

## **An outsider looks in (or, further Notes from the Middle World)**

« *Und doch ist das Lachen vielleicht der einzige Beweis menschlicher Freiheit* »  
- Nikos Dimou, Über das Unglück ein Grieche zu sein

**1.** Please bear with me when I propose my thoughts and reflections in a fragmentary way.

In the world we live in with its rapid evolution in modes of production ; its exponential demographic explosion with a concomittant increase in the percentage of people who will never find work, and ever less water and food for the poor ; with inadequate educational systems ; with wars and epidemics and the resultant population displacements so that huge numbers of migrants roam the earth in search of survival ; in the absence of effective international solidarity ; a world where, other than global capitalism and fundamentalist Islamism, there's no longer a coherent eschatology or a worldview (perhaps simplistic) allowing for the creative potential of a moral imagination to develop ; where we seem to have no defence against the arbitrary rule of a caste of politicians and bureaucrats and their power abuse and corruption ; in a world enclosed by narcissism presented as personal 'liberation' and 'self-fulfillment', by social decay and depression, a world become slippery with political correctness, which is nothing but moralistic intolerance masquerading as deference for the private space and pain of the other ; a world where cynicism in the guise of a Putin or an Erdogan or a Netanyahu or a Bachar al-Assad or a Donald Trump or a Zuma... passes for *real-politik* ; on a planet that we, its inhabitants, are destroying in an orgy of greed and self-indulgent consumerism... :

in such a world and at times like these it would be presumptuous and misleading to pretend to an integrated analysis or a coherent synthesis and discourse. We will leave such a conceit to the preachers and the prophets, the charlatan politicians, the spymasters, the bankers, the rabble-rousers, the statisticians, the television donkeys.

**2.** I also plead your indulgence for being personal in my reading. Maybe I'm generalising my own confusion and that what we experience ought rather to be ascribed to historical determinism, to the internal contradictions of a world profit system which can be understood and interpreted. After all, what we're witnessing is also the vicious thrashing of Western colonialism bolstered by world capitalism attempting to secure its plunder, and then the reactions to that system of oppression and exploitation.

But I can only use my own trajectory as conduit. Better to proceed from picture to picture, from day to day and maybe from question to question. The quintessentially European attempts by Enlightenment to bring about rationality in human affairs have long since been instrumentalised by Power to promote the darkness within which it can flourish, in the coils of which we flounder.

Reason falls short and may be a trap.

(I have spent enough time writing, attempting to impose a sequentiality on this process of dialectical interaction between the living matter of language – the outside – and – inside - the broken line of becoming conscious, to know that patterns *do* emerge and that these may approximate ‘meaning’.)

**3. *Illustrations of the thrashing as of beheaded chickens, of whom tens of thousands have come home to roost*** : recently I saw an appalling series of documentaries detailing the continuation of colonialism in practice.

The first one showed mostly young illegal miners in Burkina Faso, digging like moles (and often dying in their holes) for gold that, if found in the pan-washed pebbles, will earn them perhaps one Euro a day each – the gold that will be hoarded as ostentatious richness by people far away who couldn’t care less where it came from. The young miners are doped on a mix of cocaine and prescription medicine no longer valid for consumption in the countries of origin, dumped on Africa. (One wonders who produced the drugs.)

The second film showed how bales of *fripe* (from the latin *faluppa* meaning ‘fibre’ or ‘little thing without worth’) - second-hand clothing probably discarded to be collected and ‘donated’ by various instances in France - end up in Senegal to be traded commercially where it will change local fashions and destroy the fabrication of indigenous cloth. A case of jobs scrounged from the cast-off excesses of the West destroying local creativity.

The third example showed how frozen chickens of inferior quality from France, meant only for Africa, massively flood the local market in Cotonou – to the extent that home producers must now freeze their chickens and offer them wrapped as if imported in order to sell them. I’m told that chickens never to be found on American dining tables are similarly exported in bulk to Africa.

