

MIS 457

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE UNIVERSITY

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There is one thing we should understand about civil rights, before we even begin to discuss their absence in South Africa. It is simply this: in South Africa, it is government policy to remove civil rights. This may sound like a gross exaggeration, but it is true: civil rights, essentially, are about freedom. And freedom is more than the right to see uncensored films, to make political speeches, to associate with people of one's choice, or to have an 'open' university.

Cicero understood what freedom is - he said 'freedom is participation in power'. It is clear that any government which has as its basic policy the retention of power in the hands of a small elitist clique, is totally opposed to freedom; that the only so-called 'freedom' that such a government will allow is freedom that does not threaten its own power - in other words, no freedom at all. It may be prepared - even keen - to create the impression of freedom - but it will create this impression only to consolidate and legitimise its own power.

The record of the Nationalist government is quite clear in this regard. The last twenty-four years have seen the systematic removal of the few civil rights remaining to the majority of South Africans - in other words, have seen their few remaining roads to freedom and power destroyed.

We should not be surprised by this. The Nationalists made their intentions quite clear before they ever reached power. Their support of the Nazi regime was only one example of this. Today they are embarrassed by any reminder of their past - but they cannot escape it. In 1940 Mr. Ben Schoeman, then MP for Fordsburg, put it this way:

'The whole future of Afrikanerdom is dependent on a German victory. We may as well say that openly, because it is a fact.'

Mr. B.J. Vorster put it more explicitly in 1942:

'We stand for Christian Nationalism which is an ally of National Socialism. You can call this anti-democratic principle dictatorship if you wish. In Italy it is called Fascism, in Germany German National Socialism, and in South Africa Christian Nationalism.'

Today, these men are not entirely unrelated to the South African Government - and I would suggest that their policies are not entirely unrelated to what they said when they were still seeking power.

What have the universities to do with this? It has been suggested that the universities must be non-political, and non-partisan. What this argument ignores is that it is only in a spirit of free enquiry, and in a free society, that a university can function properly. The argument ignores the fact that universities are a real source of power in any society - and that they inevitably perform a political role in that society. Universities provide the knowledge and trained manpower for the society. The university serves society -

and it must choose, in a country like South Africa, whether it is to serve the whole society or a small ruling clique. The university is involved in society's problems - and it must help to solve those problems. It must make knowledge a real source of power, and hence a means of overcoming human powerlessness.

Sadly we must admit that our own universities have often failed in this regard. We must admit that they have tended to see their social function as the production of a managerial elite - and have used knowledge to bolster the power of that elite.

Their educational methods, for example, have perpetuated the values of the status quo. They have promoted schooling before education, authority before learning, discipline before freedom.

And what have they taught? They have directed the attention of their students to the problems of the elite industrial society: engineers for the super highways which serve the white suburbs; commercial practices to ensure a safe continued profit; industrial psychology to fit the man to the job; surgical operations to treat hearts that have failed from over-eating. But we know that the real problem of South Africa is poverty and powerlessness - not small profits; under-eating, not over-eating. Yet our universities continue to produce people and knowledge to fit into the slots created by our repressive society - complaining bitterly all the while about how repressive the society is.

Why do you think the government pays 70% of your university fees, and of mine? Not because they are dedicated to the pursuit of truth - that's not their usual motivation. Not because they like the things we say - they have made that clear enough. They support us because they like the things we do - and that is, consolidate their power and the system of white supremacy.

I say these things not because one gets any enjoyment out of it. I say them because I believe it is time the universities seriously re-examined the role they are fulfilling in our society - because the time is now. Because the universities must see whether they are really supporting freedom and civil rights - or whether they are just talking.

And it would do them no harm to examine the practices within their own institutions. It would do them no harm to discover that at one of our 'liberal' universities, at least four categories of black workers have a maximum wage which is below the poverty datum line. That at another university, a committee investigating conditions of service for black workers within the university has representatives from academics, administration and students - but not from black workers.

It would do them no harm to discover that at our universities, there are many facilities reserved for whites only; that their leave conditions discriminate viciously against black staff - that at one university,

three categories of black workers have to work for twenty years before qualifying for the annual leave of one month that all other full-time employees receive.

They might look at the system of university government - and ask themselves how they can reconcile their own decision-making process with the principles they apply in scholarly contexts - open inquiry, reasoned justification of conclusions, and the submission of findings to public evaluation and criticism.

They might look, in other words, at civil rights within the universities - because this is also important, even if slightly embarrassing.

Despite all this, however, we are now in the midst of a campaign against the universities. The campaign against student dissent is easy for all to see, but there is also a silent, more subtle campaign against the universities as a whole - to the extent that they permit dissent.

This campaign is not to cripple so vital a national resource as the universities - only to render them docile and powerless.

There is little point in adding much to the volumes that have already been written about the recent speech by the Minister of police. It is, after all, the sort of disastrous blunder that we have come to expect from this man. It has been said, with some justification, that the first thing he does on opening his mouth is to change feet. But all the same, is it too much to expect that if he really insists on giving cheap political thrills to a capacity audience of 80 somewhere in Pretoria, he should check his exciting revelations with those unfortunate things, the facts?

He is not really hostile to the facts - it's just that he is apathetic about them.

Of course, no-one takes him very seriously any longer. And his speech was, from his personal point of view, very successful - he seems to have embarrassed the Prime Minister into retaining him in the Cabinet for a little longer. He would now seem to have assured for himself at least another year in the Cabinet, before being offered the post of Consul-General in Outer Mongolia.

And so now we must act - because we know that as Martin Luther King said, 'to ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it.'

