

## CHAPTER 10

### “TRUTH AND HISTORY” IN THE POST-*APARTHEID* SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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*ABSTRACT.* The intention of this paper is to show that “truth” is not a very well-defined topic in the study of history. By considering “history” as interpretations of processes and interpretations of human experiences, we affirm here that all historians make choices between certain sources and certain bodies of evidence, that they make choices in their presentation and the articulation of facts. Pursuing these general concerns, this paper presents firstly the dominant traits of history teaching during the apartheid era. Then, it goes on with two specific problems within the historical discipline in the post-apartheid context: the evolution of history teaching at school, and the use of history in a particular public document, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report.

“Truth and History”<sup>1</sup> is one of the major issues debated among historians, whatever their subject of research. It was the topic of the last biennial Conference of the South African Historical Society: “*Not Telling: Lies, Secrecy and History*” (hosted by the University of the Western Cape, July 1999). As the title of the conference indicates, it is interesting and exciting for historians to demonstrate what could be considered as a lie, how other historians are dealing with sources and evidence and how they tell history.

The intention of this paper is to show that “truth” is not a very well-defined topic in the study of history. We are not pretending that truth does not exist. We believe that truth does exist. But by considering “history” as interpretations of processes and interpretations of human experiences, we affirm here that all historians make choices between certain sources and certain bodies of evidence, that they make choices in their presentation and the articulation of facts. Therefore, people have to be aware that historians have considerable power. This power is so strong that some historians could use it to paralyze anyone challenging their work. Such historians could purposefully omit facts or people, they could whisk out of sight certain primary sources – because “they do not fit their view” – or they could invent non-existing sources in order to prove that they are right in saying what they say. This type of impostors does exist among historians. Even if they

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represent a minority, we should not underestimate their power. We argue that it is not impossible to challenge them; the point is how.

The topic of “Truth and History” is a false “good topic”. History is interpretations and tales by people who are themselves sensitive to their own time and society. They are themselves citizens with philosophical and political opinions, with beliefs and ethical principles. This influences inevitably the way they tell history.

Of course, history does not belong to historians alone, yet historians are particularly responsible before society for what they present and analyse as the past, and how they do this. Historians are always under the pressure of social demands and politics. This is why it is never enough to read the work of one historian only, on a specific matter. Different history books and sources provide different approaches and their combination helps to apprehend an epoch in its diverse dimensions.

This paper presents firstly the dominant traits of history teaching during the *apartheid* era. Then, it goes on with two specific problems within the historical discipline in the post-*apartheid* context: the evolution of history teaching at school, and the use of history in a particular public document, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report.

### *From the history of politics to the use of history as a political instrument*

During the *apartheid* era, the discipline of history was subjected to huge debates and arguments, precisely because the various historical discourses were deeply linked with fundamental political issues.

The supporters of *apartheid* were obsessed with the need to find historical justifications for the system, and claimed that they were telling the truth because they were in possession of irrefutable evidence. The historians who were opposed to the *apartheid* system as well as to its official historical discourse developed views that were different from those of *apartheid*'s supporters. Many of them were nourishing the desire to “restore the truth”.

In order to address the question of “Truth and History” in South Africa today, we need to recall briefly what the relationship was between truth and history among historians during the *apartheid* era. Contrary to a widely held view, historians who supported *apartheid* were not avoiding the debate on “Truth *in* History”.

In her paper on history teaching at the University of Durban-Westville during the 1960s-1980s, the historian Uma D. Mesthrie recalls the questions asked to students preparing their essays on history:

For instance, is (or was) he a scientific historian? Does he belong to a specific cultural, religious, or political group? Is (or was) he in a position to present his facts objectively? Has he been contradicted by another historian? Is he telling the truth? (Mesthrie 1999: 8.)