**4.** These are some isolated examples of the nexus of disfunctioning that lead to one end of the problem : thousands of valid young people who believe there is no future for them in Africa trying to get into Europe and stay there, often illegally, to make some money by any means possible to be remitted to their families back home.

What are the outlines ? There is no state in Africa, construed and demarcated to serve foreign appetites, that can adequately provide for the requirements of its own citizens. African politicians are not only corrupt and inefficient and often alienated from their constituencies, but they also serve as intermediaries and purveyors of outside interests. The only striking power African armed forces have is to make war on the people. *Power* is the name of the game in town that interests the predators – the power, preferably entrenched, to access pomp and privilege and patronage and cronyism and state-plundering. And impunity. ‘Progress’ there may be in Africa, but no development that will last, no institutions to guarantee and protect this. Generations of young Africans have been brainwashed by Western gadgets made in China, often relying on scarce components extracted from Africa under miserable conditions, so that their *imaginaire*

now consists of desires inculcated by this make-believe world of opulence and material security and ease.

What are the further outlines ? That the West (or the North, if you prefer) consider the rest of the world as their zones of influence, needed to fuel their economic and often, as with France and Germany, also their cultural wellbeing. That Western armed forces mandated, it was said, by European and American representational governments, intervened repeatedly to destroy old and nascent state demarcations (Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan and Libya come to mind) to divide and rule and maybe share the spoils. That they had neither the understanding nor the resolve or the intention to contain the ensuing chaos. Wars are profitable too, provided it is other people far away who do the dying.

That they helped engineer the establishment of a Jewish state, partly to disculpate themselves of guilt in having persecuted Jews over the centuries, and then in effect allow and abet that state to squeeze out of existence the Palestinians.

How could Europe not have foreseen the consequences ? Why is it unprepared for the tens of thousands of refugees, exploited by human traffickers feeding off their despair, who try to force their way into Europe ?

The lasting damage is that the West – Europe, America – intervene, disrupt, destroy and leave (as long as they can secure the flow of petrol and gas) in the name of democracy and human rights. How could it then expect these values not to be soiled ?

5. There have always been movements of people over the face of the earth, fleeing wars or dictatorships or famine or national disasters, to look for passages to new worlds, to conquer territories, to capture slaves and markets, to explore, to extend trade, to share the generosity of trying to understand and ameliorate the ‘under-developed’ world, to experience the *frisson* of foreignness, to revitalise the jaded senses... The nomadic instinct is part of our nature.

History repeats itself and it is not clear that we learn or even retain anything from experiences in the past. Perhaps we are doomed (programmed ?) to play out the scenarios – more or less horrible, more or less utopian – built from the contradictions of our human condition.

I’m the descendant of such a diaspora. My ancestors, at least from one of my fathers’ side, left Europe either willingly or in despair (as far as I know from somewhere in Germany) to look for a future in what was later to become South Africa. The employees, adventurers, heretics, *glücksritter*, fortune seekers and riff-raff in the service of the Dutch East India Company that established a halfway station on their route to the Far East at the southern tip of the continent, came from nearly every European kingdom and province of the time. Add to that, and thus add to my genetic pool, the craftsmen and slaves and political or religious exiles proscribed to the Cape from Company possessions in the East. Add to that the people who’d always lived and moved over that part of the world as pastoralists and hunters, in tribal or clan or even ‘national’ groupings that would soon be dislocated and decimated by the European intrusion of their space. Part of my ancestry also comes from them.

In acculturation and hybridisation, from processes of submission, dispossession, seduction, adaptation, becoming other, a new tribe was forged : the Afrikaners - meaning the descendants of the mixing of Europeans and indigenous people and slaves.

Can there be any progress – survival even – without the interpretation and enactment of power ? Can there ever be justification for exercising power that is not posited on the recognition of so-called differences among groupings of people and thereby, on the definition of the other ? Can there be power that is not rooted in the fallacy of purity and superiority – of ‘race’, doctrine, belief, intention, destiny, goal, or maybe even methods ?

