

Of Elephants and Asses:

The Collapse of Bourgeois Democracy and the Rise of Fascism

At the turn of this new century, my partner and I joined about 8 other outsiders on a Global Exchange sponsored three week tour of post Apartheid South Africa. The trip was brilliantly led by two South African men originally from Capetown's what had formerly been called "mixed race." Both Keith and Clive had been active with the ANC in the war against Apartheid and thus knew their way around. We were able to experience the heart of South Africa from Soweto to poor rural farms, to tribal villages and cooperatives, from Pretoria to Capetown, from museums to natural splendors like the Cape.

At every turn we were afforded entry to Black African communities and organizations. Not what I had expected, Soweto, a city of 4-5 times the population of its better known developed urban suburb (Johannesburg) did not suffer from the total degradation of poverty and hopelessness of nearby Alexandra, a compact square mile of 50,000 or more souls living packed family to family, often barefooted, in cardboard, mud and a bit of corrugated metal, dirt row upon dirt row, eyes peering out at passers by through the squalor. No, Soweto had the feel of the Black middle class, with paved roads and livable housing with some poverty scattered here and about among churches and schools and small stores; but of course no high rises or banks or apparent city center. Alexandra, in contrast, was a place reminiscent of the hopelessness of poverty in Europe of the early 19th century, or the rural South of the U.S. before the end of the Jim Crow era, or the boxcars of homeless in the 30s or the homeless under bridges and tunnels today.

In just three weeks we were exposed too to the panoply of the history and politics of South Africa including contemporary Black contradictions that were beginning to come to the fore in a class society where class division had for the previous 50 years been measured almost strictly according to color lines. The contradictions that inevitably now take place on a plane that crosses that nasty "race" barrier. At a tribal area we visited, a rural village community had set up a small communal collective farm with the help of activists, and were proud of a pump that allowed them to irrigate the field. But the Tribal Chief was resisting the development of collectivization by "his people" at every turn, for the turn toward democratization--economic, social, political--was weakening his power, authority and control. When he heard our group was at the village he send a delegation that pressured us to bus to his home several miles away where we were received, fed and entertained and provided with an audience with the Chief (who drove in from the city in a big car wearing an expensive tailored suit) so he could explain the benefits his leadership was providing his people. A loyal band of women, in native costume, sang and danced and extolled the Chief for us, but we were also being told by our local guide from that region, an African woman, about the politics behind the politics. This chief had a picture of Chris Hanni, the ANC leader and hero in his home. He had long been an outspoken opponent of Apartheid, but it was now in his interest to hold back the tide of history as the people moved toward greater equality, democracy. He was not a bad man; he was just who he was. (This was not Kwazulu-Natal, so it reflected more a national problem not merely the politics of Mr. Buthelezi and the Zulu-Incatha).

At Capetown we were taken to a small but famous museum that documents the racially integrated

and multinational, multi-ethnic cultural community that had thrived through the first half of the 20th century while the noose tightened on the Blacks, year by year, law by law, until the demise of the last vestige of freedom with the electoral victory of the Nationalist Party in 1948. The museum brought that cultural heyday to life so well that one could almost feel the atmosphere of New Orleans jazz and Basin street in the air. Writers, poets, musicians, theater, artists, a thriving ebullient culture of joy and enlightenment was based there in Capetown and was slowly strangled as people of Black and Mixed Race backgrounds were eventually segregated, then banned and forced to move to reservations. Given my own background I was impressed that Jews and Muslims in particular, and other religions as well, had often shared the same temples and synagogues and churches and functioned as if a single religion in many ways. Was it an idyllic world of peace and harmony. A utopia? Indubitably not. But there are still a few people alive who remember that period and one of them a Muslim man sits in the museum to talk about that life and the experiences of it. And colored by sadness from the later years though his recollections may be, the reader and listener knows that those were safe good times for the people who lived there, regardless of their economic deprivations. But fascism happened to South Africa. It began around a century before our visit and was built up block by block, piece by piece, law by law, smidgeon by smidgeon, justification by justification, until it was—temporarily—unstoppable.

The 22 days and nights flew by and the tour ended there in Capetown. Sheila and I flew back to Pretoria to rent a car and go off on our own adventure to the big game area, the Kruger National Park in the North. We had reserved a few nights at one of the private preserves on the western border of the giant park before entering the park itself for the rest of the week. We were lucky. The animals, knowing no borders were abundant wherever we went in or outside the official park. The first evening as we arrived at the Honeydew preserve we rounded a bend in the dirt road to find a very tall giraffe slowly crossing our path. At Honeydew we lived in a platform tent with a locked door. We were told not to leave the tent then, that a guide would pick us up and take us to the dinner area because it was getting dark and it was not safe to go out. The encampment was not enclosed from the savanna and potentially dangerous animals could and did wander through at their leisure. Even in daylight we saw animals such as small herds of the waterbuck, impala and zebras passing within a hundred or two hundred feet of our tent.

