Citizenship, identity and myth

Educational implications of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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How should the work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) be taken up in citizenship education? National myths are widely regarded as an appropriate starting point for citizen identity. Instead, this article argues that citizenship education in South Africa should be based on a ‘constitutional patriotism’ that takes the political project presented by the TRC as its starting point.

PART I

Many if not most modern democracies are plural societies whose members have diverging loyalties and identities. This makes fostering a shared sense of citizenship both difficult and controversial. The problem becomes even greater in polities marked by recent histories of violence and authoritarianism as well as difference and oppression. While members of societies with settled democratic conventions are likely to have some of the shared memories that help to create a common identity on which citizens can draw in maintaining a commitment to a political community, where should educators in societies where these conditions are not present start in trying to teach the shared identity necessary for common citizenship?

South Africa at the end of the nineties exemplifies the problem of creating a common citizenship from a deeply divided past and in the absence of a shared identity. Following the near miracle of a negotiated transition to democracy, a starting point is needed from which to build a common citizenship. Here the ‘parallel lives’ of identity and memory (Gillis 1994) do not offer the means of promoting unity as readily as they might in less divided societies. The shared myths which are often regarded as creating identity out of memory are not present. Let’s accept James Booth’s notion of political identity as presupposing ‘the continuity of a community over time’ (Booth 1999, p.249). What possibilities does the South African situation present for the two dimensions of this continuity – looking ahead on the one hand and looking back, confronting the past through memory, on
the other? The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose report was released in 1998, offers a starting point. The TRC has been seen by some as presenting the defining action of a new order. Indeed, one respected commentator has described it as:

... destined for a place in history. Certainly it is the most important political testament to emerge from South Africa and I suspect that to describe it as one of the most important documents of the 20th century is to judge conservatively. (Beresford 1998, p.22)

I will argue, through a discussion of the TRC, firstly that looking back and coming to terms with the continuing moral presence of South Africa’s past is not an appropriate means of fostering shared myths as a basis for a common political identity, and, secondly, that collective looking ahead, taking up the moral implications of the TRC, should aim instead to develop what Booth (1999) calls a constitutional patriotism. In exploring how the report of the TRC offers a means of developing a common citizenship and a starting point for education for democratic citizenship in the new polity, my aim is to challenge the idea that education for democratic citizenship should harness historical and political myths. I will suggest how the educational uptake of the TRC’s work should proceed instead. The aims, process, findings and recommendations of the Commission will be discussed, followed by an assessment of its implications for education for democratic citizenship. My starting point is a debate that precedes the TRC’s work.

PART II

Post-apartheid education, I have argued (Enslin 1994), should not include nation-building among its aims as a means of developing democratic citizenship. The logic of nation-building, which would require the invention of a ‘communal national past’ (Miller 1988, quoted in Enslin 1994, p.29) with attendant myths of nationhood, is at odds with the educational ideal of the citizen as an autonomous person with a capacity for critical thinking.

In taking issue with this position, John White (1997) has argued that there is a place for myth in the curriculum, as part of the teaching of national history. Central to White’s argument is his treatment of the concept of a myth. He correctly points out that my argument has assumed that the myths that characterise national sentiment are based on falsehood or irrationality of some kind, but argues that:

... national myths are rarely based on outright falsehoods ... Historians differ in their interpretations ... If a myth is not false or irrationally based, only a contested version of events, then the charge that the idea of the nation contradicts the rationality requirements of democracy fails to stick. (1997, p.19)

I have no quarrel with White’s observation that part of the attachment to communities which are an important part of our identities ‘is attachment to an ongoing, historically situated phenomenon with a history still to be written about it in the future’ (1997, p.21). White goes on to propose that, there being no good reason to exclude the nation from the communities that comprise our identities, ‘national history, among other sorts of history,
must figure in every child’s education’ (ibid). My interest in the present article is primarily in White’s argument that myths should have a place in the curriculum.

