

John S Saul. *Revolutionary Traveller: Freeze Frames From a Life*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2009. 436 pp. & John S Saul. *Recolonization and Empire*. London: Merlin, 2008. 202 pp.

John Saul has been one of the foremost scholars of Southern Africa for fifty years. He is known not only for his thoughtful presentation of the case for democratic socialism, which he argues is the only humane development strategy for the region, but also as a “scholar activist” who has blended his scholarly research and analysis with his commitment to fostering political change in Southern Africa and in Canada as well. The two volumes I review here represent his most recent attempts to reflect on his long (and far from over!) career, addressing these themes of democratic socialist development and scholar activism in quite different – albeit intersecting – ways. *Revolutionary Traveller* is a scholarly memoir that beautifully integrates Saul’s first-hand knowledge and activism with his intellectual preoccupations during critical moments in his life as it intersected with the history of Southern African decolonization, development and recolonization. Organized in chronological chapters, Saul contextualizes a selection of passages of his writings (especially less formal writings like reports and magazine articles) with information about where he was in his life at that point, and thus, how his academic and activist commitments together informed his analysis. Saul says: “the book seeks to register the fact of solidarity as many, including myself, have attempted to live it – something that is, of course, easier to do when one becomes convinced that struggles around the world, in both Southern Africa and Canada for example, are linked together by their focus upon a common enemy: capitalism, both local and global” (p. 9).

Even for those who have known Saul over a number of years (and I must come clean here – I came to York University to begin my PhD in 1991 in order to study with Saul, who supervised my doctoral dissertation and at the same time became a comrade and friend through our joint work on Southern Africa Report until its demise in 2000), there will be things to learn here, for his intellectual life has richly informed his activist life – and *vice versa* – throughout his career. This is one important contribution of his book – it illustrates the importance of passion and political commitment in developing the intellect, and simultaneously, the relevance of what Saul calls “scientific” knowledge in informing activism. You do not need to

know Saul to be able to learn much from his personal, intellectual and political journey as it is presented here.

Saul takes us from Tanzania in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the hope and disappointment of its particular brand of “African socialism,” to the liberated areas of Mozambique and the promise and subsequent disappointment of FRELIMO’s socialist project there (defeated, as Saul notes, primarily through the external interference of South Africa, backed by the US and other Western powers, but ultimately also hampered by its own internal rigidities and failures). We then join Saul back in Canada to fight against the hypocrisy of the government and corporate sector, with frequent sojourns to join the struggle for democracy in South Africa in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and some attention to Zimbabwe, where Saul saw quite early the opportunism in Mugabe’s political project. In all, as Saul notes, “the main focus is on the kind of solidarity I came to forge with those struggling against global capitalism, principally in southern Africa, and on the dramatic natures of those struggles themselves” (p. 18).

The book will most obviously be of interest to those who know and love Saul – and there are many who have been inspired by him and his work over the years – but also is relevant to students seeking to understand how it was that Africa (today often portrayed as a hopeless continent) was an inspiration to people around the world in the 1960s and 1970s. It is all too easy today to forget the promise that decolonization represented in Africa, and the importance and global influence of movements like Frelimo in the 1960s and 1970s. The promise of this era has become all but a footnote in current-day scholarship and teaching, yet Saul reminds us of the continuities as well as the disjunctures in post-colonial, anti-capitalist struggles in Southern Africa. Saul’s work reminds us of the importance of continually developing our perspectives on Africa, but at the same time, keeping those aspects that inspired such hope just a few decades ago front and centre.

Such sentiments, albeit with a more sober cast, shape *Decolonization and Empire*, the second book I will review here. Saul sets out here to explore current debates on empire and the contemporary status of the struggle for socialism in Southern Africa in light of the apparently unshakable dominance of global capitalism. Socialism – for Saul, “the hegemony of democratically determined social needs, requirements and priorities over and against the

“choices” of the market and those in social, economic and political power who control it,” (p. 4) is the only political objective that makes sense for Africa, Saul argues, given global capitalism’s demonstrated inability to develop the continent in a way that benefits the majority even minimally.

In *Decolonization and Empire*, Saul reviews recent proposals to foster social change that may have relevance for Southern Africa, focusing in particular on two recent frameworks for thinking about such questions. The first has been exemplified in recent writings advocating the benign advantages of “empire,” notably those by Niall Ferguson and Michael Ignatieff. Saul deftly dismisses their claims as idealizing the impact of (neo)colonialisms, past and present, on the African continent, and argues that such perspectives are precisely designed to foster the kind of amnesia of the situation on the ground in Africa under both colonial forms and assume the progressive and positive impact of capitalism, when Saul finds no evidence that capitalism can beneficially develop Africa for Africans. The second set of proposals has been drawn from the recent socialist impulses in South America, which are more promising in Saul’s estimation, and reinforce the pragmatic advantages of building new, democratic socialist impulses at the nation-state level. Saul is far from sanguine about the possibilities for similar government-cum-political movements in Southern Africa in the immediate future, but nonetheless sees some promise here for inspiring the kind of political leadership willing to foster the genuine democratic accountability being attempted in parts of South America.

Saul’s work remains an inspiration to scholars and activists in Southern Africa and around the world. Each of his books offers a sober and relevant reflection on the possibilities and dilemmas for genuinely emancipatory human development in Southern Africa, offering both a clear vision of the bold changes needed and a sober assessment of the challenges that must be surmounted to achieve such a reasonable yet seemingly distant objective. *Revolutionary Traveller* makes the additional case for a genuine and engaged politics of solidarity that recognizes the interconnected nature of struggles for social justice.

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