

AT ISSUE

**Establishing the Truth about the Apartheid Past:
Historians and the South African Truth and Reconciliation
Commission**

JACOBUS A. DU PISANI AND KWANG-SU KIM

Abstract: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was mandated to establish “the truth” about the causes, nature and extent of gross violations of human rights in the country between 1960 and 1994. This article assesses the significance of the TRC for historians and the writing of history in South Africa. There is no doubt that the TRC had shortcomings. Its coverage of human rights violations was uneven. Those who testified at public hearings did not constitute a representative sample of the South African population. The truthfulness of their subjective testimonies was not properly verified. A discursive framework, reinforcing the TRC discourse of reconciliation, was imposed on participants. Because the socio-economic context of human rights violations was neglected, analysis of causation was shallow. The way in which the outcomes of the TRC have been handled by the government seems to endorse Derrida's suggestion that it might become an exercise in forgetting. Despite these shortcomings, the significant contributions of the TRC towards producing a new archive of previously repressed histories, from which a fuller truth about the past could emerge, cannot be denied. Particularly important was the re-enactment of past events by victims and perpetrators of human rights violations at the much-publicised public hearings of the TRC, which helped to democratise memory and give history a public face. Interest in the value of history to address current problems was revived. It is the main objective of this article to reflect upon the tasks of historians after the TRC. Historians are committed to the never ending debate of history and not to the type of closure sought by priests and politicians. They have an important task to attend to the unfinished business of the TRC and to resist denial or erasure. Through the critical study, interpretation, and narration of the facts from the TRC archive, historians have to establish what really happened and why it happened, thus rendering a service to science and the nation.

INTRODUCTION

History was at the core of the TRC process. A central task of the TRC was to uncover the truth about the apartheid past, although its final report states that its purpose was not to write the history of the country. Yet questions about history were raised as a result of the work of the

Jacobus du Pisani is Professor of History at North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa. His long-term interest is contemporary South African political history, but he has specialised in recent years in masculinities studies and environmental history. **Kwang-Su Kim** is an Africanist employed by Seoul National University and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in the Republic of Korea. He worked on historical consciousness in South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His current project deals with oral histories in Africa

TRC. Is history's function simply to reveal the facts and leave it for others to judge? Are the facts of a contested past intrinsically knowable, when they seem concealed forever behind a veil of language and discourse which proves impenetrable to simplistic notions of the truth? Is history, particularly when it relates to traumatic situations, primarily a form of moral rhetoric which can aid a society in dealing with guilt and blame? What is history's relationship in general with the phenomenon of public memory and the memorialization of the past?¹ In their grappling with the significance of the TRC, historians have been putting forward a variety of ideas about such questions. These ideas are analysed below in an attempt to identify the main tasks of historians in the TRC aftermath.

CRITIQUE OF THE TRC EVIDENCE

The South African democracy, born in 1994, succeeded nearly half a century of institutionalised racial discrimination and oppression under the apartheid system. How to deal with the past, and particularly the atrocities of the apartheid era, was one of the major issues that confronted the new government.² The negotiating parties, on the eve of the April 1994 election, opted for a truth commission to investigate human rights violations and make recommendations on how to deal with such violations. In 1995, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established.

One of the major tasks of the TRC in terms of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act no. 34 of 1995) was "to establish the truth in relation to past events" and to provide as "complete a picture as possible" about these events. This truth-finding mandate was restricted to a specific period (1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994) and a specific type of past event (gross violations of human rights). The act specified that the investigation should cover the nature, causes, and extent of human rights violations. This included the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations, and the motives for and circumstances in which they had occurred, as well as the fate or whereabouts of the victims. The investigation was to cover the perspectives of both the victims and the perpetrators. It was stipulated that the investigation should be done in the form of conducting investigations, holding hearings, and compiling a comprehensive report.³

During its two-year operational phase (1995-1997) the Human Rights Violations Committee (HRVC), which was responsible for this part of the work of the TRC, held 140 hearings across the country, including victim hearings, event hearings, special hearings, institutional hearings, and political party hearings. At the hearings, about 2,400 victims of gross violations testified and the names of 27,000 victims were recorded. The HRVC, assisted by the TRC Investigation Unit, gathered a total of 21,519 victim statements containing evidence of 30,384 gross human rights violations. It made more than 15,000 findings, confirming that victims had been the subjects of gross human rights violations. Still, for a variety of reasons, many people who wished to do so were unable to make statements to the TRC. More than 8,000 statements were submitted after the TRC had stopped collecting statements.⁴

From all this evidence, the HRVC compiled a number of reports that eventually formed part of sections three, four, and five of the final TRC report. The TRC report was presented to President Nelson Mandela in October 1998 and the TRC was dissolved in 2001, but the final amended version of the report was not publicly disclosed before March 2003, when all disputes and legal action by interested parties had been settled.⁵

In its administrative report the HRVC rated its own work highly. It described the victims' volume (volume seven of the final report) as a major achievement, a "living monument to those

who suffered great pain and loss during the years of struggle” that “will endure in the nation’s memory for many years to come.” The database of information collected by the HRVC, currently in the custody of the National Archives as part of the TRC archives, is regarded as “one of the most remarkable archival collections in the country.”⁶

