

## ACAS Thirty Years On

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In 2008 the *ACAS Bulletin* celebrated its thirtieth birthday. ACAS emerged at a moment when radical African movements were capturing international headlines, inspiring activists around the world, and were firmly opposed by the US government. As national liberation movements in the early and mid-1970s scored significant victories against white minority and colonial rule, US overt and covert intervention across Africa accelerated. Blocked by traditional academic organizations from supporting and mobilizing on behalf of these struggles for majority rule, progressive scholars of Africa came together to form ACAS.

There were models for such work. ACAS' origins and early actions followed in the wake of other scholar-activist organizations which had emerged out of the long 1960s wave of anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements. The North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), for example, was founded in 1966 in response to the April 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic. The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars was similarly established in 1967 as part of the upwelling of protest against US expansion into Vietnam.

Founded in 1977, ACAS was thus a late arrival to the scene of organized scholar-activism. By celebrating its thirtieth birthday ACAS stands out, however, as one of the few surviving scholar-activist organizations, and one of the few surviving Africa solidarity organizations. Most local Africa-related groups have long since disappeared, while national organizations focused on other world areas have long ago narrowed their work to scholarly analysis and journal production--as in the transition of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* to today's *Critical Asian Studies* journal.

To re-read the early years of the *ACAS Bulletin* is to encounter an exciting period, when the possibility

of a new and liberated Africa, and a transformed US relationship with Africa, engaged scholars' imaginations. ACAS' aims were stated in the first sentence of its founding 1977 "Draft Statement of Principles": "We are a grouping of scholars interested in Africa and concerned with moving U.S. policy toward Africa in directions more sympathetic to African interests." The same first issue of the *ACAS Newsletter* (later *Bulletin*) advanced an agenda to promote scholarly analysis of US policy, develop alternative policy proposals, construct a communication network among progressive Africanist scholars, and coordinate with other national and local solidarity organizations.

These goals remained central to ACAS work over three decades. How they have been carried out has, however, changed over the years as three different generations of activists have grappled with US-African relations. The first generation's focus was openly stated in ACAS' 1977 "draft principles" statement: "For political and practical reasons, our emphasis for the foreseeable future will be on southern Africa." This reflected the strength of the southern African movements and the problems they posed for the US government in the preceding few years: Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau had just won independence in 1975 after long guerrilla wars; battles for independence were heating up in Zimbabwe and Namibia; and the 1976 Soweto rebellion presaged a resurgence of resistance inside South Africa and the strengthening of the ANC in exile.

At the same time President Jimmy Carter was moving to impose a solution in Zimbabwe and Namibia that would secure white interests. The first issue of the *ACAS Newsletter* led the charge against these efforts. As Co-chair Immanuel Wallerstein asked, "What can be done by Americans who think that African liberation in southern is part of human liberation?" The answer: "They can demand that their own government *cease* supporting the white regimes. But above all they can avoid being lured into the trap of supporting liberal interventionism." Four senior Africanists and ACAS members (Sean

Gervasi, Ann Seidman, Immanuel Wallerstein and David Wiley) jointly penned an article on "Why We Said 'No' to A.I.D.," rejecting a large project designed to support conservative policies on southern Africa. Co-Chair Willard Johnson, in laying out more practical steps for activists in the same issue, nevertheless put quite sweeping goals on the agenda: "We wish to have our foreign relations promote respect for the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to advance the liberation of oppressed peoples, and to achieve a more nearly equal distribution of power, productivity and wealth among the peoples of the world."

These were radical aims indeed and remain so. They reflected the times—and lived experiences. Many founding members of ACAS had been active in and carried forward the sentiments of the 1960s North American and African movements; these were now married to the expectation that Africa's national liberation movements could deliver a more radical solution to the process of decolonization, neocolonialism, and resistance to US imperial power. Many ACAS leaders had or would teach and work in southern Africa, as would their students who often became, twenty years later, ACAS' second generation members, co-chairs and executive board members.

Throughout its first two decades of work ACAS remained solidly focused on southern Africa. Members—through the *ACAS Bulletin*, their own published work, and activity on their many local campuses and communities—sought to unearth US cooperation with white rule while building support for southern African movements. This included, as it had for NACLA, Concerned Asian Scholars, and other anti-imperialist groups, tackling US multinational corporations' support for repressive regimes, covert US intelligence agencies' operations, US counter-insurgency and military interventions. It also led to long-term support for radical regimes opposed to apartheid, particularly Mozambique. This research and educational work did not take place in a welcoming climate given the

reemergence of Cold War "globalist" foreign policy analysts under Carter, and then policies of "constructive engagement" with white power and structural adjustment that accompanied Reagan's rise to power.

