

Patrick Bond

Patrick Bond is director of the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society, where Brutus was based from 2005–2009. Among his numerous publications are *Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation* (Zed Books, 2006) and *Climate Change, Carbon Trading and Civil Society: Negative Returns on South African Investments* (Rozenburg, Publishers, UKZN Press, 2008).
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Obituary

Dennis Brutus: A memorial statement

Much can and has been said about the loving and nurturing characteristics of Dennis Brutus and his politico-literary contributions. Those who knew him understood how much he encouraged future generations of radicals and poets. His written word was often breathtaking, and few have so movingly grieved of injustice combined with incarceration (*Letters to Martha* and *Sirens, Knuckles and Boots* during the mid-1960s), exile (e.g. *Poems from Algiers* and *China Poems* during the 1970s), and social struggle (*Stubborn Hope* and *Salutes and Censures*).

Context is crucial to knowing Brutus' poetry. After risking his life repeatedly to end apartheid, he was terribly angry about post-1994 South Africa. Until the point he died on December 26, 2009, he railed against worsening inequality, reflected in a recent SA government report that confessed whites enjoy real income one quarter higher today than in 1994, while blacks actually lost real income.

The anger generated intense and insightful poetry, because Brutus had the self-discipline to construct lyrical prose, haikus and free-form poetry in a way that fused his emotions and liberatory strategy.

For though he dabbled in Congress politics during the 1950s and 1960s, Brutus was an independent leftist for life. In his teens he fought racism in sports and soon learned politics in the Trotskyist movement of the Eastern Cape region (the Teachers' League), when he radicalized many high school youth when teaching at Paterson High. Many of his feats are recounted, with humility and humor, along with his favourite poems, in the book *Poetry and Protest*, edited by Aisha Karim and Lee Sustar (Haymarket Press, 2006).

Here are just some of the highlights along the way:

- 1924 – born in Harare, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) but his family soon moved to Port Elizabeth;
- 1950s – organized community, sport and teacher organizations, and published his early poems in the Eastern Cape, after university at Fort Hare (South Africa's main black university);
- 1961 – received his first banning order mainly due to anti-racist sports activism and journalism;

- 1963 – shot in the back trying to escape apartheid police, then tortured on Robben Island;
- 1966 – released from prison only to be deported to Britain with his family;
- 1968 – persuaded thirty Third World Olympics teams to boycott Mexico if the white South African team played, and won;
- 1972 – achieving South Africa’s formal expulsion from the Olympics;
- 1960s–90s – as exiled academic, helped generate an African literary community, publishing a dozen poetry volumes and organizing writer associations and events first in London (1966–71), then at Chicago’s Northwestern University (1971–84) followed by the University of Pittsburgh;
- 1970s–80s – eloquently advocated divestment of US corporations from South Africa, anti-apartheid sanctions and the cultural/academic boycott, fighting off the Reagan Administration attempts to deport him to his homeland;
- 1990s – gave support to high-profile political prisoners, especially Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal;
- 1998 – worked with South African independent leftist and church activists to found Jubilee South Africa (alongside Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane and Prof Fatima Meer);
- 1999 – was active in mobilizations for – and civil disobedience at – the Seattle World Trade Organisation protest;
- 2000 – at a major World Bank / IMF protest, he helped initiate and launch the World Bank Boycott and successfully advocated disinvestment of Bank bonds by major municipalities and pension funds;
- 2000–09 – helped launch the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and Anti-Privatisation Forum, and throughout the 2000s offered constant solidarity to South Africa’s new urban social movements’;
- 2000s – chaired a successful campaign against US navy’s test-bombing of Vieques (Puerto Rico);
- 2001 – was excited by the advent of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre; he attended nearly every gathering and promoted global left unity in its image;
- 2001 – he served as lead critic of the United Nations at the Durban World Conference Against Racism, helping to lead a march of 10,000 demanding (unsuccessfully) that Zionism and reparations for slavery, colonialism and apartheid be put on the agenda;
- 2002 – moved to SA and assisted 30,000 local activists in swarming the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, on grounds of its corporate domination and neoliberal eco-social policies;
- 2002–03 – assisted Durban activists to generate critiques of capitalism as a protest leader against the African Union’s New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and then the Southern African World Economic Forum (and was in-

jured when a police horse knocked him over at the Durban International Convention Centre);

- 2003 – participated in anti-war mobilizations and was commissioner in the independent George W. Bush War Crimes Commission;
- 2003–09 – helped initiate apartheid reparations lawsuits and promoted them through many hurdles;
- 2005 – advocated strongly against the sweatshops issue, especially at University of Pittsburgh where he retained Professor Emeritus status;
- 2005–09 – offered solidarity to Burmese and Tamil liberation struggles;
- 2006–09 – provided intensifying solidarity to Palestinians and Lebanese under attack from Israel (including bearing witness to the Lebanon invasion in July 2006), and in early 2009 during the Gaza incursion, strongly promoted the Israel Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions campaign in Durban;
- 2007 – adapted Howard Zinn’s one-man play *Marx in Soho* to South Africa, performing it across the region;
- 2007 – given the honour of membership in South Africa’s Sports Hall of Fame but rejected it because of the persistence of racism;
- 2008 – supported the case of University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society founder Adam Habib, banned from entering the US on spurious grounds, initiating a protest at Durban’s US Consulate;
- 2008–09 – announced opposition to South Africa’s hosting of the 2010 World Cup, arguing that the soccer tournament would result in extremely expensive white elephant stadiums and increased oppression of poor people, including displaced street hawkers and fisherfolk whom he supported against municipal oppression;
- 2009 – called for the ‘seattling’ of the Copenhagen climate summit, on grounds that Third World leaders could recognize – and should resist – a bad deal (as did Africa in 1999 at the Seattle WTO summit), and that outside, an increasingly militant Climate Justice movement should engage in direct action to protest elites’ failure to cut emissions, pay ecological debt and transcend carbon trading gimmicks.

His enemies were legion, and strong emotions were expressed by opponents even from within the anti-apartheid fold, such as Minister in the Office of the President (and former Brutus student) Essop Pahad, who called him “Dennis the Menace” in *The Sowetan* in 2002, and Sam Ramsamy, whose takeover of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee in 1990 exemplified the strategies of conciliation versus principled struggle.

A week after Brutus died, Ramsamy observed that one of the world’s greatest sports justice campaigners “did not fully comprehend the realities of reconciliation. Sadly, he divorced himself from post-apartheid reconstruction of South African sport.

I believe that it was because he did not fully comprehend the realities of reconciliation and the difficult process of uniting all sectors of SA society.”

The reason was simple, as Ashwin Desai replied:

It is indeed true that Dennis did not understand the complexities of reconciliation and nation-building. This is not because he was for one moment of his life trapped in any obsessive racial mindset. He was the most open and approachable person on a one-to-one basis. Dennis ignored the national agenda because his political goals did not include the realities of a certain form of reconciliation. During the 1990s–2000s, as he became involved in social movement politics, he freed himself from those complexities, just as he had earlier freed himself from complexities imposed during apartheid upon “responsible” blacks, to bolster the PW Botha regime’s fake reforms.

Nadine Gordimer described Brutus accurately: “A freedom fighter who never thought it necessary to give up being an intellectual, but combined both.” And US radical academic Noam Chomsky paid tribute to Brutus as “a great artist and intrepid warrior in the unending struggle for justice and freedom. He will long be remembered with honor, respect, and affection.”