To assess the significance of the TRC process for history in South Africa is the first quite obvious task of historians. The value of the TRC evidence must be evaluated and guidelines provided for how this evidence should be used in the quest for historical truth. Much work has been done towards this end. Even before the opening of the archives of the TRC to researchers, more has been written about it than almost all other events in South African history.⁷ It is certainly too early to make a final evaluation of the contribution of the TRC, but contemporary assessments are, nevertheless, valuable contributions. Assessments of the TRC have ranged from positive to neutral to negative. The majority of serious observers have been rather critical and indicated that the TRC failed to achieve most of its objectives, yet they all seem to agree that it was an “important” and “necessary” exercise.⁸

The work of the TRC has been praised as a serious effort to negotiate the writing of the new history of South Africa. Some observers, perhaps somewhat prematurely, give the TRC credit for “constructing a national memory” and “creating an officially acknowledged past.”⁹ The TRC’s final report did, according to its proponents, represent an authoritative version of the past and an alternative vision about South Africa’s past, present, and future.¹⁰ History itself, at least as far as the part of the apartheid period covered by the TRC investigation is concerned, has undergone a national process of change and revision.¹¹

Perhaps the idea of an “official” version of South Africa’s recent past will not, once again, amount to an attempt to mobilise history for the ideological purposes of those in power. Wynand Malan, one of the TRC commissioners, warned: “A shared understanding of our history requires an understanding of different perspectives, not the building of a new national myth. Presenting ‘the truth’ as a one-dimensional finding is a continuation of the old frame.”¹² Yet in recording aspects of the past, the TRC was relatively successful. It did manage to establish the truth about many events of the apartheid years. A number of unanswered questions about prominent political murders and disappearances were answered.

Most historians hold the TRC to have been a significant contribution. Given the extent of silencing and censorship under the apartheid state, the testimonies are regarded as important knowledge, which constitutes a new archive of previously silenced South African history. The human rights violations hearings are regarded as the main strength of the TRC. Victim/survivor testimonies are able to speak out against the power relations that previously constrained them. Macro-historical developments after 1990 enabled people, who had previously been rendered powerless and voiceless, to appear in a public forum as relevant and important story-tellers and to bring hidden transcripts into the open. The simple historical act of telling what previously could not be told, of representing the previously unrepresentable, is in itself significant.¹³

By exposing some of the things that happened during apartheid, these texts consolidate the criticism of the “old” South Africa. They restore segments of lost history and reveal a censored, incomplete past. More than this, the ties these texts have with the past, the very fact that they were marginalized by the practices of the old social order, authenticates their retrospective critique and grants them a special status. They have become vital additions to the South African archives, necessary for a “fuller truth.”

Personal experiences frequently reveal the silenced yet routine day-to-day details through which the victims/survivors of apartheid lived as well as the callousness and brutality of the

system. Taken in total, the TRC's collection of victim/survivor testimonies provides evidence of the injustices and inhumanities of apartheid South Africa. In addition, documents such as applications for amnesty from a large number of security policemen, provided information that would be difficult to obtain by other means. After the TRC, apartheid crimes can no longer be denied and the number of permissible lies in circulation has been reduced. As a result of this, some allege that there has been a shift in many whites' perceptions of the past.¹⁴

Historians who favour a poststructural approach to history have taken a particularly positive view of the TRC. Thelen argues that different types of history-making could be better connected around individual experience and re-enactment in the manner achieved by the TRC. He regards the TRC's victim and perpetrator hearings as the best sources available in any part of the world for listening to individuals re-enacting their civic experiences in political struggle.¹⁵ The TRC has thus been the cornerstone of what might be called a kind of democratised history-making process. The TRC, coupled with the new South African Constitution, are poignant examples of how to construct a new national narrative, which acknowledges that nations and peoples have to take responsibility for the past.¹⁶

From a historian's perspective, the first challenge facing the HRVC in exercising its truth-finding mission was to decide what it entailed to establish "the truth" about the past. The controversial philosophical question on the nature of truth has occupied the minds of historians for centuries. As history developed into a science from the eighteenth century, historians became preoccupied with factual evidence as the foundation of their discipline. A rigorous tradition was established in historiography, emphasising scrupulous verification, thorough sifting of evidence, total review of the literature, and minute exactitude in reporting. No matter which school they represented and which approach they followed, scientific historians agreed that a truthful reconstruction of the past should be based on a critical study, interpretation, and narration of facts.¹⁷

In the twentieth century, the idea of the existence of objective truth and a master narrative about the past came under increasing pressure. Historians had to concede that the ideal of objectivity in historical studies was not fully attainable. Even when the facts about a historical topic were reasonably well established, historians still differed radically in their interpretations of those facts, because subjective elements and contemporary views influenced the work of individual historians.¹⁸ In the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodernist scholars pushed the intellectual challenge to the objectivity of knowledge and the possibility of a grand narrative (representing "the truth" about the past) to its extreme. They rejected the notion that historical truth is a commodity that can be discovered simply by revealing the facts about the past, and advocated the idea that historical truth is constructed on the basis of individual experience. Although historians wish to maintain standards of proof and evidence, most realise that historical truth, as it is filtered through their minds, remains partial and subjective to a greater or lesser extent.

