could really grasp the meaning of the concept.

Speaking at the conference on Social Sciences in Southern Africa which, was held in Maputo in July 1982 First stated that,

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 a 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.

Ruth First (1982) noted that the course faced a number of challenges in its attempt to break with conventional university recruitment. The kinds of problems First was referring to were 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 organisations and so on”. She went on to say “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”.

Still reflecting on these problems First went on to say,

“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 criterion, that involvement in work is very important and 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 students to learn. Now I don't say we've resolved it. We struggle with it.”

First pushed staff to think about new ways to organise the teaching and research of the course in an effort to overcome some of the apparent problems. The course was for starters reduced from two years to one year, and classes were structured more closely around the problematic of the research project. This experimentation was guided by First's conviction that scientific intellectual work was an indispensable part of any revolutionary struggle.

De Braganca and O'Laughlin (1984: 162) admit that outside of the Centre there was not always clarity as to what the Development Course was all about, and particularly why Ruth First was putting so much of her energy into it. There were those for instance who thought that fieldwork in the countryside was “simply an outlet for romantic infatuation with the peasantry, a sentimental and populist attachment to backwardness”. Her intentions in

Mozambique were also questioned by her comrades in the liberation struggle who considered her intense interest and opinions about questions such as the policy of agricultural mechanization in Mozambique strange. There were also feelings that she was withdrawing from the South African struggle which had been her preoccupation for most of her adult life.

During her time in Mozambique Ruth First “revelled 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” (Slovo, 2007: 14). She never shied away from a debate and had strong opinions, definite perspectives. This might have made her rigid and narrow; but it did not. She remained an intensely questioning person, with a great appetite for learning, with a free mind, an open ear, and a great sense of the ridiculous. Bridget O’Laughlin⁸ describes Ruth First as “a visionary” who knew how to be an academic and organise rigorous academic research. O’Laughlin⁹ recalls how Aquino de Braganca would sometimes introduce Ruth First as being from Oxford because she was a Wits graduate and later a lecturer at Durham University and it was his way of suggesting that she was a “real academic”.

Teresa Cruz e Silva¹⁰ who was both a CEA staff member and participant in the Development Course states that having come from a colonial university (UEM) where it was forbidden to study the history of Africa the CEA played a role in changing the role of social science, the conception of methodologies of learning and teaching. As a student of Ruth First's one of the most important lessons learnt from First's creative teaching is the tradition of critical analysis and the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. As a teacher she instilled in her students their obligation to understand what was going on in their country and the world because Mozambique is not isolated from the rest of the world. As Isabel Casimiro¹¹ states “she taught us how to work for society”.

Ruth First and the Story of Africa and African Politics

Ruth First's analysis of the African condition- both pre and post-independence- is adumbrated in several book-length studies, from South West Africa to Libya that, “stand today as prescient and persistent readings of the story of Africa and African politics”.

⁸ Interview August, 2011.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Interview April, 2011.

¹¹ Interview April, 2011.

Ruth First was an author who took the whole of Africa, and its peoples, for their province (Williams, 1996: 200).

In the introduction to her 1970 book *The Barrel of a Gun* she states “I count myself an African, and there is no cause I hold dearer.” Gavin Williams (1996) recalls that this preoccupation with Africa puzzled many including husband Joe Slovo who could not understand her continued interest with countries like Nigeria, Sudan and Libya instead of focusing her attention on the liberation of South Africa. Her continued preoccupation with the liberation of the African continent has become one of her defining characteristics.

In studying the African continent First remained a committed field researcher. In 1960 she headed to Namibia to do research for what was to become her first book. While the archives suddenly denied her access to documents written after 1946, Africans in the country were bursting with talk. To obtain data First conducted interviews on street corners, in motor cars, under trees, and in crowded shops. The resulting book *South West Africa* was a groundbreaking historical and political account based on a field that was particularly ignored by scholars at the time, remains one of her finest and most comprehensible books. In the book First is critical of the policies of apartheid South Africa commenting that “It drives Africans into the wilderness; creating not one South West Africa, but two, one privileged and the other deprived and both in never-ending conflict (Ruth First, 1963: 34).

