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David Goodman

## Why Killers Should Go Free: Lessons from South Africa

When Archbishop Desmond Tutu handed the five-volume final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to President Nelson Mandela on October 29, 1998, the bittersweet denouement of South Africa's negotiated revolution hung in the air like an awkward faux pas. Here were the two leading icons of the South African liberation struggle marking the completion of an official history of one of the darkest chapters in postwar times, the reign of racist terror known as apartheid. But behind the pageantry and speeches was a gut-wrenching reality: the killers were going free.

So much truth, and so little justice. This burning contradiction haunted me when I first began attending hearings of the TRC nearly three years ago. I was deeply moved by the testimonies that I heard and deeply skeptical of the process. On the face of it, the deal offered by the TRC was preposterous: just tell the truth and your crimes—provided they were “political”—will be forgiven.

It did not take me long to decide that the TRC was presiding over a massive miscarriage of justice. How else could one characterize the fact that Brian Mitchell, a security policeman who had led his men in the massacre of 11 innocent villagers in a botched December 1988 police raid, was granted amnesty and walked free eight years later? And what about amnesty for Dirk Coetzee, the former head of a police death squad, who testified about roasting the corpses of murdered anti-apartheid activists on a pyre while guzzling beer with his police buddies? How could black activists be pardoned for trying other black people in kangaroo “people’s courts” and then dispatching them in swift and grisly executions?

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I had no difficulty poking holes in the inquiry's flimsy moral foundation. The criticisms are many. The commission traded justice for truth. The perpetrators got away with murder, while victims have been left waiting for token reparations. White South Africans, in whose name most of the abuses were carried out, ignored the entire spectacle. Tears have been shed only by the victims, just as in the past.

So why am I now uneasy about such facile criticisms of the TRC? It is because, after attending numerous hearings and talking about the TRC with regular South Africans over the past three years, I have come to a surprising conclusion about this flawed, compromised national process of introspection and confession: it worked.

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Nine thick-necked, burly white policemen walk single file into the packed tenth-floor hearing room at the TRC headquarters in downtown Cape Town. The cops, many of whom currently hold senior positions in the made-over South African Police Service, take seats in the front row with their backs to the audience. They are here to testify about their role in the killing of the Guguletu Seven. On March 3, 1986, in what became an infamous incident, seven young men were killed in an alleged shootout with these same policemen. The authorities claimed that they had stopped a terrorist attack that day. Eyewitnesses charged that many of the black youths were executed in cold blood by the police.

The hearing begins with a horrific police crime scene video, complete with closeups of bullet-riddled heads and contorted corpses. Commissioners and other members of the audience let out involuntary gasps of revulsion. A white South African journalist sitting next to me throws her hands around her head in a reflexive act of self-defense. I am finally forced to divert my gaze.

As the video rolls, the victims' relatives who are sitting in the audience can take no more. A mother sitting next to me shrieks in grief, grabs her shoe, and throws it at the policemen who killed her son, now sitting just 10 feet away. Several other mothers leap to their feet and break into high-pitched sobs. Pandemonium ensues: chairs tumble, journalists duck, two of the cops bolt to the back, and TRC "briefers" overpower the grief-stricken women in bear hugs. The distraught parents are swiftly hustled out of the room.

When the hearing resumes, impatient commissioners explode the myth that this was merely a routine police action to stop "terrorists." They introduce evidence suggesting this was a calculated police death squad hit.

After a grueling four-hour interrogation, Superintendent William Rudolf Liebenberg, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed former head of the "terrorist tracking unit" of the Cape Town security police, is asked how he would de-

scribe the youths whom he once dubbed “terrorists.” He is momentarily dumbstruck and shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

Finally, the top cop clears his throat and replies, “Today I would say they were freedom fighters who were fighting for freedom.” A quiet chorus of amazed acknowledgments—“uh huh,” “that’s right,” “oooooh”—ripples through the room. The dead boys’ mothers nod their heads and chat excitedly among each other. Several even manage a smile.

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The daily confessional roadshows held by the TRC were supposed to end in December 1997. But the overwhelming response from both victims and perpetrators compelled the South African parliament to repeatedly extend the commission’s life. Even now, the TRC is not quite finished with its work. There is still a backlog of some 2,000 amnesty applications. So while most of the TRC has closed down, the amnesty committee will continue to hear cases. The “final” TRC report submitted last October will be amended after the amnesty hearings finish, expected to be sometime in 1999. The current TRC report chronicles the rise and fall of apartheid through the stories of victims and perpetrators. It concludes with recommendations for reparations to victims and proposes safeguards to prevent such abuses from ever happening again in South Africa.

