

The Conquest of Nature

D.Blackbourn

December 14–24, 2006

History and Geography are intertwined, and this book is about both, although this is not fully appreciated by the author. History is about people, but people are anchored to a space, and although that particular connection is one of convention and hence ultimately fluid, it does provide a very powerful myth, because on the timescale of a few generations the connection is very tangible. In its most articulate form, literary and political, this myth is to be found in the very German sense of *Heimat*, a notion compromised, and to a large extent unfairly if understandably so, by recent political catastrophes. The notion of *Heimat* is never more pungent when referring to something lost, just as we are most painfully aware of a limb when it has just been severed.

Ultimately of course humankind is just an episode in the history of the universe, but such a general perspective is too vapid to be instructive. From a human point of view, man is traditionally a nomadic animal, with a 'Drang' to roam globally. In practice though as a cultural being he is constrained to a certain type of geography, even if there is no particular attachment to particular spots. The game is survival, and if local conditions are not accomodating, the impulse is to migrate. Man turning into a sedantary being is by many antropologists considered as the most decisive phase change and the prerequisite for documented history as we know of it usually refered to as civilization. Yet few people can trace their lineage back to a particular spot for more than a few generations back, and in the last two thousand years mass migrations, whether spontaneous or imposed, have been legion. Countries are merely adminstrative conventions and as such unnatural partitions, unlike say drainage basises of rivers, and the fluidity of state boundaries are particular manifest in Eastern Europe (as opposed to Western Europe) as exemplified by the movement, and occasional disappearance, of Poland on the eastern fringes. The book is about examining the concept of *Heimat*, although this only becomes apparent in the last few chapters, and in particular to show that its history is brief and can be approached by the land reclamations of Frederic the Great some two-hundred and fifty years ago. The author thus decides to start his narrative inauspicioulsy by letting a party of three men in a boat, one of whom is the illustrious Euler¹, on a reconnaissance mission. Then continuing his narrative as if merely recounting the triumphs of hydrological engineering as providing a red thread² to recent quotidian history, before suddenly throwing the reader into the midst of Nazi genocidal exploits³. Another tack would have made the disposition of the material as well as the aims of the author more transparent. But anyway let us start, as does the author, from the beginning.

¹ Whose scientific, especially mathematical, nimbus, may not be fully appreciated by the author

² a favourite expression employed by the author

³ And inevitably as is then always the case trying to persuade the reader of what should need no persuasion, namely his personal distaste for such things

Human memory is short, even if extended by oral tradition, and in particular the human landscape seems eternal, as it is the same landscape that was once inherited and which will be bequeathed in its turn. But this is a myth. Human landscapes are no wildernesses, even when uninhabited by humans, they all bear the mark of human interventions, deliberate as well as accidental. Anything else would be logically impossible, humans, like all other creatures impose themselves upon the landscape and try to have it serve their parochial purposes. The impact is traditionally marginal, and marginal indeed has human existence been through most of its earthly tenure, but sustained impact accelerated to boot by improving technology invariably leaves more than a mere indentation. The landscape of northern Europe, of which the book is focused, is a landscape formed by the retreating glaciers, leaving lakes, bogs and marshes, crisscrossed by rivers in its wake and covered with heaths and forests whenever suitably provided for. Humans do not disperse uniformly on the land, the land is structured by geography, which means rivers and brooks. Man himself finds him on the shifting edge between land and water, the latter being as indispensable as the former, but more feckless and harder to control. Rivers partition the landscape, as well as serving as lines of communication connecting disparate parts. Modern man has little appreciation of rivers, his universe strung out instead along man-made roads. Occasionally he encounters a river, but then only as an obstruction to his progress, conveniently evaded by the structure of a bridge or tunnel. Seldom does he flow along it, being dependant on it to get from A to B. Thus the memorization of river names, formerly part of the education of school-children is now disparaged as obsolete knowledge, along with geography itself, as we become more and more estranged from the realities of the land on which we ultimately place our feet, only occasionally reminded on the virtual screen of catastrophic floods and similar so called natural disasters.

