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‘Interpret the World Correctly in Advance of Changing it’

A Review of
Rethinking the Social Sciences with Sam Moyo,
edited by by Praveen Jha, Paris Yeros, and Walter Chambati
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When Sam Moyo, the outstanding scholar of the agrarian question, died in 2015, he left behind more than a great trove of writings, and more than memories, thoughts and theories to be picked up and deployed by those left living. He also left behind a set of institutions—living testaments—not least among them the African Institute for Agrarian Studies and its linked journal, the tricontinental *Agrarian South*.

In this he was perhaps unique amongst the great Global South scholars of the second half of the twentieth century. The recently published festschrift, *Rethinking the Social Sciences with Sam Moyo*, highlights his uniqueness. The book makes clear that Moyo’s intellect took shape as the noon of the national liberation struggles and the legacy of national-capitalist developmentalism was giving way to the dusk and midnight of the neoliberal dismantling of institutions and de-development of nation-states. That intellectual crystallisation occurred alongside the establishment of institutions. And, so, the volume is not merely about remembering him as an individual or his thoughts, but also concerns a

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rare ‘strategy[y] of epistemic survival’ when the national, continental or tricontinental institutions for advancing an epistemic challenge in the form of ‘autonomous knowledge production’ were under siege or invasion (xi).

The book emerges from a 2018 memorial conference at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and centres on several interlocking themes: one, epistemic sovereignty, an intellectual extension of the struggle for national liberation; two, the semiproletariat and small peasants as the anchors of postcolonial national development; three, their exclusion as inseparable from postcolonial underdevelopment; and four, imperialism and accumulation on a world scale as the macro situation within which and against which Moyo developed his life’s work.

For Moyo, thinking from the South meant thinking with, in support

of, and reflecting and shaping the vanguard struggles of those most dispossessed by the racial allocation of development and wealth. It was only natural, and it is a natural touchstone for the volume, that Zimbabwe appears again and again. The most important post-Cold War struggle for economic decolonisation revealed the ideology—that is, the ‘imperialist class position’—of ‘Western Marxism’ to be remorseless in its defence of white wealth and the colonial order against any nationalist challenge (Kadri 2021: 144).

The embargo against Moyo’s pristine empirical work on agrarian reform in Zimbabwe, which showed that this reform had begun to set in motion successful ‘accumulation from below’, echoed the imperialist siege and sanctioning of Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, as the chapter by Tendai Murisa describes, Black peasants drove agrarian reform, infusing the nationalist project with class content mixed with antiracist struggle. This, in turn, led to ever-broader democratisation: popular control over life and livelihood. The erasure of the catalytic role of the Black land occupations in driving agrarian decolonisation was a

historiographical-analytical erasure. Such blindness, furthermore, was a blindness to the struggle, which undermined the foundation stone of accumulation on a world scale: ‘monopoly control over land’ and ‘cheap agrarian labour supplies’. Those two elements, as Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik, other key interlocutors of Moyo, portray in *A Theory of Imperialism* (2016), are central to global accumulation.

Dzodski Tsikata, in her chapter, explains that the struggle for epistemic sovereignty, like any struggle, is an accretion of past experiences. Moyo’s work at CODESRIA, the pan-African social science organisation based in Dakar, and in a series of Zimbabwe-centred research and policy organisations, gave solid form to his research agenda: semiproletarianisation as a dominant mode of social being across the Third World and especially in Africa; the latent or living possibilities for re-peasantisation; and the omnipresence of circular social reproduction in Africa.

In a brilliant exegesis and expansion of semiproletarianisation, Lyn Ossome’s chapter brings out that phenomenon’s gendered aspects, thinking about the concept in relation to social reproduction. If the South functions as a massive labour reserve, which suppresses labour shares of value on a worldwide basis, this relationship hinges first on the unpaid work of women and children. As she asks, ‘What does it mean to be both part of surplus labour yet integral to the reproduction of that surplus ... domestic labour is not governed by the capital-wage relation but is nonetheless essential to it, even though on its own it may not be sufficient for the surplus population?’ She articulates the agrarian questions of gender and nation in terms of Moyo’s problematic of semiproletarianisa-

tion, as the gender contradiction is nested within, not subservient to, yet only resolvable by, a secure and sovereign state.

