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# **Structural Transformations in Africa Today: Interventions from the left**

## **By Ray Bush, Yao Graham and Leo Zeilig**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This introduction to the Accra workshop on 'Radical Political Economy and Industrialisation in Africa', held 13-14 November 2017, explains the rationale behind the initiative to have three Africa based RoAPE meetings, why they are important and how they relate to historic socio-economic transformations the most significant of which remains the great Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, whose centenary month coincided with the Accra workshop.

Industrial transformation has been pivotal to such large-scale change. As Ghana's experience underlines, when industrial change has failed or faltered, societies and polities have paid a steep price, certainly in terms of overall development that transforms the lives of all their peoples and, it seems, in terms of sovereign or autonomous economic development and freedom from foreign domination of their economies. That the workshop also coincided with Ghana's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence made the reflections in Accra doubly important, focused as they were on strategies of industrialisation and Africa's non-dependent development broadly defined. It was also the appropriate starting point for the trilogy of meetings: the upcoming meetings in Dar es Salaam in April and Johannesburg September 2018 will explore alternative development strategies and the politics and character of resistance and change respectively.

RoAPE has historically convened large formal conferences. These included, to name a few, The Transition to Socialism, Leeds, 1982; The World Recession and Food Crisis, Keele, 1984; State, Mining and Development, Leeds 2007. In 2016, however, the journal's Editorial Working Group decided to adapt this approach and to help convene and establish a series of dialogues of enquiry and interrogation of issues over a longer time frame with activist and other non-academic actors in Africa. Our initiative with [www.roape.net](http://www.roape.net) has certainly increased accessibility and range of material from Africa with a modest view of trying to be more engaged in Africa. The series of three workshops is intended both to build on this initiative generated by the new website and to extend and deepen RoAPE's grounding in Africa.

### **INDUSTRIALISATION AND STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION**

In thinking about industrialisation we have been keen to have a sense of how debates about Africa's industrialisation have changed over time, and how these relate, in contemporary times, to international as well as local and regional dimensions of 'structural transformation' (as industrialisation and broader, industrially-centred transformation is currently termed). Most salient within this ambit are considerations regarding, inter alia, diversification of economies, boosting of industrial output by transforming the capabilities of/returns to domestic economic producers, the adapted application and incremental endogenous generation of technique and technology, the ability to retain value added and its productive accumulation within historically extraverted economies.

Structural transformation has regained currency in African development debates but what it means and requires are strongly contested. For the IFIs (World Bank, 2017), in affirmation of the policies they have pushed over the past three decades, structural transformation is heralded by the perverse changes currently taking place in many African economies - a declining contribution from agriculture (which still has the biggest share of the labour force), deindustrialization, and a services sector bloated by the precarious low productivity work of the millions fleeing poverty in the countryside for

ever-growing urban slums but whose most profitable areas - in finance, telecom, transport, trade, etc.- are controlled by TNCs.

Despite the acclamations of 'Africa Rising', the inadequacies and perverseness of this model have been brought into sharp focus by the decade of commodity export fueled growth, whose main beneficiaries were TNCs, which deepened the dependence of Africa's economies on primary export production, with all its attendant vulnerabilities. This reality, and the pressures of popular struggles and demands, explain why leading African policy centres such as the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the African Union speak of 'structural transformation for inclusive and people's centred development' (AU, 2014). This perspective on structural transformation informed a raft of policy frameworks on industrialisation and minerals and development and others. But these policy proposals are yet to find expression in the choices of most African governments, which remain unwilling or unable, to break decisively with the ruling neoliberal orthodoxies, which they simultaneously rely on and chafe against.

Whilst it is difficult to identify a coherent African Left perspective on structural transformation several elements are central to radical orientations and objectives. These include ending Africa's subordinate insertion into the global economy as a raw material commodity exporter and also the dominance of finance; industrialisation and agrarian transformation which build national and regional intersectoral linkages, centred on meeting national and regional demand; health; transition to climate friendly energy; secure and remunerative jobs across the economy and the valuing of hitherto unpaid domestic work. The transformation of the state into a democratic and accountable state, which assumes a leading role in the economy and transformation processes, is a central component of this perspective as is the democratic public and collective ownership and control of key economic resources. Across the African continent many ongoing citizens' struggles and some victories express elements of this platform.