My position has assumed an interpretation of myths, historical and political, as being by definition false or fictitious accounts of events, actions or situations. Teaching such fictitious narratives as if they are true, I have argued (1994), contradicts the aims of democratic citizenship because they undermine the autonomy of those who learn them. White is right in observing that not all myths are based on falsehoods. In remarking similarly that myth should not be identified with falsehood and deception, George Schöpflin argues that: ‘Centrally, myth is about perceptions rather than historically validated truths’ (1997, p.19). But he points out that a country’s members can be aware that an accepted myth does not represent an accurate account of history. What matters is not the historical accuracy of the myth, but the role that its content plays as a foundation of a collectivity’s conception of itself.

But the kinds of myths on which different collectivities have founded their conceptions of themselves and their relations to others vary, and can be placed on a continuum from the kinds of myths that White and Schöpflin have in mind, where there is an awareness on the part of their holders that the myth is not historically accurate, to those that are false accounts of historical events but not recognised as such. The myth that a pact with God ensured the Voortrekker victory against the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River is an example of myth as embellishment of actual events. Myth-making by forgetting can be seen in remembrance of the deaths of 26,000 Boer women and children in British concentration camps during the South African War while simultaneously forgetting that some 18,000 black people also died as a result of the scorched earth strategy of which the camps were a component. To borrow from another not dissimilar context, myth by denial is created when, for example, it is claimed that the holocaust never happened. These different kinds of historical myths share the characteristic of purporting to be true accounts of historical events. They also attribute righteousness to a particular group, especially a ‘nation’ in dispute with others, justifying its sectional interests over those of others and sometimes sanctioning acts of vengeance against the other.

White’s chosen example of a myth is quite different: that there are deep historical roots to the British nation’s attachment to liberty and that major events in British history, like the Magna Carta, can be interpreted in this light. But while defending consideration of this type of myth within the curriculum, White emphasises the importance of making several different interpretations available and encouraging pupils to make up their own minds about them. This approach to teaching pupils to evaluate competing interpretations of British constitutional history looks quite different from the way in which the perhaps cruder but still influential myths in my list have been taught. Successfully teaching these kinds of myths as if they are true, as tends to happen in authoritarian schooling systems, requires that they are not put up for contestation alongside alternative interpretations. Conversely, in a liberal education system, not to make pupils aware of some interpretations of events because they have mythical elements would also impair their autonomy by denying them the opportunity to critically scrutinise them. And presenting
to pupils a mythical interpretation as one among a set of competing interpretations is likely to expose any fictitious dimensions of the myth. I'm not disputing the power of myth, or the educational value of instructive fables and legends, provided pupils learn to recognise the differences between such myths and those that pretend to be true and incontestable narratives of significant events.

That White and I are working with different interpretations of myth can to some extent be attributed to the different kinds of societies about which we write. My examples seem to be of a type more likely to arise in very divided societies. It may be that the countries to which White refers, like Switzerland, Britain and the Scandinavian countries, where there is more of a sense of a common history, are less susceptible to the crude mythologising still present in some transitional societies, one of which is the focus of this article. Such contexts often lack a sense of a common history, mythologised or not, on which to build a new sense of citizenship, the basis of which has to be sought elsewhere. Does the new democratic order introduced in South Africa in 1994 offer the opportunity to replace the old myths, based on unacknowledged fictitious versions of history, with new less fictional myths? More specifically, can the TRC offer an opportunity to break away from myths that falsify and to constitute new myths as a foundation for a new identity?

PART III

Several societies in transition to democracy, like Chile and South Africa, have established truth and reconciliation commissions as a way of dealing with a painful past and fostering a new order. In order to consider how South Africa's Commission could provide a starting point for citizenship and citizenship education under conditions of 'transitional justice', I will first present an overview of the TRC's work and then discuss its general significance before turning to the issue of how it might be taken up educationally.

The Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, begins his foreword to its report by noting that South Africa's recent history 'is littered with some horrendous occurrences', that 'our country is soaked in the blood of her children of all races and of all political persuasions' (1998a, p.2) and that we have to come to terms with this history and to deal with its legacy.

The objectives of the Commission were to conduct inquiries into 'gross human rights violations' between 1960 and the transition to democracy in 1994, establishing the identity of persons, organisations and institutions involved in these violations, whether they were the result of deliberate planning, and who is accountable for them. The most visible part of the Commission's work was conducted by the Human Rights Violations Committee, which heard the accounts of victims and conducted investigations, while two other committees were charged with evaluating amnesty applications and with reparations and rehabilitation. Over two-and-a-half years, beginning in April 1996, the Commission conducted hearings in venues across the country. Its findings, published in a five-volume report in October 1998, draw on over 21,000 statements on human rights violations, as well as other documents including applications for amnesty – relying on the latter, espe-
cially from a large number of security policemen, for information that proved difficult to obtain by other means.

As a process, the Commission was a unique and powerful spectacle. Over many months of public hearings, with extensive and often shocking coverage in all the media that ensured that the hearings became a process of public education, ordinary people who were victims of human rights violations, or their relations, told their stories, as did some of the perpetrators. In some cases the victims were able to confront their former torturers.

The report observes that: `The apartheid system was maintained through repressive means, depriving the majority of South Africans of the most basic human rights, including civil, political, social and economic rights' (1998b, p.2). The consequences of this general deprivation of rights were many: economic deprivation and poor living conditions, physical and psychological trauma resulting from conflict between the state and its opponents, arrests, abductions, detention, restrictions, exile, loss of breadwinners, physical injuries and disabilities, and homelessness caused by the destruction of homes and the displacement of families in intra-community violence (ibid, p.3).

The main focus of the Commission's work was gross violations of human rights, which it found 'were perpetrated and facilitated by all the major role-players in the conflicts of the mandate era' (ibid, p.6), including the state and its security and law-enforcement agencies, homeland governments, the Inkatha Freedom Party, conservative surrogate organisations, white right-wing organisations, liberation movements and non-state paramilitary formations:

... all of the above were responsible for gross violations of human rights – including killing, torture and severe ill-treatment – at different stages during the mandate period and ... to varying degrees, such violations entailed deliberate planning on the part of the organisations and institutions concerned, or were of such a nature that the organisations were accountable for them. (ibid)

Most of the major participants are criticised not only for their actions but also for their response to the attempts by the Commission to establish responsibility for the injustices of the past. Former Presidents F.W. De Klerk and particularly P.W. Botha were found to be reluctant to cooperate, as was the South African Defence Force, which was 'responsible for the commission of gross human rights violations on a massive scale' (ibid, p.5). Leaders of the former state lacked an appreciation of the extent of both the violations and the massive suffering they caused. The former state had the support, active and passive, of the white electorate.

The Commission found that the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC), on the other hand, answered questions frankly and accepted collective responsibility for human rights violations committed by its members. Its internal ally during the 1980s, the United Democratic Front (UDF), accepted responsibility for human rights violations committed by its members, although its response to the Commission was not satisfactory in all respects. The Inkatha Freedom Party, under the leadership of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, was found to be uncooperative, evasive and defensive, although it had been
responsible for a large number of violations. But although it was critical of these organisations to varying degrees, the Commission's primary finding was that: 'The predominant portion of gross violations of human rights was committed by the former State through its security and law-enforcement agencies' (ibid, p.6).

In arguing that the primary responsibility rests with the former state and its allies, the Commission distinguished between the actions of the state and the liberation movements, on the grounds that apartheid was a crime against humanity, that it had been the state that had generated violent conflict and that as a legally constituted government its actions should be assessed against higher standards of conduct. Rejecting the arguments of some members of the liberation movements, it recognised the notion of a just war in assessing their conduct but found that: 'A just war does not exempt an organisation from pursuing its goals through just means' (ibid).