The TRC final report became the focus of bitter last minute political wrangling. Just before it was released on October 29, both the African National Congress (ANC) and former President F. W. de Klerk took legal action to stop its publication. Both the ANC and de Klerk argued that they had been wrongly accused of responsibility for gross human rights violations. The ANC lost its bid; de Klerk succeeded in having the TRC findings about him temporarily excised from the report until his legal challenge is resolved. The TRC reportedly found that de Klerk was “an accessory after the fact” to a number of apartheid crimes, notably the bombing of church and union offices in the late eighties.

The last few years have been excruciating for many South Africans. Like a surgeon draining a festering wound, the TRC has aired many of apartheid’s dirtiest secrets. The commission took testimony from nearly 22,000 victims of human rights abuses and is in the process of rendering judgment on more than 7,000 applications for amnesty. Among its most sensational findings have been revelations by policemen about how they killed the anti-apartheid leader Steve Biko in 1977, which ended a two-decade-old mystery. The commission also heard about how government scientists were dispatched to poison political enemies, and how agents were sent abroad to bomb and kill leading members of the African National Congress.

The South African TRC has been the most lavishly endowed of the ap-

proximately 20 truth commissions that have been constituted around the world since 1974. Formed in late 1995, the TRC included 17 commissioners, a staff of 250, and an expected final cost of about \$37 million. The commission has been chaired by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The commission's purpose, according to an explanatory memorandum that accompanied the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, has been "to bring about unity and reconciliation . . . based on the

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principle that reconciliation depends on forgiveness and that forgiveness can only take place if gross violations of human rights are fully disclosed." The commission's most controversial responsibility has been to award amnesty to killers.

The TRC has not lived up to its original mandate. The emerging "truth" has only been partial. "Reconciliation" has really just been coexistence. And the commission's triumph has regularly left people feeling traumatized and angry.

But in the wake of the pain, South Africans are reaping a consolation prize: they know more about their past than ever before. The henchmen of apartheid time and again proved their talent at keeping secrets. It seemed a grim truism that what the assassins didn't want to reveal would simply never be known. The TRC cracked the wall of silence: it succeeded in extracting the truth about most of the major political assassinations and massacres of the apartheid era.

With the carrot of amnesty and the threat that former colleagues would turn on them, ex-enforcers have confessed to murders that have defied numerous inquests and court cases over the past 40 years. These confessions have been a watershed. Whites who supported apartheid have been confronted with irrefutable evidence of the depravity of the system that served them. Blacks have finally heard public acknowledgment of the brutality that they and their leaders endured.

What good is truth? This question has nagged at me. Because no one is celebrating the revelations in South Africa. People once again feel the pain of the blows that rained down on a shackled Steve Biko. Then, in a galling denouement, the killers go free. If truth is a cure for what ails South Africa, it seems almost as bad as the disease.

Yet oddly enough, setting killers free has spared South Africa the fate that has consumed so many other post-authoritarian societies. The cycle of fratricidal violence that has gripped such places as Rwanda and Yugoslavia has not taken root in South Africa. In those countries, animosities continue

to simmer while their respective international tribunals deliver neither truth nor justice. In South Africa, confession and contrition have been potent antidotes to revenge.

What of the victims? Many with whom I spoke are angry and hurt. South Africa is populated by people, not saints. Some, notably the families of leaders such as Steve Biko and Chris Hani, have been opposed to amnesty for the killers of their loved ones. I would have expected most victims to feel this way. But they don't. The vast majority of black South Africans with whom I have spoken about the TRC supports the truth and amnesty process. To find out why, I revisited the mothers of the Guguletu Seven.

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The drab community center in the so-called "colored," or mixed race, Cape Town suburb of Athlone is the setting for a second round of hearings into the Guguletu Seven. Outside the hall, the TRC's trademark posters beckon the curious to enter. "Silence kills. Truth heals," declares one. "Don't let our nightmares become our children's," warns another.

Inside, I take a seat near the mothers of the dead youths, who sit in a long row dressed neatly in colorful African regalia. They are more stoic than the last time I saw them, facing the men who killed their sons with stony faces and only an occasional damp eye. Based on the outbursts I had witnessed at the first hearing three months earlier, I assume these aggrieved mothers want the men to pay a stiff price for what they did. At a tea break, I approach Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of slain activist Christopher Piet. I ask her how she feels about the fact that these cops, should they apply for amnesty, could walk free.

"It is better to know who killed my son," says the squat matron. "They can get the amnesty, but they mustn't go to jail. They must support the children and families of the victims."

