



Tributes on ROAPE's 50th anniversary

There is no equivalent anywhere to my knowledge of a journal as exceptional as ROAPE or in any way comparable.

For 50 years, the *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE) has been at the cutting edge of what a political economy perspective at its very best can offer to research, in this case concerning Africa. The journal has been the source of never-ending innovative contributions on the continent, both conceptual and empirical. As such, it has provided a critically important record of evolving progressive thought and research about Africa which spans five decades.

Others will consider ROAPE's exceptional contribution to research in Africa in more detail. But what has made this possible? The answer may seem obvious, but I think it merits closer attention. Consequently, in this short note I would like to address this question. Nothing of what has been accomplished would have occurred without the deep commitment, dedication and hard work of the Editorial Working Groups (EWGs) which have succeeded each other over the years and decades. Having had the privilege of being invited to be a member of the International Advisory Board of 'RAPE', as it was called initially, and a close observer since, but one who has never been at the front line of making ROAPE into what it has become, I hope to be able to claim a certain degree of objectivity in formulating these remarks.

From the very beginning, under the guidance of its founding members, notably Lionel Cliffe and Ruth First, and the administrative assistance of the successive 'managing' editors, a particular chemistry was set in motion in the recruitment process of the EWGs. The resulting community of scholars, which has been responsible for the journal over so many years, has been able to ride the waves while maintaining its own cohesion when so many other journals have floundered. Above all, those responsible have managed this feat while staying true to the journal's central objective, as stated on its website, of contributing to 'radical analysis of trends, issues and social processes in Africa, adopting a broadly materialist interpretation of change'. Over the many years, when other publications followed what were considered 'new trends', ROAPE has stayed steadfast to a unique set of priorities which others abandoned:

It pays particular attention to the political economy of inequality, exploitation and oppression, and to organised struggles against them, whether these inequities are driven by global forces or local ones such as class, race, ethnicity and gender. It sustains a critical analysis of the nature of power and the state in Africa in the context of capitalist globalisation.

Rarely has one the privilege to be witness to the degree of collegiality and dedication of the scholars who have been the driving forces of this journal. Behind ROAPE is a

network of like-minded individuals who have come together because they share a passion: a deep commitment to social justice and to broadening the scope for progressive change in today's ever more complex capitalist system. It is factors such as this which explain the continuity, the coherence and the quality of the content of the journal.

The result is a momentous contribution to progressive scholarship concerning Africa. From the start, ROAPE distinguished itself by giving a central place to African voices, so often to this day silenced by Western perspectives. The wealth of the approaches highlighted and developed make the corpus gathered over the decades an indispensable library for researchers and practitioners. Each of us will have a long list of articles which made an impression on us and influenced our own work. Among the dozens that come to mind, the following stand out: Samir Amin in Issue 1 (Amin 1974) and the tribute to him in Volume 48 (Kvangraven et al. 2021); Issa Shivji in Issue 3 (Shivji 1975); the debates on the state in Issue 5 (Cliffe and Lawrence 1976), including the contribution by Colin Leys (1976); or again the articles by Rita Abrahamsen – notably, though short, the important review article in Volume 31 (Abrahamsen 2004). Beyond presenting dozens of critically important thematic issues, too many to list but to mention just one – War and Famine, in Issue 33 (Lawrence, Snyder and Szeftel 1985) – the innovative manner in which the EWGs have initiated and encouraged contributions explains not only the exceptional diversity and richness of the themes presented but also the capacity of the journal to act as a trailblazer, anticipating research gaps, opening new fields and renewing approaches.

From the very beginning, the EWGs have tried to overcome the linguistic divides which plague the continent. An exploratory trip was made, for example, to the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Paris in the 1970s to see whether collaboration might be set up with the *Cahiers d'études africaines*. In spite of the support of French colleagues like Claude Meillassoux and Jean Copans and the commitment of the members of ROAPE, the project proved ahead of its time and so did not receive institutional support in France and never materialised. Overcoming the colonial legacy of institutionalised linguistic divisions, which has marred research and created solitudes among progressive thinkers on the continent, remains a challenge. However, with new tools at their disposal, the teams who head up the journal are now better prepared than ever to overcome this lingering instrument of divide and conquer, not to speak of overcoming the challenges that lie ahead concerning African languages, especially in countries where they have become dominant, as for example Kiswahili in Tanzania or Wolof in Senegal.

As a result of the quality and pertinence of the hundreds of articles and contributions which ROAPE has brought together over the last 50 years, the journal represents a treasure of inestimable value, which provides the analytical tools, the historical depth and the contextualisation necessary for the ongoing renewal of radical analysis of trends, issues and social processes in Africa for many years to come.

Thank you to the EWGs from all of us who have benefited from your work and commitment, and from those who will follow us.

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Critical Third Worldism

All journals have a history. In 1974, ROAPE began its publication run situated against a backdrop of receding moments of political independence in north, west and east Africa and amid ongoing liberation struggles in southern Africa. The Durban Moment had just happened, sparking a renewal of labour activism in South Africa, while Black Consciousness was gaining momentum in schools and townships, culminating in the Soweto Uprising of 1976. Angola and Mozambique would achieve self-determination in a year's time. Meanwhile, the Second Chimurenga continued apace in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, concurrent to SWAPO's parallel efforts in Namibia. The establishment of ROAPE reflected a unifying spirit of Africa-centred Third Worldism during this multifaceted time and the need for critical scholarship that engaged with these political developments and struggles, which were born from deep histories of anti-colonial resistance but also portended mutual futures of political, economic and social justice.

