

“MIERDA”, OR CONCERNING “EVIL” IN POLITICS.
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS.

By Philippe-Joseph Salazar



My purpose is to outline the question of “the diabolical”. To acknowledge something like “the diabolical” in politics of transition has a direct bearing on the appreciation by which in order to achieve a “new beginning” a traumatised polity “treats” the diabolical and proceeds to reconciliation, or to vengeance.¹

I.

Let me begin with immediate differences and one analogy on the question of “the diabolical” in Argentina and South Africa. Both in the Report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission² and in the debate ensuing from the republication of the *Nunca más* Report by CONADEP “the diabolical” makes its presence felt. The TRC Report names apartheid “evil” and in Argentina there is a debate on the mysteriously named “teoría de los dos demonios”. Terms vary but fall within the same paradigm, “the diabolical”.

However, there are immediate differences in the treatment of “the diabolical” in public debate. In South Africa, it was a case of a morbid or eroticised fascination for “prime evil”, Colonel Eugene de Kock.³ In Argentina (as the English entry in Wikipedia says cleverly) it functions

¹ Material is based upon work supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (GUN: 75930). Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these materials are those of the author and therefore the NRF does not accept any liability in regard thereto.

² Readers are referred to two compendia of the TRC Report: 1.) Erik Doxtader and Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa. The fundamental documents* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2007); 2.) French-English version by Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *Amnistier l’Apartheid* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2004).

³ In Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 35: 210 - 217 and note: 297.

like (or as) a “rhetorical device”,⁴ and it refers to the “theory” whereby criminals *pro* and *con* engaged in acts of violence that were “demoniac”; in South Africa however the epithet “evil” has never been applied (to my knowledge) to crimes committed by Liberation movements.

Further, that apartheid was evil was taken for granted, not only as an idea but as practice. Some perpetrators⁵ actually staged its exorcism and expressed that they “had found God again”, after they had been deposed by the TRC; as if, through talking they exorcised the evil in themselves. An apartheid cabinet minister washed the feet of an opponent (by then also a Cabinet official) whose assassination he had ordered or covered up, in a gesture of religious atonement at Easter time.

In addition, whereas Liberation movements were asked by the TRC to justify their human rights violations, by contrast in Argentina the suggestion that those who, from anti-junta or security forces, committed crimes were equally demoniac, was not taken for granted. In fact it deeply divides the partisans of criminal tribunals, who won in the end, and the partisans of a reconciliation akin to South Africa’s whereby perpetrators and victims were treated “with fair handedness” — *i.e.* not in the same way but with the same recognition that apartheid being evil, perpetrators were also its victims. No such consideration seems acceptable to many or even most of the relatives of victims in Argentina.⁶

The leader of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo called the idea of

⁴ “The theory of the two demons (Spanish: *Teoría de los dos demonios*) is a rhetorical device used in Argentine political discourse to disqualify arguments that appear to morally equate violent political subversion with illegal repressive activities carried out by the state”: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theory_of_the_two_demons&oldid=422752387.

⁵ For an anthropology of “perpetrators”, see Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Relato, reconciliación, reconocimiento, a propósito de los *perpetradores* y de la amnistía de Sudáfrica”, *Historia, Antropología y Fuentes Orales* 42 (2009): 37 - 53.

⁶ Argenpress.info (20 September 2010): <http://www.argenpress.info/2010/09/argentina-cordoba-la-teoria-de-los-dos.html>.

“fair handedness” or equally shared evil “Mierda”, “shit”.⁷

The word is strong. Indeed “the diabolical” in theology is often in proximity with vile matters, cold semen and excrement; so, when voices of vengeance evoke indirectly the purity or innocence of “our children” (who were undoubtedly tortured, or raped and killed), the link between the excremental nature of the “diabolical” on one side and the virginal on the other settles in a neat, if somewhat expected, balance of opposites. None of this was prominent in South Africa where, mostly, pardon granted and remorse expressed equalised pain and anger. Victimhood at the hands of “evil” apartheid was perceived to be borne both by perpetrators and what we usually and juristically call, victims. Some Liberation fighters, who had been tortured refused for that reason to appear as “victims”.

