

Obituary

John Daniel (1944–2014)



The editors of *Transformation* have been deeply saddened by the death of their colleague John Daniel on July 25, 2014. John had a remarkable life and career that involved him in a range of important and memorable events in the last extraordinary transformational half-century of South African history. He made an enormous contribution to constructing a better society.

The son of liberal schoolteachers, John's first important political role was that of a leader of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), serving as president of the Pietermaritzburg chapter. The 1960s were a low point in the history of the South African opposition to apartheid, but among the imaginative initiatives John took was inviting US Senator Robert Kennedy in 1966 to come to South Africa. Kennedy had unimpeachable anti-Communist credentials to which the government could hardly object but he was equally committed to civil rights reform in the USA and an enemy of the South African racial dispensation. It was a visit that included memorable speechmaking by John, heartening the opposition in the middle of a politically deathly period.

For his pains, John received a one-way pass out of the country in 1968. He chose to study politics at Western Michigan University. Here he came under the ambit of Howard (not Harold!) Wolpe, who had written an excellent dissertation on the politics of the Nigerian city of Port Harcourt. Later Wolpe entered the US Congress and became especially known for his championing of African issues and notably the anti-apartheid legislation of the 1980s. John went on to doctoral studies at what is now Buffalo University. Here a close friend was JM Coetzee who mused with John about whether he might not shift from literary criticism to a growing passion for writing fiction himself. While working on his PhD, John came back to this part of the world to teach at Waterford School in Swaziland, a haven for families who wanted

an alternative to the values typical of South African schooling in an integrated setting.

From 1975 with his degree in hand, John continued to teach at the new University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Amongst many people whom he knew from that time it was a particularly distinguished former student, our Public Prosecutor Thuli Madonsela who remembered him fondly, speaking at the memorial service in his honour at the University of the Witwatersrand. She was one of many South African students John taught there and for her he symbolised those white people who gave so much to destroy the apartheid system.

Swaziland was a very conservative little country, newly independent but it became a place of encounters, passage and plots for the insurgent ANC after the independence of Mozambique. This allowed John to develop as a teacher of politics, to connect and help support ANC exiles and activities underground and also to write surreptitiously under the unlikely pseudonym of Isobel Winter about the Swaziland monarchy and its operations. These years of intense political involvement were among those he remembered as amongst the most important of his life. The Swaziland authorities, backed as they were by the apartheid state, finally decided that they could dispense with his services and packed him off on yet another one-way ticket in 1984.

Here another facet of John's career had a chance to develop as disaster turned to opportunity. In Swaziland, John and his American wife, Cathy, started a bookshop. In London, his old friend Rob Molteno now brought him onto Zed Press, then and now a committed press devoted to readable discussions of third world public issues of considerable note. John's first book while at Zed in the 1980s was that by Mzala (pseudonym of ANC activist Jabulani Nxumalo), *Gatsha Buthelezi, Chief with a Double Agenda*, on the Inkatha leader. John here learnt the publishing trade from which South Africa would later benefit: Here we are thinking of his remarkable turnaround of the HSRC Press as well as his critical work for us at *Transformation*.

But there really is more. On finally being able to return legally to a post-apartheid South Africa, after a short stint at Rhodes university, John was able to secure a post heading the Politics Department at the reforming University of Durban-Westville, the institution created by the apartheid state for 'Indians', that was trying to turn itself into a relevant and exciting university for all South Africans. He is remembered by his colleagues for his excellent leadership and inspired teaching during that heady period. From 1997, he headed the regional KZN division of the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission research team where he played a major role for two long years. One of his most important contributions to the TRC reports was insisting that it include an account of political violence outside of South African borders, and that it therefore tell the story of apartheid abuses as the regional phenomenon that they were. After retiring, his galvanising work at the once somnolent HSRC from 2001, brought in by his old friend Mark Orkin, deserves mention – as does his directorship of the American study-abroad programme SIT where he proved inspirational to young students, some of whom have gone on to work in human rights law, conflict resolution and forensic anthropology.

John as *Transformation* editor

We were very lucky to be able to bring John on board when he retired to Durban. Of course he remained active as a writer and scholar, turning his experiences into performing the role of one of the two or three important writers on South African economic and political relations with the rest of Africa, continuing to engage on issues stemming from the TRC experience, while engaging with the SIT programme. His very wide range of contacts and friends as well as his publishing background put him in a special position in helping our journal. Together with Bill Freund, John is/was the responsible editor for *Transformation* 85, which came out in the month of his death.

