

LETTER FROM JOHANNESBURG

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I've been stimulated to write by a series of conversations I've been having with my new housemate, Mzwee. It's strange spending time with an ex-guerilla who has as many names as the countries he's lived in. Mzwee returned in December after a ten year exile in Angola, Zambia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Soviet Union and Cuba. By the time he returned he had risen to the rank of political commissar in the SACP and ANC, although he, like so many of his comrades, is deeply disillusioned. Actually it's not so much disillusionment as disorientation. Their rigorous training in Marxism-Leninism was unreflective and anachronistic. Ironically I think there has never been a time in South African history where a good class analysis is needed. But the pat narratives, the types of didactic debates that the movement in exile spend many hours agonizing over are of little value in the current context. This leaves many with a feeling of perplexity. For others it's easiest to collapse into the world of technical questions. For many, these *are* the questions.

Mzwee moved in when Mark, my former housemate from NY moved out. He didn't just move out, he's off to West Africa, actually the Ouagadougou Film Festival in Burkina Faso. There's a large contingent of South African film makers going up to the festival this year, I guess for the first time in the history of the festival. From what he told me, it's the most important bi-annual cultural event in Africa and the main source of foreign revenue for Bukino Faso.

Back to Mzwee. There are so many ironies in the 'new South Africa'. This phrase has such an incredibly complex set of meanings, it's used in so many different ways, by so many different people, it's hard to untangle it. I guess in some way, this whole letter is about coming to terms with, getting hold of, trying to break through, the strange taken-for-grantedness that has overtaken this place in a time when nothing should be taken for granted. But to that later. For now just the description of a single ironic event. Last Thursday night the national symphony orchestra played Mozart's Requiem. Mzwee and a handful of other returnees and ex-political prisoners attended the concert. There they began to cautiously fraternize with what the trendy Marxists refer to as 'the commanding heights of capital'. Why are the commissars at the symphony? It's the legacy of Lenin's cultural conservatism, the legacy of their years in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. And who is performing? The quality of the orchestra has vastly improved with the huge influx of previously unemployed musicians from Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Gabor, the conductor, has been in the country for many years, but the new first violinist arrived less than six months ago. The choir for the Requiem was the Soweto Teachers Choir.

In my attempt to come to terms with the 'new South Africa', I've come up against a process of normalization, an absence of idealism, and business takes command. They are interconnected in a complex ideological and pragmatic web of relations that has only become clear to me recently.

Undoubtedly the thing that makes me most unsettled about South Africa is the 'naturalness' or 'ordinariness' of this cultural and political moment. A new mood is spreading through the urban areas, not just in the white community, but my sense is that it is even pervasive in middle-class and working-class communities in Soweto and other townships around Johannesburg. The intensity of the violence of the second half of last year has waned, the crisis mentality it engendered has past. Replacing it is a numbness. Actually it's not so much a sense of being tranquilized, but of selective forgetting. This is the first year in which the government schools are desegregated (not all, but an increasing number). Rather than a monumental event, the formally all-white schools have maintained their old practices and cultures, just with a few new black faces. Already problems are emerging, but they are not the great cultural problems of a fundamental transformation of social life, but the technical problems of black children not having adequate preparation for the standards of white education. Catch-up programmes, intensive remediation, but no real reconsiderations of the curriculum or organization of existing systems are under way. What is so stunning about these schools is the sense one gets that not only has nothing changed, which in some sense is true, but where there has been real change (black faces in white crowds), that those changes go unrecognized. There is a sense in which what is now, is somehow how it has always been, even where it never was. And it has only been months, not even years.

The continued crisis in most black schools remains unchanged. We hear accounts all the time of militant youth firing principals and teachers. One recent newspaper reported that a seventeen-year-old had been elected principal in a Pretoria high school. The particular young comrade would not give his name to the reporter for fear that his father would whip him if he found out. The perpetual crisis has become the normal state of affairs and no aggressive initiative, either from the government, the Mass Democratic Movement or the ANC has begun to address it. While there are a lot of words, little action has materialized. For many children, crisis is all that they know. Children ordering teachers around. You would be hard pressed to find a high school classroom in Soweto full after eleven in the morning. For many, this is what school has come to mean. Gone is any sense for left educationalists that youth controlling schools is part of the overall transformation of the social relations of schooling. Instead, the youth are out of hand. (I'm beginning to sound more and more conservative, as do so many of my radical colleagues.)

The normalization, whether it be of crisis or of the 'new' that is taking place in the schools, epitomizes processes that are under way in the country as a whole. As neighbourhoods become integrated almost no one seems to notice. Perhaps these changes go unnoticed because it is only the most exclusive neighbourhoods and those which are traditionally left/liberal that are 'greying'. Conservative white working class suburbs remain untouched because the country is in a deep recession and few people can afford to move into over-priced white areas. But even the absence of change is going unnoticed despite the huge back-log of people needing decent housing. Public places are now integrated, the privileged few who can afford the expensive price of a movie ticket seem to blend in with the affluent whites around them. The buses are now integrated, but only a small number of blacks

ride the previously whites-only buses: when they do they are invisible. But the bus system as a whole remains unchanged, because the system is really based on geography rather than the colour of one's skin. We can analyze the variety of reasons that the *de jure* changes have not totally transformed social life, and yet, there has been sufficient changes to warrant people talking, people sitting up and paying attention.

