

I WRITE WHAT I LIKE*

By Steve Biko

Fear--an important determinant in South African politics.

It would seem that the greatest waste of time in South Africa is to try and find logic in why the White government does certain things. If anything else, the constant inroads into the freedom of the Black people illustrates a complete contempt for this section of the community.

My premise has always been that Black people should not at any stage be surprised at some of the atrocities committed by the government. This to me follows logically after their initial assumption that they, being a settler minority, can have the right to be supreme masters. If they could be cruel enough to cow the natives down with brutal force and install themselves as perpetual rulers in a foreign land, then anything else they do to the same Black people becomes logical in terms of the initial cruelty. To expect justice from them at any stage is to be naive. They almost have a duty to themselves and to their "electorate" to show that they still have the upper hand over the Black people. There is only one way of showing that upper hand--by ruthlessly breaking down the back of resistance amongst the Blacks, however petty that resistance is.

One must look at the huge security force that South Africa has in order to realize this. These men must always report something to their masters in order to justify their employment. It is not enough to report that "I have been to Pondoland and the natives are behaving well and are peaceful and content." This is not satisfactory, for the perpetrators of evil are aware of the cruelty of their system and hence do not expect the natives to be satisfied. So the security boys are sent back to Pondoland to find out who the spokesman is who claims that the people are satisfied and to beat him until he admits that he is not satisfied. At that point he is either banned or brought forward to be tried under one of the many Acts. The absolutely infantile evidence upon which the State builds up its cases is some of the trials does suggest to me that they are quite capable of arresting a group of boys playing hide-and-seek and charging them with high treason.

This is the background against which one must see the many political trials that are held in this country. To them

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It looks as if something would be dangerously wrong if no major political trial was held for a period of one year. It looks as if someone will be accused by his superior for not doing his work. The strangest thing is that people are hauled in for almost nothing to be tried under the most vicious of Acts--like the Terrorism Act.

Aimé Césaire once said: "When I turn on my radio, when I hear that Negroes have been lynched in America, I say that we have been lied to: Hitler is not dead; when I turn on my radio and hear that in Africa, forced labour has been inaugurated and legislated, I say that we have certainly been lied to: Hitler is not dead."

Perhaps one need add only the following in order to make the picture complete:

"When I turn on my radio, when I hear that someone in the Pondoland forest was beaten and tortured, I say that we have been lied to: Hitler is not dead; when I turn on my radio, when I hear that someone in jail slipped off a piece of soap and died, I say that we have been lied to: Hitler is not dead, he is likely to be found in Pretoria."

To look for instances of cruelty directed at those who fall into disfavor with the security police is perhaps to look too far. One need not try to establish the truth of the claim that Black people in South Africa have to struggle for survival. It presents itself in ever so many facets of our lives. Township life alone makes it a miracle for anyone to live up to adulthood. There we see a situation of absolute want in which Black will kill Black to be able to survive. This is the basis of the vandalism, murder, rape and plunder that goes on while the real sources of the evil--White society--are sunbathing on exclusive beaches or relaxing in their bourgeois homes.

While those amongst Blacks who do bother to open their mouths in feeble protest against what is going on are periodically intimidated with security visits and occasional banning orders and house arrests, the rest of the Black community lives in absolute fear of the police. *No average Black man can ever at any moment be absolutely sure that he is not breaking a law.* There are so many laws governing the lives and behavior of Black people that sometimes one feels that the police only need to page at random through their statute book to be able to get a law under which to charge a victim.

The philosophy behind police action in this country seems to be, "*Harass them! Harass them!*" And one needs to add that they interpret the word in a very extravagant sense. Thus even

young traffic policemen, people generally known for their grace, occasionally find it proper to slap adult Black people. It sometimes looks obvious here that the great plan is to keep the Black people thoroughly intimidated and to perpetuate the "super-race" image of the White man, if not intellectually, at least in terms of force. White people, working through their vanguard--the South African police--have come to realize the truth of that golden maxim: if you cannot make a man respect you, then make him fear you.

Clearly Black people cannot respect White people, at least not in this country. There is such an obvious aura of immorality and naked cruelty in all that is done in the name of White people that no Black man, no matter how intimidated, can ever be made to respect White society. However, in spite of their obvious contempt for the values cherished by Whites and the price at which White comfort and security is purchased, Blacks seem to me to have been successfully cowed down by the type of brutality that emanates from this section of the community.

It is this fear that erodes the soul of Black people in South Africa--a fear obviously built up deliberately by the system through a myriad of civil agents, be they post office attendants, police, C.I.D. officials, army men in uniform, security police or even the occasional trigger-happy White farmer or storeowner. It is a fear so basic in the considered actions of Black people as to make it impossible for them to behave like people--let alone free people. From the attitude of a servant to his employer, to that of a Black man being served by a White attendant at a shop, one sees this fear clearly showing through. How can people be prepared to put up a resistance against their overall oppression if in their individual situations, they cannot insist on the observance of their manhood? This is a question that often occurs to overseas visitors who are perceptive enough to realize that all is not well in the land of sunshine and milk.

