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Muller, Adam

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**Historicism, Nationalism and Ethics:  
Some Reflections on the 'New' South Africa**

Adam Muller

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Aalborg University

Fibigerstræde 2

Dk-9220 Aalborg Ø, Denmark

Phone + 45 96 35 91 33

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## Historicism, Nationalism, and Ethics: Some Reflections on the "New" South Africa

Adam Muller

University of Manitoba

"There are no people without history, or who can be understood without it. Their history, like ours, is incomprehensible outside its setting in a wider world (which has become coterminous with the inhabited globe) and, certainly, in the past half-millennium it cannot be understood except through the intersections of different types of social organization, each modified by interaction with the others" (Eric Hobsbawm, *All Peoples Have History*, 1998)

The argument I wish to advance in this paper builds upon the claim that history plays a constitutive role in the imagined community found at the heart of the modern nation state. Citizens, on this view, come to recognize themselves as such at least partly in virtue of the stories they tell and hear told about themselves, their attachments to their homeland, as well as about the homeland itself. This is not a new idea; it has been espoused in one form or another by political philosophers *at least* since the nineteenth century. But its longevity has done little to diminish its present contentiousness. Part of the problem with the claim is that the terms "history", "nation", and "community", in virtue of their referential ambiguities and implication in a *mise-en-abyme* of postmodernist scepticisms, have proven very difficult to work with. Of these terms "history" is perhaps the most troublesome, and has been so more or less since the time of Herodotus. But it is in the wake of postmodernism and its disciplinary and methodological corollaries (cultural studies, relativism, anti-realism) that history in the traditional sense has become almost undoable, as well as undone. Indeed it would be fair to say, as a number of practicing historians have said, that history is currently in a state of crisis, one

with serious implications for our thinking about nationalism, and one with no immediate end in sight.

Perhaps nowhere have the problems with "history" been more fully revealed in recent years than in South Africa, a country struggling to define itself nationally in marked contrast to its racist past. But the past in South Africa, as in so many other nations in the midst of political and social reconfiguration, is not all that easily identified as such. The line between fact and fiction, often fine, can sometimes disappear completely, hidden by the language of political self-justification common to victors and vanquished alike. By way of redressing this problem, and in recognition of its significance to the ongoing stability of the "new" South Africa, the Mandela government in 1995 established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) whose dual mandate was to determine what actually happened during the struggle against apartheid and to decide what should consequently be done about it.

The TRC fascinates me for a number of reasons, but one of the most significant of these is that its activities speak loudly of the interrelationship of history and ethics. As I will go on to show, the TRC's formal *raison d'être* was to redress past injustices, to offer a form of moral solace to those previously unable or unwilling to receive it. But in order to adjudicate fairly and with equanimity its commissioners needed to be properly informed; to be properly informed, of course, they needed to know what had happened in South Africa's prisons, townships, and bushveldt, as well as in Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. The commissioners, in short, needed to know the Truth about apartheid. Only then could justice be served. History, truth, and ethics were thus conjoined in the operational mandate of the TRC, and in a way that raises interesting problems for historicists.

Historicism is not a new idea, indeed it reflects some structural ambiguities in the practice of history which, it has been argued,<sup>1</sup> go all the way back to the methodological peculiarities of Herodotus (fabulism) and Thucydides (documentarism). At issue in a comparison of their respective methods, and of central importance to historicism more generally, is the role played by context in shaping our understanding of the "text" that is the past. Indeed the debate over historicism, which now dominates history as never before, can be seen to revolve around the crucial question of whether or not it is ever really possible to know something about the past, "knowing the past" here meaning "comprehend it objectively" in some way independently of our current context: our biases, opinions, and multifarious states of mind. The generally agreed upon short answer to this question seems to be "no", and for a couple of very good reasons, and yet it is not at all clear what such an answer entails for historiography. For some historians, let us call them "presentists", this answer means that historians should reject the idea that the past can be understood as a discrete constellation of actions and events, recoverable through the sustained concentration of historians' energies on appropriate forms of evidence. On this view the study of the past can, at most, tell us something about who we are right now, at this precise moment in time. For others, whom we may call "positivists", the past can be recovered piece by piece and explained objectively, through the careful identification and interpretation of documents and other appropriate evidence of prior acts and experiences.