Offsetting these harsh conditions in the United States in the 1980s were actions inside South Africa which served to boost and expand anti-apartheid activity across the US. ACAS members were particularly active on local campuses, where divestment and sanctions campaigns gained ground in the late 1970s and 1980s as revealed in successive issues of the *Bulletin*. New national campaigns emerged in the early 1980s, led variously by the Africa Fund/the American Committee on Africa, the American Friends Service Committee, the Africa Policy Information Center, the Washington Office on Africa, and TransAfrica (itself founded in the same year as ACAS).

The years surrounding 1984-1986, marked as they were by escalating rebellions inside South Africa, were the high-water mark for the US and worldwide anti-apartheid movement. By 1986 a national network of activists had built such pressure on Congress that it passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act—something long opposed by both the Democratic and Republican parties. It was Reagan's most significant foreign policy defeat. ACAS and the entire anti-apartheid movement felt victory was near, as was well evoked by Co-Chair Jean Sindab in the *Bulletin* at the time: "This is quite an exciting time for those of us who have struggled so hard, for so long, to bring an end to apartheid and U.S. support for that racist system." (*Bulletin* No. 16, Winter 1986:21).

1986 would prove in many ways to be the zenith of the anti-apartheid movement. By the late 1980s ACAS members sensed major, uncertain challenges were coming. Mozambique's difficult accommodation with apartheid South Africa in the wake of destabilization, the Nkomati Accord (1984), and Samora Machel's death (1986), along with the region's and continent's accommodation

with the IMF, signaled that new challenges lie ahead. In a series on "ACAS—Ten Years On" in *Bulletin* No. 23 (Spring 1988), Co-Chair Immanuel Wallerstein flagged "present ambiguities" and "dilemmas" in the wake of successful divestment and sanctions; John Saul, founding member of the Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa, noted the smashing of the "high hopes" surrounding the 1975 victories against Portuguese colonialism, most notably in Mozambique; and James Mittelman pinpointed the challenge of moving beyond targeting individual states and single-issue campaigns. While all called for greater commitment and more rigorous intellectual analysis, a period of difficulty for scholarly-activist work was clearly ahead.

Mandela's release and the unbanning of the ANC, PAC, and CP in 1990 and the ANC's electoral victory in 1994 opened up this new era as exiles went home and the ANC took over the reigns of state power. This transformation was propelled further on this side of the Atlantic by the election of Clinton in 1992, and a seemingly much more prominent position for Africa-America and even Africa. Still, as might have been expected, civic and community-based antiapartheid organizations in both South Africa and the US declined. Meanwhile both the ANC and the Clinton administration came to aggressively embrace neoliberal policies.

ACAS itself changed. In November 1992 ACAS reorganized with new Co-Chairs (Jean Sindab and David Wiley), moved from southern Africa to work on the entire continent, and launched a continuing presence in Washington with a paid staff member for the first time (Lisa Alfred). Thirteen "Issue Working Groups" were formed to chart a new vision for ACAS, and a national meeting of solidarity organizations was organized under ACAS auspices (see *Bulletins* 35, Spring 1992 and 38-39, Winter 1993).

The difficulties were starkly stated in Co-Chair Wiley's own assessment of the near future (*Bulletin* 38/39:9-13): geopolitically Africa was falling off

the Washington policy map, while economically Africa became subject to unrelenting pressure from the IMF, World Bank and the US. Aid from Northern governments was falling and attention of Western and Japanese economic interests declining. Meanwhile most academic Africanists, Wiley noted, remained "professionally dispassionate, and focused on occupational productivity and advancement, mirroring the turn to self-interest by many Americans in these insecure times" (11). If Africanists had failed so far address the continent's new realities, ACAS, Wiley argued, should try to do so: "Our major tasks in this period are to struggle understand the new situation in Africa and globally, to explore both those policy issues in Africa that merit our attention in this new period and what needs to be said about them to U.S. policymakers, and to redirect ACAS to become a more effective instrument of change."

Over the course of the next decade much of the agenda set out in the early to mid-1990s was pushed forward, which stood in stark relief to the collapse of most groups that focused on southern Africa and apartheid. Coverage of continental Africa rapidly expanded, featuring special issues on progressive approaches and debates on democratization, human rights, academic freedom, militarization, and conflict resolution. Coverage of key crisis areas grew as well, from the Congo to Nigeria, from Somalia to Africa/Iraq. Far greater attention was paid to health, women, and political violence, an effort led by Meredith Turshen who became a Co-Chair in 2001. Greater coordination with Washington groups also took place, and the board and membership became more diverse and somewhat younger.

