



# teacher and comrade



*Richard Dudley and the  
Fight for Democracy in South Africa*

A L A N   W I E D E R

teacher *and*  
comrade



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(*Alan Wieder photographer*)

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Richard Dudley and the  
Fight for Democracy in South Africa

Alan Wieder

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# 1

## introduction

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### Before Dudley: Oppression, Racism, and the Roots of Resistance

Much has been written about the fight against apartheid in South Africa, and now, with a continuing flow of publications on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, we are presented with a unique expanse of stories from the ground. Richard Dudley is one of the fighters. He is an urban educator and political activist who combined foundational ideological politics with great caring, communication, and even compromise as a teacher and nominal principal at Livingstone High School, a highly rated public secondary school that was created for coloured students in 1926. In addition to teaching, Dudley worked endlessly, through various political organizations, against apartheid oppression and for a democratic South Africa. Richard Dudley's life offers us multiple lenses for understanding apartheid South Africa. Dudley is truly a public intellectual, and that in itself is an important story. He is also totally and thoughtfully entwined with the life of Livingstone—first as a student, then as a teacher/principal, and presently as an elder. Finally, Richard Dudley has given his life to teaching and politics and affected and influenced thousands of people who continue to work for democracy in South Africa and abroad.

Dudley's life is totally entwined with education and politics, Livingstone High School, Cape Town, and democracy in South Africa. Dudley's biography gives us the chance to explore the connection of education and politics in Cape Town as he and his comrades challenged first oppression and then apartheid. Dudley was born in 1924 and his story takes us through the many twentieth-century changes in South African oppression and resistance. In addition, we are afforded a picture of both the city, Cape Town, and the

country, South Africa, and their resistance education and politics. First and foremost, however, Richard Dudley is a teacher. The thread that runs through his life, chronologically as well as in his many roles, is that he is always teaching. Whether it was at home, at Livingstone High School, in the political organizations where he worked, interacting with political adversaries or government officials, or even when he was detained, Dudley was a teacher.

### **Teacher with the Fighting Spirit: Noncollaboration and Nonracialism**

The pedagogy and politics of Richard Dudley and his comrades have two foundational stands that are written in stone—noncollaboration and nonracialism. Both ideological positions existed before the apartheid regime came to power in 1948, remained during apartheid, and continue in both the beliefs and actions of Dudley and his comrades at the present time. Both stands are important to Dudley's fight for a democratic South Africa and are central to each chapter of his story. Franz Fanon's thesis in *Black Skins White Masks* presents a theoretical perspective for the noncollaboration ideology and action of Dudley and other South Africans. Fanon writes of colonials who take on the white supremacist ideology and actions of the colonialists to oppress other colonials. Isaac Tabata analyzes the theme through South African teachers in *Education for Barbarism*. He also introduces teachers like Dudley who lived and taught noncollaboration and nonracialism.

When I interviewed University of Cape Town history professor William Nasson, who had been a student at Livingstone in the 1960s, he spoke of Dudley with respect and admiration. While Nasson's 1990 article in *Radical History Review*, "The Unity Movement: Its Legacy in Historical Consciousness," is critical of the Unity Movement, it positively provides a context for Dudley and his Teachers' League comrades, "teachers with the fighting spirit." Nasson's recollection is of teachers, whether their subject were language, history, science, or math, providing historical and political analysis with "an influential independent socialist force." He begins his article by quoting one of his teachers.

This school has a mission to teach you history which will liberate you. We are here to make sure that you aren't contaminated by the Herrenvolk poison contained in your textbook. We as the oppressed cannot afford colonized minds. Our history, our liberation are inseparable. Because it teaches us that we should never salaam before this country's rulers. (Nasson, 1990, p. 189)

Dudley defined his role as a teacher broadly, connecting academic discipline, nonracialism, social class, and world imperialism in his mission. He is quick

to argue that the critiques of other left opposition, including Tabata in 1961, and scholars both miss the breadth and depth of Unity Movement teachers. Dudley explains that the population of South Africa was only about 10 million when the apartheid regime came to power, and there was great need to spread liberation ideas—*teacher* did not mean “classroom” but rather corresponded to the “vectors” of ideas.

