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The TRC Report: What Kind of History? What Kind of Truth?

A preliminary exploration

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> 'Fundamental to all forms of justice is official acknowledgement of what happened' (Judge Richard Goldstone, *Business Day*, 7 March 1996).

The TRC's 'official acknowledgement of what happened' in South Africa from 1960 to 1993 has been a dramatic, wide-ranging process, spanning two and a half years of hearings, investigations and research, issuing in the five-volume report presented to the State President on 29 October 1998. If the TRC's human rights and amnesty hearings represent the 'live', active, fluid, human face of its truth-finding process, the report is pre-eminently the site of the TRC's 'official' voice on the truth as found: formal, voluminous, weighty, considered, authoritative.

Spanning over 2 700 pages of text, this is a report which relatively few are likely to read in anything like its entirety. It is long, unwieldy, expensive and difficult to locate (particularly since it has been removed from the Internet). Yet, even the bulky five volume's worth is a highly edited distillation of the large archive assembled by the TRC which, I'm told, would overwhelm the average suburban house. Within parameters very firmly set by the enabling legislation, the TRC embarked on a 'daunting and formidable[1]' task, of 'establishing as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of the gross human rights violations which were committed between 1 March 1960 to 5 December 1993, including the antecedents,

[1]Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town, 1998),, vol 1 ch 6 para 2.

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circumstances, factors and context of such violations, as well as the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations'[2]. Underscoring the enormity of this undertaking, Archbishop Tutu's Foreword to the report stresses, therefore, that

> the report...offers a road map to those who wish to travel into our past. It is not and cannot be the whole story, but it provides a perspective on the truth about a past that is more extensive and more complex than any one commission could, within two and a half years, have hoped to capture[3].

Tutu's comment gives rise to two sets of questions which have prompted this paper:
1) The first set of questions is animated by the epistemological and methodological conundrum of the TRC: how does an inherently selective writing of only part of the story about the past present itself with the authority and objectivity of truth required of an official state commission?[4] How are the concepts of 'truth' and 'objectivity' understood in this process? How are decisions made about what to cut out, what to leave in? What counts as sufficient evidence for producing definitive findings about what happened in the past?

2) What version of South Africa's recent past has emerged as a consequence of these choices? How has the story about the commission of gross human rights violations been written in the TRC Report? How 'extensive and complex' is it as an historical text?

In addressing these questions, the paper begins with an exploration of the various facets of the TRC's mandate, and demonstrates three key tensions which inhere in it. The paper then

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[2] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 4 para 31(a).

[3] *TRC Report*, Vol. 1 chapter 1, para 5

[4] For all Tutu's apparent insight into the TRC's having presented a 'perspective on the truth' about the past, he doesn't for a moment renounce the surety or veracity of the Commission as the official version of what happened.

examines the discourses of truth and method which are produced in the Commission's attempts to manage these tensions. And lastly, the paper traces the imprints of these discourses in what the TRC Report has written about the country's past.

In line with the genre of an official state commission, the TRC Report presents itself as the work of a team of 'observers' on the past, who collated and assembled a series of facts about gross human rights violations, to produce the objective, authorised version of the country's recent past. But a closer reading reveals a different process of knowledge production. The report contains a version of the past which has been actively crafted according to particular strategies of inclusion and exclusion, borne of the complexities of the TRC's mandate. Part epistemological and methodological, part moral, the effect of these discursive strategies is to produce a primarily descriptive rendition of the past, uneven in its discernment of detail and indifferent to the complexities of social causation. The TRC's 'truth' about the past is neither 'complex' nor particularly 'extensive' (despite its length). With little explanatory and analytical power, the report reads less as a history, more as a moral narrative about the fact of moral wrongdoing across the political spectrum, spawned by the overriding evil of the apartheid system. In so doing, the TRC Report achieves some notable successes that go a long way towards fulfilling some parts of the Commission's mandate - but to the exclusion of others.

The Mandate:

As many - including the authors of the report - have stressed, the TRC's exercise in retrieving South Africa's recent past was shaped in absolutely fundamental ways by the mandate of its enabling legislation and the political moment within which it was conceived and enacted[5]. The mandate was multi-faceted. The Commission was to be an excavation of truth about gross human rights violations, both in respect of individual cases presented to the Commission and more generally, by way of establishing 'systematic' local and national patterns of gross human rights violations. The truth-finding process was to be both descriptive (what happened) and

[5] See eg. *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch. 1, paras 7 & 15.

explanatory (why it happened), the latter understood to devolve upon establishing the 'antecedents' and 'causes' for gross human rights violations as well as the 'motives and perspectives' of victims and perpetrators. Understanding why gross human rights violations had taken place was seen as crucial to the future of democracy in the country: 'it is only by accounting for the past that we can become accountable for the future'[6].

That this was intended as a serious and ambitious pursuit was signalled by the considerable powers and resources placed at the disposal of the TRC. Its powers of subpoena, search and seizure were formidable, 'much stronger than those of other truth commissions'[7]. In theory, the Commission had unlimited access to archival materials otherwise wholly unavailable to scholars of the past. The Commission also had a budget and staff significantly larger than previous state commissions in this country, and well in excess of other truth commissions elsewhere in the world[8]. This included a sizeable research department.

The TRC 's mandate was simultaneously deeply moral: access to truth was to lay the foundation for a more humane, just social order, passing resolute moral judgement on the past but in ways which reconciled a previously divided society to a common future rooted in a 'respect for human rights'[9]. The 'reconciliation' dimension was itself variegated, inspired by a cluster of meanings of the idea[10]. The TRC was to initiate processes of individual, interpersonal and collective 'healing', through the catharsis of finally expunging the truth about gross human rights violations previously hidden. Here, reconciliation was to be an affirmation of 'ubuntu', a 'recognition of the humanity of the other'. The idea of reconciliation was also explicitly tied to the project of nation-building, 'imagining' a new form of national community based on a 'collective memory',

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[6] *TRC Report*, vol. 1, ch. 1 para 28.

[7] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 4 para 26.

[8] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 4 para 30

[9] *TRC Report*, Vol. 1 ch 1 para 28.

[10] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 5 paras 10 - 28.

a 'shared' history. Exposure to truth was to lay the basis for a national consensus about the past and how to overcome its legacy in the future - 'some essential lessons for the future of the people of this country'[11]. Lastly, reconciliation was also understood as an act of compromise, borne of the country's negotiated transition. As itself the product of a political compromise, the TRC was seen as a crucial vehicle in attempts to stabilise and reproduce the politics of transitional justice.

