Editorial

Memory and forgetting: how meta-narratives about the past overshadow the future

Two decades on from 1994 seems an appropriate time to take stock of what has been achieved and where we have fallen short of our own expectations, and identify what remains to be done in South Africa. But perhaps it is also an appropriate moment to take stock of how we remember and represent our past and how the meta-narratives, particularly about apartheid and opposition to apartheid, inform and overshadow our present and future.

Memory is a curious thing, at both a social and individual level. While we are inclined to think of our memory as a static entity, scientists such as Charles Fernyhough describe it as a constantly changing set of impressions, informed as much by the needs of the present as by the experiences of the past.[1] When the memories we have are of traumatic events, the process of remembering is even more fraught, especially when those who are doing the remembering do not share the same perspectives, experiences or social status.

For South Africans the construction of a collective memory about the experience of apartheid is thus fraught. While remembering the details of the past was regarded as an essential requirement for moving forward, we as a society did our remembering within a formal process guided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and within a very narrow time period. After the TRC, arguably, we moved forward very quickly to forget – enabled by the construction of comfortable meta-narratives that do not disturb. This is consistent with trauma psychologist Judith Herman's theory that 'the knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but … is rarely retained for long'. Indeed, she argues that '[d]enial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level'. But, 'like traumatised people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future'.[2]

The meta-narratives we have constructed draw very clear lines between 'perpetrator' and 'victim', 'hero' and 'villain', establishing these as distinct categories, despite the very real murkiness and fluidity between them, identified even by the TRC.[3] I believe it is the untroubled acceptance of these categories of 'othering', applied post-apartheid, that creates the basis for justifying state violence.

Over the past 18 months the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Global Leadership Academy of the German Development Agency (GIZ) have held a series of international dialogues about transitional justice and 'memory work'. The driving motivation of these dialogues has been to overcome what practitioners, theorists and activists in the fields of peace-building and transitional justice have come to express as a stagnancy in thinking about, and approaches to dealing with, past injustices and conflict.

The dialogues have identified as a crucial element in any transition to democracy 'respect for, and the provision of space for, the interrelated dynamics of remembering and storytelling'. At the same time they have recognised that globally our experiences have shown that 'in the context of post-oppression or post-conflict, archives and memory regimes tend to alienate voices that are potentially important for a resilient and sustainable society; whether the reckoning takes place immediately or many years after the rights violations'. The concern underlying these views is that what is regarded as important to remember, and what is left unsaid or silenced, are shaped by today's interests and powerful groups within societies.[4]

Why is this relevant now, and why in the context of a 20-year review?

The Presidency's 20-year review[5] of safety and security between 1994 and 2014 reveals an interesting, albeit contentious, analysis of the progress made in the field of criminal justice in the past 20 years. It adopts selective narratives as fact, but in reality they are open to enormous contestation. Arguably these narratives – and the language we use to tell them – trouble our ability to address persistently high levels of violence and to understand the root of the inability of the police service to establish a mutually respectful relationship with citizens.

The language that should trouble us is the language of war and othering that has persistently characterised official statements about crime and violence since crime rates peaked in 2001. The fifth volume of the TRC's final report reminds us that the excuse that 'we were at war' was used to justify atrocities by state security forces, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party. The context of war allowed the protagonists to undertake violent actions 'with pride rather than distress or embarrassment'.[6] Yet, while being at war implies the application of military discipline and hierarchy to those involved, the TRC found that 'all parties fell short, in some respects, in imposing restraints and disciplines on their own members, followers and supporters'.[7] The report also refers to leaders' denial of responsibility for the actions of their supporters when things went wrong. This was as true of the ANC, United Democratic Front (UDF) and IFP as it was of the leaders of state security structures.

In relation to the police and policing a particular meta-narrative has been adopted, and is reflected in the Presidency's 20-year review. The story we tell ourselves is that before 1994 the police existed only to uphold apartheid, and dealing with crime was given little attention, with the latter focused on the needs of the white population. We also tell ourselves, as reflected in the 20-year review, that community structures to oversee security under apartheid were both effective and progressive, thus informing attempts to recreate such structures in the form of community policing forums and community safety forums. We have chosen to forget the violence meted out by self-defence units (SDUs) in Gauteng and the Western and Eastern Cape. We have also chosen to forget the many differences, ideological and aspirational, that existed in black communities, choosing rather to represent these communities as homogenous. And we have forgotten policemen like Wilson Magadla who served in the South African Police, and later on the TRC, who worked tirelessly and with integrity to respond to crime in all communities during apartheid.