I am momentarily dumbstruck: was this the same woman who exploded in grief and anger just a few months earlier? Her friend Eunice Miya, whose son Jabulani was also killed, offers an explanation. "Going to jail is useless," she says. She notes that her dead son had three children. "They must just support our children's children."

The mothers seemed impossibly charitable, but their sentiments were consistent with what I had heard at numerous other hearings. When victims were asked what they would like to see happen to perpetrators, few called for punishment. They asked to know the truth about what had happened. They occasionally requested an apology from the killers, and they frequently requested that a tombstone be erected, a bit of dignity for the dead that they were unable to afford. Some requested financial assistance.

Ngewu and Miya will obtain partial satisfaction: they will get truth from

some of the cops. In hearings held in 1998, several policemen revealed that the Guguletu Seven were indeed ambushed and killed in an operation by the notorious police death squad known as Vlakplaas. As for the compensation and personal penance that the mothers seek, the TRC will not be able to deliver. The South African government has approved "interim" reparations payments of \$300 to \$1,000 for some victims of gross human rights abuses. It is a token payment, one that can not possibly compensate victims for their losses. And since the new government may have to delay funding for other social programs in order to pay apartheid reparations, it means that in a very real sense the victims will pay for their own oppression. It is another one of the jagged edges left by South Africa's bargain with the devil.

As I walk out of the hearing with Ngewu and Miya, I feel troubled. I want revenge more than they do. But they understand something that I don't. I am white and have money. They are black and have none. White man's justice has never been available to the residents of Guguletu, a hardscrabble old black township on the fringes of Cape Town. Notwithstanding the hoopla about the "new" South Africa, these women are keenly aware that the distribution of power in South Africa has not changed much. After the hearings, the nine cops on the witness stand will drive back to their neat plots in their still white suburbs and resume their plum jobs as senior officials in the "new" police service.

Indeed, of the 50,000 white officers on the former apartheid police force, 47,000 of them remain. This is the result of a dubious deal struck in the final hours of pre-election negotiations, in which the new government promised to retain white civil servants in their jobs at least until 1999. This sop was intended to buy peace with whites. For blacks, the postponement of redemption has become a tired theme song of the new South Africa.

So for the mothers of Guguletu, forgiving the perpetrators is a move that is partly magnanimous and mostly pragmatic. Justice is not an option for most black South Africans. Never has been, and won't be for a long time.

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Where is the justice in the truth process? The answer came with swift and bitter decisiveness on October 11, 1996. General Magnus Malan, minister of defense under former president P.W. Botha, was acquitted on that day, along with nine other top apartheid-era officials, of a wide-ranging conspiracy that linked him to the 1987 massacre of 13 people. The case against Malan was a bold attempt to convict the kingpins of apartheid for the crimes of the past. The government spent \$2 million on the seven-month trial. The state failed miserably, and the judge ultimately chastised the attorney general for his inept prosecution.

Was Malan's acquittal a result of incompetence? Legal sabotage? Perhaps

both, but the question is moot. It was the best that South Africa's weak legal system could muster, and it wasn't enough. More importantly, the trial demonstrated a simple truth: when the generals are prosecuted, they reveal nothing. When they go before the TRC, the old soldiers talk. In both scenarios, they go free. At least with the TRC, there's a bit of truth as a salve for old wounds.

Critics of South Africa's amnesty program speak longingly of "the Nuremberg option," a reference to the international war crimes trials that followed World War II. It is a wishful thought that ignores the realities of South Africa's negotiated revolution. The Nuremberg trials were imposed by military victors upon a vanquished adversary. But the anti-apartheid forces did not and could not defeat the apartheid military machine. They were stuck with bargaining for their freedom.

The issue of amnesty emerged early on as a sticking point between ANC and National Party negotiators. The apartheid military wanted a general amnesty; the ANC wanted trials. The stalemate threatened to derail the historic April 1994 elections. The compromise was a novel one: amnesty would be granted only on an individual basis when a perpetrator made a full and public disclosure of his or her crimes to the TRC. If a perpetrator didn't apply for amnesty or withheld information, or if a crime was not deemed "politically motivated," the offender would be liable to prosecution like any common criminal. Blanket pardons, such as outgoing Latin American dictators typically bestowed upon themselves and their cronies, were out. This truth-for-amnesty exchange was unprecedented in the annals of truth commissions. This was amnesty, with a stick.

