

Editor's Introduction

Sean Jacobs (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

Mahmood Mamdani, a university professor of anthropology at Columbia University in New York City remains one of the pre-eminent scholars of African Studies in the West. He also remains prolific, often taking the lead in unpacking controversial debates. For example, this month he has a new book out on the Darfur crisis, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (Knopf, 2009). And few can disagree about the impact of his previous two books. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Pantheon, 2004) certainly contributed—especially in popular media—to our understanding of the historical roots of the “War on Terror”: to the United States’ engagement in proxy wars in Southern Africa, Latin America and Afghanistan and the antecedents of “collateral damage.” A decade earlier, his *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996) became a must-read in universities.

So when, in early December 2008, the *London Review of Books* (hereafter LRB) published a long essay by Mamdani on the ongoing political and economic crises (at least for a decade now) in Zimbabwe, it was inevitable that it would provoke debate. As one critic of Mamdani’s concedes in this issue, “...whatever Mamdani writes he is always brilliant and provocative.”

In his LRB essay, Mamdani writes that “... it is hard to think of a figure more reviled in the West than Robert Mugabe,” but also that a pre-occupation with Mugabe’s character “... does little to illuminate the socio-historical issues involved,” or give any sense of how the Zimbabwean leader and his party, ZANU-PF, has managed to survive.

Mamdani then goes on to argue that Mugabe has not just ruled by coercion, but also by consent. That the land issue is at the crux of the crisis and that the “... the people of Zimbabwe are likely to remember 2000-3 as the end of the settler colonial era” (this is the period of intense political violence, invasion and settlement of white-owned farms in Zimbabwe following Mugabe’s loss of referendum vote and parliamentary elections). For Mamdani the political split in Zimbabwe is largely rural-urban, respectively in support of, or opposition to, Mugabe and ZANU-PF. Furthermore, an ethnic split characterizes Mugabe supporters on the one hand against that of the alliance of the Movement for Democratic Change and the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions. Mamdani concluded his piece with a warning to neighboring South Africa:

Few doubt that this is the hour of reckoning for former settler colonies. The increasing number of land invasions in KwaZulu Natal (province in South Africa), and the violence that has accompanied them, indicate that the clock is ticking.

Not surprisingly Mamdani’s piece provoked wide response. Not only did it reflect the importance attached to his writings, but it also pointed to the passions that the Zimbabwe situation arouses.

The responses were quick and fast. For example, the distinguished Africanist Terence Ranger, of Oxford University, wrote in his letter to the LRB:

Mahmood Mamdani is correct to stress that Robert Mugabe is not just a crazed dictator or a corrupt thug but that he promotes a program and an ideology that are attractive to many in Africa and to some in Zimbabwe itself. Mamdani takes care to balance this by recognizing Mugabe’s propensity for violence. Yet this balance is hard to maintain and towards the end of his article Mamdani lets it slip.

Another early response came from 35 academics, who wrote a collective letter to the LRB. We

publish that letter in full here, as well as Mamdani's response to his critics in the LRB.

But it was not long after that the debate about the article extended beyond the pages of the LRB. Horace Campbell, author of *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation* (Africa World Press, 2003) wrote an opinion piece for *Pambazuka News*. Sam Moyo (based at the Africa Institute for Agrarian Studies) and Paris Yeros (Catholic University of Minas Gerais) wrote a piece for *Monthly Review's Zine* website. We reproduce those articles here.

A number of other academics, researchers and commentators have written commentaries on Mamdani's original LRB piece since then and are published in this issue of ACAS Bulletin too: Patrick Bond (director of the Center for Civil Society at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa), Amanda Hammar (program coordinator at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala in Sweden), Elaine Windrich (Stanford University), David Moore (University of Johannesburg) and the former Zimbabwean liberation war Senior Commander and leader in the Zimbabwe Liberation Veterans Forum, Wilfred Mhanda.

Apart from Moyo and Yeros, this issue also includes contributions from two other scholars cited by Mamdani in his original essay: Ben Cousins, director of the Program on Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa — described by Mamdani as "... one of the most astute South African analysts of agrarian change" — as well as Brian Raftopoulos, one of Zimbabwe's leading intellectuals. Raftopoulos is a former associate professor of the Institute for Development at the University of Zimbabwe and now director for Research and Policy at the Solidarity Peace Trust in South Africa.

The contributions of so many politically engaged scholars demonstrate how the debate over the Zimbabwe situation of the past nine years has never been simply an "academic" debate. At the same

time, Mamdani's contribution has helped to bring the more specific Zimbabwean debate to the attention of a wider audience.

While some may suggest that the frame of the debate has shifted since the formation of the unity government in Zimbabwe in February of 2009, it is important to fully consider how the fault lines in this debate will continue to shape domestic and international responses to the ongoing crises in Zimbabwe. How best to rebuild the economy and carry out sustainable land reforms, for example, or to locate sufficient international and regional support to end the cholera epidemic and restore much needed health services, are all questions that, in one way or another, must deal with the fundamental issues raised by the scholars included in this Bulletin.

This issue — like the last two on the crises in Zimbabwe — reflects ACAS's new focus to intervene publicly — and timely — as well as to disseminate widely key debates about contemporary African affairs, especially on-line.

A few final notes: We retained the British spelling and quotation style from the LRB and *Pambazuka*. We want to thank the editors of the *London Review of Books*, *The Monthly Review Zine*, and *Pambazuka News* for allowing us to reprint articles and letters here.

Finally, I'd like to thank Jacob Mundy, Bulletin co-editor, for layout and design of the issue, Wendy Urban-Mead and Blair Rutherford for their edits and ideas, Amanda Hammar and David Moore for coordinating and facilitating contributions to this issue from other key Zimbabwe experts, and most importantly, Timothy Scarnecchia, for collaborating on the idea for the special issue back in December, for cajoling people to write, and for coordinating collection of the articles.