

letters

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BENOIT B. MANDELBROT

IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Center

Yorktown Heights, New York

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

5/86

Apartheid

I have often found it bitterly amusing to receive an appreciative nod from acquaintances who discover that I have lived for over a year in the Soviet Union, followed by a murderous frown when they learn that I have spent an equal amount of time in South Africa. It is thus distressing to read the letter of A. Bhattacharya, Murray Goldman and T. Schaffer, and that of Charles Hyde-Wright, in the October *PHYSICS TODAY* (page 148).

Bhattacharya and his colleagues are probably correct when they say that "the violations of fundamental rights in South Africa are not on a par with those of other African states or the Soviet Union." If one were perverse enough to construct a scale of human-rights violations, at least one could say that the South African government oppresses only three-quarters of the population, whereas the same sort of laws in the USSR oppress virtually everybody. (Is this acceptable because it is no longer discriminatory?) And if you were one of the 100 000-300 000 victims of the recent Ugandan genocide, you might be hard pressed to rank South African atrocities above all others.

Bhattacharya, Goldman and Schaffer write that "it is totally irrelevant whether these universities claim to be racially neutral. They are subject to the same laws of apartheid and must comply. It is hard for us to imagine that a freedom-loving American physicist would accept a position anywhere in South Africa. . . . If this hurts South African physicists maybe they should think of emigration." I am skeptical that even they believe these statements. First, they are condemning certain South Africans because they were born there. Emigration is not easy, emotionally or legally. (Are Bhattacharya and his colleagues offering jobs?) Indeed, some love this troubled land and want to stay in order to help as they are able. Second, I doubt that Bhattacharya and his colleagues would object to an American who came to teach at the University of the Western Cape, a nonwhite and somewhat radical institution in Cape Town, which has recently been the scene of many protests against government actions. Neither have I heard complaints that Gandhi spent 20 years in South Africa. Third, while discriminatory policies do prevail at the Afrikaner universities (Stellenbosch, Orange Free State, Pretoria, Potchefstroom), other South African universities (Witswatersrand, Rhodes, Cape Town) are surprisingly liberal.

The University of Cape Town, of which I have firsthand experience, has a nonracial admissions policy, an affirmative-action program and a 15% nonwhite student population. This figure shows that Cape Town is more integrated than, say, the University of Texas, even if one adjusts for the percentage of nonwhite population in the country or state. Cape Town's liberal traditions appear to me genuine. For instance, the vice-chancellor, Stuart Saunders, has recently been elected president of the South African Institute of Race Relations. Several members of my department also belong to this organization, and one, cosmologist George Ellis, is chairman of its Cape Town division. Protests against repressive government actions are frequent, are supported by the faculty and are held in dangerous circumstances. Students and staff have been teargassed, beaten by the police and arrested. Clearly, the racial policies of an individual institution are reflected in its response to the apartheid laws.

In regard to Hyde-Wright's letter, I should mention that the University of South Africa at Pretoria, as distinguished from the University of Pretoria, is primarily a correspondence school and has a very large black enrollment. To the best of my knowledge it accepts students from any country in the world, regardless of race.

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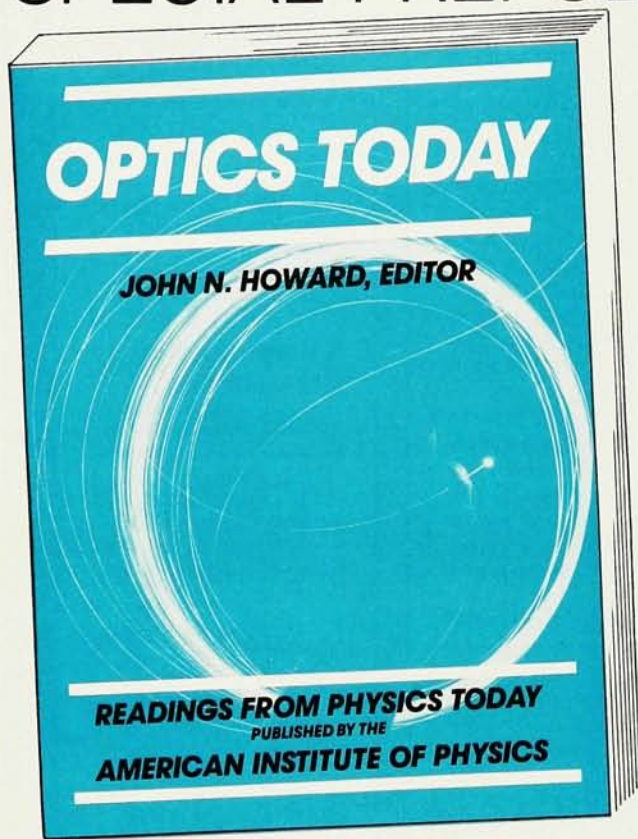
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letters

If the American Institute of Physics feels it should not run advertisements for certain universities, this is justifiable. But it should use a bit of—shall I say it?—discrimination to identify those institutions.

To conclude, the blanket condemnation of anything connected with South Africa shows that the authors, along with most Americans, fail to grasp three basic facts:

- ▶ No one hates an oppressive government more than those who live under it.
- ▶ The situation on the inside is always more differentiated than it appears from the outside.
- ▶ You can do more to help a cause when you're there than when you're not there.

For myself, the final irony is that I have been welcomed in South Africa by blacks, Indians, coloreds, Asians and most whites. The only people who seem to object to my presence here are liberal Americans and a few reactionary Afrikaners. Strange bedfellows indeed.

TONY ROTHMAN
University of Cape Town
South Africa

11/85

BHATTACHARYA REPLIES: That our letter on apartheid should cause a modicum of distress to some came to us as no surprise. It was intended to and it seems we eminently succeeded.