The performance of the TRC of its truth-finding mandate should therefore be assessed against the background of this continuing tension between the pursuit of objective factual truth and the acknowledgement of various subjective truths. In South Africa, with its multicultural and deeply divided society, the idea of juxtaposing and critically comparing several views of the past from different subjective viewpoints rather than trying to impose one master narrative, is particularly compelling.

History, after a change of regime such as the one that occurred in South Africa in 1994, faces particular challenges in the pursuit of truth. When a dictatorial regime comes to an end the

challenges are even bigger. The victims and perpetrators of human rights violations are still alive. Memories of suffering and questions of guilt and shame are very sensitive issues. It is neither possible nor politically desirable to reveal all the facts about the past. In the light of the TRC's pursuit of both truth and reconciliation, this brings to the fore questions such as: Which truth? Whose truth? How much truth? However important the TRC texts may be, they are not without flaws. Only a partial, subjective, and to some extent distorted truth is reflected in the TRC records. In this respect the TRC was no different from other truth commissions. A truth commission may not be the best option to reveal the truth about the past. In fact, it can hardly be expected of a truth commission to establish in a short space of time a shared and absolute truth. Christie, therefore, rightly points out that truth may not emerge as a necessary outcome of a truth commission and that prosecutions are likely to provide a greater measure of truth.¹⁹

The TRC could in any event not hope to bring more than a little bit of truth. Because rapid results were required and the research department of the TRC worked under pressure of time there was uneven coverage of the different parts of the country. Rural areas, particularly in the former Bantustans, were neglected compared to urban areas.²⁰ It has also been argued that the TRC did not deal adequately with local histories and that the important variations or permutations of the liberation struggle, as manifested in the different townships, are not adequately accounted for in the final report.²¹

Furthermore, those who testified at the public hearings did not constitute a representative sample of the country's population, because the focus was on one type of perpetrator and one type of victim. Therefore, the "perpetrator-victim dichotomy," which is so central to the TRC's overall analysis, needs to be questioned. Sections of the population, particularly among whites, were apathetic and reluctant to participate. Many white right-wingers and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters regarded the TRC as a partisan body representing the African National Congress' view of history which involved a witch-hunt to discredit the enemies of the ANC.²² Amongst the black population, the indirect victims of apartheid were not really heard.²³ Thus, rather than "the truth" about South Africa's apartheid past, the TRC report and records contain a range of "fractured, incomplete and selective truths."²⁴

There is no doubt that the TRC testimonies reflect subjective truths. Human memory is uncertain and individual testimony is often unreliable. With possible reparations and amnesty in mind, victims and perpetrators told their stories with varying degrees of honesty. For the most part, the TRC testimonies were neither factual nor objective. Accounts of personal experiences were not corroborated on their truthfulness. The Commission has been severely criticised for its reliance on unverified statements made in applications for amnesty and on unsubstantiated statements made by victims, few of them given under oath and few tested under cross-examination. Gossip, hearsay, lies and contradictions therefore form part of the TRC records.²⁵ However, it is not so much the subjectivity of the testimonies that is criticised severely, but the alleged imposition of a discursive framework on witnesses. Through the TRC, the South African state assumed the role of an organiser of the collective past and manufacturer of consent about a past that needed to be representative of at least a majority of the people.

The TRC's truth-finding mandate was complex enough, because it dealt with recent events, which had a very emotional content and which were fiercely disputed by different groups in the country. However, what made this mandate much more problematic from the outset was that the TRC had to pursue historical truth not for its own sake, but in the service of reconciliation and nation-building. It was expressly stated in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act that "the objectives of the Commission shall be to promote national unity and reconciliation

in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past” and that “there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance.”²⁶ The TRC was expected to recover repressed histories and to expose the past in such a way that the country could come to terms with it and get on with a democratic, multiracial future. It was to exemplify a new and better way for a deeply divided nation to address its past, one that steers a path between vengeance and forgiveness, between the victor’s justice and historical amnesia. The TRC was understood as having a nation-building mandate to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation between populations bitterly divided by generations of racial oppression and exploitation.²⁷

Perhaps because its main discourse was reconciliation, priests seemed to dominate the TRC. It is almost as if forgiveness and reconciliation, derived from Christian ideas about confession and absolution propagated forcefully by Archbishop Tutu, were more important to the TRC than truth. Thus, according to some critics, it had the nature of a sacrament or quasi-church, involving a religious process of witness, confession, and forgiveness.²⁸

During the TRC public hearings, witnesses had limited speaking time and their testimonies were given within a predetermined structure. The commissioners could control the issues by stressing certain topics and through elicitation. This made it possible for the TRC to impose its viewpoints, objectives and framework on participants. A particular meta-narrative, aimed at reconciliation and national unity rather than retribution, was thus reinforced.²⁹ Excessive controversy about the past was avoided. In the hierarchy of discourses within the TRC process, the discourse of reconciliation had the highest status.³⁰ Even in the post-TRC period, the “memorable” narratives will remain those “that come closest to contemporary generic expectations and current moral, political and other codes”.³¹

NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND PUBLIC HISTORY

An important aspect of the TRC, from the perspective of the historian reflecting about its significance, is the relationship between public history and academic history. This is linked to the whole issue of how historical knowledge is constructed and contested. The production of knowledge as a social practice is rooted in relations of power. History as an academic discipline and a way of examining the past is a Western project. It represents a specific mode of investigation that considers past events in terms of causes, effects, and progression over time. Dominant European paradigms, theories, and historiographical conventions may reflect relations of dependence of Africa on the West. Therefore, the hold of academic accounts on the wider public’s interest may not be that strong, because marginalised Africans may prefer non-historical modes to deal with their own legacy. This leads to questions about the relevance of metropolitan theories and paradigms to Africa.³²

The gap between public encounters with the past and the reconstructions offered by historians is larger in South Africa than in many countries because African scholars in South Africa have not yet managed to fully claim intellectual independence and take control of their own history.³³ The historical profession in South Africa has been overwhelmingly dominated by whites. As a result, there are questions about the authenticity of the voices of academic historians, because they are not representative of the majority of the people.

For a number of decades at the end of the twentieth century, social histories produced by radical scholars steeped in Marxist theoretical traditions dominated South African English-language historiography. They produced highly detailed studies, focused on class analysis and the situation of the black working classes. It was the objective of the social history project to

restore the “voice of the people.” Multiple initiatives in the domain of “people’s history” and “history from below” were launched.³⁴ Today its relevance for taking South African historiography forward is questioned. The whole exercise seems not to have been very successful in keeping academic history within the reach of a larger audience and making historical knowledge more accessible to the public. Other forms of historical knowledge have remained marginalised.³⁵ “History from below” has appealed much more to white university-educated audiences than to black popular constituencies.³⁶ While focussing on the subject position of the black worker, it represented the African object as the constructed subject of the past. The historians engaged in these projects claimed to recover the nation’s past, but in fact imposed themselves and their methods of radical history on ordinary people.³⁷ Their claims to representing the “real story” of South Africa’s past are now seriously challenged.

One must distinguish between a focus on Africans and an African focus in writing history.³⁸ Radical historiography has focused on Africans for thirty years, but this has not yet produced a truly significant number of black historians. History is still practised almost exclusively by white scholars, whose social and institutional position remains privileged despite their commitment to progressive and anti-colonial causes. Their ability to convey the concerns of the black masses is questioned. The gap between academics and the common people whom they claim to represent continues to exist. The barriers between those who control the production of knowledge and those who provide the raw material for it remain as firm as ever. Alternative constructions of the past are assimilated into academic scholarship in such a way that these narratives are subordinated to the rules of evidence and of historiography.³⁹

Anachronistically, the demographics of knowledge production, also in the field of history, has not yet been corrected in the “new” South Africa.⁴⁰ The barrier of race places a burden on white academics seeking to speak for or about blacks.⁴¹ As far as recent reviews of South African history are concerned, Moleah’s work on the colonial period, despite serious flaws in scholarship, reflects popular perceptions better than the academically acclaimed publications by Worden and Beinart, because it is written from a black perspective.⁴²

The issue of the gap between academic and public history was brought to the foreground by the TRC, which was an exercise in the making of public history. Like no other event in the recent South African past the TRC has underlined that public history can no longer be neglected by the historical profession.⁴³ In moments of sudden political transition, history assumes special relevance and importance. This has also been the case in the South African transition as evidenced by the democratisation of the concept of heritage and the promotion of history as a school subject after years of decline. The TRC has brought the debate on evidence, truth, and the production of history into the public domain in an unprecedented manner. It has propelled history to a central place in debates about how to learn from and come to terms with the past. Interest has been revived in the possibilities of history.⁴⁴

In the new South Africa, the visual spectacle has been regarded as a gateway to a neglected past. As a process, the TRC was a compelling and unique spectacle. For the first time a truth commission held all its hearings in public, with television cameras and microphones present at all times. Over months of public hearings, with comprehensive coverage in the media, the victims of human rights violations, or their relatives, told their often disturbing stories, as did some of the perpetrators. In the TRC’s more dramatic moments, the victims were able to confront their former torturers. The live broadcasts, daily reports, and weekly summaries on television of the TRC public hearings converted the small stories of the victims of apartheid in the glare of the television cameras into an “electronic monument to apartheid’s past.” By

listening to the stories of victims of human rights violations, holding numerous amnesty hearings for perpetrators, and inviting different organisations, institutions, and political parties to make submissions, the process was given a public face. By involving many ordinary people who spoke at and attended the hearings, as well as enabling members of the public to follow them through the print and electronic media, the hearings became a process of public education. The past was given a visuality for a mass public gathered at their television sets. Through this visual spectacle, collective history was being revised and re-envisioned.⁴⁵

It was not only the public hearings that stimulated interest in history. The release of the TRC report also elevated public discourse about the need to reflect on the past. For the second time the TRC had a significant influence on public discourse and public memory in South Africa. For a brief period at least the testimonies and report of the TRC propelled history to a central place in debates about how to learn from and come to terms with the past. There is little doubt that the TRC has encouraged South Africans to raise questions about how best to remedy inequalities created by the past as well as harness a renewed commitment to re-making civil society.⁴⁶

