

A Tribute to ABDALLA BUJRA

The loss of Abdalla Bujra has not been easy to accept. His exuberance. His snap questions so sharp. His quiet sense of humour that was always followed by an infectious laugh.

Though we had crossed paths at the University of Nairobi in 1970, I got to know Abdalla much better in Dakar in 1975. I had gone to the UN Institute for Development and Economic Planning (IDEP) as a research fellow. My thesis was a study of the 'Political economy of coffee production in Ivory Coast'.

Samir Amin was the director of IDEP then, and had done extensive research on agrarian issues in West Africa. He had also published the book *L'Afrique de l'Ouest bloquée* (translated as *Neo-colonialism in West Africa*). I intended to learn from him during my stay at IDEP, which I did.

In the meantime, I met Abdalla and Thandika Mkandawire, who were nursing the birth of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) literally 'on the ribs of IDEP'! I say so because their offices were tucked somewhere downstairs to the left of the IDEP building, literally 'struggling to be noticed'.

Since both Abdalla and Thandika were immersed in research on agrarian issues, I found their company indispensable. They were both very helpful to me in the work I was doing, especially on the problematic that I had framed in terms of the 'articulation of modes of production'.

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In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, large-scale French coffee farmers introduced capitalist agriculture by depriving peasants of their land and turning them into 'farm hands' who lived in their own homes. This is what Samir Amin called 'a proletariat working at home'.

Abdalla Bujra, in his anthropological thesis, 'The politics of stratifications: A study of political change in a South Arabian town', analysed this 'articulation of modes of production' and how it manifests itself in social struggles and political change in peasant and poor urban communities.

According to Bujra and Mkandawire, the study of African politics had been too 'party-centric', 'independence-centric' and 'political power-centric'. There was inordinate attention paid to 'nationalism' and the elites who led whole nations to independence and captured political power. Granted, this was in and of itself a story worth telling, but what about the people who were involved in the struggles? Who were they and what were their interests in supporting nationalism and the struggle for independence? When we go further and accuse the elites, newly in power after independence, of having 'betrayed the people', what does this really mean? What evidence do we have to make this judgement?

The search for the answer to these questions led to Thandika and Abdalla urging me to put together a group of African scholars for a research project on 'popular struggles for democracy in Africa'. Our book by the same title covered such struggles in Uganda, Congo, Zaire, South Africa, Ghana, Liberia and Kenya, and was published by Third World Forum in 1987.

Abdalla Bujra and Thandika Mkandawire need to be credited for laying the solid framework within which CODESRIA has continued, under Godwin Murunga, to develop social sciences in Africa, by mobilising the African social science community to undertake fundamental policy-oriented research from a perspective that is relevant to the demands of the African people.

The question 'Whither Africa?' cannot be answered adequately without developing this knowledge. Nor is this kind of knowledge closed in an intellectual way that cannot open itself to further inquiry. Social, political and economic changes will always open doors to new questions which, by themselves, require looking into new theoretical constructs. That, indeed, is how knowledge grows and why there is the need for an unorthodox dialogue in the social sciences based on sound social theory. Bujra always emphasised this point.

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