

---

# Ruth First: lessons for a new generation of African scholars

---

by

*Tebello Letsekha\**

**Abstract:** The 17<sup>th</sup> of August 2012 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the untimely passing of South African sociologist Ruth First. Ruth First the investigative journalist and anti-apartheid activist is well-recognised as a celebrated and honoured figure in South Africa. This paper narrates the often untold story of First, the scholar, and the valuable scholastic contributions that she made. The paper also documents some of the lessons that can be drawn from her scholarship by a new generation of African scholars. As an academic, teacher and scholar First regarded her work as promoting a more just world; her scholarly work was informed and sharpened by her political activism. In allying herself with political movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London and the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo), First developed a kind of rationale for her intellectual labour. Engaging with her work as an intellectual and inserting her intellectual contributions – which like those of many African scholars have given way to debates from the global North – into curricula would perhaps be the real refutation of the assassin's bomb. This engagement is also crucial because it extends much further than the prominent accolades which take the form of buildings and lectures established in her memory.

## Introduction

Ruth Heloise First passed away on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1987, at her office in Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique. The then 59 year old mother of three was killed by a letter bomb believed to have been sent to her office by the South African government. Her death was a blow not only to her comrades in the liberation struggle and colleagues at the *Centro de Estudos Africanos* (Centre of African Studies, CEA), but also to scholarship on the continent as a whole.

---

\* Tebello Letsekha is a researcher in the Education and Skills Development programme at the Human Science Research Council in Pretoria, South Africa. She holds a BA (Hons) in Industrial and Economic Sociology from Rhodes University and obtained an MA in Industrial and Economic Sociology from the same university in 2012. Her Master's research, *Portrait of a Scholar: Ruth First the Teacher and Academic*, focused on the sociological works of South African scholar-activist Ruth First. Before joining the HSRC she was a fulltime PhD candidate at Rhodes University. Her PhD research on africanising higher education social science curricula aims to develop a framework to inform implementation decisions regarding the integration of endogenous knowledge into social science curricula. Her areas of research interest include curriculum development and transformation, educational policy and life history research.

Although the news of her passing sent shockwaves around the world, in South Africa, the country of her birth where her work was banned, the news was hardly mentioned in the press. The fallen struggle hero, journalist and academic was buried at Llanguene Cemetery in Maputo.

First had a dignified funeral which was attended by over 3,000 mourners, and her coffin, draped in the African National Congress (ANC) flag, was carried by exiled ANC comrades. The coffin was followed by her husband Joe Slovo, and the couple's three daughters, Gillian, Shawn and Robyn Slovo. She was buried next to the graves of 13 ANC members killed in a South African commando raid near Maputo in January 1981. Believing that their mother was at peace in Maputo, First's daughters chose not to bring her body back to South Africa.

Over the years Ruth First has become a struggle icon and a revolutionary hero, and while some argue that this is to make too much of her, I argue that it is to make too little of her. In only celebrating her contributions as a journalist and political activist there is a danger that her other achievements, her intellectual, and scholarly contributions, will be forgotten. This paper is divided into three sections; the first two sections are dedicated to my own "encounters" with Ruth First's work, first as a journalist and later as a teacher, scholar and academic. The last section examines the meaning of First's work for myself as part of a new generation of African scholars and outlines some of the lessons this new generation can learn from the scholarship of Ruth First.

### **Ruth First, the political activist and investigative journalist**

Prior to my arrival at Rhodes University in 2006, and being informed that I would reside in Ruth First House I had no knowledge of whom Ruth First was, so I was understandably puzzled by why in 2003, 70 women had deemed it appropriate to name their residence Ruth First House. In a lecture on the legacy of Ruth First during my orientation week, I was informed that Ruth First was an investigative journalist and political activist who had made a momentous contribution to South Africa's liberation struggle. This was later confirmed by two books I read on Ruth First's work, written by journalist Don Pinnock. The first book, titled *Voices of Liberation: Ruth First*, is a collection of Ruth First's journalistic writings on subjects such as migrant labour, the 1976 Soweto uprisings, the 1956 women's march and her arrest in August 1963 under the 90 day detention act (Pinnock 1997). The second, *Writing Left: the Radical Journalism of Ruth First*, is a reworked version of Don Pinnock's 1992 doctoral thesis (Pinnock 2007).