The Commission was able to uncover the truth about much of the violent conflict of the apartheid years; previously unanswered questions about some prominent political murders and about those who disappeared were answered. Victims and perpetrators told their stories, the latter with varying degrees of honesty. While the report makes it clear that its task was not to write the history of the country, it was quite successful in its efforts 'to expose the violations of all parties in an attempt to lay the basis for a culture in which human rights are respected and not violated' (1998c, p.2). Compiling an accurate record of events was seen as a crucial prerequisite for reconciliation: '... there can be no genuine, lasting reconciliation without truth' (ibid). Recording and acknowledging suffering and responsibility for it was a driving motive of the Commission. Its report contrasts this aim with the secrecy and silence that characterised the apartheid era, in which press freedom was restricted, censorship increased, academic freedom constrained and organisations banned. These measures 'went hand in hand with secrecy of the security apparatus and even of cabinet and parliamentary procedures. Along with secrecy went silence ...' (1998b, p.12). When the transition to majority rule was imminent, many tons of classified records were destroyed to deny access to incriminating evidence about the state's actions against its opponents. In the light of this feature of the previous state's conduct, there is a disturbing significance in the attempt by the ANC to prevent the release of the TRC report shortly before publication by an application for a court order, claiming that the report distorts history.

PART IV

Did the TRC succeed in revealing the truth and has it fostered reconciliation? There is disagreement on both issues. It has been argued (Jeffrey 1999) that: 'Far from being strong on the truth, as the commission has claimed, it has produced a report which distorts as much as discloses the truth' (quoted in Du Preez 1999, p.18). Anthea Jeffrey criticises the Commission's reliance on unverified statements made in applications for amnesty and on unsubstantiated statements made by victims, few of them given under oath and few tested under cross-examination. Some have responded that such criticism of the TRC misses the point: the value of the Commission's work lies in the process that it
oversaw, of the telling of stories by survivors or their families, and of the resulting shift in whites' perceptions of the past (Du Preez 1999).

Just as the debate about whether and in what sense the Commission revealed the truth is set to continue, so too has there been controversy about whether the TRC has produced reconciliation. For some it did. The recounting of their stories by victims of violations is presented by the report as a process of healing through telling the truth. Among these stories is that of Lukas Baba Sikwepere, who was shot in the face and blinded in a settlement near Cape Town in 1985 and later tortured by the police: 'I feel that what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story' (1998c, p.6).

Hennie Smit, whose eight-year-old son was killed by a bomb planted at a shopping centre in Amanzimtoti said:

... We buried him in Pretoria. I told newspapers that I thought my son was a hero because he died for freedom for people ... He died in the cause of the oppressed people.
A lot of people criticised me for this. They said that I was a traitor, and they condemned me, but I still feel that way today ... (ibid, pp.7-8)

Smit and his wife had met the parents of the boy who placed the bomb. He reported to the Commission his relief at meeting them and his gladness that they bore him no grudge. More ambiguously, former political detainee Alwinu Mralasi told the Commission his story of vengefulness turned to forgiveness when he encountered by chance, after five years, the man who had given false testimony against him. His knife ready, he planned to kill his accuser, but found him changed and unable to speak:

And I asked my wife to take out one pound and give it to this man so that he could buy food for himself. And that was the last I saw of him. He never went back to his house.
He went to the hospital and that was the end of his life. (ibid, p.7)

Stories like these are powerful evidence of reconciliation. But others, like a study of attitudes towards the TRC among militant youth activists of the Bonteheuwel Military Wing (BMW) in the 1980s (Ismail and Grossman 1997) tell a different tale. While some members of the BMW chose not to testify to the Commission at all, others testified with pride about their contribution to the struggle. For some, giving their testimony in public before the TRC was not comforting, but served as a reminder of their suffering at the hands of the police, of their lost youth, of educational opportunities sacrificed, of resultant unemployment and disillusionment, fuelling resentment rather than encouraging reconciliation.