In our letter of mild admonition to PHYSICS TODAY with a cautionary word to fellow physicists we wished to point out the difference between a state that flaunts its racially repressive "laws" and one that at least on paper subscribes to the same ideals of racial equality as the West or one that has no laws at all. Here is what Ray Swart, opposition legislator in the all-white South African parliament, has to say about his own homeland: "There is probably less freedom in South Africa at present than there is in Communist Russia. The [South African] government is going beyond the people in the Kremlin when it comes to denying democratic rights to people" (*The New York Times*, 17 June 1986, page A12). A perverse fact that may somewhat cool Tony Rothman's anti-USSR ardor is that almost every dissident in the USSR has had the benefits of a good education; they are mathematicians, computer scientists and physicists, to name just a few professions. My own Russian emigré students can boast of far better schooling than their progeny are likely to get in a US public school. What is the corresponding record of South Africa? Up until 1981 the law did not even require black children to go to school. In 1982 they spent \$1199 on education for every white child and

\$145 for every black child. Given these figures, the "free admission" policies of the "surprisingly liberal" English-language universities of South Africa are without significance. Having thoroughly barred the outer door to education, the so-called inner "open door" policy at the university level is a fraud that even a mildly confused neoconservative should be able to see through. What is puzzling, however, is why Rothman, knowing, as he claims, "the situation on the inside," omits a few details concerning "the discriminatory policies" in force at, say, the University of Stellenbosch, of which we spoke in our letter. He could have easily devoted a few lines to this with information gained from the South African Institute of Race Relations, which monitors these matters and to which his brave and illustrious colleagues belong.

I am entitled to the same measure of skepticism about the reasons that prompt US physicists to go to South Africa given by Rothman. Bluntly speaking, the reason is most likely a professional one—a university job that is pleasant, particularly so when jobs in one's special field of interest are perhaps few back home—and not a Gandhian mission of struggle for the rights of the oppressed. It is plain honesty to admit it. Permit me, as a US liberal, to doubt equally that opportunities in education for blacks in South Africa in any institution are superior to those in the US.

Unless liberal South African physicists are prepared to go into Heisenberg-like "inner exile," they should give our suggestion serious thought. Where is the "condemnation" Rothman reads into that? The emotional and legal problems of emigration are going to be far less for them than for those who live daily under apartheid because of the color of their skin. As for jobs, they can all come here and help defend the "free world" from the "evil empire" with the umpteen billions that President Reagan plans to spend on his "Star Wars" scheme (scam?).

For reasons somewhat different from Rothman's I find myself in agreement with two of his statements: First, the white South Africans, liberal or otherwise, do indeed "love" their land; they've grabbed all but 13% of it. Second, he is right that "no one hates an oppressive government more than those who live under it—ask any black South African. I wonder if Rothman would have asked the scientists and scholars who left Nazi Germany in the 1930s to stay and fight because "you can do more . . . when you're there than when you're not there." And would he give the same advice to the "refuseniks" in the USSR, about whose plight

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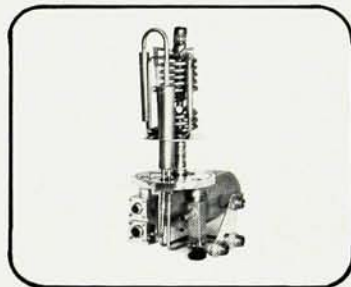
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letters

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we read so frequently in this column?

The kind of legerdemain by which Rothman lumps "most American liberals" with "reactionary Afrikaners" can put him in the same bed with the latter, because some variant of "you see, it is more complex than you think" has by now become the standard response of all apologists for the South African government's policies.

Thanks to a resolutely free and unfettered press and television, both of which are effectively muzzled in South Africa, US "liberals" grasp rather too well the slide into disaster that may have already begun. To work in South Africa as a scientist today only helps to prolong a regime whose collapse is inevitable, and the sooner Rothman and others realize this, the better for the world.

A. BHATTACHARYA

Community College of Philadelphia
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

7/86

I was perturbed by letters in your October issue that suggest a degree of misconception about the nature and functioning of the University of South Africa.

It is a completely multiracial university, open to all who qualify for admission. Nonwhites make up close to 40% of its student enrollment, including hundreds from neighboring black states.

All appointments are done on merit, and there are blacks on its tenured professional and lecturing staff.

THEO VAN WIJK

Principal and Vice-Chancellor
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa

2/86

Where credit is due

In an announcement by Wiley-Interscience of a forthcoming book, *Interferometry and Synthesis in Radio Astronomy*, which appeared on page 84 of the January issue of PHYSICS TODAY, the names of my two coauthors were inadvertently omitted. They are James M. Moran of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and George W. Swenson Jr of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

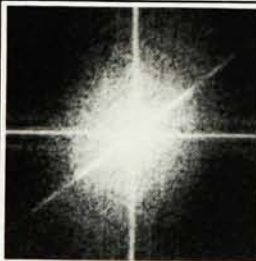
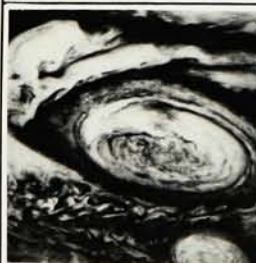
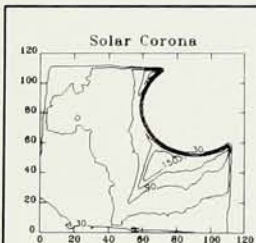
A. RICHARD THOMPSON

National Radio Astronomy Observatory
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2/86

Correction

July, page 78—In the story on the winners of the National Medals of Science, Robert Hofstadter (Stanford University) was inadvertently given a middle initial. He does not have one. □



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