

Twenty years of post-apartheid archiving: have we reckoned with the past, or has the past reckoned with us?

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Let me begin with a quote from the last page of Nelson Mandela's autobiography:

"The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road ... The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning."¹

In the 1990s South Africa was the envy of the world. In terms of reckoning with our oppressive pasts we were regarded as exemplary – observers cited the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the flood of post-1990 memory work, the transformed national archival system, and so on. We readily became experts and travelled the world advising other countries. Like I did.

But how well have we done? Are we exemplary? What does the world think of us today? Specifically, what does the world think of what some call Nelson Mandela's reconciliation project? In the last two years the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) has had a unique opportunity to gauge international views. Between November 2013 and July 2014 the NMF and the GIZ Global Leadership Academy, the latter commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), brought together 26

participants from ten countries² to engage in a three-part dialogue series (the Mandela Dialogues) on memory work in contexts where oppression, violent conflict or systemic human rights abuses have taken place. The dialogues offered an international forum to discuss the complex personal, collective and professional challenges facing those engaged in reckoning with the past. Through different layers and modes of engagement the process sought to reinvigorate debates about memory work; and offer new approaches, new questions and challenges to existing paradigms. The dialogue has generated a body of insight based on diverse and deep experience in reckoning with oppressive pasts. Let me try to summarize this body of insight.³

Firstly, the fundamental assumption informing this kind of reckoning has to be that society's mission, at once collective and profoundly personal, is the realization of a just society. And that our immediate objective, our purpose, is the creation of spaces within which our damaged societies can find healing.⁴ Healing has to take place at multiple levels – for individuals, for families, communities and society most

² The participants came from Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Kenya, Serbia, South Africa and Uruguay.

³ For a full account see <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reckoning-with-oppressive-pasts> (accessed 4 February 2015)

⁴ By 'healing' I do not refer to the repairing of damage or the finding of 'closure', although healing for many doubtless involves both. Here I use the term to describe: the processes whereby those who are traumatised work with their trauma successfully; and the processes whereby those who have been violated find ways of narrating and befriending the selves they were before their violation. For society healing must mean, fundamentally, a collectivity no longer burdened by its traumatised pasts.

¹ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Abacus, 1994), p.617.

broadly. Of course, there can be no blueprint for healing. Creating those spaces in which it takes place requires complex, difficult work. The difficult work of memory. And that work involves a range of processes, and the Mandela Dialogues have taught us that all of these processes are necessary. Without prescription. Without formula. Without best-practice timing or weighting. Within the constraints, limitations, and potentialities of their contexts, societies carrying damage from their pasts must negotiate and implement the full range of these processes. Failure to do so condemns societies to the danger of festering wounds and vulnerability to a recurrence of violence and violation.

Secondly, as hard as it might be, as complex and dangerous as it might seem, the state must ensure a process of prosecution for those responsible for past violations. A blanket amnesty for the perpetrators of violation can never be justified. Indemnity for crimes against humanity is unthinkable. The consequence is resilient cultures of impunity, lack of accountability, and societal rage. Of course, conditional amnesties are usually unavoidable, agreed to within fraught political and societal contexts. Often amnesty is exercised without use of the term – for instance in limiting the time period for criminal investigation, focusing on ‘gross’ human rights violations, or limiting investigation to the agents of state terror. Thirdly, redress and reparation is essential to the empowerment of those violated – their full participation in the making of a liberatory future is predicated on these processes. The consequence of a failure to implement them is a redrawing of societal patterns inherited from the past. Fourthly, research and investigation is fundamental to an informed implementation of all processes. It is fundamental to the assuming of responsibility before all who have been damaged by oppressive pasts. It is necessary to any commitment to removing the poison causing the festering deep inside societal wounds. It addresses the closed doors labeled ‘secret’, ‘taboo’,

‘disavowal’ and ‘lie’. It is dedicated not to the establishment of ‘the truth’, but rather to the disclosure of all relevant facts. The consequence of a failure to dig deep is continued festering. Finally, storytelling acknowledges the power of narrative – a power to work with pain, to generate energy for healing, to embrace complexity, to hear the voices of those regarded as ‘other’, to find shared representations of the past and common identities. Without the precondition of established, verifiable, authentic facts however, storytelling runs the risk of either reinforcing old myths or generating new ones. But with them in place storytelling can become an arena within which a liberatory future can be imagined. In the long-term, storytelling is the glue fundamental to any hope of cohesion, if not unity.

