

Fran Buntman. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xviii + 340 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-80993-1.



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Published on H-SAfrica (November, 2004)

Robben Island has been fairly well covered in literature of various kinds: popular descriptions, histories of the various phases of its existence, scholarly works on specific issues, books containing interviews, biographies and autobiographies with substantial coverage of individual experiences on the Island. Fran Buntman has contributed to some of the earlier scholarly works but this book is much more substantial than any previous treatment of Robben Island as a place of incarceration of political prisoners. It is also unique in its simultaneous treatment of the prison as a place of punishment, of intended demoralization and isolation from the world, and also of the counter efforts of the prisoners. These counter efforts, she shows, transformed the institution into a place where alternative values were lived out and prisoners took a substantial measure of control of their lives, despite being incarcerated.

There is no doubt that this is a major work of scholarship. It derives from a Ph.D. dissertation built on earlier postgraduate work, and is consequently the result of many long years of patient research. In the course of collecting the data, the

author has also developed a very sophisticated, but not unproblematic, theoretical framework of interpretation. Whatever the arguments I or anyone else may have with aspects of this book, it certainly breaks new ground and also covers old ground in a way that rethinks the entire Robben Island experience.

A key element of the book is understanding the responses of the prisoners as an attempt to create an alternative world insofar as they come to control more and more of their lives, albeit within a situation of incarceration. They were able to establish a culture that was in the first place a continuation of the political cultures of their respective organizations prior to imprisonment, although the African National Congress (ANC) was able, partly through its numbers and partly through its long experience, to achieve this process most effectively. But Robben Island also was a cultural experience where the environment was used to build something beyond that. It was a situation that catered to the political needs of the veterans as well as to the induction and training and development of new intellectuals, for that is

what happened with many prisoners who came onto the island. They may have come in as *klipgooiers* (stone throwers), but gradually they learned more and more about the organizations and over time many became not only articulate spokespersons, but also political thinkers.

Much of the book is devoted to discussing prisoner strategies and tactics towards the authorities. What emerges is that there were differences between prisoners, partly based on generational factors, over how to relate to the authorities. The younger prisoners, primarily from the 1976 "Soweto" generation, were more predisposed towards defiance of a continuous nature. The older generation, who had weathered many long years of difficult conditions, was more cautious. They believed that one had to choose battles carefully, but also consider the impact of conflict and how it would affect aspects of their lives that needed safeguarding. A hunger strike, while inaugurated for a just cause, might sometimes lead to searches of the cells and this needed to be avoided in order to safeguard contraband political material.

At the same time the older prisoners had presided over a process whereby they had gradually assumed more and more control over their lives. They managed various recreational activities and took charge of elements of their existence that might in conventional criminal prisons have been the task of the wardens. This was important in asserting the subjective control of individuals, but the way it was done, Buntman shows, was partly through building a new democratic culture that was intended to inform the South Africa of the future.

It is important to underline this insight in that those who write on the 1980s tend to see People's Power as peculiar to that period when in fact it can be found on Robben Island and also in some elements of the exile experience. The Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College also was consciously designed as an alternative popular, democratic

educational experience, meant to be totally different from that of the authoritarian schooling systems of apartheid South Africa. Whether it was totally successful or not, like the Robben Island experience, it entailed large-scale organizational questions as well as many and continuing debates, and this needs to be factored into South African history.[1]

In much of the existing historiography there is no clarity as to why the ANC or the Congress movement became the dominant force in South African politics from the late 1970s onwards. If it were true, as much of the existing literature suggests, that the ANC ceased to exist inside the country after Rivonia, how did it later attain this pre-eminence? In the first place, oral evidence and recent written literature suggest that the scholars who read invisibility as meaning absence prematurely assumed the death of the ANC. Yet there was underground activity all the time, varying in strength and levels of activity.[2] Likewise the exile experience was an important period of induction of people into the ANC from the moment of crossing the border, of choosing one or the other side and then consolidating that choice through processes of political discussion and classes.

Buntman adds to this understanding by showing the crucial role of the Robben Island experience in bringing together the different strands under ANC hegemony, the gradual winning over of many Black Consciousness (BC) people, and how they often became major figures in the United Democratic Front (UDF) and ANC after their release from prison. At the same time, this was not a one-way process and insufficient attention has been paid in the existing literature to the impact that BC had on the ANC, other than having many of its leaders and members absorbed into the larger organization. The marks of BC influence cannot be measured by the election performance of the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), but rather needs to be uncovered within the ANC itself. This is beyond Buntman's brief, though she

does hint at it in the interaction between the young and the old on the island.

Despite the strengths of the work there are some elements of imprecision or insufficient clarity in the formulations used. For example, Nelson Mandela is described as a "dissident" (p. 2). The word dissident refers to someone who is in an antagonistic relationship to a consensus, one who stands against the crowd, not to authorities per se. Mandela, even if incarcerated, could be said to have reflected the overall national consensus (insofar as one existed or was emerging) much more clearly than his jailers and their masters. It may be that the conventional Cold War usage is to treat dissidence purely in relation to authorities, but it should also be related to notions of consensus and building of consensus, and in that sense, the author's use of the word needs further reflection.

