19 THE MEANING OF "APARTHEID" AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EVIL

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RAW NERVES

In May 2012, the former president of South Africa was interviewed on.CNN by Christiane Amanpour and asked to repudiate apartheid as "morally indefensible." Despite having played the central role in dismantling apartheid, he could only do this, he replied, in a "qualified" way: "I don't apologize for saying that what drove me as a young man, before I decided we need to embrace a new vision, was a quest to bring justice for black South Africans in a way which would not—that's what I believed then—destroy the justice to which my people were entitled," de Klerk said the previous week on CNN. "My people, whose self-determination (was) taken away by colonial power in the Anglo-Boer War" (Burke 2012). South Africa's new ruling elite greeted de Klerk's reflections on the ideals of his youth with outrage. The former state president was quickly forced to retreat into claims his comments had been taken out of context. More than two decades after its demise, evidently, anything less than a full-throated condemnation of apartheid as evil is still taboo in South Africa.

De Klerk's 2012 interview contained nothing new. In his 1996 submission to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on behalf of the former ruling National Party (NP), he also presented apartheid as a well-intentioned policy that, perhaps unfortunately, failed. Of the men who devised the policy he testified: "Within the context of their time, circumstances and convictions they were good and honourable men—although history has subsequently shown that, as far as the policy of apartheid was concerned, they were deeply

mistaken in the course upon which they embarked" (de Klerk 1996, 2). In de Klerk's official submission to the TRC, the harm that was done by the apartheid regime was portrayed as largely inadvertent—the unforeseen consequences of honorable individuals acting on laudable motives, or the work of a few "bad apples" for which the leadership could not be held responsible other than in a general sort of way. For these failings, the former state president apologized. And while he acknowledged that "abuses" became more widespread in the later years of NP rule, as resistance to apartheid intensified, he presented these as the product of a failure of command rather than the expression of a deliberate and evil—"morally reprehensible"—program.

The African National Congress (ANC), on the other hand has always presented a radically different interpretation of the past that stresses malicious racist motivations for apartheid. In their submission to the TRC in 1996, for example, the ANC stated: "Apartheid oppression and repression were therefore not an aberration of a well-intentioned undertaking that went horribly wrong. Neither were they, as we were later told, an attempt to stave off the 'evil of communism.' The ideological underpinning and the programme of apartheid constituted a deliberate and systematic mission of a ruling clique that saw itself as the champion of a 'super-race'" (African National Congress 1996,4). Apartheid, in short, was a crime—deliberate and systematic. Because of its institutionalizing of racial oppression, moreover, apartheid was a crime against humanity, as the United Nations decreed in 1966 (Dugard n.d.). Indeed, by the 1980s, during what we now know to have been the waning days of apartheid, critics of apartheid were unanimous in denouncing the evil inherent in the "system." In his speech at his investiture as chancellor of the University of the Western Cape in May 1988, for example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached: "apartheid is 'so utterly evil, immoral, unbiblical and unchristian that it can only be compared with that equally evil system—Nazism'" (Crary 1988). Judging by their response to the TRC report, it seems the vast majority of black South Africans still agree (van der Merwe and Chapman 2008,209).

This essay examines various ways of construing the meaning of "apartheid" and judging the ethical content of the term. It also explores some aspects of the interpretation of the evil nature of apartheid state power from the perspective of everyday life in Soweto in the early 1990s, drawing on several years of fieldwork in the township at that time (See Ashforth 2000, 2005). Understanding how the attribution of evil to the apartheid state operated in the dying days of apartheid might help us better understand why maintaining the sanctity of that label remains so important to so many people in the present.

APARTHEID: THE BIOGRAPHY OF A WORD

The word *apartheid* was first used to express the desire of Afrikaner national-
ists in the 1930s, still smarting from their defeat by the armies of the British
Empire at the turn of the century, to imagine a world in which their nation
could survive and thrive (Giliomee 2009; Moodie 1975). Most of the early na-
tionalist dreamers were clerics and scholars—sober, earnest, and no doubt, to
quote de Klerk, "honourable." Some, as J. M. Coetzee has pointed out of Geof-
frey Cronje, were more than a little crazy (Coetzee 1991). Their cogitations were
for a long time marginal to the central political debates of the time concerning
what was called the "Native Question," or the modes, means, and justifications
for governing Africans (Ashforth 1990). Two decades were to pass before the
term became part of Afrikaner nationalist political orthodoxy and the ruling
ideology of a governing party.

