

What is ‘Soul Murder’, Anyway?

Let us suppose, as have others before us, that the world, the big one, out there, beyond the family (however well the family might serve as a concentration and focus of currents and energies abroad in it), with all its chaos, commotion, abruptness, and volatility, its appetites, ideals, and aspirations, its politics, mythologies, ordering principles, hierarchies, and ... murder--let us suppose that this world impinges on the individual consciousness, penetrating it, in some sense, fashioning it, however unaccountably.

Let us suppose, additionally, that there are facts about this world so appalling that they cannot be allowed full, frank, daylight recognition by an individual consciousness or, indeed, by a collective consciousness. And that this must be all the more so in instances in which the consciousness understands itself to be deeply invested in the world in question, so deeply invested in it as, perhaps, to be unable to tell itself apart from it, as to be effectively constituted by it. In such instances, let us allow that a mental mechanism of ancient provenance, refined over long periods of deep evolutionary time, asserts itself so as to deny the very facticity of appalling facts, transposing them instead into a realm in which they may be allowed recognition only in somewhat distorted ‘symbolic’ form. Let us call this mechanism repression.

Let us, for the moment, not worry too much about this repression. Let us not ask when it is exactly, under which circumstances, in response to which stimuli the repressive mechanism asserts itself. Let us not ask, for the moment, just how the repressive mechanism is able, almost alchemically, to transform facts into metaphors. Let us not worry too much whether, finally, there exists a criterion with respect to which facts and metaphors may even be told apart. Let us not, in short, be too clever. We shall be naïve, accepting the consequences, and shall leave rigor to the pedants and hacks of academe. Perhaps, there is something to be gained by this approach.

--

A chronology:~

(As it happens, the dates are correct. But let’s not be vulgar, looking for perfect coincidences or definite causalities ...)

In 1884, Schreber spent some weeks at Sonnenstein Asylum.

Also, in 1884, delegates from the great powers of Europe met in Berlin to decide exactly how Africa was to be carved up, its lands distributed. In the same year, the Germans purchased land, in what is today Namibia, from the Nama tribe, declaring it a protectorate, in spite of the German government's knowledge that the land hadn't been quite legally acquired.

The settlement of African territory by white Germans began. In accordance with the racial ideology then current in Germany, the overwhelming majority of white settlers considered themselves to be inherently superior to the Africans among whom they lived. And so, rape of African women by white settlers was not uncommon. Nor, for that matter, was use of Africans as slaves on white plantations.

In 1893, Schreber was admitted to Leipzig Psychiatric Clinic. In 1894, Schreber was transferred to Lindenhof Asylum and, from there, to Sonnenstein Asylum.

In 1894, Theodor Leutwein was appointed governor of the German territories in South West Africa. The same year, the German government sent the *Schutztruppe*, imperial colonial troops, to pacify the region.

In 1900, Schreber took legal action for his discharge.

In 1901, Friedrich Ratzel, coined the term *Lebensraum*, concentrating in a word ideas which had been in circulation for some time. Germany was experiencing, at the end of the nineteenth century, a demographic crisis--too many people, not enough space to house them, not enough resources to provide for them. Extra land, or living room, was needed. Just as Britain, France, and the United States had expanded to satisfy their needs, so too should Germany, by claiming territories in Africa, making satellite states of them, *thereby creating the conditions for the perpetuation of modern German civilization*.

In 1903, Schreber's memoirs were published.

In 1904, the German genocide of the Herero people commenced. General von Trotha drove the Herero people into the Kalahari desert. A 200 mile long installation of guard posts was erected to keep the Herero there. Tens of thousands of Herero thus died. In the same year, General von Trotha gave his annihilation order, committing to paper a plan to destroy the Herero people. "Every Herero will be shot," he wrote.

And later, in 1904, the first modern concentration camp was conceived, in which 4,000 Herero were held captive, beaten, starved, and worked to death by the Army of the Second Reich. Herero prisoners were transferred like cattle in train cars between camp facilities. Their comings

and goings were monitored with bureaucratic efficiency. Thousands of metal tags were requested, produced in Germany, and sent to the colony for this purpose. Herero prisoners were rented as slaves to private German industries in the colonies. Herero prisoners were used as slaves on the construction of a private railway line. 67% of those who worked on this line died from malnutrition and exhaustion. A death camp was established at Shark Island, off the Namibian coast, conceived for the express purpose of the extermination of the Nama and Herero peoples. Shark Island became a leading center for the study of the emerging German racial sciences. The heads of 3,000 murdered Herero prisoners were sent to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin for anthropological analysis.

In 1907, Schreber was admitted to the asylum at Leipsig-Dosen.

By 1907, as many as 100,000 Herero and 10,000 Nama had been killed, in unprecedentedly modern fashion.

--

The story of the German perpetrated genocide of the Herero people touches on every aspect of German modernity: science, bureaucracy, technology, politics, media, industry, commerce. This is perhaps no very big deal. It would have had to, given that the genocide occurred when it did. What is more disturbing is the idea, propagated by Friedrich Ratzel and shared in by large segments of the German population, that German modernity was a project which was viable only in so far as it was capable of arrogating to itself the resources needed for its perpetuation--even if this should require ... murder.

What is German modernity, then? What is modernity, more generally? How are the sensitive, the honest to square the murder that is its very condition with the taller claims which may be made on its behalf? What of Schreber, the Senatspräsident, high official of the Second Reich? He drew breaths from a heady, modern atmosphere. What became of the air once in his lungs, his brain? How did it react? How might Schreber have resolved the discord between the noblest proclaimed modern purpose and the basest of modern deeds? What did he mean by "soul murder", anyway?