The realization of this agenda however has to confront the persistence of structural features of the world economy, of unequal trade, where aid serves external and not local, democratically determined need, and of course new expressions of cross-border financial flows and unprecedented capital flight: net outflow of capital from a continent that cannot or does not under current conditions access resources locally for local needs based upon principles of justice and equality (UNECA 2014; Boyce and Ndikumana 2012). We also need to ask the extent to which a strategy for industrialisation can be promoted in the context of shifts in the sources of economic growth, and of profits, away from investment in real productive sectors as opposed to financial assets and speculative activity globally. In Africa, this unprecedented penetration by financial interests and actors into commodity chains, land grabs, monopoly rents on technology and intellectual property, and from what were hitherto, discrete domestic financial circuits, expresses itself as a particularly pernicious persistence of regimes of extreme primitive accumulation, pervasive asset stripping and multiplication of sources and channels of financial value extraction and monopoly rents.

Meanwhile, as the dislocations and limits of this rapaciousness multiply and loom more starkly, further bouts of speculation are fueled. As Jason Moore and others have argued, the contemporary period is characterised by the demise of the four cheaps: energy, raw materials, labour power, food and this has a consequence (may be opportunity) for radical transformation in Africa (Moore 2015; Patel and Moore 2017).

The revival of interest in industrialisation and structural transformation, at a time when the apparent chasm between need and possibility suggested by these deep systemic and structural brakes on Africa's transformation also informed why RoAPE wanted the Accra workshop to mark the impact and consequences of the great Bolshevik revolution for Africa, and more generally for the debates about how to transform the economies of semi-colonial or imperialized formations. This opened a wonderful Pandora's box of themes that were debated by activists and researchers – not least the debate about what does development mean and how has it been frustrated on the continent. Debating industrialism and rural transformation involved asking a series of questions in the context of combined and uneven capitalist development on the continent. It raised questions that were general across different country case studies about strategy and techniques, the role of technology and access to it in the strategy to raise productivity where there remained high dependence upon TNC access and delivery of machinery and technical inputs.

Among the many different themes raised by the Bolshevik revolution, and its evolution, were the lessons from forced industrialisation, (as opposed to 'fast tracked radical transformation from below'); accelerated surplus extraction from the Russian countryside that offered a model for African states, not least in Ghana, the possibility of an alternative model for development, the opportunity to catch up and move away from the inherited colonial parsimony. There was also the recognition that the debate about accelerated industrialisation, development more generally, was highly contested within the left. Was the fast track possible alone, as a single country experience? What are the prospects for regional approaches in an African context of small, weak and extraverted national economies? Or was it only desirable, possible, as an international and economic project from which all industrial and agrarian possibilities would or could be resolved?

The Bolshevik revolution raised the prospect that there could be an alternative to capitalist expansion to the highest level. The creation of the Soviet Union as well as the revolutions in China and Viet Nam, delivered a multipolar world in which African struggles had examples and solidarity within which to base their own projects. The lessons now included the rapid modernisation of the Russian economy, the forced surplus extraction from Russian peasants, over a short time period, that ensured the presence in development theory, and among activists, of the gains to be had from possibility of auto-centred development. The seduction of being able to move quickly from the inherited colonial parsimony offered real hope across Africa.

The leading and driving role of the state and organizing framework of a multiyear Plan in the transformations in the Soviet Union were features of the Bolshevik legacy that many newly African independent countries sought to emulate. In addition, support for African liberation and the promise of being able to emulate the Soviet Union's accelerated industrialisation to overcome backwardness, proved attractive to many African states. Alongside this one of the major difficulties, we argue, that underpinned the Soviet failures was the absence of working class democratic control of economic decision making. So, while there may have been admiration for moving so quickly from semi-feudalism to the sputnik in just 40 years, a democratically organized industrial strategy driven by working class and peasant initiative may not have chosen the space and arms race for the use of valued wealth creation. We can also see however that even where there was a social constituency for radical transformation, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, for example, the mechanisms for driving it were less than democratic. The consolidation of the petty bourgeois fractions in post-colonial political leadership and the speedy marginalization of the working class component of the anti-colonial alliance were not dissimilar to the suppression of the leading political role of the proletariat in the Soviet Union.