Friendship is part of the *Transformation* editorial board meetings: over many years, the available editors meet in restaurants somewhere in Durban and discuss the next issue. Debates are robust and, over the years, sometimes loud! John loved the debate, the new young voices coming through the old ones, the issues, the fights over principles; not to forget the food. John particularly championed emerging writers. He suggested we set up a young scholars award with a monetary prize and offer of publication for an article potentially (but not necessarily) drawn from an academic thesis. The first award was given out in 2013 to Rachel Matteau-Matsha for an article on readership in apartheid South Africa.

John's association with *Transformation* spanned nearly 20 years. He joined the journal ten years into its existence. *Transformation* started in 1986 at the height of the popular anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The journal started here in Durban as a journal of the independent left, meant to take in the political economy and organisational life of a changing South Africa. The original founding editors were Bill Freund, Gerry Maré and Mike Morris, all of whom had then recently taken jobs at the University of Natal's

Howard College campus. Vishnu Padayachee joined them later. John joined the journal in 1995 whilst he was based at the University of Durban-Westville. In *Transformation* 50, the editorial group, looking back on these years and John joining the journal wrote: ‘We finally had a political scientist rather than a political economist to write about politics!’ John’s previous experience with Zed Press was invaluable to *Transformation* as would be his experience in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which fed into a pioneer TRC focus issue in 2000, *Transformation* 42. John wrote:

The Truth Commission process has been a powerful moment in South Africa’s post-apartheid experience. ... Despite its flaws and shortcomings, it achieved, in our view, much. At an individual level, the relatives of numerous victims of apartheid’s outrages now know the truth of what happened to their loved ones. The parents of the murdered ANC cadre Phila Portia Ndwandwe now know that their daughter was not an agent and died at the hands of apartheid assassins true to her beliefs and principles; the three young children of Petros and Jabu Nyawose, who witnessed their parents die in a car-bomb explosion, now know the identities of their killers. I personally experienced their satisfaction at learning that truth after a wait of 17 years. (2000: 7-8)

Three years after John’s arrival at *Transformation*, Imraan Valodia, Adam Habib, Monique Marks and Lindy Stiebel joined the editorial board too, as did Shirley Brooks – an exciting time. The widening of the board meant a wider range of disciplines and issues could be drawn in, though all having a core interest in a transforming South Africa, an interest in ‘critical perspectives on southern Africa’, the journal’s sub-title.

This is, for example, John in 1995 in *Transformation* 28 debating, together with Peter Vale, the issue of regional security in southern Africa in the 1990s. These words ring true still, now nearly 20 years later:

As the region reaches towards its future, it cannot escape the embrace of South Africa; neither, ... can South Africa escape the region. ... Because Southern Africa’s people have suffered so much, their future requires innovative and imaginative thought and emancipatory action. To transform the region into a zone of peace – the essential prerequisite for tackling the region’s poverty and inequity – a political agenda of reconciliation and non-hegemonic engagement must fill the policy space previously filled by the dark and destructive fantasies of the neo-realists.(1995: 92)

So, from the editors, past and present, we offer John's family our condolences and thanks for his wonderful life of service to this society, his friends and colleagues. We were so sorry to see him suffer and we will miss him very much.

We refer you to such as:

John Daniel (1984) 'A comparative analysis of Lesotho and Swaziland's relations with South Africa', in SARS (ed) *South African Review II*. Johannesburg: Ravan.

————— (2000a) 'Editorial: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Transformation* 42. [This issue also carried a review, and a commentary on Human Rights Watch's attempt to have the South African government arrest former Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, both by John.]

————— (2013) 'Teaching politics in exile: a memoir from Swaziland 1973-1985', *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 40(3).

————— (2014) 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission process: a retrospective', in Catherine Jenkins and Max du Plessis (eds) *Law, Nation-Building and Transformation: the South African experience in perspective*. Cambridge, Antwerp, Portland: Intersentia.

Peter Vale and John Daniel (1995) 'Regional security in southern Africa in the 1990s: challenging the terms of the neo-realist debate', *Transformation* 28.

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