The course of a river, (as well as the coastline of a sea), is not eternally fixed, save on a map. The river meanders, constantly changing its course, this is why river valleys are so wide, being the records of all the past positions of the flow. As noted above, rivers define partitions of the land, in particular each river or system thereof including all its primary, secondary and tertiary and so on tributaries, define well known regions, known as basins or drainage areas. Rivers in their history of change involve regular floodings, thus creating wetlands, fractal mixtures of land and water, sustaining remarkable bio-diversity. The rivers themselves, as far as staying in virginal unpolluted states, constitute rich sources of fish and other means of livelihoods. But such lands can only support a fairly sparse population, when the population multiply and densify, more effective means of production needs to be envisaged. The technology of hydrology means controlling the flow of water. As such it is a fascinating one, involving fundamental physics and ad hoc tricks and practical applications. It concerns cutting new river beds, digging ditches and erecting dykes, constructing canals and locks, and damming up water into reservoirs. In this way valuable arable land is being freed, as well as temporary protection from unpredictable floods. Many positive side-effects occur, like improving navigability of rivers, hence enhancing their original functions as avenues of communications, as well as eradicating indigenous diseases like malaria⁴. But there were costs to be paid. Controlling rivers by redesigning

⁴ Malaria and dengue and other mosquito carried diseases are nowadays thought of as curses of the tropics, forgetting that until a few generations ago those were also rampant in Europe and the States

them did not eradicate the problem of flooding, on the contrary, it made flooding even more momentous when it occurred. Dams inundated living agricultural lands, wittingly and deliberately condemning to extinction whole communities. Reservoirs as artificial lakes were hailed as wonders of scenery, and as such drew large touristic crowds turning to the commodity known as recreation, yet remaining artificial and liable to burst. With improved navigability, industry was encouraged and flourishing, increased demand and correspondingly stepped-up production meant pollution, and soon living rivers, teeming with fish, turned into biologically dead cloaks. As Blackbourn notes, the Faustian bargain came with the day of recognizing.

The initial engineers that performed the feats were hailed as heroes, generals that subjugated the most formidable foe of them all - mother nature. This started, as mentioned, already in the middle of the 18th century by the efforts of Frederic the Great, eager not only to extend his domain geographically but also to enhance it. Tulla straightened up the Rhine in the beginning of the 19th century, and at the end of the same there were many projects underway of damming up rivers and creating large reservoirs, the not so insignificant side-effect of which were the harnessing of hydro-electrical power, once the technological problems of transmission over large distances had been solved. This incidentally was a source of energy that seemed like nuclear energy would appear in the 50's and 60's, namely to be the solution to all the energy problems of mankind. It was cheap, it was clean, and in principle inexhaustible. Yet dissenting voices were never entirely absent, and they started to gain momentum by the turn of the century, as the more or less universal technological optimism, retroactively associated with the Victorian Age, started to encounter its first obstructions.

Conservatism can apply as well to natural habitats as to political institutions, and in both cases vested interests as well as sentimentality, not to say nostalgia, may play pivotal roles. An interesting question is to what extent the two are connected. National Socialism, with its emphasis on traditional family values and admittedly claims for racial superiority (although I suspect this probably played a less important role than subsequent developments have naturally led us to retroactively attribute), is a case in point, and in fact it turned out to be responsive and supportive of many of the environmental movements that had sprung up in previous decades, leading many of their leaders to identify themselves as Nazis and phrasing their visions in the prevalent rhetorics of the time. And indeed during the 1930's exemplary legislation to protect the environment⁵ were enacted, serving as a foundation to build on in recent years. This of course leads us to the question whether this involvement with the racial regime compromised the environmental movement. In short is concern for the protection of the environment a krypto-fascist project? Is the green bean really an avocado brown at the core? Modern Greens would obviously take indignant exception to such suggestions, claiming that the Greens is really a liberal leftist movement, but such claims really reveals a deep ignorance of history, as well as a political naivety. Every political movement that strikes a chord carries within itself the seeds of fascism. Such seeds are so much a feature of the movement as such as to make it impossible to