It is worth noting that the first activist-intellectual cited in ROAPE's pages is Frantz Fanon. The editorial for Issue 1 of Volume 1 cites Fanon's remark from *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that the post-independence leadership of Africa amounted to being the 'spoilt children of yesterday's colonialism' (ROAPE 1974, 1), who remained beholden to foreign influence. In short, ROAPE started with a critical stance that worked against reductive time frames of 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' or, similarly, against cultural differences of 'Africa' versus 'the West'. While mindful of the usage and importance of these broad distinctions, ROAPE charted a different course of intellectual inquiry and political commitment that stressed the primacy of local material conditions among peasantries, urban workers and related demographic groups to grasp the different meanings of political

progress (or lack thereof), economic development and historical change, yet without seeking to get lost amid the details of individual localities. Indeed, the second intellectual cited in ROAPE's pages is Mao Zedong ('No investigation, no right to speak'), which signalled the journal's further orientation toward a global context (*ibid.*, 2). As noted later in this first editorial, the internationalisation of capital at times rendered the salience of continental and other conventional political geographies irrelevant (*ibid.*, 3).

In this first issue and subsequent ones, a litany of significant names followed, among them Samora Machel, Ruth First, Mahmood Mamdani, John S. Saul, Harold Wolpe, David Hemson, and many others. Yet, it is more interesting to consider this initial framing involving Fanon and Mao and how these reference points have continued to inform the journal up to the present. Fanon himself was influenced by Mao – his personal library attests to this inspiration, which would manifest in his emphasis on the peasantry as a revolutionary vanguard in *The Wretched of the Earth* – and Fanon's remarks regarding the self-enrichment of the postcolonial bourgeoisie have proved all too prescient (on Mao in Fanon's personal library, see Fanon 2018, 762–764). More surprising is how China has assisted this very bourgeoisie – a phenomenon that has been consistently documented by ROAPE over the past two decades.

This recent inter-continental trend illustrates once more the importance of stressing material conditions over political alignments and loyalties, even those that are purportedly anti-imperial and anti-Western in orientation. It also underscores ROAPE's early position that the geographies of global capitalism matter more than those of the nation-state. It is to the credit of ROAPE's founding editorial team that the journal positioned itself from the start as being attentive to continental concerns vis-à-vis the Third World – and today the global South – but without uncritically valorising these entities and their vantage points. The *Review of African Political Economy* was among the first journals to articulate a critical Third Worldism that sided with neither party, nation, nor region. In doing so, it has documented instead the working lives and struggles of ordinary people, whose political and economic fates continue to shape vitally our present political dispensation.

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ROAPE at 50: amplifying the voices of organic intellectuals in grassroots social movements

As ROAPE celebrates its 50th anniversary, my reflections revisit my articles and also the great meeting of intellectuals, the second ROAPE Connections workshop, organised jointly by ROAPE, the University of Dar es Salaam Convocation and the Nyerere Foundation, and held at Dar es Salaam University in April 2018 (Bujra et al. 2018). In the multi-authored debate special issue that came out of the Connections 2 workshop, my paper, titled ‘Reflections on Struggles: Building Grassroots Social Movements in Kenya’ (*ibid.*, 644–652), spoke about my lived experience over a period of 15 years and my passion over that period in building a network of organic intellectuals in the grassroots social justice movement – a network to think creatively and participate in the battle of ideas and in anti-imperialist resistance.

In the workshop, we established a powerful intergenerational connection and built alliances. Comrade Issa Shivji was inspirational in his contribution, evoking the battle of ideas:

This is where, in my view, the crucial problem of the Left lies. How to win the battle of ideas, the battle for hegemony, at the level of civil society? In other words, how to do politics where the masses are – and not simply where (state) power resides. (Bujra et al. 2018, 618)

Shivji also noted what Antonio Gramsci taught us, ‘that the bourgeoisie does not rule by force or propaganda alone. Its rule is rooted in the hegemony of its world outlook and ideology’ (*ibid.*). In our grassroots social movements, in this battle of ideas, we struggle in shaping our collective struggles as working-class people in Africa within emerging social movements. Today we celebrate ROAPE’s founding spirit of 1973, a pan-Africanist intellectual platform committed to anti-imperialist and socialist development, and its 50 years of amplifying these ideas, nurturing new cadres and ideas in social movement struggles in Africa.

The intellectual moment of Dar was a great connection with many activist-scholars from social movements, from academic communities of diverse universities, and from grassroots social justice movements. There were great memories of the history of Dar es Salaam University, recalling the Guyanese revolutionary intellectual Walter Rodney’s teaching and writings against imperialism in the early 1960s and 1970s. The battle of ideas on people-centred pan-Africanism inspired by Caribbean social movements that took shape in Dar in 1974 was absolutely critical in shaping my own path, creating spaces of organic intellectuals in the grassroots social movements convened by Mathare Social Justice Centre. We made a video about the development of the network (Mathare Social Justice Centre 2021).

ROAPE has prepared fertile ground, helping to form grassroots organic intellectuals by publishing reflections, community research and social movements’ human rights press statements. These continue to challenge the crisis of capitalism and to advance the struggle for social justice in Kenya and Africa. Members of the Organic Intellectuals network have published in ROAPE, and the journal continues to inspire politics of the mass movements and ideas in defence of social justice and human rights. I wrote about how I became active in my interview, which was published on Roape.net in 2019 (Gachihi and Zeilig 2019). I also published my reflections on Maina wa Kinyatti’s *Kenya: A Prison*

Notebook on the journal's website (Gachihi 2021). This article was about the notebook written by Professor Maina wa Kinyatti during his six-year detention in a Kenyan prison. He was jailed in 1982 for being a member of the December Twelve Movement. This was a workers' and peasants' underground political movement inspired by embryonic anti-imperialist revolutionary intellectuals in the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University in early 1960s, following the betrayal of Mau Mau (Kenya land and freedom army) struggles by the Kenyatta neo-colonial state which assassinated the leading socialist and pan-Africanist cadre, Pio Gama Pinto, in 1965.

