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Somewhere over the rainbow

Ivor Chipkin
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The TRC cut through a vision of South Africans as either black victims or white perpetrators — offering another way to define ourselves, writes Ivor Chipkin

SHORTLY after the transition from white minority rule, it became important to answer a basic question: what makes the heterogeneous people of South Africa a common people? This was no trifling matter. It cut to the heart of the political settlement.

Firstly, the idea that South Africans formed a people made it sensible to think about the time after apartheid as the time of a unitary state.

Secondly, it suggested that South Africans shared something with each other that they did not share with anyone else. Therein, however, lay a paradox. Why was it reasonable to grant rights to and expect obligations from someone born in Messina, but not at Beit Bridge? What did someone living in Soweto share with someone in Sandton that they did not have in common with someone born in Bulawayo (or Maseru or anywhere else in Africa for that matter)?

It was clear who South Africans were not. They were not the South Africans of old, those who had perpetrated and tolerated the injustices of the past. Yet they did not speak any particular language, nor did they follow any one faith. They had neither a common culture nor belonged to one race. Despite this, the first democratic election proceeded as if they had — as if, nonetheless, it made sense to include them in a single country.

Two things trumped this absurdity: a geographical legacy and an intuition. The legacy was of a territory, the land of South Africa, with its de facto inhabitants. This made the limits of the people easier to determine, given by borders beyond which lay other peoples.

More obscure was the internal measure : what was the special bond that South Africans, irrespective of race and class, ethnicity, religion, language and geography, shared with each other? Herein lay the intuition. If South Africans were not yet a nation, they were, nonetheless, already some kind of people.

At stake was the real meaning of reconciliation.

National reconciliation could not simply be about forgiveness or truth or overcoming the past. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was always correct in this regard. It was about love.

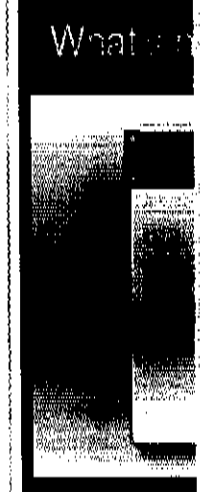
The modern political community is not founded on the basis of common interests. It is established on the basis of feeling. Without strong emotional bonds between citizens,

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“Post-apartheid South Africa must encourage solidarity between its citizens without appealing to common language or race or religion or culture in any traditional sense”

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democratic societies will not hold together. Nationalism qualifies this statement with another. It says: A deep sense of solidarity comes from sharing the same race and/or culture, speaking the same language, and/or sharing the same religion.

Political stability and economic growth presuppose these strong social bonds. Citizens are only willing to pay taxes or consent to the redistribution of wealth if they regard themselves as bound to the beneficiaries by strong ties of community. We can see how apartheid ideology tapped into a prejudice at the heart of modern politics. We can also see why the post-apartheid project is both radical and risky.

Post-apartheid South Africa must encourage solidarity between its citizens without appealing to common language or race or religion or culture in any traditional sense.

This was the real challenge of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It had to establish what South Africans had in common so that they could come to share strong bonds of solidarity.

What the TRC invoked was the idea of a common history. South Africans were those people that had been caught up in the drama of apartheid.

In telling this story the TRC would simultaneously identify the contours of the people. More importantly, it had to tell this story in such a way that it created strong bonds between those involved.

This is how the TRC's model of reconciliation was supposed to work: South Africa consisted of perpetrators of human rights abuses and their victims.

On this idea, the perpetrators could accede to the people by confessing their crimes and asking their former victims for forgiveness. There is no doubt that this confessional relationship could produce very strong affective relations between people, enough perhaps to form strong social ties. It is what made the TRC, at times, such a harrowing process to watch — and, at others, such a moving one.

Yet the process was far too restricted to have this effect on anything but a tiny minority of people in South Africa.

A better prospect was if persons who testified at TRC hearings were understood to be representatives of classes of people. Hence "victims" stood for black South Africans and "perpetrators" stood for a white population (including others complicit with apartheid) seeking their forgiveness. The resulting nation would consist of whites and blacks bonded to each other through this process of asking and being granted forgiveness.

Yet, for this to happen the TRC needed to be seen to function symbolically. The effect only worked, that is, if victim referred exclusively to blacks and perpetrator, to whites.

The commission itself, unwittingly, spoiled the effect.

In the final report, it found that the ANC itself had been responsible for gross human rights violations. It upset any exclusive association between "perpetrators", the apartheid state and whites.

It seems that the ANC understood the consequences of this better than the commissioners. The day before handing over the final report, the ANC applied to the High Court for an interdict stopping its publication. Tutu was shocked. "It was so surreal," he says in his account of the commission. "This was totally unexpected and thoroughly out of line with [the ANC's] character and attitude."

It is perhaps less surprising if one understands what was at stake.

If blacks were also "perpetrators" (and whites also "victims"), then reconciliation simply



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became a process of reconciliation between human rights abusers and their victims. But what was the difference between a victim of human rights abuse in South Africa and anywhere else in the world? What was lost was the specifically South African character of the story.

Indeed, what the TRC generated was not the South African people, but humanity as a whole.

Such a finding was latent in the structure of the commission. By casting the effects of apartheid in terms of human rights, the founding legislation prefigured a judgment in these terms. The Act that established the TRC took its cue from the Constitution. The language of human rights was the currency of the proceedings and, eventually, the findings. It was complemented by Christian theology. The two worked hand in hand.

In the final report, Tutu enthuses: "Ours is a remarkable country ... Let us celebrate our diversity, our differences. God wants us as we are. South Africa wants and needs the Afrikaner, the English, the coloured, the Indian, the black. We are sisters and brothers in one family — God's family, the human family."

Reconciliation was possible because, despite their awful deeds, perpetrators, like victims, were the "children of God". This is what united them, this was the quality of X in respect of which they were the same. Despite the great diversity of South Africans, they were "the rainbow people of God".

Therein lay the problem. By finding the quality of identity in a divine spark, the TRC did not generate the South African people per se. It produced a world- people. South Africans are merely instances of humanity, indistinguishable from anyone else.

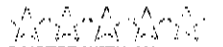
We can understand why the TRC turned out to be uncomfortable for nationalists. Christianity and the language of human rights have nothing to say about the specifically (South) African characteristics of the people. Surely this explains the mixed feelings that the commission evokes today, especially among those for whom a native is not just anybody. But before we lament a lost chance at cosmopolitanism, the TRC brings to the fore the fundamental challenge of any post-nationalist politics.

The TRC did not reconcile us as South Africans or Africans. It had no option in this regard. We have nothing in common as either. In the end, what it tried to do, perhaps unwittingly, was much more ambitious and more noble. It tried to reconcile us, not as a nation, but as members of the human family.

Is the appeal, however, to a common humanity enough to hold any particular society together?

Ivor Chipkin is the author of Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, Democracy and the Identity of the People, published by Wits University Press and available early in 2007. Chipkin spoke on The TRC and the Limits of the South African Nation at a conference in Cape Town this week on Memory, Narrative & Forgiveness: Reflecting on Ten Years of South Africa's TRC

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