One of the most difficult things to appreciate about *apartheid* as a doctrine,
given the history of NP rule in South Africa after 1948, is that it was not—in
essence, or, at least, not entirely—a species of *racial* thought. This is not to say
that the founding fathers of the doctrine were not racists personally, or that
the effects of the doctrine involved racial oppression, or, indeed, that the final
purpose of the apartheid ideology as implemented by the NP was to ensure
the continuation of a political structure of racial domination within the South
African state. Rather, it is to emphasize that the core principles of the doctrine
were not premised on concepts of race, but rather precepts of cultural nation-
alism with Christian roots in Calvinist theology, "scientific" foundations in
German anthropology, and political links to European nationalisms (Giliomee
2003; Greenfeld 1995; Penny and Bunzl 2003).

The basic underpinning of the apartheid idea is a version of a broader
nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative of the origin of nations. It went
something like this: following an unfortunate incident on a building site in
Babel (reported in the Bible in Genesis 11:5–8), God decided to scatter His peo-
ple across the world and divide them into separate groups speaking different
languages. These groups, as anthropological science of *volkekunde* teaches, are
known as "cultures," or "*volk.*" Being creations of God, these separate and dis-
tinct cultures are each entitled to exist and to flourish in their God-given forms
according to their God-given designs. In order to do so, each culture must of
necessity have its own homeland, a place where the members of the culture can
live together without outside interference and express themselves in the full-
ness of their being. Over time, as the history of Europe shows, distinct cultures
develop to a point where they become self-aware, conscious of their existence as

distinct "nations." At this point, they become entitled to the right of self-determination; they have earned the right to their own state. All cultures, given time and propitious circumstances, should be able to develop in a similar fashion. Until all cultures reach the point of national self-determination, however, it is incumbent upon the stronger and more developed cultures, nations, to guide and protect the weaker and less developed, to assist them in their God-given paths so as to allow them to develop along their own lines according to God's divine plan. Amen.

Embraced by Afrikaner intellectuals, this nationalist narrative was expressed in the language of apartheid. It is not difficult to imagine how it might have seemed attractive to idealistic young Afrikaners such as de Klerk—or, for that matter, the later critic of apartheid Frederick van zyl Slabbert (van zyl Slabbert 1985, 85). Indeed, framed in this way, I have yet to find an American undergraduate who can object to this divine scheme—no doubt from reluctance to challenge biblical verities. In the South African context, anyone imbued with a sense of the destiny of the Afrikaner nation—forged as it was in the crucible of resistance to imperialist domination—could not help but notice that within the territory of the Union of South Africa, created by that war against the Boers, there seemed to be a number of African populations that could be deemed distinct "cultures," each with its own language and customs, which, given access to a secure homeland, could one day develop into self-governing nations. In English, the idea was translated as "separate development." Seeing the world in this way, to be sure, was helped enormously by the influence of a thoroughly misleading historiography purveyed by Afrikaner nationalists that taught that the region was settled by "Bantu tribes" moving down from the north into unoccupied lands at more or less the same time as white settlers arriving from the south (Thompson 1962).

The elaboration of the principles of apartheid, in theory and practice, took several decades. From the currency of a small group of intellectuals in the 1930s, the idea of apartheid by the late 1940s became the electoral slogan of the NP (Herenigde Nasionale Party), articulated at length in the 1948 Sauer Report (Herenigde Nasionale Party 1948). When the NP, unexpectedly and narrowly, won election to office in that year, they proclaimed this strange new word as their guiding principle, though in fact it contained only a vague outline of a policy of radical segregation. Shortly after winning office, the NP government commissioned a major study, the Tomlinson Commission (Commission for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bantu Areas Within the Union of South 1955), to flesh out the details of their policy of separate development with a view to creating the impression of a grand plan for government (Ashforth 1990).