The information for *Writing Left: the Radical Journalism of Ruth First* and Pinnock's thesis were gathered around the question of why First felt her life had reached a point where she wished it extinguished when she attempted to commit suicide while in solitary confinement in 1963. Pinnock (2007) argues that the answer to this question involves who Ruth First was, what she believed in, and her perception at that moment in time of the magnitude of the defeat of all she had worked for. Interestingly in both these works very little attention is given to the intellectual work undertaken by First subsequent to her exile in 1964. It is also worth noting that the question posed by Pinnock is itself problematic because when

Ruth First attempted to commit suicide she was not concerned with her life as much as she was concerned with the idea that she could have betrayed her comrades. This is revealed in her prison memoir *117 Days* when she writes:

I was in a state of collapse not for fear of what would happen to me physically (...) but for the gnawing ugly fear that they could have destroyed me among the people whose understanding and succour I most needed, and that once they had done that I would have nothing to live for (First 1965: 128).

In August 2007 the women of Ruth First House along with the rest of Rhodes University commemorated the 25th anniversary of Ruth First's assassination. In an effort to highlight the many facets of First, the week-long event involved seminars by her daughter Gillian Slovo, friend and fellow comrade Albie Sachs, and lecturers from the Journalism and History departments. These seminars followed the common trend of focusing on Ruth First the anti-apartheid militant, socialist, journalist, and human rights agitator with minimal attention being paid to her intellectual work.

At the end of the week all those involved in organizing the events declared that the week of commemoration had done justice to First's legacy. At this point I was a second year student and unaware of how unfounded this claim was until my first year as a postgraduate student. In my first year of postgraduate study we were tasked with conducting a research project as part of the Honours programme and while searching for prospective supervisors within the Sociology department I discovered the work that was being conducted under the Intellectual Heritage Project (IHP). Led by Professor Jimi Adesina, this project is dedicated to the critical intellectual engagement with the lives and works African scholars, one of which was Ruth First. This is when I came to discover that the commemoration week and much of what has been written about First had done a great injustice to her legacy by neglecting her contribution to the world of scholarship, much of which has been to the discipline of Sociology.

The lack of serious engagement with local scholars like Ruth First, Bernard Magubane or Archie Mafeje, scholars with strong international reputations, can be attributed to what Farid Alatas (2003: 602) describes as "academic dependency", and Adesina (2006) refers to as "epistemic dependency", a result of absent self-knowledge and a "failure of intellectual nerve". Academic dependency is analogous to political economic dependency, the domination of one people by another in their world of thinking. Alatas (2003) argues that intellectually dependent societies are shaped by the institutions and ideas from the global North such that the classification of problem areas, research agendas and standards of excellence are borrowed from the West. This has been particularly evident within South Africa's social sciences as in most universities the social sciences are taught within the scope of American, British or continental European traditions (Lorenzo Togni 1996: 5). This results in a neglect and lack of awareness of the debates, scholarships and scholars from the continent, past and present (Jeremiah Arowosegbe 2008).

### **Ruth First the scholar**

Discovering that Ruth First was much more than an activist and journalist also left me questioning the curriculum to which I had been exposed, and I came to realise that I had been the casualty of what Adesina (2006) might describe as an “alienating curriculum” which he argues is the result of “absent intimacy in the teachers”. For three years as a social science undergraduate student I “sat through courses and with teachers whose epistemic gazes were firmly planted on the global North” (Adesina 2006: 243). Reviewing the course outlines for my undergraduate courses I realised that my exposure in the classroom to scholars from the continent did not extend beyond brief encounters with the works of Mahmood Mamdani in my first year, and Jacklyn Cock and Archie Mafeje in my third year.

