Mozambique – Ideals and Reality

Mozambique the Revolution Under Fire
Joseph Hanlon Zed Press, £6.95

In the aftermath of a revolutionary seizure of power, all is euphoria or hatred, depending on whose side you happen to be on. Thus early writings on the Mozambican revolution tended to be either crass apologies for Portuguese colonialism, or quite uncritical adulations of Frelimo's regime itself. But that was not how it was presented in Mozambique, and Frelimo still shows a remarkable capacity for self-criticism, as demonstrated at the Party's Fourth Congress in April 1983. There are few other ruling parties in which a Congress delegate could tell the President to his face: 'We have been infiltrated. Some of our enemies are sitting on the Central Committee and on the Council of Ministers'. There are even fewer in which the critic would then be elected to the new Central Committee.

But independent Mozambique has largely been shaped by the experience of war – first against the Smith regime in what was then still Rhodesia, and then against South Africa and its surrogates of the 'Mozambique National Resistance' (MNR). It was the ravages of the MNR that turned the 1983 drought into a disaster, and condemned an unknown number of Mozambicans to death by starvation (assisted, it should be said, by the tardy response of western food donors to Mozambique's appeal for aid).

Mozambique survived the South African onslaught in itself no mean achievement. But it survived desperately weakened, with its economy shattered, and obliged to seek a rescheduling of its foreign debt. By early 1984 there was little option but to sign a non-aggression pact. Far from being a 'sell-out', as proclaimed in ultra-left quarters, the Nkomati Accord was the best deal that could be negotiated after months of tenacious Mozambican diplomacy, first with South Africa's allies, then with the apartheid regime itself. But that was not how it was presented in

Now, ten years later, the Mozambican economy lies in ruins, tens of thousands of Mozambican peasants have starved to death in a largely human-made famine, and the Frelimo government has signed a non-aggression pact with South Africa. Clearly it is time for a cool, unsentimental assessment. What went wrong? Or was it all inevitable? Was the path followed by Mozambique dictated by the catastrophic colonial heritage, and by the sheer brute strength of neighbouring South Africa?

Joseph Hanlon is well-placed to write such an assessment. He spent over four years based in Maputo freelancing for the BBC, the Guardian, and a host of other publications. His book draws on a wealth of personal experience, and on an extensive network of reliable sources, official and unofficial. The result is a work which, while deeply sympathetic to the fight to build a Mozambican socialism, can point accurately to the weaknesses and contradictions in Frelimo's politics.

Perhaps the most glaring of these is the heavy dose of voluntarism in Mozambican economic policy. There is a yawning gap between the beautiful ideals cherished by the Frelimo leadership, and the harsh realities of underdevelopment. To bridge the gap spectacular plans were drawn up on paper to conquer underdevelopment in a single decade. A grandiose ten-year plan was passed unanimously by the Mozambican parliament but was then quietly shelved when it was realised that the fantastic rates of growth called for were unattainable. Indeed, even before the vote was taken the economic ministries were already working on a much more modest three-year plan.

Where unrealistic economic policies have done most harm is in agriculture. Gigantic state farms were assumed to be the quickest way of increasing production, and supplying the cities with foodstuffs. But most Mozambican farmworkers lacked the technical expertise to cope with the heavy machinery that was imported for the state farms. Lacking also were the managerial skills to deal with the organisation of huge agro-industrial complexes. So most state farms became graveyards for tractors (assisted, it should be said, by the tardy response of western food donors to Mozambique's appeal for aid).

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Democratisation is another thorny issue. A commitment to grass-roots democracy has co-existed uneasily with authoritarian practices, some of them deriving from the state of war in which Mozambique has lived for 20 years, some of them survivals from colonialism, and some deeply embedded in the 'orthodox' Marxism-Leninism that Frelimo has inherited. Democracy in Mozambique is also constantly under threat from a nightmarish bureaucratic system, not much modified from Portuguese days, but now operated by a parasitic layer of timeservers and technocrats, rightly described by Hanlon as 'neither red nor expert'.

Yet despite formidable obstacles, democracy does function, albeit fitfully, in Mozambique, and Frelimo still shows a remarkable capacity for self-criticism, as demonstrated at the Party's Fourth Congress in April 1983. There are few other ruling parties in which a Congress delegate could tell the President to his face: 'We have been infiltrated. Some of our enemies are sitting on the Central Committee and on the Council of Ministers'. There are even fewer in which the critic would then be elected to the new Central Committee.

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Mozambique. Putting on a brave face, Frelimo described the Accord as a ‘victory for our socialist peace policy’. A perfectly legitimate compromise with the enemy was thus exaggerated into a triumph – to the visible annoyance of Mozambique’s allies. The virtue of the Nkomati Accord is that it may give Mozambique a breathing space, may give the embattled socialist republic the chance to fight another day. But that is not what the official speeches say.