All of us involved in the political movement are in fact teachers. Not teachers in the narrow sort of professional sense. We were looking at previous critical changes in human society. The inescapable thing was that there were always people who were thinkers working out, working over, the nature of the events that were occurring and how peoples’ actions were influenced by what they heard collectively or what they thought up individually. Particularly we were looking at those things that brought about the transformation from feudal society to bourgeois democracy to the industrialized nations. The separation of the different functions in society—those who are ruling, the separation of powers and so on. We worked over events and abstracted the vital things that people needed to know. (Dudley Interview, 2001)

Noncollaboration was a position that was solidified in the late 1930s and early 1940s before the apartheid government came to power. Noncollaboration was relevant in both education and politics. Nonwhite teachers were somewhat privileged in relationship to other South African people of color, and many failed to question the oppression and racism that existed in society and schools. Fanon analyzes the issue as part of the colonial practice of divide and rule, a tactic that is often critiqued by Dudley and his comrades in regard to both pre-apartheid and apartheid racism and oppression and is currently part of the postcolonial literature on slavery in South Africa. Dennis Ntomela, an African teacher who taught in his rural homeland in the 1980s before moving to Cape Town, experienced black teachers doing colonialist work. He was deeply affected because so many of his fellow teachers honored white people and demeaned black people, including their students. “And we were black and I couldn’t understand. Uh, they would say something like, you know, black people are noisy, black people are lazy, black people are careless, and all those negative things would be said at pupil assemblies in the morning as school starts” (Ntombela Interview, 1999). Ntombela spoke about specific instances where the principal and teachers told the students how much better whites were than blacks, how white students were more disciplined, and how they were better behaved in public. Ntombela challenged colleagues with little success and found himself nurturing student self-esteem.

In addition, there were nonwhite South Africans who participated in the political process in cooperation with the oppressive and racist pre-apartheid

government. Noncollaboration was a stand that challenged the government, confronted teachers who did not want to compromise their privilege, and also confronted power-seeking politicians who were referred to as “quislings.” Some nonwhite teachers and politicians continued as collaborators during apartheid, yet Dudley and his comrades still believe in noncollaboration today, because the end of apartheid did not bring democratic socialism to South Africa. The correspondence of class disparity and racism was addressed by Dudley in his 1992—Jonas Fred Bosch Memorial Lecture.

The class struggle and the struggle against racism are parts of one struggle. But the very dynamics of struggle, if it is nourished by the growth of class awareness, awareness of the historic duty that the workers and peasants in this country have to carry out, will promote the class struggle to its prime position in the scale of priorities of the liberation movement. (Dudley, 1992, p. 1)

The second foundational rock, nonracialism, is a tenet that Dudley has held since childhood—a belief that you fight racism all the while knowing that there is no such thing as race. Before addressing nonracialism, it might be instructive to briefly discuss the government ethnic and racial distinctions prior to 1994 in South Africa—a country Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to as a “pigmentocracy.” Long before the apartheid regime came to power in 1948, at the turn of the twentieth century, South Africa made racial distinctions between African, coloured, Indian, and white. Racial definitions were legalized by the apartheid regime, but reading those designations makes for further evidence of the social and political construction of race. Consider how the apartheid regime defined coloured:

1. any person who is not a member of the white group or of the native group; and
2. any woman, to whichever race, tribe, or class she may belong, between whom and a person who is, in terms of sub-paragraph 1, a member of the coloured group, there exists a marriage, or who cohabits with such a person;
3. any white man between whom and a woman who in terms of sub-paragraph 1 is a member of the coloured group, there exists a marriage, or who cohabits with such a woman. (Western, 1996, p. 9)

John Western also writes of testing for racial designations using paper grocery store bags and other absurdities. While there will be questions throughout the text and some messiness surrounding nonracial politics and coloured ethnic identity, suffice it to say that Dudley and his comrades, like the antiracist scholars of the present, believe that race is an artificial social and

political construction (Gilroy, 2000). Nonracialism was part of the teaching and politics of Dudley and a primary ideological stand in the fight against apartheid. He reflected on hiring teachers at Livingstone.