In spite of the ongoing debate about whether it has succeeded in promoting truth and reconciliation, the Commission, in its findings and process, as well as its recommendations – to which I will turn shortly – provides compelling material for formulating a vision of democratic citizenship after apartheid. In the narratives of suffering, courage and forgiveness like those above there are stories of great moral force on which civic education can draw. These, along with the record of human rights violations and the allocation of responsibility for them, constitute a profound moral agenda that invites all
citizens to participate in developing a culture of human rights. As we have seen, the TRC itself is the subject of competing interpretations. But the impact of the report, true to its motivation, lies in the way it uncovers the truth about the past.

The victims whose stories have been recorded by the Commission were mostly ordinary people, who emerge on the whole with far more credit than the former officials and representatives of various organisations who were found responsible, to widely varying degrees, for gross human rights violations. And here lies another strength of the report, for those looking to understand citizenship in its light. While the former state was rightly found culpable for the vast majority of violations, and with no excuse for doing so, organisations which opposed apartheid were also found responsible by commission or omission for violations, many of which might have been prevented. These include the torture, ill-treatment and execution of mutineers and suspected enemy agents in ANC camps, and the murders by the 'necklace' method committed by followers of the UDF. Most striking of all is the case of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and the Mandela United Football Club, which was found to have conducted itself like a 'private vigilante unit' (1998b, p.8). The Commission comments that: 'Mrs Madikizela-Mandela's contempt not only for the Commission but for the notion of accountability was palpable to the millions who followed the hearing in which she appeared' (ibid, p.5). While not doubting that the right side won, these judgments by the Commission provide important material for teaching the moral complexity and ambiguity of some actions in the struggle, discouraging unqualified adulation of the victors, with the potential to foster citizens' historical and moral imagination.

The report observes that for reconciliation to be achieved, extensive healing and social and political reconstruction is required at every level of society. While conceding that reconciliation will be a complex and long-term process, it recommends a number of steps that are necessary for its achievement. One is that if reconciliation is to have a chance of succeeding, a human rights culture will have to be developed, and ought to be included in the formal education curriculum (1998c, p.2). Another is that all the Commission's records should be preserved and made available to the public, including on a website and at decentralised 'centres of memory' (ibid).

The Commission recommends the following measures to foster reconciliation: the alleviation of poverty, to close the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, allowing those who have benefited from past exploitation to contribute. This will require the creation of job opportunities. There must be a commitment to transformation in both the corporate sphere and government structures like prisons, health care, the justice system and the security forces. Assistance should be extended to victims and survivors, in the form of reparations and rehabilitation as well as apologies for human rights abuses, including those committed by the liberation movements. Rehabilitation should include those falsely accused of being informers and collaborators and ostracised from their communities.

A further implication of the TRC as a model for democracy and democratic citizenship for a new polity is the way its processes created a unique opportunity for the voices of ordinary people from all parts of the society to be heard, and a model of listening
attentively to their stories. The Commission enacted a communicative model of democracy (see Young 1996) that was inclusive and genuinely attentive to difference. Its didactic value lies also in its commitment to deliberation rather than violence. These democratic values, along with the range of measures proposed to foster reconciliation, provide South Africans with a common political project as a focus for democratic citizenship and a shared future.

