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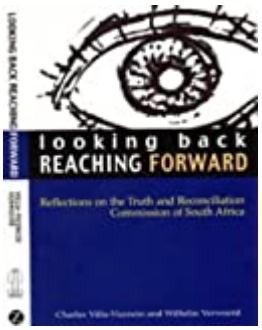

Charles Villa-Vicencio, Wilhelm Verwoerd, eds. *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa.* Cape Town: UCT Press, 2000. xxi + 322 pp. US$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-919713-49-6.

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But One Choice?

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This comprehensively written work makes absorbing and thought-provoking reading for scholars mainly interested in the politics of transition. The strength of the book lies in the diverse expertise that it brought from within and outside South Africa to the writing of a useful analytical work: ranging from former Commissioners as 'insiders', ANC politicians, academics in the fields of religion, psychology, sociology, law, business and economics, journalism, religion, and human rights, as well as those who were closely connected to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as researchers, participants or victims. The book has a scholarly appeal with its extensive references to cases compiled in the report, related academic publications in journals and in other theoretical publications.

The book was conceptualised by Charles Villa-Vicencio, former Director of Research for the TRC and currently Executive Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Wilhelm Verwoerd, ANC member and researcher for the TRC who became well known internationally and locally for his family association - the grandson of the architect of apartheid, Dr H. F. Verwoerd. It provides a 'hands-on', 'inside' account and includes the analysis of experts and researchers from both within and outside South Africa. In the foreword, Judge Goldstone remarks that the writers demonstrate a 'candour that is refreshing and an objectivity that is unusual and commendable so soon after the event'. The book is on the bookshelves a mere two years after the Commission handed its report to President Mandela in October 1998.

Contributors include those directly affected by apartheid related atrocities (Nkosinathi Biko, Ginn Fourie and Yazir Henry). High profile contributions come from: Kader Asmal (Minister of Education); Johnny de Lange (ANC member of parliament); Jakes Gerwel (Former Director-General in the Office of the State President); Richard Goldstone (Justice of the South African Constitutional Court) and Njongonkulu Ndungane (Archbishop of Cape Town, Church of the Province of South Africa). Thought provoking contributions are made by Rajeev Bhargava (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) who writes on 'The moral justification of truth commissions'

and Priscilla Hayner (New York-based researcher on truth commissions) who writes on 'Same species, different animal: how South Africa compares to truth commissions worldwide'.

The book comprises four sections. One, 'The historical context and origins of the Commission'; two, 'The philosophical framework of the Commission'; three, 'What the Commission sought to achieve' and section four dealing with 'After the Commission'.

The authors acknowledge the TRC as controversial, challenging and imperfect. Readers are presented with the challenges that the TRC faced in carrying out its work, the debates within the Commission, the frustrations experienced with the legal system, the writers' own personal begging on questions of morality, judgement and the truth – questions that remain debatable.

There is no pretence that the work is 'inclusive' of 'multiple voices'. The voices of those who reject the Commission in principle are not included. The result, hence, a powerful perspective of 'but one choice' as seen from those closely associated with the TRC: within or as understood from outside. This all-embracing paradigm filters and reflects through the craft of many of the contributors as academics, writers and participants. There is therefore a strong (perhaps unintended) 'consensus' that runs through the book from chapter to chapter, from voices within and without. However, it is perhaps this very presentation of largely consensus voices rather than disconcerting voices that makes it a very useful and comprehensive reference work to facilitate the debate that it hopes to promote. Its dominant paradigm of 'no other choice' is thought provoking and interesting and will certainly be inviting very many critical responses. Hence, much of what the editors have hoped for would certainly be achieved. Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd refer to the work as an anthology designed to promote debate on the TRC by presenting only the 'internal' voices in the form of 'critique' and 'reflection'.

This work is compelling. The texts engage readers in very thought provoking post-modernist constructs of the truth and justice, on the new language of meaning that was constructed through dialogue and debate, the hands-on construction of a new form of justice, of different ways of seeing the process from within in the context of the wider framework. South Africa's contribution to international law is emphasised and illustrated. The complexities of the TRC process in the context of transition in South Africa are presented with cogent arguments and clear articulations of dilemmas and challenges. The work is well researched; benefiting from the rich data that was accessed though the research process for the TRC itself. In this sense, the book makes a unique and very important contribution to discourse on transitional politics, the rewriting of South Africa's history and the philosophical contestations of justice, truth, morality and ethics.

