OBITUARY

Dennis Brutus: Poet and Revolutionary (1924–2009)

Paul Le Blanc

Losing Dennis, for many of us, is like losing a member of our family. Activists all around the world know him and have loved him as a wonderful poet, seemingly tireless activist, comrade and friend. He was incredibly important for me—as I believe he must have been for many—because he took various individuals that he met very seriously, validating them, encouraging them to realize the potential he could see in them, in some cases as poets and cultural warriors, in some cases as radical activists and revolutionaries.

This dear friend has left behind the riches of his poetry, particularly well represented in the two most recent volumes of his work. One is a very beautiful collection of poetry, plus photographs and an interview, Leafdrift. The second, Poetry and Protest: A Dennis Brutus Reader, is a more ambitious compilation—an important source not only for all those wanting information about earlier anti-racist and global justice struggles and the South African freedom movement in particular, but also for all those who will draw inspiration from Dennis’s efforts in order to participate effectively in future struggles.

Dennis Brutus became politically active in South Africa in part through a cluster of revolutionary socialists influenced by the ideas of Leon Trotsky, but later moved—in part through its development and promotion of the historic ‘Freedom Charter’—into the orbit of the more sizeable African National Congress (ANC), associating with the militants of the South African Communist Party (SACP) who were so influential in its ranks. Arrested in 1963, then shot while attempting to escape, he survived to break rocks with Nelson Mandela and other imprisoned revolutionaries on the notorious Robben Island. Released in 1965, he was able to leave South Africa a year later—becoming prominent first in Britain and then in the United States in international anti-apartheid efforts.

Many of us in the United States first became aware of Dennis Brutus in the 1970s, as an eloquent spokesman in exile against the system of racial separation and white
domination afflicting his homeland. Not only a fine poet, he was also a sophisticated organizer—helping to put together and lead a powerful movement (SANROC, South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee) to have the all-white teams of the apartheid regime excluded from the Olympic Games.

He explained in verse and prose the necessity of opposing the regime and the system that had—for example—gunned down peacefully protesting men, women and children in Sharpeville in 1960:

What is important
about Sharpeville
is not that seventy died:
nor even that they were shot in the back
retreating, unarmed, defenseless
and certainly not
the heavy caliber slug
that tore through a mother’s back
and ripped through the child in her arms
killing it
Remember Sharpeville
bullet-in-the-back day
Because it epitomized oppression
and the nature of society
more clearly than anything else;
it was the classic event
Nowhere is racial dominance
more clearly defined
nowhere the will to oppress
more clearly demonstrated
what the world whispers
apartheid with snarling guns
the blood lust after
South Africa spills in the dust
Remember Sharpeville
Remember bullet-in-the-back day
And remember the unquenchable will for freedom
Remember the dead
and be glad

He told us about the meaning of the Soweto student uprising of 1976:

Understandably
there are many versions
of what really happened;
reporters of course, their stories,
but, better stories of students
those who were there just then
when it happened;

3 Brutus, Poetry and Protest, op. cit., pp. 95–96.
they say they were confused,
that they were scared of dying,
that there was so much happening:
but one, when I pressed him, tried,
haltingly, with much uncertainty:
‘How many?’ I demanded, ‘at least guess!’
but he backed away from figures
claimed he could not, would not guess
then began, again, haltingly
(also, partly, trying to explain)
why he could not say with certainty
how many students were killed in Soweto
on that June sixteenth day:
‘When they had filled that church floor
with corpses
when they had filled all classrooms
with corpses
they laid corpses outside along fences
or grassy verges
or by pavements, sidewalks, street edges:
each corpse had on its forehead
a strip of bandaid imprinted with a number
those numbers were indistinct:
there were four numbers
it was hard to say what they were
but there were four numbers’
that is what he could say for certain
He was Sietsie Mashanini—
a student who escaped from Soweto
in Soweto on June 16, 1976
it was on that day Hector Peterson died
(13-year old first one shot his image
that is carried on posters)
on June 16
in Soweto
Soweto

He told us about the vision of a new South Africa:

This is a land
so vibrant and alive
that laughter will come bursting through
as imperious as the sun
and the spirit will survive
Resilient as the soil.

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4 Brutus, Leafdrift, op. cit., pp. 50–51.
5 Brutus, Poetry and Protest, op. cit., p. 274.
When conservatism’s shining ‘champion of freedom’ and ‘great communicator’ Ronald Reagan became president of the United States, Dennis Brutus became a cause célèbre as the US government—in deference to its white-racist and staunchly anti-communist ally on the African continent—sought to deport the activist back to a South African prison. More than once, with many others, I had the opportunity to hear him explain his case, focusing on the realities of the brutal apartheid system. And many of us sometimes had an opportunity to linger over the poignancy of his poetic works. I loved listening to him, always, whether he was reading poems or giving talks. And he was obviously a revolutionary militant, as he explained in 1975:

I am a rebel and freedom is my cause:
Many of you have fought similar struggles
therefore you must join my cause:
My cause is a dream of freedom
and you must help me make my dream reality:
For why should I not dream and hope?
Let us work together that my dream may be fulfilled
that I may return with my people out of exile
to live in one democracy in peace.
Is not my dream a noble one
worthy to stand beside freedom struggles everywhere?6

He won his battle against the Reagan administration, and in the wake of that victory he accepted an offer to be the Chair of the Department of Africana Studies at the University of Pittsburgh in 1985. It was astonishing to me that this great spokesman for freedom was coming to live in my hometown.