The relevance of such questions remains deeply and acutely expressed in relation to the specific different country cases as well. How does the mass protests in Burkina Faso against a military regime with roots in a previous phase of authoritarian progressive populism speak to these issues? What different projects or processes are available and immanent in the routes that different agencies of social mobilization offer – for example, as might be seen in the respective roles and leaderships of a limited but militant working class in Burkina or how it was that rural struggles initiated the Tunisian uprising of 2010-2011.

What are the relative weights and inter-connection between change 'in' and 'for' Africa within the highly uneven, hierarchical and unequal global order, wherein Africa lies at the very bottom, imposed and put upon, it would seem, by all. Is autonomy not primary as perhaps implied by the ideas of autocentred-development being reborn by the Samir Amin, among others (Amin 2017; 2013). Autocentred development, may be initially an inward-looking development option that is indispensable to promote a form of de-linking understood at a strategy for a sovereign popular project. In raising the possibility for developing sovereign national/regional projects it will be necessary to assemble a strategy to confront what Amin has called 'apartheid at the global level' – the ways in which Africa is persistently and systematically de-industrialised – or in Ferguson's terms abjected (2006). Indeed, for countries of the Global South 'delinking' from the world economy seemed to be the chief export from the Soviet Union.

Rather than just offering a knee jerk response to this as again fanciful in the context of globalisation and the power of the WTO that sanctions and restricts national development alternatives there was an attempt, although not fully realized to investigate concretely, just how realistic such a strategy might be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Activists were invited to reflect on the existing configuration of class and social forces – locally, regionally and internationally - that was articulating agenda for social transformation in Africa and also what was still necessary in programmatic terms and was evident in real historical struggles to promote an alternative to existing globalisation. Discussions about such a sovereign popular project, its validity, strategy, organisational base were debated in Accra.

These issues were at the heart of why RoAPE organized the series of workshops and raised the debate about the possibilities of the extent to which the journal could help promote radical agenda. This begs the question of course what does a radical agenda look like?

Answering that question perhaps used to be easier than it is now. The journal began based in Sheffield but always had the idea it would become embedded and produced from Africa. In the early 1970s there was optimism that liberation movements, in Lusophone Africa and South Africa would generate not just national liberation but convert armed struggle into socialist reconstruction. It was perhaps easier, although contentious, which movement a journal like RoAPE would advocate for. The 'second wave' of national liberation, it was believed, would promote a radical agenda of socialist transformation based explicitly on a critique of the 'first wave' of negotiated independence in the early 1960s. This earlier period of decolonisation led Ruth First, one of RoAPE's original members, to comment that independence had been little more than 'a bargaining process with cooperative African elites. The former colonial government guarded its options and . . . the careerist heirs to independence preoccupied themselves with the "Africanisation" of the administration" (First 1970, 57–58).

At the time of its inception in 1974 the founders of the journal intended relocating it to Africa – that has largely faded though not disappeared. The production link with Taylor and Francis, but also the considerable autonomy the journal has within that corporate journals empire, and the partnership with Third World Network Africa based in Accra helped facilitate and fund the workshop and the next two meetings scheduled in 2018.

But what transformation agenda and goals, what types of research, policy and strategic projects about struggle and change would or should RoAPE editors advocate for now? What is the role of or links that are possible to be forged between activists and academics in the journal? In the mid-1970s thanks to a vibrant community of activists and solidarity networks around African national liberation movements more than half the Editorial Working Group (EWG) were non-academics, in the changed circumstances of 2018 all are or have been academics. How does the journal, in the current context amid the increasing 'audit culture' of academia as labeled by university managers, continue to help bridge the divides between the worlds of academia and activism? The activist, as Jun Borrás has noted is one who is 'irreverent, subversive and passionate' while the academic is 'prim, respectful and clinical' (2016,32). For academics there is an incentive to fit intellectual work to the dominant trends in the academic disciplines and funding rather than determining and defining the questions of importance for promoting radical transformation. But for RoAPE, as Lionel Cliffe among others noted, its remit must combine the highest academic excellence which simultaneously shows emancipatory commitment to enhancing and equipping, and thereby helping to elevate, activism against 'inequality, exploitation and oppression' in and for Africa and her transformation.