Soon the history, the natural reality of intermarriage and survival and the usurpation of power would lead to the bounding of *two* new tribal formations, each with many internal variants : *Afrikaners* as the lighter-skinned results of the mixing, and *Coloureds* as darker-skinned Afrikaners. What they had in common as shared vein of sameness and difference was the coming about of a new language, a creole tongue, Afrikaans.

The rest is the history we know, of intrusion and exploration and conquest and acquisition and appropriation. Of wars : frontier wars, wars of the Boers against British imperialism, and then the long struggle of black nationalism against those that were depicted as settlers, a struggle that would both admit to the complexity of liberation history and to the irreversible results of modernisation or acculturation that had come about, and simultaneously deny and reject these. The struggle for state power, for territorial domination, was at stake. It was assumed that the rest – legitimacy, freedom, equality, perhaps even justice – would flow from ‘liberation’ and the overthrow of the abominable Apartheid regime.

Black nationalism triumphed and did not find the antidote to the abuse of power or to the urge to monopolise control and patronage to the advantage of the cadres, the ruling predators and their cronies. Like the white (or whitish) nationalism of before it enables skin colour and cultural and linguistic differences to be the marker of belonging or not belonging, as to who will be citizen and who subject, and ultimately to exclude the foreigner. The goal now is to legitimate a homogeneous ‘nation’ that would marginalise and in due time expel the diverse and the different, ruled over and misruled by a faction within the majority alliance that still drapes itself in the tattered legitimacy of the struggle against injustice and for national liberation, and for whom the state is the boundless cave of Ali Baba. The only question remaining is whether Ali Baba is the pseudonym of the Gupta family or of the giggling President Zuma.

And the result, for now at least, is that the demographic composition of the country, according to categories imposed by the white minority dispensation of the time, is used as blunt tool to justify the hogging of power and to impose cultural cohesion. In practice it means that, in the name of ‘Africanisation’ one language only, Globish, will be used and taught. It implies that we are expected to forego the vital and creative and enriching and transformative interactions between over-arching goals on the one hand, and regional or cultural diversity on the other. The National Democratic Revolution posits the disappearance of the Afrikaners as the distinctive result of bastardisation.

2000 years ago, Ovid commented thus on exile : « Beyond lies nothing but chillness, hostility, frozen waves of an ice-hard sea. » Much later Bob Dylan would take the

thought further and remind us that in the end we're all exiles – even the super-rich who won't be taking any of it with them. »

6. Early in 1960 I came to Europe, not intending to stay, but also not knowing that it would be a very long time before I could go back home. And certainly unaware, perhaps, that there would never again be a 'home' to go back to, just as one cannot return to the lost country of one's youth. I came as an African of the whitish Afrikaner variety. Much later I would realise that my commitment to the struggle in South Africa against a barbarous system imposed by people of my tribe – none of which I regret and would not do again – was a futile attempt to help shape an environment where true transformation towards dignity and equal opportunities could take root, a 'home' where the continued « making-each-other-different » without prejudicing the outcome of the mutation, a sort of permanent revolution therefore, would be the practice of the land. That was not going to happen.

There was then no such place as 'Europe' either that I could identify and be part of, even though according to the classification then propagated in South Africa I was considered to be a European.

What did Europe evoke at the time ? I was painfully aware of its exclusionary, colonialist policies. After all, we were still in the middle of the Algerian war with its atrocities of torture and the OAS in France making its presence felt – a precursor to Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris many years later. African independence, in general, was still to be granted by the European powers to their client states. Salazar was still the big man in Portugal (where I first landed), the *Caudillo* Franco was haughtily alive and unrepentant in Spain and actively tolerated and supported by his Western allies. The Roman Catholic Church, in Spain at least, was as before stealing children from poor families at birth to sell them to richer, childless, devout Falangist couples. (I can't remember that countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, would conceive of themselves as becoming part of Europe then.)

