

O B I T U A R Y

Samson Moyo, 1954–2015

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Sam Moyo addressing the plenary session of the tenth anniversary conference of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies, Kochi, January 9, 2014.

Our comrade and brother Sam Moyo passed away last November after a tragic accident suffered in New Delhi. He was attending a conference at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, convened with the support of the Agrarian South Network – a South-South research initiative that he built and led. On the last day of the conference, as he was returning to the guest house where he was staying, the taxi in which he was travelling was hit by an oncoming vehicle as the taxi took a turn. Sam

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was gravely injured and eventually succumbed to his injuries in hospital on November 22, 2015.

Born on September 23, 1954, Sam Moyo grew up in Zimbabwe under Rhodesian rule, and was exposed from an early age to the violence of white supremacism and to the politics of national liberation. In Highfield, his Harare township and a historic cradle of nationalist activity, in the midst of nationalist mobilisation and the onset of armed struggle, Sam excelled in school. He became active in the national movement and was arrested at an early age. Sam later received a scholarship to study at Njala University in Sierra Leone. His early years in Zimbabwe under Rhodesian rule and his long stay in liberated West Africa, including teaching posts at the Universities of Calabar and Port Harcourt in Nigeria, were to form the contours and substance of Sam's world view at a time – the 1970s – of exceptional intellectual dynamism and innovation on the continent. He pursued further studies in Canada where he obtained a Master's degree from the University of Western Ontario, and then in the United Kingdom where he did his PhD at the University of Newcastle. During the course of his studies he gained expertise on land and agrarian issues, and developed a special talent for meticulous empirical research.

Sam also nurtured a deep conviction with regard to the need to radically transform the social sciences beyond their colonial functions, and lift them out of the impasse into which they had fallen. He strongly believed that a historic leap was necessary for the social sciences, a leap that could only be achieved by building strong and organic roots in Africa and the global South as a whole. His political and intellectual experiences in Africa, his studies in Western universities, and, not least, the links he cultivated over time with scholars from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, were definitive in moulding a world vision and scientific intuition that ranked him among the giants of his generation – and made him an inspiration to us all. Sam was a devoted pan-Africanist, committed to national liberation and social justice for Africans and Afro-descendants in the diaspora; he was a cosmopolitan familiar with every part of the world and an appreciation of what each had to contribute to humanity, especially the historically colonised peoples of the South; and he was a scholar who combined intellectual rigour with tireless activism in the building of autonomous capacity for research in Africa and the South.

Sam returned definitively to Zimbabwe in 1983, after independence. He participated in the creation of the Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies (ZIDS), which became a centre of intellectual dynamism – though now at a different juncture marked by the decline of autonomous thought elsewhere under the weight of structural adjustment programmes. He was a hard worker, an institution builder, and a prolific writer. From the 1980s and into the 1990s, he taught at the University of Zimbabwe, founded the Zimbabwe Environmental Research Organisation (ZERO), and joined the Southern Africa Political Economy Series (SAPES) Trust, where he built the Southern Africa Research Institute for Policy Studies (SARIPS). He also became

actively involved in the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

In 2002, Sam founded the African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS), his final and greatest achievement. Launched in the course of Zimbabwe's radical land reforms, accompanied by an escalation of Western sanctions and economic strangulation, the AIAS soon became a unique centre of research in the country, as well as in the region and the continent, devoted specifically to land and agrarian issues. Sam's defence of land reforms in Zimbabwe, though based on extremely careful and rigorous research, was initially vilified by most mainstream scholars working on Africa (who, interestingly, were by and large based in the West/North) as a mirage set up by "Mugabe and his cronies." But this hardly disturbed Sam; he simply laughed off the barrage of motivated assaults launched by such vested interests, even though he knew that this battle of speaking "truth to power" was a difficult one. He never gave up, and that was Sam; he knew how to plod on against all odds with a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his lips. He often told us, even at the height of adversarial and slanderous campaigns, "Comrades, we will have the last laugh" – and so it was. In recent years, particularly after 2010, there has been slow and grudging, perhaps, but growing recognition amongst non-radical but influential mainstream scholars on Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, that it is futile to ignore the work of one of the best and the brightest. Not surprisingly, there have been increasing cheers, and more and more toasts raised to Sam! And equally unsurprisingly, it did not seem to matter much to Sam, apart from adding a few more mischievous smiles to his face when the matter came up for discussion among us, as he knew how to carry the growing accolades with grace and humility.

Thus Sam glowed and grew in stature both nationally and globally, as he defended honest and rigorous research on the success of Zimbabwe's land reforms, independently of party politics and intrigues, and stubbornly resisting Western donor strategies of cooptation and silencing. No one but Sam could have succeeded in building and sustaining such an autonomous centre of excellence under such adverse circumstances. His achievements and dedication were recognised, if never properly, by reluctant Western scholarship, certainly by his peers in Africa, when they elected him president of CODESRIA, arguably the most prestigious academic position on the continent, for 2008–11.

Although a typical recognition of Sam's research interests and contributions would foreground agrarian studies, land reform, and food security, it is important not to characterise him as only a "land expert." Of course, these were important entry points in his quest for engaging with the theory and practice (the link between the two being integral to his work) of progressive economic and social transformation.

Sam was clear in his belief that Africa shared values and interests most fundamentally with the rest of the South, and so he dedicated himself to South-South cooperation.

From his base in Harare, he led the building of a research network of remarkable breadth and depth across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This matured into the Agrarian South Network (ASN), and *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, of which he was the founding editor-in-chief. To our knowledge, and to his merit, it is among the few academic journals in the social sciences that can claim to be based in the South and tri-continental in its internal constitution and systematic practice of South-South knowledge production.

Sam's main intellectual contribution was to the thesis, shared by the ASN and others before us, that Africa – and the South generally – could stand on its feet and be truly sovereign only if it took seriously the “peasant path” to national development, regional integration, and collective self-reliance. The peasantry, he believed, remained an untested agent. He inherited from great African scholars such as Archie Mafeje and Samir Amin the view that the poor peasantry, as the main demographic, socio-economic, and political reality in Africa, was the motive force of Africa's liberation. He insisted that the peasantry had a key role to play even in the white-settler countries of southern Africa that had undergone substantial proletarianisation, led by South Africa; and he was also the first to throw light, in the 1990s and 2000s, on the new land questions and pressures of proletarianisation that were emerging in non-settler African countries under neoliberalism. He saw no real possibilities in the “catching-up” postulates of Western modernisation theory, and its latter-day reincarnation in the neoliberal and neo-Weberian mainstream. His arguments had special force in his home region, southern Africa, for which, we believe, he had the clearest vision among all his contemporaries – too many of whom never fully abandoned the belief that development could be a spin-off of white settler capitalism. The empirical research that Sam and the AIAS produced on Zimbabwe and its historic dismantling of settler capitalism showed that the peasant path was indeed possible, even in the lion's den! It was this clarity of vision and stubbornness of purpose that made Sam either (depending on your point of view) the most loved or most feared researcher in contemporary Africa.

Sam will be remembered for his intellectual tenacity, honesty, and rigour; his “charming inflexibility” on matters of principle; his dedication to scholarship; his defence of autonomy in the social sciences; his tireless efforts to teach and supervise young scholars; his unequalled generosity to all – students, friends, and colleagues alike; and, not least, his lively and infectious personality.