It is quite incredible that such questions were being asked, considering that the students had only one single reference book available during the 1970s – for the undergraduate curriculum –, notably *Five Hundred Years: a History of South Africa* by C.F.J. Muller, a Professor of History at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Yet, the historians who supported *apartheid* affirmed that their historical analysis was nothing less than *scientific*.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that the diversification of sources – primary and secondary – as well as the critical analysis, confrontation and comparison of such sources, are fundamental to an historian’s work during his training and will remain so throughout his career, *apartheid* historians simply claimed that there were no accurate sources available regarding the pre-colonial past.

This book recounts the activities and experiences, over a period of nearly five hundred years, of the White man in South Africa (...). For the history of these five centuries we have incomparably more reliable sources than all the centuries before the Portuguese discoveries. Naturally the history of South Africa did not begin with the advent of the White man and the non-Whites have played an extremely significant role in South Africa’s development. Nevertheless, reliable factual records in exact chronological focus concerning the Bantu, Hottentots and Bushmen are too scarce for an authoritative history of the non-White to be written at this stage. It must also be recognized that during these centuries, and especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the White man played, and is still playing, a predominant role in the history of South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

As the historians Uma D. Mesthrie and Cynthia Kros<sup>4</sup> emphasize:

[T]he History syllabus of the old South Africa did not (...) deny that Africans could have civilization, industry and perhaps, most importantly, their own “nation states” but it denied that it could be studied – because of a lack of evidence and sources, and denied that it had the same decisive importance for the nation. Furthermore, Black people were encouraged to see themselves as ethnically distinct from the Whites as well as other Black people<sup>5</sup>:

It was, however, [at least, so the textbook writer alleged – Eds.] the Whites, who, in Southern Africa over the last century and more, have directed the historical development and led to a much clearer imprint of [the African’s] way of life.<sup>6</sup>

The official historical discourse during the *apartheid* era was strongly linked to the issue of “nation building”. The South African nation is young if one considers the *South African Union Act* of 1910 as its “birth certificate”.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Grundlingh 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Muller 1969: 190 quoted by Mesthrie 1999: 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kros 1999: 7.

<sup>5</sup> Kros 1999: 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Survey of South Africa* quoted by Mesthrie 1999: 10.

From then on, nation building required an historical discourse which took South Africa out of the British Empire as regards “national identity” – and set the foundations and principles of the *South African* society. It was a society which was already deeply divided: the rule of a minority – “white” – over a majority – “black” – was already effective. The development of Afrikaner nationalism – from the establishment of the Afrikaner republics to the victory of the National Party in 1948 and the installation of the *apartheid* system – was considered as the main issue of the time, despite the African people’s claims for land and political rights.

Historians have paid a lot of attention to Afrikaner nationalism, its roots, its rhetoric and its evolution. The more enlightened and critical of these historians, for instance Marianne Cornevin, demonstrated the powerful links between religion, history and politics in the ideology of Christian Nationalism; she described this discourse as a tale of *mythicisim, falsification and mystification*.<sup>7</sup>

South African historians today recall that the South African history taught during *apartheid* times was *biased* to the point of making many pupils and students lose interest:

For generations history teachers in South Africa classrooms have been forced to trot out Afrikaner Nationalist ideology, presented as the story of South Africa’s past. The story is familiar to us all – South African history is dominated by 1652 when Jan van Riebeeck landed at the Cape to build a refreshment station. It then proceeds inexorably through a litany of succeeding Cape governments, slogs through a few frontier wars and reaches a high point with that heroic epic – the Great Trek. Thence the story winds gently down through the Afrikaner republics, the Anglo-Boer War, Union, Pact, various *gevaar* [“danger”] elections and the inevitable Nationalist victory in 1948. Many pupils abandon the history classroom as fast as their legs will carry them at the first available exit point – Standard Seven. History is seen as a subject choice for those not gifted enough to do Sciences or Mathematics.<sup>8</sup>

There was no opportunity, no space, for criticism and debate: history was “one” unchallengeable tale. Historians who supported *apartheid* were using their authority to impose the idea that there could be no alternative views or interpretations of a process, and that their conception of history was the relevant one. Any other historical discourse was regarded and presented to the students as propaganda and as “anti-scientific.”<sup>9</sup> Until the 1970s, the political evolution of South Africa since 1948 – i.e. the installation of *apartheid* – was put in the context of the fight against the so-called Communist menace:

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<sup>7</sup> Cornevin 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Kros & Greybe 1997: 6.