Some of us who were ‘normal’ day-to-day activists initially felt some reticence about approaching such an imposing presence—but Dennis, a seasoned activist himself, had no taste for holding aloof from the likes of us, rubbing elbows with increasing numbers of us at meetings, picket lines, rallies, and more.

He did not hide his misgivings over compromises with the system of the global capital that so many of his ANC comrades, once partisans of socialism, were now making as the apartheid regime was collapsing and they themselves were assuming the reins of power. As he put it in an angry poem written at 3:05am in 2000:

Forgive me, comrades
if I say something apolitical
and shamefully emotional
but in the dark of night
it is as if my heart is clutched
by a giant iron hand:
‘Treachery, treachery’ I cry out

6 Ibid., p. 393.
thinking of you, comrades
and how you have betrayed
the things we suffered for.\textsuperscript{7}

While some of his erstwhile comrades, now with government portfolio, testily mocked him as ‘Dennis the Menace’ and accused him of being an ‘outsider’, Dennis’s many years on the Left helped him to place into perspective the disappointments associated with the conservative shift in ANC policy—which constituted a post-Cold War capitulation to the pressures from the multi-national corporations and governmental superpowers dominating the global capitalist economy. It was the new variant of what such Marxists of the past as Lenin and Luxemburg had analyzed as imperialism, and which in its new form has been hailed as ‘globalization’.

He turned his energies to help build ‘a globalization from below’ of protest and struggle. Globalization from above ‘adds up to a systematic determination to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a minority and to reduce the rest of us to beggars and even superfluous people because they no longer need us’, he wrote in the forward to my book *Marx, Lenin and the Revolutionary Experience*, but his indignation was tempered because ‘things are lively these days, and I continue my cautious optimism’, pleased with the ‘increasing number of activists, especially young activists, making their voices heard’ in protests around the world. He added: ‘A better world is possible, but it can be brought into existence only through an intensification of our efforts and a systematic evolution from protest to resistance, and from resistance to radical social change that will give masses of people the possibility of a decent life and control over their own situations. In order to struggle in the present for a better future, we need to comprehend the efforts and the lessons of the past.’ Specifically, he urged that ‘thoughts of the giants of the past—whether Karl Marx or Rosa Luxemburg on Antonio Gramsci—[be] connected with... [global justice] actions of Seattle, Prague, Washington, and Genoa.’\textsuperscript{8}

Just as he had been a leading activist in the struggle against apartheid, he became known to millions worldwide in the global justice movement. ‘His passion for justice in our native African continent has now long extended to the whole world where the abyss between rich and poor countries grows instead of closing,’ commented his friend Nadine Gordimer. ‘Dennis’s passion is the real face of globalization.’\textsuperscript{9}

Dennis was incredibly accessible to a broad range of us who were activists in Pittsburgh, and relationships developed that had meaning for all concerned. He spoke at socialist forums that I helped to organize in Pittsburgh, and he gave me incredibly meaningful encouragement as I sought to develop a body of Marxist writings that would be helpful to activists of today and tomorrow—all the while urging me and

\textsuperscript{7} Brutus, *Leafdrift*, op. cit., p. 87.

\textsuperscript{8} Dennis Brutus, ‘Foreword’, in Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), pp. x–xi.

\textsuperscript{9} Nadine Gordimer, ‘Tribute to Dennis Brutus: Brighter Than Their Searchlights’, *Illuminations*, 20: August (2004), pp. 34–35.
others to do this in a way that was open, non-dogmatic, and framed in terms to which those unfamiliar with left-wing jargon could connect.

In the wake of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to which he had journeyed in 2002, Dennis initiated the organization of an ongoing Pittsburgh Social Forum in which many of us became involved for a couple of years, and some of us followed him to future World Social Forums in Brazil and India.

One of the striking features in the way he communicated—in his political talks at various events—was his consistent avoidance of what I have seen less effective left-wing speakers do: trying to fit the entire revolution into one presentation (which means unloosing an avalanche of quickly made points that inundate the listeners and make it impossible for them to absorb, let alone reflect on what is being said).

In a typical Dennis Brutus talk, he would speak slowly, clearly and eloquently, letting you know at the very beginning that there were three or four specific points he wished to make, telling you what they are at the beginning of his comments. Then he would visit each point in turn, using a memorable example, image, statistic, with spare but telling rhetoric. This coincides with aspects of his poetry. As he explains in his interview with Lamont Steptoe: ‘So you can see I’m shooting for the minimum. Always as compact as I can make it.’