This latter view has come to be associated with the thought of the nineteenth-century historian and philosopher Leopold von Ranke, who urged historians "only to show what actually happened" ("Preface to 'Histories of Romance and Germanic Peoples'", 1973, p. 57)<sup>2</sup>. The Rankean position dominated historiographical thinking throughout much of the twentieth century, thanks in no small

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Hamilton, 1996, pp. 7-13.

<sup>2</sup>"To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present of the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)" (1973, p. 57)

way to the efforts of the English historian Geoffrey Elton. The overarching concern in Elton's work is that what he termed "ideological theory" would force the historian to tailor his evidence to explanatory schemes alien to the period under consideration. Thus his claim that the evidence of the past must be read "in the context of the day that produced it [...] The present must be kept out of the past if the search for the truth of that past is to move towards such success as in the circumstances is possible" (quoted in Evans, 1998, p. 75). This last sentence helps to clarify Elton's position in that it shows that he accepts that for practical reasons our present understanding of the past must remain incomplete. For as Dominic LaCapra has shown, the evidence of past is unevenly distributed in the present, and the lens through which the historian views it is therefore of necessity opaque. This evidentiary incompleteness for Elton defines what the role of the historian must be: the transformation of facts into evidence for arguments about the interconnectedness of events.

It is to this conception of the historian's craft that the presentists take exception, and it should be noted that after struggling for decades the presentists appear to have carried the day. There are stronger and weaker versions of the presentist position, though the stronger version is now on the ascendant institutionally and currently represents the greatest threat to traditional "history". The weaker version of the presentist argument can be identified with the hermeneutic position outlined by E.H. Carr (1990), in his seminal text *What is History?*. For Carr the past must of necessity be seen in terms of present concerns and preoccupations, but not statically so. Past and present on his view exist in dialogue, in what he terms a "coherent relation" (1990, p. 130), with the former informing the way in which the historian chooses presently to interrogate it. Some sense of the specifics of this dynamic relationship is revealed in the following quote:

The absolute in history is not something in the past from which we start; it is not something in the present, since all present thinking is necessarily relative. It is something still incomplete and in process of becoming-something in the future

towards which we move, which begins to take shape only as we move towards it, and in the light of which, as we move forward, we gradually shape our interpretation of the past (1990, p. 121).

Carr's thesis, although in several respects dated, nonetheless has proven enduring, and still for many students of history represents their first exposure to debates within the field of historiography over such matters as objectivity, context, and values.

The stronger presentist claim seeks to destroy history, with a capital "H", altogether. One of its most vocal proponents is Keith Jenkins, a scholar for whom the postmodern present—a fractured, unstable place—renders the line between present and past indistinguishable, and history irrelevant. On Jenkins's view:

it really is history *per se* that radical postmodernism threatens with extinction [...]  
I argue that we can now "forget history" for postmodern imaginaries *sans histoire*.  
Of course, this doesn't mean to say that the lower case (and other histories) are already dead and buried, rather that an argument can be made that history *per se* is just slipping out of conversation; that it does not seem urgent or much to the point any more. And it is, of course my argument that this is a good thing (*Why History?*, 1999, p. 9).

Just why this eradication of historical activity and understanding should be a "good thing" has to do with the standard advantages attributed to postmodernism: the eradication of artificial differences between races, classes, and sexual identities; an end to the privileging of white, European cultures (and histories) over a host of non-European ones; and the abandonment of tired Modernist myths about improvement and progress, myths belied by the horrors which have typically accompanied them.



Now, there are more and less charitable ways to read Jenkins's argument, and the arguments of those he claims to represent. One of the least charitable of these (and self-admittedly so) can be found in Richard Evans's, otherwise superb study *In Defence of History*, in which he attributes Jenkins's iconoclasm to his being "only a lecturer in an institute of higher education, and so feels excluded from the multi-million pound university institutions he is criticizing so aggressively" (1998, p. 205). Evans's point is that by critically oversimplifying the workings of culture and the institutions of which it is comprised, Jenkins leaves himself open to precisely the same kind of reductively crude response as that which he levels at others. Evans reminds postmodernists that before they dispense with history out of hand, they need to know exactly what it is they are rejecting: "Like many postmodernist critics of history, Jenkins lumps all historians together into a single category ('bourgeois liberals') and refuses to recognize the enormous variety of political and methodological positions that characterize the profession as it is today" (ibid., p. 207).