My discovery of Ruth First’s contribution was later to lead to my Masters research on her scholarly contribution while in Mozambique. This research was largely a venture in “self-knowledge”, a process which Adesina (2008) argues involves “intimacy with one’s antecedents”. The study sought to identify, document and analyse South African political activist and scholar Ruth First’s contribution to knowledge from 1977 until 1982. First spent this period as the director of research at the Centre of African Studies in Mozambique. The significance of the work she was conducting in Mozambique can be gauged from the decision by South Africa’s security agencies to assassinate her. When Ruth First was alive she was declared an enemy of the State and not a word that she wrote could be legally read within South Africa. It has now been 32 years since her untimely death in 1982 and one might argue that the silence regarding her scholarship is itself a form of censorship.

My research was not an attempt at a biography, and the initial research objectives were to: assemble the scholarly outputs of Ruth First during her time at the Centre of African Studies; examine the contribution she made to knowledge while locating her discourse within the wider political and social contexts which shaped her ideas; examine her methodological approach to knowledge production; identify the themes running through her work, and assess her works as a scholar from the global South as texts to learn *from*, not just *about*.

These initial research objectives were significantly altered during the fieldwork. Having conducted a desktop search during the early phases of the research process and prior to going into the field I expected to find Ruth First’s contribution in the form of published and unpublished documents. However a visit to the Centre of African Studies and the interviews conducted with former colleagues and students in Maputo and former colleagues in South Africa revealed that while in Maputo First’s contribution to knowledge was through three activities. First, in the building and day– to– day running of the Centre of African Studies, a social research and research– training institute, which through the history of its development, on– going work, and its organisation, expressed much of what was central and significant to the strategy of social research in Mozambique (CEA 1982: 29). Second, in the Development Course through which she organised in the practice of the Centre of African Studies a distinctive and revolutionary conception of university teaching. The course was not only innovative in its objectives, it was

also extremely productive in research outputs (Aquino de Braganca and Bridget O’Laughlin 1984: 161). Third, through the writing of what was to be her final book, *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (First 1983), which according to Peter Gutkind (1984: 272) is an “informative and very detailed exposition of the effects of migration on the peasant economy, on subsistence and export production”.

### **A tale of three cities: Ruth First in London, Dar es Salaam and Maputo**

During her lifetime Ruth First combined her activities in the liberation movement with her teaching, writing and research commitments. Trained by experience and credentialed by her numerous publications, First wrote as an investigative journalist, historian and sociologist, dying at the hands of men who represented the apartheid regime which detested all of these pursuits (Barbara Harlow 2010).

Having been released after 90 days only to be re-arrested outside the prison gates, First refused to believe the prison official who came with her release order 117 days after her arrest in 1963. When she finally arrived at home her mother and three children were horrified at her condition. Daughter Robyn (cited in Pinnock 2007: 147) remembers that her mother looked “absolutely terrible” and that she was “horrified at the state of her and the fact that she seemed to have lost power and was [...] unsubstantial”. Her time in South Africa had clearly run out and, even though she had previously dismissed her husband Joe Slovo when he appealed to her to get herself and the children to London, on March 14, 1964, she left South Africa for what was to be the last time.

Ruth First’s reputation in South Africa as an investigative journalist, an anti-apartheid activist, and former political prisoner preceded her arrival in London in March 1964. It was a reputation she would uphold, and elaborate, during the years she spent in exile. The means of economic survival when she arrived in London became those activities for which she had been arrested in South Africa: her research and writing. These means were also connected to the larger end: the liberation of Southern Africa (Harlow 2010). Her intellectual biography is underwritten by these conflicting agendas.

The means to economic survival also launched her career as a teacher. In 1973, following a brief stint as a research fellow at the University of Manchester, Firsts began lecturing at Durham University on the Sociology of Underdevelopment. First was an effective teacher, respected and appreciated. During her time at Durham University when the Sociology Department was alive with conflicting theories she could bring her colleagues down to earth. Gavin Williams (2010: 4) recalls that she responded sharply in defence of a fine piece of empirical research that was being critiqued by colleague Derek Sayer by observing that “he should therefore do it himself”.