One step back into rhetoric: How common places are turned into ethical arguments, how such arguments have no other truth-value than the rhetorical effects they produce as they solidify in objects for transactions, is the ambit of rhetoric as practical philosophy. Arguments are commodities. I have called them, elsewhere, “rhetoremes”. This is in essence a radical, materialist approach.

II.

Thus, if there is a discursive theory of “evil”, it is found in the TRC Report. I will list the main instances of “evil” in the Report, and facing each occurrence, I will offer the prolegomena of a gloss. The sum of the glosses structures the rhetoreme “evil”.

A similar work must be done with regard to the controversy around the “demonios” and the new, 2006 version of *Nunca más* which rejects a “symmetry” between “State terrorism” and acts of rebellion — bearing in mind that the idiom *teoría de los dos demonios* is not to be found in the original *Nunca más* and is a rebuttal device used by its opponent.

⁷ Olivier Galak, “Controversia por el prólogo agregado al informe ‘Nunca más’”, *La Nación* (19 May 2006).

1. The online presentation on the TRC website states:

“The Mandate (Volume 1, Chapter 4, paragraph 1) is critical to understanding the way in which the Commission grappled with and interpreted its mandate, and how it dealt with the complexities that attended this process. The chapter explores the origins of the Commission and the political processes that brought it into existence. It provides some background as to how the Commission approached its work and takes up some of the important debates that provided the framework within which the Commission operated. These include a discussion on terminology; the debate on the definition of victims in an apartheid society and the necessarily narrow focus of the Commission (“Who were the victims of gross violations of human rights?”): “...It can never be forgotten that the system itself was evil, inhumane and degrading for the many millions who became its second and third class citizens. Amongst its many crimes, perhaps the greatest was its power to humiliate, to denigrate and to remove the

self-confidence, self-esteem and dignity of its millions of victims”.¹

Gloss: Apartheid as a system is “evil, inhumane, degrading”. That is: a theological definition of evil appears first in connection with the degradation of mankind from its Edenic status to what we call humanity,² when death becomes an integral part of humanity. Apartheid is equated with the Fall and Death.³

¹<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/execsum.htm>

² Genesis 3.

³ Wisdom 2: 24.

2. A statement about the Scriptural basis for the imperative to oppose evil:

“Liberation theologians’ biblical imperative is to be found in Isaiah Chapter 61, verse 1 – 4, and is quoted in Luke Chapter 4, verse 18 - 19, particularly the words: “To set at liberty those who are oppressed”. For this reason a group of Theologians met together at that critical time of South Africa’s history, and using the process of wide and in-depth consultation, eventually came up with what came to be known as the (*Kairos*)⁴ Document, issued as a challenge to the churches. In its short lifetime, the institute has suffered much at the hands of the previous government and from rejection by most churches who have misunderstood its vision and mission. Both government and the churches singled out liberation theology as the devil’s theology and thus accused ICT of serving the

⁴ Transcript says “Carus”, a transcription which shows how little knowledge the TRC staff had of Liberation theology in South Africa (*Kairos document*, 1985 ; in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit*, Document 9: 50 - 56).

interest of...[TAPE ENDS] ...[inaudible] have a lot in common between communism, barring atheism and Christianity than the church would care to admit.⁵

Gloss: Apartheid branded Liberation theology, the “devil’s theology”. What is highlighted here is the accusatory or adversarial nature of apartheid: again, there is a Scriptural reference, whereby Satan is “accusatory” in that sense that he indicts the innocent using false claims.⁶

⁵ Statement by the General Secretary of the Institute for Contextual Theology, Faith Community Hearings, 17-19 Nov. 1997: http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/faith/faith_a.htm.

⁶ Psalms 109: 6.