My speculation is that it is all about memory and its opposite, the forgetting of the past. 'Europeans Only' has been taken down and at least in the public space, the old white way of talking is muffled. (Some still talk in private about the 'natives': 'Zulu boys make much better garden boys'). The government has a vested interest in forgetting. Their apologists speak of the crime of apartheid. Many of the public signifiers have disappeared (still two entrances to the local liquor store). Some names have changed. All get a new wash, come out sanitized. The most difficult task of all, the rewriting of history, has begun with a vengeance. Pik Botha, the minister of foreign affairs through the period of high apartheid, said in a recent television interview that he was always anti-apartheid, but believed the best way to change the system was from the inside. You cannot find a government officer who ever believed in apartheid. The monuments still stand, the homeland government buildings in rural wastelands, the fascist sculpture of the Boer-trekkers, but they seem to be ancient relics of a former barbaric civilization. Although the object still remains, somehow people have forgotten their purpose, they don't understand their meaning in the context of a whole system.

If we could even talk about a public consciousness, it would now be in the in-between world, neither in the past, nor in the future. If there is a future, it's to get ahead or live the life of the flashy non-racial beer commercial. It is certainly not a glorious collective future of the new nation, new culture. The big ideals of the struggle, 'the people shall govern, the doors of culture and learning shall be open...' can still be heard, but somehow if you listen closely you notice a real hollowness about the sound, its the echo, not the original.

For the public to have a memory, for there to be something other than this 'normality', there needs to be history, an attention to everydayness, and an imaginative future. The government has taken care of history and replaced it with American sitcom and CNN. In fact American television or programmes have dominated South African evening viewing for the last ten years. A lot of the imaginative futures (socialism and even democracy) has gone stale, the old slogans about people's power and socialism seem a little facile. No new vision has come to take their place. As for the everydayness, either people escape from it, or it's not an issue. In either case, at least for the moment, the everydayness is not going to push people into a critical consciousness. As Gramsci would say, common sense is winning out over good sense. and the government and business are clearly winning the common sense. People have been watching the future on television for the past few years even when their daily lives told them that it was a lie. As our social world begins to shift, what is strange about the new arrangements is ironically familiar because people have been watching it on television. Here perhaps is the key to the normality mentality because the unfamiliar has consciously been made familiar.

Nelson Mandela came to his *alma mater*, Witwatersrand University last Wednesday to give the opening address to the student. Introduced by the

leader of the 'most' revolutionary wing of the liberation movement, SANSCO, the South African National Students Congress, as one of Africa's greatest men, a man that walks with giants, Mandela gave a steady, convincing speech under an umbrella which protected him from the sun. This was the stadium [previously the main showing of the annual Rand agricultural exhibition] where I came as a kid to watch the prize-winning bulls being displayed. Along the sides of the arena were stands with the state-of-the-art equipment for the artificial insemination of cows. In those days black South Africans were only allowed access to the fairground on Wednesdays, the rest of the week was reserved for whites. About five years ago the university took over the fairground for the education, commerce, law and engineering faculties.

Mandela spoke about the role of the university and academic freedom, of the strategies for the transition period, and of the campaign for a constituent assembly. To the students he said, 'the struggle is no substitute for studying', forever we hope, putting to rest the slogan, no education before liberation. To the faculty he offered a new concept, the patriotic intellectual, the academic who put her expertise to use in framing options for what he referred to as the 'new South Africa'. Yogesh, a long time and committed activist who works in the Policy Unit attached to the Education Department, cynically commented to me later that day that the struggle no longer demanded that we be organic intellectuals, we don't have to be ashamed of our petty bourgeois origins, we can work for the Development Bank of Southern Africa. After years of grass root activism he's just come back from a job interview at a big corporate foundation.

The crowd at the Mandela show included large numbers of the maintenance staff. The security guards listened politely. At two o'clock, in the middle of the speech, many students started leaving the stadium, heading for class. At the close of the speech the university community stood for the traditional singing of the national anthem, 'Nkosi Sikelele Afrika. Something happened in the middle of the anthem. The crowd almost lost the melody because the tempo was so incredibly slow. The customary 'vivas' received only the vaguest response. As Mandela left the stadium, the students rushed towards the exits, no toyi-toying, no freedom songs today. People are tired, perhaps they have other things to do. Politics is no longer in command.

