

IN DEPTH

The Many Faces of Truth

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The term 'Truth Commission' usually describes time-limited, official (state) 'committees of notables', appointed to investigate some period of recent violence or atrocity and report on it for public edification. The end product has an indeterminate but powerful status, as some approximation to an official history. Neither journalism nor mere storytelling; not evidence nor verdict, the Truth Commission report seems to say that these things happened – these particular, terrible, dreadful things did, demonstrably happen – at this time, and on this place, and on this day; and this is how, and this may be why. Michael Ignatieff famously claimed that this kind of truth-telling 'narrows the space of acceptable lies'. To refute propaganda, to outlaw denial or the rewriting of history, to expose and overturn the lies and silence of perpetrators, their organisations, and their regimes... surely these are noble aims? And yet the very idea of truth, let alone, of a single, state-sanctioned truth, may be in trouble if we really do now live in a 'post-truth' age.

The first Truth Commission of modern times convened in Argentina in 1985, in the aftermath of a military dictatorship that killed and disappeared upwards of 10,000 people. In the three decades since, dozens more commissions, held in other parts of Latin America and around the world, have added to the tragic compendia of human loss. Their reports run to hundreds or thousands of pages: compelling accounts of inhumanity, resistance and courage. They are often compiled by a mix of searing first hand testimony, and the patient collecting and piecing together of documents, records, and fragmentary accounts. More recently, they have made praiseworthy efforts to be sensitive to hidden harm, to the experiences of collective, not only individual, subjects,

to gender violence, and to the whole gamut of insidious, relentless damage that human beings inflict upon one another.

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Whether they document, historicize, explain, or just describe, the weighty tomes of commission reports add an air of gravitas and seriousness to state assurances that everything will be known, discovered, taken seriously, laid bare. But how does this help us? Can it save us? At what cost? Can it, strictly speaking, even be done? Many of Latin America's Truth Commission reports chose their opening words from the Christian gospel of St. John: “the truth will set you free”. And yet the experience, and the aftermath, of these same commissions suggests that truth can be an elusive, never-ending, and maybe even an impossible, challenge.

Why is this so? For one thing, the very act of mediating, weighing, and testing the truth of what is told to the commission –essential for giving solidity to its findings– can do violence to the notion of welcoming, embracing, and acknowledging what victims, relatives and survivors want to say. Witnesses may be wrong, they may misremember, they may also –unpopular as it is to say so– distort, select or appropriate the truth. It's easier, of course, to imagine that perpetrators will do those things. Of course, we might reason, those who held the gun, gave the orders, and dug the graves, will have an interest in self-justification, self-exculpation or outright falsification. Why would they want the truth to come out, much less take part in its telling? But if they are not present, as often they are not, surely the story is incomplete. If they are, new violence may be done to the memory of their victims, if they want to celebrate or justify what was done. And what of those communities or societies, such as Northern Ireland or many more, where violence travelled side to side, not just up and down the social scale? Where old scores were settled; neighbour fought neighbour; yesterday's victim became tomorrow's perpetrator, and the bomber died alongside his or her targets? These are the

messy, untamed truths that surround conflict, and the revealing of some of them genuinely can be as poisonous to peace as can silence or denial. Do we want truth at any price? All of the truth, all of the time?

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If so, do we know with clarity what truth consists of, and how to go about getting it? Guatemala's official, UN-sponsored Truth Commission found in 1999 that the army's counter-insurgency scorched earth violence had amounted to genocide against the Mayan indigenous people. In the same year, Rigoberta Menchú, the Nobel peace prize-winning indigenous leader whose autobiography famously first brought the slaughter to the attention of the wider world, was challenged about the factual accuracy of her account of key episodes in her own lifestory. She eventually acknowledged some discrepancies, claiming, however, that hers was another way of telling truths. Her 'testimony', she said, was not and did not claim to be Western forensic facticity. It was a poetic invocation of solidarity, an appeal for affective, rather than cognitive, understanding.

The South African Truth Commission, for its part, introduced the notion of at least four coexisting modes of truth: factual or forensic; personal narrative; social truth, and healing or restorative truth. The typology has been critiqued, but there is a larger underlying question about whether and how we can live with the indeterminacy of these layered categories. What is being said or claimed, with what standards or safeguards of accuracy, veracity, and completeness, is quite simply too different, across these categories, to be meaningfully compared. It is often claimed that one of the strengths of the Truth Commission format is that it gives victims a platform and a voice. Shorn of the inquisitorial or accusatorial procedures of the courtroom, so the story goes, survivors and relatives can take the stage and be heard, acknowledged, believed, even broadcast to the nation. Assertions about the cathartic or therapeutic potential of these encounters abound, but they are often voiced by people who have little in-depth

knowledge of the individual or social psychology of healing and trauma. In practice, survivors and witnesses differ widely. Some find giving testimony to be empowering and dignifying; others, the opposite. Still others would like their truth(s) to have the kinds of consequences that only a court of law can impose. They may feel cheated, or worse, when their tormentors are allowed, as in South Africa, to receive secular absolution, in the form of amnesty, in return for reciting a litany of sometimes dispassionate, or even triumphant, confession.

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What, after all, is the specifically social purpose of a commission? Is it solely an arena for encounter of survivor and perpetrator, or should it seek to tell a larger tale of causes and consequences, collusion, and collective wrongdoing? Perhaps uniquely among the panoply of narrative vehicles and platforms for denunciation, claim and counter-claim, commissions can endeavour to help entire societies understand how they could have come to this pass, and how they might avoid ever coming close to it in the future. This is the ‘never again’ motif that also appears time and time again in the mandates, purposes and collective hopes that are invested in commissions. Many include sweeping and often laudable recommendations in their final reports, to just this end. The Salvadoran commission of 1993 was even invested up front with the power to make supposedly binding recommendations –although many are still unfulfilled more than two decades later. The Peruvian commission of 2003 laid bare the centuries-old racial, class and ethnic fault lines that underlay both Shining Path guerrilla violence and the state’s unspeakable responses to it. It was also intelligent, sensitive and far-reaching in its treatment of gender-based harms, including sexual violence, but that does not mean to say that things have changed for the better. Indeed it can sometimes seem, with

Truth Commissions as with human rights governance, that the more hard-hitting commissions choose to be, the more they risk. The messengers are attacked, to distract from or deny the message. Certainly in Peru, the commission and its members were vilified, their integrity and good faith questioned, in a concerted campaign orchestrated by still-powerful vested interests unhappy about being exposed. The very fact that a commission is not a court of law is seized on, often cynically, to discredit or downplay its findings.

These outcomes undermine more ambitious claims about the power of commissions to heal, change, and correct the course of post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies. This will only happen insofar as societies are willing to own, accept and act upon the portion of the commission's diagnosis and prescription that feels true, workable, and practicable. This essentially circular logic brings us back, of course, to the initial question about how we define and police, collectively and severally, the boundaries of what counts as the telling of truth. The difficult news, for societies starting out on the long, hard road of dealing with the past, is that the Truth Commission may be not an endpoint but a staging post, the first skirmish in a new, and hopefully less deadly, war of words and meaning.

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