

Reflections on the Relationship between Rhodes University and the Wider Society, 1977-1981

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Introduction

Grahamstown was the scene of an iconic moment in South Africa's political history: the detention of Steve Biko on 18 August, 1977. This was one crucial event in an escalating pattern of violence that has been described as 'a low intensity civil war'. The paper refers to two crucial processes during this 'war' between 1977-1981, the deaths in detention and forced removals that took place within a 300km radius of Grahamstown. It uses these two processes as pegs in a reflection on the relation between Rhodes and the wider South African society during the period I was employed in the Sociology Department. My central argument is that our engagement with these social processes of the time was flawed and inappropriate to the nature of what was happening around us.

South Africa as a terrorist state

South Africa at this time was a 'terrorist state'. By 'terrorism' I mean a strategy of political violence that involves systematic acts of destruction aimed at altering or maintaining power relations through spreading extreme fear. The terrorist state maintains its authority by spreading terror or extreme fear through systematic violence. The term 'terrorist state' appears to involve a contradiction in terms. 'Terrorism' is usually defined as illegitimate violence and the source of legitimacy is conventionally defined as the state. However apartheid state strategy was characterised by an increasing violence which was sanctioned by law. The violence was either inscribed in the law or was unrestrained by the law. It was directed against anti-apartheid activists both within the without South Africa's borders. In all cases the state's aim was 'destabilisation' – the disorganisation and atomisation of individuals, organisations and social relations. While very different forms of violence were used they all involved the spread of 'extreme fear or terror'. That fear was directed from within the authority structure of the apartheid state, and defines the South African state as a 'regime of terror' in Walzer's terms.¹

Fear and violence are the two poles around which the terrorist state turns. The violence has the following characteristics:

1. It is largely covert; it is planned in secret arenas which are not open to public scrutiny.
2. It is systematic – it is planned rather than spontaneous.
3. The pattern of violence has a particular relation to the law. It is either unrestrained by the law, operating outside of the courts and legal processes, or it is embedded in the legal system as in the case of executions and detentions.
4. The violence is apparently random, indiscriminate, arbitrary and capricious – all are potential victims.
5. The violence violates established norms, values and social patterns.
6. It is frequently perpetrated by anonymous actors.

The power base of the terrorist state is the armed forces in the shape of the army and the police. However the informer is the fulcrum around which the terrorist state turns. As Hannah Arendt writes, 'The effectiveness of terror depends almost entirely on the degree of social atomization. ... This atomization – an outrageously pale, academic word for the horror it implies – is maintained and intensified through the ubiquity of the informer, who can be literally omnipresent because he is no longer merely a professional agent in the pay of the police but potentially every person one comes into contact with' (Arendt, 1970:55).

The acts of political violence in apartheid South Africa took many different forms ranging from death – through legal executions (the most famous during this period being the execution of Solomon Mahlangu in 1979), torture and assassination – to neutralisation through detention and banning, to the destruction of property through bombings and arson, to demoralisation through harassment and intimidation. What united these different forms of political violence is the notion of destabilisation, the disorganisation and atomisation of anti-apartheid organisations and individuals.

Many of these forms of political violence took place on our doorstep in Grahamstown. One example is detention without trial. According to the Commissioner of Prisons for the year 1 July 1977-30 June 1978, a total of 278 people were detained in terms of the Terrorism Act and 190 in terms of the Internal Security Act. (SAIRR, 1980:142) Many of these detainees were held in Grahamstown. Some of them were subjected to forms of torture which included teeth removed with pliers, sleep deprivation, electric shocks to the genitals and so on.

There were also a number of deaths in detention during the period I am reflecting on. From March 1976 to November 1977, nineteen persons were known to have died while in detention in terms of security legislation (SAIRR, 1978:150). The number includes George Botha detained in Port Elizabeth in 1977. Police claimed he committed suicide by jumping over the stairwell and falling to the ground floor of the Sanlam building where the security police

offices were (SAIRR, 1978:154). This building was also where Lungile Tabalaza died on July 10 1977 allegedly by jumping from the fifth floor of the building. (SAIRR, 1979:117) Suicide was also claimed by the SAP to be the cause of death of Bayempin Mzizi found hanging from a cell window bar in the Brighton Beach police cells on 13 August. The best known case was that of Steve Biko, detained on 18 August in Grahamstown who died on 12 September (SAIRR:1978:159).

Several cases of deaths were heard in the Grahamstown Supreme Court during these years. For example in October 1979 there was the case of Mr Mapetla Mohapi, who was found hanging in his Kei Road police cell.

Other dramatic forms of political repression which took place during these years include the 19 October 1977 banning of 18 black consciousness organisations and the detention of some 47 black political leaders on 19 October 1977 (SAIRR, 1978:169).

At the same time as these local manifestations of South Africa becoming a terrorist state, there was a policy of forced removals which may be described as a form of genocide, if genocide is used to mean the large scale, forcible removal and confinement of populations to spaces where they lack access to the means of survival.

