

The Topos and the Topography of Utopia

I'm not sure whether I should be thanking STIAS for this opportunity to be associated with the launch of *Imagined Liberation*, the study on Xenophobia, Citizenship and Identity in South Africa, Germany and Canada, written by Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley – mainly because their eloquent and thorough study speaks for itself (and I dread not giving it its scope by speaking inadequately to a complicated subject, or intertwined themes, that they have been poring over for so many years and with so much sympathetic understanding) – but also, because I am not at all clear in my own mind how to approach the phenomenon of *vreemdelinge haat* (the hatred of the other), or the further concepts they allude to.

Allow me nevertheless, first of all and before moving on to murkier matters, to pay my respects to this book and to the authors.

The title, *Imagined Liberation*, intrigues me. It seems to imply that our much vaunted post 1990 'liberation' is more imaginary than real, that our Rainbow is a mirage. But it also underlines, to my mind, the organic link between 'imagination' and 'liberation'. If I may say so, the first attribute of 'imagination' is generosity, or sharing, and the 'liberation' of a people can only mean a freeing from bondage, iniquity and oppression, also the fallacies that made it acceptable to oppress others, and thereby promote an environment where hospitality and tolerance and understanding may flourish. For both of these - the 'imagination' and the liberation' - a *dépassement*, a surpassing, a going beyond the confines of the personal, a striving for a decisive break with the norm and often the orthodoxy, will be needed. 'Liberation', ideally, brings with it the enactment of altruism. To broaden our minds and deepen our hearts, liberation, in order to take root will have to be informed by the ethics of imagination. (This may be an oxymoron...)

In its subtitle, the book links Xenophobia, Citizenship and Identity. It can be argued that these are quite discrete concepts emerging from different processes. Identity is not necessarily posited on Citizenship (the Touaregs and the Kurds may have a clear sense of cultural and historical identity but not consider themselves citizens of either Mali or Niger in the one case, Iraq

or Turkey in the other). Furthermore, it would be nice to think (I nearly said 'imagine'!) that Identity subsumed by Citizenship, when people are at ease with who they are, should diminish the grounds that breed xenophobia – but often, as this book points out, it is not the case. Indeed, one could reason that the more confirmed the identity, individual and collective, expressed in citizenship, the more easily people feel threatened by the presence of the diverse and thus the more easily xenophobia will be given a free rein.

It is said that the ethical fibre of a society is measured by the way it treats its prisoners – still true, and by this yardstick the United States fails miserably – or women (think Saudi Arabia) or child labour – with countries like India and Afghanistan in flagrant dereliction of decency. The merit of the book under discussion is that it reminds us of the imperative of hospitality and of encompassing differences in background and in origin, and that a society can also be measured by the way it reacts to the *amakwere* in their midst – indeed, that there is interaction between the quality of its liberation and the policies applicable to those who came from elsewhere.

The book then analyses at length comparable situations and processes in South Africa, Germany and Canada. The authors, we know, have an intimate working knowledge of the three countries. In passing it ought to be noted that we are fortunate that Kogila Moodley and Heribert Adam should have consecrated so much of their learning and their energy to the understanding and interpretation of this construct-in-becoming, this work in progress (or is it decay?), which is South Africa. They may agree, though, that the three entities cannot really be compared except to the extent that the presence of xenophobia in one country, or the way tensions are defused and integration brought about, may clarify processes in other parts of the world.

As many other people in the world, I can only look at Canada and marvel about its essential qualities. For a moment in our South African history as well, there seems to have been the flicker of common purpose, maybe even a skyline where – to borrow a phrase from Kogila out of context –

“difference was incorporated as a common good and not simply evoked for ‘cultural maintenance’ purposes.”

It did not last long. Maybe it was never intended to be the veritable motivation for transformation into one multihued nation? Can it be argued that the falling apart of this ostensible purpose and the absence of a Centre accounts for the extreme pathological expressions and acts of xenophobia? What does it say about the state of self-denigration that seems to underlie and inform so many of our violent reactions against the ‘foreigner’?

Andile Mngxitama, who states that the presence of even one white person in the same room as he and any number of black comrades will change the equation, will signify the death of the blacks, will deprive him of oxygen – said in a May 2008 interview with Ferial Hafferjee in the Mail & Guardian: “Fourteen years of our democratic neo-apartheid existence has produced negrophobic bestiality, misnamed xenophobia. The barbarism of super profits for the few and the exclusion of the black majority has given us cannibalism. After the *makwerekwere* it’s the Sotho, Venda, Xhosa and so on...”

