

Enlarging the Circle

A perspective on violence and rights



A nuclear ban in Britain.

Many of us feel dazzled by the pace and scale of the social changes we're living through. In my view there is one issue in the contemporary world which overshadows all the other changes – that is the fact that we now have the capacity to exterminate all life on this earth. It's a numbing kind of insight which we tend to block and bury away but many thoughtful men and women think that this extermination is likely to happen before the end of the century. In South Africa we are often passionately caught up in human rights issues, detentions, torture and repression. Certainly these issues deserve our time, our thoughts and our voices. But these issues presume that there are human beings around. The struggle for human rights presupposes human existence, and that existence is no longer certain.

When I say we have the capacity to exterminate all life on this earth, I am not only thinking of nuclear weapons. Nor am I thinking of 'we' in a very abstract or distant sense. ESCOM have embarked on a public relations exercise to convince us – the South African taxpayer – that we need another nuclear power station. The effects of an accident at a nuclear power plant are similar to the effects of a nuclear bomb exploding. The Chernobyl nuclear accident is now thought to have released 50 times more radioactivity into the atmosphere than did the explosion of the nuclear bomb at Hiroshima. It left deformed babies, genetic mutations such as horses born with eight legs, pigs with no eyes, and many sick people. The Soviet authorities are presently facing the enormous social and economic cost of having to resettle a total of 4 million people whose homes are now thought to have been dangerously contaminated by radiation (Weekly Mail 4.5.1990). Closer to home the Koeberg nuclear power station generates high level waste that includes some of the most dangerous substances known to man. Nuclear waste from Koeberg includes at least 200kg of plutonium a year. Plutonium is so toxic that five kilograms is enough to kill every man, woman and child on this earth. (Weekly Mail 4.5.1990). Our understanding of the struggle for human rights should be located in terms of these dangers to all human existence.

Our century will probably go down in history as the century of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as the century of war. But the end of the century – the eighties have been marked by a great outburst of energy demanding the end to war, as well as basic human rights. One of the most amazing changes we are living through is the demise of authoritarian socialism in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Some people have argued that the changes in the USSR do not represent the failure of socialism but the recognition of the need to couple socialism to democracy. There is no aspect of life in the USSR which remains unaffected by the Gorbachev revolution. The most striking change is in human rights, symbolised by the release from exile of Andre Sakharov in December 1986 and the freeing of virtually all political prisoners over the next two years. These were not just tactical concessions designed to improve the Soviet image in the West. Protection of human rights was made into a cardinal principle of Soviet policy. Before this the denial of human rights was appalling. The suffering of the human rights activists is documented by Irina Ratushinskaya in her book **Grey is the Colour of Hope**. She was sentenced to a prison sentence and to internal exile on the grounds that her poetry was "anti-Soviet propaganda". Her account of 4 years in a camp for women political prisoners is a deeply moving account of both cruelty (on the part of the camp authorities) and the selfless courage and mutual support of the women prisoners.

Progress in the struggle for human rights is for me also symbolised by the movement of Vaclav Havel from a prison cell to the President's office. This one man survived the misery of almost five years imprisonment with hard labour for his human rights activism to become President of Czechoslovakia. His account of his prison experiences is a reminder to us all of how the human spirit may survive, and even grow under conditions of extreme loneliness and deprivation. (Havel, 1989).

VIOLENCE

Violence erodes human rights. In South Africa until very recently we were caught up in a spiral of violence. This has three layers to it.

Violence No. 1 – the violence of injustice, of oppression and exploitation. The indirect violence which damages human beings and blocks them from realising their potential.

Violence No. 2 – the counter-violence of revolt in riots, bomb attacks and guerilla war.

Violence No. 3 – the action by the authorities to re-establish their control when they resort to imprisonment without trial, torture and the taking of life.

The first layer of violence is often not recognised as such. Galtung writes, "Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and

mental realisations are below their potential realisations.” (Galtung, 1969: 168) This ‘structural violence’ is equated with injustice and discrimination. “The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances.” (Galtung, 1969: 171)