The public work of the TRC both democratised memory and retraced a multiplicity of pasts. Thelen focuses on this aspect of the TRC's public hearings and argues that people often feel disconnected from and distrustful toward formal history, as it is encountered in school and the media. This feeling of disconnectedness was overcome by the TRC hearings. Through re-enactment, the TRC afforded witnesses (and observers) the opportunity to create their own ways of coming to terms with their pasts. Re-enactment challenges the notion that history is about events of the past that are closed and provides a means "to open events that looked closed, to see possibilities, to frame choices." Testimony before the TRC demonstrated how history transports people to the open-endedness that participants originally faced by recreating the uncertainty and flux of that moment. As witnesses reconsidered, they could choose how to act. This helped in taking responsibility for the consequences of their original actions and in reassuring themselves and others how they will act in future. By transporting them to the past to reflect on their own human capacities for good and evil, history allowed them to explore how to exercise their civic selves. Thus, by making experiences open-ended "we make them arenas of choice and then of taking responsibility."⁴⁷

Thelen is in favour of a "civics of history that would pivot around individual choice." He argues that the focus by modern historians on "historical perspective" and "historical context" has limited the capacity of the discipline to observe individuals and their experiences, to engage everyday uses of the past by ordinary people, and to recognise the open-endedness of history. Individuals make their own histories, but they are constrained by circumstances only partly of their own making. With its focus on individual experience, re-enactment and taking responsibility by individuals for what they had done, the TRC opened a window on the issue of how individual experience is and is not shaped by larger structures or the historical context. If one argues that the historical context of apartheid and its structures were responsible for human rights abuses, the individual perpetrators are denied both agency and culpability.⁴⁸

When subaltern narratives have to be filtered by disciplinary procedures and set against a scientifically established context, the problem is that witnesses are reduced to oral sources waiting to be processed by a literate elite and written into history as evidence. The rhetoric of contextualisation constrains the subaltern and even renders it unspeakable in a project that attributes its legitimacy to subaltern capacities. In this way, the danger remains that people may make history only to be written out of history by historians.⁴⁹

The TRC made an important contribution by showing the way forward for individuals to dedicate themselves to the new civic culture of human rights and democracy by reliving and re-evaluating their actions in the past. It gave individuals the opportunity to examine their complicity in committing or tolerating evil and determine how to take responsibility for the damage and prevent its reoccurrence. Confronting the past is an option that is open to all South African citizens. Alex Boraine, vice chairperson of the TRC, insisted that the civic challenge went beyond victims and perpetrators, that “the process will not be completed until all South Africans who benefited from apartheid confront the reality of the past, accept the uncomfortable truth of complicity, give practical expression of remorse, and commit themselves to a way of life which accepts and offers the dignity of humanness.”⁵⁰ Central to the TRC’s endeavour was resisting denial and erasure. In the public perception the TRC has been regarded as a mechanism for moving into the future via a thorough dealing with the past, a process for remembering and memorialising, and a symbol of a refusal to simply forget. However, critics do not all agree on the supposed open-endedness of the TRC process. Pressure for closure never ceased. Despite the subjective and partial nature of the truth revealed by the TRC, there was the danger that it could be regarded by the public as the real and whole history of apartheid. It presented a narrative with a strong moral message of sacrifice and community in struggle, which created the impression of a completed and “closed” apartheid past, leaving no room for doubts and alternative possibilities.⁵¹

This impression of closure was further strengthened by the dominant imagery of the hearings. At the core of the TRC hearings was a preoccupation with visible, tangible human bodies as material evidence of the acts of history. Many witnesses described the bodies of their loved ones in various states of internment, mutilation, dismemberment, and some even brought physical remains of apartheid victims. The physicality of mutilation came to embody the materiality of apartheid. The visibility and recovery of human remains became a metaphor for the settlement of the apartheid past. One after the other, witnesses stated that they wanted to locate the remains of their loved ones so that they could establish what had happened to them and find consolation through proper burial.⁵²

The literal burial of human bodies became a metaphor that could be linked to the figurative burial of the past. With reference to the TRC, several priests and politicians stated that the past had to be “buried” or “laid to rest.” In the same way that physical remains gave people an inheritance that was recoverable, it was thought that the apartheid past could be made measurable, transparent, and finite through the TRC process, allowing for a rebirth at the threshold of a new nation.⁵³

If truth is constituted in such a way that praise is reserved for the new regime and blame for the old, then history can simply appear to be victors’ history. Therefore, there needs to be some balance in apportioning guilt. If the desire is to heal the wounds of the past, there may be a tendency to cover up the past, because too much truth may be damaging to the cohesiveness of a new democracy, whose success depends on keeping social and political divisions within reasonable limits. Historical truth may be divisive rather than promoting reconciliation and maintaining silence may be a tempting option. An open confrontation with a painful past may have to wait for a change of generations, as it did in Germany after the Nazi period.⁵⁴

Historians would agree with Archbishop Tutu that remembering the past is crucial in dealing with the past. But, whereas the priest interprets this “dealing with the past” in terms of confession, forgiveness, absolution, and closure, the historian has another commitment. This commitment is to the “never ending debate” of historical research, in which the evidence is

revisited and re-interpreted. For the historian there can be no real closure, because there will never be a definitive answer about causes and consequences. For historians, it is unthinkable to “close the book of the past.” Questions about history will remain relevant and will continue to provoke debate. It is, therefore, up to historians to continue the endeavour started by the TRC and resist forgetting.