The TRC received 7,060 applications for amnesty. The commission had hoped for more. More than three-fourths of the applicants were current prisoners, some of them looking for an easy way out of jail. Also among the applicants were a number of high-ranking ANC officials, a smattering of former policemen, and disappointingly few members of the military. The Malan verdict had emboldened many old warriors to remain silent. They will take their chances in the courts and hope the beleaguered legal system never gets around to them.

"Amnesty involves the denial of justice to a very large degree to the victims and to the perpetrators," says a matter-of-fact Father Michael Lapsley, who runs "healing the memories" workshops for South Africans. When I

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first met Father Mike in 1984, he was a hip ANC priest-in-exile buzzing around Harare, Zimbabwe, on his moped. In 1990, he received a parcel bomb in Zimbabwe that blew off his hands and an eye. The TRC has established that the bomb was the work of the Civil Cooperation Bureau, the death squad of South African military intelligence. No one has applied for amnesty for the attack.

As we sit in Lapsley's Cape Town flat, I wonder out loud if the ANC couldn't have won more than the amnesty-for-truth deal it settled for during the pre-election negotiations. Holding a glass of beer in the hook he now has for hands, Father Mike peers pensively at me with his one eye. He finally replies, "It is clear to me that the alternative that we had as a country was civil war that would consume us all."

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Captain Jacques Hechter, a particularly prolific killer, takes the stand in the Pretoria City Council chambers to express contrition for dozens of murders that he committed as a security policeman in the northern Transvaal. It is part of his appeal for amnesty. Looking stiff and out of character in a navy blue blazer, striped shirt, and gray slacks, he reads from a prepared text, "I believed that what I did was in the interests of the Republic of South Africa, my religion, and my Christian convictions." He speaks in a monotone, like a nervous schoolboy. "Today I am uncertain where I stand. I am sorry about the loss of lives. I hope this will result in reconciliation in South Africa. I am also a committed citizen of the new South Africa." The flat, emotionless delivery sounds hopelessly disingenuous, especially when his partner, Warrant Officer Paul van Vuuren, follows him and reads nearly the identical statement.

That afternoon, I stop Captain Hechter on his way out of the hearing. He is a trim, solidly built, youthful-looking fellow with a steely visage—a South African version of the Marlboro Man. His Fu Manchu mustache droops in a permanent scowl. He waves me off contemptuously, directing me to his lawyer. I persist. "That apology you read didn't really sound like your words," I say as I follow him. "Do you really feel sorry for what you did?"

Hechter wheels around and glares at me. "Ach, I'm not fuckin' sorry for what I did," he says defiantly, his mouth cocked in a macabre half-smile. He stares directly at me, as if his stare could freeze me in place. "Look—I fought for my country, I believed in what I did, and I did a good job. They were my enemy at the time. That oke over there was a terr," he says motioning to a black activist who was waiting to testify. Hechter had tortured the man with electric shocks and beat him to the verge of death. "I gave him the hiding of his life that he'll never forget. I did my job well. And I'd do it again if the circumstances called for it."



“No, man,” he reiterates with bored disdain, continuing to stare right through me, “I’m not really fuckin’ sorry for what I did.”

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu is in hellfire preaching mode. “I want to say to the white community: you don’t know how lucky you are that people are willing to forgive,” admonishes the magenta-clad TRC chair at a commission hearing in Paarl, in the Afrikaner heartland. “All these people want is—not to put you in jail—but for people to come forward and say, ‘We are sorry for what we did.’ . . . If this country wanted revenge, it would make Rwanda look like a Sunday school picnic.” Heads wag in agreement and a murmur of acknowledgment rises from the blacks in the audience. Tutu is right, of course. But he is preaching to the choir: there are hardly any whites in the hall. This is the last place the *volk* of Paarl would come today.

South African whites have done their best to ignore the TRC, and most refuse to concede that apartheid was enforced on their behalf. Their response to the commission ranges from avoidance, to denial, to facile rationalizations. Abuses were committed by “a few bad apples” in “the bad old days,” I am told repeatedly. Whites view the TRC as a necessary evil to be gotten over as quickly as possible, like a trip to the dentist.

But while the truth process has not reduced South African whites to beating their breasts in remorse, it has made a crucial dent: implicit in their personal disavowals is an acknowledgment that apartheid happened and there were abuses. When I compare this to the total denial and ignorance that I heard from whites in the 1980s and early 1990s, I realize that, like water on a stone, the daily reports from the TRC have brought about a palpable shift in white attitudes. There is now a rough consensus about what happened in South Africa. This acknowledgment is critical. Without it, any hope of reconciliation would be dashed entirely.

