

**richardjacksonterrorismblog**

*Richard Jackson's thoughts on terrorism, war, pacifism, political violence, intervention, torture, security and conflict resolution.*

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**How I was radicalized; or, the effects of opening your eyes**

Posted on [October 29, 2012](#)

It's a typical story. There's nothing unusual or exceptional about it, despite what the so-called 'experts' will try and tell you. It's a well-worn path that so many of life's travellers have trod leading from a kind of blissful ignorance to an uncomfortable awareness of all the violence cleverly hidden in plain sight; the brutality which daily crushes and bruises the human spirit. It's really nothing more than a gradual clearing of the eyes, a flowering of sight.

I was radicalized in stages, starting when I was a child growing up in rural Africa. My parents were missionaries in the Republic of Zambia. We lived on a mission station twenty miles down a dirt road that became a river of thick, sticky mud in the rainy season. It was not unusual for the driver of the mission vehicle, on his way to the local town to collect supplies, to have to leave his car mired in the middle of the road to find a local villager willing to lend an ox for an hour to pull the trapped car from the sucking mud. The mission station where we lived had a secondary school and a hospital. It served a large area far from the nearest town, an area without roads, electricity, running water, police, or any vestige of the bureaucratic architecture of the modern state. The people lived in mud huts, kept cows, goats and chickens, and grew maize as their staple food source, selling the surplus to the National Maize Board who, as the sole designated buyer, set the non-negotiable price they would pay for it. It was a system based openly on corruption and exploitation.

One of my early memories of our life in this harsh landscape was noticing how the local African children my own age all had massive swollen bellies which protruded through their tattered clothes on top of spindly legs and dusty bare feet. With a glazed look and mucus lines trailing from their noses and eyes, they would stop and gape at me. Sometimes, one would lean back with an arm crooked on his hip looking just like a heavily pregnant woman. My friends and I, bursting with shiny clean health, and blissfully unaware of the symptoms of malnutrition (we didn't even know what malnutrition was!), really thought this was hilarious. Did you see that? Look at their huge tummies! They look like your mum who's having a baby!

A few years later someone, an adult on the mission (I cannot remember now who it was, but I wonder if they ever knew the role they played in my radicalization process) told me why they had swollen bellies; how they must have lived with a gnawing hunger which clung to them every waking minute; how the lack of nutrition that early in life made their bellies swell, their eyes run, their hair change colour; and how it impeded childhood brain development, which probably meant that they would struggle in school, be consigned to a life of manual labour and subsistence in which their own children would no doubt also grow up with swollen bellies, glazed eyes and a brown tinge to their curly black hair. The saddest thing of all is that as adults they would be told by people who should have known better that they were stupid and ignorant because they were Africans. That's just how Africans

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talk about how we used to joke and giggle at the hungry, staring children. In case we had to remember how we treated food so casually, throwing it away when we didn't like the taste, dropping unfinished morsels on the very same ground our neighbors' children would walk in their bare, cracked feet.

I still feel a hot flush of shame even now when I think of it: my younger self, ignorantly laughing at starving children, mocking their misery, completely unaware of my role as a European missionary's son in the long history of colonialism and neocolonialism, or my place in the violent structures of global capitalism which provides me more wealth than I need to live and life opportunities undreamed of by previous generations, whilst simultaneously consigning other peoples' children to the poisonous, debilitating pregnancy of lifelong poverty.

This was the first little step on my path to radicalization. I've since learned to see and understand the vast, terrifying violence of systematic, human-induced poverty which has most of the world's people in its crushing grasp, not just in rural Africa, but also in the vast urban slums of the mega-cities of Asia and Central America; the millions of shuffling homeless people sleeping on the sidewalk of every single American city; the unseen and unheard people in the dusty tribal reservations of Australia; the generationally poor masses in the sink estates of Britain, and the decaying worker cities of Russia; and countless others, too many to ever name.

A couple of years ago I returned to Africa, to the places of my childhood. I saw the same children with the same swollen bellies. I quietly swore to myself once again that I would try my best to undermine the global system that made me see these same spindly-legged children over and over again, decade after decade.

Ten years after I had faced up to my cruel laughter I was on a bus, about to be radicalized for a second time.

I was seventeen and had just completed my Cambridge 'O' levels, the exams taken at 11:00am in the morning or 3:00pm in the afternoon to coincide exactly with the exams being sat in Cambridge itself. This was, I suppose, to prevent someone in Africa coming out of the exam early and calling long distance to give the questions to someone in Britain. It meant that most of the exams were conducted during the hottest part of the day. My head would be throbbing, my shirt stuck to my back with perspiration by the time I left the exam room.

My parents had decided it was time to return the family 'home' to New Zealand (it was a place I had not lived in for more than a few months over my entire seventeen years, but all the adults around me insisted it was my 'real' home, despite the fact that I knew no one there and couldn't even picture it) so I could attend university – if I passed my exams, of course. However, before we left the land where I was born, the place where my only friends were, where all my memories resided, where I'd first kissed a girl and held her hand watching a film, where I'd once caught a snake, seen an elephant in the wild, learned to run for hours at a time, written my first poem; before I left that place, I wanted to hitch-hike down to South Africa, say good-bye to a girl I used to like who lived in Stellenbosch, and see the country the whole world seemed to be talking about. It was 1983 and I wanted to say good-bye to the continent which had made me who I was.