On a visit to South Africa in 1998, the eminent philosopher Jacques Derrida suggested that the TRC might be an “exercise in forgetting.” Derrida was not denying the dimensions of memory which informed the TRC’s work. He had many positive things to say about the TRC’s determination to reveal and archive apartheid atrocities. Yet from a philosophical point of view, archiving, traditionally understood as an act of remembering, is at profound levels an act of forgetting. When we write a note on a piece of paper and consign it to a pocket, Derrida explained, we are archiving the information so that we can forget it now, but retrieve it when we need it. Remembering and forgetting are not binary opposites as all remembering is informed by forgetting.

In response to Derrida’s suggestion, Verne Harris, Director of the South African History Archive and former member of the TRC’s investigation into the destruction of records, has indicated those dimensions of forgetting which can be detected in the work of the TRC:

- the Commission operated in a selective way
- its mandate restricted it to a narrow investigative focus
- practical constraints forced it to focus even more narrowly
- numerous investigations were hampered
- political parties were able to force the deletion or amendment of certain findings in the final report

According to Harris, the state has not responded adequately to several recommendations in the TRC report. He also points to evidence that records seen by the TRC have been lost and that it is not as easy as it should be to access the TRC archive which is in the custody of the National Archives.⁵⁵

Harris comes to the conclusion that “for the state the TRC is no more than a tool for providing a nod at remembering in the interests of a profounder forgetting” and that “while the state says it is dealing with the past, in fact it is intent on getting back to business as usual as quickly as possible.” However, he agrees with Derrida that there is never forgetting without the possibility of remembering and expresses the hope that individuals and organisations in South Africa committed to countering processes of erasure will prevent the unfinished business of the TRC from being forgotten.⁵⁶

How do we relate to past injustice? It is an easy way out to “forget” and “close” the book on apartheid and to start anew with an unblemished, or at least, sanitised version of the past. The vital question for South Africa is how to deal with the politics of memory and forgetting in the context of a new and unconsolidated democracy.⁵⁷ In this regard historians certainly have a vital role to play.

Can the TRC evidence be used to bridge the divide between public and academic history in South Africa? The best solution would obviously be to restructure the historical profession in a way that reflects the diversity of historical practice. In practice, however, relatively few black historians are coming through the profession’s ranks. Perhaps Odendaal’s suggestion of a chair in

public history should be followed up to promote the image of the profession in the black community.⁵⁸

It would make no sense for academics to renounce their scholarship. However, if they aspire to break down the barriers between ivory tower and popular versions of history, they must be attuned to popular perceptions and acknowledge that there are other versions of the past which exist alongside academic history. Those versions often operate in a non-historical mode and may not be valid if measured by academic standards, but they are significant for people coming to terms with their heritage and their position in a transforming South Africa.

Finally, transformation of the historical profession in post-apartheid South Africa entails more than the incorporation of members of marginalized groups into the existing structures. The rules, standards and norms of these structures, and their relations to the society at large must be examined critically. The very categories of analysis that are used to determine facts and decide between competing interpretations of the past must be interrogated.⁵⁹

REINTERPRETING SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

An important task for historians is to use the TRC archive for the re-interpretation of recent South African history. Ian Buruma, who has studied the postwar memories of Germany and Japan, argues that the basic tasks of the historian dealing with recent traumatic events are "to strip the past of its mystery, to relate history as a series of more or less coherent events...and to explain and evaluate those events critically."⁶⁰ Academic historians are expected to provide a synthesis out of what seems to be disparate episodes of personal trauma in the record of the TRC testimonies. They have to recover historical evidence, reconstruct past processes and events, and help create an understanding within society.⁶¹

In its report, the TRC attempted to pave the way for the reinterpretation of South Africa's recent past. Amongst other things, the HRVC sections of the report deal with the activities of major roleplayers (the former South African government and its security forces, the ANC and allied organisations, the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Pan Africanist Congress, the Azanian People's Organisation, and right-wing groups) and assess to what extent the various roleplayers should be held accountable. Chapters on abductions, disappearances, missing persons, and exhumations are also included.⁶²

The TRC report emerged as primarily a story of moral wrongdoing. As expected, the TRC found that the National Party government and the Inkatha Freedom Party (as governing party in KwaZulu) had been the main perpetrators of human rights violations, including the extra-judicial killing of political opponents. The TRC report described apartheid as a "crime against humanity," and acknowledged that the ANC had launched a "just war." But the ANC and PAC were also guilty of human rights abuses and criminal actions during the course of the liberation struggle.⁶³ Thus, the TRC report tried to be impartial without equating the violations of human rights perpetrated by the ANC with those perpetrated by the apartheid state. In distinguishing between the conduct of the former state and the liberation movements, the TRC argued that the state had engendered violent conflict and its actions should be assessed against higher standards of conduct because it had been the legally constituted government.⁶⁴

Some scholars, especially historians operating from a structuralist basis, have charged that the TRC inadequately practiced the discipline of history. Their criticisms deal mainly with the TRC's neglect of context and causation. For historians such as Colin Bundy and Deborah Posel, the major shortcoming of the TRC was that it did not properly address the structural aspects of

apartheid. In their opinion, the TRC failed to come to terms with the underlying structures and processes that have patterned South African society. They criticised the TRC report for lacking a critical and substantive engagement with the myriad complexities that constituted the context within which violations occurred and for failing to grasp the relationship between individual experience, collective action, and societal structures.⁶⁵