As the journal marks 50 years in the battle of ideas, it is very important to continue on the path of building and shaping ideas against imperialism and for social justice. We need to avoid the pitfalls of commodification of knowledge. In the light of this, the great decision and move in this 50th anniversary year to open-access publication, making the journal's articles and reflections easily available to activists and scholars in grassroots movements, is cause for celebration.

We hope that the journal will continue convening intergenerational connections and seminars as a part of nurturing intellectual cadres to continue with ROAPE in the struggle against imperialism, advancing the struggle for social justice.

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It took a village to help me publish my first blog on Roape.net

I first heard about ROAPE in my late teens from a close friend. I was excited to know about this online space for radical analysis of the political conditions of my continent, but for a long time I could not access most of the published material. In my mid twenties, I became involved in community organising at Mathare Social Justice Centre and at Ukombozi Library; once again, ROAPE floated into my universe.

It took a village to help me publish my first blog on the site, and it has been wonderful to witness many more young members of the social justice movement publishing their work on Roape.net. Even as we were succeeding and forging new intellectual paths in the movement, access to ROAPE's archives was still an issue. I remember searching high and low to get a copy of a paper on community organising written during one of ROAPE's connections workshops in Dar es Salaam. I reminisce with a lot of warmth in my heart about the immense support of ROAPE, the Africa is A Country website, Mathare Social Justice Centre, Cheche Books and Ukombozi Library during the initial writing workshops that birthed the Organic Intellectuals movement, which has collectively published three books reflecting on historical figures of the Kenyan left.

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A platform for the people, by the people

There emerges a new wave of African youth disenchanted with the prevailing status quo in their nations and across the continent. In Sudan, these young generations have vocally expressed their aspirations through marches, grassroots organisations and calls for freedom, peace and justice during and after the December 2018 Revolution, which persists amid the ongoing war that erupted in April 2023.

Growing up in a nation that gained political independence three or four decades before they were born, these youths have witnessed the failure of most institutions and elites to fulfil the promises of genuine independence. Despite the exit of foreign colonisers, Sudan remains entrapped in the grip of colonial and imperial legacies, perpetuated by national elites who have brought little change to governance structures inherited from British rule.

The currents of neoliberalism have seized control of Sudan's institutions of academia, research, media, civil society and politics, particularly since the 1990s, with the global sharp turn to the right. The NGO-isation of public life and the interlinkages between

international donors and local entities have led to the portraying of political economy as a ghost from a distant past, discouraging any serious resistance to neoliberal discourse.

The young revolutionaries of Sudan have had to confront walls of isolation, both local and global. Subjected to a ruthless military dictatorship enforcing extreme Islamic fundamentalism and a brutal market economy, they have relied on self-education to inform their resistance and political organising theories in the face of intimidation, ridicule, or even enticement.

Access to technological resources has been limited and public education, when available, has been inadequate to equip students and graduates with tools to engage with critical narratives and connect beyond mainstream discourse. Access to revolutionary literature and research has been particularly challenging, with activists going to extra lengths to overcome these challenges.

Some posted on social media outlets asking for people who could lend access to platforms that published relevant literature and materials. Reading groups were created throughout the country and in the virtual world where members translated, summarised, shared and discussed relevant literature they could access. An inspiring young Sudanese revolutionary, author of numerous books on political economy, used his mobile phone to write his books because he couldn't afford a personal computer.

ROAPE has been a vital resource for many of these young activists and scholars, offering critical insights that challenge hegemonic narratives and foster social change. ROAPE provides stories, literature and analysis that are absent from mainstream outlets, offering support and solidarity to those striving for change.

ROAPE blogs and long reads provided an important chronicle for the December 2018 Revolution, documenting alternative narratives and shedding light on crucial aspects that are overlooked by the dominant voices. They enabled debates and discussions among the many grassroots bodies, especially the Resistance Committees. Many voices that came out of these same bodies contributed to ROAPE, enriching the materials available about Sudan on the platform.

ROAPE's efforts to break free from corporate publishing control towards offering open access and relying on community-led publishing models is a significant achievement towards democratising knowledge sharing and scholarship. This shift enables broader access to its rich resources, fostering wider participation and engagement, and building alliances.

As a reader and contributor to ROAPE, the 50th anniversary marks a significant milestone worthy of celebration. It is an opportunity to pay tribute to its visionary founders, supporters, readers and contributors. ROAPE's vision and mission remain crucial for the future of social change, justice, development and independence for African people.

Looking ahead, I propose the translation of ROAPE articles into Arabic and other languages spoken in Africa, facilitating wider accessibility and reach. By allowing readers and contributors to organise voluntary translations, ROAPE can expand its impact and promote inclusivity.

In solidarity for many more anniversaries!

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Tribute to ROAPE on its 50th anniversary

I recently moved from Johannesburg to London. My reasons were personal, and the loss has been considerable. My own library had to be reduced by more than 50% (it would have been greater without the sympathy of my partner, who accepted a bigger cut). Hardcopy journals had to go, including, sadly, ROAPE. It does not make sense to retain them when online versions are available, at least for those of us with a university affiliation (if our institution has a half-decent library). Sorrow was mitigated by graduate students who were developing their own academic collections and took some copies off my hands.

There was, however, an exception – the first 10 issues of the journal. This was not a matter of access – they are available on the ROAPE website. It was something more important: personal identity.

The really revolutionary thing was that the journal was sold to activist students by somebody wandering around the Junior Common Room bar and the Assembly Hall at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, where I was a student. This was how *Socialist Worker* and other left-wing papers were sold. The seller was Erika Flegg, a member of the Editorial Working Group. Thank you, Erika. I was taken aback that an academic journal could be distributed this way, and suspicious that she was linked to one of the other left groups.