Archana Prasad adds to this question of social reproduction the question of how the active labour of humans reproduces nature, and how the positivist epistemology of imperial climate schemes erases that labour, facilitating the ‘expropriation of people from their habitat’. This erasure assists a vast South–North transfer of forest products, with the EU and US by far the largest consumers of such products. Prasad shows how northern REDD climate schemes do not remunerate the work that goes into preserving forests, in their way assuming that ‘the use of forests is against the interest of the planet as a whole’.

Similarly, William Martin explains that, for Moyo, semiproletarianisation and re-peasantisation reveal the North as sharply distinct from the South, with its own patterns of class formation and its own burdens of epistemic renaissance. Sovereignty of the South in the realm of thought meant being able to build theories that could make sense of the social realities of the South—to interpret the world correctly in advance of changing it.

Another theme, first visited in the introduction, is the class basis of nationalism, Pan-Africanism and tricontinentalism. For Moyo, in Africa this had to be a project rooted in the peasantry for it to be a project at all. He did not merely criticise dominant developmental theories, but sought to chart a different path for the South. Zimbabwe had begun to do in practice what he had long agitated for in theory—reclaiming the land and in the process reclaiming the nation. Such reclamations

and restitutions were necessary, if insufficient, conditions for a sovereign development path based on interlinked and complementary rural–urban agricultural–industrial interactions. That lock-in of value had to be based on the productive potential of the peasantry and their role in reconstituting South nationalism and reorienting it towards national liberation (Cabral 1979: 130–3). The class basis of nationalism as a political practice later meets the class basis of distinct theories of development. Issa Shivji returns to this question, clarifying that we cannot speak of ‘the national question’ without clarifying which social agent would be its bearer in the ‘actually existing conditions of Africa today’ (264).

The challenge posed in the book is epistemic and political, bringing history to bear on the alleged universal pretensions of Western theories of development, revealing them as parochial apologetics for unequal development. Sandeep Chachra touches upon this in his dissection of fashionable theories of spatial-demographic-political-economic transition based on the enchantment with cities. Subtending such models is an ideal-typical development model—basically, the US ‘path’—the original accumulation of which was based on the demographic demolition of western Africa and the Indigenous population of the Americas, robbing human beings and converting them into capital, or robbing human beings of their capital through colonial genocide and turning that land into the physical foundation of settler states.

Contemporary Third World cities have no such history of primitive accumulation to draw on for their late industrialisation. Already, Chachra adds, they are burdened by ‘fragility and vulnerability’

(218) with two billion informal labourers. Further depopulation of the countryside under such models could only increase the size of the surplus reserve army of labour, leading to further Third World wage suppression and wage suppression on a world scale. Against such fates foretold, Chachra suggests, ‘the future of urbanism lies ... in the conjoined development of the countryside and the city’, the former housing fully 40 per cent of the planet’s workers. People need their rights to land regularised and rights to work enshrined, and the struggle for land—the classic agrarian question of land and the fire that lit many a national liberation struggle—‘constitutes not a memory of history, but a design for the future’.

On a complementary note, Anamitra Roychowdhury in ‘Employment Opportunities in India’s Unregistered Manufacturing Sector’, clarifies the difficulties of leaning on decentralised manufacturing as a development strategy and as a labour sponge, concluding: the ‘scope of gainful employment creation in the unregistered manufacturing sector remains bleak’.

Continuing the book’s demolition of modernisation theories, Utsa Patnaik, in ‘Looking Back at Karl Marx’s Analysis of Capitalism in the Context of Colonialism’, notes that surplus transfers from India were the foundation stone for Western development: ‘the freedom of workers in the core countries was historically conditional on the imposition of unfreedom on non-European peoples.’ ‘Freedom’ was not an ideal-typical type of employment or political subjectivity, but bound up with a world-systemic relationship of un-freedom in the Third World and slave imports from Africa. Furthermore, ‘development’ was no nationally bound

process, but a Western manifestation of a global process that girded the Western working classes for national-level class struggles:

The massive inflow of colonial transfers which boosted domestically generated profits substantially, serving to raise mass living standards ... it is these features that allowed the industrialising nations to *externalise the acute internal contradictions* which would otherwise have torn their societies apart, and served to undermine the potential for revolution at the core.

