

# Preface

*Silence in the face of injustice is complicity*  
*The power of the people is greater than the power of any government*  
*The separation of powers is one of the most fundamental principles of democracy*  
*Apartheid is a crime against humanity*  
*The will to fight is born out of the desire for freedom*  
*There is no justice in a system that denies basic human rights*  
*Ignorance is the enemy of progress and justice*  
*Education is the key to empowering individuals and challenging oppressive systems*  
 – Ruth First

**D**rawn from an archive of Ruth First, by no means exhaustive, the above appropriately captures in part the ideas, thinking and activism demonstrated by Ruth First, who held multiple roles as communist militant, journalist, scholar and intellectual. Written and or spoken before her untimely assassination over four decades ago, these projective ideas could be seen as prophetic and timely. Legal apartheid may have ended in South Africa; however, her words have bearing and resonance in a current global context as we write. The volume we present attempts to make sense of Ruth First (either directly or circuitously) by revisiting her work, ideas and life and share this with new audiences. In several ways, recuperating Ruth First's work reminds us in similar (yet different) ways of Hannah Arendt's deep humanist thinking that boldly, provocatively and unapologetically alerted us to find ways to create a shared political and ethical world.

*Research and Activism: Ruth First and Activist Research* assembles contributions that describe, analyse, interrogate, celebrate, perform and open up a projective scholarship on First's extraordinary body of knowledge. The volume explores the making of First, her writing as a journalist, her role in movement building as an activist and her practice in some of these domains to consider the material and intellectual weight of her life and work and its nuanced textures. The text recuperates, recovers and perhaps rediscovers Ruth First, over four decades since her murder by South African security forces in 1982. By mobilising original contributions on the creative tension of her assigned identities, we seek to offer new thinking about First the person, the subject and indeed, as an object of knowledge, to expand and complicate our understanding of her various legacies (whether intellectual, journalism or activism)

and to stimulate a renewed critical reflection about her life and work.

The text seeks to advance thinking on research and activism and activist research, and to stimulate greater research on and an analysis of the issue. We loosely define “activist research” as research intimately connected with political and social movements and projects. Some scholars, and intellectuals more broadly, consider their theorising, analysis and empirical research as “activist research”. There is, however, little scholarly or public engagement on “activist research” in South Africa—its meanings, character, history, institutional locations, role in society, place in universities, what distinguishes it from other kinds of research and the complications and the challenges that can arise for activist scholars and intellectuals. Of course, the questions of research and activism and activist research, when undertaken by university scholars, also raise the issues of the purposes, functions and roles of universities in general and in South Africa in particular.

Neo-liberalism and its pernicious impact on knowledge and universities has resulted in universities and their core activities being increasingly incorporated into the reproduction of capitalism and class rule. The trend is commodified, corporatised universities that are notionally sites of education and research and increasingly, businesses in their logics and operations. This has implications for the idea of serving the common public good and for Neville Alexander’s invocation that the accountability of academics must extend beyond peers to diverse constituencies beyond universities. Those external constituencies cannot be reduced to the state and business and the prioritisation of their needs because of their funding and ‘purchasing power’ but must include the needs of subaltern social classes and the institutions, movements and organisations that articulate and represent their interests.

Today, critical and activist scholarship appear to remain marginal activities, with a dearth of strong and sustained connection with South Africa’s marginalised and excluded social groups and their movements and formations. The lack of collaborative knowledge partnerships with social movements and their intellectuals that can enhance the understanding of social conditions, power and struggles compromises the rigour and quality of humanities and social science scholarship. It also compromises the production of knowledge that can meaningfully inform strategies and policies for substantive social transformation.

The making of this volume has been a two-year journey with our authors, who rose to the challenge with their dedicated work and revisions. During that time, it has been our pleasure to work with a scholar collective at Durham University and a diverse group of senior and young local scholars at seven universities to finalise this volume. We are immensely grateful to an anonymous critical reader for his thorough, rigorous and incisive commentary on each of the chapters, which has resulted in an immeasurably strengthened volume. We are also indebted to peer reviewers who provided critical

and wise feedback before revision. It has also been a pleasure to work with Heather Thuynsma and our publisher ESI, who have provided effective support all along the way. We invite readers to engage the ideas that follow critically, and to help to advance thought that can inform the practices necessary for creating the egalitarian future that First lived and died for.

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