I used to be invited by the principal to interview people who made application to the school. We used to point out to people that although the school now fell under the Coloured Affairs Department; the school had a set of aims, objectives and directions which were very explicit. We used to point out to them that we don't have coloured children at this school; we don't have African children at this school; we don't have Indian children at this school; we have boys and girls. And if you can fit in with the program that we have, and if you feel that you have any prejudices and you can leave them outside at the gate of the school and so on, you'd be welcome. (Dudley Interview, 1999)

Like noncollaboration, the thread of nonracialism is evident throughout the story of Dudley and the struggle against apartheid. His colleague and comrade, Helen Kies, provides a nonracialism mantra. "To counter the rulers' main objective, retribalizing to make their divide and rule policy possible and easier. Our main lesson was we are one human Race. There are no superior, no inferior races." (Kies Interview, 1999)

While Richard Dudley spent thirty-nine years on the faculty of Livingstone High School, his civic and political life stretched beyond the school. As a child he began to learn the lessons of nonracialism from his family—parents, siblings, and aunts. As a teen he was taught the lessons of noncollaboration as he joined in the discussions of the various political fellowships that are part of Cape Town, initially in the New Era Fellowship (NEF) where he was schooled in the anticolonialist politics of the day. As a young teacher he became an active member and then leader of the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA) and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), two anti-oppression and antiracist political organizations that stressed noncollaboration and nonracialism. In 1984, in the midst of the struggle years, he retired from teaching and became President of the New Unity Movement (NUM), a reincarnation of NEUM. Now in his eighties, although pleased by the collapse of apartheid, Dudley still fights for equality and the democratic world that he believes has yet to come to South Africa.

### **White Supremacy and Resistance, 1900–1924**

Before presenting the outline of the text, it is important to broadly consider the history of oppression and racism that occurred just before Dudley was born that greatly defines twentieth-century South Africa. While Cape Town

is unique in reference to the rest of the country, at the time of the South African War at the beginning of the twentieth century it was the most densely populated area of South Africa. Both the government and many white South Africans endorsed class, ethnic, and racial divisions at the time. In 1899, just before the South African War, the British High Commissioner in South Africa, Sir Alfred Milner, exclaimed that “the ultimate end is a self-governing white community, supported by well-treated and justly-governed black labour from Cape Town to Zambesi” (Thompson, 2000, p. 144). As we will see later in the chapter, however, resistance, both black and white, existed throughout the country—including Cape Town.

The state provided the stepping-stones for whites, both English and especially Afrikaans-speaking, to take power and entrench a system of racially based dominance that was unique in its rigidity. Segregation to 1948, and apartheid afterwards, were policies aimed not simply at separating white from black, but at regulating the way in which the indigenous population was drawn into a new society. Economically, blacks were essential as peasants, workers, and farm tenants; politically the settler state tried to exclude them. The country’s relative peace for nearly three-quarters of a century was achieved at the cost of deep divisions of power, race, and wealth. White power in South Africa was more efficient and often more uncompromising than in many other colonial contexts. (Beinart, 1994, p. 3)

The legacy of colonialism and slavery in South Africa led to both class disparity and racial segregation as the country entered the twentieth century. The South African Act of 1905 established equal rights for English and Afrikaners and a lesser place for blacks—both Africans and coloureds. While black labor was needed for the mines and other manual work, the government instituted segregation in housing, although this was initially difficult in Cape Town. Blacks migrated to the mines from rural South Africa as well as Mozambique, but both their occupational roles and their housing accommodations were controlled and segregated. The mine companies instituted compounds for African workers and restrictions on their movement and other freedoms. Some 70,000 whites lived in Johannesburg in 1900, yet 100,000 Africans worked in the city’s gold mines, producing over 27 percent of the world’s gold.