Finally, all of this was to be undertaken 'as expeditiously as possible'[12], within a period of two years.

Ensuing Tensions for the Encounter with the Past

The TRC's mandate was not simply vast; it straddled at least three internal tensions, borne of the conflicting pressures which moulded the Commission's efforts to write the past[13].

1. Achieving 'Objectivity' while acknowledging contending subjectivities:

The legitimacy and credibility of the TRC as an official, authoritative account of the recent past rests profoundly on a demonstrable objectivity and impartiality. With rival political parties angling to accuse the TRC enterprise of bias and partiality, Commissioners had to elevate the TRC above the political realm into a domain uncontaminated by such differences and disputes[14]. The quasi-judicial character of the TRC as an official state commission was crucial, offering a range of signifiers for a sober, thoughtful and impartial set of proceedings. The TRC's report was presented in similar vein, as 'a comprehensive report...based on factual and objective evidence collected or received by [the Commission] or placed at its disposal'[15]. At the same time however,

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[11] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 1 para 19.

[12] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 4 para 82.

[13] Eg *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch. 6 para 27; vol. 1 ch 5 paras 3 & 4.

[14] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch. 1 paras 34 & 60.

[15] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 6 para 1 (e)

the TRC began from the recognition of a deeply conflictual past which produced competing perspectives, judgements and versions of what had happened and why - particularly in respect of the highly charged issue of violence and violation. As the report put it, 'the telling of the truth about past gross human rights violations, as viewed from different perspectives, facilitates the process of understanding our divided past'[16].

The TRC then, had to contain the tensions between two different notions of historical knowledge. On one hand, the past was the site of contending constructions and perspectives, each 'truthful' to those who proposed it. On the other hand, the past was a procession of 'facts', visible from the elevated and perspicacious vantage point of the Commission. By 'collecting' and 'receiving' this data, the authors of the TRC Report were to write the past in a way which transcended conflicting perspectives; the official truth had to be one to which all South Africans would consent, as an authoritative, impartial account.

The 'healing' function of the TRC brought this tension to the fore in yet another way. If the TRC was to produce the 'official' authorised verdict on the past, it also had to legitimate the voices and perspectives of victims whose stories had not previously been told, allowing that their intense pain and suffering automatically gave a certain authenticity to their version of events. This was their 'truth', and the Commission had to acknowledge it. Even more than this, the TRC pledged to allocate a special place to these testimonies in the overall structure of its proceedings. Central to the 'healing' mission of the Commission was a commitment to a 'victim-centred' process, which would allow the victims of gross human rights violations to tell their own stories, thereby restoring their dignity and humanity.

2. Competing versions of 'completeness':

At the outset, the TRC issued an open invitation to all South Africans to tell their stories of gross human rights violations, in the knowledge that in the three and a bit decades spanned by the

[16] *TRC Report*, vol.1 ch 4 para 3.

commission, there were many thousands of previously untold stories to tell[17]. The enabling legislation required that the Commission accept statements from all South Africans who wished to make them, and committed the TRC to documenting these narratives in a 'report providing as comprehensive an account as possible of the activities and findings of the Commission...'[18]. In many communities, expectations of this prospect ran high: people saw the TRC as an opportunity to piece together a comprehensive and detailed account of turbulent and divisive episodes in their histories, to clarify exactly who had been responsible for past traumas, how and why these had been inflicted, and to dispel any lingering doubts about who had or had not been an informer[19] - for many communities a particularly divisive and sensitive issue. These are expectations which square with, and indeed validate, the Commission's commitment to the catharsis of truth-telling, as the basis of reconciliation at an interpersonal and community level.

Yet, the TRC's thinking was simultaneously subject to a different logic about how much of the past it was necessary to expose. If the idea of individual, interpersonal and communal catharsis validated the impulse towards completeness, the version of reconciliation as a nationalrupture with a divisive past pulled in a different direction. This nation-building exercise - creating a 'shared' national history - did not require a comprehensive, detailed narration of individual and community histories. The goal was rather to produce enough truth to demonstrate and exemplify the inequities of the past. A sample of the truth rather than the whole would suffice to establish the desired consensus. From this perspective, the global truth about the past was, in a fundamental sense, 'already known'. As Commissioner Mary Burton put it,

> a commission of truth...must gather in stories to reach that truth which is, in a way, already widely known and accepted. But we need to make it legitimate through that process. We need to tell and record and validate that truth. We need to acknowledge the wrongs, not

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[17] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 4 para 133.

[18] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 4 para 31 (d).

[19] H. van der Merwe, 'Community Reconciliation in South Africa: Lessons from the TRC's Intervention in Two Communities', CSVR seminar paper, March 1999.

only in terms of justice and hurt but also the terrible loss[20].

Here, the historical exercise was primarily to narrate a moral truth about wrongdoing, conflict and injustice, and it was one which could be represented effectively by a relatively small number of carefully selected individual cases which exemplified collective 'truths'. Indeed, the danger to be avoided was exactly that of 'overly individualis[ing] the horrors of apartheid and provid[ing] merely a piecemeal picture of the past, at the expense of necessary attention to its systemic and collective evils'[21].

The politics of the TRC created additional reasons for a deliberately attenuated, rather than a 'complete' version of the past. The Commission acknowledged from the start that it was poised on a knife-edge, mandated to expose truths in the interests of 'reconciliation' but in the knowledge that the exposure could provoke pain, anger and further violence just as readily as impulses to forgive and 'reconcile'. The new state was itself walking a political tightrope in respect of the conflict between the ANC and IFP, which created a further difficulty for the TRC. Writing a chapter about a violent past which continued to engulf the present could have worsened the conflict still further. From the start, the IFP had registered its contempt for the TRC process and refused to participate, in the midst of renewed eruptions of violent conflict in KwaZulu Natal. The TRC had to assert its moral authority through its powers of truth-telling, yet not overexpose the past in ways that might have exacerbated the problems of the present.

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[20] M. Burton in A. Boraine and J. Levy (eds), *Healing the Nation?*, (Cape Town, 1995), pp. 122 - 3.