Be that as it may, it is clear that Jenkins, and those he cites as influences, have some grave and *prima facie* legitimate reservations about the practice, about the very conditions of possibility, of history. It is equally clear that these reservations have a broad base of support in the profession at large. Two of these reservations concern me here, since they potentially complicate our ability to "read" the TRC historically, and thus to assess its contribution to nation building in South Africa. They are, first, the fact that history has no specialized language of its own; and, second, that there are risks in subsuming local historical claims and arguments under larger, overarching metanarratives, in particular those conveying some sense of human forward momentum, or "progress".

The language of historical discourse, as well as the language through which history is identified and recovered (in documents, oral histories, etc.), has been foregrounded thanks to a "linguistic turn" in historiography which began in the mid-1970s and which can be traced back to the work of Hayden

White. White and his disciples, most notably Frank Ankersmit, have done much to reconfigure the basic presumptions of historians vis-à-vis their craft by alerting them to their dependence on language, both as a means of accessing the past and as a vehicle for (mis)representing it. I do not intend to spend much time detailing the specifics of this position here. Indeed I could not hope to do so in the time I have left and still do justice to the points of view I would be summarizing. In passing, however, let me just note that for White it is impossible for the historian ever to offer a literally "true" account of some prior state of affairs since any statements made by historians will be embedded in narratives in which both fictional and non-fictional communicative conventions obtain. In White's words: "narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story" (1997, p. 393). On this view any single moment of history can give rise to an infinite number of competing (compatible and contradictory) accounts or "emplotments", and our decision about which of these to count as true will depend not on some neutral evaluative criteria but rather on our overarching rhetorical strategy and aims.

While White has often been misconstrued as advocating a more robust anti-realism than actually appears to be the case,<sup>3</sup> the same cannot be said for his student Frank Ankersmit, one of the most influential historicists working today. Ankersmit toes a strong narrativist and anti-realist line in terms "historism" and which is indebted to the postmodernism of Lyotard, de Certeau, and Derrida. In his "Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History", Ankersmit (1997, cited in Jenkins, 1999), offers a number of aphorisms indicative of his view that historical narratives paradoxically move us further away from the truth about prior actions and events. This view, and the widening acceptance of the epistemic scepticism it entails, marks the advent of what he has famously termed the "autumn"

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Jenkins's elaborate rebuttal of these criticisms in his *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (1999, pp. 115-20).

of Western historiography ("Historiography and postmodernism", 1997, p. 291). Consider, for example, the following aphorism related to Ankersmit's claim that history properly aims to multiply, not to reduce, the number of possible accounts of the past, thereby rendering epistemology as such irrelevant:

5.3.5. Historiographical debate, ultimately, does not aim for agreement but for the proliferation of interpretive theses. The purpose of historiography is not the transformation of narrative things into real things (or their type concepts). On the contrary, it attempts to bring about the dissolution of what seems known and unproblematic. Its goal is not the reduction of the unknown to the known, but the estrangement of what seems so familiar ("Six Theses", 1999, cited in Jenkins, 1999, p. 151).

Ankersmit's aims in formulating his claims in this way are multiple and complex, but centrally involve his desire to repudiate the scientific positivism characteristic of a kind of historiographical modernism which attempts to distinguish between available accounts of the past with reference to some stable notion of "what really happened". On the latter view it would be possible to determine not simply what happened in the past, but also what this happening meant; on Ankersmit's view such a reckoning would be impossible.

Ankersmit's position impinges on a number of debates in epistemology, metaphysics, literary criticism and the sociology of knowledge. It also, however, bears significance for our thinking about ethics, for inasmuch as the narrativity of history is a representational problem, it is also a special kind of ethical one. When George Santayana proposed that those of us who forget the past are doomed to repeat it he was making the case that the study of the past teaches us not just simply about where we've come from, but also about how to get to where it is we would like to be (and what to look out for along the way). Without that past, however, or with the past only ever serving multiple

and contingent present ends (as strong presentists like Ankersmit and White would have it), it is unclear exactly what *or how* the past is supposed to teach us either about ourselves and our values or about those belonging to people who aren't at all like us. For presentists the past can only ever be present-confirming, ethically or otherwise. Put another way the question becomes: in the absence of a stable, non-contingent, historiographical frame of reference what kind of ethical roadmaps can we draw to guide us through our ongoing process of moral and cultural refinement? In crucial ways this is a question the presentists can't answer, Ankersmit's claim to the ubiquity of ethics in narrative history notwithstanding.<sup>4</sup>