From the start of NP rule, however, it was clear that the commitment to the "development" part of separate development was half-hearted at best.[1] The key recommendations of the Tomlinson Commission, fanciful as they were, were ignored.

Though the practical effect of the apartheid ideology on NP governance resulted more in an intensification of existing practices of racial domination than in a grand vision of separate development in the region, there were radical differences between the principles of apartheid and those enshrined in the original scheme for governing "Natives" within the state created under the auspices of the British Empire in the first decade of the twentieth century as the Union of South Africa. These differences hinged on the conception of the relation between African polities, their subjects, and the territories still occupied by them at the end of the nineteenth century. Whereas the apartheid scheme conceived of African polities and their associated territories, remnants as they were of the long history of conquest, as deriving from the nature of cultures, the British framed the relation in the language of empire, with a quasi-imperial regional state (the Union) recognizing the rights of "Native Tribes" with political sovereignty over distinct territories whose inhabitants had been ruled by "chiefs" since "time immemorial" (Ashforth 1990, chap. 2).

The imperial scheme established under British auspices, however, contained a central contradiction. For, according to the precepts of nineteenth-century British imperialism, citizenship was to be open, in principle, to all "civilized" men. In theory, then, over time as Africans attained the levels of education and property ownership deemed indicative of "civilization"—as many were—citizenship would have had to have been opened to the growing urban African population in South African cities. Various fixes for this contradiction were proffered in the second quarter of the century, notably those enshrined in the Stallard Commission's formulation that towns were the "white man's creation" wherein natives belonged only insofar, and for so long, as they "ministered unto the needs of the white man"—the rest being "surplus" and thus liable to removal to their putative rural homes (Ashforth 1990; Davenport 1976; Province of the Transvaal 1921). By the middle of the century, the absurdity of this conception was becoming all too evident in the face of massive urbanization of African workers and the steady growth of an educated, property-owning African middle class. The commitment of white voters to a political order enshrining their sense of racial superiority, however, remained unshakable. Various ad hoc solutions to what was termed "influx" were proposed, notably that of the Fagan Commission in 1947, but none provided the simplicity and elegance of the apartheid formula's resolution of the African citizenship conundrum, to

wit: remove the possibility of Africans attaining full citizenship and relegate their political communities to remote "Homelands" in the name of national self-determination and separate development. That urban African elites and middle-class aspirants to full citizenship did not embrace this formulation with the same ardor as young Afrikaner idealists such as de Klerk is not surprising. That black South Africans did not universally share their dissatisfaction until several decades after the apartheid era began is a fact not generally heralded in the current era of African nationalist triumph.

By the late 1950s, the NP government began to look like it was getting serious about separate development, promulgating as it did legislation such as the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act (1959), which laid out a putative scheme to transform "native reserves" into self-governing homelands. Critics at the time, however, were quick to point out that these so-called homelands were being provided with nowhere near the resources necessary to turn the nationalist dream into reality. Nonetheless, substantial investments in physical and administrative infrastructure were made in the former reserves in the following decades, leaving a significant legacy in the present regional configuration of the postapartheid constitution with the provinces, such as Eastern Cape, having the largest territories of former homelands remaining significantly poorer and less developed than the more metropolitan and formerly "white" demarcated areas of the country.

Apartheid, then, was conceived in the language of postwar anti-imperial nationalism. By the time African nationalists across the continent began securing places at the helm of independent states, however, the term had become identified with racial domination in the manner of colonial regimes. In the international arena, independent India led the way in vilifying the apartheid regime in South Africa. In time, the antiapartheid movement became a global social movement, perhaps the first in world history (Skinner 2010; Thörn 2006). In tandem with the civil rights movement in the United States, campaigns against apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in making "racial discrimination" (a deeply flawed description of the situation in South Africa) and "white supremacy" a uniquely illegitimate business, cementing a commitment to antiracism into the foundation of what it means to be a civilized human being. When apartheid officially ended, with the first fully inclusive election in the country's history, many saw the moment as the symbolic end of five hundred years of European imperialism in Africa.