All of these processes require what I am calling ‘liberatory memory work’. Justice is unimaginable without it. So, how is South Africa being measured internationally now against the benchmark I have just outlined?

Well, we have been renowned for our embrace of ‘reconciliation’ as a strategy for negotiating a democratic future. The caricature suggests a nation which successfully privileged ‘reconciliation’ over ‘justice’. Realities, of course, are far more complex. On the one hand, at inception the reconciliation project assumed both what I call ‘softer’ and ‘harder’ processes. On the other, reconciliation remains elusive.

By the end of the apartheid era South Africa was profoundly damaged. We knew it would take generations to fix. But we were seduced into thinking we could fix things quickly. And ironically part of the seduction was the magic of Nelson Mandela. Those who worked in government under Mandela will remember well how we believed that we could fix anything. And for us only the best models and strategies in the world were good enough. We looked to the North. We

very seldom looked at the rest of Africa, Asia and South America. We thought we were exceptional. Now we are starting to understand that we share problems and challenges with other developing countries, and we are beginning to try and learn from their experiences. Now, nearly twenty years after the establishment of our own TRC, we are beginning to look at what we can learn from many other countries in relation to reckoning with our oppressive pasts.

Arguably we tried to reckon with our pasts too quickly. Some countries can wait. Even twenty years. We could not wait. It wasn't only the levels of damage. We were sitting on a powderkeg. Fifteen thousand people had died between 1990 and 1994. The 1994 election was almost stopped by reactionaries. The levels of rage were high. The levels of expectation were high. The provision of a conditional amnesty was unavoidable. But did we choose a model that was designed to be a quick fix? Did we too easily try to close the book on the past? Did Nelson Mandela make it too easy for white South Africans to forget their role in a crime against humanity? Did we avoid the long, hard, painful work of prosecuting the perpetrators of human rights violations?

I'm tempted to simply say 'yes' and move on.

However, the world misunderstands South Africa's 'reconciliation project' if it looks only at our TRC. Nelson Mandela's government adopted a wide-ranging strategy for reckoning with the past which had many elements and many instruments. In terms of the international Mandela Dialogues analysis, the strategy embraced the full spectrum of 'harder' and 'softer' processes. The TRC provided the basis for 'truth-recovery', reparation, conditional amnesty, and systematic prosecution. Also put in place were the following:

- A land restitution process

- A land reform policy designed to transfer 30% of white-owned land to black farmers by 2014
- Employment equity and affirmative action policies
- A black economic empowerment strategy
- Special pensions for those who contributed to the struggle against apartheid
- A Missing Persons Unit to recover the remains of 'disappeared' activists (established on the recommendation of the TRC after it had completed its work)
- A Special Investigations Unit to undertake systematic prosecution (as above)
- And, crucially, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) designed to restructure the state and the economy in order to redistribute wealth and advance previously disadvantaged communities

In other words, at the outset of the post-apartheid era there was a commitment to a comprehensive range of processes led by the state but requiring action by all of society - the state, civil society, the private sector, communities and individuals. Each one of those processes relied fundamentally on memory work. On archives. Much of this work is ongoing. Much good work has been done. However, overall our implementation of these strategies has been very slow. Most important, in some areas we have stopped the work. Most of the TRC's recommendations were ignored. Reparations were small. (Very recently our government has indicated that it wants to redeploy half of the money earmarked for further reparations.) A handful of more or less arbitrary prosecutions have taken place since the TRC finished its work in 2003. The fragile moral underpinning of the TRC has been unravelled. And, crucially, the RDP was replaced by a neo-liberal macro-economic policy. Inequality in South Africa today is greater than it was in 1994. Our performance on the 'harder' processes has

been poor; on the 'softer' processes much better.

"We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road." Mandela's legacy must reckon with some of the failures to implement his original vision for reckoning with our pasts. But the primary responsibility must be carried by the next generation of leadership.

Today we are paying the price of deeply skewed memory work. There is a lot of rage in our society, rooted in the past. Arguably we are sitting on another powderkeg. We know now that we have lots to learn from other countries. We are not exceptional. We have not found a magical route to reconciliation. We are beginning to accept that the really difficult memory work hasn't even started. We understand that there is no short-cut to the liberatory future our people dream of, and increasingly, demand.

