David Moore Interview

August 2022

RF:
David, as an academic who has researched Zimbabwe for many years, please tell us how and why you became interested in this country.

DM:
You could go back as far as 1971, when at the age of 15 or 16 I was skipping Sunday School for some reason (yes, I'm a WASP – White Anglo-Saxon Protestant raised in English Canada, but a bit of a quiet dissident even then) and listening to a really good Canadian Broadcasting Corporation current affairs radio show. This time it was about the Pearce Commission in (then) Rhodesia, which was set up by the Brits – who bore some responsibility for getting that nuisance Ian Smith and his white minority regime with its 'Unilateral (illegal) Declaration of Independence' propounded to stave off the wave of decolonisation around them - off the backs of those looking forward to being Zimbabweans with full democratic rights, and preparing a guerrilla war in order to do so. Some of the African nationalists and white liberals there had taken the Commissions mandate to 'consult the people of Rhodesia' literally, to include black Africans, so this widespread consultation process started all over the place. I was fascinated by this apparent stalling and re-igniting of democratic ideals in this part of the world. I also had an assignment for my World Politics class – taught by Mrs Cameron, one of the best high school teachers I ever had – due the next day or so. So there was a cool and unique story – I might even have had to present it orally – and I think I did quite well with it.

As the years went on, the guerrilla war, with all of its contradictions, proceeded, to reach its apogee in 1980, as my revival of a delayed undergraduate degree after some time in the Ivory Coast was reaching its end. The radical ferment in the universities those days had perhaps also approached its climax, and by the time I started post-graduate work I met my soon-to-be supervisor John Saul, who had been teaching in Tanzania and Mozambique. He was enamoured with Samora Machel of Mozambique's Front for the Liberation of Mozambique and FRELIMO's socialist potential, which in the midst of Robert Mugabe's rise to power within the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU went on to rule Zimbabwe and still does, albeit with the slightly different nomenclature of ZANU-Patriotic Front: there is quite a story behind *that*), which at the time he was in touch with Machel was supporting a group of young Marxist-oriented radicals who had been tasked with re-igniting the liberation struggle after a ceasefire whilst some ill-fated settlement plans were underway. One of their objectives was to unite the two main Zimbabwean liberation movements. It was not long until Mugabe – who for some time was under FRELIMO house arrest given the uncertainty of his provenance amidst the factional battles going on in ZANU – got to the top of the political pole and with the help of Machel imprisoned these 'young Turks'. They have since more-or-less been wiped out of the history books (although, ironically, as we talk the current regime is trying to make the leader of this short-lived and mostly ignored 'youth movement' a 'National Hero', along with a few other – ideologically and strategically very different! – forgotten nationalists, in some sort of attempt to patch together a fragmented ruling party as the 2023 elections approach).

The book argues that this late 1976-7 moment marked Mugabe's leadership style forever. When he announced a new central committee in the wake of their side-lining he warned that "the axe would fall" on any further agents of what he thought was 'counter-revolution'. But in the next moment he advised his co-leaders to get to the books to read up on Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought. This instance signified his authoritarian ways mixed up in a melange of an attempt at intellectualism that marked his legacy for ever – ending with a sad, but soft, coup at 2017 came

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to an end. This is probably the main aim of the book – after what is about half a century of my engagement with it, in various contexts.

RF:
This book attempts to answer questions about Robert Mugabe in a more expanded way, including the affective economies that surround the man. Can you tell us more about your aim in this book in that arena.

