

Beatrix Campbell talks to Albie Sachs

Soft Vengeance

Albie Sachs is a member of the executive committee of the African National Congress.

Where did the confidence come from for your cultural revolution, your critique of the language of struggle and how that has been expressed in revolutionary art?

I was asked to participate at the launch, in Stockholm, of an exhibition of art from southern Africa. I noticed that the local people talked about the exhibition but there was a fixed smile on their faces. It was a sort of a solidarity smile. They weren't engaging with the art. So when I spoke, I said, 'We don't want solidarity. The solidarity was bringing the art here. Now we have the right to hear real criticism and not solidarity criticism.'

Did you find that you had a fixed smile as you looked at it?

No no, I saw some work that I liked and some that was poor; and I thought that people should react to the quality of the work. Speaker after speaker said, almost like a ritual incantation, 'art is a weapon of struggle', and some said 'culture is an instrument of struggle'. I made my pronouncement. And Barbara Masekela, who was the head of the ANC arts and culture department, was in the audience and asked me to an in-house seminar on culture. I agreed to send a paper. It provoked a tremendous but good hearted reaction. That was before the ANC was unbanned.

When the ANC was unbanned in February 1991 my paper was one of the first things by the ANC to be published in South Africa. It created a big stir, I was amazed. Some said: 'At last Albie's seen the light, you can't mix art and politics' which was rather absurd, as it was being presented at a political occasion.

The whole transformation in South Africa is a cultural act, it is destroying complexes of superiority and inferiority, it is establishing an identity. Culture has a profound significance for our country, in some ways deeper than the evident political format because of the question: who are we? We know where the country is but we don't know what it is. We still have a very active participatory tradition - of culture being how you live, how you express yourself and how you relate to others; not something you pay to see.

Tell us about your critique of the emblems of struggle: fists and spears.

My problem was limiting all our work to these simplistic forms. You'd count the number of fists per square inch to see how revolutionary it was. One phrase which caused a lot of amusement at the



seminar was where I said, 'we never have love in our literature. What happens, don't our people make love? When they go to bed at night do they simply discuss the role of the white working class?' Well, apparently that night when people went to bed they were discussing whether art should be called a weapon of struggle or not.

Let's talk about the internal cultures of revolutionary movements. Things that were at one time emblematic, democratic centralism, internal security, 'discipline', and the problem of paranoia that seems to infuse some of those disciplines; what's your feeling about those cultures?

I found the 'officialisation' of solidarity distressing. We got important solidarity from the east European countries when nobody else would look at us. But instead of solidarity coming from the heart of the people it became institutionalised and formalised.

The suspicions we had were not simply paranoia. The sense that we were being set up for assassination were real. My own experience of being blown up proves that lots of killers were sent out using everything from bombs to poison. The question is: is it inevitable in an underground movement, built in exile with very poor facilities, that torture and brutal physical means will be used internally against suspects to deal with real threats? The answer has to be no, it's not inevitable.

In the ANC leadership on the issue made a difference to the whole approach. The membership raised the question of ill-treatment of detainees in the period 1983-84. And at our conference in 85 a full day was devoted to discussing the treatment of detainees, and a code of conduct for the organisation. We attempted to introduce a kind of legality for our conditions. We had to set a lot of definitions of offences and penalties for the treatment of persons suspected of having violated the norms and standards of the organisation. We made it very clear that this was not to be used for political suppression or dissent, but for cases of rape, of stabbing, of theft, of drunken driving and of course attempts to kill the leadership.

We even considered whether or not, in special circumstances where somebody was known or suspected to have crucial information about some imminent attack, some form of prolonged interrogation without torture or violence, could be permissible. The delegates at the conference gave an emphatic no. That was the spirit that came from our membership and strengthened the position of leaders like Oliver Tambo and the great

majority who hated the idea of violence being used against suspects.

Where do you go from there if its true that socialisms on the bolshevik model are dead, and there is also a crisis of social democratic socialisms?

One wishes oppression were dead. In South Africa now we're one of the last old fashioned freedom movements. We still have massive overt discrimination and oppression in our society, so our crisis is much less profound because we have more than enough to do in achieving what were always our goals.

Are you old fashioned? Isn't that a problem? How do you imagine modernising and rescuing your nation?

The hallmark of the ANC in recent years is the emphasis on the branch as our best unit of organisation. And our branches have been very active and, if I can use the word, very bolschy.

Towards whom?

Kicking the asses of the leadership of the ANC. That doesn't come from the collapse of socialism in eastern Europe. But it is more difficult for those who still think in terms of centralising thought, leadership and decision-making. One wants to avoid a kind of demagogic populism where you simply count opinions and go for the most attractive solution. That could be very dangerous in our country.

One of the striking thing's in your book *The Soft Vengeance Of A Freedom Fighter* is that the language of your re-acquaintance with your own body after being blown up, the discovery that your body was alive, the pleasure in the discovery that you'd survived. The way in which you talk about your body is resonant of the way in which women talk about their bodies. What, apart from the rediscovery of you own body was the impact on your political language?

Solitary confinement put me in touch with my mind, often very uncomfortably, the bomb blast put me in touch with my body. I'm sure I'd been prepared, to some extent, by contact with feminism. It had opened the way, but it was the experience which really did it. There's no question, you can't be macho when you're lying flat out on your back, when you're learning to shit again and to walk again. There is a thrill in just seeing the human body, just seeing people walking down the street, its so marvellous.

The ANC suddenly discovered they'd got one of their fairly well-known personalities writing about the body as though it's on a par with the overt political thing. The whole theme of *Soft Ven-*

geance, is not just based on reconciliation, its based on what our morality is, what all those years in jail were for, what the bomb was about, what the resistance of torture was for, something special. That's strongly echoed in the ANC.

Tell us what marks the difference between the ANC's thinking about an appropriate constitutional model and citizenship and that of the South African State.

If I can say something that I think might be interesting for the Left generally. A lot of us have shifted from a focus on people's power to a focus on people's rights. We used to believe that if we could get the institutions of power properly organised, with a lot of participatory democracy and popular involvement, then the rest would follow. I think experience has shown it doesn't work that way. Institutions become objects in themselves, the people become abstract entities.

We accept universally what are now called the universal concept of human rights. Maybe some years ago we were very quick to condemn bourgeois human rights, it almost became one word. Bourgeois became attached to the thing we were criticising. Its awful, we handed so much over to the bourgeoisie that we had no right to.

The irony was that it was never the bourgeoisie who fought for bourgeois rights in our country. We look at the city with new eyes, from a human rights point of view, we look at gender, not as woman's rights issue, it's human rights for women as well. We want these to be constitutionalised. The government is being pushed off its insistence on racial categorisation as a foundation of the constitution. They've abandoned explicit reference to race in the constitutional programs, but there are indirect forms of maintaining racial exclusiveness, in codes that are not very difficult to decipher. They can't accept the idea of a black president in South Africa, they want to compartmentalise government by having quotas.

The whites could lock up the wealthy areas, the good schools and hospitals, at the local level in white hands through neighbourhood councils and other devolutions of power - that's really where apartheid operates in practise. So the battle against apartheid is very much the battle of local government.

Is forgiveness possible?

One of the striking features of our movement is that attention is not focused on revenge. You trap yourself when you're trapped in the past. ●