The guide who picked us up to cross no more than 100 feet of terrain to dinner, carrying a sidearm, turned out to be our guide for the 3 days there. On the second day he asked if anyone wanted to track animals on foot instead of in the safari vehicles. We and another couple agreed. The guide was a white South African naturalist from Capetown. He had a Black South African assistant, a local. Both were armed. It was easy to imagine the strapping white fellow as a racist Afrikaner, but we learned that he was someone who had opposed the Apartheid system, though who knows how much he did or didn't risk in the process. Despite his egalitarian outlook, the reality of South Africa's past racial divide was ever present however. The Black assistant stayed to himself. When we ate lunch near the vehicle for safety he walked away a bit. He spoke a bit of English but was not easily engaged. What we represented to him can only be imagined. The White guide and he seemed to get on but not as friends. He was a local.

Our guide gave us a stern warning as we trekked about following a rhino, approaching a lion who ran off from eating the remains of a buffalo, and a herd of elephants. Before we left the safari vehicle he told us that we must follow his every instruction precisely if we intended to stay alive.

If he said to follow him rapidly and quietly we must do it without question. If he climbed a giant termite hill we should also follow. He told this story: A year earlier at the next private preserve over, a group had been on foot and came upon a breeding herd of elephants. A breeding herd is the most dangerous thing to encounter out here he remarked. The herd of elephants quickly senses danger and foreign presence by smell and sound. The herd will then begin to move into a circle to surround the intruder, assuming the need to defend their young from predators. Once the apparently laconic meandering of the herd has you surrounded you are finished. The year before when that group of safarians came upon the herd the guide had told everyone to move as quickly and quietly as possible in a single file following him as he began to retreat. A woman in the group decided to linger to take a picture of the quaint elephants approaching. In the few seconds it took for her to prepare her snap shot she was surrounded and then stomped to death by a female mother elephant. That day out on foot we came upon a breeding herd. They were only vaguely seen through the trees and brush but an occasional trumpeting was audible. Anxiously we retreated at a good clip following the guide back into the brush.

We like to think of elephants generally as non-threatening animals. They are easily trained to perform for people and they have been beasts of burden and for riding by humans over the centuries. Elephants appear to smile and they are not carnivorous. But the world is never exactly as we humans imagine it. Elephants are, indeed, not only dangerous in protecting their young—which is what all animals do—but they also are slovenly and wasteful. An elephant will knock down and destroy tree upon tree upon tree just to reach and enjoy the most succulent leaves off of the very top and leave the rest to rot when the environment presents the opportunity. And elephants can have bad tempers also, not only when they are protecting their young, but when they are just being elephants. But even domestic cows sometimes get pissed off and kill people.

In composing this essay I'm not going to look into the political culture of the U.S. to find out how and why the Republicans chose the elephant as their mascot nor why the Democrats chose the ass because I don't want to damage the contemporary aptness of these symbols. And it is surely not in the historic selection of animal symbols, but in the human history of the 20th century that South Africa lends itself to an appreciation of United States culture, past present and future. Perhaps I will return to elephants and asses from time to time but what I'm about to attempt is an exploration of some elements of culture and political economy and their relationship to a state of affairs that few Americans (left, liberal, moderate, conservative, or right) grasp, called fascism.

In the words of its own founders fascism was fundamentally the total and final merging of the State power (the government and all its force) with the interests of capitalism. Fascist demagogues provide one clever little twist of logic to make this work harmoniously for them—that the interests of the working people of a nation are well represented in this scheme because capitalism under fascism is the happy marriage between the nationalist interests of owners of wealth and power and nationalist interests of the majority of those who are workers and servants of that small, elite and powerful group, now organized not just as corporations and banks and power companies but as the state itself, the state of the whole people. Flag waiving patriotism becomes the stand in for corporate wealth and power. A clever lie. By this definition of the merging of wealth and government the United States of America is already a fascist state. The elephants and asses may have some differences about social policy but they are both run around by some unified conception of the same wealth and power interests (even when those powerful interests have significant

differences of opinion on some matters). After all Ken Lay was Bush's main contributor and the Democrats have their own guys too. Naturally this description lacks detail, color, culture and nuance. It's not very edifying or satisfying. In fact it's so general that it's rather useless. But I'm going to try and show here why it isn't so useless at all.

This essay, apparently written in 2000, was never completed, though I have no idea why. I'm posting it in its incompleteness because I reckon there are some ideas within that remain salient in the 2017 environment, which threatens us with a full blown national-security police state and an apparently expanding U.S.-provoked world war (if Mr. Trump and the military leaders at the Pentagon are to be taken at all seriously). You know, even back at the end of WWII the "Red Menace" was a put up job. Anti-communism sufficed to gain public support for all kinds of military adventures like Vietnam, the Bay of Pigs the toppling of Dr. Salvador Allende, elected and popular president of Chile and Juan Bosch, the elected president of the Dominican Republic. The Monroe Doctrine did not conceal the anti-democratic nature of U.S. intents. Though Russia and China are obviously capitalist nations and Iran and Korea are behaving in a manner to protect their own sovereignty, and Cuba is really quite exemplary in its humanism, altruism and health care and educational successes both for Cubans and the dozens of nations they have helped, all the same baloney from the Cold War is being raised again and not only by one nasty idiot of a man, nor one party nor one group of criminal minds, but by the representatives of dominant class rule. ms