DM:
Well the book is not *really* about the political economy of Mugabe's legacy, although there are parts of it that discuss the massive inflationary consequences of printing money to stave off the many crises coalescing in Zimbabwe (and serve as a tricky way for those with access to official forex rates to get rich quick), and the epilogue gets into the current manifestation of them a bit. As South Africans we are somewhat familiar with the effects of Zimbabwe's many crises south of the Limpopo too: they contribute the xenophobia that has infected many South Africans. Some of the theoretical discussion in the book may however indicate some of the economies (in the sense that what some call 'Mugabeism' may indicate something akin to a new sort of 'mode of production and reproduction' or what some Anthropologists call a 'mode of belonging' that spreads far beyond Zimbabwe) contingent with the way Mugabe worked on the various fissures in an emerging ruling class – playing their agents off against each other with elements of coercion, consent, and corruption in a way that only a reincarnation of Antonio Gramsci could understand fully – led to his being persuaded by a section of the liberation 'war vets' in the late 1990s to follow through on his many promises to take over and parcel up a good proportion of the large capitalist farms owned by white Zimbabweans. That was one of his last straws as opposition to his rule was on the cards in his own party, and fully displayed with the new Movement for Democratic Change – with a working-class base and also in the wake of renewed liberalism, supported by 'the west', in post-Cold War Africa. Given that the forward and backward linkages between this capitalist agricultural sector and urban, industrial ones were tight, and many, the formal economy spiralled down quickly (and there went the working class and tne MDC's social democratic stance, to a great extent). Given a whole host of other global and local contradictions that last straw broke Zimbabwe's economic back. As Thabo Mbeki wrote in a fascinating 2001 ANC document this 'Mugabeist' mode of rule had led the country to the effective rule of the 'lumpen-proletariat'! One could say that the type of ruling class arising out of this process is a 'lumpen-bourgeoisie' with very little grasp of productive strategies, consensual leadership, or even a very solid hold on the levers of force. We have what many Anthropologists and political economy scholars

RF:
There is already quite a bit of scholarship on Mugabe and Zimbabwe. What intervention are you trying to make with this book in that area of scholarship?

DM:
Over forty year of scouring the archives, interviewing scores of actors, and visiting Zimbabwe many times – this is sort of a long-term ethnography of a ruling class-in-the-making, some of its best critics, and their formative moments since the 1960s – provides new empirical material with an historical depth and contemporary width that should be worthwhile and even unique amidst what is indeed a plethora. One of the reasons I moved to teach here in South Africa was to be closer to my favourite country. Furthermore, I think some of the theoretical interventions in the book – running from my 'Development Studies 101' riff on the Holy Trinity (the father is primitive accumulation – of course, Karl Marx; the son is a hybrid of Gramscian and Weberian takes on hegemonic construction and state formation; and the holy ghost is this wide-ranging idea of 'democracy' in both its deep and shallow manifestations) to what might be interesting discussions of 'truths and false truths' – and discussions of 'states of exception/emergency' – as they relate to the many real and imagined coup attempts running through this history and the conceits of this rapacious and often feckless ruling group might add some flavour based in recent theoretical discussions of a world in the midst of a long interregnum (bringing to mind recent thinking on Gramscian ideas of all the morbid symptoms within these long periods of liminality). I think the book builds on some of the best of what is an excellent core of a lot of Zimbabwean scholarship: only some of it is marred by some fairly obvious examples of partisan politics and that nearly eternal

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moment of the nationalist myth bereft of decent class analysis and political economy.

It could also be said that the *African Arguments* motif is to present relatively short and accessible books that will suit both academics and interested ‘lay’ folks ranging from activists to other people whose roles Gramsci would have interrogated as ‘organic intellectuals’. If *Mugabe’s Legacy* manages very tough task it might be unique, too.

RF:
While this book focuses on Mugabe and Zimbabwe, what lessons and connections can be established from this research on a global scale.

DM:
As I look back on the book and its subjects I think we need more interrogation of the ideas of ‘mode of production’ that people such as Harold Wolpe wrote about in his path-breaking work on South Africa’s particular manifestation of the articulation of these modes here, in the crises of the 1970s as apartheid reached the beginning of its end. We are in crisis mode now too. It is manifested by new ways of thinking within a decentred intelligentsia ranging from decoloniality (which may get too centred on a romantic past) to the deader ends of ‘neo-patrimonialism’ among the liberals and conservative scholars stuck in their decades of Afro-pessimism: any of their optimism in the ‘neo-liberal’ (so often just a platitude of the ‘left’ with not much more to offer either) solution to the world-wide crises of the seventies (as the Golden Age of Capitalism came to a close) must have been quelled by now, given the dual challenges of the post-Covid recovery and the joblessness promised by the so-called 4th Industrial Revolution. There are no solutions on offer as we have reached the *cul-de-sac* of any political-economic model – ranging from the debris of the old-Soviet style systems to the rise of the right embedded in the rule of Trumps and Bolsonaros all over. Come to think of it, the current instance of this global shift and its uncertain end – that being the war between Russia and Ukraine – impels us all to look much deeper into the histories of authoritarian rulers such as Putin (he has his Rasputins, and of course they reach far back), to get back at the fantasies inherent in the American dream/nightmare, and many on this continent.