There will be many people who will oppose us if we act - and they will raise various objections to our action. Their basic objection, however, will be simple - it will be that we are acting, that we are doing something.

There will be those who object to what they call street politics - they will say that we must work only through white political parties. We should remind them that a certain white political party - now allegedly in opposition - nearly came to power through the activities of the Torch Commando, which employed street politics, about twenty years ago. They didn't seem to mind then.

They will say that we are communists - and we should then remind them of what was said by Dr. Malan and General Hertzog, then both members of the Nationalist Party.

In 1919 General Hertzog said the following:

'I say that Bolshevism is the will of the people to be free. Why do people want to oppress and kill Bolshevism? Because national freedom means death to capitalism and imperialism. Do not let us be afraid of Bolshevism. The idea itself is excellent.'

In 1920, Dr D.F. Malan put it this way:

'The aim of the Bolsheviks was that Russians should manage their own affairs This was the same policy that Nationalists would follow in South Africa. The Bolsheviks stand for freedom, just like the Nationalist Party.'

Then they will say that we are unrepresentative - that we are only a small minority. Now firstly, this is a strange allegation from a government which represents about eleven per cent of the people it rules. But our answer to this allegation is quite simple. With Henry Thoreau, we will say that 'any man more right than his neighbour constitutes a majority of one already.'

Then they will tell us that we will antagonise some of our supporters if we continue, because this will lead to a confrontation. First, I will admit that at UCT we did lose some white public support when we continued to protest after the police riot at the Cathedral. But what sort of supporters are these, who support you when you are hit on the head once, and then disown you because you are hit on the head a second time? This is not support at all. Support is no good at all to us unless it implies something more than sympathy - it must also imply action. And let us not fool ourselves that by protesting or not protesting, we are going to persuade the majority of white South Africans, to take action that will eliminate their privilege and white supremacy.

Then they will say that some people have broken the law while they protested. The first thing we should do is remind them of the difference between justice and the law. Then we should remind them - and particularly a certain B.J.Vorster, who was a general in the Ossewa-Brandwag during the last war - of certain things. Again, Dr. Malan provides the answer: in 1941, Dr. Malan said:

'If the O.B. decides on passive resistance and refuses to be disbanded, this is a matter for its own decision. I will share the consequence with the O.B..'

Later that year, he made the following revelation:

'The O.B. leaders were openly talking about obtaining a republic by rebellion, and storm troopers have been told to prepare for it. There were whisperings throughout the country that the storm troopers had rifles, cannons, and even aeroplanes. The O.B. was responsible for Afrikaners being interned.'

That was Mr. Vorster's organisation.

So we must act. And I would suggest that our action should be based on a careful analysis of the structure of our sick society - and that we should learn to hit where it hurts. We should not rush into a particular form of action simply because it is legal, or illegal, or what we usually do. Let us for once take action because it is effective - because that is what counts.

Let us take radical action - that is, action which gets down to the roots of our society. This does not necessarily mean illegal action - it means effective action. What Cosmas Desmond did in exposing conditions in the dumping grounds was not illegal - but it was radical. That is why he was banned.

What David de Beer did in Ovanboland was not illegal - but it was radical, it was effective, it got to the roots of an evil system. That is why he was banned.

The time has come in South Africa when each man and woman must publicly declare his or her interests - must take sides. We cannot afford to have fence-sitters because in a crisis, fence-sitters are worse than useless. In a time of crisis, no man can remain neutral - and only a fool and a coward will try to. It is up to each one of us to decide - what am I prepared to do? Am I prepared to suffer for my beliefs? On which side do I really stand? Those questions must be answered - and they must be answered now.

When the police baton-charged on the steps of the Jameson Hall a few weeks ago, about 400 students stood their ground on the steps. They were warned to move, but they said to the police - it is a simple right to sit here - and it is a right you are not going to remove easily. We will not be moved. And the police gave them a number of warnings, and told them that they were acting illegally. And the students said - this is our right - neither you nor your government will force us to give it up willingly. We will not be moved.

And eventually the police charged, with batons and police dogs. And while the 400 sat on the steps, refusing to move, about 1200 students stood at the side and hissed, shouted "Sieg Heil", and generally expressed their support for the 400.

But what sort of support was this? Verbal. Were they prepared to take any action? No. It was with some justification that one of the 400 later told me that he wished the 1200 had not been there - that what had made him frightened and sick was not the police advancing up the steps, but the 1200 students standing alongside, verbalising their support.

He was right. It was sick. One felt immensely proud to be at a university where 400 students had brought themselves to defy illegal and immoral force in this way - and ashamed of the 1200 who did not have the guts to support them - to act in support of their friends, with whom they apparently sympathised.

And it seemed to me then, and still seems to me, that that scene on the Jameson Hall steps symbolised quite a lot.

The forces of government violence were there - with their powerful and frightening threats.

There was a small group of people resisting, refusing to bow down - the 400. There were people trying to persuade them to bow down - notably, certain senior member of the university administration, trying to avoid a confrontation at all costs - and not realising that the confrontation was already, and permanently, with us.

And there were the sympathisers - the 1200. Who agreed with the 400, but Who were opposed to the government, but..... Who felt that by shouting Sieg Heil, they were doing their bit, and supporting the 400. Their shouts of "Sieg Heil" were ironic - for did they not realise that what they were doing, was what the majority of good Germans did under Hitler's regime? Did they not realise that it was precisely this sort of passive 'opposition' that allowed Hitler to rule, and allows our government to rule?

The question each one of us has to face this week is simple - am I one of the 1200, or one of the 400?

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