

# John Pilger (1929-2023) on Apartheid and Post-apartheid Injustices: “South Africa is where much of my political education took place.”

By [Prof. Patrick Bond](#)

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*John Pilger, who died in his hometown of Sydney aged 84 on December 30, was a unique journalist, equipped with the combination of moral outrage, relentless sleuthing and unparalleled interviewing skills required to understand South Africa's deep structural injustices. Setting aside all the [scoops and awards elsewhere](#), no one else could have periodically parachuted into this country – first in 1967 when he was banned by apartheid, and lastly in 2017 – and then fit that half-century of dramatic turmoil into a hard-hitting film, *Apartheid Did Not Die*, and a dozen influential articles and book chapters.*

Above all, John represented a chronicler of what can be considered the independent-left critique, one who connected the dots from imperialism to local power relations to suffering individuals with passion and eloquence. No one was spared by his savage pen. He [wrote](#) in 2013,

“In 2001, George Soros told the Davos Economic Forum, ‘South Africa is in the hands of international capital’... This led directly to state crimes such as the massacre of 34 miners at Marikana in 2012, which evoked the infamous Sharpeville massacre more than half a century earlier. Both had been protests about injustice. Nelson Mandela, too, fostered crony relationships with wealthy whites from the corporate world, including those who had profited from apartheid.”

There were three distinct phases of his work here, resulting in scores of references to South African injustice peppering many of his other international observations – including about Israel's version of apartheid in his 2002 film *Palestine is Still the Issue*.

In the first phase, during apartheid, his book *Heroes* (1986) contains a long chapter covering

the gritty realities he encountered in 1967, before he was banned by Pretoria from visiting again.



In the second, after returning in 1995, Pilger was aghast at post-apartheid triumphalism, which meant his 1998 film *Apartheid Did Not Die* was received with outrage by old and new elite alike. Pilger asked Nelson Mandela what were probably the toughest ethical and practical questions about the new system the president ever received.

Likewise, [debating](#) F.W. de Klerk, Pilger was forthright:

‘Didn’t you and your fellow white supremacists really win?’

It was as if a secret truth had been put to him. Waving away the smoke of an ever-present cigarette, he said: “It is true that our lives have not fundamentally changed. We can still go to the cricket at Newlands and watch the rugby. We are doing okay.”

“For the majority, the poverty has not changed, has it?” I said.

Warming to this implied criticism of the ANC, he agreed that his most enduring achievement was to have handed on his regime’s economic policies, including the same corporate brotherhood... “You must understand, we’ve achieved a broad consensus on many things now.”

Pilger’s mix of hectoring and charm compelled the likes of Anglo-American spokesperson Michael Spicer, real estate mogul Pam Golding and fashion trend-setter Edith Venter to reveal similar white-greed truths. Spicer’s team would later show the film to the firm’s management trainees, I’ve been reliably told, as providing the best example of what *not* to do in an interview.



Famed liberal journalist Alister Sparks headed up the SABC's current affairs division in 1998, and was incensed at what he saw as Pilger's distortions due to "reliance mainly on fringe sources and disaffected people" (such as community activist Mzwanele Mayekiso and lawyer Richard Spoor).

[Rebutted](#) Pilger in the *Mail & Guardian*, "The film's primary source is Mandela himself, who reveals just how much he has changed his views." The national broadcaster, he went on, "having bought the South African rights to my film, sought first to ban it, then to muffle it. Sparks's explanation for this has a Kafkaesque tone similar to Cold War tracts denouncing journalists, writers and playwrights who begged to differ with the regime in the Eastern bloc. He describes me as 'a man with an ideological mission.'"

Pilger had previously written admiringly of Sparks's bravery as a journalist reformer, but now complained,

"Inexplicably, my ideological masters and the colour of my party card are never identified, no doubt because it would be too truthful to point out that I have never allied myself with any political group. Indeed, I have always been intensely proud of my independence."

In a third phase of his engagement, Pilger continued to provoke the elite, especially when after his book *Freedom Next Time* was published in 2006 and excerpted here, Thabo Mbeki's finance minister Trevor Manuel and minister in the presidency Joel Netshitenzhe were enraged. The *Sunday Independent* was the site of a fierce battle over whether progress was

really being made.

In his essay, “ANC government has yet to free citizens from the fear of poverty,” Pilger wrote of the “arrogance that comes from undisputed power, which is the conundrum of South African political life – that the vote has given the nation democracy in many ways, but the price has been effectively a one-party state.”



Pilger’s [last event here](#) was the inaugural Saloojee Memorial Lecture just over six years ago: “South Africa: how a nation was misled and became a model for the world, and how the people can rise again.” He declared,

“South Africa is where much of my political education took place,” and concluded, “what makes South Africa so interesting and so hopeful and probably unique because there are so many grassroots popular movements.”

In 2008, poet Dennis Brutus, journalist Ferial Haffajee and I hosted John at the Time of the Writer conference in Durban, just after an epic Pilger film fest at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (all his works are online [here](#)). Within 20 months, Dennis had passed on, leaving John to [lament](#),

“I was so honored to meet Dennis last year, finally. He was a giant of a human being who changed the world in so many ways. His tenacious humanity inspired so many to go on and not let the bastards win in the long run.”

As can be testified by so many who met him here – or learned about our realities from him – Pilger deserves the same tribute, as his films and writing renew our sense of indignity and our instincts for justice.

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*Patrick Bond, Professor, University of the Western Cape School of Government. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.*

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*Featured image: John Pilger in his film, Palestine Is Still the Issue (johnpilger.com)*

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