One of the aims of the book is to warn against the teleological views of history and futures – it’s a bit of a contradiction because so much of the weight in the Holy Trinity of Development is wrapped up in these certainties. If anything, Mugabe’s Legacy should warn us that uncertainty is what rules interregna that have no pre-determined end: this actually should enable open-ended thinking and arguing about what kind of future we could imagine out of the potentiality that is inherent in crises.

RF:
The relationship between Mugabe’s Zimbabwe and post-1994 South Africa has been complicated and controversial. How do you understand this relationship?

DM:
I think I noted this in my thoughts on Mbeki’s 2001 treatise. If anything these relations indicate the difficulties of what might be a ‘regional hegemon’ exercising leadership in the wake of a crisis of the southern African liberation legacy. As the promises of the Holy Trinity break down on one’s borders, ones borders cannot hold them off. From Cosatu’s support for the working class in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s to ‘Mbekian despair’ (not a do-nothingness but actual support: fraudulent elections were lauded as fair-enough; a negotiated ‘Government of National Unity’ in the wake of the 2008 rampant ruling party violence ended up giving ZANU-PF breathing space to recoup; and the 2017 coup was more-or-less

supported as the only way to remove Mugabe) to the current responses to xenophobic sentiments such as the cancellation of the Zimbabwean exemption permits, all illustrates the actual powerlessness of an already shakily emerging system of rule. It should be remembered that the days of July 2021 indicate the deep fractures in ANC rule, so it can't be expected that much can be done across borders.

RF:
Can you explain how Mugabe went from a freedom fighter to a ruthless dictator over the course of 40 years? What mechanisms do we have to understand this transition?

DM:
I think I have gone though this above: perhaps the contingencies of his rise to power amidst an already fracturing new ruling group suggest the extreme difficulties of fashioning freedom therein. But instead of working to fill the gaps, Mugabe worked them to his advantage until he grew too old to manage them. Rule by conspiracy and conceit leads to true and false coups. Marxists (hard and soft ones) and Weberians and most good social scientists never veered away from the violence inherent in changing modes of production and politics, but rulers hide from public acknowledgement of that reality while using it, simultaneously denying the means and ends of its use while it's in open display. To be sure, there are scores of underlings and aspirants who augment these mechanisms in the hopes of gaining from them. Perhaps when they find are forced to find their allies among the 'subalterns' instead of their commanders these mechanisms will change.

RF:
What do you think Mugabe's legacy is today, both inside Zimbabwe and within a pan-Africanist frame?

DM:
I guess a true pan-Africanism would threaten the states in which today's rulers gain much of their power and wealth, so the way in which Mugabe used an 'anti-imperialist' discourse did not do much to build that agenda. The struggles against such modalities of power and rhetoric *are* pan-African, as one sees from Sudan to Nigeria to here. There has always been a progressive legacy struggling from under 'Mugabeism' but it if often crushed: this is the lesson of the youthful challenges in the midst of the liberation war that he quelled.

RF:
In terms of your own research, what is next?

DM:
I promised the 'hero' of *Mugabe's Legacy* before he died in 2014 that I would edit and add to the second edition of his book (*Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter)* so that should be done within a decade of his death. I have always been a theorist *manqué* so would like to see if the idea of an 'African mode of production' has any traction, and I would like to jostle with Edmund Burke's ideas of 'tradition' with Gramsci's. I would also like to pursue the thoughts of Richard Wright as he moved from membership of the American Communist Party to his engagement with the leaders of the emerging 'third world' in his book arising from his visit to the Bandung conference in 1955 – that book, *The Colour Curtain,* was published by a CIA front. His 1940 *Native Son* is a stunning take on race and class in Chicago with a strong Marxisant take. This transition might say a lot about current ideological moves here and abroad. But I am supposed to be retired so should get to know what that is really like.