Patnaik puts quantitative flesh on the qualitative-historical bones of these processes, showing that colonial transfers totalled USD 9.2 trillion. And if India, for example, were to retread the British path of outmigration to alleviate domestic class contradictions, it would have had to export 400 million human beings since independence. Such ‘transfers’ have hardly ceased in a ‘postcolonial’ age, although they are often frequently ignored amidst ongoing highfalutin’ chatter that places the origins of capitalism in internal British class relations and the origins of development amongst the glimmering struggles of the Western working class.

In a different way, the chapter on food grain prices by Arindam Banerjee points out how the much-vaunted suppression of commodity prices during ‘globalisation’, which subtended mythical possibilities of opening up, rested on an epochal and apocalyptic income deflation in the former Soviet states. Food got cheaper because an entire market of command economies almost evaporated, devastating the lives of the Second World poor, killing millions.

The final section of the book, ‘Unfinished Dialogues on Revolution and Liberation’, casts light on

older themes and new ones alike. Samir Amin clarifies how ‘emergence’ requires peasant production as the basis of national democratic development, which acquires its sharpest edge in the struggle against imperialism. Amin further notes how the emergence of East Asia is the legacy of socialism, with the capitalist satraps, the so-called model states of Third World developmentalism, having only ‘emerged’ to build a geo-economic Maginot Line around revolutionary China. India and Africa, further afield, remain at best trapped in lumpenddevelopment, with a modern sector and a crushed peasant labour reserve, which is at worst essentially excluded from development processes.

China recurs in these dialogues and visions. C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh in ‘Making Sense of Global Capitalism in the Twenty-first Century’, show how China has not merely become an offshore manufacturing platform but has challenged imperial rent in the form of monopoly control over knowledge. China has increasingly endogenised knowledge and moved up the value chain. In the challenging, ‘Legacy of China’s Land Revolution of 1949: An Unfinished Dialogue with Sam Moyo’, Erebus Wong, Wen Tiejun, Sit Tsui and Lau Kin Chi anchor China’s development path in its control over inflation. They also anchor the book’s implicit argument about the fundamental importance of China to Moyo’s thought and Third World development writ large.

Since value was moored to the sovereign production of agricultural needs, anchored in the land revolution and a ‘return’ to traditional peasant agriculture, the Maoist revolution was able to go ‘back’ to the past and, by stepping through that door, into the future.

China tied national finance to the national production of foodstuffs and productivity enhancements in its rural technological and infrastructural base. In so doing, it was able to do what yet had not been done: successfully emerge amidst and against the imperialist storm.

The authors contrast this experience with the export-oriented agricultural and raw commodity development path of the postcolonial world, wherein countries lose power over pricing and lose national finance, becoming subject to the vicissitudes of global market fluctuations and value drain all along the supply chain, 'as logistics, trading and financial clearing are controlled by transnational corporations from former suzerains or master-states'. Because the postcolonial countries are food-import dependent, they are locked into trying to vend their monocrop or monocommodity exports on markets they do not control. They lose control of their future.

Finally, Dinesh Abrol writes on the 'The Agrarian Question, Rising Indian Right-wing Populism and Worker-Peasant Alliance Building', showing how right-wing populism in India is based on intensified internal primitive accumulation, along various lines of difference: 'Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Muslims'. Meanwhile, the semiproletarian petty producers, 'poor peasants, landless peasants, rural labour, and artisans', continue to demand decommodified public services and support organising women to reduce their burden and the society-level unpaid component of labour (318). On a small note of hope, Abrol writes of increasing attention in India to the ecological dimensions of industrialisation, including ideas like circular economics, and the peo-

ple's science movement for rural industrialisation and agroecology.

In a number of respects, my main critique is that the interconnections between the various elements of the festschrift, and the way they achieve an organic unity building on ongoing conversations with Moyo, or part of his intellectual project as well as that of *Agrarian South*, may not be fully apparent to the reader not enmeshed in those conversations. In fact, the editors gave no instructions to contributors, so the smooth meshing of the chapters in fact mirrors the ambition and coherence of Moyo's memory and contributions. I wish to lift up a few of those themes.