Racial segregation and discrimination were nevertheless the hallmarks of the industry. On the Rand, as in Kimberley, African men who had homes in the rural areas left their families for several months at a time to earn money on the mines. As in Kimberley, they lived in all-male compounds owned and controlled by the companies, under severe discipline imposed by African foremen

responsible to white managers. They were clustered together, as many as fifty to a room, where they slept without beds in double-decker concrete bunks. (Thompson, 2000, p. 121)

In Cape Town, where there were no mines and there had been what might be called a more liberal tradition, there were also attempts to segregate the city's approximately 10,000 African people and 70,000 coloureds. Many Africans came to the city to work on the docks and in various maintenance jobs, but like black miners they were quickly forced to live in the segregated, depressed area of Ndebeni under the rationale that their lifestyles might promote the plague. Ironically, the move to Ndebeni protected them from the disease and death when the plague hit. What did not stop was the oppressive view of white officialdom toward people of color. W. J. Simpson was the plague advisor in the Cape, and his racialism exemplifies the divide. "The Africans living in the town were unfit for urban life; the poorer coloured people were even dirtier in their habits, while the Malays and Indians possessed the habits of the Asiatic, and the poorer-class Portuguese, Italians, Levantines and Jews were almost as filthy as the others" (Bickford-Smith, van Heyningen, Wordon, pp. 18, 19). Segregation was not as easy in Cape Town because Africans began to declare squatter rights at the time, and coloured people were more infused in the city. There was some resistance and poor people, white and black, did live in certain neighborhoods together. However, class disparity also served to segregate coloureds and whites.

In 1910 the country became the Union of South Africa, and the divisions between whites and blacks solidified with laws such as the Native Land Act (1913) that reserved close to 80 percent of the land for whites. Sol Plaatje, one of the founders of the African National Congress (ANC), reacted to the law in his book, *Native Life in South Africa*: "Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913 the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth" (Plaatje, 1916, p. 6). Restrictions were also imposed in the cities, including pass laws for Africans and housing covenants where deeds restricted homes in certain areas to white-only residency. Saul Dubow analyzes early twentieth-century segregation in South Africa and makes connections to industrialization and capitalism. His work is important because he reminds us of the complexities of class and race in the country. While giving credit to other South African historians who connect class and race, such as Shula Marks, William Beinart, and Martin Leggasick, Dubow explains that South African segregation moved from informal and theoretical to political and hegemonic during the formation of the Union. Vivian Bickford-Smith argues that Cape Town was part of the change. He explains that there were Africans living in the city in 1910, that the city was greatly segregated, and that the first example of forced removals preceded the declaration of the Union of South Africa (Bickford-Smith, 2001). The caveat was that there were still areas where whites and blacks



lived together. Poor people, both black and white, lived in the neighborhood that became known as District Six, for example, Dudley was born in Newlands, which is presently an elite neighborhood that is sometimes referred to as “millionaires mile,” where at that time his neighbors were both white and coloured. These neighborhoods were exceptions, however, and segregation was the South African norm throughout the twentieth century.

The political and legal solidification of segregation had both conservative and liberal rationales. As we review sources, it is difficult to sort class theory from racial hatred and fear. Dubow argues that both conservative and liberal politicians tried to explain the humanity behind the division of the races and talked of laws that simply supported different cultures. Of course, this did not address economic and political ploys of divide and rule. Nor did it address white working-class economic and racist fears or lessen the fact that the government passed legislation that took land from Africans and forced them into becoming cheap wage laborers. Dubow does clearly point out that there were contradictions, and some of them come out in corresponding paragraphs in political speeches and bureaucratic documents, first couched in the liberal racism of “anthropological” differences between black and white and then within the overt conservative portrayal of the depravity of blacks.