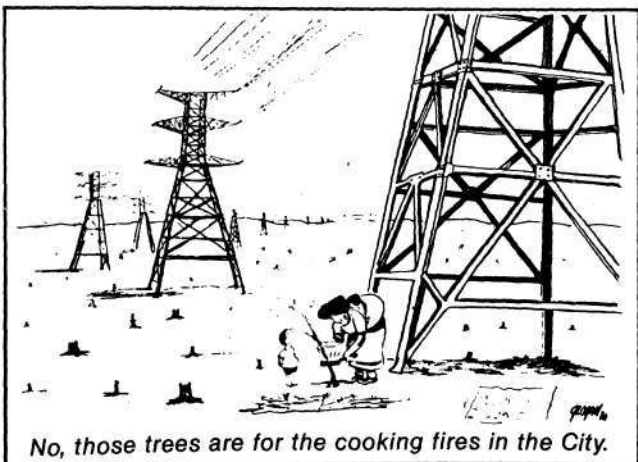
One indicator points us to the extent of these unequal life chances in South Africa – income distribution. Whites, who constitute less than a sixth of the population, earn nearly two-thirds of the income; blacks, who account for nearly two-thirds of the population, earn a quarter. (Wilson and Ramphele, 1989). Nearly two thirds of black people live below the minimum living level, fixed in 1985 at R350 a month. (Ibid) It has been estimated that more than 80% of blacks in the homelands live in dire poverty.

Clearly this structural violence has something to do with the high levels of criminal violence in the country at the moment. Official statistics show that there is one murder every 45 minutes in South Africa, a rape every 26 minutes, a serious assault every 4 minutes and a burglary every 3 minutes. These statistics have recently been quoted by the Times correspondent in Johannesburg to suggest that South Africa is “sliding into violent anarchy”. (The Star 16.5.1990) It is apparent that the biggest challenge to a new South Africa will be a strong state that can reduce both structural violence and criminal violence.

Violence perpetrated by the state itself is strangely absent from most of our discussions of the problem of violence. This is extraordinary when we think of the scale on which we have practised state violence in South Africa. Since 1983 we have executed 700 people – the term ‘execution’ being a euphemism for a slow, painful and deliberate killing. Since 1984 51,000 people were detained without trial – I could go on. However we in South Africa, are not unique in our acceptance of official violence as legitimate. In a 1969 survey in the USA 30% of a national sample said that “police beating students” was not an act of violence, and an astonishing 57% said that “police shooting looters” was not an act of violence. The same survey asked people what violent events were of the greatest concern to them. Even though the survey was conducted during the Vietnam War, only 4% of those interviewed, mentioned war.

THE STATE

These responses come out of the way we view the state not as a source of violence, but as the source of legitimacy. We look to the state to protect human rights. In



the current debate about change in South Africa it is sometimes said that the state must also protect some notion of group rights. Others argue that the future of whites is best secured by a constitution that makes no special guarantees for whites as a group. As Albie Sachs has argued, it is not the quality of being white that needs protection, “but the quality of human being, of being a citizen”. He has argued that the best way to allay white fears is “to ensure that democracy and its institutions are firmly planted in SA: the worst way is to undermine democracy from the start and subvert it with a complicated and unworkable set of institutions based on notions designed to keep racially defined groups locked in endless battle”. (WIP, 65, 1990)

Albie Sachs has termed the establishment of human rights, as “one of the great gains of humanity over the ages.” He describes so called “first generation rights” as blue rights. These are political, civil and legal rights such as the right to vote. “The second generation rights”, the rights to education, to health to nutrition and to shelter are red rights. “Third generation” or green rights include the right to a clean environment. (Sache, 1990).

WAR

The greatest threat to all these human rights is the large scale official violence of war. Hannah Arendt defined war as “the massification of violence”. The threat of war between the superpowers has faded in the eighties. But now there is the danger of nuclear proliferation, – the spread of nuclear weapons. This is especially serious in the case of Iraq. Evidence has recently emerged that Iraq is working more actively to build nuclear weapons than most of the world had previously thought. While an Iraq bomb program was known to exist, most outsiders believed that it had been allowed to slide into inactivity. Now we know that it is not only nuclear weapons that Iraq is pursuing. It manufactures poison gas and has used it a number of times, both in its war with Iran and against its own Kurdish population.

There are similarities between war against people and war against nature. Both are about maintaining power and maximising profit. For example there are many similarities between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons, both in relation to technology and in relation to raw materials. Another example of how the war against nature and the war against people involves similar technologies is chemical weapons and pesticides. In *The Silent Spring* Rachel Carson talked about how the war on people and the war on nature often employed the same weapons. Nerve gases developed for world War II, were used as pesticides in agriculture after the war. Likewise herbicides developed for agriculture before the Vietnam War were used as defoliants in that war, and by us in Angola. Carson's biographer, Patricia Hynes writes, “The destruction of people and nature with chemical poisons constitutes the same failure to solve problems other than by force”. Carson's central warning was that the methods employed for insect control were such that “they will destroy us along with the insects”. In 1985 the “Hiroshima of the chemical industry” occurred when an accident at a pesticide factory in Bhopal, India caused the death of at least 2 000 people and injured 200 000. Clearly violence against nature and violence against people are connected.

