

# The dialectic of ruin

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This article focuses on the ambiguous aspects of ‘ruin’ in its different appearances – as visible material phenomenon and as concept or idea. The word ‘ruin’ implies the dialectic of passivity and action; the specific and universal, and the merging of past and future in the present. I apply the abstract and physical idea of ruin to the European political sphere of the past century. The meanings of ‘ideology’ and ‘dialectic’ are placed in perspective with the physical destruction of the Berlin wall. Within days after the event, chunks of wall were for sale in the USA: wrapped in velvet satchels and stacked under Christmas trees, this became part of the American Christmas shopping experience. The material and symbolic value and meanings attached to ‘ruin’ is explored in light of the Berlin Wall. In some ways the symbolic meaning of the ruined wall can serve as a metaphor for the ambiguity of our existence and its similarities to ‘ruin’.

**Key words:** Berlin wall, dialectic, ideology, rationalisation

## **Die dialektiese aspekte van ruïne**

Die artikel fokus op die dubbelsinnige karakter van die ruïne: eensyds as ‘n fisiese artefak en andersyds as ‘n idee of ‘n konsep. Die woord ‘ruïne’ impliseer die dialektiese verhouding van aktiwiteit en passiwiteit; van die spesifieke en die universele, asook die samevloei van verlede en toekoms in die teenwoordige. Die idee van die ruïne word hier weergelê in die lig van die Europese politieke geskiedenis van die afgelope eeu. Die val van die Berlynse muur dien hier as fisiese en simboliese verwysingspunt om die betekenis van ‘dialektiek’ en ‘ideologie’ in die konteks bloot te lê. Die verskillende betekenisse van die ruïne mag dalk as analoog dien om ons eie bestaan te interpreteer en beter te verstaan.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Berlynse muur, dialektiek, ideologie, rasionalisasie

**S**tanding on the pavement in ‘downtown’ Philadelphia I read the note that accompanied the piece of ‘Berlin wall-for-Christmas’ in my hand:

“The Wall is Gone! And from this rubble rose a new symbol for tomorrow,  
An icon for future generations; the Berlin Wall . . . dismantled.  
History is a look backward, a reconciliation of times and lives gone by.  
Now we are faced with the glowing view before us. It is the stuff of dreams.  
It is the blue sky that sails just out of view.  
Grip the artifact and in your hand is the past and future.  
Let your fingers wander slowly across its battered surface.  
You can tell the balance of our lives.  
You can feel the struggles and the triumphs, the grief and the joy,  
the hope and the fulfilment.  
You can feel the distant tremor of tomorrow’s  
history gently unfolding in the palm of your hand.”

In Philadelphia, crowds of spectators gathered around television displays in shop fronts to witness the drama unfold halfway around the world. This situation itself was like a scene from a movie. My question with regard to the Berlin wall is how were people affected by the Wall’s [known as *die Mauer* in German (Rottman 2008: 4)] presence and its subsequent absence? In other words, what was the relation of human beings with the Wall as a cultural construct and its demolition? In this article I suggest that there is a parallel between the dialectic on the material

and conceptual levels; a dialectic that entails a relation between the past and the present (and future), and between the specific and the universal. This dialectic also foreshadows an alleged parallel between the dialectic of political history and of the history of certain artefacts, notably the infamous Berlin Wall, with the implication that – given the meaning of the dialectic – a past can never be fully erased, and continues to haunt the present.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary professional historians criticise those of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century for de-personalising the major events of the era. The narrative ‘story-telling’ nature of history is marginalised in favour of an objective stance. The proliferation of new technologies and sources and inventions might have added to the preference for a ‘scientific’ worldview. Upon reflection, we have to focus on the confluence of ideas, sources and events between 1914 and 1949 in order to understand the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially our present era (Outhwaite 2006: 273-4).

## **1914 - 1949**

After the First World War the Soviet Union arose in the 1920’s as the socialist society as proclaimed by Marx. Under the leadership of Lenin, the following Marxist goals were successively attained: a) private property was abolished; b) organised religion was abolished; c) class structures were abolished; and d) the transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat. A whole economic reform occurred in this era of the Russian communist experiment.<sup>3</sup> I think the fascination with Marx’s texts is the complexities and various possible interpretations and misinterpretations thereof. Marx’s ‘prophetic’ ideas on inevitable overthrow of a capitalist system through revolution were fulfilled by the Russians a few decades later. By relinquishing private ownership of the instruments and modes of production, the ‘ideal’ state of equality actually succeeded for a time in the USSR under Lenin. For the next 75 years the effects of communism played a major role in world history. (Outhwaite 2006: 274).

I do not claim anything more than a superficial understanding of these complex political dynamics however, my interest in these historical events lies in the dynamic powers and forces unleashed by ideas and concepts. Merleau-Ponty aptly stated that “an act or a thought once expressed has the power to outlive itself” (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 392). The fact that an ideology that propagated a utopia became a reality –albeit momentarily- keeps historians, theorists and intellectuals (studying politics, economics or other principles of power relations) occupied. In the case of Lenin’s appropriation of Marx’s philosophy, theory and practice coincided. The Soviet Union’s firm belief that the future of humankind lies in Socialism by means of the Communist Party, led to the unbridled, forceful expansion of Communism under Stalin. Let us have a look at the concept of the dialectic before we return to the Berlin Wall.

