

## LOOKING BACK IN ANGER

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Our sister school, the University of the Western Cape, has a unique way of summing up the feeling which presents itself, often so readily, as we leave places. 'Prospice, Respice', they say as they utter their school motto, the Latin imperative: 'Look ahead, look behind!'. Which translates more or less idiomatically into, 'Envision, remember!'. It is an apperception of a world where our ability to dream, our creative capacities are somehow tied heavily into our strengths at recapitulation. **The University's motto reminds us that there is something alienating about the very act of remembering, something which ties memory to its thematic opposite of envisioning.**

Over the German summer, and for two weeks spanning the end of July, I travelled to the University of Erfurt in the former Eastern-bloc state of Thuringia. I was one of several guests of the German government participating in the conference, 'Muslims in the West', an annual gathering now in its third year. This was the second year in succession that South Africa had been represented here. Hosted by the University of Erfurt's Chair for Religious Philosophy in Islamic Studies, Dr Jamal Malik, the idea was to foster 'encounters' between academics who carry a Muslim Identity, and those who do not.

My time spent in Erfurt was neither useful to me, in the sense that it added directly to my doctoral research in literary theory, nor was it elegiac in the sense that travel in Europe so often is. My time in Erfurt, like the conference itself, must be bound neither by a discourse of utility, nor by one of romance. And as such falls outside the discourses popularized by the Travel Channel. It is the hard, non-jaundiced edge of logic to be used as criterion for the affair.

My primary area of interest is discourse analysis, especially how it connects in with the area of comics, which is today seen perhaps as the trash-heap of popular culture, already the trash-heap of literature. I fell into the conference by my relation to the Center for Contemporary Islam, at the University of Cape Town, where I had done some editorial work in the past, and continue to do so. While my interest in identity politics is keen, my academic instinct with reference to the particular case of Muslim representation was until the German Summer, lacking somewhat. If nothing else, the conference has heaved up a morass of detail to keep me occupied in the specific field of Muslim identity politics for some time, but this is perhaps only a tertiary, and

perhaps unimportant, outcome.

In a hamlet-university of only 4 000 students, in a town where there seems to be no concept for parallel streets, there is a certain lilt of humor to my choice of title. Erfurt is built around not one, but two town-squares. The primary square is the spiritual center where the cathedrals stand. This square is of a certain pedigree and has a history hankering back some thousand years. The first town square is named Domplatz, roughly 'cathedral square'. There is however, a second square that can be found by travelling further down the line from Fischmarkt. Here, in the second town square, can be found imprints of a global market, often loosely referred to as 'American culture'. There is a small shopping mall, a McDonalds, a Burger King. Californian Levi, Guess and Diesel brands can be readily purchased. This new town square, not unpromisingly, is called Anger. It is the junction where the tram-lines converge.

The title of this piece then, is a summoning up of sorts, a secret cabal of language that returns us to the liberatory work of John Osborne, and reminds us of what we already knew from the motto of our sister school; memory is always laced with the bile of building a new vision of the world.

Osborne is perhaps not a poor place to begin, when putting thoughts on my German experience into a certain order. Writing in the *World Socialist* of the 1999 production of Osborne's Look Back in Anger, staged at the Royal National Theater, London, Paul Bond labels the play as 'an inarticulate hope'. Before commenting on the production at hand, Bond levels an accusation at Osborne's scriptwriting ability. Speaking of the script, Bond introduces his objection with the suggestion that '...there is a faint whiff of formula about it'. On the other hand, there is a great liberation that arises from the language itself, and from the very fact of the portraiture Osborne makes of the frustrated and highly educated working class. *Kitchen Sink Drama*, as Osborne's inauguration of the genre came to later be known, is marked by providing a 'wind at the door', as Eliot might have put it, to the populist back-door comedies of Coward and *Rattigan* and others in the early fifties West End scene.

What Bond clearly obfuscates is the idea of competence. An easily-made mistake since when viewing Look Back in Anger, we fall into the trap of viewing Osborne as a novice playwright, simply because this is his first play. Bond, as do so many others, obliterates the fact of an artistic culpability on Osborne's part. The scripting is poor as a result of skill that is lacking, Bond believes, rather than allowing

for Osborne to have deliberately impoverished the script to the point of it being generic by intention. Look Back in Anger is in the purest of senses, the dark and angry child of George Bernhard Shaw's Pygmalion, and as such, should be approached as an artefact of the purest artisanship. It is in many ways formulaic, by design. Its hidden gems clearly lie elsewhere, and as such, an impoverishment of scripting is a necessary evil. I believe a similar generosity could be claimed for, what in everyday parlance of the attendees at Erfurt, came to be called 'The Summer School'.