Forced removals

Between 1960 and 1982 some three and a half million people were relocated in the name of apartheid.² As the Surplus People Project Report stated, 'The GG trucks, the rows of latrines, the crude temporary huts staked out in the veld, the numbers painted on the buildings of threatened communities, the ruins of destroyed homesteads and communities, these have been and are central features of South Africa under apartheid' (SPP,1983:1).

The SPP Report points out that the removals were forced in two senses: structural in that coercion was built into the laws and institutions restricting black freedom of movement and access to land, and direct, often involving police and guns, bulldozers, demolished houses and arrests. 'The massive scale of the removals and the enormous suffering they have imposed on individuals and families and communities have not been accidental or incidental to the development of the apartheid state since the 1950s' (SPP,1983:2).

Both the relocation policy and deaths in detention were not policy aberrations, on the contrary they were integral to maintaining white minority rule. Removals meant Connie Mulder, then Minister of Plural Relations, could say in 1978, 'There will be no more black South Africans' (SPP,1983:2). Clearly the relocation was 'part of a policy aimed not simply at dispossessing people of their land or houses but of their South African citizenship and claim to full political rights' (SPP,1983:18).

Conditions in resettlement camps in the Ciskei (the destination for most of the removals in the Eastern Cape) were particularly bad with people lacking

access to employment, little economic activity, inadequate water, proper sanitation, and even food.

Near Grahamstown (about 40 km away) was the infamous Glenmore resettlement camp. By 1979 there were 3000 people in Glenmore, removed from Colchester, Alexandra, Coega, Grahamstown itself and Klipfontein (SAIRR,1980: 435). A survey found that only 40 of the 3000 residents were in full-time employment, each earning about R80 a month. Another 160 people shared jobs on a half-time basis at R40 a month and about 200 pensioners were receiving R25 per month (SAIRR, 1980:436). According to the SPP report, 'most lived dangerously close to starvation' (SPP,1983:282). 'Conditions suffered in the initial weeks of 1979 at Glenmore were nothing short of critical. Complaints of unemployment, hunger and cold were rife. The rations provided by the government were pitifully inadequate' (SPP,1983: 293). Some of the Klipfontein people had brought their cattle but these quickly succumbed to the ticks and the tulp, a poisonous iris in the area. Within a few months here were 11 deaths at Glenmore, 9 of them children (SPP,1983: 293).

Also near Grahamstown was Khammaskraal, a temporary relocation area established in 1980 with a population in that year of about 1000 people living under appalling conditions. The first people to arrive there were given tents and rations; the only water supply came from a few water trucks. The rations consisted of samp, beans, mealie meal, soup and powdered milk. The supply was expected to last for three days, and that was the first and last ration provided. The SPP researchers found that 'most people had an extremely poor diet of maize, break, tea and sugar. 'Almost half the households interviewed said they ate meat less than once a month and the vast majority ate jam less than once a month'. Two journalists who visited the camp in October 1980 reported serious cases of starvation. 'One old man had eaten nothing for two days. He did not know when he was going to eat again' (SPP,1983: 318). The level of general health in the area is indicated by the fact that in 1980 the mines, through the Employment Bureau of Africa, were employing about 2000 people from Peddie, but in November of that year, 17 people were turned down because they were underweight (SPP,1983: 317).

Early in 1977 it was reported that large numbers of children at the Thornhill resettlement camp were dying from gastro-enteritis and diarrhoea, and that 'adult deaths were occurring as a result of malnutrition and its consequent diseases'. It was reported that more than 300 children had died by January 1977 since October 1976 in the various (Ciskei) resettlement camps, including Thornhill. 'Doctors said that babies were dying at the rate of 5 a day at Thornhill'(SAIRR, 1978:35). How did we – the staff at Rhodes – respond to these processes?

Response by Rhodes

Writing of some 150 years ago, Mostert refers to ‘the frontier’s tiny community of beleaguered radicals’ (Mostert, 1992:828). Contemporary ‘radicals’, if that is the right word, did engage with these processes in a number of ways including research, protest and support. The Glenmore Action Group did crucial work, as did the Surplus People Project from which I have quoted so extensively.

The first meeting of the Surplus People Project was held in February 1980 in the Katberg and at least 12 members of the Rhodes staff were involved in or contributed to this massive project which involved a total of 1671 household interviews carried out in the 19 relocation areas selected for study. This was good, rigorous research. We used our sociological skills and commitment to document a process that was crucial to maintaining the white minority regime. But I would argue – in retrospect – that our response was flawed in at least two ways. Firstly we spoke on behalf of this oppressed group, rather than enabling them to develop their own collective voice and speak for themselves. Secondly we did not try to deepen their understanding of their experience. Most of the ex-farm workers removed to Khammaskraal for instance believed that they were the victims of unfeeling white farm owners. We did not engage with them in any reframing of this experience in terms of the wider process of mechanisation of agriculture which was taking place in the Eastern Cape at the time. In other words we failed to share knowledge in ways that would translate private troubles into social issues, what C. Wright Mills defined as the essence of ‘the sociological imagination’.