The most useful debates centre on how the Commission grappled with its mandate, which gave rise to its findings. Other interesting and thought provoking arguments relate to notions of coexistence as opposed to the unattainable expectation of reconciliation; the role of the TRC as epistemological (knowledge of the past; factual truth and emotional truth; negotiated truth) and hermeneutic (negotiated meanings of the past in a new language of understanding) rather than judicial (as not serving conventional justice but imbedded in a holistic approach to judgement and punishment such as through memory); the TRC as reconciliation catalyst (initiating the process of healing) rather than reconciliation itself; the TRC as mythology and symbolic ritual (a narrative of performance and catharsis) rather than the implementation of justice.

Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd raise a key question: whether the TRC mandate was adequately interpreted by the Commission or, for that matter, adequately conceived by the drafters of the TRC legislation. But this question remains a subject for further debate and research. The related issue of international law remains also a vexed question. Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and Ronald Suresh Roberts in their chapter refer to the report that 'becomes strangely tentative when it states the violence of the powerful; the South African state was not necessarily equal to the violence of the powerless', suggesting that the notion of 'identical acts dissolves into nonsense'; that the Commission has therefore failed in its moral judgement of the issues pertaining to the Just War doctrine and was therefore unable to contribute to the advancement of the doctrine.

Paul Van Zyl notes that South Africa had one choice only (justice without punishment) in the face of a military powerful previous regime. He outlines the many serious challenges that successor regimes face (economic and civic) coupled with the huge costs and time implicated in political prosecutions. He provides a stimulating analysis of state obligations under international law. Dumisa Ntsebeza gives a detailed account of the TRC process and illustrates how the Commission corroborated evidence through a number of processes and activities.

There are historical gaps, such as in Johnny de

Lange's chapter on the historical context of the TRC. The issue of conventions is not dealt with comprehensively. There is an opportunity to draw on the convention of 1910 (resultant of the South African War) and comparisons to the post 1990 convention of CODESA (resultant of the South African negotiated revolution). Although the TRC did not come up for discussion in the negotiation process, the vexed question of amnesty did (as de Lange indicates). It was therefore certainly influenced by the predominance of convention politics within public discourse partly rooted in the ANC's own Motsuenyane Commission established in 1993.

In evaluating the severe limitations of the TRC process, many contributors agree that the South African nation remains divided materially. Deep racial economic divisions remain and this presents the biggest challenge for peaceful transition and hopeful reconciliation in South Africa. Mahmood Mamdani's beneficiary thesis (alluded to but not sufficiently evaluated in the book) seems to remain one of the most challenging aspects to be addressed by South Africans (political, academic and economic). As de Lange notes, 'that if we do not deliver on economic justice, then no matter how reconciliatory we are or whether we know the complete truth about our past or not, the whole South African liberation project would be put in jeopardy'.

But what makes South Africa's TRC's process unique? I would like to address one aspect identified by the writers. Hayner notes that while other commissions have been more legal, technical or historical in their investigative approach, the South African process was rooted in the religious (moreover Christian) tradition of forgiveness with the chairperson - Archbishop Desmond Tutu's angelic personae begging victims to forgive and perpetrators to say 'sorry'. When Hayner notes that the limiting influence of this religious tone has not yet fully been appreciated, one cannot help but reflect on the recent negative response of white South Africans to the declaration of apology by whites for apartheid launched on Reconciliation Day (16 December) this year. The declaration (thus far signed by only four hundred and fifty whites) forms part of the Home for All Campaign and envisages a development fund as a means towards 'promoting racial harmony and redressing past wrongs'.