<sup>9</sup> Mesthrie 1999: 16.

Communism poses a threat to every inhabitant of South Africa. Under the pretext of fighting for the liberation of all-Africa, it has nothing less in mind than world-domination. (...) In 1962 the South African police uncovered the Communist inspired Rivonia plot, which was geared for total chaos in South Africa. (...) South Africa’s fight against Communism seems likely, in the near future, to become a way of life.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1980s, this issue disappeared from the syllabus, and students were asked questions about the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan-African Congress (PAC), Mohandas Ghandi or Tengo Jabavu, but, in spite of that, the orientation of history teaching remained the same. The Afrikaner people had brought civilization to this part of the continent and “their” history was the history of South Africa. It was a history of heroes, “great men (Kruger, Smuts, Hertzog and Verwoerd) with visions for their people”. History was the tale of the leader’s *sacred quest* (like the European medieval *De Vita Caroli* of Eginhard).

Uma D. Mesthrie notes that even if political protest could be strong among students in the 1970s and 1980s, they did not go to the point of using their examination papers as an opportunity to defy the official historical discourse. And, surely, the questions asked did not give them a chance to do so. However, she reports the remarks of two University of Durban-Westville students once daring to express their frustrations with the history curriculum:

the majority of textbooks see the white man as the hero and always the winner. The black man is portrayed as a bad person who has no rights. (...) Do leaders like Shaka, Dingane or Moshoeshoe have no interest outside their interaction with whites?<sup>11</sup>

and Uma D. Mesthrie adds,

there was a call for “people’s history – not the perspective of the ruler”.

More recently, and regarding the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, historians have shown that several aspects of the conflict had been *hidden*, e.g. the “black” concentration camps, in order to victimize the Afrikaner community more than any other.<sup>12</sup> This victimization was the bedrock of a strengthened claim for independence from the British authority. If we look at the official calendar, which punctuated the years during the *apartheid* era, we can see that it contained celebrations of battles – mainly, “Boer victories” – and religious celebrations. The monuments erected on South African soil were also mainly celebrating the glory and/or the martyrdom of the Afrikaner people. African heroes or kings were not forgotten but – as was mentioned before – were presented as especially evil and bloodthirsty, and

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Mesthrie 1999: 10.

<sup>11</sup> Mesthrie 1999: 17.

<sup>12</sup> Kessler 1999.

most of all, as losers.

*Apartheid* ideologists and supporters *distorted* sources, evidence and facts, and in doing so, distorted processes of events or collective and individual intentions and motivations.

A recent study of the period of the 1920s-1930s shows that the Black “working class” regarded history as a story written by and for white people. Therefore, in reaction to what they considered as *lies* told by the “Whites”, they developed counter-discourses in order to reassert the values of the African indigenous historical heritage.<sup>13</sup> These counter-histories, which were particularly used by trade unionists and political activists in their writings or speeches, intended to restore self-esteem and confidence among the people oppressed by the segregation. This was not aimed at dividing the African people: whatever their “tribe”, they would identify with the figures of late heroes like King Dingane or Shaka. They united against discriminatory policies and laws.

Despite counter histories and discourses, history seems to have been seen by people as divided, as the segregated society they were living in. People were more sensitive to the history or the story of their own community, tribe or group. History was not used to unite people: it was a tool to divide and oppose them just as they were divided in the society according to the *Population Registration Act* of 1950. People were sharing a history of conflicts, wars and violence and not a history where they found themselves united for – or, worse, against someone or something. This state of affairs produced a common representation of history seen as a jigsaw puzzle, an image that can be illustrated by the Report of the TRC:

The past, it has been said, is another country. The way its stories are told and the way they are heard change as the years go by. The spotlight gyrates, exposing old lies and illuminating new truths. As a fuller picture emerges, a new piece of the jigsaw puzzle of our past settles into place. (TRC Report, D. Tutu, Foreword, §17)

According to our own research, historical landmarks and reference points tend to fluctuate from one person to the next; and the same fluctuation can be observed in the individual case of each and every South African.