⁵ although different terminology was employed, the notion of environmental concern (Umweltschutz) did not arise until the early 70's, but then with such suddenness and decisiveness that most people have now forgotten that the concept has such a recent vintage

weed them out, the only safeguard being the understanding that politics is ultimately a question of pragmatism, or in the words of Bismarck, the art of the possible; and should never be pursued for the purity of its visions, such ambitions properly belong to art and science. I would say that the relationship with National Socialism and Environmental Protection was similar to the present day relationship between the Fundamental Christians and the Bush administration. A lot of common sympathy and goals expressed by rhetorical inspiration, yet when push comes to shove, a sharp divergence. Nazism was not a well-thought out ideology, what many commentators seem to miss, it was riddled with internal contradictions and with remarkably little planning and forethought (and whatever there was of the latter, we would all have been much better without it). In the words of the historian Evans, it was motivated by a blind desire for power for its own sake, dressed up in various sentimental dresses, many of which it has to be admitted corresponded to genuine human needs and apprehensions. It was a movement of sentimental reaction, but at the same time one of youthful modernity. It disowned the scientific avant-garde (as well as the avant-garde of modern art), but eagerly embraced modern technology, especially as to its applications to weaponry⁶. It glorified the environment, but had no qualms sacrificing it in order to pursue economic or military advantages.

The Third Reich despised the U.S. It dismissed it as commercial, capitalistically materialist, and lacking in culture and spirit. Words that are no different than many would nowadays be tempted to use across the political spectrum. Words often mean nothing, mere sounds, signifying not much more than fury. Those of us who deplore the vulgar americanization of western society, would in the Third Reich have found a bulwark against such tendencies. There certainly would have been no Coca-Cola, no McDonalds. Or would it? Eager as it was to denounce the emphasis on material welfare that supposedly characterized American Society, it was not above trying to secure a similar overflow for its own citizens by ruthless production or plunder if necessary. The American dream factories of California had their counterparts in similar popular domestic entertainment. And the frontier spirit that inspired the conquest of the American prairies would have its counterpart in creating Lebensraum in the East. The Wild East of Europe as opposed to the Wild West of North America. The Swedish writer Myrdal suggests that what really shocked people about Hitler was that he was prepared to use the same procedures against white European populations, that the Colonial powers had been used to apply to dark-skinned Natives. Hitler, as so many of his contemporaries had been brought up by the stories of Karl May, and it was thus natural to compare the Slavs with the Indians. Still as Blackbourn notes there are complications. In the literature of the Conquest of the West sympathetic depictions of individual Indians are not unheard of, and especially prevalent in books written by non Anglo-Saxons like May⁷. Would not that have inspired similar

⁶ We only need to recall the rockets of van Braun, but the failure to develop an atom bomb probably had more to do with a miscalculation of what was feasible and important. We all tend to view the past retroactively and hence anachronistically, forgetting how many momentous decisions were made haplessly. Then it is another question whether the low regard of fundamental physics and the consequential ideological cleansing of competent scientists, as well as depleted war-time resources would have allowed a development in real time, had the decision nevertheless been made.

⁷ This brings in mind the somewhat hypocritical attitudes of the French as to the British atrocities in

appreciations of individual Slavs? This is somewhat naive. As noted above Nazi thinking was never consistent in all its details, although on a deeper level its undercurrents, being unconscious were more of one piece. Also, in the sentimentalism of nature worship there was also the myth of the noble savage, relics of a heroic past, for which Indians may be suitable role players. The expansion in the east brings to the forefront another aspect of the connection between people and the land.

Germany stood for civilization. Its cultural, scientific and political achievements of the 19th century, supplemented with commercial success and industrial expansion, gave it a certain pride. This is understandable and there is nothing ominously German about that. In particular the Germans contrasted their own well-tended agriculture, hard-won fruits in their struggle with nature, with the more primitive development of the Poles. Prussia having inexorably moved eastwards during the 18th century claiming Polish land and developing it. Such sentiments are still common today, one need only to consider prevalent Israeli attitudes towards the Arabs, not to mention the ultimate rationale of 19th century colonialization. Ultimately those go back to the Enlightenment which promised the setting of objective criteria of worth and entitlement, and by implication giving the right to land to those most meritorious of holding it. But being understandable is of course not the same thing as being excusable, let alone condonable; but one needs to put it into a more general context to see its progeny. Similar attitudes of superiority also motivated Wilhelmine expansion in the east during the later part of the First World War, yet in their conducts there is a vast difference between the two campaigns. In the First World War, the Germans took many Russian prisoners of wars, but the attrition rate was very low, while in the Second World War it was murderous⁸.