This recalls the second reservation cited above: the one involving suspicion of grand narratives, especially that of progress. Consistent with their postmodernist creed, and against high modernist historians like Arnold Toynbee, for whom there were twenty-one civilizations in the past all of which passed through similar stages of growth, breakdown, and dissolution, presentists reject the notion that patterns can be located in history which indicate a cultural trajectory of any kind. As Ankersmit puts it: "Narrative interpretations are not necessarily of a sequential nature; historical narratives are only contingently stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end" ("Six Theses", 1999, cited in Jenkins, 1999, p. 144). Ankersmit's reference to contingency here underscores the importance of the "present" interpretive context to the strong presentist position. For what is contingent on this view is the claim by the historian to speak *sotto voce* for the past or in anticipation of the beliefs, desires, and needs of those living in the future. The presentist demands that the historian be agnostic, and silent, on both counts in a form of historical praxis termed by Gertrude

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<sup>4</sup>5.4.1. The historian is the professional 'outsider': the gap between himself and historical reality, which he is always attempting to bridge, is identical to the gap between the individual and society, which ethics and political philosophy attempt to bridge. The ethical dimension must therefore be ubiquitous in historiography. Modern historiography is based on a political decision" ("Six Theses", 1999, cited in Jenkins, 1999, p. 152).

Himmelfarb (1997), "history at the pleasure of the historian" (p. 158). An important question arises from this conception of historical self-gratification, however: what of cultures which self-consciously desire progress, of groups of people anxious to learn from their mistakes *as a people* and make a better world for themselves? Must their hopes for improvement be dismissed as one more modernist fantasy, or is there something that history-or historicism-can do to assist them in their social and moral reconstruction?

The answer to these questions brings me back both to South Africa, and also to my thinking about nationalism, since it is pretty clear that political philosophers more or less agree that history plays a pivotal role in nation building. This agreement is longstanding, and at least on one reading can be shown to consist in an understanding of the nature of history now recognizable as "presentist". Presentism underlies Renan's observation in the 1880s that the soul of a nation is constituted by its past as well as by its present. By "present" here Renan means the day-to-day practices indicative of a marked, self-conscious desire to work to preserve a shared set of interests, a heritage, a way of life. The patterns of this way of life are detectable only through the lens of present concerns, and the past thus assumes for Renan a sort of manufactured character; it is enacted in the present via "an everyday plebiscite" (1994, p. 17), the decision of a public to continue to live together as a community, and to affirm a shared culture structured around a stable, officially sanctioned past.

More recently Eric Hobsbawm has written of the invention of traditions and of the attempts by nation-builders to obscure the artificiality of their constructions. Recognition of this strategic disingenuousness similarly lies behind Ernest Gellner's claim that "Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all not what it seems to itself" (1994, p. 64). Gellner, like Hobsbawm, tracks the creation of the stable "official" cultures so necessary for the creation of nations, at the heart of which always lies a sanctioned and sanitized history. Thus Renan's recognition that:

Man, sirs, does not improvise. The nation, even as the individual, is the end product of a long period of work, sacrifice and devotion. The worship of ancestors is understandably justifiable, since our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, of great men, of glory [...], that is the social principle on which the national idea rests (1994, p. 17).

This social principle, forged as it is out of the raw material of common experience and shared outlooks, is powerful enough on Renan's view to overcome such local differences as those between languages and tribes.<sup>5</sup>

The key feature of this process of history making which I would like to draw to your attention is that it operates free from certain epistemic constraints. It is not, in other words, necessary for the reconstructed past to be "true" or in any sense "to really have happened". It is enough for a people to consent (actively or passively) to a set of historical conventions for an imagined past to count as legitimate and therefore as *de facto* "true". Ulf Hedetoft (1995) recognizes this factual agnosticism when he defines history as:

one out of many prerequisite source materials for the shape and contents of an actually resultant nationalist meaning- and sign-configuration, eg. as various types of memory, whether fully, partially, or not at all in accordance with "what really happened", various potential image substances to hook on to, various events to be shaped or forgotten-negatively or positively identified with-emotionalized or related to in a more neutral, cognitive form (p. 337).