Hanlon does not shrink from the most damaging result of the military confrontation – the tendency towards increasingly repressive measures. The death penalty was introduced in Mozambique, first for treason and related offences in 1979, and was then extended to cover serious economic crimes in 1983. Also in 1983 an astonishing law reintroduced the hated colonial practice of flogging, and a hasty evacuation of the unemployed from the cities was organised, with predictably unpleasant results. Such measures fly in the face of Frelimo ideals, but Mozambican leaders would doubtless argue that they had little choice. The great danger is that acts of this nature will undermine Frelimo’s claim to be building an ‘alternative civilisation’ to that of apartheid South Africa.

One of the undoubted triumphs of the Mozambican revolution has been the creation of a health service accessible to all citizens. Hanlon devotes an entire chapter to health policy and the class struggles it generated. Another recent Zed publication Mozambique: towards a People’s Health Service is also a very valuable account of these developments.

After ten years of independence the health sector has changed out of recognition. A network of rudimentary health posts covers the rural areas; the views of the consumers of health care are now listened to; in drugs policy the international pharmaceutical companies have been taken on and defeated; links have been built between hospitals and communities, and more health workers have been trained than in the entire 500 years of the Portuguese presence in Mozambique.

As Information Minister Jose Luis Cabaco said in summing up the revolution, in the remark which Hanlon uses as an introduction to his book: ‘The number of errors we have made is enormous. But our success is that, despite the errors, we have built something’.

Paul Fauvet

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Hegemony in Dispute

The Gramscian Challenge

John Hoffman, Basil Blackwell £17.50

In the mid-1970s the Italian Communist Party, in a series of joint statements with the French and Spanish and other Communist parties, including the British, declared that the advance to socialism in their countries could only take place on the basis of the extension of personal and collective civil liberties and the plurality of political parties. These statements gave rise to the term ‘Eurocommunism’.

This has been called the ‘third road’ to socialism, in contrast to the experience of social democratic governments which have not led to socialism, and to the path followed in the Soviet Union and the other socialist states in Eastern Europe. This approach is especially well fitted to Britain, where there are such deep-rooted traditions of struggle for religious, cultural and political freedoms – and it is the basis followed in the Soviet Union and the other socialist states in Eastern Europe. This approach is especially well fitted to Britain, where there are such deep-rooted traditions of struggle for religious, cultural and political freedoms – and it is the basis followed in the Soviet Union and the other socialist states in Eastern Europe.

For John Hoffman, however, Eurocommunism is a new ‘revisionism’, because its ‘rediscovered’ emphasis on democracy and consent is ‘an emphasis which it shares perfectly with Bernstein and the late Kautsky’.

Gramsci’s political writings, especially his concept of hegemony, are widely recognised as a key influence in the development of Eurocommunism. Hoffman’s book therefore sets out to confront the challenge of Gramsci.

He takes the central theme of his book from Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks (1929-35): the question of politics in terms of consent and coercion. He argues that Gramsci was right in seeing this as a key issue for Marxist political theory, but that his analysis, for all its pioneering significance, fails. The reason is that Gramsci treats consent and coercion as organically separate, whereas they should be understood as dialectically united.

Hoffman founds his argument on Marx’s analysis of commodity circulation in Capital, where Marx shows how the apparent equal exchange between the labourer who sells his labour power and the capitalist who buys it, conceals the coercive exploitation of the labourer in the factory. Just as consent and coercion are two aspects of a single process in the economic sphere, so they are also in the political sphere; for this economic coercion is re-expressed in the state, as the coercive institution which at the same time commands consent. It does this by representing the particular interests of the capitalist class in the generalised form of an illusory community. The state is a coercive instrument of class rule, but it is an ideologically charged instrument, which generalises the consensual illusions inherent in capitalist production and circulation.

Hoffman claims that this synthesis of coercion and consent is implicit in what he calls ‘classical Marxism’ – the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin. His theme is explored with great ingenuity and erudition, and in a chapter on philosophy, he develops the notion that consent is the dialectical negation of coercion. If his theory is sound, it follows that the working class can only gain state power by opposing its own coercive force to that of the capitalist class, and that the Eurocommunist strategy of a democratic road to socialism is a myth. But there are many difficulties in taking such a simplistic view of the state – it is merely an instrument of the capitalist class. A major problem is Hoffman’s view that the capitalist state obtains consent by virtue of its being the generalised form of an illusory community.

Gramsci’s concept of hegemony was based in part on his experiences in Italy after the First World War when he had to confront the question: why did the Italian parliamentary state collapse, and what was the nature of the fascist state that replaced it? For him, the problem of coercion and consent is only a starting point. The crucial question is how the ruling class maintains its hegemony, that is, how it succeeds in keeping the consent of subaltern classes. He argues that hegemony can never be