

A lost generation: Review of *Faces in the Revolution*

by Gill Straker

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Media images of the 1980's often show black youth leading marches, stoning police Casspirs, making barricades, at funerals, toyi-toying, at disciplinary committees, 'necklacings' or running meetings. Black youth are characterised as 'a lost generation', 'brutalised', 'barbaric, or as 'freedom fighters' and 'heroes' depending on the media's politics.

Straker looks at these stereotypes. Through interviews with youth involved in the events of 1984 - 1986, she attempts to uncover the effect of political violence on youth bearing the brunt of state and vigilante violence over the last decade or having participated in violent acts themselves. The author concludes that we do not yet have a 'lost generation', though it depends on what happens next.

Case Studies

The book studies 60 youths who fled Leandra township on the Reef in 1986 from vigilante and police attacks. They took refuge at the South African Council of Churches (SACC) Wilgespruit Conference Centre. The conference centre was raided by the police and the youth fled (or were briefly arrested) and regrouped a few days later. Conflict developed between the youth and the staff, and there were conflicts in the group itself. The SACC called in mental health workers to counsel the youth. The book's clinical material comes from the interviews conducted then, the clinical impressions of the counsellors and follow up interviews conducted in 1989.

The case studies are of 'leaders', 'followers', 'psychological casualties' (including substance-abusers) and 'anti-socials' (tsotsis or com-tsotsis). For security reasons these personality profiles are not of individual youth, but composite pictures to illustrate the situation of several youth who fitted into that category. This method gives a sense of the factors that contribute to making a person a leader or anti-social without focussing too much on the details of individuals' lives.

Perspectives

The book focuses on the effects of violent surroundings, youth witnessing violence and participating in acts of violence against those defined as 'enemy'. Implicit in this study is an evaluation of youth according to characteristics valued by a Western psychoanalytic perspective - in particular, a capacity to integrate painful events, an ability to connect with others. The capacity for empathy and guilt are taken as signs of health and resilience.

This understanding of psychological health perceives that violence is an inevitable part of human life, although it is potentially more damaging than constructive. Witnessing, participating in and being a victim of violence is viewed as a trauma with a potential to damage a person's ability to function effectively in the world. The level of damage can be measured according to the individual's ability to respond empathically, to connect and so on.

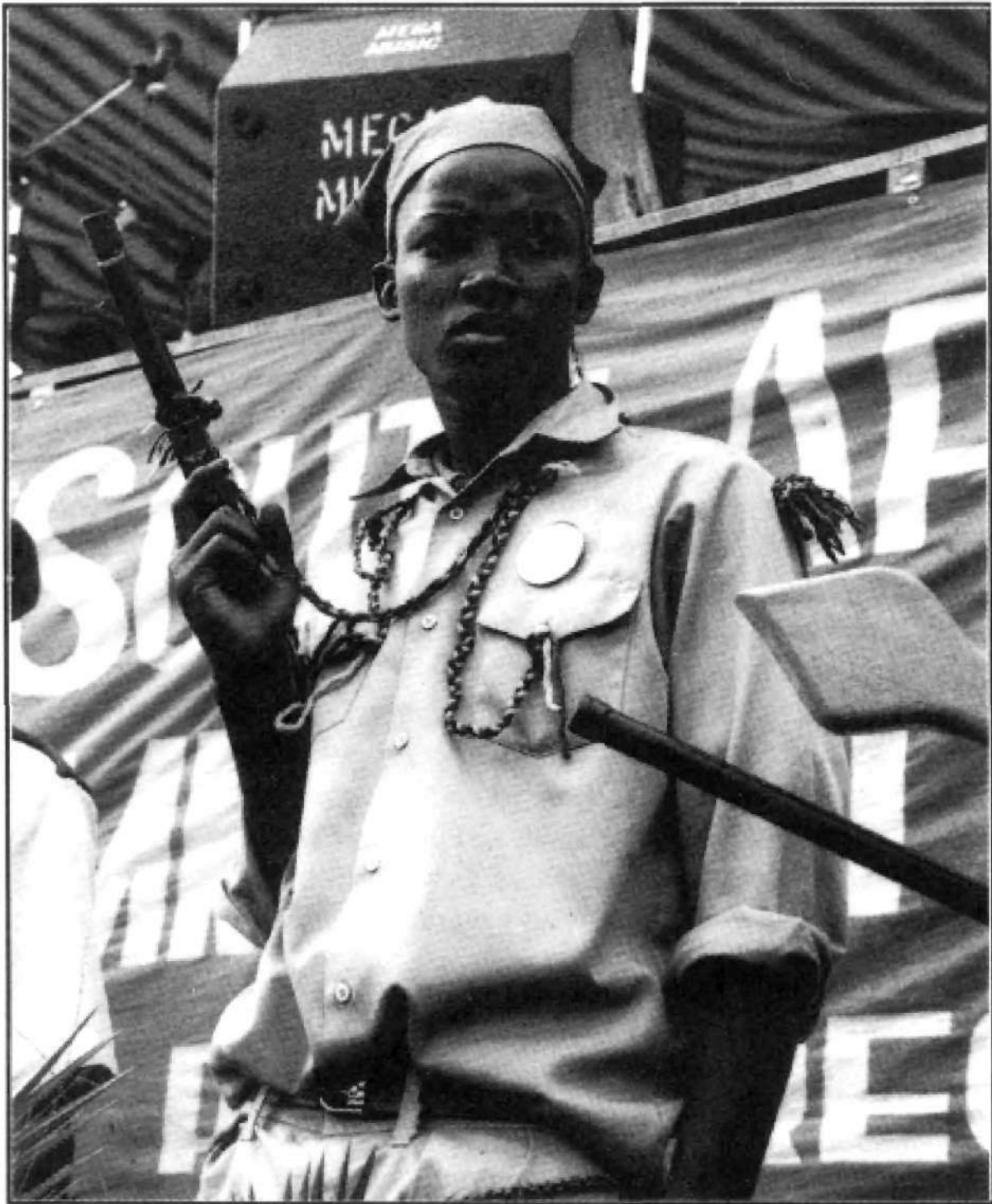
Other theorists argue that violence against an oppressor can endow individuals with the identity of being part of an oppressed mass craving liberation. Although the author acknowledges the value that action against oppression and the solidarity of group identity have for South African youth, the book is concerned with violence as trauma. Even the central question "does violence beget violence" assumes violence as a psychologically damaging and negative series of events.

