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# The Breaking of Men

South African 'solitary'

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LEN BLOOM

IN SOUTH AFRICA IN 1963, sixty leading psychiatrists, psychologists and medical specialists (including the Dean of the Medical School of the University of Natal), appealed to the Minister of Justice to abolish solitary confinement (as carried out under the "90-Day" detention clause), and said that solitary confinement is "inhuman and unjustifiable". A substantial report on solitary confinement by two psychologists of the University of the Witwatersrand concludes that detainees who spend even a short time in solitary can suffer "various bizarre experiences". (*Rand Daily Mail*, 19 December 1963.)

One hundred years ago England abolished solitary confinement as a punishment: it was condemned as brutalising rather than as reforming. The theory behind this punishment was that the prisoner, left alone with his thoughts, would mull over his sins and repent of his wickedness. He was kept in the strictest solitude, visited only by the chaplain, and his loneliness was relieved only by the reading of the bible. This punishment broke men's spirits in the mid-1800s. In 1963 the Minister of Justice admitted that "it is not a very nice thing to see a human being broken . . . I am painfully aware of that fact". But: the object of the "90-day" clause was to hold any "person—who is connected with crimes affecting the security of the state . . . for interrogation, and until he has answered those questions to the satisfaction of the Commissioner of Police". Where the criterion for release is the satisfaction of the Police, a little breaking of human beings is as inevitable as it was in Nazi Germany where similar pressures were used by the Gestapo.

During the seven (or so) months the Act has operated human beings *have* been broken. Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle was "found hanged in his cell", and at least four people (including one young woman) were mental hospital patients during their imprisonment. None of these showed the least sign of mental instability before they were imprisoned. The frequent breaking-down in Court of those turning state evidence suggests too that the South African police have learned something about the techniques of brain-washing.

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Up to the beginning of December 1963 there were 586 solitary detainees. At least one man (Alfred Nzo) was starting his third term of 90-Days confinement; and to the 23 men and women still detained at the time of writing, the Commissioner of Police has said that if they "co-operate" with the police they might be released for Christmas 1963. And if they do not . . . ?

HUNDREDS OF STUDIES by psychologists and psychiatrists have analysed the effects of solitary confinement, and there are many autobiographical accounts of what it means to live in solitude. Christopher Burney was kept in solitude for 18 months by the Nazis, and wrote of his experiences: "I feel a sense of impotence, an inexorable subjection to a machine of nameless horror . . ." Admiral Byrd spent six months alone in the Antarctic, and despite the excitement of battling with the elements, the sheer loneliness made him acutely anxious and unbearably depressed. Captain Joshua Slocum who sailed alone around the world "saw" a man at the tiller who assured him that he would steer the ship to safety. Major-General Dean of the U.S. was "brainwashed" and kept isolated by North Korean troops. He felt abandoned and had the greatest difficulty to keep his judgement. "You have no one on whom to test your ideas". What is real? What is going on in the world outside your cell? You cannot tell—except through the filtered and distorted reports of the

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## Warning To An Absent Lover

*What is lost but today's desire  
Or the hurt we praise as love?  
It is the breaking tree and the burning tree  
And the sky that's blind with fire.*

*We are drugged with absence, or drown  
In our sleep that's pain,  
Through the wild nerve's urging  
In the hours clattering down.*

*Remember little in your separate year  
But the structure of muscle and bone,  
That we may not build on nothing  
Nor speak our prayers from fear;*

*Except the permanent heart  
There's little our cells protect;  
Come away from the skyline's edge,  
Settle the dusk in our eyes.  
If we lose this map, we lose our guide  
And so much more than hurt or flesh.*

C. J. DRIVER

prison staff. General Dean became so depressed that he attempted suicide.

Burney, Byrd and Slocum (and many others) were competent, normal and dedicated, imprisoned while carrying out important duties for their country, and believing strongly in their cause. Yet their isolation drove them to thinking, feeling and perceiving as though they were temporarily insane, or at the very least, disturbed.