[21] K.Asmal, L. Asmal & R. Roberts, *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (Cape Town, 1996) p. 19. R. Wilson makes a similar point: 'the symbolic impact of truth commissions lies in how they codify the history of a period. Popular memory of an authoritarian past is often fluid, unfixed and fragmentary and it is impossible to investigate all the cases brought to a commission, so truth commissions fix upon particular cases and events in order to create 'the global truth' of an abusive period' (R. Wilson,'The Sizwe Will Not Go Away: The TRC, Human Rights and Nation-Building', *African Studies 55/2, 1996, p.17.*).

The tension between writing the history of gross human rights violations as a series of essential exemplars, rather than as a comprehensive record, in turn implied competing versions of the very purpose of history and its relevance to the future. From the perspective of nation-building, the TRC has the status of an event, rather than on ongoing process of disclosure over many years. As Asmal et al put it, 'the TRC's best chance to change the nation's paradigm of itself [is] through a short, sharp hammer blow of a new beginning...The TRC...must not become ensnared in the banalities of subpoena and cross-examination, nor in the narrow business of determining individual guilt or innocence. We already have the courts to do that. Nor must the TRC convert itself or some form of itself, into a permanent bureaucracy....[this] would let boredom in upon magic'. By contrast, the commitment to producing an increasingly comprehensive record of the past implies an acceptance that the TRC is a beginning rather than the end of an encounter with history, one which has no necessary deadline or schedule.

3. Ambiguities in the object of historical inquiry:

The tension between writing 'as complete' an account of the past 'as possible' and merely distilling some 'essential' exemplars was magnified by the ambiguities in the TRC's object of historical inquiry. The TRC's truth-telling mandate was part descriptive (what had happened, when, who had done it), part explanatory (why, in respect of structural, institutional causes as well as motives and perspectives of relevant historical actors). In respect of the first part, the TRC 's object of inquiry was strictly limited to gross human rights violations, rather than human rights violation in their entirety. And a precise definition of gross human rights violations was provided, in ways which excluded many of the routines of apartheid degradation and humiliation from the TRC's ambit (a feature of the TRC which has attracted intense criticism from various commentators, notably Mahmood Mamdani). From this vantage point, the apartheid system itself was not the subject of the TRC's investigations; rather, it was the 'background'[22], the 'political landscape' on which the picture of gross human rights violations was to be painted. On the other hand, the TRC was also expected to account for why gross human rights violations had been

[22] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 4 para 51.

perpetrated, placing individual actions in their broader structural and institutional context. This *did* require an engagement with the apartheid system, not merely as the 'backdrop' but as the source of gross human rights violations. The nature of apartheid was simultaneously merely the background to the commission's investigations, yet absolutely central to its findings.

How did the TRC manage these tensions?

The nub of each of these tensions was epistemological and methodological, in some respects not unlike the routine challenges confronting practising historians: how to reconcile conflicting versions of the past; how to paint a national picture which takes sufficient account of regional/local specifities; how to adjudicate between different types and genres of historical evidence (particularly the tensions between oral and written modes of recording the past). But they confronted the TRC in a particular form: how to construct knowledge about the past in a form which satisfied a range of competing criteria of adequacy and validity borne of the different facets of its mandate?

One of the striking and unusual features of the TRC report is the extent to which its authors reflect explicitly on their (perceived) epistemological and methodological options. There can't be many official state commissions which ponder the question of the possibility of objective knowledge[23], explore the meaning of 'truth'[24], invoke historical sociologist Max Weber as a methodological role-model[25], and render their research process as a 'dialectical encounter' with disparate sets of data[26]. Yet, for all this, the overriding epistemological and methodological underpinnings of the report are conventional fare for the genre of the official state commission.

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[23] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 6 para 10.

[24] TRC Report, vol. 1 ch 5, paras 29 - 45.

[25] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch. 6 paras 13 - 15.

[26] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 11, para 9.

A Rainbow of Truths

The Commission was mandated to acknowledge the contestedness of history and yet deliver the authoritative, official verdict on the recent past. Unusually for a state commission, the TRC report names the problem of truth up-front in the first volume:

> But what about truth - and whose truth? The complexity of this concept...emerged in the debates that took place before and during the life of the Commission[27].

The solution presented in the report is to differentiate between 'four notions of truth: factual or forensic truth, personal or narrative truth, social or 'dialogue' truth, and healing or restorative truth'. As spelt out in the report, 'factual or forensic truth' refers to 'the familiar legal or scientific notion of bringing to light factual, corroborated, evidence, of obtaining accurate information through reliable (impartial, objective) procedures'[28]. This sort of truth, argues the report, pertains to both 'findings on an individual level' as well as the more general findings on the 'contexts, causes and patterns of violations'. This, we are told, is the 'social scientist's approach, [of] analys[ing], interpret[ing] and draw[ing] inferences from the information...received'[29]. According to the report, this is the notion of truth directly implicated in the TRC's mandate to produce a 'comprehensive report...based on factual and objective information'[30]. Yet, for the sorts of reasons identified earlier, there were other aspects of the Commission's mandate which required an acknowledgement that the stuff of history is subjectively and intersubjectively constructed. To take account of this, three additional types of truth are then suggested. First, the process of personal story-telling is deemed to generate its own type of truth: 'personal and narrative truth'. The concept is not explicitly defined, but invokes such ideas as 'the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless';

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[27] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 5 para 29.

[28] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 5 para 30.

[29] TRC Report, vol 1 ch 5 paras 32 and 33.

[30] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 5 para 31.

'capturing the widest possible record of peoples' perceptions, stories, myths and experiences', and 'recovering parts of the national memory that had been hitherto been officially ignored'[31]. Another type of truth posited is 'social truth', defined by Judge Albie Sachs as 'the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate', which the report here deems the type of truth which embodies 'the closest connection between the Commission's process and its goal'. Social truth is to be found in 'trying to transcend the divisions of the past by listening carefully to the complex motives and perspectives of all those involved'. Establishing this type of truth, it was stressed, 'could not be divorced from the affirmation of the dignity of human being. Thus, not only the actual outcome or findings of an investigation counted. The process whereby the truth was reached was itself important because it was through this process that the essential norms of social relations between people were reflected'[32]. Each of these three types of truth is in turn distinguished from a fourth, originating in a rejection of 'the popular assumption that there are only two options to be considered when talking about truth - namely factual, objective information or subjective opinions. There is also 'healing' truth, the kind of truth that places facts and what they mean within the context of human relationships - both amongst citizens and between the state and its citizens. This kind of truth was central to the Commission'. 'Healing' truth is necessary because 'it was not enough simply to determine what had happened. Truth as factual, objective information cannot be divorced from the way in which this information is acquired; nor can such information be separated from the purposes it is required to serve'[33].