3. A statement regarding the use of violence in opposing violence:

“As we reflect on the past and look to the future, there are several things we would like to say. Notwithstanding that many in the White community saw the evil of apartheid and its out working, many did not and may not have chosen to. That stands as a sombre lesson of how whole communities and countries can be misled by skilful leaders. It has happened before and no doubt it will happen again. While we believe that many of the government officials of the old regime were sincere Christians, nevertheless, we were a witness to how the bible and its message can be misused to support an evil ideology... But then so did some liberation theologians who finally supported violence as a means of continuing the struggle. They argued that the crucifixion of Jesus sanctioned violence as a method of obtaining freedom”.⁷

Gloss: The question is, what is it to “see evil” and to choose not to oppose it? Theologically, it means that the Whites were “possessed” by that evil spirit unless, through “sincerity” they “witnessed” how the possession operated and how the victory over evil and of life over death (the Crucifixion) was misused – itself a case of derivative “possession”. The text behind this instantiation of evil is the story of Christ chasing demons from a possessed man into a herd of pigs.⁸

⁷ Statement by the representative of the Church of England in South Africa, *Ibid.*

⁸ Luke 8: 22 - 36.

4. A statement regarding “moral strength” in opposing evil:

“We are grateful to God that in spite of our shortcomings we were given strength to resist the evil of apartheid. In spite of extreme government pressure, we refused to withdraw our membership from the World Council of Churches. A number of our pulpits fearlessly proclaimed a wholesome gospel that prophetically declared that the people of South Africa will be free. We constantly focused our prayers to the cause of justice and to the discomfort of many, we used sometimes symbols that sought to keep the hope alive for a new South Africa to dawn. A number of our ministers suffered public humiliation at the hands of the government and its agents of evil. A large number of Methodist families suffered at the hands of the tyrannical system, as they responded to the prophetic call to resist apartheid”.⁹

Gloss: “Agents of evil” is an interesting artefact as it introduces, precisely, agency. The question of the agency of perpetrators is a key element – see below. In opposition to the energumen “possessed” (he who is “travailed by evil”, in Greek is an “*energumenos*”) there is the “agent”.

⁹ Statement by the representative of the Methodist church, *Ibid*.

5. A statement regarding the intrinsic nature of evil:

“But from 1947 when the Conference was established, the Bishops sought to speak as a Conference on the issues of the day and they began to attach the false theological base on which the ideology of apartheid was based. In 1951 one of the first Conference statements condemned racial discrimination but didn’t use the word apartheid, but here we see the fact that we were a church community of the day. We reflected the way issues were looked at in that day. For example, it reflected a paternalistic spirit, the statement in 1952, maintaining that most non-Europeans (was the word commonly used at the time) were not yet ready for full participation in the social, political and economic life of the country, but must be allowed and encouraged to evolve towards such participation. That was an early statement, but by 1957, the Conference had begun to focus much more critically and it in 1957 called apartheid what it really is: intrinsically evil”.¹⁰

¹⁰ Statement by the representative

Gloss: Indeed the Catholic Church was the first to provide a neat definition, and the first to oppose apartheid on solid, doctrinal grounds. The key term is “intrinsically”. What would be “extrinsic evil”? The product or the application of a system. That will be the exact defence by F.W. de Klerk, as representative of the apartheid National Party: that if “apartheid was wrong”,¹¹ and its applications were “mistaken”, apartheid leaders were however “honourable” “within the context of their time”.¹² This distinction sets into motion a new distinction: if apartheid was “intrinsically” evil, then some made the choice to support it (as, by contrast, if it had been only “extrinsically” *i.e.* through applications, “evil”, then agents needed not choose it; they would merely have acted, and

of the Roman Catholic Church, *Ibid.*

¹¹ Statement by F.W. de Klerk, 14 May 1997 (<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/party2/np2.htm>); analysis in Salazar, *Ammistier l’Apartheid*: 58 - 59.