What we are experiencing at present – the enormous increase in people fleeing their homelands to look for asylum, the clumsy ways in which the developed world deals with the phenomenon, the horrors of a Lampedusa or of desperate “people without papers”, as the euphemism goes, literally using their own bodies and those of their companions as stepping flesh to try and climb the barbed fences around Ceuta, the European enclave in Morocco – has been building for many years. The tide of people trying to save their skins or to access a better life – how ‘better’ it will be is an open question – cannot be stemmed.

I want to quote at some length from a text entitled “The Long March” that I presented at the New School for Social Research in New York, October 1990. Already then, it was clear that one of the defining characteristics of the world we were getting to know (“the end of history”, some wag called it) was going to be the massive flow of people – refugees, clandestine migrants, guests workers, asylum seekers, wetbacks and other wall jumpers

– from the poor and hungry and corrupt and over-populated south to the fortified colonial north. It was as if a vast demographic redistribution was under way. And there may have been humanitarian concern for the destitute ‘foreigners’ and sporadic attempts to regulate the flow in terms of the interests of the north, but no longer any internationalist solidarity – as experienced at the time of anti-imperialist wars – to significantly inflect the ‘problem’ being solved by exclusion or deportation or arbitrary administrative measures, and of course by xenophobia and exploitation. This was to become an ever more important symptom of a disintegrating global community - together with the destruction of the planetary environment, the systemic disconnect between the filthy rich and the growing poor, and the tyranny of consumerism. What has changed since then is perhaps that huge numbers of desperate people now also try to get into whatever country they think they may survive in – Dubai, Australia, South Africa, even Israel – and that the world (if ever there was something we could define as “the world”) has become even more indifferent if not inured to genocides and the large-scale extermination of people – those of another faction or belief or colour or origin – by their own rampaging armies.

“I want to enter a plea for the exiles,” I wrote optimistically, “who are often enough admirable people. The courage and perseverance, the futile quest for survival of these stowaways, wetbacks, throwbacks and other illegal humans, always astonish me. Tamils sneaking with false passports across the border, Angolans surfacing in Berlin from some ‘underground railway’, Ghanaians passing themselves off as citizens from Zaire or the Ivory Coast, whole families making it to the ‘capital’ to be crammed into one room, boat people working like beavers to build dams for a future generation. And nearly always they are starving themselves to help provide for more unfortunate relatives back home.

“How resilient they are! See them come to terms with the writ of the rat. See how quickly they pick up the art of negotiating the labyrinths and warrens of Administration and Order, how rapidly they snick their tongues around the foreign language, how keen they are to learn! Along the beaches of Europe, on the squares of its cities, you come across the young men of Mali – distant descendants of Ahmad Baba – tirelessly unrolling their bundles of African kitsch made in Hong Kong, the bangles and the beads and the

imitation effigies. They peddle the instantly discardable. They squint at the grey skies and wind up plastic doves which they throw in the air to flutter and fall. Somehow they survive. Have you noticed the pride and the joy when these people manage to afford that first dress or leather jacket?

“Still, the personal compensation of survival and existential enrichment can never justify the wilful destruction of hearth and habit, the forced removal of population groups or the expulsion of individuals. Will Romania ever recover from the mindless razing of the peasant villages? Can South Africa knit into a serviceable national cloth the torn fibres of Apartheid? How will the Touaregs, driven to give up their nomadic existence and herded into the shallows of Western civilization, survive as fly-swatters in shanty towns? And how can one ever explain – let alone understand or condone – the crimes perpetrated by Israel when they wall up and dynamite the homes of ‘suspect’ Palestinians?

“My personal declaration of human rights could be resumed in four brief points: 1. Every human being has the birth right to struggle for justice and equality. 2. Every human being has the right to a home. 3. Every human being has the survivor’s right to the preservation of our planet with all its life. 4. Every human being has the right to die with his or her dignity intact.”