This is a very wobbly, poorly constructed conceptual grid. The grounds for differentiating the four types of truth are poorly specified and remain rather opaque. For example, the marker of 'healing truth'(putting truth in the context of human relationships) seems largely to reiterate the criterion for social truth (reflecting the essential norms of social relations). And the notion of 'healing

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[31] TRC Report, vol. 1 ch 5 paras 36 & 37.

[32] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 5, paras 40 - 42.

[33] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 5 paras 43 & 44.

truth' is defined in a way which undermines the very possibility of factual/ forensic truth, rather than as constituting an additional 'type' of truth alongside factual truth. If 'truth as factual, objective information cannot be divorced from the way in which this information is acquired...[or] the purposes it is required to serve', then the earlier definition of factual/ forensic truth does not make sense. More generally. There is an elision between differentiating types and sites of evidence with the case for qualitatively different types of truth[34]. Moreover, definitional problems aside, the typology of truths *restates* the original challenge, of how to manage the tensions between competing versions and perspectives on the past. If the 'forensic' version of events is at odds with the 'social' truth in any particular community, on what basis is the conflict to be adjudicated?

The report's foray into epistemology stops short of considering these questions of how one type of truth relates to, or impacts upon, another. This is no surprise, because the tacit logic of the exercise is to separate the four 'types' of truth into apparently distinct, unrelated sorts of undertakings. For, herein lies an apparently neat resolution to the dilemma of truth-telling confronting the TRC. Different facets of the Commission's mandate seem each to be taken care of by means of a distinct type and standard of truth, each of which services a particular type of 'reconciliation'. Giving individual victims a voice in the hearings illustrates the TRC's commitment to personal truth; getting victims and perpetrators to speak to each other and hear each others' perspectives is an instance of social truth; creating a forum for national reconciliation enacts healing truth; and the report becomes an exercise in factual or forensic truth. Seemingly then each type of truth would have its place in a proceedings which thereby manages to reconcile subjective, intersubjective, contextual and objective truths as though they were unrelated, separate sorts of pursuits.

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[34] Reconstructing the typology in these terms would read as follows: the evidence for personal truth is the intensity of personal beliefs and feelings; the evidence for social truth is the emergence of a consensus which may or may nor have to do with 'facts' about the case; the evidence for 'healing' truth is its effects in promoting reconciliation; whereas the evidence for factual or forensic truth would be the objective 'facts' of the case. Thanks to Mark Leon for his insights on this point.

On this basis, the report then proceeds to take a conventionally positivist stance on the source of its own authority as the official, objective version of the past. Presenting four distinct types of truth allows the Commission's written report to preserve its status as the official, impartial, disengaged verdict on the past: Factual or forensic truth is distinguished as that type of truth which is *not* embedded in social relations or social norms, and which is *not* established through dialogue and interaction. So the judgements on the past written in the report are delivered as the deliberations of 'the onlooker, the outsider, the observer, the recorder, the evaluator, the scientist'[35]. If the impact of varying and competing subjectivities is felt in oral testimony (the realm of the hearings), the written text gives expression to an objectivity which is seemingly divested of subjective intrusions or contaminations. Findings on gross human rights violations are presented in quasi-judicial form, as impartial verdicts on the past. The apartheid 'context' within gross human rights violations took place is written in a 'factual' mode, effacing any sense of historiographical debate or contestation (more on this later). So seemingly the contestedness of South Africa's recent past detracts little from the authority of the official commission.

There are a few moments in the report which reveal flashes of a more sophisticated position on truth. A brief footnote buried in a methodological appendix suggests that at least one of the authors of the report saw objectivity as 'knowledge that is inter-subjectively reliable, knowledge on which the involved actors can agree is held in common between them'[36] - in other words, that truth is a judgement taken by particular communities of truth-tellers (the TRC being one) according to shared norms and standards of evidence. And at another point, the reader is alerted to the Commission's heterogenous and contested engagement with the past:

> While its overall aim is to be even-handed and as objective as possible, to view the Commission as homogenous, as all of one piece, is a rather oversimplified approach. The Commission is made up of many people with different perspectives...This is not to decry

[35] *TRC Report*, vol. 5 ch 7 para 51.

[36] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch. 6, footnote 14 on page 161.

> the efforts of the Commission to be objective. It is an honest admission that the perspective of the Commission and its members is a complex one[37].

This version of the report treats it as a more contested, contextual and interpretative exercise than simply the detached findings of 'the onlooker, the outsider, the observer'. It begins to blur the earlier typology of distinct, unrelated truths, which treats subjectivity and objectivity as unrelated modes of knowing. But this position is marginal in the report as a whole, which resolutely reproduces the discourse of factual, forensic truth as its vantage point on the past.

Trying to Make A Little Go A Long Way:

One of the other epistemological and methodological dilemmas deriving from the TRC's mandate was how to capture the vast and complex phenomenon of gross human rights violations for the period 1960 - 1993, accounting for what happened and why, but without succumbing to the sort of detail which was morally unnecessary, politically inexpedient and unduly time-consuming[38].

Processes of selection, summary, truncation and exclusion were fundamental to the workings of the TCR. Overwhelmed by the enormity of its mandate, the TRC sought to transform it into a more manageable undertaking. These methodological judgements in turn had a profound effect in shaping its discourse on the past.

The TRC's starting point on this front was to treat local cases as instances of national patterns. Overwhelmed by the 21 298 statements taken in respect of nearly 38 000 gross human rights violations, the TRC hearings showcased a sample, crafted on the basis of a careful political balancing act, reflecting the diversity of the victims (representing different ages, races and genders), a regional and historical spread of cases, and a commitment to even-handedness (reflecting gross human rights violations across the political spectrum, from the rightwing through

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[37] *TRC Report.* vol. 5 ch 7, para 52.

[38] Although the lifespan of the Commission was extended by a few months, there was little sympathy for the idea of a more substantial extension beyond the two years within which it was originally expected to complete its work.

to the left)[39]. The TRC report then distilled, selected and summarised even further: 'it was not possible to include every case brought to the Commission; rather the stories that illustrate particular events, trends and phenomena have been used as windows on the experiences of many people'. The idea of opening exemplary 'windows'' on the past also governed the selection of ten 'event hearings' 'aimed to provide detailed insights into particular incidents that were representative of broader patterns of abuse'[40].