Today, the term *apartheid* has come to stand for any and all forms of social separation and exclusion. Even where race is not at issue, to call something apartheid is to label it as a form of evil. The word has acquired a semantic solid-

ity that carries a guaranteed weight of opprobrium. It simplifies and focuses moral judgment, clarifies political battle lines, and precludes dispassionate analysis of the issue at hand. Link the word *apartheid* with the word *Israel* or *Zionism*, for example, as former president Jimmy Carter has done, and observe the reaction (Carter 2006).

MORALITY AND APARTHEID

How should the ethical complexion of apartheid be judged in relation to the history of the south of Africa?

The answer to this question hinges on what the term *apartheid* is applied to. This is not always obvious and is worth clarifying. If we consider the wide range of discourse on the subject of apartheid over what is now almost a century of usage, five general referents of the term emerge: First, it has been used to describe a political ideal, a vision of a possible future in which different cultures can flourish in their own territories while coexisting with each other as independent entities. Second, it describes a doctrine, a set of principles guiding, or proposing to guide, the actions of government with a view to achieving the ideal outlined in the previous section. Third, it has been used to describe a policy, or set of policies, intended—or, at least, prescribed—to achieve in practice the ends specified by the idea. Fourth, it is the name of an ideology, a more or less consistent set of ideas and principles used to justify state policy and motivate political action in line with the specified ideals. Finally, it has been used to name a "system" and a "regime," both of which were said to be "evil." Needless to say, the term can also be applied to a whole era of South African history—in which case, ethics need not apply. Given these various points of reference, judgments about the morality of apartheid will involve different factors depending on the particular matter the term is applied to.

In the first instance, stated as an ideal, there is surely nothing inherently immoral about the idea of apartheid. As we have seen, it can be articulated as a vision of national freedom and human flourishing—a vision divinely ordained, for that matter—to which few in the postimperial age could object. In the past half-century or so, where the term *apartheid* stands for the arbitrary separation, by virtue of race or ethnicity, of populations that would otherwise be united in a singular national entity, the ideal stands for a uniquely illegitimate form of political order.

Questions about morality, however, inevitably creep into view when the matter at hand concerns apartheid as a political doctrine. For the apartheid vision of cultural and national separation could only have been legitimate if

it were to have been embraced by all who were to become subject to it—or, at least, a solid majority of those people. Yet, as elaborated in the years prior to 1948 and subsequently, the doctrine of apartheid gave little weight to the obligation of its advocates to secure the consent of those whom they governed. The oft-repeated claims of regime leaders that they were not in fact governing the homelands and that the homelands were not, properly considered, part of the South African state (and, therefore, that their "citizens" were not really South Africans), obviating thereby the need to secure consent of the governed, were always more than a little disingenuous. Moreover, as the subsequent practice of the NP in government made clear, the doctrine of apartheid was designed to be imposed on all subject to it, regardless of their views about how they wished to be governed or, for that matter, to govern themselves.

A common defense of the policy of apartheid of the sort de Klerk was alluding to in his CNN interview was that it was more about carving out a space of self-determination for the Afrikaner nation than imposing a vision of a political future on Africans. (After all, their destiny was to "develop along their own lines" into self-governing nations.) Another common assertion on the part of apartheid's defenders prior to 1990, though rendered increasingly implausible in the years following the Soweto Uprising of 1976 as antiapartheid resistance grew, was that the cooperation of African leaders in the homelands was tantamount to consent. Neither of these assertions was plausible. The first failed because English-speaking white South Africans were from the start admitted to the nation as full citizens simply because of their race, while "coloreds" and "Indians" were later admitted to the political fold, albeit on a second- and third-tier basis. The second argument failed, too, because by no means all of the leaders who were constrained to govern homelands during the time of apartheid, notably Mangosuthu Buthelezi in Kwa-Zulu, acceded to the policy—at least according to them.