Thus far the quote from that distant document. We all know the story of what happened since. Maybe the most important slide has been the distension of public and international morals, the extent to which we have become used to ‘understanding’ and tacitly accepting the unacceptable, the ease with which we live beyond the shattered vestiges of our outrage of the time and our betrayed aspirations. How did we get to make do with the reality of nearly two million Zimbabweans surviving in South Africa, often illegally, while their country, the neighbouring country, is being sacked by so-called freedom fighters and now ever more appropriated by China?

Is it truly that easy? Can one look away – at the mountain, say, or at the Freedom Charter? How confident can they really be: the whites squeezing out the last juices of the good life, of the quality of lifestyle in a country that cannot absorb them and must side-line and in due time expunge them once they have coughed up enough for past sins, or the newly empowered blacks arrogantly trashing the poverty of the people who cannot forever be bought

off with food parcels? Are these not the repressed fears that sometimes spill over in random acts of barbarism?

A few nights ago in Cape Town we had a gathering, already then discussing some aspects of the book of tonight. I'd wanted to shape my own contribution in *The Topos and the Topography of Utopia* – as I similarly entitled tonight's remarks. The 'topography' part consisted only of a series of rhetorical questions.

For example: faced with the globalization of financial finagling and economic systems controlling us ('free' enterprise, capitalism, "the market"), as also the placebo of 'communication' – can the movements (the incursions) of outsiders/ incomers / clandestinos/undocumented ones / car guards and poachers... announce a new manifestation of the 'solidarity' we seem to have forfeited or forgotten? Can the 'world order' still be comprehensively undermined? Or are even these marginal ones just potential consumer junkies?

How do discourses/perceptions come about? What can the average citizen really know about how the *farenj* is treated, and the assumptions 'justifying' the dehumanisation? Is it not true that we 'liberals' are for once silenced by the impression that, for once, this is not our fight, that it is black-on-black violence, the poor putting fire to the foreign poor?

Structuralists hold that language ('understanding'/'communication') has its own innate structure. We sense its power, we know when we deviate from it and we know how it can convey (the illusion of?) order. Is language not the original delineation of inclusion and thus of exclusion? To exist consciously is to be aware of the texture, the associations, the emotions of words, sounds, metaphors; can we say that language is not only the territory and the history (the collectiveness of memory) but also the template through which the single consciousness negotiates its environment and thus its interaction with what is perceived as 'different'? Are we not hoisted on the petard of our exquisite self-questioning?

In any case, what could the influence of arduous public thinking possibly be on a population where dumbing down is purported to be the way to democracy and security?

Do 'morals' figure? Is it not angelic to expect that they who have internalized humiliation, who may have experienced the degrees of the abject, will not enact the same subjection or even worse scenarios to the 'others' when they feel threatened? After all, they would know about the workings of *power*. (The Afrikaner and the Jew, for example, having been there, know this.)

What of *agency*, *time*, *texture*? Does 'liberation', however much of a fool's game it might have been, of necessity not always bring its corollary of destruction? One is, after all, destroying the structures of the arbitrary, even if it is to replace them with another set.

Is there a time of forgetting? Is there not the near impossibility of time being kept alive and present in its implications? How much do we remember of our own idealism? One forgets in order to continue, to get back to 'normal'. Time does not secrete morals. How do we learn, then?

In the context of our failed revolution – how do we go about the premises of *belonging* and the precepts of *hospitality*? There is an apparent contradiction between the rights of citizenship and human rights. Is there a right *to* citizenship with its concomitant responsibilities, and how is this to be enacted in the absence of a shared moral centre?

Utopian thinking does not have a good press. It is assumed that one is being unrealistic – a cardinal sin in empirical practical politics! – escapist to boot, and, perish the thought, maybe revolutionary!

Yet, within the South African context it can be a useful tool. Surely, we can agree that it denotes in most places the nostalgia for what we imagine existed – in our case the magical moment of together becoming other, of a reckoning with ourselves and our conflicting histories and a desire to transform in depth, of a willingness to listen to each others' stories and actively tolerate, even encourage the dialectic between the specific and the general, also in our cultures and our mother tongues.

Maybe a start would be to admit that this dream had no legs. We were never a nation. Maybe a further necessary step would be to agree that without a utopia to strive for we are condemned to killing one another, that if we were to stop dreaming this shared 'space' we call South Africa we shall revert to fighting factions, that we are obliged to provide for movement or else stagnate and destroy or self-destruct. Is it not true that the harmony or balance we strive for must be a radical agent for change?