Beinart provides examples of racist violence in both the country and the city and also presents government ideological statements that are a foreshadowing of some of the most vicious racist declarations by Hendrik Verwoerd during apartheid.

The Chamber developed an argument to suggest that if Africans earned more, they would work less. It was based on the assumption that migrant workers with land had only a very limited desire for “luxuries” or consumer items: “the only pressing need of a savage are those of food and sex” so the Labour Commission opined, “and the conditions of Native life in Africa are such that these are as a rule easily supplied.” (Beinart, 1994, p. 66)

Segregation meant both exclusion and oppression for African and coloured South Africans. Like the apartheid government that was yet to rise, the Union of South Africa recognized coloureds as above Africans but definitively not equal to whites. Early on the mines reserved certain jobs for whites, and the government and other enterprises had restrictive employment codes just as the apartheid regime would enact when it came to power. For example, many postal and railroad positions were only available to white South Africans. In 1905 Cape Town initiated compulsory primary education for white children, blacks need not apply.

Racial discrimination in jobs, housing, education, and the vote for all people did bring on resistance, and both blacks and whites challenged racism. Shula Marks as well as Beinart and Dubow, however, argue that resis-

tance was not uniform and was actually rather messy. Africans responded to racialism in the mines and other job sites. Although there were strikes and boycotts, African and coloured leadership did not always represent resistance. For example, Tengo Jabavu, an African leader in the Cape, presided over meetings and protests, but he was also worried about alienating powerful whites. He worked with other Africans and formed a team with John Dube, Solomon Plaatje, Pixley kalsaka Seme, and others to launch the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), the forerunner of today's presiding political party, the African National Congress (Beinart, 1994, pp. 84, 85; Rive & Couzens, 1993). Seme made a powerful speech at the initial conference in 1912.

Chiefs of royal blood and gentleman of our race, we have gathered here to consider and discuss a theme which my colleagues and I have decided to place before you. We have discussed that in the land of their birth, Africans are treated as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The white people of this country have formed what is known as the Union of South Africa—a union in which we have no voice in the making of laws and no part in their administration. We have called you therefore to this conference so that we can together devise ways and means of forming our national unity and defending our rights and privileges. (Rive & Couzens, 1993, p. 10)

While there were protests and pass burnings and more, the initial resistance is generally considered gradualist in nature, although as Dubow asserts in his recent book on the ANC, the original American and English educated leaders of the organization were committed to “overcoming inter-African ethnic divisions and to extending citizenship and franchise rights to all South Africans on a non-racial basis” (Dubow, 1989, p. 3). As Marks and others have already informed us, however, conservatism and resistance often coexisted. In the initial years through the early 1920s there was geographical diversity in SANNC theory and practice. Leaders in the Transvaal attempted to form alliances with socialist labor and the South African Communist Party. Meanwhile, people such as Solomon Plaatje in the Cape, who on other occasions had written articles and made speeches that were socialist in nature, apologized to Debeers, the diamond company, for the “Johannesburg socialist propaganda” (Meli, 1998, p. 61). Even in the early years, however, the ANC forerunner was the one political organization that preached what today is referred to as multiculturalism.

They retained a liberal belief in multiracial civilization and citizenship in South Africa. Aside from some white liberals and later socialists, they were the only political grouping at the time to articulate this goal. Their interpretation of non-racialism and their strategies

for achieving it were often uncertain, as was their view about incorporating the uneducated masses. But they were not offering a black version of exclusive white South Africanism—whites as well as blacks were part of the nation. (Beinart, 1994, p. 89)

The mix of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism that was part of African opposition to Union racism and oppression is evident throughout black resistance, including the coloured political and educational organizations that were founded in Cape Town.