One, the reader may not fully appreciate the centrality of the Chinese model to Moyo's thought and practice, nor to the institutions he left behind. Erebus Wong and his co-authors, Amin, Ghosh and others, make clear that China is critical, above all the legacy of how it dealt with its land question. But the contrast between Chinese endogenous capital formation and the settler-colonial or colonial path of late Victorian genocide, income deflation, drain and settler land alienation and social disarticulation is left implicit, to be drawn out from the chapters. It could have been made more explicitly, illuminating more starkly the fundamental distinction between Chinese primary accumulation and the Western path. Similarly, a bit more on how Moyo saw the Chinese revolution would have been interesting, not least for a window into its impact on pan-Africanist radical and Marxist thinking about development more broadly.

Second, I would have liked a bit more on how Moyo's focus on semiproletarianisation was woven into the book's conceptual fab-

ric: the land question, the national question, re-peasantisation, peripheral labour reserves, and the impossibility of mimetic copies of the Western developmental path. All this is there. But one must know the importance Moyo attached to the concept of the semiproletariat to see how these concepts and frameworks, explained clearly in the book, achieve a unity and reflect Moyo's own unity of thought. Redistributing the land and focusing state developmental policy on smallholders opens up developmental vistas theretofore over the horizon. It closes the circle of colonial-imperialist disarticulation that was opened up by land alienation, distorted development, drain and the use of the people of the Third World against themselves, their existence a mechanism of surplus extraction through wage suppression and uncompensated social reproduction rather than a part of building up national use values.

Third, there is a bit of a gap around industrialisation. False industrial paths, as with Indian decentralised manufacturing, or South Korean and Japanese industrialisation under the imperial law of value, are rightly dismissed. Chinese sovereign industrialisation receives its due. But where and what are proper developmental paths for the periphery in the current context, beyond the necessary technical upgrading of agriculture? People's technology movements, in fact, have a lot in common with the Chinese decentralised accretion of knowledge and industrialisation during the Maoist period, an experience that needs revisiting in any strategy for delinked and autocentred development.

Four, where lies the Soviet experience in the thought and practice of Moyo, and in the historical conditions within which he grew politi-

cally and intellectually? The book successfully brings out how the destruction of the USSR actually led to massive death and hunger in the Second World. But it would have been interesting to see some of Moyo's perspectives on the USSR, the epistemic space its existence kept open, and the developmental possibilities it had cleaved open for the Third World—a false view, given the irrepressible Latin American revolts—to become impossibilities during the 'end of history'. This end featured globalisation, capitalist advance, mop-up operations against Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, and the asphyxiation of Zimbabwe as its people sought to turn political into economic decolonisation, much to the consternation of Western governments.

Five, it is important to be clear how Zimbabwe brought the semi-proletariat class to the fore as the central actor of a renewed urban—

rural migration, setting in motion accumulation from below. Zimbabwe's challenge was material and ideological: material to the racial-colonial-capitalist polarisation of wealth; and ideological, in that Zimbabwe's challenge, laced into a Look East strategy that only the Maoist success in China made possible, was to hypostasise ideal-typical theories of social change that were emerging from the devil's cauldron of London Marxism.

When such Black Africans stepped onto history's stage, they were abruptly swatted at with sanctions and their interlocutors and academic champions derided as the stooges of another Black African leader, Mugabe apologists and other terms of abuse. In that sense, the 'rethinking' to which Moyo devoted his life reached its capstone as Zimbabweans did the unthinkable, which was met by a wall of

disinterest and contempt from the clerics of Western Marxism. These preferred to drone on about Spinoza, neopatrimonialism, populism or authoritarianism rather than support the dispossessed in taking action against their dispossessors. Whether the challenge will be taken up, of accepting that the subject of world ecological, political and social revolution remains on the periphery, remains to be seen. But this collection throws down that gauntlet with verve, elegance, sophistication and commitment—a fitting legacy for Moyo himself.

References

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