

People Like Us

Extract from: “A Tale of Two Towers: Language, Terrorism and Another Moment in History”* by Mark Behr. First published in **The Truth About The Fact**, Spring 2007

1976:

Eight months after the inauguration of the futuristic Afrikaans Language Monument where we young boys had sung for the white elite, South Africa's black children spoke out. Displacing and taking the spotlight, they cast themselves and their songs, their languages and their bodies into the glare of the world media. Forced to study all school subjects in Afrikaans -- the language that staked its claim on a continent -- children of that continent resisted in and demanded recognition of their own: IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, SiSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, and, who knows how many more. But the state offered no ear to these requests and demands for respect of an own language and the spirit borne on the tongue of one's parents and ancestors. Instead, Parliament passed a law to compel all people to learn (in) the same language. On June 16, 1976, while fathers laboured to extract gold for others from deep beneath the earth, while mothers entered hospitals, offices, factories and homes to serve the needs of white Johannesburg, thousands of children gathered in Soweto (the black township outside of Johannesburg from where white privilege drew its labour) in peaceful protest against the law of Afrikaans and its intended effects. Thousands teenagers marched. In their hands nothing but written words of protest against their coercion into the language of their oppressors and exploiters. The articulations of black children were met by the brutal and brutalizing language of the state: violence, arrest, detention, death. Now arming and defending themselves with stones and bottles and burning tires, children faced policemen with guns and helicopters. Teargas smudged the blue Highveld sky. Buildings and cars burned. Over the weeks that followed, children destroyed the schools of Bantu Education invoking on their path a new concept: 'black consciousness' along with a new leader's name: Steven Biko. Till today I recall vividly from television news a white woman interviewed after her car was surrounded by protesting black kids as she took her domestic worker back to Soweto: 'I am English,' she tells the camera, 'that is what I shouted at them. I'm not Afrikaans.' Language became alibi. Language became fire. Language became rage. Language was resistance. Language was power. In the wake of the Soweto uprisings, 360 children were left dead. Thousands of children left to join exiled leaders or the military wing of the banned African National Congress and Pan African

Congress. A year after I had sung for the Prime Minister at the inauguration of the Afrikaans Language Monument, I would have seen the man again, this time on television. In his annual New Year's message the Prime Minister, speaking in either or both Afrikaans and English, said: "The storm has not struck yet. We are only experiencing the whirlwinds that go before it."**

In our languages – Afrikaans and English – most of us termed what happened in Soweto not protests, but riots. "The rioting black savages; a communist inspired chaos; bloody ungrateful black bastards," are some of the more generous phrases I recall us using. These were not children, they were terrorists. They were not black children, they were kaffirs. [Our version of nigger; rooted in the Arab word kfir, unbeliever]. And we did not speak of the ANC or PAC as organisations co-constitutive of a liberation movement, but as black terrorist organisations. How easily black and communist and terrorist were collapsed into one. And in this we were not alone: In the USA, in official documentation of Congress and the State Department, the ANC was termed 'one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisations' and Nelson Mandela, at that point incarcerated on Robben Island, 'a terrorist leader of a communist and terrorist organisation.'

Around South Africa, the Portuguese Colonies of Mozambique and Angola were obtaining independence. *Independence*. A word ominous to most white ears. What we termed our 'Cordon Sanitaire' – literally the sanitary circle ensuring our selective separateness from Africa -- was crumbling. In a world said to be and written of as balanced on knife-point between East and West, the East supported the liberation movements. The Communist block backed the one-party Marxist states springing up like poisonous mushrooms that threatened the enlightened Western Tradition and life-style we whites (with the backing of our Western European and American siblings) defended in South Africa. Besides us, only Rhodesia remained white: civilized, Christian, capitalist, a multi-white-party democracy. A brutal bush war raged there. Some weeks, hundreds of what we and both the Afrikaans and English press in South Africa called terrorists – all of whom were nameless -- were killed along with scores of white Rhodesians -- all of whom had names. Soon the South African army (we called it the Defense Force) invaded Angola to halt the spread of communism and the infiltration of African National Congress terrorists into our white way of life. Never -- we told the world and ourselves -- was the war against black people. No, we were not racists. For years the story was that we had entered Angola to oppose the Soviet-backed Cuban forces of Fidel Castro who had come to Angola to back communists and terrorists. But, in 2002, on board a plane from San Francisco to South Africa it came as no surprise to me to read in the San Francisco Chronicle at last what seemed irrefutable proof that we and American CIA backed rebels had in fact invaded Angola weeks before the arrival of the Cubans.

Where there aren't terrorists the powerful have known for years just how to create them. Today, somewhere between ten and fifteen million landmines still lie in wait of black limbs in Angola. At the very least a million people have died in the continuing war; some say four million. Numbers are contested. Just as are the numbers of black slaves taken from this and other regions of Africa and sold to labour in regions West of the Atlantic: some texts say 13 million people. Some say *60 million and more*. If we accept the most conservative estimates of black people taken in the Maafa (a Kiswahili term denoting 'disaster' or a 'terrible occurrence' and what we call the Atlantic Slave Trade) – at least half of whom died in captivity – then by a simple measure of human life a cruel arithmetic tells us that we, the civilized, the post-modern, we of globalization theory, we the best read and educated have caused more devastation to the people of the oil and diamond rich Angola in the past 25 years than was done in three and a half centuries of enslavement and human commerce from there and from the adjoining Congo alone. From one perspective, this must be what is meant with progress. From another, it raises the question of what we meant when we said: our war is not against black people.