She co-sponsored with Ronald Segal in 1966 an international conference on South West Africa advocating economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa which resulted in the publication of a collection of essays titled *South West Africa: Travesty of Trust*. The volume is divided into three sections ('Genesis: from Conquest to Mandate'; 'Inside South West Africa'; and 'The Abuse of Responsibility'), ranging from Helmuth Bley's paper extracted from his Hamburg thesis, tracing South West Africa's history from German conquest, to the South African of the mandate, and the contributions of J. Rogaly and Richard Gott, who analyse South Africa's defence arrangements in the territory. Although the collection of papers varies in quality the volume is repetitive and the papers by no means all deserve to be labelled as 'expert papers and findings'.

Between 1964 and 1968 the gallant scholar-activist continued her commitment to field research by navigating Africa from Lagos to Libya and from Accra to Khartoum, conducting

interviews with peasants and politicians, military-men and bureaucrats, in a bid to understand the phenomenon of the coups in Africa. The result was one of her more substantial works, *The Barrel of a Gun*, which was highly critical of Africa's leadership. She provides a detailed account of coups in places like Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana. In doing so First locates the military and their political activity within the wider context of political, economic, and social forces in African society. Written during a time when criticism of Africa's ruling elite was still subdued, writing the book took the independence of mind which characterised First's approach to scholarship.

Despite the book's obvious strengths and pioneering vitality *The Barrel of a Gun* has a number of weaknesses. Firstly one has to ask whether the five cases on which Ruth focused were really diverse enough for the sorts of conclusions she was drawing about political power and military rule in Africa. She herself seemed to recognise the dangers in generalising from very specific, idiosyncratic cases. Secondly in her determination to give Africans 'agency' she underplays the role of external actors in instigating instability on the continent. Since 1960, France has acted like a 'pyromaniac fire man', intervening about forty times in countries such as Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Togo, and Zaire, often to prop up dictators in trouble. And lastly while there is some truth to First's point about the dangers of armies fracturing the longer they stayed in power, the longevity of regimes like Libya's Qaddafi and Congo's Mobutu Sese Seko suggests that several military strongmen found ways to stop their armies from splintering and to preserving their own power.

In the preface to her 1975 book *Libya: the Elusive Revolution* First informs us that the book 'is based on four visits to Libya in the years since 1969 when the Revolutionary Command Council under Colonel Mu'ammarr Gaddafi came to power. The book offers a detailed analysis of the history of Libya before and after the 1969 coup. Her involvement as a journalist and editor focusing on issues relating to southern and South West Africa is evident in the book. First adopts a broad approach that includes a great deal of information that clarifies the historical and wider international setting in which the philosophy of Libya's political revolution emerged. In her analysis of Libya's pre-coup environment she concentrates on fruitless stirrings that may have represented attempts to bridge the gap between the structure of the monarchy and the basic reality of Libya's underdevelopment.

Her final book *Black Gold, Mozambican miner proletariat and Peasant* makes a textual argument threaded between some powerful photographs, work songs and case studies of Mozambican miners and their families. *Black Gold* deals more comprehensively than any previous study with labour migration from southern Mozambique (White, 1983). The book is distinct in that it changes the focus to one of the major labour supplying areas, Mozambique, which is intrinsically significant as it historically supplied anything from one quarter to two-thirds of the black labour on the South African mines. It also provides a study site where the comparative impact of a powerful regional capitalism and a weaker metropolitan capitalism can be assessed (Cohen, 1983). What emerges throughout the book is Ruth First's ability to pose key questions, to bring out what really matters in detail and to puzzle out how to go about getting answers to tough questions.

