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Martin Meredith. *Coming to Terms: South Africa's Search for the Truth.* New York: Public Affairs, 1999. xii + 380 pp. $27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-891620-33-1.

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Coming to terms with the past has emerged as the grand narrative of the late twentieth, early 21st centuries. Many nation-states and their citizens are seeking to overcome their traumatic legacies and move forward: the past in that sense needs to be "got over" and perhaps more importantly needs to be seen to be "got over". The twentieth century has been the century of the missing and the obliterated. In part, inquiries into the past like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter TRC) have the task of seeing the unseeable, revealing the concealed and finding and remembering the obliterated. There is also another important reason however for finding the "missing"; it is to display a sign that they were once alive and that their lives had meaning.

This book is one among several now emerging on the South African TRC and indeed on remembering and dealing with the past in societies undergoing democratic transition in general. In this sense Martin Meredith's work (with a very useful and illuminating foreword and afterword by Tina Rosenberg) seeks to examine the political and moral implications of the TRC and its effect on South African society. The book is interesting because it seeks to encapsulate many of the key and most controversial cases within the Commission's ambit, in a manner that is readable and interesting without losing sight of the frightening complexity of the proceedings. Meredith is also trying to contextualise the environment and difficulties within which the TRC was forced to work. Given this he is fairly positive about about its achievements. He delivers information on how the TRC was set up, the security mechanisms and climate of fear which pervaded South African life for the vast majority, the chains of command and the testimonies of key players as well as some analysis into the results of the commission.

Dictatorships have frequently come and gone in the twentieth century, but apartheid in every way represented an affront to the basic concept of human dignity. Few prolonged conflicts of the twentieth century could match the terror and pain that apartheid caused its victims at its height. In South Africa the state claimed to be fighting a war against communist terrorists in order to justify their policies of apartheid. This resulted in the

wide scale militarization of the state apparatus and the creation of secret security mechanisms which did not adhere to the rule of law in any form. Victims of apartheid wanted to know what really happened during this traumatic period, they wanted to know why it happened and where their relatives or loved ones who disappeared were buried, and they would like to be allowed to mourn and grieve. There also emerged the question of punishment. Who should pay for the crimes of the past and in what ways? Moreover, it has been argued that there is a real need to create an overall awareness of the illegitimacy of apartheid. In the new South Africa, while at the one level we had a political dispensation which called for reconciliation and forgiveness; on another level, we had ever increasing calls for the secret history of the apartheid state to be exposed and the perpetrators brought to book.

There are few places like South Africa where myth, history and politics coincide to produce such different prisms in the way people see themselves and their role in society. South Africa is a country where the notion of "fractured" memory is given new meaning. Memory is not fractured here; it is splintered, rent apart, torn into a multitude of pieces. In this sense, it is these shards of memory that the TRC would like to put back, to replace, to restore, and from that engender a common sense of nation and purpose.

Meredith has managed to encapsulate most of the major issues involved in the TRC with broad-brush strokes that make it accessible to readers from all backgrounds. There are no footnotes or endnotes in the text and it reads in a very fluid sense taking us from one catalogue of horrors to the next. In this sense it is not a book written for academics, but for a much wider audience who would like to gain insight into the shape of the new South Africa. The cases he uses are mainly the high profile and most controversial ones of the work that the TRC faced, including Eugene De Kok and the death squads that operated out of Vlakplass. Stephen Biko, the violations in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Winnie Mandela and the death of Stompie Seipei, Jeffrey Benzien and the methods of torture, as well as the chemical and biological warfare programmes dreamed up by scientists (to whom the description "mad" might be most appropriate) are all covered here, among others.

The dilemma that many transitional states face is whether prosecution would lead to political violence, perhaps even civil war which would weaken an already vulnerable democratic system. Reconciliation presents a strong argument against prosecution in this instance. International law and the political constraints which form part of this allows an affirmative obligation on the part of states to investigate and punish gross violations of human rights.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission emerged through a series of protracted political negotiations and compromises which were part and parcel of the larger negotiated revolution in the new South Africa between contenders for power. It could not have been otherwise. And at the end of the day, the strength of South African democracy will be something of a reflection of the way in which negotiations, compromises, deals and bargaining amongst different groups was and is carried out. South Africans will not become democratic overnight; democracy takes time to flourish, grow and develop. And yet it offers the best hope for survival of all the different groups that constitute the new South Africa.

The question of what truth is in the new South Africa is also the question of what constitutes a nation and what the meaning of that nation is. South Africans through the TRC and the processes it has worked through must start to ask themselves the question: not what the TRC has exposed to have had such a cathartic experience, but how could they have afforded ***not*** to have pursued that process and experience? Ultimately building a common nation with shared values, perspectives and ideas seems an overwhelming

task for the new South Africa given the horrific legacies of apartheid. Apartheid may be gone and the formal structures that sustained it, but racism and a refusal to acknowledge the sins of the past are severe detrimental factors in forging common bonds.

