

Book Review: Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid

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Buntman, Fran Lisa. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 358 pp. \$65.00 (cloth).

Many political figures, especially those trying to remake their societies from outside the established political process, have spent time in prison. Leaders with such diverse political orientations as Fidel Castro, Ruhollah Khomeini, Václav Havel, Gerry Adams, and Nelson Mandela were all incarcerated. While there has been some examination of the impact of prison in biographies and autobiographies of these figures, there is little systematic examination of the ways that prison shaped their political goals and strategies. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* examines this issue, concentrating on the experiences of those imprisoned on South Africa's notorious Robben Island. The author, a member of the Sociology Department at George Washington University, does not claim that the role played by the Islanders was more significant than that played by those outside the prison, but she argues that it is a role that has not been examined adequately. Buntman relies largely on interviews with former prisoners and warders, although she also examines records of the prison administration as well as secondary sources.

Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town, had served as a prison for many years. The number of political prisoners there increased in the early 1960s as protests against South Africa's *apartheid* system intensified and the regime passed ever more draconian security legislation. Several hundred were already imprisoned by 1964, when the African National Congress's leaders—Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, among others—arrived. Later waves arrived after the Soweto-inspired uprisings of 1976 and the civil unrest of the early 1980s. Throughout, of course, Mandela and other ANC leaders remained. Not until 1991 was the last political prisoner released or removed from the Island.

Conditions are undoubtedly harsh in all prisons, but those in charge of Robben Island sought to make life there especially difficult. Some of the guards were brutal, hard labor was required of most prisoners, and there were daily humiliations. The *apartheid* system was replicated within the prison: the entire prison staff was white, while all the prisoners were "black" (African, Coloured, or Asian). *Apartheid* rules governed the provision of daily amenities: African prisoners received only 12 ounces of corn meal each

day, while Asians and Coloureds received 14 ounces; Coloureds and Asians received 6 ounces of meat or fish four times a week, but Africans received only 5 ounces. To further heighten tensions, prisoners of different political affiliations were housed together. In the 1960s, this meant jailing African National Congress (ANC) members with those of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). Later, after the Soweto protests of the mid-1970s, there was a large influx of prisoners who advocated Black Consciousness ideas. That group was also of a very different generation than Mandela and his colleagues, adding generational strains to political ones.

These details of daily life might lead one to expect the prison population to be atomized and focused solely on daily needs. That was likely the intent of prison authorities, but the prisoners were able to resist, to survive, and even to thrive during their years on Robben Island. "Resistance" is conceptualized here as more than just a refusal to submit to prison authorities; it also refers to efforts to remake the power relationships within the prison and, ultimately, society as a whole. Prisoners' resistance took two forms, "resistance for survival" and "resistance beyond survival." While there was not a linear progression from one type of resistance to the other, conditions had improved dramatically by the mid-1970s so there was greater emphasis on resistance beyond survival after that time.

Creating conditions for survival in prison is a prerequisite for any further resistance strategies. To combat the conditions identified previously, prisoners resorted to a number of tactics. These could be as simple as mouthing an unspoken profanity at a guard. More organized efforts included a hunger strike, as occurred in 1965 or 1966, and utilizing legal channels, e.g., preparing court petitions or writing letters to prison authorities. The prisoners also had a number of allies outside the prison. These included former prisoners, Helen Suzman—a South African parliamentarian, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. While external actors were important, both Suzman and prison authorities agree that the actions of the prisoners, themselves, were crucial to changing prison conditions because, in Suzman's words, "they were strong and they were united and they were organized and they were informed..." (Suzman quoted at p. 58).

Resistance strategies did not end as prison conditions improved. Struggling for more than mere survival, prisoners sought to improve their physical and mental health, not

only as a means of relieving boredom but also to improve themselves and to prepare for what many believed would be a post-*apartheid* order in their lifetimes. One of the most important of these “strategies of resistance beyond survival” was education. The Island was considered a “university” by many, a term usually taken to mean that prisoners were exposed to the insights of Mandela and other leading resistance figures. Yet it was also a university in the more traditional sense. Prisoners enrolled in correspondence courses offered by the University of South Africa and other distance education institutions, some earning college degrees. There were education programs within the prison, too, as better educated prisoners taught less well-educated ones. There was also political education. Some prisoners taught classes in political theory and later, as change became more likely, a prisoner trained in political science offered classes on different constitutional models. In addition to education, there were also efforts to improve the prisoners’ physical health, e.g., football (soccer) and rugby tournaments as well as tennis lessons. Recreational and cultural activities, including chess and checkers games, ballroom dancing competitions, the staging of plays, and instruction in musical instruments, were also available.