Despite the number of victims’ frustrations, the TRC has done an essential work in restoring knowledge about the *apartheid* era, especially regarding the 1960-94 period.

It must also be underlined that the existence of the TRC opened the way to critical historical analyses, free from the *apartheid* ideology as well as

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<sup>13</sup> Ndlovu 1999.

other official historical discourses such as that of liberation movements.<sup>14</sup> Long before the end of *apartheid*, several historical schools of thought developed analyses of South African history but were not necessarily in agreement. Their divergence was not a problem; such divergence is part and parcel of history as an academic discipline. However, divergence became a problem a new history curriculum had to be shaped.

*Does the end of the apartheid era open up the way to the truth in the teaching of history?*

Here, we point out two different aspects of the practice and the use of history. First of all, the problems historians and history teachers experience when they seek to break away from the old contents as well as the old teaching methods of the history syllabus.

Different answers were given to the following question:

How would we contest a particular version of South African history? Our long experience with Afrikaner historiography should have taught us that it is not simply by denying that it is “true” and parrying with an alternative version of the “truth”. (...) Laying claim to the “truth” is futile and can shut off the possibility of dialogue altogether.<sup>15</sup>

The quality of history lies not only in its contents but also in the manner in which it is taught. Between 1993 and 1995, a group of teachers, historians and publishers participated in a series of conferences on the state of history teaching and textbooks in South Africa. In 1994, these delegates drew up a manifesto emphasizing the need

- to be analytical and explanatory
- to teach skills and contents inseparably
- to reflect the process of writing history
- to develop pupil’s power of empathy and moral judgement
- to seek to reconcile different groups of people with each other
- to show that “ethnicity, culture and identity have been constructed over time”
- to locate South African history within regional, continental and world contexts
- to retain a common national core but allow for regional or school-based flexibility of choices (...) to stimulate understanding and interpretation.

However, many historians and history teachers or lecturers have been disappointed by the interim history syllabus. Research led by the History Workshop of the University of the Witwatersrand shows the disillusion of some “practitioners” of history:

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<sup>14</sup> For example see Ndlovu 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Kros 1998: 15.

many teachers are still unhappy with the new curriculum. (...) teachers interviewed in 1995 (...) express their opinions and outline some of the problems they experience in implementing the new syllabus. “I hate it. I still find the history for Standard Threes extremely boring.” (...) I feel you must know the truth (...) you cannot simply forgive and forget when you do not know what it is you are forgiving and forgetting. One of [the topics in the textbook] is headed *The Freeburghers – The First Real South Africans* – this sort of thing really hurts (Kros & Greybe 1997: 1).<sup>16</sup>

They were complaining about the persistence of racial stereotypes, generalizations and misconceptions. The crucial question remained:

The old history curriculum and its textbook have been universally condemned for many years. Teachers and the education authorities alike have acknowledged that history needs a thorough overhaul. This leaves us all with the question: if Afrikaner Nationalist history is now discredited, what should replace it? (Kros & Greybe 1997: 7)

In post-*apartheid* South Africa, history has to justify its place in a under-resourced, pressurized curriculum (...) South African history continues to be experienced as abrasive and damaging for most pupils and the big question what history can offer beyond the usual bland platitudes, has not been addressed. At the same time we acknowledged that there are very difficult questions to be addressed within South African history about identity, national reconstruction, reconciliation, as well as those related to pupil’s cognitive growth. (Kros & Greybe 1997: 13)

In other words, the problems with which the architects of the new history curriculum were confronted, were the strong political demands. Even today, the contents of history are still linked to the fundamental question of nation building, which is redefined in the context of a multicultural democratic society. South Africa is in search of its national identity, and according to its new Constitution, it has now to encompass ethnic, racial, gender and religious diversity among the South African people. But, nation building is not, and has never been, a natural process; it is a socio-political one.