Both kinds of wars involve a similar set of attitudes which legitimate killing and violence as a solution to conflict, both value domination, conquest and control. Both involve a disrespect for human and other forms of life.

In times of war and conflict the enemy is often defined as 'other', as 'animal'. Defining people as animals is used to strip them of rights, to locate them outside the boundaries of human = humane treatment. Both the categories of 'war' and 'animal' are cited to legitimate an abdication of conventional morality. In South Africa Africans are sometimes spoken of as animals. The implication is that they do not have the same needs and feelings as white people do. Therefore they can be paid low wages and be forced to work excessively long hours particularly as farm and domestic workers. "They're not like us".

The comparison of Africans with animals was a common theme in colonial thinking. For example Edward Long declared that "the orang-outang was closer to the negro than was the negro to the white man." (Thomas, 1984:136) According to an observer in Zambia this century, "in all their actions they (Africans) are so like animals that I question they have any brains". (Hansen, 1989:30). Another commented, "I say that a dog and a native are on a par. One should give them a good hiding when they have earned it, but one should never thrash either until one's temper has cooled". (Hansen, 1989: 50).

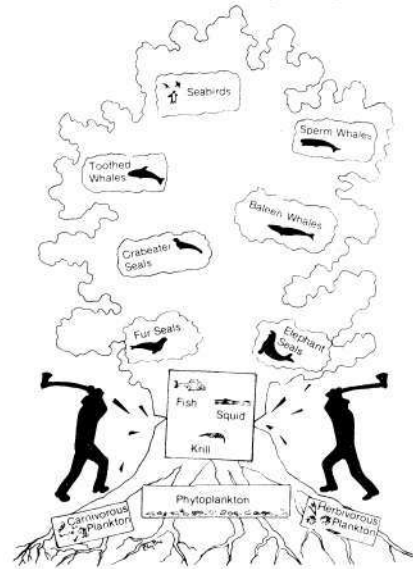
ANIMAL ABUSE

Many people involved in the struggle against such obscene racism and for human rights seem curiously anthropocentric – they are only concerned with their only species. It is this lack of concern which allows the abuse of animals to continue. Such abuse is highlighted in the case of vivisection which involves at least 2 million animals a year in South Africa in cruel and often unnecessary experiments, 85% of which are performed without anaesthetic.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men were created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights, it was understood he was talking only about white American males. Since the American Revolution however, rights have been extended, at least by law and social consensus, to include women and ethnic minorities. Many thoughtful people argue that the right to considerate and ethical treatment should be extended to animals as well. For example in a recent interview Alice Walker has drawn a strong connection between human and animal rights. Her response to those who dismiss the concern with animal exploitation as "sentimental" is that they are people who have "destroyed great tracts of feeling in themselves." (Walker, 1988)

'Green politics' (Bahro, 1984; Capra and Spretnak, 1984; Poritt, 1984) calls for an end to violence against both animals and people. It denies that human beings are separate from the rest of nature; that nature only exists for man's comfort and convenience. This anthropocentric attitude towards nature is rooted deep in our colonial past. There is on record a report to Governor Jan van Riebeeck by a faithful servant of the Dutch East India Company, "We plucked 700 seagulls as ordered by you to make two featherbeds and a pillow". (Odyssey, February, March, 1988). However van Riebeeck himself issued South Africa's first

ANTARCTIC TREE OF LIFE



colonial conservation measure on 14 April 1654 when he instructed officials to limit themselves to eating half a penguin per person per day. He was concerned that soon penguins would become extinct.

But in South Africa we cannot only be concerned with the extinction of species. Here we have to face up to both third world environmental problems such as soil erosion and first world environmental issues such as acid rain.

POLLUTION

The area I come from, the Eastern Transvaal Highveld, is one of the most polluted areas in the world. In this area annual emissions of sulphur dioxide total 31 tons per square kilometer, according to the CSIR, or 57 tons according to two independent air pollution analysts. In East Germany, which is famous for its coal-polluted air, annual emissions are only 30 tons. (Durning, 1990: 23) Sulphur dioxide is the main ingredient of acid rain.