But already opposition by citizens all over Europe to the long and iniquitous Vietnam war was mobilising and coalescing progressive forces, and the same would happen in support of campaigns for emancipation in Latin America. International (and internationalist) solidarity was a reality. 'Europe' was in the making among people of all walks of life, aware of its besmirched history certainly, but developing a collective purpose powerful enough to serve as foil to American imperialism and Russian totalitarianism. Idealism and the acceptance of solidarity started being essential characteristics of a Europe in construction. This was not to be a compound of nationalisms and not just a common market, it was believed then, but the coming together on equal terms of a generation that had successfully slain the dragon of warfare between Germany and the rest to construct a Europe that could serve as example and resource for the poor embarking upon development, a Europe of values and of cultural creativeness intensely aware of their relationship to the downtrodden all over the world, a Europe that would retain the specificities of the textures making the component countries different from one another whilst agreeing, in an elan of trust and sharedness,

to abolish the borders and to harmonise human rights that would include the right to a dignified existence. A Europe that would not be dictated to by big capital.

All of these generous battles for secularism, for the freedom of opinion and expression and movement, for an independent judiciary and strong civil societies expressing themselves, inter alia, in a vigorously independent and innovative media sector culminated, symbolically, in the « change of generations » during the early summer months of 1968. In retrospect one can say it was the European Spring.

7. Let me pause for a moment as I try to spell out my reminiscence. There is something about the human hand that seems to hold all of the contradictions of our existence, more so even than the heart or, in some traditions, the liver. It is the hand that caresses, soothes, creates, feeds, plants, gives. It is also the hand that holds the stone to be used as weapon. It is the same hand, as the fascists with the silver lettering on their black banners made clear on the screens in our living rooms, that rests in a gesture of nearly tender reassurance on the shoulder or the neck of the victim, the fellow human arbitrarily chosen for execution, before taking up the bloodied knife to cut off the head.

It is also the hand that points, that writes rubbing up against the words as if trying to ease its wounds, which will sign the treaties of 'good intentions' that must estrange it.

8. What happened to the humanist Europe of tolerance and hospitality ? What became of the alternative to the American model or to China's all-devouring and blithely unprincipled surge for economic supremacy in the world ?

A fortress. A space, still nominally shared, where we see the resurgence of walls and barbed wire barriers. Of course, there *is* such a phenomenon as spatial recognition which constitutes a communal sense of belonging, perhaps of possession and of a common destiny. This 'space' will be physical (the landscape, the architecture, the climate), social and maybe historical (the laws and customs, the myths and what will be described as national interests, the story of statehood, and particularly the language). How was the European conviction of belonging being threatened ?

It took the arrival of a few hundred thousand desperate migrants for the bubble of the much vaunted common purpose and tolerance to burst. Each country now seems to react in terms of its own interests or ignorance or callousness, and always with the demagoguery of populist posturing in mind. Measures were announced by bureaucrats and politicians who clearly were unimaginative and reactionary in their approach, even though they seemed to give only fitful and superficial attention to the question. Positions were not coordinated or, when decided upon jointly, not carried out. No wonder the border states felt that Schengen was not adequately protected. Along the way Turkey was given the opportunity to blackmail Europe, and Europe came up with the humiliating solution of entering the trade in human flesh : for every migrant legally granted asylum one 'illegal' was to be sent back to Turkey.

Two types of reaction are prevalent : the opportunistic discourse of playing the nationalist card of barely disguised xenophobia – in most European states popular perceptions regarding migrants are now defined by rightist parties ; and repression.

How easy it turned out to be for bands of criminals of immigrant origin, the alienated results of a botched integration, committing acts of terror on their own or as part of a larger strategy to sow panic - provided they could pass this off as being done in the name of the Prophet - to disrupt Western societies !

The Europe so many of us had dreamt about as means and method for the transformation in the concept of power and, particularly, of citizen participation and the accountability to the people of those elected to represent their interests, did not come about. What we have is a super-state gravely deficient in democracy. The old truth, which we also saw unfolding in South Africa and now ever more in the United States, became evident : that you cannot brutally repress and exploit those who do not share your origins and your privileges without, in the distention of morals and the blunting of awareness, eventually destroying yourself.