Experimental studies also show in detail the psychological and physical changes that isolation causes. In most studies the experimenter places his subject in a silent, dimly-lit room, with no means of telling the time, no direct contact with any human being, and nothing to relieve the monotony. But, the subject *can* summon the experimenter, visit the toilet, have meals—and end the experiment when he wants. All the subject has to do is to relax upon a comfortable bed. In some experiments the subjects were paid considerable sums if they stayed in isolation; in other cases the experiment was part of projects to test if the subject were able to take part in space-flights. The experimenters took care to weed out disturbed subjects.

The pattern of how the subjects emerged from isolation is remarkably similar. There was very often widespread disturbance of thinking and feeling, and some subjects had hallucinations: hearing non-existent voices, music, smelling strange things and having sensations of floating. Many subjects did not know where they were, could not carry out simple tests, were confused, bewildered, dazzled and detached from the outside world, frightened of people. And perhaps most sinister, some subjects lost their desire to think and persisted living in the inner-world created by them during their isolation. Some doctors believe that isolation affects the brain itself; it becomes disorganised, as though certain drugs had been taken, or as though it suffered from large brain tumours or lack of oxygen.

THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY of research-workers agree that if the mind is to work normally the individual must live in a changing and interesting world, that *he feels he can control*. A human being must do things. If he has no power to make his own world his mind suffers—perhaps permanently.

Isolation plus brain-washing is a more terrible way to break a human being. "The complete separation of the prisoner from the companionship and support of others, his utter loneliness, and his prolonged uncertainty", added to fatigue, cold, hunger, unfamiliar and often crude living-conditions, physical discomfort (including torture) may be totally unbearable. Brainwashing depends upon destroying the prisoner as a human being; he is made to feel helpless, hopeless and alone; rejected, forgotten and worthless; guilty and responsible for the fate of others. The prisoner often develops an overwhelming urge to confide in someone, to talk to another human being, and may find himself dependent upon *anyone* who appears to befriend and help him. Thus the technique of a team of interrogators: the strong-arm men to break down the prisoner's strength, and the phoney friend who exploits the prisoner; need for comforting, for news of his family,

for *anything* to make him feel that he *is* a human being still, despite the indignity, hardship and misery inflicted on him.

WHATEVER TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED: simple isolation, brainwashing and prolonged questioning, torture (or some combination of all these) evidence obtained under these pressures must be highly suspect, however coherent and sincere the prisoner may appear in court. It seems that in South Africa all three methods have been used since high-ranking police officers visited the French authorities in Algeria before Algerian independence. A study for the United States government summed the results of isolation-plus-brainwashing: the prisoner becomes 'mentally dull and loses his capacity for discrimination. He becomes malleable and suggestible, and in some instances he may confabulate', that is, he may invent elaborate fantasies to escape the horrors of his prison life.

According to the *Cape Times* "allegations by people detained that they have been questioned brutally by police investigators have been increasing steadily in the past few

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## Christian-National- Communism; or, Our Leader has a Plan

*A conversation piece*

*Scene: The Cabinet Office in the  
Union Buildings, Pretoria.*

*Present: Dr. Verwoerd and all his cabinet members.*

DR. V.: (*tapping table with jukskei-gavel*) *Kêrels*, as you all know, I am pretty worried these days about the situation. These communists are making things really tough. Our airways have now been hard-hit, the United Nations is passing strong resolutions against us, and even our closest allies are saying that they will not send us arms any more. It is these communists and we must think of a plan to outwit them. Now, *kêrels*, I have been spending the past few months thinking of just such a plan to outwit them all—that is why I have been so quiet and have done so little talking. I have a plan—

CABINET MEMBERS: *Ons leier het 'n plan—hoera! Nou sal ons die kommuniste donder.*

DR. V.: I have not worked out the plan in detail yet, and that is why I have called this cabinet meeting. I want you *kêrels* to help fill in the details of my plan.

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months . . . the allegations have been so many, and so circumstantial, that they cannot be shrugged off". And yet hundreds of men and women have been sent to prison for as much as twenty years (and others might be executed) on evidence obtained in this manner.