Viewed retrospectively, then, ethical judgment of apartheid as a policy, or set of policies, requires assessment of the consequences of efforts to implement it. At the start of the apartheid era, these ethical and political judgments were made prospectively in terms of future possibilities. As the mounting toll of human suffering became increasingly evident, however, both as a result of what might be called "positive" efforts by the state to implement the policy by means of programs such as "Group Areas," "Separate Amenities," and "Black Spot" removals (population relocation), as well as "negative" efforts to repress dissent, doubts about its morality grew even among the former true believers. In the final decade of the apartheid era, few defenders of the regime invoked the original vision of national separation, resorting rather to the putative impera-

tive of resisting the spread of Communism in Africa. By the end of the era, in fact, even staunch former believers in the vision, such as de Klerk, sought to distance themselves from responsibility for its effects.

Ultimately, judgment of the morality of the policy of apartheid depends on an assessment of motives. If the policy, as de Klerk argued, had in fact been a well-intentioned mistake, it would surely be legitimate to leaven the accounting of suffering caused with references to benefits bestowed. Similarly, if the putative benefits turned out to be substantial and lasting, there might be reason to diminish the reckoning of pain suffered. However, if the intentions behind the policy are adjudged malicious—such as the promotion of white supremacy—no amount of benefit enjoyed could outweigh the harm inflicted. Not surprisingly, people who still remember the suffering and struggles of the apartheid era tend to find the insistence of people like de Klerk that apartheid was not all bad somewhat galling.

This brings us to the fourth dimension of the term *apartheid:* ideology. Here the key question is whether or not the noble vision, with its high ideals, was genuinely motivating the people involved in implementing the policy—from those at the highest realms of the state administration to the lowly voter who supported them. If the ideology was merely a mask for ulterior motives resulting in widespread suffering, the whole enterprise can only be judged immoral. Judgment of the morality of an ideology, however, cannot be divorced from assessment of its impact in practice—which, after all, distinguishes it from a mere vision or set of ideals. Four broad possible interpretations of apartheid ideology present themselves, which I shall rank here in ascending order of opprobrium: it was a noble vision that was inadequately implemented; it was a noble vision that turned out to be mistaken by virtue of the unwarranted suffering imposed in its implementation and, later, continuation after the noble goal was lost; it was, from the start, a cynical exercise in political legitimation for a system of racial domination serving a variety of vested interests; it was a deliberate program to exploit and oppress the black masses in the interests of white supremacy. None of these points of view can be sustained merely by reference to historical evidence. They all derive from prior political commitments.

Finally, when *apartheid* is used as a term describing a "system," how might its ethical character be evaluated? The word *system* refers to a set of components integrated into a single whole for the purpose of processing inputs into outputs. Outputs on systems created by humans are spoken of as "purposes." To refer to apartheid as a system, then, is to have made a decision—either explicitly or

implicitly—about the purpose, or purposes, of the system. In practice, people who referred, and still refer, to the "apartheid system" were critics who argued that the fundamental purpose of the system was racial domination involving the oppression of blacks by whites, usually said to be connected with the related purpose of creating and sustaining economic power and wealth for whites. Proponents of apartheid in the years of NP rule, on the other hand, did not refer to a system, preferring instead the anodyne term *policy*. Talk of the apartheid system, then, particularly in the waning decades of NP rule and since, was not merely a dispassionate assessment of the cumulative impact of policies and ideologies. Rather, it was a mode of invoking a class of moral judgments to inform political practice.

Description of apartheid as a system of racial oppression, however, does not obviate all ethical considerations for it leaves the question: who was responsible for the system? For which, the obvious answer is: the whites. But such an answer would not only ignore the obvious fact that not all whites were actively supportive of, or responsible for, apartheid policies, but the reasoning of such an answer embodies the same sort of racial logic that was the grounds for opposing apartheid in the first place. Most leaders, activists, and ordinary opponents of apartheid were thus careful to distinguish between the moralities, or rather immorality, of the system and that of whites in general as a social category. No one doubted the system was evil; few insisted that all white people were. Even when the category "white" was disaggregated, as it commonly was, into "Afrikaner" (or, more commonly, and unflatteringly, in popular discourse, "Boer") and "English," each of which manifesting stereotypical racist tendencies of their own, a categorical denunciation was typically avoided. As a white man living in the black township of Soweto during the last years of the apartheid era, albeit one belonging to that other social category "white-from-overseas," I can testify not only to the importance of this distinction about moral responsibility in practice but also its rootedness in everyday life.

