

Book Review

YOUTH IN CRISIS

Gill Straker (1992), *Faces in the Revolution: The Psychological Effects of Violence on Township Youth in South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town.

The building of a new society in South Africa must depend on the ability of the country's youth to provide the energy to remould the social structure of the country. Research in the 1930s showed that the problems was immense. Youth roamed the streets, apparently directionless, begging or involved in criminal activities. They existed on the edges of society until arrested – if they had lived that long. Once removed their places were filled by new recruits from the festering slums that were called townships. So it went on, like a merry-go-round, generations of destitute youth replacing those that went before.

The struggles against apartheid, in the 1970s and 1980s, which shook the fabric of every township, spawned new layers of street-wise youth. Some took part in the struggles, adopting names that were lifted from B-grade films, others turned to petty crime in the townships or in the streets of the cities. These misfits, with no place in their own communities were, and are, illiterate and unemployable. In urgent need of assistance they live in a society that provides no special schooling, no counselling and no therapists. It is doubtful whether there are any reliable statistics, and little research, to guide the few social workers in confronting the many difficulties faced by the youth. What is known depends largely on anecdotal information.

A glance at information provided by the annual *Surveys of Race Relations* in Johannesburg serves to indicate the scope of the problem. In February 1990 the then Minister of Planning said that there were 2,055 'street children' in the country. That is, children who roamed the streets, alone or in gangs, begging, scavenging, or thieving. He also said that there were no special government facilities or funds available for these children. His figure was rejected by Jill Swart, the National Chairperson of Street-Wise, a nationwide educational, vocational and child-care project for street children. She said that there were 1,200 street children in Soweto alone. In addition Professor Linda Richter at the Institute of Behavioural Studies at the University of South Africa estimated that there were 9,000 street children in South Africa.

In a detailed article in the *Journal of Comprehensive Health*, 1,1, of June 1990, Ms Swart said that these children, who were physically and sexually abused (some were recruited as young as seven for sex) were carriers of venereal diseases. They used intoxicants such as glue, petrol, benzine and thinners. Those who roamed the streets of Hillbrow (at that

time a suburb of Johannesburg that was mainly white) were greeted with hostility. When interviewed, 12 per cent of the local inhabitants called for their compulsory sterilisation or 'annihilation'; 30 per cent said that they should be removed from society, placed in a state penitentiary or distant reformatories. Shopkeepers kept sjamboks (rhino skin whips), tear-gas and boiling water to drive them away.

Reviewing the available statistics for children in detention the *Survey* stated that in South Africa there were 11 'places of safety' for African children in 1990 with accommodation for 1,400 children. 709 were held in February 1990. Seven institutions held children in terms of the Child Care Act of 1983, and the remaining institutions held 204 youths in terms of the Criminal Procedures Act of 1977. Eight places of safety which could accommodate 700 Coloured children held 506 children in February; 2 places of safety for Indian children with 140 places held 102 children; 7 places of safety for White children with 491 places held 392.

It is against this scenario that I read Gill Straker's account of her encounters with youth caught up in the revolt of 1984-86. Let me say at the outset that I was most impressed. It is a book that is wonderfully well written and presented and carries the stamp of authority with its references to contemporary literature and its appendix on methodology. It is an important contribution to the problems of a society torn in conflict, and particularly those traumatic experiences that impinge on a youth caught in violent upheavals. Above all, this book concentrates on human beings, their reasons for becoming involved with their peer groups in the struggles during the years of revolt and the effects of that struggle on their lives. It is a book that deals with a universal problem that has surfaced in Africa (it is possible to cite Somalia, Sudan and Liberia), in Europe (particularly former Yugoslavia) and across the world.

As Straker points out the effects on those *passively* suffering violence has been well documented in works on post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the effects on the psyche of those *actively* participating in violence has been less well studied. Straker's work, which concentrates on the latter aspect of violence, widens our understanding of victims of self-induced trauma and will undoubtedly be placed on the list of required reading for all counsellors, psychiatrists, mediators and politicians who have to deal with such matters.