## **The dialectic**

The dialectic, whether that of Hegel, Marx, and/or the Frankfurt School, contains the crucial element namely, “sublation” (*Aufhebung* in German) which means that in every successive stage of the dialectic the previous stages are cancelled, but simultaneously lifted up to a higher level of development, and preserved in altered form. For Hegel, The Absolute / universal spirit moved people to perceive the contractions in the governing ideas of the age. By means of the dialectic between an idea and its opposite (or contradiction), people could reach a new understanding “and move human history ultimately to culminate in a Christian state.”(Maurer 2008: 14). Marx turned Hegel’s notion of the dialectic around to claim that the ultimate truth is not in the Spirit, but in practical, material existence. Material forces and relations to production would move

people to become aware of the contradictions of their material existence, and that awareness would culminate into revolutionary transformation (Maurer 2008: 14).

When I reflect back on the situation in Philadelphia in 1989, I recognise the irony of being in the heart of the capitalist world, doing Christmas shopping and buying a piece of structure that symbolised the destruction of relations and lives of a past era. The commoditisation of the remnants of the Wall in the guise of gifts that symbolised the collapse of a past oppressive regime while simultaneously representing an open future (in the present) showed the dialectic of the past era embedded in an artefact, which has a different meaning for me today than it had twenty years ago and forty years ago for an East Berliner.

Political conditions in East and West Germany, especially in occupied Berlin after the Second World War right through the 1990's are extremely well recorded and extensive: audio-visual, photographic, biographical and other means of documentation are prolific. Media and communication technologies greatly enhanced the impact of the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall, which marked a new way of looking at the world. Spectators around the world watched the drama of the Wall via 'live' television broadcasting. On 9 November 1989 the final moments of General Honecker's East Berlin were recorded in history for future generations.

## **The Wall**

The 206km long Berlin Wall (1961-1989) notes a long and violent history that stretches over a century. The Berlin Wall and the Intra-German border (IGB) marked the symbolic and physical possibilities of small and powerful ideologies; firstly, as a cultural product this radical device had the dual purpose of excluding and 'keeping in' (Rottman 2008: 5,29). Secondly, this barricade (and for that matter the Great Wall of China and other barriers such as the wall between Israel and Palestina built in 2002) represents the lengths to which human beings went to forcefully employ or defend their ideologies (Bevan 2006: 133). The barrier would inevitably lead to the topographical and physical ruination of buildings, networks and the city as a whole. In Berlin, even sewer lines were blocked off by East German soldiers to prevent escapes to West Berlin. The Wall's appearance destroyed human lifeworlds and meaningful existence for countless people.

The orientation of the defences and footings of the Berlin Wall demonstrated that the East bloc's intention with their so-called "'anti-fascist protection rampart' to secure peace" (Bevan 2006: 158, Monghani 2008: 130, Maier 1997: 158) had in reality been designed to prevent escape to the West.<sup>4</sup> As the physical metaphor for the Iron Curtain, not only Europe was divided (MacMahon 2003: 178, Manghani 2008: 95-99, 118) but the East / West ideological systems were associated with on a global phenomenon. New fortifications and rebuilding, expanding and upgrading of the IGB and the Berlin Wall took place on a constant basis. More than thirty thousand East German border patrol and security soldiers were employed. By mid-1970's, the German Democratic Republic (GDR/ East Germany) spent an average of five hundred thousand US dollars per year on securing the IGB. Notwithstanding, an average of 3000 East Germans escaped to the West via West Berlin on a yearly basis (Rottman 2008: 16-43).

The Berlin Wall's demolition in November 1989 happened as fast and unexpected as its construction had happened in the early morning hours of 13 August 1961. This moment overtly signified the Western final blow to the Soviet Republic's communist ideology - the victory of freedom over oppression and of reclaiming the privacy of family and home in everyday life. However, the process of re-unification of the inhabitants of the former East Germany and West

Germany, and more specifically Berlin proved to be difficult and complicated. Shortly after the fall of the Wall, many East Germans felt especially dislocated.

“A regime had disappeared. With it a framework of inculcated collective values—cultivated by constraint to be sure, but nonetheless pervasive—had been abandoned, pronounced irrelevant, cancelled. What East German party members and intellectuals referred to as ‘our republic,’ with its implicit distinction from ‘their republic,’ no longer existed. But the differences between East and West persisted.” (Maier 1997: 285-6).

