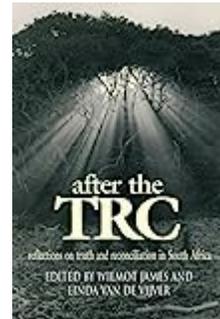




Wilmot James, Linda Van De Vijver, eds. *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. x + 228 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1385-2.



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Published on H-SAfrica (October, 2002)

Alex Boraine quotes Justice Mohamed in his essay, “The Language of Potential,” as saying: “Consider if the TRC had never existed. Think about what would have happened if the silence had not been broken, if the right to be heard had been turned away. Because of this opportunity for both perpetrator and victim, there are enormous new possibilities in South Africa” (p. 79).

I am frequently asked if I believe that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a success. Having invested more than four years working at the TRC, I would like nothing more than to be able to answer the question with a simplistic “yes” and be done with it. Instead, I think I will refer future inquirers to *After the TRC*. The naivety of the question itself belies a larger issue. So many people seem to both want and expect a neat, concise answer, assuming that the success of the TRC is somehow easily quantifiable, disregarding the many complexities surrounding the process. Therein lies the success of this book. Although I wondered how useful it could be to reflect on a process that is barely complete, I found the diverse, though by no means comprehensive, collection of essays a thought-provoking critique on the nature of truth and reconciliation in South Africa. Based on the conference “After the TRC: Reconciliation in the New Millennium” held in Cape Town in August 1999, it provides a constructive starting point for much needed

further debate.

The book is divided into five parts: historical and comparative perspectives, reflections on the process, unfinished business, after the TRC, and building the assets of a nation. The writers include several former TRC Commissioners and researchers. Colin Bundy’s critique of the TRC’s somewhat paradoxical mandate effectively situates the Commission in its appropriate political and historical context. This perspective is further developed in Charles Villa-Vicencio’s response to some of the criticism leveled at the TRC. He discusses some of the mitigating internal and external political factors and the high level of pressure that surrounded the production of the report. The first section of the book, in fact, almost forms a disclaimer to the TRC, setting a critical framework for the essays that follow.

The well-chosen selection addresses a number of controversial issues, including the “skewed” composition of the TRC Commissioners; the focus on gross human rights violations that were illegal under apartheid laws which, for example, ignored victims of forced removals and the millions who suffered under racial laws; the lack of accountability displayed by the National Party; and perhaps the most controversial of all—the manner in which the human rights abuses committed by the liberation movement were handled. Also worthy of note are the reflec-

tions on the TRC's measures regarding reconciliation. While some argue that the objective of the TRC was to promote reconciliation, not to achieve it, and that significant strides had been made in that direction, others contend that it failed dismally to achieve that mandate. Certainly this is another subject worthy of further discourse.

It is the "Unfinished Business" section of this book that I found most revealing. Though first published in 2000, *After the TRC* is, unfortunately, still timely.[1] Former TRC Commissioner Mary Burton addresses a number of vital processes and decisions that need to be initiated. Her disappointment at the continued lack of reparations for victims is consistently echoed throughout the book. In fact, two years after this book's publication, little has emerged on any of the issues she raises. The "final" TRC report is still not released while legal wrangling with

the Inkatha Freedom Party continues. There is no hint of a final reparations policy, financial or symbolic. There is no final decision on access to the TRC records or further discussion on creating a "TRC Archive" that is easily accessible to victims who have not been informed on the outcome of investigations done on their behalf. Nor is there an official follow-up on any of the TRC recommendations or the process itself. Equally distressing is the alarming ease with which the words "blanket amnesty" are still used. Two years after the first publication of the book, and almost seven years after the creation of the TRC, the process is far from over. Perhaps it is not too soon to reflect, as long as that is not all we do.

Note

[1]. The book was first published in Cape Town in 2000 by David Philip.

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Citation: Ruendree Govinder. Review of James, Wilmot; Vijver, Linda Van De, eds., *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

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