The research concludes that 50% of the youth interviewed showed signs of psychological distress or damage. The generally repressive political and social situation is acknowledged as a major contributing factor, where township youth have been exposed to "horrifying" levels of violence on an almost daily basis.

Approach

Straker has defined as 'casualties' those youth who could no longer function in everyday life at the time of the second interview in 1989. This includes those who anaesthetise themselves from the pain of their lives by substance abuse to the extent that they are regularly unable to function because of it, those who act out (in criminal and other anti-social acts) and those who are unable to block out the pain and show symptoms of anxiety and depression. Straker comments that this last group who can allow themselves to feel their depression are youth who could live with the complexity of their position without finding an external enemy to project it onto.

Of more concern to the community are the com-tsotsis whose involvement in the struggle seemed to open them up both to a need for belonging to a group and to the potential for violence to meet their needs. Where there was potential for aggressive behaviour in personal anger against emotionally and physically de-



Cadre or casualty? Photo: Market Theatre Photo Workshop

prived backgrounds, it was the social sanction of violent acts against a community-defined 'enemy' which made acting out this anger acceptable. However, when the struggle subsided they seemed unable to find other ways of dealing with their anger and continued to act out aggressively for personal gain. However, the author points out, the fact that they feel the need to sustain the slogans and images of the struggle despite community disapproval of their actions, is a sign of hope. It indicates a need for connectedness which can potentially be used to pull them into community activities.

The author notes that much of the literature on war covers situations where the individual becomes a part of an army which combats another from elsewhere. In wartime people are expected and allowed to behave differently, especially combatants. The ability of people to construct a 'wartime self' has been well-documented. This wartime self allows for participating in violence which is not socially accepted in civilian life. And violence is sanctioned against those defined as 'enemy'.

For township youth in the 1980's, the situation was far more complex. They were expected to go to school and participate in civilian activities in the middle of a civil war. They had to keep both their 'peacetime selves' and their 'wartime selves' together in one overarching identity - which Straker describes as an "enormous psychic task". With a return to relative normalcy in their township, most of the youth in the sample returned to a civilian, peacetime morality, in which they felt discomfort with arbitrary violence and were clear about the need for discipline and strategy. Only 10% became hardcore tsotsis whose capacity for empathy is damaged and who do not restrain their aggression. Thus there seems to be little evidence of a brutalised generation.

The author argues that psychological distress in war can be short-lived. Key factors in this are adult and community support during and after the traumatic period. If adults in a situation show competence this helps children cope with the experience. The leaders in the Leandra group had supportive families, often with adult members who belonged to unions or civic structures providing role models. Without this support, the youth were vulnerable, more likely to drop out or become criminalised.

Research in other parts of the world indicates the importance of a benign post-trauma environment. This is not the case in South Africa where the conflict has persisted for over a decade, mass unemployment raises the stress levels on youth and the removal of apartheid legislation has hardly affected the poverty and violent social conditions in the townships. Therefore it is not surprising, argues the author, that 50% of the original Leandra group were suffering from some psychological distress three years after their return to the township.

Uses and Shortcomings

The case study format makes for interesting and easy reading. It is brief and accessibly written. Psychological theory is presented in a readable fashion and would be accessible to many with a rudimentary understanding of psychology. Theory is applied to the practical situation of the Leandra group in a way that many non-professionals will recognise and understand the issues from their own experi

ence. Nevertheless it presents a complex argument and requires careful attention.

Community workers will find the categories useful in understanding the dynamics of groups they are working with. Many readers will have been through the experience of the war themselves and may recognise their own complex reactions to the violence in the text. Most valuable is an understanding of the concept of a peacetime and a wartime morality in explaining apparent inconsistencies in how people behave in different situations. Also useful is the understanding of the resources that assist people to cope with trauma, especially community and adult support. The need for belonging and interpersonal connectedness which is expressed in the adoption of a group identity, even by com-tsotsis, gives communities a way to understand and reintegrate alienated youth. There is a useful section on group dynamics in conditions of stress, and an outline of the psychological needs of youth which should be integrated into decisions about priorities for social restructuring in the new South Africa. In parts, however, the argument across chapters is confusing and links are unclear.

The future?

This section is too brief and sketchy, with little by way of making the ideas concrete for readers who need to use the insights to influence their work with youth.

The author describes measures used in other societies dealing with the reintegration of soldiers into peacetime. She proposes some ritual or community ceremony in which combatants are acknowledged and 'debriefed' before being taken back as civilians. This would serve the function of disabling the 'wartime ego' and allowing the taking on of civilian values and norms.

However, an important means of reintegrating youth who have been part of the war is the creation of conditions for a normal civilian life. The rights and privileges of civilian society, such as security, housing, employment and education are critical to creating the conditions for youth to drop their warrior role. Without the rewards of a 'normal' society, there is little incentive for alienated youth to make the transition. Until they feel their needs are met, violence will always be an option for achieving the fulfilment of their needs.

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