Making Men:

Meanwhile, back from singing at the tower in 1976, at the school of music and corals, in enlightened western lyrics we boys performed Benjamin Britten, Samuel Baber, Franz Schubert, Aaron Copland, Tchaikovsky, George Gershwin, Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim. Dependent on a denial of the meaning of its chosen repertoire, the school punished boys caught in homosexual play mercilessly. Once, after our most severe caning, the man who wielded the rod warned of what became of people like us. In that narrative of shame we heard that the city of San Francisco meant the same as Sodom. Built on the San Andreas Fault, that place/city/symbol of defilement and same sex perversion too would be swallowed by the earth. Against our homosexual futures we erected our own *cordons sanitaire* ... stridently heterosexist and homophobic identities were cultivated; after all, heterosexuality requires homosexuality for its very existence. White requires black; capitalist requires communist; and an assertion of innocence requires the guilt of terrorism.

By age thirteen, most boys who had sung Afrikaans folksongs at the inauguration of the tower to celebrate Afrikaans, were in military uniform. At school we wore brown on Fridays: for an hour each week we did military cadets. We learnt a language of military commands and obedience. Command stands to obedience like masculinity to femininity. Compulsory 'national service' was expanded to two

years; soon, white girls too were doing military cadets. Here a slight breakdown in traditional concepts of femininity had occurred ... but while feminine could magically alter, masculine stood firmer than ever. To our north, in Rhodesia, the bush war between the white minority and the black terrorists intensified, foreshadowing what was certainly heading south. Most boys sang less and marched more. But learnt, too, that one could sing while marching, albeit to a different beat and the sound of angrier words. And the more whites took on the rhythms of the military beat, so black resistance to that beat grew, spoke its own, increasingly on its own terms. The more government imposed what it called 'reform' of the system, the more outrage flared in the one-time children of Soweto – those inside and those exiled outside the borders of the Republic. For every black child shot or still being tortured, for every dissident or communist detained, there seemed to come ten in their place. Airport searches and security became standard procedure. Bombs went off and (some white) civilians perished. Security became the catchphrase at banks, at schools, at multi-national corporations with offices in the tallest buildings. Body searches and bleeping electronic devices became the norm at entryways. All through South Africa, frequently in the greatest secrecy, the State Security Council expanded its function. Like a spider web fanning out and infiltrating every level of society, *security of the homeland* became watchword and catchphrase. And the entire world was against us. No one wanted to listen to us; no other country wanted to believe what we knew. Worst of all was the UN. Praise be to God for the unflinching support – though necessarily covert, for security reasons of course -- from other besieged nations: Taiwan, Israel. And, from that other country with a contemporary history locked to September 11 and foreign-backed terrorism: General Augusto Pinochet's Chile.

Boys become proud young men. We played rough team sport to build character and *esprit d'corps*. The older we got, the more we were warned against Art: art in this context of national insecurity was increasingly a risky business, a recipe for dissidence and perversion. Surely, you know, don't you, that most male composers of music, most great **p**ainters and **p**ianists and **p**oets were **dung-punchers**; **fudge-packers**; **p**ansies; **p**ederasts; **p**erverts; **p**oofers; **p**edophiles, queers – well, with queers the alliteration is lost, but, heterosexism stays in tact. Team sport found its place discursively, morally, politically, and sexually in opposition to Art. Between 30 000 and 40 000 white boys per year went into the army. I'm guessing by far most of those played rugby. I too went with the pride of superman into the Angolan war and as a marine officer protected South Africa's dwindling Indian Ocean oil reserves from 'terrorist attack'; then I went to university as a spy for the 'security police', to have my studies paid and to do my part for 'national security'.

And as security grew, so resistance grew, and in turn security needs grew, so there were more

detentions without trial, more assassinations, more detentions, more control of the word spoken and printed, more slanting of the story, and more and more whites digging in our heels and voting for the governing regime.

And by this time Rhodesia had had its name changed to Zimbabwe. There, the terrorists/communists were now in power. Our cordon sanitaire was gone; now we were on the 'front-line against African poverty' as it was termed by the next Prime Minister.

Within a decade, the bipolar world would collapse and white South Africa would negotiate its future with the terrorists we had been fighting, arguably for 350 years. Soon, an erstwhile terrorist would be, respectfully, Mister President.

(*) First Presented as a lecture on the theme of *Dissonance* at Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada, February 2003.

(**) For this quote in full and details on the events of June 16, 1976, I am indebted to Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill in *The Soweto Uprising, 1976*, from *Whirlwind Before The Storm*, International Defense and Aid Fund, London, 1980.