Another story. Monday night I have my campaigns sub-committee meetings (ANC newspeak for sub-committees of the branches). A beautifully spoken young woman (product of an elite private school) gave us an 'input' on the strategy of the Patriotic Front. In the subsequent discussion one of the hardest working members of the sub-committee made a comment about working not to see people just being integrated into the existing structures, but for genuine restructuring. In her words, what we used to call 'socialism' and 'democracy'. Only in that moment did it really come home to me that I and many 'committed' people have all but abandoned this language. Instead it's about solving problems, about negotiating for and about the interim government. The pride and the centrepiece of the left ideology, of its mythology, the concept and practice of strong democracy is losing its intellectual power and it's disappearing from the practices of many organizations. The particular meaning that democracy took for the left in the early eighties had to be with a process of consultation, of leadership being held accountable

to the lowest levels in grassroots organizations. 'Decisions must emerge from the bottom', was the key concept of the United Democratic Front. But today, for a whole host of reasons, democracy has lost the power to capture our imaginations. Our leaders negotiate behind closed doors, their major decisions taken without the organizations having any real input. The returning liberation movement [from exile] has no experience of the kind of democratic practice that had become the norm in the mass movement. Some of the key figures in the democratic movement are just burnt out.

I sometimes think of the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Sandanistas, or the young Bolsheviks in the first experimental years of the 1920s and their faith and commitment to a new world. The 'new' in the 'new South Africa' is very different from the 'new' in a socialist 'new order'. I imagine there must have been an incredible sense of excitement, a kind of potency of unexplored power and a sense of comfort in working collectively for a new future. The 'people' in South Africa haven't even come close yet to 'seizing' power and yet the cynicism stage in transformation has miraculously been brought forward. We've skipped the idealist phase, we've even missed disillusionment and gone straight to cynicism. Perhaps this is the first truly post-modern transition.

The only grouping with any sense of bounce is big business, what we used to refer to as 'capital'. The spirit of the new South Africa is business in command. They have captured the cultural moment in the beer commercials, in the call for management and efficient running of society. The ANC is returning from exile with so little to offer in terms of solutions or vision. In part this can be attributed to the fact that the central theme in the language of the exile movement was outdated ideas on socialist and third world political and revolutionary theory. This is the moment when nearly all African countries are turning to privatization, free market and individual initiative. Zimbabwe has just accepted the World Bank's demands for a restructuring of their economy, as a precondition for significant new loan allocations. Mozambique and Angola, the newest 'socialist' countries in the region are undergoing similar transformations. These changes tend to be uncritical and rather unimaginative implementations of models of development most successfully articulated in the 'miracle' economies of the Pacific rim such as Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan.

Business has a new confidence, even arrogance. Mzwee who works as the coordinator of employment for returning exiles comes home every day with a new story about various businesses that have approached his office with offers of employment for returning MK soldiers. One of the largest insurance companies in the country, Southern Life, called the other day to offer twenty five positions for ANC returnees. In the meeting with the company it came out that they were keen on getting militant members of the movement as they believe that such men would be trusted and accepted by the communities in which they would be expected to sell life insurance. Like nothing else, the image of ex-guerilla soldiers going house to house selling life insurance to working class black families embodies the spirit of this new age. The law of the new South Africa: the state shall not provide, leave it to individual initiative, let the market decide. The new cadre of salesmen would be well paid by South African standards, be given company cars, (probably Hondas)

and housing subsidies which would allow them to buy expensive homes in the new integrated suburbs.

The university graduate business school has just opened a programme in public administration which specifically targets community leaders. With massive funding from mining, Anglo-American Corporation and De Beers, the programme hopes to socialize a new elite for positions in the future government bureaucracy. The South African Breweries has just donated a fleet of new Toyotas to the various regional offices of the ANC with 'no strings attached'. The list is endless, the gifts and contributions, the concern about training and up-grading, of job creation. Massive incorporation with offers of social mobility, stability and success in a corporatist new South Africa.

But why has the once militant movement just succumbed? The answer isn't too hard to find. Big business has the resources, they have the expertise, they have the training facilities. For those that remained in the country for the intense years of the struggle, there was never even a thought about running, controlling and administering an advanced industrial society. The enemy was business, business methods and business mentality. The state was the enemy. No one wanted to understand how the state ran the country, the principle concern was how the state was used as a mechanism of repression. In place of the state, activists posited a romantic notion about popular participation. Perhaps the best example is in education where the mass movement elaborated a concept of People's Education. In real terms this had to do with rewriting a few text books and attempts to institute democratic structures involving teachers, students and parents. Little attention was paid to addressing the backlog, to thinking creatively about broad new approaches to an educational system as a whole. Most of all, little thought was given to the fact that any new system would be built on the old, or more precisely, any new system would inherit the old. In the rhetoric of the time it was the government's responsibility to provide equal education. As for the movement in exile, most of the time was spent just trying to keep the mythologies alive. Almost no one got experience in other countries with the planning and running of massive state systems of schooling.

The spirit of the day is the spirit of business, pragmatic, instrumental, and fundamentally conservative. All the talk is of negotiated settlements, compromise and realism. I must confess that I find myself talking the very self-same talk in the company of people I think are dreamers.

The absence of idealism might mean transition without euphoria. This might mean less dogmatism and fewer grand schemes for social planning. But this loss of idealism is not the same as sobriety. When you are sober, your head clears and the world comes into sharper focus. Unfortunately the world is now more foggy.

This is the news from the frontier.

This letter, written in February 1991, has been overtaken by the violence that erupted in the Townships. This does not alter the perceptions of the writer. We hope to print further letters by the same author in later issues of *Searchlight South Africa*.