PART V

In its recommendations and as a model of democratic procedure, the TRC constitutes a substantial project for South Africa’s citizens. But is it not necessary, it might be argued, given the way that citizenship in modern nation states tends to be constituted, to create from the TRC a new myth of citizenship? My response is that, apart from the dangers that myth-making of the kind based on falsification might present to the educational aim of teaching autonomy and critical thinking, there is a more fundamental problem. While the TRC may have initiated reconciliation, the process will take a long time, given the extent of the human rights violations that it documented. It has been suggested that reconciliation will not be completed in our lifetimes. In societies as deeply divided as this one still is, there is a more basic obstacle to defensible myth-making than the dangers of creating false myths, but one which also opens the way to a political identity which is constitutionally based. In her analysis of the implications of the TRC for negotiating the memory of the past, Aletta Norval (1998) notes the need to explore both the relation between identity and memory and the forms that national identity as commemoration may take. Norval argues that in trying to understand the ‘memory work’ of the TRC, ‘In contrast to the usual constructions of memories of a nation’s past, this exercise has no singular past and commemorates no one unified nationhood’ (Norval 1998, p.258; emphasis in original). Instead, she claims:

This memory work ... contains the seeds of a relation to the past and to memory which may lead South Africa to a post-national conception of identity, a conception of identity characterised by the distance it takes from that which was exemplary in the identitarian conception of identity that informed apartheid. (Norval 1998, p.259; emphasis in original)

While this leads Norval to suggest that what the TRC commemorates is the impossibility of both identity and reconciliation, it is her notion of a post-national identity that offers the most significant implication of the TRC for citizenship education. If the import of the TRC’s memory work is that it cannot provide a unified national myth, and this seems plausible given what the TRC revealed about the past, there is much else in its findings to provide a focus for the constitutional patriotism that Booth (1999) defends as an alternative to nationalism and the moral significance that nationalism attributes to the past. The focus of this citizenship in our context is the development of a culture of human rights and democratic values, and giving priority to economic and social rights through development. Constitutional patriotism does not require the shared history considered neces-
sary for nationalism; nor is it solely dependant, as is liberal universalism, on the thinness of a voluntary sharing in a commitment to universal rights. Citizenship as constitutional patriotism comprises subscription to 'a set of locally instituted but nonetheless universal principles' (Booth 1999, p.252). Here: '... identity, shared memories, and responsibility are dense but strictly within the limits of the past of the constitutional order and its practices of freedom' (Booth 1999, p.252). And Booth suggests a way of understanding what the focus of citizenship education should be in such a political order: 'Civic competence, politically defined, is the main entry requirement, not ethnic belonging, religion, or other ascriptive nonpolitical attributes' (Booth 1999, p.252). Although Booth seems to propose his concept of citizenship for a range of societies, it is particularly pertinent to contexts like South Africa. Here the civic competences would comprise the usually cited democratic dispositions and also an informed appreciation of the past, particularly of the events recorded by the TRC. Developing such capacities, rather than fostering ascriptive attributes, should characterise civic education after apartheid.

White has observed that my defence of education for democracy rather than nation-building has said, 'nothing about the society in which that education should take place, except, by implication, that it will be a society of all South Africans' (1997, p.22) and he asks, 'What should we call this, if not the creation of a South African nation?' (ibid). The TRC report itself invokes the idea of 'national reconciliation' as one of its aims, and the Commission's hearings sometimes became a process of telling myths. The TRC hearings in Alexandra Township near Johannesburg took the form of a ritual in which myths about the Township were told, cast in a litany of struggle and African nationalism (Bozzoli 1998). But the concept of the nation does little if anything to drive the judgments underlying the TRC's findings, behaving more like an uplifting slogan than the deeper moral concepts of Christian witness and forgiveness, and universal principles of truth, transparency and accountability.

No doubt the idea of the nation will continue to be invoked in our political discourse. But my argument has been that South Africans can draw richly from the TRC for a common identity through the project that it presents. Indeed, given the regional scale of past conflict and the extent of the gross human rights violations committed in neighbouring states, the project that emerges from the TRC is not one confined to the people of one country. South African citizens' moral obligation to contribute to the reconstruction of neighbouring states requires a regional if not cosmopolitan conception of citizenship and its obligations. Here there is a common political identity which comprises a rich and morally compelling local commitment to constitutional democracy as a primary identity, alongside a wider democratic identity shared with others outside the borders of this particular society.

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