What about archives in South Africa? I don't have time to talk about archive in the broadest sense, so I'll focus on the new post-apartheid national archival system. Our public archives system. By the end of Nelson Mandela's presidency, most of the system's building blocks had been put in place and it was beginning to take shape around five key objectives:

- Turning archives into an accessible public resource in support of the exercise of rights.
- Using archives in support of post-apartheid programmes of redress and reparation, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, land restitution and special pensions.
- Taking archives to the people through imaginative and participative public programming.
- Active documenting of the voices and the experiences of those either excluded

from or marginalised in the colonial and apartheid archives.

- Transforming public archives into auditors of government record-keeping in support of efficient, accountable and transparent administration.

Much good work was done systematically through the 1990s, but the hopes of that period have not been realised. Today the national archival system is in trouble. This despite the work of many courageous and dedicated professionals. The vision of the 1990s has evaporated. Chronic underfunding and lack of resources is ubiquitous. The political will required to change things is largely absent. The system, simply put, is not delivering. These conclusions have been reached by the Archival Platform (a joint University of Cape Town-Nelson Mandela Foundation project) on the basis of a detailed analysis undertaken over two years (2012-2014). As I speak the Platform's report is being finalized for submission to the Minister of Arts and Culture during November 2014. According to the Report (pp.3-4) the system in 2014 fares poorly when measured against the key objectives of the 1990s:

- As has been noted repeatedly by the Auditor-General in recent years, the state of government record-keeping is embarrassing. And public archives are not equipped, resourced nor positioned to do the records auditing and records management support they are required to by their mandates. Poor record-keeping undermines service-delivery, cripples accountability, and creates environments in which corruption thrives.
- Generally public archives have been unable to transform themselves into active documenters of society, nor to fulfil their mandated role of co-ordinating and setting standards across sectors. Oral history projects are common, but are both random and undertaken in modes that are

profoundly problematic in relation to voice and to power. The huge potential of digitisation in support of preservation and public access has not been harnessed.

- Apartheid-era patterns of archival use and accessibility have proved resilient. Archives remain the domain of elites. Public archives do very little outreach, and only a fraction of their holdings are accessible online.
- Swathes of documentary memory are being lost, especially in electronic environments. While 21st century recordkeeping is primarily electronic, public archives remain geared to paper-based realities. Numerous cases have been reported of records ‘disappearing’. And public archives continue to authorise the destruction of the vast majority (estimated at over 90%) of public records through appraisal processes without independent monitoring in the public interest.
- Ironically public access to archives has become more restricted in the era of a constitutionally protected freedom of information. The 1990s vision of ‘open democracy’, which saw archives opened in ways that had been impossible under apartheid, has been lost. The Promotion of Access to Information Act is routinely used by archives for gatekeeping. And the impending Protection of State Information Act has already fostered new cultures of secrecy within public archives and revived that old apartheid oppressive tool – the classified record.

The Archival Platform’s analysis reveals a national archival system that looks like something from the past. After twenty years of democratisation and transformation the system reminds me of nothing so much as the 1980s State Archives Service and its bantustan subsidiaries. We are haunted by this presence of what we want to be absent. We are haunted by our 1990s dream of a truly post-apartheid system. We are haunted

by the ghosts of those who sacrificed so much for our liberation.

Let me return to the Mandela quote I started with:

“The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road ... The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.”

It still holds true, doesn’t it? We should be ashamed. Ashamed before Madiba, and before every individual who died for our freedom, who sacrificed themselves, who suffered privation and violation. And who continue to. This morning at the NMF we convened a dialogue on land and traditional leadership, focusing on North West Province. How do we justify communities who confronted forced removal under apartheid facing similar removal today as a result of alliances between the state, mining companies and so-called traditional leaders?

The only question which remains is: what do we do about it? We keep fighting. We keep working. We keep walking the long walk to freedom. Last week Cheryl Carolus spoke very movingly at the memorial for our fallen comrade Gerald Kraak. She demanded of us that we keep working. Wagging her finger in PW Botha style, she implored us to keep working. “Your work matters,” she said. Friends, whether we are in the land sector or in archives, in the NGO sector or the academy, whether we are students or madalas like me, we must heed her call. Even if we are discouraged and exhausted, we must keep working. *A luta continua.*