On leave from Durham University, Ruth First spent the fall semester of 1975 teaching in the department of Economics at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. This was during intensely energetic years throughout recently

decolonised Africa, and not least so in the universities. The semester in Tanzania coincided with the presentations, seminars, debates, and colloquia across the faculty of Social Science faculty of intellectuals – now luminaries, such as Terence Ranger, Walter Rodney, Mahmood Mamdani, John Saul, Jacques Depelchin and Archie Mafeje. While 1975 was an active year in post-colonial Africa's intellectual history, it was also a turning point in First's intellectual career (Harlow 2010).

In 1975 while still in Tanzania First received a letter from Aquino de Bragança, inviting her for a short visit to newly independent Mozambique, to discuss the possibility of joining the Centre of African Studies. First and de Bragança had a number of mutual friends in the revolution, the likes of Mozambican poet and statesman Marcelino dos Santos, Kenyan journalist Pio Gama Pinto, and Moroccan politician Mehdi Ben Barka. As journalists, First and de Bragança were both engaged in getting the undistorted story of the liberation movements in Africa into the media.

On 15 October 1975, while in Tanzania, an excited First wrote to Joe Slovo informing him of the invitation.

Mozambique. I've heard that they (the University people planning a Centre of African? Southern African? Studies (I'm not sure which) want me to come to LM [Lourenço Marques, the name of Mozambique's capital city until 1976] for a short visit. I may say that I'm thrilled to bits. Tanzania is one thing, but Mozambique! Wow (15/10/1975).

Mozambique's independence on June 25, 1975 gave rise to a scholarship of engagement which was focused on Frelimo's socialist project. The Centre of African Studies was established within Eduardo Mondlane University in January 1976 and provided intellectual support to the Mozambican revolution (Michael Cross 2011). The Centre was established in cooperation with Mozambique's national university to develop and oversee social science research on Southern Africa.

In March 1976, First, who had returned to Durham University, wrote to de Bragança in Maputo: "beside a revolution, doing a teaching job is mediocre stuff" (de Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984: 159). She made this statement after thinking to the prior visit she had made to Mozambique during the time of its independence in 1975.

Responding the letter that Ruth First had written to him in March 1976, de Bragança mentioned the work he was conducting with a group of 12 young history graduates to organise the CEA (de Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984). According to Yussuf Adam, who was one of the graduates, the group was called "the History Workshop". The main aim of the History Workshop at the time of its establishment was to conduct research on the Southern African subsystem, with particular emphasis on the history and economy of Mozambique.

Aware that First wanted to actively get back into the revolution, de Bragança suggested that she might be convinced to return to Southern Africa to work and live in Mozambique. According to her CEA colleagues, First's earlier work as an investigative journalist in South Africa and the books she wrote while in exile made her the ideal person to conduct research on the Southern African subsystem. First was also an ideal candidate for the position due to her teaching and research experience at Durham University and her commitment to understanding the

relationship between South Africa and Mozambique. She took up the position of research director of the Centre in 1977.

By 1979 Ruth First was leading a strong team of international researchers which included Belgian macro-economist Marc Wuyts, American political scientist Bridget O’Laughlin, South African sociologist Alpheus Manghezi, documentalist and analyst Colin Darch, Italian historian Anna Maria Gentili and Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin. This team of researchers was assembled on the basis of their analytical unity as Marxists capable of making their work relevant to the process of socialist transformation and applying a scientific material analysis to the problems of socialist revolution (CEA 1982). According to Cross (2011: 15) their biographies shared some common features: a history of political activism; first-hand experience in Mozambique that enhanced their scholarship; writing for an audience beyond the narrow boundaries of the academy; helping to transform the terms of scholarship and intellectual debates in Mozambique; challenging the dogmatic euphoria and the orthodoxies.