People have lost the sense of being able to inflect their own understanding and their destinies. The world has become too disjointed, too doomed for us to take part in. When we do it will be mostly in folkloristic ways. We have been dispossessed of agency.

In Europe, the rot is expressed in people whose salient attribute would now be that they are consumers. « *I buy – without necessarily knowing where it comes from – or, I scrounge for a living, and therefore I am.* » Citizen concerns, oscillating between purely repressive reactions and the politically correct speak of the unengaged, or atrophied in a shell of narcissism where one can indulge in « *the freedom to be you* », would seem to be channeled through the social media, a Facebook where the individual isolation is accentuated by the number of « *friends* » he or she has. Disempowerment presented as empowerment of the individual hungry for attention, for a sense of being.

States now serve as mechanisms to reflect and promote the interests of the powerful. The European super-state - the compromise 'holding' among nations as expressed through the organs of the Union, that is, among their politicians and coveys of unellected bureaucrats and experts and lobbyists, the decision-makers without ethical depth but with a lot of nationalist posturing - is little more than a bulwark of liberal capitalism. The European Parliament might as well sit on Mars for all the proximity and accountability that it has to the European people. The consensus among the caste of technicians would still seem to be that progress (amassing riches) is infinite. There is a refusal to admit that this 'progress' spreading its tentacles over the world is predicated on the growing impoverishment of the vast majority of people living on our planet, including here in Europe. The Greek crisis has already shown, and continues to do so, that the real interests of a market-driven Europe are strictly financial. It cannot be about the well-being of the people. Only profit matters.

Europe will be remembered as a manufacturer of arms and a consumer of drugs, as the conveyer belt for Chinese junk, as the adjunct to those international instances truly and cynically embodying power : Monsanto, Bayer and other pharmaceutical multi-nationals, Airbus, Volkswagen, the banks, Goldman Sachs, Facebook, Nestlé...

9. Allow me to allude to an illustration of the condition of being a migrant. It was given to me by some-one who now finds himself in this Nowhere. Quite appropriately, I don't know where the fable originated, and perhaps the person who gave it to me does not either because there will be a total break between *before* and *now* even though memories surface from time to time and are transformed in the process of recollection. The *future* or the *beyond* is unimaginable.

This is how it was told to me :

*Everything is dark, so it seems. People are dressed in dark clothes and it is as if their faces are black. We are herded together in huge, gloomy, derelict buildings. Those of us who were here first object to the new arrivals that also have to be accommodated, perhaps because we instinctively try to reconstitute a space of our own. It must be inherent to human nature. There are not many children among us or maybe it is just that they are so silent. More of us keep coming all the time ; hundreds must be fitted into houses that were meant for only ten or at most fifteen people.*

*One day we see a black cat climbing up a wall and disappearing through an opening into the roof. We pile furniture one on top of the other and one of us, a migrant, scrambles to the top to see where the cat went, how it managed to escape to freedom. He reports back that there's a space between the roof and the ceiling and there must be at least four score and one black cats up here, big and small, all mewling silently.*

*In the corner of the huge communal shed where we're kept there's a big black box. It is as big as a container on a ship but square and without any opening or even a crack to let in daylight. It is also soundproof. From time to time one of us will be summoned to spend time in the black box. This is an anomaly because there is no time in there either to be found or leave behind, you cannot even see your hands and if it weren't for the memory of the body you wouldn't know that you still existed. Nobody knows how long he will stay in there. We don't know whether this is to prepare us for citizenship or to purge us of all memory of who we are or were and of where we came from. It cannot be meant as punishment because we know we have done nothing wrong.*

*We do not know what to do with the corpses. We only remember that they ought to be washed and wrapped in clean cloth before inhumation or incineration. But we are no longer allowed the privilege of responsibility.*