I then thought of asking Kogila and Heribert: with all of their experience, insight and empathy - what would be the two or three measures they'd consider as capable of bringing about the forward movement towards utopia, maybe even realistically so?

Perhaps it is unfair to ask this of anybody. And if one were to be unfair, why not begin with one's own uncertainties? So, if you were to ask me, I'd say, again sticking to four points:

1. Bring about truly elective politics, constituency based so that Parliament can become vitalised and represent the interests and the aspirations of the people, and establish a true devolution of power that will reflect local concerns and responsibilities and conditions.
2. Bring about a "social contract" between the state and its citizens so that priorities can be agreed upon, explained, accepted, and the state be held accountable.
3. Allow for the vigorous and constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of institutions, free from party political interference.
4. Actively understand and enshrine that our essential richness is the diversity of our make-up, the depth of our languages, the force of our dreaming...

All of the above beg the question of how to get there. Nowhere on our continent has a national liberation movement given up power – neither in Algeria nor Angola nor Zimbabwe, not in Eritrea or Guinea-Bissau or Mozambique – and the ANC in South Africa is no different, even now when the once generous struggle is reduced to the banding of robbers. They can no longer drape themselves in moral probity or even political sense (at

least not to the benefit of the population, and most definitely not to that of the “stranger within our gates”) – these ideals, together with ‘democracy’ and ‘accountability’ and ‘nation-building’ were in any event only lures to finesse their opponents out of power and lull the gullible international community. Their lust for power, patronage and entitlement – not yet assuaged – is now petrified in historical legitimacy. “We won, therefore all of it is ours.” One might as well paraphrase: “We broke it, therefore we own it.” And our comrade capitalists have only one dream: how to morph from ostensible communism as erstwhile servants to the people into party power monopoly along the lines of the Chinese example where the state is the captured cow and the people now the capital.

Yet, we all know liberation was a long time coming and that the ANC, although the dominant factor, was not the only agent. In fact, the historical con game was to have enough people believe the ANC, with the Stalinist worm in the apple all along, is the agent for change, which in the South African context could then only be equated with ‘liberation’. Perhaps it’s unfair to judge as harshly in retrospect just because one has been fooled. To mind comes a double-edged dictum of Marx that is still apposite: “Men make their own history, but only in the circumstances given to them.”

One is going to have to resist in every possible way – by exposure (‘shaming’ will make no dent), by keeping the Constitution alive and if possible protected from raids by marauding power mongers, by promoting alliances among parties and citizen organisations and in the process validating civics and civil society, by working on a clear and comprehensive and complex vision that will take account of our diversity, by really listening to the poor, by trying to contain the unholy collusion between big capital and cadre corruption, by building firewalls between the state and the party in power, by identifying and renouncing the rotten tongue Newspeak of political correctness...

The list is long and confused. It has always been a long walk. The way out, let alone the way forward, is not to disqualify or to grade and degrade some people found along the road. In fact, as always our capacity for imagining liberation – and liberating our imagination – will at least in part be measured by the extent to which we functionally recognize and receive the

dignified human in the other. South Africa has no other lasting and founding richness except the patchwork of its people.

Justice is a function of social memory. Not to speak up, not to validate the living archaeology and magic of our languages, not to be aware of the *roots* and the *reach* of our experiences as expressed in our cultures and the extent to which these cohere into a sense of belonging (or not belonging), not to test the boundaries of the forces defining our identities (or destroying them), not to go to the limits of what is within reach of transformation and of creative citizenship, would be to acquiesce to the cynicism of what passes for politics and the thieving incompetence of what presents itself as leadership. It will be like saying: all of this is too big and abstract and ugly and dangerous for me to engage with. Not to speak up would be a maiming of our own dignity and potential, and a failure to the dream of liberation. We would then be the silent and angry and disillusioned accomplices to our own failure of imagination, and thus of liberation.

To conclude: We have only this passage, this window of opportunity on the eternity of dust and the oblivion of what came before. I believe we are doomed (programmed, you might say) to strive for a certain human dignity, to extol a given tenderness of life – and these can be measured by our capacity for recognizing in the other what we share, and by our willingness to become other. I believe this is how, in all creole honesty, we may still fabricate the commons.

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