

Man/Nature: A Case History of the Pathology

'Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or that between men and animals (as is the case of those whose business it is to use their body, and can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as of all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.'
Aristotle

'Ou mense vrou-mense, kaffirs and kinders is die selde.' Afrikaner saying

Chamberlain, Milner and Rhodes went to war with President Kruger in order to protect the natives in 1899. The ensuing war saw the British corral and consign Afrikaner women and children as well families of natives to concentration camps where many of them died. In 1910, eight years after the Peace of Vereeniging was signed in 1902, the victorious British endorsed the defeated Afrikaner government's policy of 'no equality in Church or State' for the natives, when forming the Union of South Africa, a colony of the British Empire.

Britain became the first country in the world in 1948 to recognize the newly elected Malan government, whose apartheid laws and policies were considered 'barbaric', a travesty of all things civilized nations stood for. Britain supported apartheid in a move which violated and undermined the values and principles for which the allied nations went to war in WWII, which ended only three years previously.

Now, if British governments did not betray the benighted natives, they played a cruel joke on them. Maybe Aristotle can explain.

Sad Landscapes*

The project was begun in 1997 as an exploration of sites associated with spectacular events of horror in Europe and Asia. It has since evolved in its conception and scope to embrace ecological and natural disasters. In the process I try to trace evolving perceptions regarding man and landscape in what I call Aristotle's nightmare.

At the time when I began this project South Africa was still debating the fate of Robben Island, the tragedy that is Vlakplaas and other landscapes with terrible memories. I was looking for examples about how other countries were coping with memories of events filled with traumas similar to our own. Suffice it to say, my forays in the metropolises of Europe have since convinced me of the banality of horror. Moreover, of the futility and enormity of such an undertaking because of lack of a clear focus and conception.

This journey began at home in Soweto. It took me to ancestral caves in the Free State, places invested with spiritual meaning. I then looked at sites of concentration camps and burial grounds in Middelburg, Greylingstad and Brandfort – an inventory of atrocities, in an effort to reclaim the South African landscape.

Namibia, once German Sudwest, is less known as a site of near genocide of the Herero in 1904. I visited the battle sites and war graves there. From there I went to Europe, Asia and the former USSR in order to gain perspective on the images of South Africa and its troubled history.

I don't think I exaggerate when I say the Holocaust and Apartheid are the two most memorable evils which hypnotized the world in the twentieth century. To compare apartheid with the holocaust is very tempting, albeit futile. One being that the British pioneered the use of concentration camps in the last century in an effort to contain recalcitrant Boers and their guerrilla tactics in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. Another being, apartheid and the holocaust share the same progenitor, Nazi ideology. It is no secret that National Party leadership was composed mostly of convicted Nazi sympathizers, some of whom had studied in Germany. France's Jean-Marie Le Pen regards the final solution as a 'detail' of history. Austria's Jörg Haider would like the world to take a more relaxed view of Hitler.

I saw disquieting developments in Poland regarding Hitler's death camps. You can now go on a Schindler's List tour of the camps. Aside from the camps you have the neglected Jewish Ghetto mass graves. In Vietnam you can do the DMZ tour to the sound of late-1960s and early-1970s American pop hits and listen to anti-American government propaganda.

The Jewish experience in France during the Vichy Government is little known outside Francophone countries. I guess this situation is being remedied because of recent high-profile trials of Nazi collaborators since Jacques Chirac came into power. He, more than any of the previous governments in France, acknowledges the culpability of French in the final solution because of actions taken by the government during the war. In the past, the French, chiefly De Gaulle, through selective amnesia, wished only to extol the virtues of the French resistance. At Drancy, a transit holding camp, one stop before Auschwitz, some Jewish groups work to keep the memory of what happened in that place, a *sammellager*, alive.

While Germany was debating the question of whether or not there should be a national holocaust memorial in that country, or whether the camps themselves should serve as their own memorials, neo-Nazi groups ironically helped to keep the memory of the holocaust alive. Their efforts to raze the remaining death camps in Germany, in a bid to erase the holocaust from memory, were trumpeted in the press. The question then is, would a monument invite remembrance or, through a kind of containment, forgetting?

In my travels through Europe and Asia I am left wondering whether we South Africans can ever learn anything from there on how to deal with our own terrible memories. Does Spain after Franco offer an alternative solution? Spain chose to forget the past and get on with building a future, with varying degrees of success. Pep Subiros of Barcelona declaims the Spanish solution in these words: 'The recent Spanish experience is not very exemplary. We mostly have chosen to forget that past, so that we are not very well prepared to deal with its current manifestations.'

When I began, my brief was simple. I am now finding myself in the murky and slippery terrain that is memory. Landscape and Memory. How do we deal with the memory of the past? Who owns this memory? Do we need this memory? What is re-remembered and how? How long is the memory? Who can be trusted with this memory? Tzvetan Todorov in his essays cautions about the dangers to which memory can be put to use. South Africa, a rainbow nation, would do well to take heed.

*My use of the word landscape is arbitrary at best. I have stretched the use to its fullest in order to invoke literal, colloquial, psychological, philosophical, mystical, metaphysical and metonymic meanings and applications. See also Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: AA Knopf, 1995), especially his assertion: 'Landscape is a construct of memory, it is a work of the mind "built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock".'