Afterword

Terence Ranger

To cite this article: Terence Ranger (2011) Afterword, Critical African Studies, 4:6, 114-117, DOI: 10.1080/20407211.2011.10530769

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20407211.2011.10530769

Published online: 26 Jul 2012.

Article views: 151

View related articles
AFTERWORD

Terence Ranger
Professor and Emeritus Fellow, St Antony’s College, Oxford.

terence.ranger@sant.ox.ac.uk
Becoming Zimbabwe was a landmark book. It was not, of course, perfect. So it is important to criticise and assess it. The papers in this collection begin that process. Most make fair points and the response by Alois Mlambo and Brian Raftopoulos is a model of generosity and humility. I have one or two points to make about these papers. The first concerns JoAnne McGregor’s excellent paper; the second concerns Munyaradzi Munochveyi’s historiography.

McGregor’s argument, I think, can be extended even further. Joshua Nkomo’s claim that colonialism had settled the boundaries of Zimbabwe does not represent the agreed mind of African nationalism. The pioneer leader of the Southern Rhodesian National Congress in the 1940s, Thompson Samkange, certainly did not think in terms of a state defined by Rhodesian border. Samkange wanted an alliance, a confederation, of Congresses running from South Africa to Nyasaland. He envisaged a great Bantu state. Later on we know from John Reed’s diaries that George Nyandoro, that quintessential nationalist, was debating in 1965 what shape a future state/nation should assume. He took it for granted that Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe would be too small to constitute a viable unit. It must combine with Northern Rhodesia and the Katanga and maybe a chunk of Central Mozambique.¹ And even today, from the heart of the Mugabe establishment comes testimony of the arbitrary nature of the present boundaries. On December 11 2010, ‘Nathaniel Manheru’ – who is widely identified as Mugabe’s press secretary, Charamba – published in the Herald a long column about constant migration:

Throughout history Zimbabweans have been a footloose people…. We are an immigrant nation…. We have travelled great distances…. We are a people of hot feet, a people afflicted by a wandering curse.

Only colonial conquest penned Zimbabweans in. Charamba envisages ‘Zimbabweans’ in a constant state of becoming rather than a fixed ‘Zimbabwe’.

Really the only moment that nationalists celebrated a territorially bound homeland came with the Internal Settlement, when Ndabaningi Sithole proclaimed that it was virtuous precisely because it was internal. It repudiated the migrant ideologies which ZAPU and ZANU had acquired from Tanzania, Zambia and

¹ John Reed kept a daily diary between 1957 and 1965, to which I have access.
Mozambique – African Socialism, Marxism. It proclaimed the values of the ancestor spirits as against all the avenging ngozi spirits created by guerrilla terror.

Munyaradzi Munovicheyi’s paper reveals the dangers of historiography – its tendency to simplify and caricature. I take his point about the need to focus not only on the war but on the whole liberation struggle – on stone throwing urban youth and ‘freedom ploughing’ peasants as well as on guerrillas. But I don’t recognise his picture of previous accounts of the struggle. I will offer him – or anyone else – a champagne breakfast if they can find a reference to ‘the masses’ in my own work. Indeed its tendency has been to move from ‘the African Voice’ to ‘African Voices’ and from national leaders to rural activists. This hunt for ‘ordinary’ people is a frustrating one. If one is relying on press reports or colonial records people only figure in them if they are in some way worthy of remark. Norma Kriger criticised my Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War because it drew on remarkable informants rather than ordinary ones. Munovicheyi admires Kriger’s work. But the irony is that the ‘ordinary’ man with whom he begins – Obed Mutezo – would certainly have fallen into Kriger’s category of the remarkable. And there is indeed a large archive about Mutezo on which I myself have drawn. ²

Such comments aside, what will really challenge the book is the passage of time. Mlambo and Raftopoulos disclaim any intention to produce a book which moves inevitably to a pre-ordained end, and the ambiguities of the present political situation allowed and even imposed an openness. Still, historians are always really writing towards the present. Raftopoulos held back his chapter to the last moment in the hope that it would become clearer what needed to be explained. Future histories will certainly not devote so much space to the 2000s and so little space to everything before 1890.

Historians are retrospective prophets. They know what has happened and sometimes believe they can explain why it had to happen. But they have little idea of what is going to happen next. In Zimbabwe determinist history has proved particularly difficult. Books which assumed the inevitable rise of the proletariat, for instance, have been undercut by Zimbabwe’s de-industrialisation. The best we can do is to make a series of surmises about the future and to ask how each would affect the writing of history. Supposing, for example, that Scoones et al. turn out to be right

about the emergence of a resilient kulak class from out of the chaos of land reform. If that happens then rural class relations will have to take a much more central place in any history of Zimbabwe. We would need to know – what Scoones and his colleagues do not tell us – where these rural entrepreneurs came from.3

Or a very different surmise. Suppose that Robert Mugabe’s assault on the Anglican church and approval of the acquisition of land by Apostolic and Zionist churches is followed up with an assault on the Catholic church and a wide redistribution of church resources. Then the interaction of politics and religion will come to be a central topic of any history of Zimbabwe, rather as any historian writing after Henry VIII could not ignore the irrefutable fact of the Reformation. Raftopoulos and Mlambo admit to their lack of grasp of religion and this may come to appear as a central weakness of their book.

Or suppose that Zimbabwe’s inimical relations with its neighbours lead to the war for which we are told Botswana has been planning. Then a history of Zimbabwe would have to say far more about the history of soldiers and about the Zimbabwean army’s activities in Mozambique and the Congo – currently the biggest black holes in the historiography.4

Or suppose, more radically, that in twenty years time not only the guerrilla war but also the freedom struggle as a whole have come to seem marginal, as an episode rather than as a climax, rather as the civil war and Cromwellian republic have been in English historiography. It was not a revolution, it is now said, but an interruption of longer terms patterns. In such a perspective Mugabe – ‘the war and fortune’s son’ – would appear more like Oliver Cromwell than Henry VIII. When this happens the assumptions of much of my own work will become redundant and the papers by Alexander and Munochiveyi will be seen not as criticisms of Becoming Zimbabwe but as part of its focus on anticolonial protest.

I hope to see at least some of these – or other unpredicted – scenarios take place and to see their effect on the next single volume history of Zimbabwe.