The strategy of creating 'window cases' is recast in the TRC Report under the rubric of Weberian social science. This Weberian flirtation begins by endorsing the view that to understand gross human rights violations requires inserting them into a context formed by 'webs of social networks and contingent cultural meanings'. This position, in line with the Weberian idea of *verstehen*, overcomes the limitations of 'decontextualised human rights reporting' and purely quantitative analysis of trends in the commission of gross human rights violations.[41]

In response, the report calls for 'methodological pluralism', identifying a seeming coincidence between Max Weber's notion of sociological method and the mandate of the Commission:

> Like the Commission, Weber recommends that analysts identify general factors in the universe of examples by applying ideal types - 'controlled and unambiguous conceptions'- which illuminate particular phenomena of study. However, the general factors must be understood in terms of the particularities of the individual cases. This definition of a set of 'ideal types' is then applied to a universe of narrative (or semi-structured) statements taken in interviews with deponents...At the Commission, the data processing teams implemented these 'ideal types' using a controlled vocabulary and a coding frame. The teams coded deponents' statements in standard forms before capturing the information on the data

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[39] *TRC Report* vol 1 ch 6 para 33.

[40] *TRC Report* vol 1 ch 6 para 37.

[41] *TRC Report*. Vol 1 ch 6, Appendix, paras 10 & 11.

base.'[42]

Supposedly following Weber, the report then calls for a two-pronged process of researching gross human rights violations in the past: a method of 'ethnography' is needed to produce an understanding of the 'relevant social networks and contingent cultural meanings' in terms of which to make sense of individual cases; a process of typification then allows for a quantitative analysis of general trends and patterns. And here, seemingly, is a neat and efficient match between a respectably scientific methodological pluralism and dual facets of the TRC's mandate: analysing the 'context, motives and perspectives' leading to gross human rights violations requires 'historical or ethnographic reflection', while exposing 'systematic patterns' in gross human rights violations 'implies a quantitative treatment'.[43]

Invoking Max Weber might lend an air of methodological rigour and authority to the proceedings, but the parallels are ultimately spurious, in ways which reveal much about the limits of the TRC's research process and its powers of historical explanation. What Weber had in mind was to *link* ethnographic interpretations of the subjective meanings of social actions, with a causal analysis of the measurable patterns in social behaviour across groups or societies at large. This, for Weber, would enable an explanation of why particular patterns of subjective meanings ('perspectives', in the language of the TRC) emerged at particular times and with particular effects. As a scientist, his goal was to understand the broader impersonal, structural constraints on how people thought and acted. human volition and intentionality. His notion of ideal types was therefore intended to make fuller sense of individual cases by linking them to more general causative patterns. The TRC however, proceeds along a rather different path. A great deal of time and effort seems to have gone into developing methods of data capture and coding which would facilitate the production of quantified trends in gross human rights violations. Individual cases of gross human rights violations

[42] *TRC Report, vol* 1 ch 6, Appendix, para 13.

[43] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 6 Appendix, para 15.

were coded according to their 'type' and patterns in their occurrence then quantified[44]. This exercise in quantification then produces a series of national and regional surveys of gross human rights violations, periodised according to the types and prevalence of these violations and disaggregated by age, race and gender. But the quantification then bears little or no relationship to the narration of individual cases, other than in providing the basis for a (descriptive) periodisation. In the report, the quantitative data is presented as a preface to the national and regional 'profiles' of gross human rights violations, which narrate what happened and produce the TRC's judgements about who was responsible for them. But there is no explanatory link between the two kinds of exercises. The impulse of Weberian methodology, of understanding *why* individual acts they way they do by inserting their actions into a broader causal context, is stillborn.

Oddly, the report deals with the issue of 'motives and causes' in a separate chapter, also unrelated to the narration of gross human rights violations and the allocation of responsibility for them. This chapter contains a general discussion setting out different possible ways of explaining motives, ranging from 'the primacy of the political motive', through the idea of 'individualistic psychological explanations' (spanning 'human nature', 'psychological abnormalities', 'authoritarianism') to the idea of 'social identities' (including de-individuation, masculinity), ending up with a reminder that 'ideology is a form of power in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain and reproduce relations of domination'. Well, so what? In general terms the chapter considers all of these factors are considered relevant; in concrete terms little if any of this is demonstrated, because this chunk of introductory psychology and sociology remains disconnected from the rest of the report.

The report's pseudo-Weberian method is responsible, then, for the unwieldy structure of the five-volumes. Its text on the past reads as a rather disconnected compilation of discrete chunks of information: quantitative surveys of national and regional patterns of gross human rights violations; a general disembodied discussion of different approaches to understanding the motives and perspectives of the victims and perpetrators; 'background' sketches of the apartheid past, and

[44] As the report points out, this not a census of gross human rights violations. Nor is it based on a representative sample. It is a compilation of only those gross human rights violations reported to the TRC.

narratives of cases of gross human rights violations and the findings reached about them. What the report lacks is an attempt to integrate and synthesise these into a unified analysis[45]. Instead, severing 'motive' from 'cause', and de-linking both from the narration of individual cases, the report deprives itself of one of the essential tools of historical analysis.

As a consequence, the report reads as an often bland, largely descriptive account of what happened, when and how. One of the striking features of these narratives is that they convey almost nothing of 'social networks and contingent cultural meanings'. These are relegated to what the report calls the 'richness' of local histories which reside in the TRC's archives, beyond the realm of the report itself. Despite the notional commitment to an 'ethnographic' project, it seems to have been marginalised by the energy and effort which went into the quantitative research exercise - a point underscored by Commissioner Wynand Malan in his 'Minority Report' to the Commission[46].

The descriptive recounting of what, when and how things happened is subject to other strategies of inclusion and exclusion. In respect of the few cases selected for the report, highly edited, condensed accounts of events and their context have been given. They have been pieced together drawing on combinations of individual testimony and statements drawn from amnesty and gross human rights violations hearings, other victim statements, primary research undertaken within the Commission, and the occasional piece of secondary historical research. It's never clear why some aspects of the broader picture are deemed relevant and not others; nor why some scholars and not others are cited. But this begs the bigger question: how much information was considered 'enough' and according to

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[45] The report lacks an index, which makes it almost impossible for its readers to cross-reference and connect different parts of the five volumes.