Here comes the acid test of how far the TRC has succeeded in raising a consciousness in white South Africans that they have benefited from apartheid – both willingly and unwillingly. While many white South Africans might admit that there have been gross violations of human rights under apartheid, it seems that they find it very difficult to acknowledge that they have benefited materially from this brutal system. Perhaps acknowledgement implies a further commitment to sharing, to taking material (rather than spiritual) responsibility for the past as rooted in colonialism, as rooted in the myriad of white biographies stretching back for many, at least one hundred, years of settlement in South Africa. It is easier to be absolved from guilt for murder and various forms of torture carried out by apartheid maniacs, but white South Africans cannot extricate themselves from their heritage of white privilege in material and cultural capital (wealth, confidence, education, resources, opportunities, networks etc.). The responsibility is therefore perhaps solely shifted to the ANC government to deliver in spite of a burdening apartheid economic legacy. The white dominated opposition Democratic Alliance contends that the ANC should apologise for its excesses instead. The crux of white opposition to the declaration is not the symbolic ritual of apology (perhaps easier to do when prompted by Tutu) but rather the concomitant acknowledgement of being beneficiaries and its implicit material responsibility. This is the most crucial aspect of not only reconciliation but also coexistence, which rests on interdependence. Surely, this is one step (amongst many other possibilities) for deracialising the material present. There should, of course, be ways in which the emerging black elite can play a similar role of sharing. But for the moment the two issues are historically and sociologically separate and unrelated; the white elite have benefited through an established capitalist tradition (stretching back over a century and most part of their 'luggage' (and perhaps proverbial 'baggage') in the present. Why has it been so easy for some, like former president and Nobel Peace recipient, De Klerk, to say 'sorry' and to blame atrocities on 'rotten eggs' among security force members, but too difficult to commit themselves to investing materially in South Africa's future? In which ways has the TRC in its conception, implementation and operation allowed this? How must the TRC be taken beyond its mandate? Is it sufficient to accept that the artists, storytellers, journalists, teachers, religious communities and so on should 'take it further' as Villa-Vicencio notes in his chapter on 'Restorative Justice' or as Gerwel suggests in the end chapter? Willie Esterhuyse notes that reconciliation is not 'cheap', can never be as it is 'a costly word that was bought with blood' and it therefore requires interventions beyond the TRC mandate. Lyster remarks that whether amnesty is granted or not, the victims of South Africa's apartheid years will remain at the lowest end of the social and political order. In his chap-

ter on 'Amnesty and denial,' Biko contends that for many whites the victim hearings were a 'non-event'. He pauses to add that for some white South Africans the process was about amnesty, and perhaps not about truth or reconciliation at all – worse still, the Commission 'was willing to bend over backwards to accommodate perpetrators of the former regime', as in the case of P. W. Botha. Biko adds poignantly that those who have suffered have acted generously; that mere words are not enough. This aspect of South Africa's transition remains insufficiently explored. Terreblanche's chapter on 'Dealing with systematic economic justice' is to some extent a response to Mamdani's beneficiary thesis, which is deserving of thoughtful intervention.

Perhaps associated with the challenge presented by the beneficiary thesis is that of the notion of the TRC as 'theatre'. Ebrahim Moosa provides a most thought provoking and brilliant analysis in his chapter, 'Truth and reconciliation as performance: spectres of Eucharistic redemption' which is of cogent relevance here. He asks, can one say that the TRC fulfilled the role of 'as if' (that is, as if there was some court of justice), 'as if' it performed the function of Nuremberg, 'as if' reconciliation occurred, as if the truth were disclosed, radically changing the metaphors of morality – a postmodern understanding of justice. Perhaps also as if political injustice is unrelated to economic injustice.

Much of the analysis put forward in the book is grounded in reconstructionist theory: the TRC 'constructing' a national memory for reconciliation or coexistence; restorative justice is an 'inclusive process' that is the basis for a 'forward looking' nation; that full disclosure of a violation by the criminal replaces the need for punishment. Bhargava, writing on the moral justifications of truth commissions, talks of the attainment of a 'minimally decent society' and takes the view that though a truth commission is necessary, it is not sufficient for the creation of such a society. Why must it be the victim that should forgive?, Bhargava begs. Since (he continues) there is nothing intrinsically wrong in resenting perpetrators of evil – such emotions are woven into one's self-respect. Reconciliation 'cannot intentionally be brought about' through a TRC process.