¹² Statement by F.W. de Klerk (21 August 1996) in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 47: 311 - 319.

then realized the application was “evil”). What is summoned here is the “temptatory” nature of evil, a commonplace of Christian theology.¹³

¹³ For instance, Luke 11, 4, 22, 40.

6. What the Report says about the motives for evil actions.

“We have sought to carry out our work to the best of our ability, without bias. I cannot, however, be asked to be neutral about apartheid. It is an intrinsically evil system. But I am even-handed in that I will let an apartheid supporter tell me what he or she sincerely believed moved him or her, and what his or her insights and perspectives were; and I will take these seriously into account in making my finding. I do believe that there were those who supported apartheid who genuinely believed that it offered the best solution to the complexities of a multiracial land with citizens at very different levels of economic, social and educational development... I do believe such people were not driven by malicious motives”.¹⁴

Gloss: Motives were generally not “malicious”. That is, agents acted through temptation, and lack of resistance to temptation and its persuasiveness. Theologically congruent with the persuasive nature of evil whereby “to persuade” (to do a given action — in Eve’s case to access the forbidden) (*peiró*, in Greek) is akin to “to tempt” (*peirazō*).¹⁵ In short: the tempted is put to a test that he does not see as a “test”.¹⁶

¹⁴ Report, *Foreword* by Desmond Tutu ; in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 17: 85 - 89.

¹⁵ Matthew 4: 1 - 3.

¹⁶ The Hebrew “*massab*” translates as “test”, or “temptation”.

7. The human dignity of evil perpetrators:

“At the forum on Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Economic Justice in Cape Town on 19 March 1997, Ms Ngewu (whose son was killed by the police in the ‘Gugulethu Seven’ incident), was asked how she saw the notion of reconciliation. She responded as follows (to the question on perpetrators serving long prison sentences): “In my opinion, I do not agree with this view. We do not want to see people suffer in the same way that we did suffer, and we did not want our families to have suffered. We do not want to return the suffering that was imposed upon us... We do not want to return the evil that perpetrators committed to the nation. We want to demonstrate humaneness towards them, so that they in turn may restore their own humanity”.¹⁷

¹⁷ Report V, 9, paragraph 33, in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 58: 389 - 411.

Gloss: This goes to the heart of the redemptive purport that is within naming apartheid as evil. It is impossible here not bring to bear Freud’s analysis of “diabolical neurosis” whereby the Devil is a substitute for the Father, allowing for the two sides of the Father (translation: the State, Society *etc.*) to play itself out, both destructively and positively.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, “A seventeenth-century demoniological neurosis”, in *The standard edition of complete psychological works* 19, James Strachey *et al.* (Eds.) (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961): 67 - 105.

8. How to restore from evil:

“One of the reasons for this failure of emphasis is the fact that the greater part of the Commission’s focus has been on what could be regarded as the exceptional — on gross violations of human rights rather than the more mundane but nonetheless traumatising dimensions of apartheid life that affected every single Black South African... The media has understandably focused on these events — labelling Eugene de Kock, the Vlakplaas commander, ‘Prime Evil’. The vast majority of victims who either made statements to the Commission or who appeared at public hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee to tell their stories of suffering simply did not receive the same level of public attention... The result is that ordinary South Africans do not see themselves as represented by those the Commission defines as perpetrators, failing to recognise the ‘little perpetrator’ in each one of us. To understand the source of evil is not to condone it. It is only by recognising the potential for evil in each one of us that we can take full

responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated”.¹⁹

Gloss: Can “evil” repeat itself? The Report answers positively. So, the work or reconciliation is to prevent “such evil” to repeat itself. Oddly, the intent is not to prevent a similar evil, or a similar process, but to prevent the repetition of this particular temptation. Question: Can reconciliatory politics also ward off an iteration of “evil”, that is, recognize it as an iteration and “treat” it before it happens?

¹⁹ Report I, 5, *Ubuntu promoting restorative justice*, paragraphs 107 - 108, in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 18: 90 - 98.