That would have been Issue 3, when I was in the second year. Lecturers like Richard Rathbone and Shula Marks were introducing us to the names of some of the authors and Editorial Working Group members. Here was Issa Shivji, Richard Jeffries, Peter Waterman, Bill Warren, Robin Cohen, Gavin Williams, Mahmood Mamdani, Basil Davidson, Claude Meillassoux and John Saul. Jeffries and Warren were lecturers at SOAS and Bahru Zewde, another author, was a graduate student. I knew Ruth First from an amazing lecture she gave to a workshop of the National Union of School Students and Anti-Apartheid Movement three years before, and Basker Vashee had been explaining left politics in Zimbabwe to our International Socialist Africa Group.

The first sentence in the editorial began: ‘Central to this issue are problems of the class analysis of underdeveloped African countries societies’ (ROAPE 1975, 1). There were articles on peasants, petty producers, bureaucrats and labour aristocracy. This was all so very relevant – a wow moment! The whole approach, coming as it did in an academic journal, gave legitimacy to me raising such topics and analysis in essays, and it informed some of the discussion with fellow students and in student union debate (not that I agreed with arguments about labour aristocracy or the lauding of peasants).

Then I bought Issues 1 and 2 (probably from Dillon's bookshop). There, in the first editorial of the first edition, were the journal's opening words – its manifesto, one might say:

This review is published with the express intent of providing a counterweight to that mass of literature on Africa which holds: that Africa's continuing chronic poverty is primarily an internal problem and not a product of her colonial history and her present dependence; that the successful attraction of foreign capital and the consequent production within the confines of the international market will bring development; and that the major role in achieving development must be played by western-educated, 'modernizing' elites who will bring progress to the 'backward' masses. We hold these perspectives to be inaccurate and mystifying and with regard to the last it should be clear that while the African revolution needs leaders and cadres, the record suggests that the leaders who inherited power at independence have all too often borne out Fanon's description of them as 'spoilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of today's national governments, [who] organise the loot of whatever national resources exist' – primarily on behalf of foreign interests, of course. (ROAPE 1974, 1)

Stirring stuff!

Issue 7 included a debate I have returned to many times. In 'Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the South African State', Rob Davis, David Kaplan, Mike Morris and Dan O'Meara advanced a neo-Poulantzian position that focused on fractions of capital (Davies et al. 1976), and Martin Legassick and Harold Wolpe (1976) proposed a more classical Marxist position in 'The Bantustans and Capital Accumulation in South Africa.' I sided with the latter, and it did not surprise me that Legassick was a left-wing opponent of the post-1994, pro-capitalist regime and Wolpe became a sharp critic (despite his earlier allegiance to the South African Communist Party). In the late 1990s, ROAPE was still locked behind glass doors at Rhodes University – available only to those brave enough to sign their names. The Rand Afrikaans University (now University of Johannesburg) did not even subscribe until some of us lobbied for it to do so. Despite these restrictions, articles were cyclostyled and distributed like the Russian samizdat. ROAPE had a resonance with the intellectual struggle then under way.

Fifty years on, when I heard that ROAPE would be published on an open-access basis, I was enthusiastic. Now it would not only be student activists who could read about politics, economics and class in Africa, there could be a wider readership. By using new technologies, it was possible to play an even more valuable role. The potential for this could already be seen in the three activist workshops held in 2017 and 2018 and in the articles and blogs published on Roape.net. The journal would be likely to become more African and more aligned to resistance against regimes and foreign interests that are even more anti-democratic and pro-capitalist than those back in 1974. In the process, it would be possible for a layer of activists to connect with each other and learn about structures and struggles in other countries on the continent. In this, the academic authors can play a critical role, writing articles that move beyond measuring impact in citations by other academics and in promotions within their universities, but through the readership and feedback of activists. From my own experience in South Africa, this is a sorely needed relationship.

We can return to that first editorial:

Though we do not have at hand a completely worked out analysis we do have a common starting point. We are not neutral about the kind of method that offers the best chance of

coming to terms with the realities of African underdevelopment. The perspective of the Review will be in this sense Marxist – not in offering a blueprint for some future society, nor in supporting a particular type of regime, as popular usage mistakenly might indicate, but in using a method which analyses a situation in order to change it. (ROAPE 1974, 2)

It is early days, with much hard work ahead, but the *Review of African Political Economy* had a worthy starting point, and we must hope that it is one that resonates 50 years later. In that way, it can fulfil its ambition to bring about change that favours those who resist the terrible poverty and repression experienced by the majority of Africans today.

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The review in a changing world

My first encounter with ROAPE was in graduate school some 45 years ago. One of its overseas editors, Björn Beckman, taught a course on the political economy of underdevelopment at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria, where I was studying with colleagues such as Raufu Mustapha, Jibrin Ibrahim and Adebayo Olukoshi, and he assigned many articles from the fledgling journal for us to read and critique. It was a profound experience in those years in the late 1970s, when liberation struggles in southern Africa and the solidarity campaigns that nourished them were at their height. Little did I anticipate that a decade later, in 1989, I would be invited to attend with another colleague, Balefi Tsie, as young PhDs, a meeting of the Editorial Working Group in Sheffield as part of our induction into the broad ROAPE family.

It has been an enriching intellectual experience and journey from being nurtured on material from the journal to becoming a Contributing Editor in the 1990s. The heady 1970s had given way to euphoria of the 1980s when Zimbabwe and later Namibia made their transition to independence, with South Africa following with its own democratic transition in 1994. Those were years full of optimism about prospects for democracy and

development, and ROAPE covered those themes extensively. But it was optimism tinged with scholarly scepticism.