The word "escape" is often used to refer to prisoners seeking "escapism." As far as I could discover, there are no actual quotations from interviews on this theme in the book. I raise it because in my own experience as a prisoner, many of us would have resisted such a description of our intentions. We sought to survive and for that reason wanted the best conditions possible. We sought to relax in order to reduce tension or channel our tensions into sport rather than aggression between prisoners or unnecessary aggression towards the authorities. None of this was escapism but rather ways of dealing with difficult conditions. Now there may have been escapism in, say, reading bad novels that amounted just to getting away from things, but it needs to be clear that this was not a mainstream way of coping with the environment. Evidence is not presented to prove otherwise.

The theorizing of the prisoners' experience has many important elements that contribute greatly to understanding it as an organization-building experience that empowered people as future leaders and which fueled debates that often spilled over into the outside world.

However, the deployment by the author of Hobbesian theories of social contract instead of Marxism is not convincing (p. 246 ff). I am not suggesting that Marxism necessarily supplies an immediate or sustainable overall explanation, but Buntman poses them as alternatives, with Marxism being an avowed alignment not having the required explanatory powers. Yet the notion of social contract theories as an explanation is based on a mythical contract, just as Benedict Anderson's imagined community is contrasted with actual relations between people and mutually agreed relationships. The essence of the Robben Island experience was in my view not unrelated to Marxism, albeit rather in the form of primitive communism, that is, the sharing of the goods of the poorest of the poor. It was a situation where people *consciously* chose to relate to one another and the authorities in a particular way, according to democratic and collective norms that were consonant with the beliefs of the organizations from which they came. The sharing of the good things of life that became available to the prisoners was not part of some imagined way of relating, but very much part of conscious socialist or Marxist thinking.

Likewise, definite modes of behavior developed that were based on what was expected of "cadres," that is, behavior approved or disapproved according to a consciously agreed-on set of norms, deriving in many ways from what was considered "comradely." These norms may be found in earlier ANC conceptions of how volunteers (in the Defiance and Congress of the People Campaigns) were expected to behave and they were further developed in the difficult conditions of imprisonment.

This type of study requires great sensitivity and in general Buntman displays this. Yet there is one very regrettable passing reference that seriously detracts from the overall care with which the material has been handled. For a person who goes to jail for political reasons, I can imagine

nothing more painful than to have the reason for your sacrifice negated, to have what has a political content impugned. What gives meaning to what you have done is then undermined. I think one needs to be extremely cautious before saying anything that may carry that meaning. Buntman refers to jail cells facilitating political consciousness and in a footnote remarks: "Within South Africa, those who became politically aware in prison include people like Amina Desai, not known among the broader public. A human rights monitor who visited Desai in the early 1970s in South Africa's Barberton prison commented that 'prison makes people think politically who sometimes did not before.' Mrs Desai had been convicted of destroying evidence after an activist boarder of hers was arrested and destroyed his diary to avoid being implicated. She came into prison 'non-political and even rather racist,' her visitor recalled, initially 'complaining of having to share meals with a black woman,' in this case Dorothy Nyembe, a veteran opponent of apartheid. Over time, however, Mrs Desai was more fiery against apartheid than Dorothy" (p. 2, fn. 5)!

This is a somewhat astonishing passage. The source is cited as an anonymous letter to the author of 10 January 1996. It is thus based on the information of a single anonymous source whose credibility we are not in a position to assess. It amounts to questioning the reasons why Amina Desai went to jail, disputing her political consciousness and even characterizing her as being racist. It is also not clear what precisely is meant by the comment: "not known among the broader public."

It should be recalled that the "activist boarder" referred to is Ahmed Timol, who was murdered in detention in 1971, thrown from the tenth floor of John Vorster Square. Desai faced trial with Salim Essop for her involvement in Timol's activities. Those were difficult times to be arrested and to go to jail.

When Mrs. Desai was jailed with Dorothy Nyembe, it meant that two people were together on their own for year after year, two people from quite distinct backgrounds and cultural experiences. Small group dynamics are taxing at the best of times but two totally different people brought together in this way must have been extremely difficult. Two people, let us recall, who did not choose one another's company but found themselves together because of apartheid.

Now we are not told for how long this "human rights monitor" spoke to Amina Desai. Was the person English-speaking? If not, then it is possible that a nuance could have been misunderstood and interpreted as racist when it was not meant that way. Anyone who has been in prison or visited prisoners will know how easily misunderstandings occur and how often things are said cryptically because of fear that one is being monitored. Members of the Indian community with whom I raised this passage were astonished and pained at this characterization of Desai.

Having raised these—some rather serious—reservations, the book remains a landmark contribution and deserves very serious study by all interested not only in Robben Island and penology, but the evolution of the struggle against apartheid in general.

Notes

[1]. Sean Morrow, Brown Maaba, and Loyiso Pulumani, *Education in Exile: SOMAFCO, the ANC School in Tanzania, 1978 to 1992* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2004).

[2]. Gregory Houston, "The Post-Rivonia ANC/SACP Underground" in South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa. Vol 1: 1960-1970* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004); Raymond Suttner, "The African National Congress (ANC) Underground between Rivonia and 1976", unpublished paper, 2004: www.sas.ac.uk.commonwealthstudies/resource/suttner.pdf.

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Citation: Raymond Suttner. Review of Buntman, Fran. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

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