### **White Supremacy and Coloured Resistance, 1900–1924**

The most influential coloured leader at the time the Union of South Africa was formed was Abdullah Abdurahman, who led the African Political Organization (APO) from 1905 until his death in 1940. He was viewed as too outspoken by some other coloured leaders, and their views partially explain the contradictions and the messiness of coloured resistance at the time of Union just before Richard Dudley was born. Abdurahman was a medical doctor, and he was sometimes fiery as he challenged racist policy. As I have noted above, there was a tone of liberalism in the Cape when compared to other parts of South Africa. Cape Town was unique because coloured people who conformed to Cecil Rhodes's slogan of "equal rights for every civilized man south of the Zambesi" were allowed limited franchise. This meant that coloured men who were educated and owned property could vote, but they could not hold office except at the most local levels. Abdurahman, for example, was on the Cape Town city council for four decades. The African Political Organization, with Abdurahman as its leader and spokesman, began in the Cape and grew into a national organization before the Union was formed in 1910. The membership list, however, was primarily from the Cape. Initially in 1902, the APO listed the following mission: (1) To promote unity between the coloured races; (2) To obtain better and higher education for our children; (3) To defend the Coloured People's social, political, and civil rights; (4) To get the names of all coloured men who have voting qualifications; and (5) The general advancement of coloured people in South Africa.

Like Marks, Beinart, and Dubow; historians of coloured South African history; Gavin Lewis, Ian Goldin, Mohamad Adhikari, and Ciraj Rassool are quick to point out the complexities of coloured politics and resistance. Lewis goes to great length to juxtapose the fight against white supremacy with middle-class white values. In fact, he uses first-person quotes as he continually references coloured leaders who accept Rhodes's edict of "civilized men."

The APO intended, he declared (Collins), to show the government that there existed "an educated class of Coloured people in Cape

Town,” who could no longer be treated as part of an undifferentiated mass of “uneducated barbarians.” The time had come, Collins claimed, for “civilised” Coloureds in all four colonies to receive the rights due to all civilized men. (Lewis, 1987, p. 23)

The APO and specifically Abdurahman also spoke to the rights of all black people. There were statements and protests against the government importing Chinese labor at the expense of black South Africans, and the organization paid persistent attention to uplifting coloured people through education and temperance. But the APO was middle class. The organization was made of coloured men—skilled artisans, small retail traders, clerks, teachers, and a few professionals—and most of the issues they addressed, especially education and limited franchise, were with the hope of the integration of coloured people into white South Africa. Abdurahman pointed out his goals, including the improvement of coloured education and the extension of the nonracial franchise throughout the country, shortly after he became APO president in 1905. He built the APO into an important political organization by 1910 while directly fighting for education and the franchise. There was urgency in the fight for education because the Cape government passed the School Board Act in 1905. Legislators began making noise about compulsory primary education for white children in the final years of the nineteenth century, but action was put on hold because of the South African War. In actuality, *de facto* school segregation had been the reality in the Cape since the 1860s. White children of means went to nondenominational schools, while black and coloured children attended missionary schools that were underfunded and lacked facilities. In spite of this disparity, the state became concerned because coloured school attendance was growing and white children were not keeping pace. Coloured leaders, on the other hand, believed that compulsory education for white children would infringe upon the educational and therefore occupational possibilities for coloured children.

The APO took up the fight, and Abdurahman was dispatched to argue the case before the Colonial Secretary. He was rebuffed at the meeting and was told that primary compulsory education for white children was essential, because (1) black school enrollment had outpaced whites; (2) whites paid more taxes; and (3) the government could not afford compulsory education for both whites and blacks. After the law passed, there was greater inequality as mission schools closed and the number of white schools doubled. Adhikari provides a class analysis that corresponds to the racism in the act and argues that the government needed to train unskilled, semiliterate workers. “There was thus a clear congruence between the ideals of white supremacy and the educational needs of the rapidly developing capitalist economy. Thus, public education was very deliberately extended to all whites and only very selectively made available to blacks” (Adhikari, 1993, p. 22). Abdurahman, however, was lauded for his work and for standing up to white power. So even