The broader context was of a changing world that was experiencing a unipolar moment in those 1990s and early 2000s following the end of the Cold War. The great themes then were, first, globalisation as another mode of imperialism and, second, democratisation prospects in Africa in the context of neoliberalism. There were high hopes regarding advances in constitutionalism and good governance signalled by reforms, regular elections and term limits for presidents. Popular struggles by various movements embracing workers, small farmers, students, professional associations and other civil society groups had been in active in struggles for the democratic transitions. Rich debates on the sustainability and trajectory of political transitions and economic transformations animated the pages of ROAPE in those years. We were no longer mere avid readers but active contributors and reviewers as well.

But the euphoria would not last. The unipolar moment gave the sole superpower, the United States, unlimited powers of intervention and hegemony in other parts of the world, not only in Africa but also in the Middle East, among others, disrupting the international order and provoking reaction from other great powers, namely Russia and China. The Great Recession of 2008 would have a disruptive effect not only on global capitalism but also on Africa's fragile natural-resource-based economies. The effects of that recession induced by globalisation are still working their way through African economies, and some of the most insightful analyses of these processes have been articulated in ROAPE over the years.

The 2010s and 2020s would witness a resurgence of inter-imperialist rivalry, including economic competition between the Great Powers. China under Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s emerged as a powerful economy, becoming second to the US in the 2000s. Africa has gravitated towards China as a source of investment especially in infrastructure, and as a vast market particularly for primary products ranging from minerals to agriculture and timber. There are debates on the Africa–China relationship, including on the presumed benevolence of the Chinese, the cost of their aid, and the impact of their investments on the environment. Questions about neo-colonialism are as alive in discussions about China's and Russia's relationships with Africa as they have been about French and US relations with Africa. These questions will continue to be debated in ROAPE and elsewhere in Africa itself.

Looking back 50 years ago, little did we anticipate that internal conflicts in Africa would continue to loom large many decades later. Millions perished in conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and thousands in Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, among others. Millions more have been displaced, disrupting development and triggering waves of migration internally and externally. Peace has also been elusive in Sahelian countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, not to mention Nigeria and Libya. The absence of peace has disrupted the political order and development in most of these countries, while the spread of Islamic insurgencies like Al-Qaeda has complicated these conflicts. There are enormous demands on African statecraft to address and resolve these conflicts.

Disrupting the initial optimism that we had for the elites and parties that inherited the colonial state has been pervasive corruption in most of African countries. While corruption takes many forms and involves multiple players, the more prominent type of

corruption has been state-based, with ruling elites creaming off public resources for their self-enrichment. Billions of dollars have been diverted into the private vaults of politicians, multinational corporations, local companies and state-related companies from outside. The wealth of leaders such as Joseph Mobutu, Ali Bongo, Sani Abacha, Muammar Gaddafi and Ben Ali, to mention a few, involved a pillage of public resources that should have been invested in social development in hospitals and schools, in infrastructure and key services. Corruption has also been closely associated with illicit transfers of resources outside the continent, transfers that run into billions of dollars every year.

One cannot conclude this retrospective view without worrying about the rollback of the economic and political gains made during the period covered by ROAPE. In the 2020s, we have witnessed some backsliding in the Sahel in the form of coups. In parts of eastern and southern Africa, a similar process of backsliding is disappointingly under way. There are fewer cases of democratic consolidation.

One can be excused for looking back to the 1960s and 1970s with a twinge of nostalgia. Popular struggles for independence and liberation had provided an expression of political power and solidarity. There should be a resurgence of those struggles to empower not just the small farmers and miners but also the growing middle classes on whom the future of democracy and development depend. Those of us who have been honoured to be associated with the *Review* have witnessed candid analysis of the unfolding developments described above, and the hopes and anxieties about their impact on sustainable development and democracy. One can only wish ROAPE well as it continues another 50 years and beyond, of erudite, activist and progressive analysis of African affairs and political economy.

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A place of critical scholarship, accompanying the struggles of African peoples, comrades and allies

In 1974, Third World countries launched the New International Economic Order (NIEO) agenda to reclaim a fairer world system. It was during this pivotal year and period, coinciding with an inflection of imperialism which no longer needed its colonial form, that ROAPE was also born.

While adhering to and displaying the scholarly demand for rigour and contradictory debate, ROAPE distinguishes itself from most academic journals based in Northern countries by its concern to report on developments in and about the African continent in terms that are both non-Eurocentric and critical, in the best tradition of radical political economy.

This editorial approach has been reinforced by lasting efforts to include African voices, those from the continent and its diasporas. ROAPE has been an outlet for the writings of inspirational thinkers such as Samir Amin, Samora Machel, John Saul, Issa Shivji, Mahmood Mamdani, Basil Davidson, Ray Bush, and others. All this has made ROAPE a crucible for two successive generations of researchers, intellectuals and activists from all horizons, as well as a leading intellectual archive on the political economy of Africa.

Created more recently, from 2014 onwards, the ROAPE blog (at Roape.net), while retaining the editorial quality of the *Review*, has offered a more flexible and interactive publication format. It has become an important source of original and fertile analysis of current events shaping African nations and peoples subject to – and also resisting against – the vagaries of the global capitalist system. In 2018, the blog hosted heated debates involving the likes of David Harvey and John Smith on the changing nature of imperialism in the 21st century: a further confirmation of ROAPE’s long-time reputation as a vibrant space for discussions around Marxist political economy and anti-capitalist alternatives.

In our current times of structural crisis, as revealed by unprecedented socio-economic inequalities at the international level and within countries, debt distress across the developing world, growing militarism, ecological devastation and increased right-wing xenophobia, ROAPE, as a place of critical scholarship, is more important than ever. Documenting the pitfalls, ambiguities and revolutionary potential of popular struggles still remains a primordial intellectual task.