While the meaning of the term *apartheid* can be anatomized in clinical fashion, as in the preceding discussion, in everyday political discourse during the years known as those of "the Struggle," the nature of the evil that was the system was generally construed as a rather more complex phenomenon. For to name evil is to identify power, the power to cause harm, and the attribution of evil to a political system is not independent of the modes of attributing evil to the other powers that shape the fortunes of everyday existence. When these powers are also invisible, epistemological problems proliferate.

ON THE EVERYDAY EPISTEMOLOGY OF EVIL:
A VIEW FROM SOWETO

In my book *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (2005), I argue that everyday "habits of interpreting power . . . put a premium on divining the true agencies behind the appearance of misfortune" in ways that contributed to the creation of a sense that the "apartheid system" was the source of virtually every kind of misfortune that could afflict black people (Ashforth 2005) The "evil" of the apartheid system, in this sense, was more than just an ethical judgment about the consequences of policies, but the naming of a source of power. Here, drawing on a further decade of fieldwork experience in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, I want to explore again the question of how evil is construed in the context of everyday relations among human persons where life is lived in a world with witches. For, in such places evil cannot be understood independently of the putative capacities of persons to cause harm to others by mysterious means named, generically, "witchcraft."

Witchcraft, as we have been reminded countless times since Evans-Pritchard's famous formulation, is a way of making sense of "misfortune" that is a "function of personal relations" (1937). Use of the term *misfortune* in this context, however, is unfortunate for the term in English is redolent of mishap, chance, and bad luck. Yet, as Evans-Pritchard makes clear in his ethnographic discussions, it is precisely because people do *not* accept an element of fortune, chance, or luck in their sufferings that they readily attribute their suffering to malicious actions by others. A better formulation, in my view, would emphasize a predisposition to experience suffering as a form of harm deliberately inflicted by another person, or persons, for malicious motives. I would also argue that once the possibility of malicious harmful action by mysterious means, such as those spoken of as witchcraft, is accepted, this predisposition to treat suffering as harm is not only rational, but inevitable.

At the heart of discourses on witchcraft is a distinction between being and action. Being a witch is one thing; performing witchcraft is another. Sometimes this distinction is rendered in terms of "witchcraft" vis-à-vis "sorcery," though this language can be misleading because it tends to imply a distinction based on modes of action (typically based on using material substances as opposed to inherent powers) rather than between being and action. It is better, in my view, to think of the witch as a distinct kind of person—both superhuman and subhuman—which is given over entirely to evil, relinquishing claims to the community of humankind. Witchcraft—malicious, violent, action involving mysterious invisible powers of a sort we might term "supernatural"—on the

other hand, can be perpetrated by anyone with the means and the motive, not just the witch. The fundamental predicate of all narratives about witchcraft is that it is perpetrated in secret by means mysterious and invisible, at least to those uninitiated in the arts of witchcraft and antiwitchcraft.

For those who know themselves not to be witches (which is pretty much everyone I have met in Africa over the past three decades), but who nonetheless consider themselves to be living in a world with witches (which is pretty much everyone), the practice of everyday life poses distinct problems. Principal among these is what I call the *epistemological double bind:* because anyone can perpetrate witchcraft, and because the witch will always hide his or her real motives, you cannot know who is the witch; and, because only the witch knows of what he is capable, you cannot know what harm is *impossible* for them to cause, so you must protect against everything. From this follows the *presumption of malice:* because you know they can harm you by mysterious unknowable means, you must presume that they will—this despite appearances to the contrary or explicit denials.

How might this structure of interpretation have shaped modes of interpreting the nature of power in relation to the "apartheid system?"

