

Avoiding intellectual fascism — *the dream of Orwell and his contemporaries*

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As we prepare for our 1984 National Conference in Johannesburg on March 15 facing the same issues which worried George Orwell and his contemporaries, we might in many ways be guided by them. Some of us might be heartily sick of *Animal Farm* and 1984, for allegory can be tedious, once it has made its point. We should now look at the rest of Orwell's most delightful writing, and the works of men like Kafka, Thomas Mann, Huxley, Malraux, Koestler, Camus.

Their warnings, their misery and their tentative hope for humanity were spawned by circumstances similar to ours and we as a human rights organization can learn perhaps some wisdom from this intensely humanist generation of authors. Writing in the aftermath of the Russian revolution they saw human freedom diminished and threatened on two fronts: by the post revolutionary terror in Russia and by the menace of fascism in Spain, Italy and Germany. Similarly, while living with the Orwellian controls of the Nationalist Government, particularly in relation to labour manipulation (see Marian Lacey's article on page 7) we are already, on the other hand, bombarded by the liberatory language of *Animal Farm*.

Especially relevant to us, now, as we find ourselves in the midst of the capitalist/socialist debate in all its permutations, and as we face the problem of having to define our relationship with the United Democratic Front and the rest of the liberatory movement, is Camus' *The Rebel* and Koestler's essay, *The Right to say No*.

Camus in *The Rebel* expounds the contradiction at the core of our work, the point at which we feel restless about simple protest, somehow static and isolated and incomplete unless we move towards a closer association with the liberatory movement.

Camus explains that within our NO to injustice is a YES to a better order of things. The authoritarian danger lurks in the YES. Within the highly individualistic act of rebellion against an unjust order is contained a conforming affirmation of an alternative and perfect scheme of things, carrying with it the desire to subject, and compel others to subject, all individuality to the needs of the new order.*

We cannot avoid this dilemma, for it is a schizophrenic contradiction at the core of our work and our thinking, but by recognizing it we can with rationality control the excesses to which it might otherwise lead us. The solu-



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tion, Camus believes, is consciously to choose *rebellion*, which he connects with outrage, protest and a limitation of objective in order to keep in touch with reality, moderation and ordinary life, and shun *revolution*, which he connects with romanticism, utopianism and ultimately the feeling that one is justified in killing some and forcing the rest into an ideological framework for their own future good.

Camus' injunction, his theory of limitation, is to settle for imperfection and limited objectives and not to lose touch with ordinary people. The Black Sash is well placed to do this, for our work in the advice offices and among rural communities is grounded in individual suffering and anxiety. Also, because the Black Sash, as well as the UDF, manages to accommodate people with different political ideas, it may be said that a significant number of people seek to avoid the pitfalls of blind ideology.

There is another sense in which progressive organizations in South Africa practice the discipline of limitation — and that is by means of an almost fanatical insistence on internal democracy, especially within their educational programmes. (And one might argue that Samora Machel has done the same thing by seeking some kind of accommodation with South Africa for the sake of the economic well-being of his people).

To the totalitarian threat and its fanatical creed we oppose an absolute and unconditional No. But our Yes to the civilisation which we are defending leaves full scope for nuances, divergent opinions, social theories and experiment.

Koestler, The Right to Say No.

The great question is, can this sober discipline survive the pressures already generated by our society? The Black Sash will be increasingly subjected to these pressures. We are used to confronting white South Africa with the effects of apartheid. Can we confront liberatory South Africa, including the much fiercer overseas liberatory movement, with the possible effects of its ideology on ordinary people? Are we prepared to examine critically the effects of sanctions and boycott in all its forms? Are those leaders who over-use 'the oppressed masses' running the risk of turning people into proles? Do ordinary people really believe their best interests are served by boycotting elections? Do they properly discuss the al-

*The Freedom Charter represents this yearning for affirmation, and criticism of 'bourgeois individuality' the yearning for conformity.

alternatives or are they increasingly afraid to do so? Does the Freedom Charter express the will of the people or seek to entrap the will of the people (so that one day they will be told, 'this is your will, now you've got it and it must be consolidated within a one-party state, so no more of the kind of elections that will allow you to change your mind')? If we don't know the answers, or if we think we do know some of the answers, will we insist on the discipline of continuously reassessing strategies? Or will we, through romanticism on the part of some members and fear of opprobrium on the part of others, fail to do so?