Absent from all current histories compiled on the TRC is a comprehensive reflection on implications for youth education, such as the burning issue of school history. And here, the issue of the role of memory needs deeper exploration. There are only hints, but no clear elaboration on possibilities and challenges: Villa-Vicencio hints at the abuse of the 'politics of memory' as shown in the case of the South African War, Northern Ireland and former Yugoslavia; in her chapter on 'Moral Judgement' Mary Burton contends that if reconciliation and national unity are to be achieved in South Africa, a clear understanding of the past conflict will be indispensable; Moosa critiques the memory of the TRC event as a 'simulation of reality' that may have to be repressed if South Africa wishes to break out of its cycle of surreal existence in so many spheres of life; Verwoerd refers to the South African War as an illustration of selective remembering but focuses only on the memory aspect as it influenced the history he was taught at school. At many former white schools there might still be pretences 'as if' apartheid never happened. In his chapter on 'Reconciliation: a call to action', Mxolisi Mgxashe notes the need for the TRC material to get into schools where many exploit the flag of the 'rainbow nation' yet they go on to practice apartheid racism. His chapter makes interesting, thought provoking and sobering reading on racist attitudes prevalent in ordinary communities.

A more critical (but far less comprehensive) account of the TRC has been compiled by Wilmot James and Linda Van De Vijver (eds.) titled *After the TRC*, which provides a good contrast for an evaluation of this book. Contributors include sociologists, legal experts, historians, former commissioners (Mary Burton, Alex Boraine and Villa-Vicencio), scholars of religious studies, political scientists, economists and politicians. It brings together another dimension of analysis and includes work from notable scholars such as Heribert Adam, Colin Bundy, Mahmood Mamdani, Njabulo Ndebele and Francis Wilson. Related issues of analysis include the question of amnesia, the kind of history produced by the TRC, the violence of the archive, the TRC and national heritage and a most controversial question on to whose benefit was the TRC? The work brings (amongst others) the dimension of a political economy analysis such as the impact of globalisation. Both these works are probably the most comprehensive anthologies of voices from various experts and research interests on the TRC. The two must be read together along with the many other accounts and critical assessments such as that of Tutu's *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999); Alex Boraine's *A Country Unmasked* (2000); Anthea Jeffery's *The Truth about the TRC* (1999) and an earlier, but useful work compiled by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past* (1998).

Writing this review has not been easy for me to do. I found myself looking back in order to look forward. As a black academic who lived in the same street as

Yazir Henry I vividly remember the fateful day when the South African army invaded our street to fetch the young man from his parents' home. This memory forced me to pause. Perhaps for this reason, I found the narratives and analysis provided by Henry, Biko and Fourie (which clearly struggle to present intellectual accounts of recent intensely emotional and close-to-the-bone recent experiences) most useful as texts to take the debate further – on the problems of amnesty, of being 'used' and sacrificed, of the double humiliation and pain suffered through the TRC process, of facing the perpetrators, the deep losses suffered (psychological, emotional and material). In reading their contributions one walks the tightrope between the intellectual and emotional, often and inescapably blurred. When does the emotional become intellectual and when does the intellectual become emotional? And this is perhaps another gap in this book. While the South African contributors like Henry, Biko and Fourie share their narrative (the reader gets to know who they are in terms of their historical and political experience), the others remain unfortunately without biography – almost without an identity, except superficially identified as a 'researcher' and so on. Who is Gerwel? Who is Meiring? Who is Walaza? What historical and social experiences of apartheid do they bring to the table in giving 'objective' perspective to this thought-provoking project? In what way are the contributors 'looking back ' on their own lives in order to look forward? This is at times implicit (such as Verwoerd's reflection on his socialisation as a white Afrikaner youngster) but not sufficiently explicit. As Henry says, apartheid affected everybody; everybody has a story to tell.

Nonetheless, a highly recommended resource which makes an excellent and unique contribution to current writings on the TRC.

Related Works

Wilmot James and Linda Van de Vijver (eds.). *After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* Athens, GA.: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 2000

Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness.* London; Johannesburg: Rider, 2000

Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's TRC.* Oxford; New York; Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000

Anthea Jeffery, *The Truth about the TRC* (Spotlight Series). Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1999

Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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