Amidst all these changes there are also continuities as well with previous periods. One of these was the continuing struggle over the relationship of scholars and the U.S. government, particularly scholars' work with US intelligence agencies. Another concerned the balance between activism and traditional scholarship. And another challenge continually arose on the reverse side of this

equation: between scholar activists and social movements, particularly as movements changed over time.

No issue was more persistent from ACAS' first days than scholars who worked for or otherwise cooperated with US military and intelligence agencies. By the time of ACAS's formation, covert and highly repressive intervention by the CIA in Ghana (against Nkrumah), Zaire (against Lumumba and for Mobutu), Ethiopia (to reinforce the Selassie monarchy) and especially southern Africa (Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa) were widely known. Here ACAS really made a difference, leading efforts throughout the 1980s and 1990s to constrain academic cooperation with military/intelligence agencies and counterinsurgency research. Successive *Bulletin* items and ACAS campaigns followed an early article by Dave Wiley in *Bulletin* No. 6 (February 1982).

In the early 1990s the Boren Bill, which later morphed into the National Education Security Program, led to another wave of work to secure African studies centers' and programs' adherence to a rejection of intelligence funding. ACAS members provided leadership in spreading and coordinating this effort with other area studies associations. This effort got much harder to sustain after 9/11 and the vast expansion of military and intelligence programs under Bush, when individual researchers and a few programs began to serve rapidly growing military and intelligence programs in Africa. But for more than 20 years ACAS has been a leader, and a successful one, in this area.

ACAS's relationship with academic associations has proved to be another source of continuing debate. In its earliest years ACAS struggled to maintain its independence from the African Studies Association which had continually distanced itself from any support for African movements or radical critiques of US foreign policy, and had correspondingly come under serious attack from black scholar-activists. Indeed much of the original impetus and

continuing support for ACAS was due to its being the home for engaged scholarship and support for African movements and activists. As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, the balance between scholarship and activist work became more difficult to sustain.

Direct support for African movements such as ANC, ZANU-PF, and FRELIMO waned, while the lure of more professional, dispassionate, and moderate work with government agencies grew. Alternative and more conservative organizations that would alongside the U.S. government and neoliberal agencies also emerged. The most notable was the National Summit for Africa, founded in 2001 through funding from the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation and widely endorsed by leaders of the African Studies Association. Yet premised as it was on greater liberal and US government commitments to Africa, efforts like the Summit had little long-term success in attracting a base membership or effecting policy.

If the demise of the antiapartheid and African nationalist movements stilled activist scholarship and work, new movements in both the US and Africa nevertheless continued to fitfully emerge in the 1990s and the new century. The Afrocentric movement in the US in the late 1990s, resulting in the 1995 Million Man and 1997 Million Women Marches—the largest black nationalist and Panafricanist demonstrations ever held in the United States—renewed interest in Africa on US campuses and communities. One result was the creation of new organizations, such as the Black Radical Congress. The evolution of the ACAS board during this time reflected the emergence of a younger, more diverse generation involved in post-national liberation movement issues, movements and campaigns.

For Africanist scholars the black nationalist renewal was especially notable. It reopened the issue of black representation and support for African liberation in the largely white African studies community, an issue that split the ASA in 1969, and

indirectly led to the formation of ACAS itself given the ASA's adamant refusal to denounce US intervention in Africa and directly support national liberation movements. In its early years ACAS alternated its meetings between the annual conferences of the ASA and the alternative, post-1969 formation of the African Heritage Studies Association. ACAS has also maintained a continual succession of black co-chairs over the years (Willard Johnson, James Turner, Jean Sindab, Al Green, Merle Bowen, Michael West). When white scholars charged in the late 1990s that Africanist academic posts were closed to white applicants, and black scholars protested, it was members of ACAS that organized an open forum at an annual ASA meeting and published the presentations and dialogue in the *ACAS Bulletin* under the title of the "The 'Ghettoization' Debate" (no. 46, Winter 1996).

Many ACAS members also participated in new international movements that grew in surrounding debt, AIDS, the IMF/World Bank, fair trade, and Darfur. None of these revived, however, the degree of interest and coalitions that had existed in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the emergence of new local movements in South Africa in the late 1990s, as elsewhere around the continent, failed to stimulate broad and successful campaigns to link US and African activists. South Africa's most successful new movement, the Treatment Action Campaign, had many admirers in the North, but few sustained and wide relations with northern scholar activists. In all these areas ACAS members nevertheless worked assiduously to support African colleagues, as successive *Bulletins* reveal. Still, ACAS's attempt to seize the opportunities offered by the new movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have been partial at best.