And Meredith shows in his work how there is still a great refusal to acknowledge and recognise the crimes of the past on the overall part of the white community. Conspicuously missing is a full and forthright apology from the leaders of the previous regime that upheld these inhumane structures.

The new South Africa, like the old, is a place of damaged goods and it will take decades to instil a democratic social fibre and Meredith shows us in his text how damaged South Africa is. It is clear that it is an unhealthy society in many respects. One only has to read his excellent chapter on the trial of Winnie Mandela to realise this. However, it is clear that there are attempts to clean up the moral and social fabric, that there is an alternative discipline in the view of human rights and toleration of others views. We would be surprised if the social fabric could be ripped any further apart than it was under the old South Africa. The fact was that *there was no* social fabric for the vast majority of the population. They had always lived in a society which excluded the very core of their being. The fact that two totally opposed groups could sit down and negotiate the future of South Africa was a remarkable step in itself.

It is clear that the truth commission means different things to different people. Recognition, acknowledgement and perhaps closure on the problematic events of the past are necessary in some cases for the new dispensations to legitimate themselves politically. Meredith in his work has shown the vulnerability and damage that apartheid produced in South Africa through his ability to select and present the testimonies and words of victims and perpetrators from the commissions hearings in a coherent manner. In this sense for the ordinary person who does not have the time or resources to access the TRC's own five-volume report, it is a way of gaining knowledge and insight in an effective way.

The fact remains that the TRC had a mandate from the Parliamentary Act that created it; it is not a governmental office because its time frame is limited. The solution to accountability was resolved by the use of amnesty based on individual application and the Act, not the TRC, established the conditions for the granting of this amnesty, which could only be given if the violation was deemed to have a political purpose. Thus within the mandate of the commission was an attempt to develop conditions for forgiveness through individual accountability which identified perpetrators, asked victims to give testimony and provided measures for reparation and rehabilitation. If these sound like half-measures, one must realise that the TRC, like the new South African democracy, was born out of series of negotiations in which there were no outright winners and losers, no victors and vanquished as in 1945 when the allies sat down to dictate the terms to the defeated.

There are two crucial things that have come out of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The first is that it has achieved a remarkable and far ranging public exposure of the human rights violations and crimes committed under the apartheid regime. In this sense it has created a record of the past in a way that it will not be forgotten soon. It has significantly reduced the number of lies in circulation by forcing people to admit to crimes against the broad mass of the South African population. This is an important and necessary exercise in itself. In ten or twenty year's time, there can be no denial that these things happened. It has forced a previously reluctant population (though of course there is still denial at one level) to see that apartheid was morally (and politically, economically etc.) indefensible; that it was a crime against humanity. It has pro-

duced an archive that allows people to examine their past and hopefully learn from it.

Secondly, it has allowed ordinary people to find expression for the suffering under the regime. It has had a completely cathartic function for many of the victims. Not all of the victims had this therapy but many who suffered. It is in this sense that some form of reconciliation has already taken place. The TRC has given people a voice where previously there only existed silence and rage. In this sense there has been a therapeutic conversation taking place. Of course, there is a great deal of pain involved and some people have argued that it might be better if the cupboards of apartheid had not been opened and laid bare. Throughout the text Meredith shows the pain by allowing victims and perpetrators to describe their experiences in their own words in front of the TRC.

It should be recognised that the TRC is just one mechanism in the transition. There are other bodies who are actively playing a role in the long overdue economic and social transformation, in reconstruction and development and these also should be factored into the equation of the dynamic project taking place. The transition to democracy was accompanied, as one might expect, with a high degree of tension, insecurity and political violence. However, democracies do not simply emerge overnight. The majority of South Africa's people who have been so long excluded from their system are now incorporated into a democratic dispensation. Democracies require habituation; they require time to forge the common understandings that allow their institutions to work in a free and open manner. Examining the past is not a novel idea; it clearly serves a domestic political function in transitional societies struggling to deal with their present difficulties as they lurch often blindly into the future, trying to establish democratic structures where there has never been a precedent. In this sense, it will take more than a two year trip down a nightmarish memory lane to relieve the ghosts of the past and the angst of the present in South Africa, as Martin Meredith has shown in his work.

The book is a valuable contribution because it details and captures the pain of the problem that the TRC successfully managed to expose. The cathartic moment is widened, intensified, for ordinary people through such work. Acknowledgement of the pain and suffering during apartheid is a necessary step in the truth and reconciliation project the new state now finds itself undergoing. In hindsight, generations of South Africans to come, will benefit from the truth-telling exercise as Meredith has shown, one that has allowed a significant reduction in the number of "permissible lies" in circulation.

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