Happy 50th anniversary to ROAPE. Hats off to its founders and to all the comrades who have worked towards this achievement. The recent publication of the magnificent volume *Voices for African Liberation: Conversations with the Review of African Political Economy* (edited by Leo Zeilig, Chinedu Chukwudinma and Ben Radley) is an eloquent testimony to the intellectual and political journey travelled so far. At the same time, what an exquisite anniversary gift!

ROAPE recently took the path-breaking decision to escape from the strictures of dominant publishing platforms, to make its contents available on a free basis and to progressively relocate to the African continent. International solidarity and commitment from its readership, contributors and other networks will be essential in order to make such a move long-lasting and fruitful.

May ROAPE continue to be there for the next 50 years to accompany the struggles of African peoples and their comrades and allies elsewhere towards a world free of all forms of oppression, exploitation and unnecessary suffering.

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Envisaging praxis and engaged scholarship in African political economy

In their foundational issue, the Editorial Working Group of ROAPE clearly and concisely asserted the intention of the publication as one that would provide a radical alternative to the inaccurate assumptions and mystifying conclusions about Africa's post-colonial politics and chronic poverty found throughout much of the social science literature at the time (ROAPE 1974). The journal was to challenge market-centric development and international relations scholarship by considering Africa's colonial legacy and present dependence in its critique of modernisation and 'white saviour' narratives. In an effort to move beyond the impracticality of much academic knowledge production, ROAPE contributions were to address themselves to issues of the tactics, strategy and action to be considered as Africa developed its potential and steered its struggle (*ibid.*). The journal set out to do this without promoting a dogmatic formula or certain political faction, applying a Marxist political economy that analyses a situation in order to change it. Producing analyses that identified emerging contradictions in global capitalist relations, ROAPE's contributions indicated essential features of social formations required to be changed and opportunities to be seized for the desired social change. The relevance of political economy was echoed and prioritisation was recommended for reconsidering the link between analysis and practice and the role of intellectuals in this dynamic by the Editorial Working Group's reflections 30 years later (Bujra et al. 2004). ROAPE continues to examine and understand Africa's present condition through a historical lens – centred around the roots of her socio-economic realities – but, as it breaks the chains of corporate publishing and transitions to an open-access format, the journal requires a reminder and focused reorientation towards ensuring space for radical knowledge and information-sharing that can inform how scholars and activists think critically about geopolitical power relations and the persistent inequalities that concede opportunities for change in Africa.

The journal's concentrated emphasis and dedication to scholarly praxis was advanced by way of Burawoy's (2004) contribution to the 30th anniversary issue. Burawoy did not offer a new paradigm for ROAPE but aimed to stimulate debates about the practical and intellectual implications of studying Africa in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities for change. Reflecting on Harold Wolpe's 2004 Memorial Lecture, Burawoy urged an acute reflection and attentiveness to past and contemporary struggles for liberation and reconstruction – the uses of power and agency required, political practice demanded, and the obligations of intellectual responsibility. In an earlier paper, Burawoy (2003) rethought the central propositions of classical Marxism to help frame the dual obligations of the intellectual as effective interpreter in the trenches of civil society and legislative councillor in critical analyses on changing social arrangements and reconstruction policies. Burawoy and others since have highlighted the role of the intellectual as interpreter – reflecting on and informing modes of struggle and forms of solidarity – and the responsibility of impartiality after liberation; however, as neoliberalism ceaselessly becomes further socially and culturally entrenched in Africa through Western-directed social engineering and internationally funded community-based initiatives, the importance of ROAPE contributions to critically interpret the conditions and relationships within civil society is paramount to informing effective resistance and change.

The last two decades of ROAPE contributions have produced meaningful interdisciplinary scholarship on Africa's pseudo-democratic sovereignty and disproportionate development – predominant themes acknowledged in the 40th anniversary editorial (Bush and Harrison 2014) – but strides to overcome a stunted inertia need renewed vigour, and fundamental questions require further debate in order to recentre an intellectual commitment to engaged radical thinking. One effort to do this began in the June 2021 issue, when Zeilig and Smedley initiated a new section of the journal that aimed to link scholarly, peer-reviewed contributions with timely, indicative and pragmatic analysis published on Roape.net. Where the journal continues to exist as a radical alternative to mainstream scholarship on development and international relations, Roape.net serves as a living platform that can swiftly pivot to react and respond to the ever-evolving social conditions and contradictions in African political economy, making it a vital part of the project of radical political, environmental and economic transformation (Zeilig 2021). Since its inception, the section 'Connecting People and Voices for Radical Change in Africa' has aimed to highlight current questions and debates in order to shift the dynamics of popular protest and serve as a platform for African voices of struggle. This routine contribution provides leftist intellectuals and activists alike with a current and contextualised roadmap for reflection on organic ideals and engagement with revolutionary interventions.

One area of engaged scholarship that is ripe for rekindled debate and analysis is the question of the entrenched role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in advocacy and popular campaigns for poverty reduction, gender inequality and other social injustices. As agents of service delivery and champions for democratic reforms, NGOs have maintained their embedded presence in African civil society and furthered the pervasiveness of neoliberalism set in motion with the initial ideological tsunami of the 1990s. ROAPE has published notable contributions to the ongoing critical investigation of NGOs in Africa, such as Hearn's (1998) pioneering study on the long-term consequences of the donor-sponsored NGO-isation of African society and Kelsall and Mercer's (2003) important article on the disproportionate power dilemmas that result from NGO-led participatory development and empowerment initiatives. A new era of critically engaged scholarship on the role of NGOs in protests, popular movements and social change is being proclaimed by scholars and activists in Africa and the diaspora. For instance, reflecting on Shivji's (2007) *Silences in NGO Discourse*, the Kenyan Organic Intellectuals Network (Ndungu 2023) have warned of the impacts of depoliticisation and NGO-isation of radical grassroots movements through NGO-led 'movement-building' initiatives – a new development industry buzzword and tactic executed throughout the non-profit industrial complex. The accounts and reflections of African activists that show how NGOs astroturf radical movements of resistance and liberation by championing misguided solutions to illusory grassroots concerns and demands display a reality that requires engaged research and a space where scholarship can be interpreted to practical action for the emancipatory design of strategy and navigation of struggle.