Hence the significance of Benedict Anderson's claims concerning the correlation between the rise of print capitalism and the rise of nations, for it is especially in the pages of print-sources like

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<sup>5</sup>Oh but were it so! The recent fragmentation of the Balkans, as well as other violent national reconfigurations in Europe, Africa, and Asia, have underscored the optimism of Renan's formulation.

newspapers that communities are imagined and history is made (via the selection or non-selection of events on which to report).

Against the background of this view of history and its importance to nation-building, what, then, are we to make of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission? The TRC came into being as a result of the constitutional negotiations preceding the first fully democratic elections in South Africa. In the final draft of the interim constitution there can be found the following passage, included as a "post-amble" at the behest of F.W. de Klerk although sanctioned by Nelson Mandela as well:

The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu [the African philosophy of humanism] but not for victimization.

In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions, and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past. To this end, Parliament under this Constitution shall adopt a law determining a firm cut-off date which shall be a date after 8 October 1990 and before 6 December 1993 and providing for mechanisms, criteria and procedures, including tribunals, if any, through which such amnesty shall be dealt with at any time after the law has been passed (cited from Krogh, 1999, pp. ix-xii).

The ambiguous language of this passage testifies to the uncertainty amongst the bargaining parties over how far-reaching any amnesty process should be, as well as what form the decision-making mechanism for granting it should take. It is nonetheless clear that amnesty is held by all concerned to be a precondition for fluid political transformation in South Africa, and this for obvious reasons including the protection of executive officers in the outgoing and incoming regimes. Given the stakes in any amnesty process—stakes including the internationally crucial moral high ground—there remained for South Africans planning an amnesty procedure the requirement that they strike a delicate balance between the need for justice (*ubuntu*) and the practicalities of political and social reform. That this balance should ultimately be thought realizable through a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* shows at least a tacit commitment by its planners to the following line of reasoning: reconciliation is a prerequisite for national unity; amnesty in its turn is a prerequisite for reconciliation; and truth, in the form of full disclosure of prior bad acts, finally makes amnesty (as well as other forms of forgiveness) possible.<sup>6</sup> As full disclosure, the kind of truth at issue for the TRC's amnesty committee was, strikingly, the *truth about what really happened in the past*.

It seems noteworthy to me that at the heart of South Africa's post-apartheid reconstruction was a commitment to a philosophical notion of truth in history that seems at odds both with a historicist conception of history and the prevailing view amongst political philosophers concerning how elite publics manufacture a nation's past. That is, if we accept the view that the nation's past becomes recognizable as such not organically but deliberately and strategically, as the result of a carefully planned effort at institutionally entrenching some desired version of things as they really were, then

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<sup>6</sup>"Applicants would have to convince a panel of commissioners that their crimes had been carried out with a political objective. In making their decision the commissioners would weight six factors, known as the 'Norgaard principles': the motive; the objective; the context; whether the deed was authorized; its 'legal and factual nature'; and its proportionality to a political goal" (Meredith, 1999, p. 21).



South Africa's departure from this model begs for further clarification and comment. At least one crucial question comes to mind: why did South Africa predicate reconciliation (and therefore national unity) on a positivistic conception of historical Truth?

At least part of the answer to this question has to do with the violent legacy of apartheid, and with the state of the South African nation in the decade or so leading up to elections in 1994. This was an extremely murky period in the nation's history during which President P.W. Botha famously declared that in response to the "total onslaught" by communists against his white regime the government would generate a "total strategy" for dealing with the threat (Meredith, 1999, p. 16). This strategy included the arrest and detainment without trial of hundreds of black community leaders, church workers, student activists, and union officials. It also included cross-border raids on ANC bases in neighbouring countries, and the training of rebel groups in countries like Zimbabwe with governments sympathetic to the struggle for black liberation. Most seriously, though, "total strategy" included the funding of covert police and military groups responsible for the torture and murder of political opponents as well as the training of militant black organizations like the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) hostile to the ANC. These latter strategies were never formally acknowledged by the white government either under Botha or under his successor F.W. de Klerk, and so remained "outside" history for the bulk of the white population. But "total strategy" was understood by blacks to be part of their history, the denials of the white establishment notwithstanding.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>In 1989 the commission headed by Supreme Court Judge Louis Hams was appointed to investigate claims by Dirk Coetzee and Almond Nofomela that the government operated death squads responsible for the murder of political dissidents. In a process described as "largely a farce" (Meredith, 1999, p. 34), the commission essentially vindicated the state security apparatus.