If context is neglected, causes cannot be properly explained. By neglecting the socio-economic context in which human rights violations had taken place and the process of change in the apartheid system, the TRC was not in a position to adequately explain the causes of violence. Historians have quite rightly criticised the TRC's shallow historical analysis of causation. Because its investigation of the past was not thorough enough, a nuanced analysis was not possible. This made for an oversimplification of the past. The validity of truth is always acquired in a given context. Without explaining the context, no truth claims can be made for any version of the past.⁶⁶

How should historians use the TRC's evidence in reinterpreting South African history? The stories told by witnesses to the TRC are real only at the level of evidence and this, like evidence in general, is neither an open window that gives us direct access to reality, nor a wall which precludes any access to reality. As already explained, the TRC hearings and report were unable to adequately take account of all the voices or perspectives of historically marginalized groups. There must be an appreciation of the value of oral testimony and personal narratives for the historian's craft, but in the same way as written records, this data must be carefully assessed through a process of historical criticism. Fact must be separated from fiction and a truthful account of events must be secured by situating the facts in the larger historical context. Such an account requires appropriate professional methodologies and expertise.⁶⁷ After the end of a regime under which serious human rights violations took place, how should history and historians proceed in exposing the crimes of the past? Historical research and writing is driven by a moral imperative to do justice to the victims of the past and bring the perpetrators to book. History's function is often perceived as assisting in the building of a democratic society by rejecting the values of the previous regime and underpinning those of the new one. Are historians deluding themselves when they claim objectivity in such circumstances? Should they not admit that they are only creating narratives that are acceptable to a different, perhaps more morally defensible regime? The work of the TRC thus suggests both problems and opportunities for a society that views history as an essential tool in re-defining national identity.⁶⁸ As long as historians realise that they represent only one voice among many, the TRC archives stand as a valuable source for re-interpreting the past.

Historians have assessed the significance of the TRC by evaluating its success both in looking backwards, to uncover the truth about the past, and looking forward, to indicate a way of using the truth about the past to the benefit of the present and future generations. These two objectives are referred to as "re-enacting" and "redesigning" the past.⁶⁹ The historical facts uncovered by the TRC are being used to highlight what must never happen again. Their service to the new order and their political efficacy in terms of ongoing democratic change in South Africa depend, according to Hook and Harris, on the extent to which their lessons are directed backwards, rather than forwards, and whether these lessons are themselves simply consigned to history. In assessing the success of the TRC, it is important to ask whether the apartheid era has been presented as more distinct from the present than in fact it actually is. Has this representation allowed the shirking of responsibility by white South Africa for concerted and active commitment to ongoing political change? Ultimately, will the texts mobilised by the TRC have

been too easily “cut off” from the present, and relegated by history to the time and place where they occurred?

This shortcoming of the TRC highlights an implicit danger within such a form of historicisation, explained by Butchart in terms of a distinction between a conventional “history of the past” and a genealogical “history of the present.” A history of the past is essentially a work of the present produced as a way of understanding what happened in a previous era. It is prone to anchoring itself in the current socio-political realm and projecting the dominant values or understandings of the present backwards. In this way, the present risks insulating itself, as location, context, and time, from the lessons of history. A history of the present, by contrast, is a work of the past produced as a way of understanding the present. Rather than immersing itself in the current socio-political context it tries to anchor itself in the past so as to write a critique of the present. Rather than alienating the past and keeping it at arm’s-length distance, a history of the present interrogates current values, discourses, and understandings with recourse to the past as a source of critical knowledge. In this sense, the TRC’s retrospective focus cannot be understood as properly genealogical, because the final target of critique for genealogical history is the present. Although the TRC may have been necessarily limited to an investigation into the past, it is important to recognise that this purely retrospective focus is a political shortcoming and a missed opportunity to comment on the “new” South Africa.⁷⁰ Both Thelen’s concept of a civics of history and Hook and Harris’s preference for a genealogical history of the present open up interesting possibilities. However, the primary task of the historian is not to show what could have been or what should be, but rather to show what was. In their pursuit of truth about the past, historians should resist the temptation of taking over the tasks of the priest and the politician. If they stick to their task of exposing lies and distortions by establishing what happened and why it happened through critical study, interpretation, and narration of facts, and if they acknowledge that their vision of the truth remains partial and subjective, they will have rendered their service, both to the academic community and the nation. Their work will then be available as an aid in performing the respective tasks of the priest, the psychologist, the politician, and all others who have a stake in the TRC process.

NOTES

1. Richard J. Evans, p. 5; I. Evans, pp. 4-6.
2. See Christie, pp. 68-9; Verdoolaege, “De Zuid-Afrikaanse Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie als model voor conflictverzoening”, p. 1.
3. Republic of South Africa, Office of the President, Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act no. 34 of 1995), 26 July 1995. See also Burger, pp. 280–281; TRC, vol. 1, pp. 55-57.
4. Republic of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (final report), Volume 6, Section 4, Chapter 3, pp. 570, 575-6. See also Meiring, p. 379; South African Institute of Race Relations, *South Africa Survey 1999/2000*, pp. 347-8.
5. Joubert; Van Zyl, p. 648.
6. Republic of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (final report), Volume 6, Section 4, Chapter 3, pp. 577, 578.
7. See the bibliography of Verdoolaege, “The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”.