I also come from a group, white South Africans, who have been identified as the worst polluters in the world. South Africa's coal burning power stations release enormous quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year. Carbon dioxide is the main ingredient in the global warming or 'greenhouse effect' which now threatens the climate of the entire planet. According to the Worldwatch Institute, white South Africans, on a per person basis, are the world's worst greenhouse offenders. They base this assertion on the distribution of national income between different races; 65% of national income to whites and 25% to blacks. "If energy consumption patterns mirror income distribution, as is likely, the white population's per capita carbon emissions stood at more than 9 tons in 1989. (Durning, 1990: 25). For comparison Americans released 5 tons each that year and the world average was one ton.

In South Africa environmental issues are deeply and fundamentally political. They are deeply embedded in the unequal distribution of power and resources in South Africa.

Challenges from below to this power structure have often included concrete environmental issues. A grassroots environmental movement existed in embryonic form in 1984 – 6 the days of “people’s power”. Through people’s courts and street committees a great deal was done to organise garbage collections and establish ‘people’s parks’ with small rockeries and colourful painted tyres in many open spaces in townships throughout the country. However these efforts have always been subordinated to the much broader struggle against apartheid.

At present there is a very real danger that conservation projects will become discredited in the eyes of the majority of South Africans. Conservation projects have too often disregarded human rights and dignity. The establishment of the Pilanesberg Game Reserve meant social dislocation and distress for many local people. So did the establishment of the Tembe Elephant Park near Kosi Bay. As a rural worker has stated, “If conservation means losing water rights, losing grazing and arable land and being dumped in a resettlement area without even the most rudimentary infrastructure, this can only promote a vigorous anti-conservation ideology among the rural communities of South Africa”. (Richard Clacey, a rural field worker quoted in the Weekly Mail 6.10.1989)

PARALLEL

There is a dangerous parallel in the way both women’s issues and environmental issues are sometimes viewed as middle class concerns. Feminism is often viewed as bourgeoisie and divisive, as concerned with extending privileges for an already privileged group of middle class women. Similarly environmental issues are sometimes viewed as limited to the conservation of large, cuddly and spectacular creatures like the blue whale, or the tiger or the giant panda bear. There are conservationists who sometimes sound a little misanthropic and appear to be more concerned with animals than people. It is not certain how much the people who frequent fashion shows and art exhibitions in Johannesburg to raise money for conservation care about human rights and welfare. Infant mortality rates in the homelands do not seem to have the same fashionable appeal as the conservation of the black rhinoceros.

At present thousands of South Africans are protesting about the proposed seal clubbing. However in the same week that the proposal was announced police used teargas and clubs on passive demonstrators at Ashton in the Cape. Fortunately the SAP do not cut the throats of demonstrators after clubbing them, as is planned for the 25 000 seal pups due to be slaughtered next week. However many of the people involved in the protest against seal clubbing have not raised their voices against the clubbing and even shooting of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in South Africa. Both types of violence warrant strong protest.

Environmental issues (and women’s issues) do have a relevance to people of all classes and races. Environmental issues do have the “potential to build alliances across the divides of class and race” as Koch and Hartford have argued. (Weekly Mail 6.10.1989) They cite the indiscriminate use of pesticides as an example. However there is no smooth and easy convergence of class and race interests around this issue. In the first place the pesticide industry is a source of enormous profit to some. Secondly the vegetable farmers in Natal who have



Thor Chemical Protest against toxic waste imports.

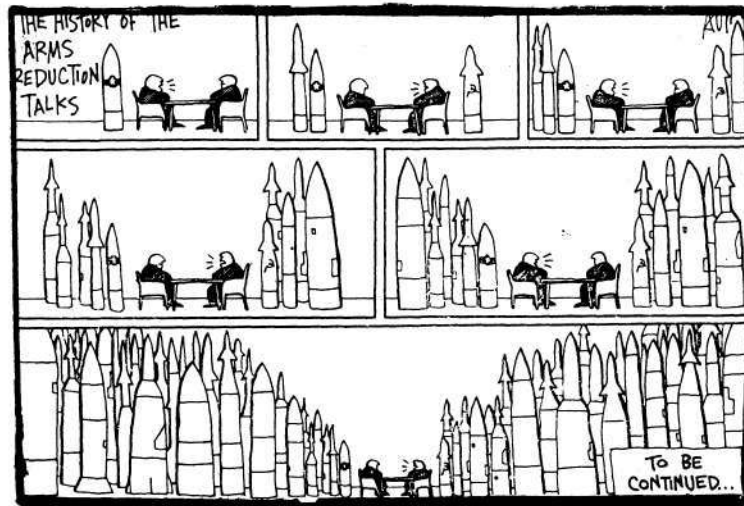
suffered from the indiscriminate use of pesticides such as the Agent-Orange type herbicide, are able to mobilise public opinion, even though they failed to win a recent Supreme Court application to prohibit the manufacture and sale of all hormone herbicides in South Africa. Middle class consumers have access to knowledge of the link between pesticides and cancer and have the purchasing power to buy organically grown produce from expensive health food shops. The real victims are the poor who do not have either this knowledge or this option. In their ranks are, as Koch and Hartford say, the agricultural workers who spray the pesticides, as well as the factory workers who manufacture them.