Under First’s leadership, the Centre of African Studies brought in what could be labelled as “an activist conception of research”, or what Allen Isaacman (2003: 4) describes as “engaged scholarship”. Isaacman defines engaged scholars as intellectuals who challenge existing social hierarchies and oppressive institutions as well as the truth regimes and structures of power that produced and supported them. Not content simply to critique the status quo, these scholars seek to change it: “Their insurgent work is thus organically and inexorably intertwined with their scholarship” (*ibidem*).

In this context political engagement can take many forms, including promoting human rights, global justice, and peace, involvement in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist campaigns, grass roots organising, or speaking out as public intellectuals. They are driven by a mutually reinforcing intellectual and political agenda and, according to Isaacman (2003), at the core of this agenda are two major initiatives. One, to render audible the voices and concerns of the powerless and simultaneously to recover the experiences of the disadvantaged and underrepresented which are routinely ignored, forgotten, or cast into the shadows of history. And two, to support their struggles aimed at ending exploitive practices and dismantling institutions of oppression.

In the context of the Centre of African Studies during First’s tenure as research director there were several dimensions to such a conception. First, it was research that was not aimed to produce “definitive research studies but rather to make social research an acceptable step in the formulation and implementation of policy”. Second, it was research that was “conducted from the perspective of social transformation and had to confront the actual problems of that transformation, or more specifically, research that was a tool of the Mozambican revolution”. Third, it “placed emphasis on the link between theory and practice, particularly in the application of Marxist theory and method” (Cross 2011: 16).

Although a large number of the Centre’s research outputs have been originally released in Portuguese, the Centre has had an admirable record of converting the results of research into policy recommendations or into teaching materials for the country’s programme of educational expansion. Much of the literature on

Mozambique, such John Saul's introduction to a re-issue of Eduardo Mondlane's *The Struggle for Mozambique*, built on work done under the auspices of the Centre, and provides the English reader with an opportunity to access what has been accomplished (Jeanne Penvenne 1985).

Outside Mozambique Ruth First was known principally as a journalist and anti-apartheid activist in the struggle for African liberation. However her CEA colleagues maintain that while in Mozambique, South Africa was rarely the focus of her work. She put most of her time, intellect and energy instead into an experimental course for Mozambican cadres known as "the Development Course".

In an email interview in August 2011, O'Laughlin describes the Development Course as:

A perhaps utopian attempt envisioned by Ruth First, the research director of the CEA, to provide tertiary level training in research to workers/students. The idea was that policies and the ways they are applied should be based in knowledge of the reality one is proposing to affect, not in assumptions about what that reality is.

Taught by lecturers of varied Marxist orientation including First, the course was innovative in its objectives, methods and contents. The course was helping civil servants understand the problems that were being faced by newly independent Mozambique. While they underwent research training these students remained within their individual workplaces to ensure that they would in turn be able to integrate the tools of investigation into their work, and thus train others as well through common practice. The students recruited to participate in the course were of extremely varied educational backgrounds; some had attended only primary school but had a good deal of work experience<sup>1</sup>.

### **Lessons from Ruth First's scholarship for a new generation of African scholars**

Having completed my M.A at Rhodes University I joined the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) as a research trainee. Still filled with the euphoria of completing my degree I presented to my colleagues a paper that I intended to present at a conference I was invited to in Maputo to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of First's passing. Titled *Portrait of an Engaged Intellectual*, the paper was a summary of my MA thesis regarding First's intellectual contributions and interventions while in Maputo.

The paper began with a brief introduction of who Ruth First was, a mother, wife, a comrade, a journalist and a scholar, followed by a brief narration of the time of First's arrest in 1963, which led to her exile in 1964. The paper also mentioned her time in solitary confinement under the apartheid state's 90 day detention law, which later became the subject of her 1965 book *117 Days*. The paper went on to briefly document First's intellectual contributions during her time in exile. These include the period she spent lecturing at Durham University, the University of Dar

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carlos Nuno Castel-Branco, May 2011.

es Salaam and Eduardo Mondlane University. I concluded the paper with a brief but detailed review of her works on Africa and African politics.