8. For an evaluation of the literature on the TRC see Verdoolaege, “The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

9. Lalu and Harris, p. 1; Bam; Verdoolaege, “The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, p. 4.

10. Mooney et. al., p. 213.

11. Buur, p. 43

12. TRC, vol. 5, p. 442.

13. Hook and Harris, p. 14; Blommaert, Bock and McCormack, pp. 2, 3; Deegan, p. 141.

14. Hook and Harris, p. 15; Verdoolaege, “De Zuid-Afrikaanse Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie als model voor conflictverzoening”, p. 7; Enslin; Michael Ignatieff, ‘Articles of faith’, *Index on censorship no. 5* cited in Christie, p. 57.

15. Thelen, p. 1.

16. Williams, p. 9.

17. Barzun and Graff, p. 257; Collingwood, pp. 127, 231, 241, 245, 246.

18. See Collingwood, pp.191-204.

19. Christie, p. 49.

20. Saunders, p. 248.

21. Mooney et. al., pp. 213-214.

22. See e.g. Roodt (who also published a book with the title *Om die waarheidskommissie te vergeet* – To forget the truth commission).

23. Verdoolaege, “De Zuid-Afrikaanse Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie als model voor conflictverzoening”, p. 9; Christie, pp. 115, 160-1, 171.

24. Posel and Simpson (eds), p. 11. See also Chief Buthelezi’s comments cited in Christie, p. 180.

25. Verdoolaege, “The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, p. 15; Enslin; Christie, p. 179. See Wynand Malan’s minority position on the unreliability of some of the testimonies and the multiplicity of truths in TRC, vol. 5, pp. 441-442.

26. Republic of South Africa, Office of the President, Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act no. 34 of 1995), 26 July 1995.

27. See Verdoolaege, “De Zuid-Afrikaanse Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie als model voor conflictverzoening”, p. 3; Statman, p. 23; Asmal, pp. 2-3.

28. Joubert.

29. Nina, pp. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; Blommaert, Bock and McCormack, pp. 2, 8; Verdoolaege, “The human rights violations hearings of the South African TRC: a bridge between individual narratives of suffering and a contextualizing master-story of reconciliation”, pp. 1, 12, 19; Verdoolaege, “The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, p. 16. See also the recommendation on the commitment to reconciliation and unity and the chapter on reconciliation in TRC, vol. 5, pp. 304-307, 350-435.

30. Verdoolaege, “The human rights violations hearings of the South African TRC: a bridge between individual narratives of suffering and a contextualizing master-story of reconciliation”, p. 19.

31. Blommaert, Bock and McCormack, p. 26.

32. Greenstein, pp. 8, 10.

33. Greenstein, p. 7.
34. Minkley, Rassool and Witz, pp. 3, 5; Greenstein, p. 3.
35. Green, p. 5.
36. Greenstein, p. 9.
37. Minkley, Rassool and Witz, p. 5.
38. Greenstein, p. 4.
39. Greenstein, p. 9.
40. Odendaal, p. 2.
41. Greenstein, p. 7.
42. Greenstein, p. 8. Reference is here made to A. Moleah, *South Africa: colonialism, apartheid and African dispossession* (1993); Nigel Worden, *The making of modern South Africa: conquest, segregation and apartheid* (1994); and William Beinart, *Twentieth-century South Africa* (1994).
43. Odendaal, p. 1.
44. Lalu and Harris, p. 1.
45. Minkley, Rassool and Witz, p. 28; Enslin; Du Preez.
46. Williams, p. 9.
47. Thelen, pp. 1, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16.
48. Thelen, pp. 6, 19, 23.
49. Lalu and Harris, pp. 12, 13, 14, 15.
50. Cited in Thelen, p. 8.
51. Minkley, Rassool and Witz, pp. 8, 9.
52. Minkley, Rassool and Witz, pp. 9-10.
53. Minkley, Rassool and Witz, pp. 10, 12.
54. Richard J. Evans, p. 9.
55. The destruction of records is discussed in TRC, vol. 1, pp. 201-236.
56. Harris.
57. Duvenage, p. 2.
58. Odendaal, p. 2.
59. Greenstein, pp. 8, 9, 11.
60. Buruma, p. 247.
61. Lalu and Harris, pp. 1-2, 11; Odendaal, p. 5.
62. Republic of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (final report), table of contents.
63. South African Institute of Race Relations, *South Africa Survey 1999/2000*, pp. 348-54. See also Laurence, p. 41.
64. Buur, p. 42 (abstract); Enslin.
65. Bundy, p. 20; Posel and Simpson, pp. 11, 165-6.
66. Verdoolaege, "De Zuid-Afrikaanse Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie als model voor conflictverzoening", p. 9; Posel and Simpson, pp. 165-6.
67. Lalu and Harris, pp. 2, 3, 7.
68. Williams, pp. 1-2, 6, 8; Verdoolaege, "The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", p. 10.
69. Thelen, p. 1; Richard J. Evans, p. 5.
70. Hook and Harris, p. 16.

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