9. How to differentiate between evil and victimhood:

The Act makes a clear distinction between “the perspectives of victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations”. This magnitude gap has a number of features:

a.) The importance of the act is usually far greater for the victim. Horror of the experience is usually seen in the victim’s terms; for the perpetrator it is often “a very small thing”.

b.) Perpetrators tend to have less emotions about their acts than do victims. This may be illustrated in the recent book by Vlakplaas operative Colonel Eugene de Kock, where repeated acts of violence are described in a matter-of-fact manner...

c.) The magnitude gap manifests in different time perspectives. The experience of violence typically fades faster for perpetrators than for victims. For victims, the suffering may continue long after the event.

d.) Moral evaluations of the events may differ: actions may appear less wrong, less evil, to the perpetrator than to the victim. While victims tend to rate events in stark categories of right and wrong, perpetrators may see large grey areas.²⁰

Gloss: What is this “gap” and what is this “magnitude”? “Mierda”, “shit”. Not to differentiate between victims (as commonly understood, in a juristic definition based on normal penal laws —as opposed to their definition as criminals by emergency or security regulations) and perpetrators (as defined by a non-juristic legalism, South African style, which dovetails with their juristic definition as security officers performing their orders implies 1.) that there is a gap, to be filled; and 2.) that this closure has to remain open. This is where “shit” is, in that gap that has to exist, yet to be filled. Lacan: “Le stade anal se caractérise

²⁰ Report V, 7, *Perpetrators, the problem of perspectives*, paragraph 47, in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 43: 266 - 285.

en ceci, que le sujet ne satisfait un besoin uniquement pour la satisfaction d'un autre".²¹ In sum, "shit" is the name of the TRC's satisfying a need in order to satisfy someone else. This other is the Mother and ultimately the sexual partner whose demand has to be satisfied for the subject to be. It is the scene of sado-masochism. The TRC is a sado-masochist scene whereby it lodges its desire for a redemptive politics in giving satisfaction to perpetrators. It embodies the self-eliminating gesture of the obsessional:

"Le fantasme fondamental de l'obsessionnel en tant qu'il se dévalorise, en tant qu'il met hors de lui tout le jeu de la dialectique érotique, qu'il feint, comme dit l'autre, d'en être l'organisateur. C'est sur le fondement de sa propre élimination qu'il fonde tout ce fantasme"

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le transfert* : <http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/bibliotheque.php?id=13>.

10. A constitutional court judgment to a challenge by a Liberation movement (AZAPO) regarding the amnesty process.²²

“Every decent human being must feel grave discomfort in living with a consequence which might allow the perpetrators of evil acts to walk the streets of this land with impunity, protected in their freedom by an amnesty, immune from constitutional attack, but the circumstances in support of this course require carefully to be appreciated... The Act seeks to address this massive problem by encouraging these survivors and the dependants of the tortured and the wounded, the maimed and the dead to unburden their grief publicly, to receive the collective recognition of a new nation that they were wronged, and crucially, to help them to discover what did in truth happen to their loved ones,

where and under what circumstances it did happen, and who was responsible... With that incentive, what might unfold are objectives fundamental to the ethos of a new constitutional order. The families of those unlawfully tortured, maimed or traumatised become more empowered to discover the truth, the perpetrators become exposed to opportunities to obtain relief from the burden of a guilt or an anxiety they might be living with for many long years, the country begins the long and necessary process of healing the wounds of the past, transforming anger and grief into a mature understanding and creating the emotional and structural climate essential for the “reconciliation and reconstruction” which informs the very difficult and sometimes painful objectives of the amnesty articulated in the Epilogue” (of the Interim Constitution of 1993 which imposed an amnesty and a reconciliation process)”.

²² Constitutional Court of South Africa, Case CCT 17/96 (25 July 1996); in Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 5: 28 - 35, and note p. 36.