It is worth revisiting the first editorial of the journal in 1974 that refers to 'the task of understanding, and countering the debilitating consequences of a capitalism which stems from external domination and is combined with internal underdevelopment and equally exploitative structures...' Crucially that editorial argued the need for a Marxist method that explores 'changing patterns of production as holding the key to changes in all societal relationships...analysis of changing relations of production and the role of state power in reproducing them as a means to identify emerging contradictions...identifying these contradictions indicates not only the essential character of the social formation requiring to be changed but equally the opportunities that will have to be seized in order to transform society' (RoAPE 1974:2-3). The focus of the Accra workshop on industrialization – changing patterns of production and their social or political economy relations and opportunities needing to be seized in order to transform society at this time – is a fitting inauguration of this new phase of RoAPE's initiatives on the ground in Africa.

The Accra workshop and those planned for Dar es Salaam and Johannesburg show a strong commitment by the EWG to reconstruct and reinvigorate the links between radical scholarship on Africa and activism for radical transformation on the continent. Yet there remains an important question as to what constitutes radicalism? What is the role of those who study Africa and advance the understanding of popular struggles, want to engage with and promote opportunities for transformative collective action? How do they respond without being just defensive and reactive in offering critiques of the claims made for 'Africa rising'; the power of the new youthful generation; the amazing liberatory powers of the middle class and immense optimism that Facebook and Twitter brings to radical politics? Among this we also need to be cautious to determine what political interventions are 'Emancipatory' and which are 'regressive' in promoting the struggle for a better society.

The journal cannot call for a blueprint, a one size fits all emancipatory politics but we do need to understand which functional, substantive and relational dimensions of social struggles we analyze and highlight. What, for example, are or were the relationships between everyday struggles of the ordinary people (Bayat 2010) around food, transport and services that helped drive the uprising in Egypt in 2011 which was also founded upon more traditional working class struggles in the textile factories of Mahalla (Beinin 2016). Or we might include Burkina Faso's decade long struggle against Compaore's regime which involved shifting fronts and locales encompassing rural struggles, rebellion against mining interests and urban struggles – but perhaps whose fragmentation or limited framing of projects for democratic struggle and an alternative future, as noted by the now late RoAPE contributor Lila Chouli, effectively handed power back to the 'good' generals (Chouli 2015).

These workshops, and our first Debate Special Issue, is a modest attempt to try and provide a platform for chivvying along a debate and a role for exploring the relationship, among other things of centering class forces and productive, transformative capital accumulation in the illustrations and case studies relating to contested development strategy, industrialisation, rural transformation and resistance to capitalism in Africa. This is frankly more than RoAPE has done for a very long time.

It is clearly not enough, but important to do nevertheless, to say as Adhaf Souef did recently that 'There's clearly a struggle taking place on a universal scale between a system that has the world in its clutches and something that's trying to be born'. To what extent can individual struggles resolve the gargantuan crisis and can the pressing issues that underpin and advance inequality like trade, migration, environmental poverty and persistent marginalisation of gender issues and the relationship between these and war and violence, be resolved on a global scale? What role does international solidarity play in the struggle for global justice and equality? So, for example, Palestinians showing unity with Black rights in the US, Occupy Movement in Europe and the US showing solidarity with Tahrir and the Tunisian struggles. Yet we must ask, what good did these considerable acts of solidarity achieve? Global solidarity did not prevent the consolidation of the most repressive regime Egypt has ever seen.

There is nevertheless a global questioning of the 1%, a questioning that must extend to an interrogation of the wealth disparity of the top 25%. In Africa calling into question the legitimacy and survival of corrupt and repressive governments intensifies. In the Global North we have seen not just the rise of Trump but more significantly many American's voting for a socialist candidate in Bernie Sanders, there have been strong leftist politics in Greece, notwithstanding the immense suffering imposed on Greeks and in the UK Jeremy Corbyn is a Prime Minister in-waiting. However, the might of global markets and their institutions (in Europe in the shape of the 'Troika', the European Commission (EC); the European Central Bank (ECB); and the International Monetary Fund), has been a persistent brake on radical governments and programmes. For decades, the IMF played the same role on the African continent, as this journal has documented. In Europe, and elsewhere, far-right and rightwing populist parties have grown. We hope that our first Debate Special Issue, based on the ROAPE-TWN Africa workshop in Accra, sharpens analysis, provides a forum for debate and addresses issues concerned with the action needed to bring about the radical transformation of Africa.

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