When I completed my presentation I received rather encouraging reviews from my colleagues, who thought the paper could make an important contribution to knowledge and some suggested that several journal articles could arise from it. However there was one colleague who read the paper and responded with “so what, Ruth First was not the only scholar-activist to have her academic identity overshadowed by her political identity, the same has happened to a number of scholar-activists. Why should people care about Ruth First?”. My response at that time was to summarise her scholastic interventions and stress her continued commitment to Africa and its people, and how unlike many others, this commitment ultimately led to her death.

However, later the question had me thinking of the profound meaning of Ruth First’s work for myself as part of a new generation of African social science scholars. I also questioned what the exposure to her work has meant to me as an upcoming researcher and what it is a younger generation of scholars can learn from First’s scholarship. That is what I would like to share in this section, the meaning of Ruth First’s work and the lessons I have drawn from the manner in which she conducted research.

Edward Said (1994) maintains that intellectuals always have a choice either to side with the weak, the less represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the more powerful. Ruth First chose the former at a harsh personal cost. Her commitment to ending racial oppression and liberating not only South Africa but the continent is what ultimately led to her demise on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1982 at the hands of South Africa’s apartheid regime.

First’s intellectual work illuminates how scholarship driven by a cause, in her case political commitment, can fuel theoretical and methodological rigour. She remained a committed member of the South African Communist Party and the ANC, and this is evident in her writings, both as a journalist and a scholar. Pinnock (1997) notes that these writings are remarkable for their conceptual and political consistency as much as for their diversity. Political commitment made her work relevant, interesting, and important to a wide audience, inside and outside academia. This commitment immeasurably strengthened the intellectual quality of her work.

Passionate commitment to worldly causes requires engaged intellectuals to keep open analytical space for doubts and to be willing to criticise the movements and causes they support. In his seminal work, *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994: 32), Said put it bluntly: “Never solidarity before criticism”. Isaacman (2003), who was closely linked with Frelimo, recalls that keeping a critical distance from the causes one supports is not always easy. Reflecting on the time he spent in Mozambique, Isaacman recalls that a number of the intellectuals “were initially caught up in the euphoria of the day”. As a result they often failed to criticise Frelimo’s long-term agenda and short-term practices.

First was in this regard unique. Her comrades in the ANC such as husband Joe Slovo and Albie Sachs maintain that she was one of the toughest critics of the movement to which she had belonged since she was a young woman at university.

Her colleagues at the Centre of African studies also maintain that although she was supportive of Frelimo's socialist project she remained critical, and this sometimes made her unpopular.

First was a loyal member of the ANC and South African Communist Party, but despite these loyalties she never swallowed a "party line". She always asked questions and drew her own conclusions. She expected those around her to practice this sort of discretion as well, and derided those who did not. Her outspoken manner often frustrated her husband and on one occasion where she had been particularly critical of the ANC he declared in exasperation to daughter Gillian Slovo (2007: 8): "your mother is so impossible (...). If not for my position in the party she would have been expelled years ago".

Between 1968 and 1983 First authored six books, co-authored two books, and wrote several journal articles. Few scholars have accomplished so much in such a short period of time. While writing the various books and articles she remained a committed and passionate field researcher: here her training as a journalist is evident. When she turned her attention to the mandated territory of South West Africa in 1960 for her first book, she headed to Windhoek to conduct field research. While the archivists suddenly denied her access to documents written after 1946, Africans in the country were bursting with talk. First conducted interviews on street corners, in motor cars, under trees, and in crowded shops (Pinnock 1997).

Through several books and articles on Africa and African politics, First produced pioneering work on Africa long before the field of African studies became popular in academia. She was in many ways ahead of her time and somewhat prophetic. Her work advanced new theoretical and methodological perspectives, and in doing so considerably extended the boundaries of knowledge. Her first book, *South West Africa*, was a pioneering historical and political account based on a field that was notoriously neglected by scholars at the time. It remains one of her paramount and most decipherable books.