Besides keeping prisoners busy, these activities helped them develop political, organizational, and leadership skills. Over time, they were able to transform the “state of nature” that had existed on the Island into a new social system, one governed by an unspoken but widely recognized social contact. To construct this new society, prisoners had to tolerate different points of view, reach out to those across communal and organizational divides, and be open to new ideas, all necessary skills for the subsequent transition from *apartheid* to democracy. Ironically, then, the prisoners’ incarceration was not so much a barrier to post-1990 reform as an opportunity for them to develop the skills to help make the new system work. Not surprisingly, then, Buntman is able to identify many former prisoners who are now prominent in government, business, and civil society. These men have been able to “tak[e] the lessons learned from Robben Island to other spheres of South African life” (p. 174).

Of course, most prisoners did not want to wait until their release to try to influence politics on the outside. The desire to end *apartheid* that had led to their imprisonment did not eliminate when they arrived on the Island, and prisoners consciously sought to influence politics outside the prison. This took many forms, direct and indirect. One indirect way was the prisoners’ serving as beacons of hope for *apartheid*’s foes. Prisoners sought to keep their organizations, typically banned on the outside, alive in prison. More direct ways for furthering the struggle included giving instructions to departing prisoners. All were urged to work for improved prison conditions; some prisoners were given more specific tasks, e.g., getting black unions to shift from economic to political demands, joining community organizations and, in a few cases, going into exile to promote the

struggle from abroad. There were also occasions when strategic discussions among the prisoners shaped the strategies of the anti-*apartheid* movement on the outside. An important example is the United Democratic Front, the umbrella organization of anti-*apartheid* organizations created in the early 1980s. While there is some disagreement on this point, some prisoners claim that the UDF “was an idea from Robben Island” (Vronda Banda quoted at p. 164). Moreover, after the formation of the UDF, many ex-prisoners served in its leadership. To cite another example, it was ANC prisoners who developed the ANC strategy of negotiating with Inkatha in KwaZulu-Natal rather than confronting it.

The clearest illustration of Buntman’s themes is that the state chose to begin to negotiate the end of *apartheid* with a prisoner, Nelson Mandela. It is true, of course, that this decision was due, in part, to Mandela’s prominence and to the ability to keep the talks secret precisely because he was a prisoner. However, the fact the Mandela had survived more than two decades in prison, that he and his fellow prisoners had developed their own community and transformed prison life through mutual tolerance and reaching out to former foes, and that the prisoners had been able to influence politics on the outside made Mandela a desirable partner once the regime had decided to end *apartheid*.

To what extent are Buntman’s ideas applicable to other cases? No two prisons are alike nor are the governments which send prisoners away, but she does find evidence of similar resistance patterns elsewhere. There are numerous examples of prisoners resisting to survive, as one would expect given the cruel conditions most political prisoners confront. She also finds examples of efforts to resist beyond survival. However, there are few cases where prisoners had such an important impact on the political process outside the prison (one exception is the role of IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland). Why was the South African case unique in this regard? Perhaps it is a result of the nature of the prisons, their prisoners, and the conditions of their confinement. In South Africa, most leading prisoners were together in the same prison rather than placed in different prisons, *gulag*-archipelago style. The prisoners also understood from the start that they would be imprisoned for lengthy periods. Those two conditions enabled and perhaps forced them to develop knowledge of and working relationships with other leaders as well as an incentive to get along with their jailers. Without those conditions, it seems unlikely that the Islanders would have had the opportunity or the willingness to construct their own prison society and the skills to help shape the new South Africa.

Despite this inability to apply some of her points to other cases, Buntman has written an important book. She has opened Robben Island, illustrated how the prisoners there were able to survive as long as they did, and shown how, despite their incarceration, they played an important role in the creation of the new South Africa.