The concluding fiction presented in the Presidency's 20-year review of safety and security is that a loss of morality is to blame for the high levels of violence in South Africa. The report holds that it is 'moral decay', a lack of respect, a failure to teach children the difference between right and wrong, that is at the root of violence, including violent public protests. My experience in speaking to perpetrators of violence over the past year has led me to understand that to speak of morality (and a loss of morality) in the context of structural violence, and in a country where violence is regarded as necessary to solve disputes, discipline children and partners, and invoke respect, is absurd. I would implore us rather, like James Gilligan[8] proposes, to regard such violence as tragedy, acknowledge the trauma it gives rise to, and seek to intervene with humility and compassion.

Several of the articles in this edition serve to trouble our existing narratives. Gail Super's article raises important considerations about the consequence of locating crime combatting as a 'community' function. While the intention behind the policy push towards 'community policing' may be to democratise policing, Super argues that it has had unintended consequences: 'Because violent punishment is one of the consequences of the state's turn towards democratic localism, we should question the way in which the "community" is deployed as a tool of crime prevention, and subject it to rigorous scrutiny.'

Julia Hornberger also tackles policing issues, arguing that to overcome the problem of violent public protests becoming more violent when the police intervene, would require the police to 'become more explicitly partisan towards the citizens they serve, and help deliver the message inherent in each protest'.

David Bruce offers an overview of state responses to corruption, showing that there is a robust legal and institutional infrastructure for addressing corruption that flounders because of unfair practices that favour those that hold power.

The articles by Khalil Goga, Jean Redpath, Elrena van der Spuy and Chloë McGrath, and Loraine Townsend, Sam Waterhouse and Christina Nomdu offer a more traditional review of the past 20 years. Goga provides an overview of state responses to organised crime while Townsend and her colleagues offer a sobering assessment of court services to support child witnesses.

In her article, Redpath shows that punitive bail and sentencing practices underlie the persistent problem of prison overcrowding. She argues that while 'durations of remand detention have increased, convictions have decreased', which results in an increasing proportion of people in remand detention who will not be convicted, while sentences are less likely than ever to contain a custodial component. Her conclusion: 'the "tough on crime" approach has in practice turned into "justice delayed and freedom denied"'.

Staying with prisons, Van der Spuy and McGrath draw on interviews with 'insiders' in the Judicial Inspectorate of Correctional Services, offering an insightful and important assessment of the efficiency of the oversight body.

Finally, the image on the front cover of this edition is an artist's impression of criminal justice over the past 20 years. The illustration is by Lize-Marie Dreyer, an honours student in visual arts at Stellenbosch University.

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Chandré Gould (Editor)

Notes

1 Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of light: the new science of memory,* London: Profile Books, 2012, 6.
2 Judith Herman, *Trauma and recovery: the aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror,* New York: Basic Books, 1997, 2.
3 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Volume five, Chapter 7, http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume5.pdf (accessed 25 June 2014).
4 Nelson Mandela Foundation and GIZ, Concept note: The Mandela dialogues: dialoguing memory work, February 2013 (unpublished).
5 The 20-year review: South Africa 1994–2014, Chapter 7: Safety and Security, www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za/news/Pages/20-Year-Review.aspx (accessed 25 June 2014).
6 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Volume five, Chapter 7, 226.
7 Ibid.
8 James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a national epidemic,* New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Editorial policy

South African Crime Quarterly is an inter-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal that promotes professional discourse and the publication of research on the subjects of crime, criminal justice, crime prevention, and related matters, including state and non-state responses to crime and violence. South Africa is the primary focus for the journal but articles on the above-mentioned subjects that reflect research and analysis from other African countries are considered for publication, if they are of relevance to South Africa.

SACQ is an applied policy journal. Its audience includes policy makers, criminal justice practitioners and civil society researchers and analysts, including the academy. The purpose of the journal is to inform and influence policy making on violence prevention, crime reduction and criminal justice. All articles submitted to SACQ are double-blind peer-reviewed before publication.