I do not claim any expertise in psychology or psychiatry, but from generalised reading knows how topical the matter of PTSD is, in the work done by specialist paediatricians and psychiatrists. I had some doubts over some of the psychological models used by Prof Straker, but perhaps this work will revive debate on the validity, for example, of Freud's interpretations. However, whatever my doubts, the references to Freud (among others) did not distract from the overall scope of the study. This

work extends the literature on the topic in looking to the therapies that will assist youth active in struggles that involved arson, mutilation and death by 'necklacing', during a fight for justice in a repressive society. Furthermore it is a story of youth, many of them severely disadvantaged by the poverty, broken families, alcoholism and endemic crime of the black townships.

Prof Straker, while distancing herself from the methods used by the youth in the struggle, makes it quite clear from a moral standpoint that her sympathies lay with those who aimed at removing the apartheid system. She did not make contact with the (black) vigilantes who were used to attack the youth groups and, consequently, offers no estimate of the harm done to their personalities as a result of the violence in which they were involved.

The author was not complacent about the nature of the work in which she was involved. She saw that the counselling team, white and middle-class, were out of touch with township politics. 'Living in peaceful suburbia, the idea of a civil war taking place fifteen kilometres from where we lived had not fully penetrated our consciousness' (p 94).

The work discussed in this book was centred on one set of youth from Leandra in the eastern Transvaal. This focus strengthened the work of the counsellors by allowing them to consider individual case studies. Those in the group, interviewed in 1986, during or just after the events in which they were involved, were followed up three years later. Consequently, it was possible to sort out resource persons: leaders, followers (including, 'heroes in search of a script', 'conduits', and 'conformists'), casualties and anti-social persons, each illustrated by carefully drawn case studies, constructed from material taken from a number of persons who fitted a given category, in this way protecting the anonymity of those interviewed. It emerged, as could be expected, that family backgrounds, and especially maternal and/or paternal attitudes or fostering (for positive or negative reasons), introduced some of the youth to the battle grounds, and support from the elders (in the family and the community) allowed the youth to meet adversity with greater confidence.

Exposure to strife, says Straker, is emotionally stressful to youth: it is a tribute to the human spirit that so many youth have the resilience to face that adversity. Optimistically, she says that one out of two will be reintegrated into a more normal society. Just as equally, one out of two are going to face personality problems — some of them severe. Consequently there is a discussion of 'psychological vulnerability' to illustrate the many effects of the violence in which the youth were involved. In this the burdens of the problems are highlighted. Straker pinpoints the actors who, apparently the most vulnerable, have learnt to live with complexity. With their pain and discomfort they become the true survivors — because of their humaneness and compassion. Taking this further,

she states that it is those who feel guilt who had the greatest possibility of integration into civilian life in the future.

I have dealt with only some of the points made in this study. I conclude by saying that the study of the Leandra youth can only assist them in finding some normality in their lives. Furthermore this investigation should provide a base for those attending to the tens of thousands outside Leandra who were not the subjects of these studies. It is my belief that other therapists, whether they place the stress on treating the trauma or on considering the youth as freedom fighters, will return again and again to this work. This, if there were nothing else, would provide the basis for praising the book.

Having put the book down I was led to consider the resources available to the government of South Africa if, and when, it decides to confront the issues of a lawless and asocial youth. The stress will have to be placed on therapists, social workers and educationalists. The cost of such a programme will be vast and it is hard to see how this can be undertaken when the resources put into educating the new generation of youth will be so taxing.

This is not the place to outline methods of education that lie outside formal school buildings. Yet, if such methods are not established immediately the social problems that must follow will place an impossible burden on any government in the future.

Baruch Hirson

Porcupine Press is pleased to announce the publication of its first book:

In Defence of the Russian Revolution: An Anthology of Bolshevik writings, 1917-1923.

Edited and introduced by Al Richardson, the editor of *Revolutionary History*, this 300 page collection of long unavailable articles by Bukharin, Kamanev, Radek, Tukhachevsky, Radek, Trotsky and Zinoviev, plus a previously suppressed speech by Lenin, is a must for anyone interested in the Russian Revolution.

£12.95 plus £1.25 from **Porcupine Press**, 10 Woburn Walk,
London WC1H 0JL

*A free catalogue of Porcupine Press's projected releases is available
— write in for your copy.*