At issue in this difference of historical perspectives is identity itself. In so saying I am agreeing with philosophers like Charles Taylor who suggest that our understanding of the past and of our place in it helps to give shape to the "horizons of significance" against which our moral sense and "authentic" inner selves develop and mature. Thus different *shared* personal histories—at least insofar as they can be said to differ over such vital details as whether or not injustice has occurred and suffering has been real—give rise to different group identities or communities, and consequently to large numbers of people nominally unable to recognize one another as fundamentally the same sort of beings—in-the-world. Hence Thabo Mbeki's observation that apartheid caused South Africans to "lose their humanity" (quoted in Krogh, 1999, p. 77). Mbeki means "loss" here in two senses: whites lost their humanity under apartheid because of the crimes they committed against blacks; blacks lost their humanity in turn because of the failure of whites to recognize or care about the extent of their suffering. The recognition of the scale of these losses underwrites Mbeki's conclusion that the "only thing that will heal this country is large doses of truth...and the truth is that apartheid was a form of genocide and a crime against humanity" (quoted in Krogh, 1999, pp. 76-77). In the wake of such sentiments the TRC's primary responsibility became to recover the truth about the past in such a way that its veracity would be left beyond dispute. The acknowledgement of this truth could then become the basis for precisely the mutual recognition and cultural *rapprochement* essential for the proper functioning of democracy in South Africa.

The TRC as it finally came to be offered three advantages to those concerned with guaranteeing the truth of history. First, it was committed to the principle of publicity, and its meetings were open to the public and broadcast across the country on radio and TV. It also issued its findings in a massive 3500 page report, although high black illiteracy rates rendered this mode of dissemination only a qualified success. Second, the TRC managed to name names while still holding to general standards of legal due process, thus guaranteeing the perception of its procedural neutrality. This perception

was crucial to maintain given the strong reservations about its mission held by nearly everyone subject to its scrutiny: the ANC objected to having their transgressions considered on a par with those of the white state; Afrikaners objected to their under-representation on the Commission and claimed that it was overwhelmingly pro-ANC; the IFP objected that the TRC was a showcase for the ANC, and claimed that the whole process of Commission hearings resembled Stalin's show trials of the 1930s. And yet the TRC guaranteed due process by pre-interviewing all those scheduled to testify in public and by notifying those they accused in order to allow them to defend themselves; they provided lawyers to those unable to pay for their own; and they informed all of those accused in the commission's final report well in advance of its publication so that they had time to appeal the TRC's assessment. Third, the Commission did not remain primarily concerned with the official acknowledgement of past misdeeds by government, military, and police leaders, and instead made a concerted effort to hear the stories and document the atrocities of individual perpetrators all the way down the line. This level of attention allowed for details to become publically known about hundreds of cases which would otherwise have remained unacknowledged, unresolved, and consequently unhistorical.

And yet despite these procedural precautions the TRC has generally been viewed as a failure by South Africans, regardless of their race or political affiliation. There are many causes for complaint<sup>8</sup>. Problems with the reconciliation process which Martin Meredith identifies in his study of the Commission include: the fact that the media coverage of the TRC was viewed and heard mostly by non-whites; what coverage whites did hear was fragmentary and led to the perception that there was more to the story of the anti-apartheid struggle than Afrikaaner brutality; indeed the more brutal the crimes being reported the more it became possible for the white audience to distance themselves

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Martin Meredith (1999), *Coming To Terms* and Antjie Krogh (1999), *Country of My Skull*.

from their perpetrators. Finally, the TRC violated its mandate for neutrality in a number of controversial decisions including the granting in 1997, without explanation, of a blanket amnesty to thirty-seven ANC leaders including Thabo Mbeki. The TRC's handling of Winnie Mandela was similarly disturbing, to blacks and to whites alike. The following statistics suggest the extent to which whites perceived the TRC to be a failure:

In a survey carried out in July 1998, some 72 percent of whites felt that the TRC had made race relations worse; almost 70 percent felt that the TRC would not help South Africans to live together more harmoniously in the future; and some 83 percent of Afrikaners and 71 percent of English-speaking whites believed the TRC to be biased (Meredith, 1999, pp. 314-5).