WHEN A PEOPLE'S SUFFERING IS HARM: POLITICAL DISCOURSE AT APARTHEID'S END

Until the last decade of the twentieth century, black people in South Africa were subjected to a steadily increasing burden of oppressive unjust rule imposed by often arbitrary and corrupt officials. From 1952 to 1986, for example, when pass laws required all Africans over the age of sixteen to carry documentation of their legal status at all time, a whole population was presumed to be in breach of the law unless they could prove otherwise. For most black people in the apartheid era, their primary experience of state power came from negotiating the labyrinthine regulations of the pass laws and "influx control system" regulating where they could live and how they could move. In urban areas, particularly after the Second World War, the townships were similarly spaces of harsh policing, while also places called home. Being exposed to the pass laws and township regulations—not to mention the liquor laws, which also criminalized millions of Africans—was to know a power that was at once systematic and arbitrary, material and mysterious. Rights of residence in urban areas, moreover, were not in fact rights but categories of exemption from a blanket prohibition on African settlement in towns and cities. Proving your entitlement meant accumulating papers and permits, finding the right office where

officials would process your claims, and carrying documentation at all times. At the end of the day, however, despite all the laws, rules, and regulations, your fate depended on the whims of an official who might be harsh and unbending, or friendly and understanding, or—more often than the literature on the pass system reflects—open to a little financial inducement to "make a plan."

Despite its oppressive and racist character and the often arbitrary or corrupt behavior of its officials, the South African state was always a lawful, if not legitimate, state. For the most part, those who acted in the name of the state were authorized to do so by laws passed in the legislature following public debate and their actions were subject to judicial scrutiny. Africans had little say in the shape of these laws. Indeed, for most of the century, the head of state had virtually unlimited legislative, administrative, and judicial power—granted by law (the Native Administration Act of 1927)—over those classified as "native," "Bantu," and, eventually, "black." African populations within South Africa, and it is important to stress the plural here because not all populations were subjugated in the same way, were subjected to extensive regulation by virtue of administrative fiat, whether by officials operating under the auspices of the erstwhile Native Affairs Department, local officials managing townships and hostels, and the police. From an African perspective, then, unknown officials in distant offices made rules, unseen by and unaccountable to those subject to them. African subjection by officials of the white-dominated state, moreover, was coordinated with private authorities in farms, mines, homes, factories, and other places of employment and residence—which were also mostly white. In the final decade and a half of white rule, furthermore, a number of secretive agencies were established to maintain state security in the face of mounting, and increasingly violent, African resistance. No wonder, then, that the whole seemed like a vast and oppressive system, the very name of suffering in general. It took time, however, before a conviction emerged in everyday contexts that would attribute the generalized suffering of African people to the harm inflicted by the apartheid system—a connection that insufficient time has elapsed to decouple.

When I arrived in Soweto in 1990, at the tail end of the apartheid era, young political activists spoke of the "system" or the "regime" as an all-encompassing field of suffering. But this suffering was not merely misfortune in the sense of a random mishap or accident of fate. No, suffering was harm—deliberately inflicted. An individual's pain and the nation's oppression both had the same cause: apartheid. When activists—and virtually everyone in those days was an activist—spoke in terms of agency, of the motive force behind the evil regime, they referred to "the Government." The government, however, was an entity

distinct from its material manifestations in the figure of the president and his men (and they were mostly men). Certainly, the "Comrades" in Soweto, as they styled themselves, recognized there was a public face to this power they named the government. But the real source of the power encapsulated in the word was essentially invisible, hidden from view: secret. For example, the men who were the public face of the government ceaselessly proclaimed that they governed in the interests of all, that they knew what the best interests of the black majority were, and that they had the support of those whom they governed. Everyone knew this was a lie. When they said: "we must protect our country against Communism," most black people heard "Communists are for the people" and cheered. If an activist died, from whatever manifest cause, no one would doubt that the government was ultimately responsible. Or, as in the last years of NP rule when the threat of HIV and AIDS became apparent, and officials announced that condoms would be provided free of charge to protect against HIV, people heard a clear message: the government wants to keep the black birthrate down to ensure white supremacy. Given the presumption of malicious motives, then, and the self-evident fact of secrecy, it was hard to say of the government: this they cannot do.