Far from being a form of romanticism, rebellion on the contrary, takes the part of true realism. If it wants a revolution, it wants it on behalf of life and not in defiance of it. That is why it relies primarily on the most concrete realities — on occupation, on the country village, where the living heart of things and of men are to be found. Politics, to satisfy the demands of rebellion, must submit to the eternal verities. Finally, when it causes history to advance and alleviates the sufferings of mankind, it does so without terror, if not without violence, and in the most dissimilar political conditions.

Camus, The Rebel

Are we prepared to acknowledge the integrity of men like Alan Paton, Dennis Beckett and John Kane-Berman together with many of our leader-writers and journalists who, like the Orwellian writers, are prepared to face the opprobrium of orthodox leftist opinion by acknowledging limitation and reality, and who are not afraid to explore the unspectacular, imperfect yet possibly significant advantages of piecemeal reform? Or would we prefer to keep such people at arms length?

Camus wrote, 'The logic of the rebel is to want to serve justice so as not to add to the injustice of the

If the limit discovered by rebellion transfigures everything; if every thought, every action which goes beyond a certain point negates itself, there is in effect a measure by which to judge events and men.

Camus, The Rebel

human condition, to insist on plain language so as not to increase the universal falsehood, and to wager, in spite of human misery, for happiness.' Are we in the Black Sash, sitting on platforms at mass meetings, going to insist on plain language so as not to increase the universal falsehood?

The Black Sash cannot ignore the economic debate in all its forms, from capitalist/socialist through to socialist/marxist. It might be, as Koestler claimed, anachronistic, but it is nevertheless still alive in the conflict between west and east and the third world, and within the western world of Thatcher, Reagan and Tony Benn. The significant point of stress seems to be between social democrat and neo-marxist, which is most vividly played out in the British labour party and which debilitates political parties, civil rights and protest organizations all over the

world. Within the Black Sash we might guard against getting bogged down by it, remembering Koestler's theory of the withering away of the dilemma:

'It is a further fact that some of these great ideological conflicts are never decided; they end in a stalemate. In successive centuries it looked as if the whole world would either become Islamic or Christian, either Catholic or Protestant, either republican or monarchist, either capitalist or socialist. But instead of a decision there came a deadlock and a process which one might call the withering away of the dilemma. The withering or draining of meaning always seems to be the result of some mutation in human consciousness accompanied by a shift of emphasis to an entirely different set of values — from religious consciousness to national consciousness to economic consciousness and so on.'

In the meantime, the great question is, can both sides reacting on each other mutate creatively? That this is possible, and that the results will be vastly important for mankind, was the great prophetic hope of the Orwellian writers. This is what Koestler was talking about when he wrote:

'The real content of this conflict can be summed up in one phrase: total tyranny against relative freedom. Sometimes I have a feeling in my bones that the terrible pressure which this conflict exerts on all humanity might perhaps represent a challenge, a biological stimulus as it were, which will release the new mutation of human consciousness; and that its content might be a new spiritual awareness, born of anguish and suffering. If that is the case, then we are indeed living in an interesting time.'

And Camus had the same dream:

'Then, when revolution in the name of power and of history becomes that immoderate and mechanical murderer, a new rebellion is consecrated in the name of moderation and of life. We are at the extremity now. However, at the end of this tunnel of darkness, there is inevitably a light, which we already divine and for which we only have to fight to ensure its coming. All of us, among the ruins, are preparing a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism. But few of us know it.'

If the Black Sash can hold on to its consensus during the coming conference and the challenges of the next few years we might find by muddling through somehow we might have made some contribution, and maybe even a unique one, to that light at the end of the tunnel.

Authentic acts of rebellion will only consent to take up arms for institutions which limit violence, not for those which codify it. A revolution is not worth dying for unless it assures the immediate suppression of the death penalty...

Camus, The Rebel

● **This is an individual article. It does not represent Black Sash thinking.**