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The Review of African Political Economy and Marxism

Fifty years ago, ROAPE arose as a journal dedicated to critically analysing the intertwined politics and economics of Africa. More than any other publications in this field, ROAPE has devoted special attention to the theory and practice of imperialism and anti-imperialism in Africa. Its contributions regularly focus on monopoly capitalism, dependency theory, world systems theory, colonialism, neo-colonialism, exploitation, class struggles and socialist and communist movements. In these respects, ROAPE has filled a vital gap in the interdisciplinary fields of African Studies and Political Economy.

Although ROAPE has disseminated a broad range of theoretical perspectives over the years, the centrality of Marxism has stood out. By deploying the theories of Marx and Engels, Marxist contributors of various stripes have illuminated the political economy of the African continent.

It is only natural that Marxism should have emerged as the dominant theoretical approach. Marxism provides a scientific understanding of society, one that is founded on a rigorous philosophy: dialectical and historical materialism; a rigorous economic framework, rooted in the labour theory of value; and a comprehensive political theory, one that centres a class analysis. Marxism has provided an unparalleled insight into the dynamics of imperialism in Africa and how capitalism is the root cause of crisis on and

in the continent. Capitalism needs to constantly accumulate capital to survive, and so Western imperialist powers invaded Africa to expand their markets, exploit the continent and its people, and enable their own capitalist development. Marxism also identified revolutionary anti-imperialist struggles and the construction of communism as the solution to imperialism. Marxist researchers have used these profound insights to deepen scholarly understandings of political and economic power relations in Africa. Crucially, ROAPE has blazed a trail in disseminating these understandings. Since its inception, the journal has been the pre-eminent outlet for publishing cutting-edge Marxist approaches to African political economy.

This is not to suggest that ROAPE has an impeccable record in encouraging Marxist studies. Marxism is a broad church, and the journal has at times fallen short of reflecting this diversity adequately. Most notably, some (though not all!) contributions to ROAPE have displayed an overly critical and one-sided approach to African Marxism-Leninism. During the Cold War, several Marxist-Leninist governments arose in Africa, including the People's Republic of Mozambique (1975–90), the People's Republic of the Congo (1969–92), the People's Republic of Angola (1975–92), the People's Republic of Benin (1975–90), and the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1974–91). Under the banner of Marxism-Leninism, these revolutionary governments toppled imperialist regimes and embarked on ambitious programmes of socialist transformation, including agricultural collectivisation, the nationalisation of industry, the construction of a planned economy, public service expansion and the establishment of vanguard Leninist parties. Although these Marxist-Leninist governments made some serious mistakes, they also made impressive strides in opposing colonialism in Africa and in providing a concrete programme for a socialist future. Several contributors to ROAPE failed to offer nuance and balance in the analyses of these governments. Some writers unfairly and uniformly denounced African Marxism-Leninism as an authoritarian and dogmatic system of tyranny, mass murder and oppression, governed by a repressive and corrupt military clique. Such perspectives, whether intended or not, supported the US-led Cold War against communism and provided an unhelpful, unscientific and misleading appraisal of African Marxism-Leninism. To this day, the Cold War bias against Marxist-Leninist theory and practice is in urgent need of a comprehensive challenge. As the leading journal on imperialism in Africa, ROAPE can and should lead the way in offering such a challenge.

These shortcomings do not overshadow ROAPE's achievements. The journal has led the way in critically illuminating African political economy. It has done so by providing the most fertile ground for Marxist analyses of the continent. Perhaps most impressively, ROAPE has maintained this environment during the various waves of scholarly anti-Marxism, which have sought to smear and denounce its scientific insights. It is well known that Marxism is routinely and periodically denounced as a Western-centric, Eurocentric and orientalist ideology, one that both marginalises and misconstrues Africa. These unjustified postcolonial narratives have achieved unprecedented prominence since the rise of Black Lives Matter and the attendant campaign to 'decolonise' academia. Whereas many other journals have jumped on the anti-Marxist bandwagon, typically by giving precedence to anti- or non-Marxist research, ROAPE has consistently published many contributions that utilise the theories of Marx and Engels. At the same time, ROAPE has always provided room for constructive criticism, debate and dialogue on even the most

fundamental principles of Marxism. In this way, the journal has stayed true to Marx's commitment to 'a ruthless criticism of everything'.

When this is understood, something else becomes evident: ROAPE's recent decision to depart from the publisher Taylor & Francis was the logical culmination of its Marxist credentials. Why? In the final analysis, Taylor & Francis is a capitalist company. Its ultimate objective is profit, and not the broad dissemination of high-quality scholarly research. To maximise profit, Taylor & Francis maintains a policy of monetising academia, typically by gatekeeping journals and publications behind expensive paywall subscriptions, which only some individuals and institutions can afford. Such an exclusive system is antithetical to Marxism, which is committed to realising the public ownership of and access to knowledge.

By switching to ScienceOpen, an open-access platform, ROAPE has ushered in a new era for the journal, one in which every person with an internet connection has free access to the journal's outstanding Marxist research. The scientific insights of Marxism, the revolutionary ideology of the working class, will spread further among the public, including the proletariat. This is a necessary step in understanding and defeating imperialism in Africa.