While *Black Gold* has its merits subtlety of analysis is not one of them. For instance the theoretical framework, that Mozambique was under the political domination of Portugal but the economic domination of South Africa, clearly reflects an agreed position at the CEA seminars. This theoretical framework is problematic as it under-estimates Portugal's own degree of industrialization in the late- nineteenth century, fuelled by profits from the slave trade. It also under-estimates the importance of the internal economic control. *Chibalo* (forced labour), for instance, reached its peak the 1940s after Portugal's corporatist authoritarian regime Estado Novo was fully entrenched (White, 1985: 323). The focus on South Africa's capital hold over Mozambique leads to a lack of focus on Portuguese capital influence which should not be ignored.

Conclusion

Writing six years after her death, and in the introduction to the second edition of her prison memoir *117 Days*, Ruth First's husband, Joe Slovo (1989) writes, "Ruth had 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, 1989: 4 cited in Harlow, 2010: 58). Her murder by the South African regime was therefore not only a blow against the liberation movements in South Africa and Mozambique; it was also a blow against scholarship in the continent.

For her colleagues at the Centre of African Studies she left a mandate to rethink and critique their own works: the organisation of the Centre, the principal lines of research and forms of teaching. Although in her absence the Centre was never what it was but she left a secure material base from which to begin an innovative organisation of collective work based on unity of political line; 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 courses and the teaching materials for new courses; and Mozambican cadres trained by First to analyse and act strategically in the struggle for socialist liberation in southern Africa.

References

- Adebajo, A. 2010. "The Barrel of a Pen: Ruth First's Pan- African Martyrdom". Paper Presented at the Conference, "Celebrating Gavin Williams", University of Oxford, England, 9- 10 July 2010.
- Gerry, C. 1983. "Ruth First: A Tribute". *Labour, Capital and Society*, 15(2), pp. 3- 4.
- CEA. 1982a. "Strategies of Social Research in Mozambique". *Review of African Political Economy*, 25 (5), pp. 29- 39.
- Coelho, J.P.B. 2008, "Memories of Ruth First in Mozambique", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 35, no. 117, pp. 500-507.
- Cross, M. 2011, *An Unfulfilled Promise. Transforming Schools in Mozambique*, African Books Collective.
- de Bragança, A. & O'Laughlin, B. 1984, "The Work of Ruth First in the Centre of African Studies: The Development Course", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 159-172.
- First, R. 1989, *117 Days*, Monthly Review Press.
- First, R. 1974, "Libya: the elusive revolution", .
- First, R. 1970, *The barrel of a gun: political power in Africa and the coup d'état*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press.
- First, R. 1963, *South West Africa*, Penguin books Harmondsworth,, UK.
- Harlow, B. 2010, "Looked Class, Talked Red: Ruth First, an intellectual biography", .
- Harlow, B. 2002, "Looked Class, Talked Red: Sketches of Ruth First and Redlined Africa", *Meridians*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 226-251.
- Isaacman, A. 2003, "Legacies of engagement: scholarship informed by political commitment", *African Studies Review*, , pp. 1-41.
- Manghezi, N. 2010, *The Maputo connection: the ANC in the world of Frelimo*, Jacana.
- Marks, S. 1983, "Ruth first: a tribute", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 123-128.
- Penvenne, J. & University Microfilms International 1982, *A history of African labor in Lourenco Marques, Mozambique, 1877 to 1950*, .

- Pinnock, D. 2007, *Writing Left: The Radical Journalism of Ruth First*, Unisa Press.
- Pinnock, D. 1997, *Voices of Liberation: Volume 2: Ruth First*, Human Sciences Research Council.
- Scott, A. 1983. "Ruth First (1925- 1982)". *History Workshop*, 15, pp. 214- 217.
- Segal, R. & First, R. 1967, *South West Africa: Travesty of Trust: the Expert Papers and Findings*, Deutsch.
- Slovo, G. 2007. "Portrait of an Activist: Ruth First and the South African Struggle". Lecture Presented at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of Ruth First's Death- 17 August 2007.
http://www.utexas.edu/law/centers/humanrights/events/speaker-series-papers/Slovo_Gillian.pdf [Accessed June 2010].
- Slovo, J. 1988. Introduction to Ruth First, 1988. *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African- Ninety Day Detention Law*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Williams, G. 1996, "Ruth first's contribution to African studies 1", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 197-220.