Yet this is a dangerous type of fear, for it only goes skin deep. It hides underneath it an immeasurable rage that often threatens to erupt. Beneath it lies naked hatred for a group that deserves absolutely no respect. Unlike in the rest of the French or Spanish former colonies where chances of assimilation made it not impossible for Blacks to aspire towards being White, in South Africa whiteness has always been associated with police brutality and intimidation, early morning pass raids, general harassment in and out of townships and hence no Black really aspires to being White. The claim by Whites of monopoly on comfort and security has always been so exclusive that Blacks see Whites as the major obstacle in their progress towards peace, prosperity and a sane society. Through its association with all these negative aspects, whiteness has thus been soiled beyond

recognition. At best, therefore, Blacks see whiteness as a concept that warrants being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an aspiration with more human content in it. At worst, Blacks envy White society for the comfort it has usurped and at the center of this envy is the wish--nay, the secret determination--in the innermost minds of most Blacks who think like this, to kick Whites off those comfortable garden chairs that one sees as he rides in a bus, out of town, and to claim them for themselves. Day by day, one gets more convinced that Aimé Césaire could not have been right when he said "no race possesses the monopoly on truth, intelligence, force and there is room for all of us at the rendezvous of victory."

It may, perhaps, surprise some people that I should talk of Whites in a collective sense when in fact it is a particular section, i.e., the government, that carries out this unwarranted vendetta against Blacks.

There are those Whites who will completely disclaim responsibility for the country's inhumanity to the Black man. These are the people who are governed by logic for four and a half years but by fear at election time. The Nationalist party has perhaps many more English votes than one imagines. All Whites collectively recognize in it a strong bastion against the highly played up *swaart gevaar*. One must not underestimate the deeply imbedded fear of the Black man so prevalent in White society. Whites know only too well what exactly they have been doing to Blacks and logically find reason for the Black man to be angry. Their state of insecurity however does not outweigh their greed for power and wealth, hence they brace themselves to react against this rage rather than to dispel it with openmindedness and fair play. This interaction between fear and reaction then sets on a vicious cycle that multiplies both the fear and the reaction. This is what makes meaningful coalitions between Black and White totally impossible. Also this is what makes Whites act as a group and hence become culpable as a group.

In any case, even if there was a real fundamental difference in thinking amongst Whites vis-à-vis Blacks, the very fact that those disgruntled Whites remain to enjoy the fruits of the system would alone be enough to condemn them at Nuremberg. Listen to Karl Jaspers writing on the concept of metaphysical guilt:

There exists amongst men, because they are men, a solidarity through which each shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world and especially for crimes that are committed in his presence or of which he cannot be ignorant. If I do

not do whatever I can to prevent them, I am an accomplice in them. If I have not risked my life in order to prevent the murder of other men, if I have stood silent, I feel guilty in a sense that cannot in any adequate fashion be understood juridically or politically or morally... That I am still alive after such things have been done weighs on me as guilt that cannot be expiated.

Somewhere in the heart of human relations, an absolute command imposes itself: in case of criminal attack or of living conditions that threaten physical being, accept life for all together or not at all.

Thus, if Whites in general do not like what is happening to the Black people, they have the power in them to stop it here and now. We, on the other hand, have every reason to bundle them together and blame them jointly.

One can of course say that the Blacks too are to blame for allowing the situation to exist. Or to drive the point even further, one may point out that there are Black policemen and Black special branch agents. To take the last point first, I must state categorically that there is no such thing as a Black policeman. Any Black man who props the system up actively has lost the right to being considered part of the Black world: he has sold his soul for thirty pieces of silver and finds that he is in fact not acceptable to the White society he sought to join. These are colorless White lackeys who live in a marginal world of unhappiness. They are extensions of the enemy into our ranks. On the other hand, the rest of the Black world is kept in check purely because of powerlessness.

Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars who smile at the enemy and swear at him in the sanctity of their toilets; who shout "Baas" willingly during the day and call the White man a dog in their buses as they go home. Once again the concept of fear is at the heart of this two-faced behavior on the part of the conquered Blacks.

This concept of fear has now taken a different dimension. One frequently hears people say of someone who has just been arrested or banned "there is no smoke without fire" or if the guy was outspoken "he asked for it, I am not surprised." In a sense this is almost deifying the security police; they cannot be wrong; if they could break the Rdvonia plot, what makes them afraid of an individual to the point of banning him unless

there is something--which we do not know?

This kind of logic, found to varying degrees in the Afrikaner, the English and the Black communities, is dangerous for it completely misses the point and reinforces irrational action on the part of the security police.

The fact of the matter is that the government and its security forces are also ruled by fear, in spite of their immense power. Like anyone living in mortal fear, they occasionally resort to irrational actions in the hope that a show of strength rather than proper intelligence might scare the resisters satisfactorily. This is the basis of security operations in South Africa most of the time. If they know that there are some three missionaries who are dangerous to their interest but whose identity is unknown, they would rather deport about eighty missionaries and hope that the three are among them than use some brains and find out who the three are. This was also the basis of the arrest of about five thousand during the so-called Pogo Raids of 1963. And of course the laws from which security police derive their power are so vague and sweeping as to allow for all this. Hence one concludes that the South African security system is force-oriented rather than intelligence-oriented. One may of course add that this type of mentality, in this country, stretches all the way from state security to the style of rugby Whites adopt. It has become their way of life.

One will therefore not be surprised if it proves very difficult to accept that "there is room for all of us at the rendezvous of victory." The tripartite system of fear--that of White fearing the Blacks, Blacks fearing Whites and the government fearing Blacks and wishing to allay the fear amongst Whites--makes it difficult to establish rapport amongst the two segments of the community. The fact of living apart adds a different dimension and perhaps a more serious one--it makes the aspirations of the two groups diametrically opposed. The White strategy so far has been to systematically break down the resistance of the Blacks to the point where the latter would accept crumbs from the White table. This we have shown we reject unequivocally; and now the stage is therefore set for a very interesting turn of events.