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What is ROAPE's significance to me?

ROAPE provides a critical analysis of the intersectionality of gender, race, class and neoliberal globalisation in Africa through theoretical discussions but, more importantly, in concrete empirical studies of developments and struggles at the local, national and regional levels. This is especially significant now, with growing resistance to open public debate in Africa on the heightening conflict over land, other resources and livelihoods, as well as over reproductive rights and sexuality. Traditional media in Africa are being silenced, and efforts are under way to control social media as well.

ROAPE has become increasingly important to me personally as a space to speak my mind and to share ideas with like-minded people about what is happening in Africa and around the world. Much more than a journal publication, the website and blogs provide a dynamic arena for information, analysis and debate. Over time, I have also seen the increasing embrace of transformative feminist analysis and action, and participation of researchers, writers, teachers, students and activists based in Africa. The new initiative to provide open access to ROAPE material will enhance this process. *Hongera sana ROAPE* – congratulations.

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ROAPE and Zimbabwe: an appreciation

Over the last 50 years, ROAPE has held a special place in the study of Africa. Combining acute analysis with solid empiricism, the journal has provided an ongoing commentary that has been highly influential over the years.

Since the mid 1980s, my work has centred on Zimbabwe. ROAPE has been a go-to source of inspiration and debate for me like many others. There are 107 articles (and reviews) that have been published focusing on Zimbabwe since 1974. The first was a 1976 editorial by Lionel Cliffe and Peter Lawrence commenting on ‘the struggle for the state in Southern Africa’ in the wake of the MPLA’s victory in Angola. The then-ongoing machinations among the liberation movements in Zimbabwe were discussed, with the hope that a progressive peasant–worker alliance would emerge. They comment:

from our perspective what urgently needs to be resolved, at least in a preliminary way, is the issue of what kind of future Zimbabwe society is to emerge. Moreover, in our assessment none of the main contenders for power shows any sign of understanding the post-independent options nor of sensitivity to the needs of the working people of Zimbabwe. (Cliffe and Lawrence 1976, 7)

Well, the future of Zimbabwe is still being debated and the political alliances of the ruling elite remain highly contentious.

Over the subsequent years, papers have been published on Zimbabwe highlighting many themes. Lionel Cliffe, sadly now late, and Peter Lawrence have been highly influential in ensuring that Zimbabwean debates have appeared in the journal. Linked to an editorial by Lionel and Barry Munslow (1980) celebrating Zimbabwe’s independence, there were a cluster of papers – including by Cliffe, Mpfu and Munslow (1980) and Yates (1980) – that discussed the prospects of a progressive, socialist future for the country. Over the subsequent decades, there have been many other contributions that have discussed the changing character of post-liberation politics, and the political alliances that exist in the region (for example, Phimister and Raftopoulos 2004). In a number of prescient pieces, the challenges for democracy have been explored by Brian Raftopoulos (1992), Lloyd Sachikonye (2003) and others. All are worth rereading today.

Another theme that saw a number of contributions, especially in the 1990s, was on the consequences of structural adjustment. ROAPE was an early critic of the adjustment programmes, seen as imposing external conditionalities and so constraining progressive policies (Stoneman 1992). Important papers were published by Nazneen Kanji and Niki Jazdowska (1993) on the consequences for women and Rob Davies and David Saunders (1987) on child health and nutrition impacts, for example, while in the aftermath of

economic restructuring Paris Yeros (2013) examined the changing role of labour unions in a two-part contribution.

The papers that I have devoured ever since starting my PhD focused particularly on the changing character of the Zimbabwean countryside and its class politics. For example, there were great papers on agricultural ‘success’ (Cliffe 1988), circular migration (Simon 1985; Potts and Mutambirwa 1997), farm labour (Moyo, Rutherford and Amanor-Wilks 2000), the role of an emerging bourgeoisie (Munslow 1980), post-independence resettlement (Jacobs 1983; Alexander 1994), rural social differentiation (Cousins, Weiner and Amin 1992) and agrarian transformations more generally (Bush and Cliffe 1984; Bernstein 2003). All added to an informed, nuanced debate on livelihoods and agrarian dynamics in Zimbabwe; one that was massively influential for me.

After the Fast Track Land Reform Programme from 2000, the journal has published perhaps the greatest concentration of articles on Zimbabwe in its history; now increasingly, I am glad to say, written by Zimbabweans. Together with colleagues, my three contributions to the journal have all been published in this period (Chaumba, Scoones and Wolmer 2003; Scoones 2015; Scoones et al. 2019). The special issue edited by Grasian Mkodzongi and Peter Lawrence published in 2019 is a stand-out collection (2019), but there are many other significant articles published in this period. These include the classic paper by Sam Moyo (2011), as well as several important ones from frequent contributor Lloyd Sachikonye on the fast-track programme (2003) and contract farming (2016). Together they all have added to a more critical and nuanced perspective on Zimbabwe’s land reform than too often offered elsewhere.

In the opening editorial in 1974, the editors promised that the journal would ask a set of questions: ‘why is Africa’s productive potential not realised? Why are most of its people still poor? Why is the continent still dependent, its future still controlled by outside forces?’ (ROAPE 1974, 1). This was to be done through ‘non-dogmatic’ theorisation, but an approach that would not get trapped by ‘bourgeois social science’ (*ibid.*, 3) that deems all causes are local and ignores the wider influences of international political economy. The same questions posed half a century ago are as relevant today, and the journal continues to provide a vital platform for scholarship and wider activist debate, particularly so in its new open-access incarnation.

In the next 50 years, I hope that the journal will continue this valuable contribution to analytical debate combined with practical engagement, encouraging more African authors and, as ever, being ahead of the curve in spotting trends, suggesting alternatives and providing a progressive perspective on contemporary themes.

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