The South African transition has been shaped by the consensus-seeking spirit – some called it “compromise” – and the historians of the History Sub-Commission for a New Curriculum have been put under pressure by this consensual ideal. There were disagreements among them. The interim syllabus reflects their inability to find a suitable compromise.

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<sup>16</sup> The offence to which the last sentence in this quotation refers, consists in the following: calling the *freeburghers*, i.e. White inhabitants of the Cape during the 17th and 18th century – in so far as they were not in the employ of the United East India Company – “the first real South Africans” implies a denial of the presence, and of claims to full constitutional and national status, of other contemporaneous groups, and of their descendants today; it thus reiterates the very foundations of the *apartheid* ideology. At the back of such a statement is another inveterate Afrikaner fiction about South African history: the claim that Black, Niger-Congo (“Bantu”) speaking people (as distinct from Khoi-San speakers, generally with somewhat lighter skin colour) arrived at the Cape at the same time as Europeans, instead of centuries earlier, and therefore could not lay greater claim to the land than the Whites. (Eds.)



Its “successor”, *Curriculum 2005*, which is now being introduced step by step, integrates history and geography into a so-called *Learning Area of Human and Social Sciences* (from Grade 1 to Grade 9). Deciding in favour of such integration is important because it will have profound effects upon the contents as well as the teaching of history. The integration is worrying many historians and history teachers, who see it as a dilution of their discipline. Some blamed the African National Congress (ANC) – as the political organization in power – responsible for the deceptive contents of the interim syllabus. However, we would like to argue here that South Africa is in the grasp of a culture and policy of consensus, which need to be analyzed further than it has been so far.

History – seen as a tale about the past – is not only a scholarly issue. Many forms of *media* – e.g. literature, television, songs, plays, the press, museums, which could be called “non-professional” vehicles of the historical discipline – provide the people with historical knowledge or historical narratives. Some of these *media* provide narratives based on historical events but with a view on entertainment rather than history teaching *per se*. By the same token, they can may favour the symbolic rather than the realistic aspects of historical events.

Here, we would like to focus on a particular aspect of the “production of history” by “non-professionals”. Nation building also requires initiatives aiming at historical popularization with an aim of making historical knowledge accessible to a large public. However, some risks attach to the popularization of history: it can lead to the reproduction of misinterpretations, it can create stereotypes and anachronisms. History must often be presented in a simple way in order to be understandable; that does not mean dissimulating the contradictions and the paradoxes of an epoch. “Popularization” does not necessarily mean “simplification”. However, those involved in historical popularization sometimes underestimate, and even thwart, the capacity of the public to learn, think and analyze.

Those in charge of a public authority or power, foremost the government, also popularize history and use it in their discourses. We would like to take the example of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* which played an historical role and which has provided a historical narrative.

### *The TRC as a context for the production of history*

As the TRC commissioners know full well, the work of the Commission and its Report were historic and historical documents. “Historic”, firstly, because

of the Commission's specific and original conditions and frame of reference (an emphasis on reconciliation, truth and justice, which differs from the European experience of the post-World War II trials at Nuremberg, Germany, or from the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example). Secondly, because the Commission appealed to "ordinary" citizens to tell their stories as part of the history of the country. Moreover, the report is an "historical document" because it has revealed a great deal of information about the *apartheid* era as well as the immediate post-*apartheid* era and the transitional period.