*Sometimes we are allowed out on the street. It is too painful to be there though. We are blinded by the whiteness of the city. It brings back too many memories – flashes of war, landscapes we loved, rivers we crossed, the faces of people mewling soundlessly. These are the far-away pictures of death before life, or perhaps we are dead and what surfaces now are of the life we so deeply buried under rubble and the distances of our endless wandering. Besides, we are not meant to remember who we were, where we came from.*

*I remember that I opened a door, my beloved. You'd gone all grey, your head is trembling as if with the ague, as if you aged long before your time. You look at me and your lips move but not to say anything. No, don't say anything. Perhaps it is better not to know we no longer have a language to share.*



**10.** There could be resistance. We need not submit to the wipe-out of historical memory, caused only too often by a surfeit of information with no guidelines to help us filter the really important from the white noise of 'communication'. The human is an obsessive being, constantly duplicating his need to remain connected and informed.

We can consciously and collectively work for a fair access to resources for all and the equitable distribution of means – or pay the price for disequilibrium, pressure and contestation. We cannot pretend that the world is not one habitat. From Europe, we must look beyond our culture of seeing the rest of the world as either a source to enrich or enchant or horrify us, or as an under-developed but magical part of the planet that cannot and should not be expected to abide by the concepts we pretend to have developed. We must hold African elites responsible for selling out the aspirations and the hopes of their own populations. And from Africa we need to face the schizophrenia of pretending to want to do away with everything that is not African while benefitting from the protection and the benefits and the ideals and the appetites and the expectations that, as people who have been in contact with the outside world and changed by that cohabitation, we all share. Perhaps we also need to realise effectively that there is no One Truth, that we're all travelling together, that there is nothing – no fatwa and no mirage caliphate and no world system of domination and no bank account and no power and no fundamentalism and no fear worth killing for.

This is not the first time Europe was invaded by the consequences of its policies. A few days ago I came across the Museum of Exile in La Jonquera on the border between Spain (or Catalonia) and France. I didn't know it existed. The town is strung out in narrow strips along its main artery. It seems to be populated now by groups of swarthy young men all running dubious 'bars' and 'tourist joints', and large numbers of prostitutes mostly (it seems) of East European origin, and clutches of elderly women with kerchiefs, from North Africa, I think, who while away the time together in the shade of the trees on public squares as they murmur their remembrances.

In the last days of January 1939, half a million Catalans and other Republicans from Spain fleeing the National forces, entered France. On the 28th of that month the women, children and wounded males were permitted to cross the border at La Jonquera. On the 8th February the defeated Republican troops were finally also allowed to cross. By the 9th, 10th and 11th February the Falangists had taken control of all the possible crossing points. The refugees were taken to camps spread over southern France. These were not supposed to be concentration camps, but this is what they turned out to be so that many of the migrants tried to get back into Spain.

In the basement of the museum that reverberates with pain, with the horrors of indignity that man can inflict upon his fellow humans, there's a collection of drawings made by children in times of war – from Guatamala, El Salvador, Algeria, Western Sahara, South Africa, Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Croatia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia. A book of these drawings, collected and annotated by Françoise and Alfred Brauner (« *I have drawn pictures of the War* ») is available. It freezes the heart.

From El Salvador, a child writes next to his drawing of six women beheaded by machetes : « *Ah brothers, don't kill us !* » « *Shut up, whores. You are guerillas' wives. Our machetes have been sharpened for these women's throats.* »

Juliette Braillon , 11 years old, from Paris. Next to her drawing in the handwriting of a young child : « *The planet is exploding. It will be barren on the whole surface. But all around humans are flying, kicked out, like a swarm of flies, but dead flies. While in Heaven – Heaven will remain – Angels are moaning : « Oh God, what have men done ?* » (In French it reads, « *Ô doux Jésus, Qu'ont fait les humains ?* »

On the walls there are quotes :

Goethe : « *Victims slay they here, / Neither lamb nor steer, / But the altars reek with human gore.* »

And, anonymously : « *el tiempo se acaba* »

Time stops.

Breyten Breytenbach

Berlin, 31 May 2016