Toxic waste is another issue which effects us all. But the people most effected are the workers directly handling these hazardous materials. There are reports from Earthlife Africa that workers at a multi-national company which imports highly toxic mercury waste into South Africa, are suffering from a severe nervous disorder induced by mercury poisoning. Large quantities of mercury from the plant were leaked into the Umgeni River. The level was nearly 9 000 times the amount required in the USA for the waste to be described as a hazard. (Weekly mail 6.7.1990)

Green politics links the struggle against such exploitation of people with the struggle against the abuse of the environment. In South Africa green politics has to be firmly anchored in the needs of the majority of our people. For many of our people living in rural areas, environmental issues means no clean water and no proper sanitation. these are the issues which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. This can only be done by a democratic government which is accountable to the people and which prioritises their interests.

GOVERNMENT

Instead we in South Africa still have a deeply authoritarian, repressive and undemocratic government. It is widely agreed that we need to change this. It is also widely agreed that to achieve the aims of green politics – to end the exploitation of both people and the environment – change is required. But what is hotly contested is the nature of the change. Many people seem to believe that the problems can be put right by a few adjustments to the system – less pollution, less destruction of vital resources



and more environmentally conscious consumption. Others are saying that more radical change is required. In the same way that feminism or gender equality is not compatible with male chivalry and protection, it is clear that a beautiful, unspoilt environment is not compatible with the present high levels of consumption in the developed world. We cannot have it both ways. Many thoughtful people are urging us to change our life styles, to reduce consumption, to move away from a consumer to a conservator economy. As Schumacher has stated, "We must live simply that others may simply live". He is among a group of people who have advocated a "voluntary simplicity". They point to three reasons why a simplification of life in the first world is important.

1. We are running out of crucial non-renewable resources. For example we are exhausting the supply of cheaply available petroleum and natural gas.
2. We are polluting ourselves with massive discharges of wastes from industrial production.
3. Each day children in the third world die from the effects of malnutrition and poor health care. They do so partly because of the massive military expenditure which absorbs so much of the first world's resources. It has been estimated that the military budgets of all nations combined for one day would provide enough to feed, clothe and house all the people of the world for one year.

THREAT

I said earlier that the greatest threat to human rights is war. War also represents the greatest threat to our environment. The threat lies not only in the awesome destructive capacity of the weapons mankind has developed for war, but in the resources invested in this process. World-wide military expenditure now amounts to more than 900 billion dollars per year. The US is presently proposing to purchase 75 B-2 Stealth bombers which will

cost \$815 million each. (Time Magazine, 7.5.1990) There are now more than 50 000 nuclear warheads in the world. The total explosive power of the world stock of nuclear weapons is about equal to one million Hiroshima bombs. There are at least 50 million people throughout the world who are either directly or indirectly engaged in military activities.

Green politics calls for an end to this process of militarisation, of mobilising resources for war. The philosophy behind green politics is that of 'Deep Ecology'. This denies that human beings are separate and superior from the rest of nature. This ecological consciousness is in sharp contrast with the dominant world view of technocratic-industrial societies which have become increasingly obsessed with the idea of dominance; with dominance of humans over non-human nature; masculine over feminine; the wealthy and powerful over the poor. Deep ecology is against such dominance and for equality. It is not anthropocentric – it does not only focus on our own species. And in so doing this ecological consciousness often incurs the same kind of scorn that was meted out to the antislavery radicals for insisting that slaves were human beings with rights.

Earlier this century Albert Schweitzer noted,

"It was once considered stupid to think that coloured men were really human and must be treated humanely. This stupidity has become a truth. Today it is thought an exaggeration to state that a reasonable ethic demands constant consideration for all living things". (Quoted by Tobias, 1988: 177).

In South Africa we have an urgent need to overturn such 'stupidities' and 'exaggerations' if we want to contribute towards a new South Africa that is free from all forms of exploitation and abuse.

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