Gloss: Rare is a legal and constitutional document that invokes evil to make an argument about the fundamental law and the Law as foundational.²³ The Court interposes itself between the before and the after, and stands at that very point where the Constitution anchors itself not in a procedure of universal access to sovereignty, but in an ethical process. The opening sentence of this landmark decision sealed forever the temptation to re-introduce a new evil into politics, *i.e.*: a negation of the reconciliation and amnesty which would result in a diabolical process: that of accusation, calumny, seduction by arguments and degradation into death (the figures of the diabolical); or retaliation. However the dramatic nature of the opening sentence, in a judicial and constitutional judgement, must be noted: “perpetrators of evil acts to walk the streets of this land with impunity, protected in their freedom by an amnesty, immune from constitutional

attack”. What does that “walk” mean? What is the philosophical sense of “walking free”?

²³ For the Epilogue, see in Salazar, *Amnistier l’Apartheid*: 37 - 58; and, Doxtader and Salazar, *op. cit.*, Document 2: 5.

III.

To answer this question, I make the following proposal: perpetrators incarnate what is evil in politics; they are, to use a phenomenological approximation, “la chair du monde politique”. They represent politics gone wrong, and the sign of its rectification, in the same way as, in Pauline theology, flesh, “la chair”, is the locale both for death and redemption. Reconciliation is possible when the agency of death and the agency of humanity redeemed are in the same site, and proceed from that site to “reconciliation”. Paul: “He has reconciled you in the body of his flesh, through death” (*nunc autem reconciliavit in corpore carnis eius per mortem* / ἀποκατήλλαξεν ἐν τῷσώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου).¹ The Greek phrase, more than the Latin one, indicates a thorough change by which a radical exchange takes place. To let “evil walk among us” is to perform an exchange (by which we acknowledge the deadly nature of their acts, a death of their humanity) and proceed to a change, both in victims and in perpetrators. Of course one has first to reconcile oneself, and one’s political ideas with this self-recognition, that politics is in essence diabolical, that it places individuals in front of choices they do not fully understand, and confront then with means they do not really, and cannot, comprehend. Perpetrators “perpetrate”, as I have explained it elsewhere,² that is they “fulfill thoroughly” their (misconceived and unapprehended) contract, and in so doing they embody deliberative politics confronted with personal responsibility: like Satan, they were able to argue (for and among themselves) the *pro* at the time they committed the act, and they can argue now the *con* as they are faced with external, unanticipated consequences — shifting the argument, the iron rule of being in politics.

In fact the question of “the diabolical” in political choice was first posed by French political philosopher Maurice Duverger (and my contention is that it is the actual source for the *teoría de los dos demonios*). In 1960, at the height of the National Liberation Front-led revolt in

¹ Colossians 1: 21 - 22 (Vulgate/Stephanus).

² Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Perpetrator, ou De la citoyenneté criminelle”, *Rue Descartes* 36 (2002): 167 - 180.

Algeria, on the cusp of a diabolical choice by the newly-founded De Gaulle régime to betray its own citizens (“Let them suffer” was his recorded comment), actions which both confronted the French people, at least those who cared, with a radical choice, Duverger wrote on “The two betrayals”.³ Because the Republic was under a double, treacherous or treasonable, attempt to violate its human rights and political charter – on one hand by supporters of the use of brutal force, and torture, by the French army (premise of a treacherous coup d’État), and on the other by supporters of the use of terrorism, and torture, by the rebels (premise of the treacherous massacre of French and Algerians alike in denial of their rights), Duverger warns of the simultaneous possibility of “two treasons”, both made in the name of justice, yet both resulting in a denial of justice. Support given, in France, to acts of terror committed by French citizens either pro-army militiamen and pro-rebellion operatives, are for him equally “diabolical”. In my view, they may or may not be “treasonous”, yet they both “perpetrate” politics to its utmost limit, showing, indeed, the innate diabolism of any political engagement whose stakes are life, death and identity.



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³ Maurice Duverger, “Les deux trahisons”, *Le Monde* (27 April 1960), reprinted in Anne Simonin, *Le droit de la désobéissance* (Paris: Minuit, 2012): 61 - 63.