The TRC's effects were predictably more profoundly transformative for blacks, since it provided a sanctioned public forum for airing black grievances and pain for the first time in living memory. But even amongst blacks its success was not uniformly conceded. Particularly hurtful to blacks was the refusal of F.W. de Klerk to take responsibility for the actions of his subordinates, since it implied a rejection of the claim that the state itself, and not simply some of its servants, was behind years of cruelty and abuse. Nor was the amnesty granted by the Commission always viewed with understanding by victims of violence, as when Dirk Coetzee, the commander of Vlakplaas, one of the apartheid regime's most notorious death squads, was allowed to escape criminal and civil prosecution. Additional criticisms were levelled at the TRC by those unhappy with the time period it was mandated to cover: all political acts committed since the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. For many this chronological delimiting suggested, contrary to facts, that criminally racist behaviour was a relatively recent invention in South Africa.

This last objection underscores once more for me the extent to which the TRC can be shown to fail insofar as it remained unable, finally, to bridge the distance between competing answers to the

question of what really happened under apartheid. A great deal hinged on the TRC's ability to affect such a rehabilitation, not least the mutual intelligibility of antagonists and their concomitant recognition of one another as similarly human: linguistic, racial and social distinctions notwithstanding. I follow Rawls in finding this recognition of shared humanity central to the creation of free and equal persons under the law, and hence a precondition for justice as fairness, the latter considered a principle which "provides a publically recognized point of view from which all citizens can examine before one another whether or not their political and social institutions are just" (1997, p. 394). Just institutions are necessary for the proper functioning of any multicultural state, and particularly for states like South Africa which wish to become fully democratic. The kind of informed and willing political agreement required for justice as fairness, though, presupposes a conception of citizens as free and equal persons, a conception of personhood entailing in turn a public recognition of individuals' authentic identities understood against the backdrop of historically informed horizons of significance.<sup>9</sup>

I wish to conclude by noting once again my agreement with the claim that nations are constructed, as are their histories. Indeed much of what I have been accounting for here confirms the proposition that the nation and its history can perhaps best be thought of as reciprocally sustaining. But to acknowledge this does not entail the necessity or the inevitability of historicism, despite the plurality of true histories present within a nation at any one given point in time. On this point I am inclined to follow Hobsbawm's rejection of historicism and claim that the historian's first "duty" is to "resist the formation of national, ethnic and other myths as they are being formed" (1998, p. 11). To fail to do so is to put history in the service of politics and hence at the mercy of contingent local passions and interests the byproducts of which can be horrific. Something like this belief motivates Richard Evans to claim that "French history is too important a matter to be left to the French, German history

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<sup>9</sup>For a more substantial version of this claim see Mohanty (1997), Chapter 7.

has affected other histories too greatly for it to be left to the Germans" (1998, p. 214). It is precisely in virtue of the multiple perspectives possibly brought to bear on events that it becomes possible to guarantee historical truth.<sup>10</sup> This guarantee of historical truth reveals history's ethical character, since it prevents the failures of recognition common in multicultural environments like Bosnia and Northern Ireland<sup>11</sup> in which the consequences of such failures have been demonstrated time and again, and again. Recognition in turn guarantees personal identity such that it becomes possible for persons to meet as equals in debates over the nature of the common good. Figuring prominently in these debates, of course, will be the precise form the institutions of a nation-state must assume to ensure the fair treatment of all its citizens, regardless of their color or creed. This "fair treatment" is nothing less than what we more commonly term "justice". The failure of the TRC, then, can be seen as a failure to specify-at least in some substantial part-what justice might look like in the "new", multicultural, South Africa.

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<sup>10</sup>This claim is related to Robert Merton's (1993) argument that what he terms "universalism" guarantees the objectivity of science.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Michael Ignatieff (1993), *Blood and Belonging*, Chapters 1 and 6.

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