

Jonathan Power

Like Water on Stone : The Story of Amnesty International
(London: The Penguin Press, 2001, 332pp.)

“ We live in a world which, on balance, despite all its many wars, poverty, refugees, weapons development, arms sales and human rights abuses, is actually changing for the better at a rate quite unprecedented in human history. Amnesty has been both part-instigator and part-beneficiary of this tide. What is needed at this time is men and women with the necessary insight to seize the moment: to take the rising tide and push the boats even further out to sea; to be demanding of our institutions, systems and traditions; above all, to challenge our orthodoxies.”

Jonathan Power highlights the history of Amnesty International by looking at its ‘founding fathers’ and at some of the countries where it has made efforts to free political prisoners, lessen the use of torture, abolish the death penalty and improve the over-all legal system.

Amnesty International is the product of the imagination of one man, Peter Benenson, a Catholic lawyer of Jewish descent, born of English and Russian parents. Late in 1960, his imagination was fired by a newspaper report about two students in Lisbon during the dark days of the Salazar dictatorship. The students had been arrested and sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom at a time when Portugal was fighting a war on two fronts against Africans who were also asking for freedom.

As Power writes “How, Benenson, wondered could the Portuguese authorities be persuaded to release these victors of outrageous oppression? Somehow a way must be devised to bombard the Salazar regime with written protests — an amazing contention that prisoners of conscience could be released by writing letters to governments.

“Benenson approached two people in London whom he thought would be interested in the idea and whose reputation and contacts would help give it momentum: Eric Baker, a prominent Quaker, and Louis Blom-Cooper, the internationally-known lawyer.” They were soon joined by Sean MacBride, a former Foreign Minister of Ireland and Secretary-General of the International Commission of Jurists, a Geneva-based organization working for the rule of law. They turned to David Astor, editor of the influential Sunday newspaper *The Observer*, who agreed to give a full page for the first presentation of the idea. The presentation was picked up by newspapers around the world with which Astor had contacts.

Thus began the “Threes Network” — each group of Amnesty supporters would adopt three prisoners who had not used or advocated violence and work for their release. One would be from a communist-bloc country, one from the West, and one from the ‘Third World’ of developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

What is remarkable about Amnesty was its rapid popular appeal and the ability of its London secretariat to supply timely information to its members throughout the world. Thus people, alone or in groups, can act together to write, fax and telephone appeals to government officials, prison authorities, and newspapers in the countries concerned. Amnesty groups do not work on cases in their own country but are always appealing for the welfare of prisoners

in another country. Likewise, Amnesty members are asked not to investigate situations in their own country. This is necessary protection from many dictatorial countries which are always on the lookout for ‘enemies’.

Amnesty is structured around a centralized secretariat of some 400 people in London and over a million members throughout the world. Information gathering, research, presentation of the information is done in London and then sent for follow-up action to groups in many countries. As Power notes “ Most of the letters go unanswered. Groups can work for years on behalf of prisoners and never know whether or not their work had achieved anything. Even if they are actually released, it is hard to know if the group was responsible for their freedom. Amnesty is always reluctant to claim credit in such circumstances. So keeping up morale is a major problem. In the end, the work depends on the sheer dedication of group members.”

In addition to the long time efforts which gives the book its title “like water on stone”, there are people who are in need of urgent help because they may face imminent execution, or torture or are very ill often from bad conditions of detention for a long period. Thus Amnesty developed an ‘Urgent Action Network’ of some 85,000 people to send fast appeals on behalf of those at risk.

In addition Amnesty has developed “special missions”— visits to a country of a small delegation for enquiry, to observe a trial or to present Amnesty’s point of view. “ Delegates are selected according to their specific experience, expertise, country of origin and gender...Mission members, apart from Amnesty’s staff, are unpaid. Missions are subject to a strict set of rules. For example, no mission is allowed to enter a country clandestinely. Often a decision is made not to make a statement to the press while the mission is in the country. (This avoids undue pressure for a statement on their findings.) A memorandum is then sent to the government on their findings and recommendations. In some cases, there will be follow-up exchanges with the government about the interpretation of the law, more detailed information on prisoners, and so on.”

Amnesty is a good example of the work of trans-frontier non-governmental organizations. The organization has relatively narrow but important aims. Its principles are based on universally-recognized human rights set out in United Nations documents to which countries have agreed. The organization has a ‘high profile’ so that countries with which it interacts knows of its work and aims. Governments may attack Amnesty, but they do not ask “What do you do?” There is a competent and dedicated staff and a large number of active volunteers. In its 45 years of activity, Amnesty has been a leader in developing an effective approach to human rights violations and is increasingly active in education about human rights as people need to know the standards by which governments should act. As, alas, there are still many violations brutal and short-sighted governments, the efforts of Amnesty will continue and expand.

Rene Wadlow