ACAS has not been alone in facing these difficulties. As the long-time activists and editors of *No Easy Victories, African Liberation and American Activists Over a Half Century, 1950-2000* argue in the conclusion of their volume (225-28), support for activist work now faces severe constraints as Africa has been increasingly

marginalized in the media, Congress, foreign policy circles, and the world-economy. Beyond access to oil and the militarization of US-African ties as part of the "war on terror," African-US work has often been narrowed to appeals for charity and humanitarian intervention. Africans in these campaigns are all too easily reduced to hapless, bewitched victims, predatory victimizers, or tribal warriors. For many long-term activists it does indeed seem--despite much current work on individual issues and states--that deepening the support for scholar-activism remains much more difficult than at any time in the past three decades.

Such a bleak assessment should not obscure real achievements and future possibilities. Looking back we can justly celebrate the major contributions scholar activists have made in the struggles against colonialism and apartheid. Looking forward, it may well be the case that too many anomalies exist to hope for--as is so common when old activists meet--a revival of the past paradigm for scholarly-activist work on Africa. The potential for and public visibility of activist work on Africa may not have simply declined; it may have indeed shifted elsewhere. Here in the United States, developments in both the academic and activist worlds may have undercut the principles and frameworks upon which past activity depended.

On the academic side, the scholarly enterprise known as area studies and its Africanist component has increasingly shrunk and fragmented amidst the rise of diaspora, Africana, ethnic, and global studies programs and degrees. This has undercut the potential for continental, Africanist-centered activism. Much higher levels of migration from Africa, including into the higher reaches of US academia, have also served to dissolve the secular missionary role that most white, mainstream Africanists played as interpreters of Africa for the American public. Multiculturalism, Afrocentric student activism in the 1990s, and neo-racist responses to these developments have further shattered the cohesion of the past African studies matrix—as has been so visible in recent years in the

emergence of black and continental African directors at major African studies programs and centers (e.g. Berkeley, Boston, Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan State, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Yale).

On the activist side, new movements have also undercut the divide between the US and Africa upon which old alliances were created. In part this is the *success* of the anti-neoliberal debt and structural adjustment movements of the 1990s, which exerted such strong influence in, and have so transformed, what is now tellingly termed the "Global South." In Latin America and Asia it is clear that the hold of the US and international financial institutions has markedly declined, and that new land, indigenous, and social justice movements are increasingly networked through new technologies across regions, states and continents.

The local expressions of these movements in Africa, including most notably in South Africa, have been equally marked. But as in the rest of the Global South, they have not evolved along the lines of past North-South solidarity, anti-colonial, panafrican or anti-apartheid models. Today's movements are far more interlinked across the South and have far less visibility and political impact in the North—at least so far. Personal experience and networks remain no less key to transnational organizing of course, but for today's growing movements these are often constructed outside the North/South lines upon which past solidarity movements flowed.

As ACAS moves toward its third generation, these changes promise to call forth different models of organizing, utilizing new technologies for the dissemination of educational materials and calls for action. ACAS' new Co-Chairs in 2006, Sean Jacobs and Chris Patterson, have been confronting and undertaking these tasks now, as can be seen in the new web site (<http://concernedafricascholars.org/>), new and action alert items, and recent *Bulletins*. As these activities show, what has not changed is the need for a continuing radical critique of US policy

and of the US's historic relation with Africa and its diasporas.

There are few signs that an Obama presidency will foster any substantive change in Africa policy given the appointment of Clinton-era veterans such as Susan Rice and Hilary Clinton, who have in the recent past and in their appointment hearings continued to promote Africa's forced "integration" into the world-economy, the war on terror and Islam, and a priority for military links with Africa through the US military command for Africa, AFRICOM. If there is a new element on the horizon, it is likely to be enhanced charity and the funding of liberal, humanitarian intervention by other forces—in large part a response to their embarrassment in failing to act in Rwanda.

These developments point to the very real need for more and not less activist work by scholars in the coming generation. Over the long run, significant dangers will arise as US financial, commercial, and political power declines, and US power may too easily come to rely upon the ultimate pillar of hegemony--military power. Yet resistance is likely to open up new opportunities as well. As activists in Africa, the Americas, and Asia already know quite well, policies based on neoliberalism and the projection of US power have been everywhere rejected. In the coming conjuncture, this reality will lead to alternative policies and centers of power. For those of us in the United States, these developments are likely to make progressive mobilization more possible and certainly more imperative. The struggle for liberation, for a post-imperial future, remains, as it was in the early days of ACAS, before us.

### **About the author**

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