

Mary Craig Lindgren
Truth Commissions
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The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a departure from those seen in Latin America. The African National Congress, the original resistance group against the Apartheid government, had gained political control in the transition of power from war to peace and was able to, at least by appearances, get more of what the people wanted out of their truth commission. They collected around 10,000 testimonies and about 2,000 of those were given in public and televised settings. This is a departure from the private testimony gathering of Guatemala—in South Africa, individuals had to go to the Truth Commission and hope for the opportunity to share their story.

Because the ANC had taken the first bargaining chip—the presidency—it had nothing left to leverage in order to truly assert political power and create further change. Therefore, the majority of black South Africans remain in the system of inequity that perpetrated the initial political divisions decades earlier.

For the ANC, reconciliation was the first step that would hopefully lead to further equality and economic redistribution. The resulting Truth & Reconciliation Commission was a compromise created with the knowledge that there would be no economic redistribution. In making truth the road to reconciliation, the meaning of reconciliation in the first place was effectively cheapened. Although truth-telling is both necessary and important, it should not be the end of the reconciliatory process. They drew the ‘truth as a road to reconciliation concept’ from Chile, which had used the combination of truth and reconciliation as an attempt to appease two polarized sides.

South Africa’s truth commission was something of a show—it was a big deal to publicly see people of color in positions of authority trying to create justice from the atrocities committed by white people. Additionally, the truth commission allowed anyone who applied to share their testimony the opportunity for amnesty, in the hopes that they would get lots of ‘little fish’ to share their role and provide evidence against the ‘big fish.’ However, the unexpectedly large number of ‘little fish’ who participated prohibited the commission from actively going after the ‘big fish,’ and they continued to live freely despite their actions.

The comparison of these two truth commissions leads me to ask many questions. Is there really an “after” stage to these atrocities? Or do they continue in smaller, less obtrusive forms for a time until they rear their ugly head in a new, more terrifying way? How can people reconcile such violence and deep hatred? The TV spectacle demonstrated in South Africa doesn’t seem to. What is next for the victims? Can they ever really have justice? Is it best to dwell in these memories, or to wipe the slate clean and move forward? The truth commission seems to have put a bandaid on the issues they sought to bring to light, but they never got around to taking the bandaid off. It is as if they view amnesty as a means of amnesia—give someone assured freedom and forget what they did, and they will be so grateful for that gift that they too will move forward peacefully. Choosing to not prosecute, is in effect permitting an entire population to ignore the disturbing picture of the violence in apartheid that the truth commission painted so clearly. How do we move forward in attempts to reconcile such atrocities?