Indeed, the entity "the Government" in some respects resembled an invisible being, with whom, when one entered the life of politics or the struggle, one became locked in a life-or-death contest. Knowledge of the nature of this entity was secret, inaccessible to all but those who had gone over to the other side—"sellouts"—and they were not telling what they knew. Its actions could only be discerned in retrospect, from an accounting of the harms inflicted. And suffering was interpreted as harm. The real power of the idea of "the Government," it seemed to me in those early days of the transition to democracy, derived from its being the name of the ultimate effective cause of suffering. That is to say, because whites—either as individuals or as a social category—could not be held to blame for the apartheid system, the government and, by extension, all who supported it, became the agent responsible.

POLITICS OF BLAME IN THE POST-ANTI-APARTHEID ERA

Although less than half of the current population of the country was alive when apartheid came to an end (Statistics South Africa 2011), much is still at stake in accounting for the evil that was apartheid. Even at the highest levels of government, passionate debates rage about the legacy of apartheid in the present. On April 2, 2013, for example, Trevor Manuel, minister in the presidency of South Africa, admonished a summit meeting of civil servants about the lack

of service delivery and told them it was time for the ANC in government to take responsibility for its failings: "We [government] should no longer say it's apartheid's fault," he is reported as saying, referring particularly to failings in the education sector (SAPA 2013). President Zuma lost no time in slapping him down. A week later, addressing a commemoration of the assassination of Communist Party leader Chris Hani, Zuma announced: "To suggest we cannot blame apartheid for what is happening in our country now, I think is a mistake to say the least" (Dodds, Seale, and SAPA, 2013). President Zuma is right, to say the least. It would be a mistake for the ANC to relinquish the right to blame apartheid for the problems of the present. For if those who are still suffering began to ask *Why?* without being able to place the blame somewhere other than on the governments of the ANC—local, provincial, and national—the consequences for the ruling party would probably be disastrous.

Today, when the question of the meaning of apartheid arises, it frequently ignites a political firestorm over who is to blame for the continuing misery of the multitudes that were expected to thrive after its demise. The conflagration is intensified, moreover, by the contributions to the politics of blame by disaffected white people who seem increasingly inclined to voice their disapproval of the current regime in starkly racist terms, particularly in the relatively anonymous confines of the Internet.[2]

In the past, however, particularly in the later years of NP rule, identifying the nature of the evil that was apartheid was a matter not merely of vilifying a political opponent, but of analyzing power. Naming the "apartheid system" as "evil," such as in Tutu's speech quoted earlier, was to identify a fundamental feature of the power that oppressed the black majority of South Africa, with very real consequences both for everyday life as well as the struggle for freedom. To suggest that apartheid was not in fact a deliberate program of maliciously inspired racism is tantamount to saying it was not evil. To deny the evil would be tantamount to denying that the suffering caused was not maliciously inflicted harm. And to deny that suffering is harm is tantamount to denying that it is suffering. The meaning of *apartheid*, then, is far from academic.

NOTES

1. Although young idealists like de Klerk might not have noticed this at the time, it was not lost on the chairman of the commission charged with figuring out how to make apartheid work. I interviewed Professor F. R. Tomlinson in 1981, some quarter of a century after presenting his report, and he was still viscerally angry with Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, the former minister of Native Affairs (later prime minister) who commissioned his report. Tomlinson told me how, after laboring for four years on their report, bringing the best scientific knowledge to bear on the problem, they presented their work

to Verwoerd. The *Report,* of which he was still evidently proud, consisted of seventeen volumes with detailed assessments of every "Bantu Area" in the Union. Verwoerd, however, dismissed the proud authors of the report with disdain, ordering them to produce a one-volume summary. At that point, Tomlinson told me, they knew the government was not serious about development but merely wanted a document they could use for political propaganda.

2. For examples, see the comment section of any online news article published in South Africa headlining the name "Zuma."

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