There is an Asian influence here, which he discussed in an earlier collection, *China Poems*: ‘The trick is to say little (the nearer to nothing, the better) and to suggest much—as much as possible. The weight of meaning hovers around the words (which should be as flat as possible) or is brought by the reader/hearer. Non-emotive, near neutral sounds should generate unlimited resonances in the mind; the delight is in the tight-rope balance between nothing and everything possible, between saying very little and implying a great deal.’

An illustration from that volume:

*Not in my hands*

*is the clay*

*of my life*

*‘They would come again’*

There were other qualities of this man that I was able to see during an unfortunate experience. He had invited me to participate with him in a conference on Latin America and revolutionary struggles sponsored by Larry Robin, of Robins Bookstore in Philadelphia—but when I got there, I found he had just thrown out his back and was in agony.

A wheelchair was commandeered, and I pushed him along Philadelphia sidewalks to a hospital and then to the office of a doctor. At various points, only slightly under

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10 Lamont Steptoe, ‘Interview of Dennis Brutus by Lamont Steptoe’, op. cit., p. 208.
11 Dennis Brutus, *China Poems* (Austin: University of Texas, 1975), p. 35.
12 Ibid., p. 36.
his breath, there were mutterings that turned out to be poetry—elements of poems that he was playing with, almost like breathing.

Nor would he tolerate being away from the conference for very long, and I wheeled him into a session—Dennis looking quite disheveled, still in pain, but insistent on being there, and it seemed to me then that revolutionary politics, too, was almost like breathing to him.

When I returned with him to Pittsburgh, and insisted on cleaning his apartment for him while he was laid up, I gathered together—to toss into a big garbage bag—various scraps of paper, old envelopes, napkins, among pizza boxes in the kitchen, only to discover with horror what Lamont Steptoe comments on in his interview: ‘Dennis, you write on scraps of paper, envelopes, napkins.’ I had come close to destroying many unpublished poems by an internationally renowned poet! I humbly piled the scraps onto the corner of the table.

The poems and the politics were inseparable from his daily life, and he asked me to attend a poetry reading on his behalf, sponsored by the Carnegie Library, on the struggles against censorship. The poems he selected were from a wonderful little booklet of his poems (this one edited by Gil Ott) from Lamont Steptoe’s publishing project, Airs and Tributes, most of which cannot be found in the two recently published volumes. He made selections, patiently explained the poems to me so that I could explain them to the audience, and sent me on my way. The one I loved the best was ‘For Ruth First’, the heroic South African Communist (portrayed by Barbara Hershey in the fine film, ‘A World Apart’, which among other things depicts the imprisonment she described in her book 117 Days). Dennis knew First and her husband Joe Slovo well, and once described to me an argument between the three of them in which she and he were aligned in a criticism of the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary in the face of Slovo’s intransigent defense. (Dennis noted that Slovo mellowed in later years.) His friend Ruth First was assassinated in 1982 by letter bomb, while in Mozambique, courtesy of the racist apartheid regime:

They would come again
you wrote
you knew
but what they did not know
was that your spirit would live on
in thousands willing to fight for freedom
in thousands willing to die for freedom
that you might be gone
but that you would come again.
They would come again
you wrote
because you knew
they could not rest
and would not let you rest

13 Lamont Steptoe, ‘Interview of Dennis Brutus by Lamont Steptoe’, op. cit. p. 204.
Dennis’s own ‘dear restless spirit’ endured, although after 27 years he was brought down by cancer, after having returned to his African homeland in 2006–2007. Even in his final days, surrounded by friends and family, hoping perhaps to get to Copenhagen to protest against capitalist-generated global warming, agitating against Israeli injustices against the Palestinians, calling for reparations from the big corporations implicated in apartheid and slavery, continuing to rail against the elitist and profiteering globalization from above, beckoning people to the struggle, pressing for a socialist future in which the free development of each would be the condition for the free development of all, and generously sharing his wonderful poems.

An interviewer once asked him, ‘How would you like history to remember you?’ Dennis answered: ‘I don’t care.’ He explained to me, later, that what counts for him are not nostalgic memories that romanticize who he is, but rather the struggles of today and tomorrow, ‘the thousands willing to fight for freedom’, that can make a difference in the lives of those who remain.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu once asserted (in comments on the back cover of *Poetry and Protest*) that the anti-apartheid struggle ‘had none more articulate and with all the credibility and integrity so indispensable than Dennis Brutus to plead our cause’. This could be said also of his role in the struggle for global justice—except that the notion of ‘pleading’ seems off. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that, now as before, he eggs us on, helps us understand more deeply, encourages us to connect with each other and to move forward.

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14 Dennis Brutus, *Airs and Tributes* (Camden, NJ: Whirlwind Press, 1989), p. 13.