The manuscript for *South West Africa* was smuggled out of South Africa and published by Penguin in 1963. The decision to go ahead with the book was an act of considerable bravery on First's part. At the time she was breaking her banning order and was through the book airing the "dirty laundry" of a government already ill-disposed towards her. When the book appeared on newsstands in South Africa it was banned and any person possessing it was liable to a fine or 5 years in jail.

First's writings are full of questions thus inducing those who read her work take an active part in the formulation of ideas. Gavin Williams (cited in Pinnock 2007: 42) who worked with First on the *Review of African Political Economy* and at Durham University maintains that "she always had more questions than answers and the answers raised more questions. There was always more to be known and done and consequently the form of the argument was always open ended". Almost all of her work shared a focused and often sarcastic criticism of apartheid and the institutions as well as the ideas which held it together (Pinnock 1997).

Regardless of her political affiliation, First's writing was always marked by a critical independence and engagement with critical issues. She was a remarkable scholar: wholly concerned with identifying and exposing the various horrors of

racial rule; with reporting and encouraging the course of struggle against it (Pinnock 1997). She was not indifferent to the risks and the costs that were involved and recognised them as the necessary consequences of the choices she made (Ronald Segal 1982). First's investigations and reports into forced labour and working conditions on the farms, conditions in the gold mines, and her studies on Africa and African politics are classic examples of committed scholarship: "They do not peddle abstract phrases and depict the real suffering of the individual victim; the real complex mood of collective defiance" (Segal 1982: 52).

In the introduction to her 1970 book *The Barrel of a Gun* she states: "I count myself an African, and there is no cause I hold dearer" (First 1970). Gavin Williams (1996) recalls that this preoccupation with Africa puzzled many including husband Joe Slovo who could not understand her continued interest with countries like Nigeria, Sudan and Libya instead of focusing her attention on the liberation of South Africa. Her continued preoccupation with the liberation of the African continent and not just the country of her birth has become one of her defining characteristics.

### **Conclusion: scholarship that made a difference**

Uzoечи Nwagbara (2008) writes that an activist-scholar develops and disseminates ideas with the intent to transform as well as illuminate the real world. Functioning from explicit standards and expectations about how social, economic, and political structures operate, they commit themselves to creating cause and effect in order to prescribe policy, planning and political interventions. To achieve an influence they write and speak clearly, and engagingly, their message carefully tailored to their multiple audiences.

Ruth First is, of course, in many ways not unique. She is part of a long lineage of African activist-scholars who have had a significant and substantive impact on the study of Africa and African politics. She forms part of a constellation of committed activist-scholars such as Fatima Meer, Mamphela Ramphele, Claude Ake, Susan Geiger and Bernard Magubane. While she may not be unique as an activist-scholar, First's intellectual work is representative of the ways in which African scholars have combined advocacy and scholarship in a quest for new ways to study the continent.

Fully evaluating the impact of the work of someone who contributed on so many different academic fronts (teaching, research and writing), worked in different countries (South Africa, England and Mozambique), and shared credit with her students, comrades and colleagues is often difficult. One measure could perhaps be evaluating the decision by South Africa's apartheid state to assassinate First, or the number of annual lectures established in her honour in South Africa, London and Mozambique. Another could be the numerous buildings named after her and scholarships established in her honour. There is also the number of heartfelt tributes written by those who have had the honour and pleasure of working with her.

Scholars who seek to make a contribution can learn a lot from the scholarly activities of Ruth First, who was prepared to think ahead, took risks, and made a significant and enduring contribution to the study of areas such as migrant labour, military leadership in Africa, and life history research. Through her teaching and writing she transformed not only her ideas but the ideas of others into powerful visions of a better future. First's collective research style and methods of research dissemination maximised the reach and impact of her work. She remains an outstanding model of scholar for both her contemporaries and younger scholars to follow.