[46] In his Minority Report, Commissioner Wynand Malan picks up on this point: ' a qualitative analysis of the data that has been collected, especially from victim statements and testimonies or through the amnesty process, would have made a very valuable contribution to a better understanding of our society and the underlying endemic risks of the conflicts of the past repeating themselves in different forms. Unfortunately we have not been able to undertake such an analysis. It is recommended that institutions of learning and research, the private sector and civil society promote research programmes aimed at qualitative analysis of the data.' (*TRC Report*, vol. 5, Minority Position Submitted by Commissioner Wynand Malan, paras 86 & 87.) The TRC Report, on the other hand, makes a recommendation calling for further quantitative analysis of its data (vol 5 ch 8 para 21).

what criteria of sufficiency?

The TRC Report has written the past history of gross human rights violations in a form which passes decisive moral judgements in respect of responsibility for gross human rights violations. The tacit criterion for deciding how much history is 'enough' was 'enough, in the eyes of various Commissioners and/or authors of the report, to pass moral judgement'. The report is written in such a way that findings allocating responsibility for gross human rights violations are the conclusions of narratives about what happened; there is no evidence for the findings over and above the narrative as it is presented. So the narrative produces the findings; but this also means that the narrative has been shaped by what has been deemed necessary evidence for those findings. Underlying the report's claims to the authority of its findings then, is a self-effacing circular process in terms of which the past is recorded only insofar as it is necessary to produce moral judgement; and the only basis for these judgements is the version of the past as it is written in the report.

How much then, is this? How much evidence is considered sufficient as the basis for producing findings about responsibility for gross human rights violations? When this issue is raised early on in the report, the issue of 'justification' is flagged as being crucial: 'the act must have been committed with the objective of countering or otherwise resisting the said struggle'[47] and should have been demonstrably the 'result of deliberate planning'[48]. The Commission also insists on tracking the chain of command: 'it must be said that those with the most power to abuse must carry the heaviest responsibility'[49]. Yet, as suggested earlier, establishing the motives, the 'justification', and degree of planning attached to *particular* acts of violence, is one the most conspicuous lacuna in the report. And the gap is biggest in respect of those most senior in the relevant structures of command. Admittedly, there were some large impediments in the way of the Commission's doing so. The search for relevant state archival documentation uncovered a systematic process of the

[47] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 4 para 123.

[48] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 4 para 124(c).

[49] *TRC Report* vol 1 ch 4 para 80

destruction of official records by the apartheid state, particularly during the 1990s. Also, the politics of compromise disabled a more robust, insistent effort to subpoena key decision-makers in either state or liberation movement hierarchies of authority. But the report's silences on questions of intentionality also reflect priorities and gaps in the research process itself, with the emphasis on the quantitative data coding exercise dwarfing the process of 'historical or ethnographic reflection'.

This does not inhibit the report from making wide-ranging moral indictments, across the political spectrum. The amount of information and degree of detail accompanying these findings varies enormously, some regions subject to a far fuller account than others and some findings are presented more cautiously and in more qualified ways than in others (eg. KwaZulu-Natal). In some cases, only named individuals in the police are held responsible for gross human rights violations. But in many other instances, the net of responsibility is thrown far more widely, with 'the state' or the relevant Minister/s held responsible for gross human rights violations committed by their underlings. Applying the Commission's own criteria for evidence, these findings often read rather baldly and at times as altogether flimsy, particularly in respect of earlier periods . For example, in the report on the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, the SAP in Vereeniging is held responsible for having deliberately opened fire on the fleeing crowds of anti-pass protestors, but so too is the 'state and Minister of Police' - although the preceding narrative makes no mention of any processes of 'deliberate planning' between the various perpetrators.[50] Reporting on the deaths in detention of Ahmed Timol, Suliman Salojee and others, the report finds the Minister of Justice 'directly responsible for the failure of magistrates to take account of evidence presented to them of the torture and assault of detainees by the police', but again with no mention of the organisational linkages between them[51]. With similar omissions, the 'former state' was held responsible for actions undertaken by the SADF's military intelligence in Ciskei, as a result of which fifteen people died[52].

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[50] *TRC Report*, vol 3 ch 6 para 42.

[51] *TRC Report*, vol. 3 ch 6 para 63.

[52] *TRC Report*, vol 3 ch 2 para 342

All in all, the unevenness with which findings are made and motivated is striking, particularly in relation to the supposed need to demonstrate the 'motivations' and 'deliberate planning' along a chain of command. While many readers of the report would be unsurprised by, and sympathetic to, a finding that the apartheid state should take responsibility for the actions of Military Intelligence (for example), from a forensic point of view, these sorts of findings in respect of 'the state' at large beg crucial questions about how much members of the Cabinet and other civilian structures/bureaucracies knew about the actions of the military, how far particular individuals and bureaucracies within the state acted independently and without authorisation from superiors, what sort of co-ordinated planning characterised the apartheid state.

If the Commission's findings in respect of 'the state' and many of its senior decision-makers read as summarised and incomplete, they point to the way in which much of the report should be read - as primarily a moral narrative about the fact of evil in South Africa's past, for which the prevalence and character of gross human rights violations is ultimately sufficient evidence. Given the constraints of the political compromise, the disinclination to antagonise or incriminate leading politicians, the emphasis on the 'healing' process, as well as the problems of archival access, the TRC chose to deal with the highest echelons of decision-making in the state largely by ignoring them, passing judgement on the system of apartheid itself, as a crime against humanity. The state is then responsible as the author of the system, but without the TRC having to demonstrate much about its institutional apparatus or *modus operandi*.

Grappling with Apartheid

As suggested earlier, the apartheid system was the 'background' to the Commission's inquiry (insofar as its mandate was limited to gross human rights violations not human rights violations and therefore the apartheid system in its entirety) and yet the crux of its investigation, as the source of these gross human rights violations. The TRC's powers of historical explanation rested heavily on its abilities to come to grips with apartheid. The previous section has exposed some of epistemological and methodological reasons why the TRC report is ultimately more of a descriptive than an explanatory exercise. This section examines how these epistemological and methodological

positions are manifest substantively, in the TRC's limited and rather unimpressive engagement with the nature of apartheid.