To my surprise, my parents agreed to let me, their seventeen year old acne-ridden, sometimes angst-filled son, hitch-hike alone from Lusaka to Harare, and then down to Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, Stellenbosch, up the coast to Port Elizabeth and Durban, and then back to Johannesburg, Harare and finally home to Lusaka –

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toilets were completely dark and flooded.) The only stipulation for my journey was that I had to send a weekly telegram to let them know I was alright. It still amazes me that I was able to do such a thing at such an age, in such a place. I can't imagine any father or mother today so easily lifting off the lead blanket of anxiety which seems to be every parent's burden to allow their child to wander the developing world with nothing but a backpack, some cash and a list of names of people who might or might not be able to put you up, should you be able to get to that town in a day.

One hot day I climbed onto a public bus on the outskirts of Cape Town, happy not to be huddling on the back of a lorry or crammed into the cab of a pick-up truck with four large men and a dog. The bus driver, a young blond European with dark sunglasses, looked up in his mirror at an old African woman sitting in the front row. 'Hey, Mama, get in the back so this bwana can sit down', he said. 'Yes, boss', she answered. Her tired body seemed to creak and groan as she pulled herself to her feet and shuffled down the bus with her bags. In the crowded rear, she was forced to stand looking out the window. I could not see her expression.

I sat down, unable to stem the relief I felt at having a comfortable seat for the next twenty minutes.

In that instant, in the wash of guilt and shame and joy that flooded over me, I truly saw the leering, demonic face of the apartheid system. It was as clear as day and it cut right through me. Its casual barbarity, in which an old woman, most likely bone tired from a long day working as a servant, and weary from an entire lifetime of obtaining permits, security checks, discrimination, crushed aspirations, servitude and exhausting poverty, was made to stand on a bumpy bus so a healthy seventeen year old boy with privileged skin could sit comfortably, slapped me hard in the face, shattering my complacent sense of self.

That was a Damascus moment for me, a real fork in my road. I turned myself around and started for home (wherever that was) that day, vowing never to come back to a country where my skin colour made fellow human beings suffer; where I was made complicit against my will in a vast enterprise of crushing millions of human beings so a chosen few could drink gin and tonic by the pool without the fear of having to share with people they considered inferior; where my own lack of moral courage to recognize suffering and injustice and take a stand against it, and a self-imposed ignorance of my fellow human beings was exposed in a thousand different ways every day I was there.

It was the day I joined the anti-apartheid movement. And the anti-fascist movement; the anti-racist movement; the anti-imperialist movement; the anti-nuclear movement; the peace movement – any movement that sought to resist and oppose and transform all the visible and invisible chains of violence that crush and grind millions of fellow human beings every day. Because I recognised that all these evils were connected. They were all part of the same unjust, violent system. It was the day I decided to become a student, to learn, and to never let my lack of knowledge or understanding be an excuse for insensitivity or unintended cruelty. I suppose it was the day I first became an international politics scholar. You would probably also say that it was the day I was properly radicalized. I opened my eyes and saw the world; and then I saw myself in it.

Twenty five years after forcing an old lady from her seat on the bus, I am sitting in my university office. A very serious but friendly man from the Home Office is asking me about a former student who is now applying to work

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head and think hard for a moment. ‘You know, I am very sorry to say he did not. I really try so hard to radicalize my students, you know, to help them see what’s going on in the world, to motivate them to go out and really struggle against all its injustices, to resist and challenge and question the violence inherent to the status quo – to become activists, not just observers.’ I pause. ‘But to my great disappointment, I can honestly say that I don’t remember [redacted] ever expressing any such views. Really, he always kept pretty quiet and I seem to recall that he wrote very average essays’, I say with genuine sincerity.

The man from the Home Office frowns, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. I don’t think he can see my point at all.

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#### About richardjacksonterrorismblog

I am currently Professor of Peace Studies and the Director of the National Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Prior to this, I was Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales, UK. I study and teach on issues of pacifism and nonviolence, terrorism, political violence, conflict resolution and war. I have published several books on these topics, including: *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (Routledge, 2016); *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011; co-authored with Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning and Marie Breen Smyth); *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Cases* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010; edited by Richard Jackson, Eamon Murphy and Scott Poynting); *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009; edited by Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning); *Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-first Century: Principles, Methods and Approaches* (Ann Arbor MI: Michigan University Press, 2009; co-authored with Jacob Bercovitch); and *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005). I am also the editor-in-chief of the academic journal, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. In 2014, I published a research-based novel entitled, *Confessions of a Terrorist* (Zed Books, 2014) which explores the mind and motivation of a terrorist.

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## 5 Responses to *How I was radicalized; or, the effects of opening your eyes*



**Anne-Marie Judson** says:

October 29, 2012 at 6:38 pm

So much so that it is now almost impossible to see the injustice that you can cause to white students who have been through

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