Inevitably evidence and information about our past will continue to emerge, as indeed they must. The report of the Commission will now take its place in the historical landscape of which future generations will try to make sense – searching for the clues that lead, endlessly, to a truth that will, in the very nature of things, never be fully revealed. (TRC Report, D. Tutu, Foreword, §18)

However, we would like to argue here that, like any historical tale and like any historical document, the Report's historical point of view – especially on the pre-*apartheid* era – can be criticized. Before presenting some of our criticism, it must be emphasized that we see the TRC partly as an illustration of the culture of consensus, and, therefore, its historical analysis as shaped by the consensus. The latter point is acknowledged openly in the Report:

We believe we have provided enough of the truth about our past for there to be a consensus about it. There is a consensus that atrocious things were done on all sides. 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. We know that we may, in the present crime rate, be reaping the harvest of the campaigns to make the country ungovernable. We know that the immorality of *apartheid* has helped to create the climate where moral standards have fallen disastrously. (TRC Report, D. Tutu, Foreword, §70)

The existence of the Commission and its two and a half years of work have directed the South African public's interest in history mainly towards the *apartheid* era. The reason for this clearly lies in political and social issues. Because this period is quite recent, history and politics merged in people's minds.

The Report presents the historical context – not process – that led to the establishment of the *apartheid* regime: the history of South Africa is presented as a history of conflict, injustice, violence and atrocity:

Hence the type of atrocities committed during the period falling within the mandate of the Commission [1960-94] must be placed in the context of violations committed in the course of:

- The importation of slaves to the Cape and the brutal treatment they endured between 1652 (when the first slaves were imported) and 1834 (when slavery was abolished).
- The many wars of dispossession and colonial conquest dating from the first war against the Khoisan in 1659, through several so-called frontier conflicts as white settlers penetrated northwards, to the Bambatha uprising of 1906, the last attempt at armed defence by [an] indigenous grouping.
- The systematic hunting and elimination of indigenous nomadic peoples as such as the San and the Khoi-khoi by settler groups, both Boer and British, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- The Difaquane or Mfecane where thousands died and tens of thousands were displaced in a Zulu-inspired process of state formation and dissolution.
- The South African War of 1899-1902 during which British forces herded Boer women and children into concentration camps in which some 20,000 died – a gross human rights violation of shocking proportions [here is inserted a footnote: “In his evidence to a Commission workshop on reconciliation, Mr. Ron Viney indicated that a similar number of black people was exhumed from British concentration camps. (Johannesburg, 18-20 February 1998.”) ]
- The genocidal war in the early years of this century directed by the German colonial administration in South West Africa at the Herero people, which took them to the brink of extinction.<sup>17</sup>

The Report tries to give information about the legacy of colonialism and segregation; it also seeks to emphasize the need for national reconciliation based on a consensus about the past.

This summary shows that the Commission takes up several stereotypes for example about the Anglo-Boer War. The Report clearly looks at this event from a predominantly Afrikaner perspective: the traditional Afrikaner belief that they were the principal victims of the war is acknowledged, and the mention of the black concentration camps appears merely in footnotes... In another part of the Foreword, we can read:

This is not the same as saying that racism was introduced into South Africa by those who brought *apartheid* into being. Racism came to South Africa in 1652; it has been part of the warp and woof of South African society since then. It was not the supporters of *apartheid* who gave this country the 1913 Land Act which ensured that the indigenous people of South Africa would effectively become hewers of wood and drawers of water for those with superior gun power from overseas. 1948 merely saw the beginning of a refinement and intensifying of repression, injustice and exploitation. It was not the upholders of *apartheid* who introduced gross violations of human rights in this land. We would argue that what happened when 20,000 women and children died in the concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War is a huge blot on our copy book. Indeed, if the key concept of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation are central to the message of this report, it would be wonderful if one day some representative of the British/English community said to the Afrikaners, “We wronged you grievously. Forgive us.” And it would be wonderful too if someone representing

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<sup>17</sup> TRC Report I, 2: 25-27. This abstract is followed by the mention of events such as the 1913 repression of strikes, 1920 killings, 1960 Sharpeville, 1976 Soweto uprising; then, Plaatje 1916 is quoted.