What took the American settlers a century to achieve, the Germans wanted to do in a few years. Grand were the schemes for reclaiming the East, to dike out marshes and produce arable land, and to effect a general colonization easing the pressures of the congested homelands. But the Germans faced a much denser population, and antagonized it more brutally, and were soon overstretched. The security of the handful of German pioneers could not be guaranteed, and the war against the guerilla was hopeless in the unregulated country of marshes. As we all know the scheme collapsed.

The forty odd years following the end of the war presented the spectacle of two competing Germanies. In the beginning they were on rather parallel tracks, but gradually they started to diverge more and more, ultimately reducing the Eastern part to an irrelevance. The loss of the eastern lands resulted in a great influx of refugees to Western-Germany, resulting in congestion and an acceleration of the processes of reclamations started already by Frederic the Great. By the early 1970 the situation had become intolerable, with the growth of the Green movement as a result, and an actual reversal of priorities. The situation in Eastern Germany was different, here conquest of nature was seen a Socialist

India, especially in connection with the so called Sepoy mutiny.

⁸ The millions Hitler killed are often compared (favourably) to the many more millions Stalin was ultimately responsible for. Yet one should keep in mind that had Hitler been unchecked, the extent of his deeds may have been far more extensive, the Jewish Holocaust possibly followed by an even bigger Slavic one. But this is of course pure speculation, and the danger and significance of a foe should be measured by his actual capabilities not his ambitions for which there often is no limit but the sky.

project and of course environmental degeneration was simply dismissed as the deplorable consequences of capitalistic profit motives. From a market point of view there are tempting remedies, in view of the fact that the point of successful production is to use the resources as efficiently as possible, and once environmental features are included in those equations, improvements are inevitable. No such incentives were present in the DDR-economy, which on the other hand because of its more limited size, left much alone by benign neglect. After the reunification policies became convergent again, and the author strikes a cautiously optimistic mode. There is of course no way of reverting to the past, deep interventions can never be undone but have irreversible consequences, yet there are modest projects, characteristically EU funded, for the returning of wetlands and at least some return of lost bio-diversity. Returning storks may do much for general morale. And nature effects its revenge, a few years ago the Oder basin suffered the worst floodings in human history.

The story is being up-dated in an epilogue, but it is of course an unending one with ups and downs and no definite conclusion each generation being aghast at the follies of its preceding ones, never realising the even greater scopes of those they are about to commit themselves. The story of environmental degradation is a sorry one, yet also an abstract one, because so alienated is modern man from his sustaining environment that he cannot experience it first hand but has to be told about it. To the untrained eyes the land still looks idyllic and the forests green and healthy, which cannot but sow doubt and scepticism, and the tendency to dismiss warnings as alarmists⁹

The book is ostensibly about German history from the point of view of its wilful impact on its environment. Such a story can and is in fact told chronologically. On a deeper level though it goes beyond the narrow German perspective and addresses the more philosophical questions of land and people, and as such it would have benefited from a different disposition of the material. Furthermore much of the treatment concerns technical things, and as such a big drawback is that the book is not more technical. A curious reader could have learnt much about hydrology of rivers and its engineering, and a few equations might not have been amiss, as well as some more relevant statistical figures. But equations are anathema in any book that aspires to reach a wide audience, and one should never fault an author for not writing exactly the kind of book the reviewer might at the moment fancy. More seriously though is the lack of maps. The Oderbruch is constantly referred to but what is it? A city, a portion of the Oder river, or maybe the marshes at its outlet?

December 25, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

⁹ In the 80's there was much talk about 'Waldsterben', nowadays you do not hear much about it. It could mean any number of things. Either that the problems were exaggerated in the first place, or that general awareness has managed to stop the dangerous trend and revert damages, or simply that the problem persists but the media has gotten tired of reporting on it, or that even more pressing problems clamour for undivided attention.