The report announces on a number of occasions the TRC's discomfort with the exclusion of human rights violations more generally from its scope (although the mind boggles at how the Commission would have been strained by an even more extensive mandate). Many Commissioners, as well as the authors of the report, emphasised repeatedly the need to understand apartheid itself as the systematic violation of human rights, contextualising gross human rights violations as one end of a continuum that should be understood as such, and which had its roots in the laws and institutions of the apartheid system. Spurred by this insistence on the need to factor the broader context into account in describing and explaining gross human rights violations, the TRC diversified its hearings in ways which promised to shed greater light on the social, ideological and institutional character of apartheid South Africa. In addition to the amnesty and human rights hearings, there were ten event hearings (as mentioned previously), institutional hearings into the business sector, media, medical profession, legal profession and 'faith community', special hearings into youth, women and military conscription, and political party hearings to allow for fuller interrogation of the actions and attitudes of their leaders and rank and file. The TRC's research committee also recognised the need to throw its research net wide enough to encompass large chunks of the apartheid system. In short, there were some promising signs that a serious exercise in historical analysis was on the cards.

But it was not to be. The TRC reports sheds remarkably little light on apartheid, and particularly little over and above what we already know. A narrative on apartheid is constructed in bits and pieces, through a combination of general 'background' accounts, as well as national and regional 'profiles' on gross human rights violations. But this narrative too, is primarily descriptive. It is also extremely brief, selective and at times historically inaccurate. To a reader familiar with South Africa's recent history, much of this text seems to have been written by persons with relatively little historical expertise. Swathes of existing research do not find their way into the report, even though writers occasionally make reference to one or other secondary text.

One of the more conspicuous gaps in the TRC's engagement with apartheid is in respect of the apartheid state. Curiously, the research department's list of fourteen 'strategic research themes' did not include one which dealt directly with the state, other than by way of research into the 'development of the security establishment', the judiciary and legal system. The state seems not to have been theorised, nor adequately conceptualised. As a result, the effort to understand the character and inner workings of the apartheid state was rather desultory. Hampered in their efforts to read the previously secret military and police records, researchers seem not to have probed elsewhere for evidence of the distribution of power, techniques of decision-making and methods of internal discipline deployed within the apartheid state.

In the light of the previous methodological discussion, these gaps in the report's rendition of apartheid can be read as symptoms of what emerged as the dominant logic of the report's global encounter with the past. Notwithstanding the TRC's mandate to account for why gross human rights violations occurred as they did, with reference to the motives, perspectives and 'deliberate planning' on the part of the perpetrators, the report offers little on this front. It emerges as primarily as a story of moral wrongdoing, for the purposes of which the complexities of motives, perspectives and planning on the part of state actors are far less important than their consequences - the commission of increasingly gross human rights violations.

The imprints of the report's notion of factual/forensic truth are also powerfully felt in its encounter with apartheid. Apartheid is written in the factual, forensic mode, as though a succession of 'facts' collated and assembled by the Commission. The report defines factual forensic truth as the business of the social scientist; but in fact it is only the most positivistic of social scientists who would recognise their practice in the Commission's writing. Any non-positivist would see the practice of producing truth as an interpretative exercise rooted in a series of theoretical assumptions about the object of inquiry and normative assumptions about the value and purpose of the inquiry. In the case of writing the history and character of apartheid, there is by now a large body of literature straddling a series of debates borne of conflicting theoretical and normative assumptions. With the

exception of the chapter recounting the Business hearings[53], none of this surfaces in the report, which otherwise lacks any explicit engagement with the *historiography* of apartheid, and therefore with the contestedness of its history.

This is ironic in view of the TRC's limited capacities to generate its own primary research on apartheid and its reliance on existing scholarship. The TRC's ideas of research, the relationship between primary and secondary research, the authority of particular scholars/versions of apartheid, remain something of a muddle in the report. One version of the research process speaks of a 'dialectical encounter' of primary and secondary research (but shedding light on what this might be). Another version allocates far more limited powers of discovery to the TRC's own research department, suggesting that selected secondary texts authorised much of the data assembled by the research department: 'by continually evaluating the Commission's primary data in the light of the material already written on the subject the Research Department was able to enhance the evidence presented to the Commission'. But the authors of the report are also at pains to emphasise that its appropriation of research was atheoretical - 'information only'[54], as though any explicit recognition of a theoretical position would have contaminated the 'forensic'objectivity of the report.

Inarticulately and inexplicitly, the report does take a position on apartheid, even if this is effaced as though an historical fact. If we look to the TRC report for an answer to the question of how and why apartheid emerged, how and why it took particular forms, how and why it survived for over four decades, all the report has to offer is 'racism'. Indeed, apartheid and racism are often treated as interchangeable.

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[53] This chapter sees the conflicting positions taken by business and labour as mirroring competing stances in the 'long-standing debate over the relationship between apartheid and capitalism' (vol 4 ch 2 para 8).

[54] An account of the workings of the research department acknowledges the contribution of 'specialist researchers', but insists that 'this work was received strictly as information only. The insights gained, views expressed and information submitted were all assessed in the first instance by the Research Department and ultimately by the Commission, which takes full responsibility for all information and findings included in the report' (vol. 1 ch 11, para 26.)

> We cannot hope properly to understand the history of the period under review unless we give apartheid and racism their rightful place as the defining features of that period.[55]

Racism, however, predated apartheid:

> Racism came to South Africa in 1652; it has been part of the warp and woof of South African society since then...1948 merely saw the beginning of a refinement and intensifying of repression, injustice and exploitation.[56]

But what then is 'racism'? Why did it 'come' to South Africa? Why was it 'refined and intensified' after 1948? The text is not consistent in its rendition of racism in South Africa, and therefore in its tacit historiography of apartheid, lurching between the view that racism in South Africa was quintessentially colonial (reproducing Mamdani's view that 'there was nothing particularly new or unique' to South Africa's version of colonial governance[57]) and the idea that apartheid - and therefore its particular incarnation of racism - was 'qualitatively different'[58]. Either way, the TRC Report tends to treat racism as an answer not a question. We read about how racism is reproduced, through processes of socialisation in the family, schooling and the media; we are presented with familiar litanies of racist legislation which institutionalise racial discrimination and oppression in various forms. But once again it is the 'what' and 'how' which feature uppermost; why racism has shaped the South African social order is another one of the bigger silences in the TRC's encounter with the past. It is as if racism simply is; it is 'part of the warp and woof of South African society', the motor of its history. Overall, there is little sense of the interconnectedness of racism and other divides in the society.

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[55] *TRC Report* vol 1 ch 1 para 63

[56] *TRC Report*, vol 1 ch 1 para 65.

[57] *TRC Report* vol 1 ch 2 para 62.

[58] *TRC Report*, vol. 1 ch 1 para 23.