Much of the work conducted by First as a researcher was conducted from the perspective of transforming the societies that she worked in and placed a great deal of emphasis on confronting the actual problems of that transformation. When I decided to follow a career in research, this is the kind of research I wanted to conduct. Research that is people-centred and makes a notable impact on the lives of community members involved in the research. And my work at the Human Sciences Research Council has allowed me to do exactly this, conduct "*social science research that makes a difference*".

From Ruth First's work I learned the value of treating community members not as research subjects, but rather as collaborators, and people to learn from. I also learned the value of being fully committed to the research I conduct and people I work with. Embodying some of the values she exhibited in her work ethic is not only my personal way of keeping her memory alive but I believe it is has made me an "engaged researcher".

## References

- Adesina, Jimi. 2006. "Sociology beyond Despair: Recovery of Nerve, Endogeneity, and Epistemic Intervention". *South African Review of Sociology* 37 (2): 241-249.
- Adesina, Jimi. 2008. "Archie Mafeje and the Pursuit of Endogeneity: Against Alterity and Extroversion". *Africa Development* 33(4): 133-152.
- Alatas, Syed Farid. 2003. "Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences". *Current Sociology* 51(6): 599-613.
- Arowosegbe, Jeremiah. 2008b. "Decolonising the Social Sciences in the Global South: Claude Ake and the Praxis of Knowledge Production in Africa". ASC Working Paper 79.
- CEA. 1982. "Strategies of Social Research in Mozambique". *Review of African Political Economy* 25(5): 29-39.
- Cross, Michael. 2011. *An Unfulfilled Promise: Transforming Schools in Mozambique*. Addis Ababa: Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa.

De Braganca, Aquino and Bridget O’Laughlin. 1984. “The Work of Ruth First in the Centre of African Studies: The Development Course”. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 8(2): 159-172.

First, Ruth. 1965. *117 Days*. London: Penguin Books.

First, Ruth. 1970. *The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d’État*. London: Allen Lane

First, Ruth. 1983. *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant*. London: Harvester Press.

Gutkind, Peter. 1983. “Revolutionary Perspectives on African Labour”. *Labour, Capital and Society* 17(2): 272-278.

Harlow, Barbara. 2010. “Public Spheres, Personal Papers, Pedagogical Practices: Ruth First’s Academic Postings to/ from Dar es Salaam and Maputo”. *Africa Development* 35(4): 47-67.

Isaacman, Allen. 2003. “Legacies of Engagement: Scholarship Informed by Political Commitment”. *African Studies Review* 46(1): 1-41.

Nwagbara, Uzoechi. 2008. “Political Power and Intellectual Activism in Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*”. *Nebula* 5 (4): 225-253.

Pinnock, Don. 1997. *Voices of Liberation. Ruth First. Volume 2.* Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Pinnock, Don. 2007. *Writing Left: The Radical Journalism of Ruth First*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

Penvenne, Jeanne. 1985. “A Luta Continua! Recent Literature on Mozambique”. *The International Journal of International Studies* 18(1): 109-138.

Said, Edward. 1994. *Representations of the Intellectual: the 1993 Reith Lectures*. London: Vintage Books.

Segal, Ronald. 1982. “Ruth First: A Memorial Address”. *Review of African Political Economy* 25(5): 52-54.

Slovo, Gillian. 2007. “Portrait of an Activist: Ruth First and the South African Struggle”. Lecture Presented at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Ruth First’s Death, 17 August.

Togni, Lorenzo. 1996. *Sociology for Africa: An Afrocentric Tutorial Reader*. Pretoria: Kagiso Tertiary.

Williams, Gavin. 1996. “Ruth First’s Contribution to African Studies”. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 14(2): 197-220.

Williams, Gavin. 2010. “Portrait of a Modern Woman: Ruth First: Academic, Scholar and Teacher”. Lecture Presented at Rhodes University, 17 August 2010.