Today, an indented line across road surfaces and pavements with a small dated copper strip would be the only physical reminder of the position of the Berlin Wall. Today, the void left by the absence of the Wall is the monument of its past existence. The fact remains that the physical eradication of the Wall did not imply its erasure from Germans’ and humankind’s memory. Its absence accentuates the Wall’s non-presence as much as active forgetting is the intentional ‘non-remembering’ of something. The integration of the past into the present (in order to adapt to the new experience of freedom) took a long time following the physical eradication of boundaries, exclusions and divisions. Returning to ‘normality’ (with the question, ‘what is normal in Germany with its political history?’<sup>5</sup>) cannot be easy, especially when the topology of war used to be where you currently live: bullet and shrapnel marks on many buildings and ruins serve as a constant reminder of the visible past in the present.

Andreas Huyssen wrote about the specific “politics of wilful forgetting” in East Berlin, following the fall of the Berlin wall. Actions such as renaming streets, the dismantling of monuments to socialism and the debates about which buildings should remain or be demolished were all, according to Huyssen, part of the tactics of power and humiliation. Much of it led to predictable conflict and drove East Berliners to a state of nostalgia for the former GDR (or German Democratic Republic / West Germany) that led to rekindling a support-base for a ‘revamped’ communist party in the 1990’s. (Huyssen 1997: 60-2). Bernhard Schneider (in Scott, 2008: 206-7) noted that politicians and authorities wanted to overcome (as quickly as possible) the horror of the ruination of the city and the “shame of the Gate’s isolation behind the Wall.” (Scott 2008: 194-6).

Schneider condemned the uncritical way in which reconstruction and designs for new buildings were handled and reviewed. The politicians believed in recalling better times before Pariser Platz and surrounding areas’ destruction and ruination. On the one hand one can understand the city authorities’ reaction to eradicate from memory the visible horrors of war and destruction in the city. Schneider continued that the authorities may have viewed this act of “ignoring the apocalyptic history of the sixty-five years since 1933” as being a necessary “way of destroying the destruction” (Scott 2008: 207), which had been impossible to accomplish, since the dialectic of history shows the past ever remaining part of the present and future.

## **Conclusion**

History cannot be ‘actively’ ignored by erasing physical remnants of war in enforcing or defending ideological goals. Some theorists believe that ideology had reached its end after the Cold War had ended.<sup>6</sup> Wars will be waged to defend ideas. Insane means to defend rational ideas will prevail as long as ideologies of progress or improvement with the goal of a utopian future exist. The past century’s wars were waged by means of a clash of arms with definitive defendable physical and ontological boundaries. Large scale migration and technological and cultural globalisation marks this century as one in which boundaries seem to fade on many

levels. For Samuel Huntington, civilizations will ultimately clash on religious level: the USA has been at war with the Middle East since 2001.

The ruination of one ideology gives way to its counter through revolution and war. The remnants of the division line in Berlin are constant reminders of what Paul Ricoeur termed “the political paradox” which means that

“politics defined by reference to power...poses the problem of political evil. There is a problem of political evil because there is a specific problem of power. Not that power is evil. But power is one of the splendours of man that is eminently prone to evil. Perhaps in history it is the greatest occasion for and the most stupendous display of evil. The reason of course is that power is....the vehicle of the historical rationality of the State”,

which represents the collective Will (Ricoeur 2007: 254-6).<sup>7</sup> What we can learn from the dialectic of ruin in which the past is a constant presence; that totalitarian insanity contained its own demise and inevitably returned to normality. In order to be mindful of our present and future, we have to remain mindful of others regardless of the commensurability of different ideas. If Merleau-Ponty is correct<sup>8</sup> in that a) culture is the sedimentation of people into things and that b) the body of the other person is the first object of culture, we cannot but take responsibility for our past, our present and our future on both physical and metaphysical levels.

## Notes

- 1 I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism and useful advice to greatly improve the content and structure of this article.
- 2 Adapted from a succinct summary by one of my reviewers, of my intentions with this article.
- 3 Refer to Stites (1989) for detailed descriptions of life in Russia during the rime of the Revolution and before Stalin’s reign. Revolutionary art and phenomena such as mini-utopian experiments were at the order of the day. The intention was to promote the notion of egalitarianism by means of festivals, parades, and events such as conductor-less orchestra performances, monographs and questions afterwards.
- 4 Bevan (2006: 158) notes that, since more than 3 million people had already fled the GDR between 1945 and 1961, as well as the nature of the fortifications, size, form and width of the Berlin wall was such that it was quite obvious that its design was rather to prevent further escapes to West-Berlin than to withstand military attacks on East Berlin from the West.
- 5 Caroline Pearce (2008: 50-3,78-9, 214-16) focuses on collective and individual memories of Germany’s ‘double past’ of Nazism as well as West Berlin’s isolation in a surrounding communist-occupied East Germany. Her main question is, what is normality and what does it mean for groups, individuals and Germany as a whole? Pearce believes it is because of its specific history, Germany is more sensitive than other countries not to repeat injustices of the past in the future.
- 6 Cf 2005. *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, Meghan Morris (eds). New York: Blackwell. s.v. *ideology*.
- 7 Ricoeur’s concept of the political paradox was explicated by Prof. Ernst Wolff (Dept of Philosophy, University of Pretoria) in a Political Philosophy course lecture, August, 2011.
- 8 Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1970: 130,348)

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