This inability to grapple with the complexities of social causation is compounded by the TRC's having to tie its account of apartheid to the story of gross human rights violations. Having to focus a narration of the past around the clash between 'victims' and 'perpetrators' provides very blunt tools for the craft of history-writing, ill-equipped for more nuanced understandings of political violence, ideological positioning, the politics of complicity and collaboration, all of which would have moulded a deeper, fuller sense of the nature and dynamics of racism in South Africa.

Once again there are the odd glimpses in the report of other avenues into the past. The report on the Business hearings acknowledges something of the effects of class in the shaping of a racist social order. The report on the 'special hearings on Women' recognises gender as a power relation; and a brief discussion of masculinity as a factor in South Africa's repetoire of violence signals that there is more to the country's history of violation than simply racism. But these discussions are themselves under-developed, and read as 'add-ons' in the report as a whole.

Taking Stock:

The TRC remains, in several respects, a remarkable achievement. One of its important successes has been in closing many individual 'dossiers' on the past, revealing what happened to sons, fathers, brothers, sisters, mothers and daughters who had 'disappeared', tracing their killers, identifying the circumstances which led up to these ghastly deeds; also, vindicating individual allegations about torture perpetrated within liberation movements previously denied. And in many instances, these disclosures have been accompanied by the sort of catharsis and individual or interpersonal reconciliation that the TRC strove to achieve. There were others for whom this process was less rewarding, people whose stories have not been fully heard, who feel frustrated by the haste which accompanied the TRC's hearings and the inattention to the complexity of local histories of political conflict and violence[59]. Clearly the task of unravelling these individual and local truths remains

[59] Hugo van der Merwe discusses these frustrations in respect of two communities in the Transvaal, Duduza and Katorus. See H. van der Merwe, 'Community Reconciliation in South Africa: Lessons from the TRC's Interventions in Two Communities'.

unfinished. But if the effect of the TRC has been to animate popular interest in unravelling the past, this is a success, despite the limits of its own rendition of it.

The TRC's overarching focus, however, was more global, on the nation at large. In this respect, one of its greatest achievements has been its role as an historical 'lie detector', which has created the possibility of a moral 'consensus that atrocious things were done on all sides'. Enough detail about the fact and prevalence of gross human rights violations has been exposed to debunk any lingering attempts either to sanitise apartheid or romanticise the struggle against it. As Tutu puts it in the Foreword to the report,

> we know that the state used its considerable resources to wage a war against some of its citizens. We know that torture and deception and murder and death squads came to be the order of the day. We know that the liberation movements were not paragons of virtue and were often responsible for egging people on to behave in ways that were uncontrollable.[60]

In Michael Ignatieff's view, this should be enough: 'all that a truth commission can achieve is to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse'[61]. Yet, the TRC was a more ambitious undertaking, its mandate creating higher expectations of its powers of historical analysis. Emphasising the need to learn from past mistakes, the Commissioners echoed the views of those who drafted the enabling legislation: it was considered crucial to expose why gross human rights violations had been committed, embedding the descriptive account in an analysis of the broader structural causes, the planned exercise of abusive power, as well as the intentions and perspectives of perpetrators. This required that the TRC grapple with what social scientists call the 'problem of agency', one which is also germane to most modes of sociological and historical analysis. As Philip Abrams puts it,

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[60] *TRC Report* vol 1 ch 1 para 70.

[61] M. Ignatieff, untitled, in *Index on Censorship*, 5/96. http://www.oneworld.org/index_oc/issue596/ignatieff.html

> the problem of agency is the problem of finding a way of accounting for human experience which recognises simultaneously and in equal measure that history and society are made by constant and more or less purposeful individual action *and* that individual action, however purposeful, is made by history and society..People make their own history - but only under definite circumstances and conditions: we act through a world of rules which our action creates, breaks and renews - we are creatures of rules, the rules are our creations: we make our own world - the world confronts us as an implacable and autonomous system of social facts'[62].

The paper has argued that it is exactly the 'problem of agency' on which the TRC stumbles. Previous sections have shown that the problem asserted itself on three fronts: epistemologically, in respect of the contestedness of truth; methodologically, in respect of the search for the appropriate 'methodological pluralism' and substantively, in the need to anchor the actions of individual victims and perpetrators of gross human rights violations in the apartheid system. The TRC made epistemological and methodological choices which disabled the link between subject and object, agent and structure; and these choices in turn produced a version of the recent past which is largely descriptive.

The limits of the 'history' written by the TRC in turn inhibit its 'cathartic' and 'healing' qualities. With its powers of explanation stunted, the TRC cannot produce a consensus about *why* the terrible deeds of the past were committed. The increasingly familiar refrain within white South African communities, that apartheid was merely a 'mistake' for which no-one was responsible, that somehow the system propelled itself impersonally, may be one of the more ironic, unintended consequences of the TRC's rendition of the past.

To the extent that the report does venture into attempts at historical explanation, its consequences may once again be deeply ironic. The report's only answer to the question of why the country was

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[62] P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (New York, 1982), pp. xiii - xiv.

subjected to such a violent and abusive past is itself in need of explanation - the prevalence and intensity of racism. But in the absence of an explanation for racism itself, the report fails to suggest any plausible grounds for transcending the racism of the past. If racism was part of the warp and woof of South African society, how can it be undone? Its embeddedness in the social fabric is also a measure of its tenacity. If we don't understand the conditions under which racism was produced, reproduced and intensified in South Africa, taking account of its interconnectedness with other modes of power and inequality such as gender and class, how can we transcend it?

Whatever the limits of its report, the TRC has created significant opportunities for an engagement with the past which are not yet fully realised. Its large archive promises to be an important resource to academic and popular historians, provided they remain open and accessible. It seems that the TRC process has stimulated an interest in, and enthusiasm for truth-telling, in communities intent on unravelling the complexities of their past. And there is much more to be said and debated about the machinations of leadership in the apartheid state, homeland governments as well as in the liberation movements who opposed it.

In the final analysis, it is a strength not a weakness of the TRC that it has initiated a process of truth-telling without seeing it through to completion. If 'the past is an argument'[63], then it should not be limited to a single distillation under one official rubric. The responsibility falls to a range of different research communities and intellectuals to diversify the terms of debate and prevent its premature conclusion. The stakes are high: as Ignatieff puts it, 'national identity [should be] a site of conflict and argument, not a silent shrine for collective worship'[64].

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[63] M. Ignatieff, in *Index on Censorship*, 5/96.

[64] M. Ignatieff, *ibid.*