While the very act of academic construction of the conference seems immediately slow and plodding, there is, I sense, an act of great deliberation on the part of Dr Mailk. In keeping with his encounter-theory, Dr Malik had set topics which perambulate questions of Muslims and identity-theory. **The question of what it means to be Muslim in the so-called West gives way to the underlying question of what it means to be Muslim. In this way, the hegemony of a homogenized Islam is defeated.** An encounter, as I am given to understand, is a rhetorical play, a psychical and social set-piece, if you will. It is aimed at interrogating not only, in this instance, the nebulous and alienating concept of the West, but also pertains to an investigation of the various machineries involved in the construction of the self. In a very classical sense, the conference hinged upon being a cathartic experience.

There was an easy passage of lectures, given by guests rather than conference attendees, beginning with the liminality of European identity and borders, culminating with the Fundamentalist Question.

Primarily for me the conference was not about social interaction, although that was clearly a fallout, nor was it about the historicity of Thuringia, although, this was another consequence. In the pure realm of reason, what the conference held up as its own, was the shaping of a particular constellation of power, which is strangely both well-meaning in what it obfuscates, and noteworthy in what it attempts. As such, *Muslims in the West* is perhaps the most important of the nine international conferences I have attended in my hitherto, short academic career.

I cannot render clearly what precisely is this constellation of power. I know that in confronting it both the German and the Muslim delegates began decoding what their respectively monolithic identities might mean. 'I am not German in that way, since I am from the old East', was a popular cry over lunch. And much the same for the Muslims; the Turks were not Pakistani, who in turn were not Egyptian. The

delegates themselves seemed to be able to navigate past the mass-produced identities that were handed out before the conference began; German and Muslim, but 'and' is too delicate a word.

Another effect of this constellation of power seems tied directly into the word needed to correlate the fractured identities of 'German' and 'Muslim'. This word would fall somewhere on continuum between 'and' at the one end, and 'versus' on the other. The linguistic machineries around the conference seem at the outset, predisposed to marketing the Muslims as the New Soviets. This is more or less a global phenomenon these days, and cynically perhaps, I am looking to a rejuvenation of Red Scare sci-fi invasion movies, which seem to be enjoying something of a rebirth as superhero flicks. While it may initially seem a shortcoming, I believe this recoding of the Muslim-Democracy debate as a nouveau East-West discourse is important in Germany. Germany is the only place where it makes any sense. And the only place where a healing of identity needs to begin as a national project.

In many senses Germany after the War is the most 'Eastern' of European countries. Pushed to the edges of disdain in the eyes of an international community, it finds itself trapped in the role of a key economic power. Not outside, but at the periphery seeking recognition and on the other hand, locked in a battle to assuage the growing encroachment of alien values, most visibly under the guise of 'American globalization'. **I remember being told of the simple dignity of wanting to keep a German traffic light, rather than opting for the global standard.** Or to say it with other terms; it is not by chance that the traditional German market rolls out Saturday mornings on Domplatz rather than on Anger. There seems to be little room for it under the shadow of the MacDonald's.

In this way of course, by opting for a new East-West discourse where the Reds are replaced with the Muslims, the conference falls short of the more pressing global discourse of North-South economies in crisis. Even promotional materials at the Frederick-Ebert Foundation generalize North economies as clean, urban technologies fixed on helping agrarian, resource-depleting, rural systems in the South. Perhaps in the coming years the notion of Muslim identity will be able to be reconceived of in a North-South dynamic, as is already being done by the Saudi-based Organization for Islamic Conference. But this would be an unfair request to make, at least until German identity can be reclaimed in the same way Afrikaner identity could be reclaimed in South Africa after Apartheid. Eminent filmmaker Wim Wenders once

said of the Peter Fonda film, Easy Rider, '[it] is a political film. Also here in Germany it's a science fiction film. Well maybe not for much longer'. While I do not share the caustic language, I have come to understand the necessity behind the original apperception. And I perhaps share his hope for a better tomorrow.

I have certain recommendations, and given my position with the organization of the conference, these would perhaps be more effective, enunciated as hopes. I would recommend that the conference continue, and that it continue in Thuringia. The fabric of former Eastern-Bloc society makes all the difference. Further, I would recommend the sustained invitation of delegates from countries like India, Malaysia and South Africa - 'South' countries of developing economies, where Islam is not the dominant or singular paradigm. It is perhaps here that German delegates themselves may find greatest society.

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Pull Quotes:

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