BUT IT IS NOT ONLY POLITICAL PRISONERS who are isolated. Professor Danziger of Cape Town University has drawn attention to the terrifying social isolation of South African whites, who "lose touch with the reality of the world, and live in a strange world of imagination and myth". The white electorate lives only partly in the twentieth century. Politically it has obstinately refused to leave the days of white-man-boss colonialism. The South African government believes in an ox-wagon political morality, but employs the same techniques of political terrorism as the French authorities in Algeria. The electorate has steadily and stealthily become isolated from reality: the reality of the changing political Africa of the twentieth century, and from the reality of the erosion of moral standards that accompany the arid arrogance of *apartheid*. Above all,

the electorate isolates itself from considering the inevitability of the spread of violence as the method of rule while the government clings on to its illusions that South Africa is a white-man's land in a black continent. The detention of political prisoners is effectively outside the control of parliament and in the hands of the police—subject only to the dictates of expediency. Yet, with a few honourable and brave people excepted, the eyes of the electorate are sealed as firmly shut as the eyes of many Germans at the time of Dachau and Belsen.

The marks of torture by electricity or beating-up can sometimes fade. The mind destroyed or damaged by the mental torture of isolation can sometimes be healed. But moral damage is done to a society in which such torture is built into its legal system, in which individual human beings are subject to the whim of "the Minister's Pleasure", and in which the Courts listen to evidence given by possibly broken men and women. These are the symptoms of a sick society. Such sickness may be incurable and irreversible. We cannot tell. We dare not wait. ●

## MARK ROBERTSON

CABINET CHORUS: *Ja seker. Wat kan ons doen?*

DR. v.: Well, let me explain. It is like this: the only way to beat these commies is at their own game. We have tried *apartheid*, we have tried separate development and good-neighbourliness but they are no good. We must compete with the commies if we want to win through, and we must beat them at their own game.

MR. VORSTER: But I am already doing that—my new laws and powers are as good as Stalin's any day.

DR. v.: Yes, but we are using the wrong theory to back our laws. We must use communist theory.

CABINET VOICES: *God, maar kommunis toerie is goddeloos! Onse land is 'n Christelike land!*

DR. v.: *Ja, ja, net so.* But our new policy is one of Christian communism. We shall remain *Christelike nasionaal* but we shall also be *kommunis* and beat the communists at their own game.

CABINET VOICES: *God, Henk, maar jy is slim.* It is an unbeatable plan.

DR. v.: Well, listen. Karl Marx said that in the communist society it would be a case of "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs". Now the white man in South Africa is suited to this. The white man gives his ability and he takes what he needs, *nê!*

Now it was Stalin who said that when the people were not ready for full communism they have to have socialism where they have the slogan "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work". In South Africa only the white man is far enough advanced to be given according to his needs, while the Bantu are still backward and only do menial work so they must be given according to their work.

LE ROUX: That is why we have job reservation.

DR. v.: *Net so. Net so.* You are understanding my plan.

So the Bantu are still backward and are not ready yet for communism so we give them Stalinist socialism and all that goes with it, while we whites who are advanced, we are ready for communism. We are, as Lenin said, the vanguard of the proletariat.

MULLER: And at the United Nations we will tell them that they must not interfere with us for we are following Stalin and now have "Socialism in One Country" and they cannot interfere with us or it will not be socialism in one country and they will be fighting against historical materialism and will be counter-revolutionary imperialist pigs, as Trotski would have said.

DR. v.: Hilgard, you must never mention Trotski. You will mess up things at UN like Eric did if you do that. As it is we are going to have quite a job trying to play the Kruschev and the Mao lines at the same time.

Now it has struck me that our Bantustan plan fits in beautifully with the collectivisation of the peasants by Stalin. So we must rewrite our theory there. We know that we are giving them what is best for them, but with peasants one can expect opposition to all change. This was the lesson of Stalin.

A possible difficulty might be the communists who are banned or in gaol at the moment. They must be denounced as Trotskyites and as liberals. Johan Balthazar, here is your opportunity to really get stuck into