the Afrikaner community responded, “Yes, we forgive you – if you will perhaps let us just tell our story, the story of our forebears and the pain that has sat for so long in the pit of our stomachs unacknowledged by you.” As we have discovered, the telling has been an important part of the process of healing. (D. Tutu, Foreword, §65)

As our own research brings out, the claim for bringing the “British community” to ask for forgiveness is not unanimously shared in South Africa. And, we can ask “who are, for instance, the ‘British/English community’, and who are their representatives mentioned here?” Are we talking about the British Queen? The English-speaking South Africans? And, if the answer to those questions is uncertain, who are then their proper representatives?...

Indeed, the words of the Report can be interpreted as a desire to coax the “Afrikaner community” (and who are, in the spirit of the Report, the authorized representatives of that particular community?) into accepting, officially and massively, the blame for *apartheid*. And such an effect has to be achieved in a consensual way. So, the report expresses sympathy with the excessive sense of victimization as developed by Afrikaner nationalist historiography, in order to make the Afrikaners agree that *apartheid*, too, was an *evil* regime. But, once more, who is authorized to speak on behalf of the Afrikaner community, and to agree or disagree with the Report on this matter?

The historian Deborah Posel emphasizes that the historical discourse of the TRC report is more descriptive than analytical and explanatory.<sup>18</sup> She argues that the Report uses mainly a clinical vocabulary – surgery and psychology – to speak about the past. It speaks of “wounds” which should be “cleansed” by a “balm” – i.e. “the word which is delivering the truth” – in order to be “healed”. Because the work of the TRC was dealing with strong emotional issues as well as political and social ones, the way the Report speaks about the past is mainly emotional, even if it tries to avoid this tendency.<sup>19</sup>

Historians cannot use the terms “evil” or “healing the wounds” as they are used by the TRC, by a priest or by a politician. It is morally effective, and, as such, a similar choice of words was used, in a very different context, by the supporters of *apartheid*, in order to qualify their enemy, Communism, and to justify their policy. These categories of vocabulary belong to an emotional range, and therefore, it is inadequate for historians to use them. What is more, such choice of vocabulary amounts to the trivialization of

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<sup>18</sup> Posel 1999.

<sup>19</sup> For an example, see the part of the Report devoted to a discussion of the different kinds of truth.

periods, of political regimes and of events such as Nazism or the *apartheid* regime; it paves the way for denial, or for normalization of the reign of the arbitrary. Therefore, historians have to be able to keep their sense of humanity, humanism (in the terms now current in South Africa: their *ubuntu*) precisely because they are dealing with human experiences, and also in order to avoid positions and points of view that are purely emotional.

History is also at stake in the TRC Report’s chapter on “Reparation and Rehabilitation Policy”,<sup>20</sup> which deals with the national duty of remembrance and commemoration. History is seen as material for symbolic reparation: renaming streets and place, erecting new monuments, organizing public official celebrations and a National Day of Remembrance. It has to do with the need to “re-map” the South African landscape which was shaped by the Afrikaner nationalist historical discourse.

The culture of consensus ensures that political goals may be reached slowly but not necessarily surely. The time spent on trying to reach consensus could also be used to change the goals to be achieved. The practice of the political consensus led to the first democratic elections, and that was unquestionably a major achievement; but, given the nature of history as a critical academic endeavour, consensus cannot be as beneficial in history as it is in politics.

*In history, neither consensus nor claimed truth are accurate*

We would like to conclude with the words of historians of the History Workshop:

- We have to get away from essentialism. It is important to acknowledge differences, but also to recognize that they are made over time and might be different in different times. Very simply, this gives us the power to believe in change.
- As History teachers we have to get away from the idea of telling the “correct stories” –we don’t have to have consensus.
- We are not to be afraid of uncertainty – uncertainty is liberating.
- We should think of History as providing a forum for dialogues –understanding that all history is partial and is therefore always open to further interrogation and critical examination. (Kros 1998: 19)

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