Rhodes at the time was not a homogeneous political community. For instance Guy Berger has noted the divergent response to Glenmore of two groups, ‘The first, the Glenmore Action Group, constituted largely of liberal academics at Rhodes University, did valuable work in ensuring maximum publicity for the removal and were instrumental in organising food aid from the World Vision organisation. The group remained entirely within a liberal, idealist paradigm seeing the removals as the working out of bigoted social ideology’ (Berger, 50 cited by SPP, 1983: 292). ‘The second group consisted of about 40 Rhodes University students who staged a symbolic protest by erecting a mock squatter camp in the university quadrangle. They provided a colourful sight surrounded by corrugated iron structures, tents and sleeping bags. The aim of the squat was to focus attention on relocation and highlight the inadequacy of the South African education system in dealing with such problems. The one night squat ended in an open air meeting attended by about 400 students. A counter-demonstration at the time was put on by five law students who, in boaters and striped blazers, played bowls on the lawn and reclined in deckchairs, sipping tea brought by an obsequious African in white clothing. One student later said he was trying to show how good colonialism was’ (Berger, 54. Cited by SPP, 1983: 293).

Much rigorous research was produced by Rhodes academics at this time. The impressive scholarship of Rhodes historians such as Rodney Davenport, Jeff Peires and Marion Lacey meant that while black South Africans were deprived of citizenship and political rights, they were not deprived of their history.

Kathy Satchwell – on the staff of the Cory Library earning R30 a month at the time – initiated a system of support for political detainees which included reading material, videos and food parcels to which several Rhodes staff contributed time and resources. We also engaged in symbolic gestures of support like being part of the crowd of 15,000 attending Biko's funeral in King Williams Town.

People like Nancy Charton helped to establish the Grahamstown Advice Office which not only assisted black victims of apartheid legislation but gave white people the opportunity to learn a little of what it meant to be black at that time.

It was a time when Rhodes was extremely small and white in its student population. For example in 1977 there were 2 568 white students, 15 coloured, 8 Indian, 54 Chinese and 9 African students with a total of 2 654 students (SAIRR, 1978: 522). This racial character was not Rhodes's choice. During 1976 the principals of Rhodes, UCT and Wits had made representations to the Minister of national education requesting that they be permitted to admit students of all race groups to their universities on academic merit alone.

However, my argument is that while there was important scholarship, protest and support, there was much that was not done. For example, on 15 September 1977 about 1,250 students at the University of Fort Hare were arrested when they held an open-air memorial service for Steve Biko. There was no expression of solidarity with them from Rhodes. According to the SAIRR Survey of 1977, after Biko's death in detention a letter calling for changes to the Terrorism Act to permit regular and frequent visits to a detainee by a lawyer, a private doctor or other representative of his family, under police supervision if necessary, was issued by the chairman of the Johannesburg Bar Council. The statement was supported in a letter signed by seven members of the Faculty of Law at the University of Stellenbosch. Sixteen staff members of the Faculty of Law at the University of the Witwatersrand also sent a letter to the Minister of Police asking for reform to allow visits to detainees by doctors and legal representatives. There is no mention of any action by the Rhodes Law staff (SAIRR, 1978:167). There were state actions against colleagues like Terence Beard, banned under the Suppression of Communism Act while he was the chair of the Liberal Party in Grahamstown, and Guy Berger, an early participant in the SPP who was detained under the Terrorism Act, actions which should have provoked mass protests, expressions of outrage and acts of civil disobedience.

Conclusion

In retrospect our collective response to these events and to the scale of violence perpetrated all around us, through the policy of forced removals and state terrorism, was flawed and inadequate. We did go beyond the academy and engage with public issues but failed to create what Arjun Appadurai has termed 'new architecture' or producing and sharing knowledge with 'the poor, the vulnerable, the dispossessed and the marginalised' (Appadurai, 2002:272).

We had a model of a social scientist doing this at the time I was at Rhodes. In his remarkable book, *The Eye of the Needle* published in 1972, Rick Turner presented a vision of a future South Africa based on participatory democracy, and stressed the capacity of people working through collective organisations to change the world. Both Turner's assassination on 8 January 1978 and Biko's murder speak to the power of their ideas.

Thirty years later those ideas are still being articulated by the new social movements that are emerging in South Africa and linking to the emerging global justice movement to confront the process of corporate globalisation which is deepening social inequality and environmental degradation throughout the world. These movements demand our time, our thoughts and our voices.

Notes

1. Walzer distinguishes between a 'siege of terror' which is oriented toward overthrowing a system of authority such as a state. Its purpose is to destroy the authority system by creating extreme fear through systematic violence. In the 'regime of terror', systems of terror coincide and coact with systems of authority and are directed by those who control the institutions of power.
2. The Surplus People Project Report points out that this figure is incomplete as it does not include the bulk of the people affected by influx control in the urban areas. 'The magnitude of influx control measures is indicated by the fact that from the beginning of 1979 to the middle of 1981 the total number of arrests under the pass laws in the 11 major urban areas of the country was 289,237 (*SAIRR Survey*, 1981, 234 -235. Cited by SPP, 1983:5).

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