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu looks uncharacteristically relaxed in a rumpled cotton shirt and slacks. The Arch, as he’s known, greets me warmly in a nondescript office that he is using in the South African Consulate in New York. With his TRC duties now largely over, Tutu has retreated to Emory University in Atlanta, where he is currently a visiting professor of theology.

Tutu has impressed me as a sharp, quick-thinking political operator in his role as TRC chair. In the endless debates about the truth process in South Africa, he has been an able adversary to every comer, from smug academics to apartheid generals.

Our conversation inevitably turns to the question of justice, or the lack of it, in the truth process. Tutu is adamant in his defense of South Africa’s

approach. “When people speak about justice, almost always they are thinking of retributive justice—the modern equivalent of, really, ‘an eye for an eye.’ Not quite, but they are saying when you have committed a crime there must be a commensurate punishment. And that is true.”

The archbishop hunches his shoulders expressively, his eyes grow wide, and he outstretches his long fingers towards me as he speaks. “But we are saying that there is another kind of justice—restorative justice. . . . Because if justice is the last word in our situation, we have *had it*, man.

“How do you break the cycle? It can’t happen through the process of justice. You have to inject a new factor. And the new factor is: you’ve got to forgive.”

I question whether this Christian notion of forgiveness is sufficient to teach future generations the requisite moral lesson that crime carries heavy consequences. Tutu bounces up in his chair, shaking his head in vigorous disagreement. “You see forgiveness is no nebulous spiritual thing that is practiced by those who are crazy and idealistic and totally unpragmatic. Forgiveness is a pragmatic absolute necessity. Without forgiveness there is no future. And that is not a religious statement—it is thoroughly political. It is *realpolitik*.”

After three years of confronting the darkest side of his country, Tutu is unremittingly hopeful. “Who could ever have thought that South Africa could be held up as a paradigm, as a model for anything except the most ghastly things? God said . . . I am going to use you. South Africa has something here that was a nightmare. It’s ended. And I want Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia—I mean, name it—Northern Ireland, the Middle East: you have nightmares . . . [that] can end, will end, too.”

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Freeing killers in exchange for telling the truth is morally absurd. I still can’t escape feeling that, especially as I watch former perpetrators continue to spill forth the contents of their ghastly résumés. But as I compare how other nations are faring as they deal with their tortured pasts, I find the case for South Africa’s approach increasingly compelling.

Concurrent with the TRC hearings in South Africa have been the international tribunals that are attempting to indict the masterminds behind the conflicts in both Rwanda and Yugoslavia. It has been a telling juxtaposition. Despite their enormous investigative resources, those tribunals have been stunningly impotent, resulting in precious few imprisonments and even fewer convictions.

The South African TRC has been far more successful than any other truth commission or tribunal at ferreting out the truth. In Argentina and Chile, the truth commissions deliberated in secret, going public only with a

final report. None of the other commissions lifted the veil of secrecy around the police and military. “The amount of information, the public transparency, and the details they are coming out with in South Africa is strikingly different,” observes Priscilla Hayner, who is writing a book about truth commissions worldwide. “Compared to truth commissions in Latin America, it’s like night and day.”

If international experience is any guide, the choice facing South Africa is not really between amnesty and justice. It is a choice between getting some degree of truth and getting nothing at all—which is what many inquests, truth commissions, and courts end up delivering. Indeed, South Africa’s successful formula for prying out the truth was cited by the *New York Times* when it called for a TRC-style amnesty-for-truth deal to resolve the long-simmering mysteries that surround the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

A civil version of the “Nuremberg option” will now have its day in South Africa. The evidence gleaned by the TRC can be used to prosecute those who rejected amnesty. Victims are free to sue perpetrators who lack indemnity. Will they succeed? Perhaps a few more foot soldiers will be snared. But South Africa’s generals are likely to elude the dragnet, just as their counterparts in other repressive regimes have always managed to do. And a top South African prosecutor recently surmised that it could take at least six years to prosecute the numerous perpetrators implicated by the TRC.

South Africa’s search for truth has failed notably in extracting confessions from the top politicians responsible for administering apartheid. Former presidents F. W. de Klerk and P. W. Botha are the big ones that got away. They borrowed Ronald Reagan’s strategy of “plausible deniability” and used it to insulate themselves while their subordinates took the rap for past abuses.

Where the TRC had its greatest success has been among the henchmen of apartheid—the burly working-class Afrikaner boys bred on a diet of anti-communism and Calvinism. Infuriated and panicked by the spectacle of their masters cutting them loose, many former policemen opened their closets, fished out their skeletons, and went public with their thuggish deeds. For the families of many of these cops, it was a first exposure to what dad did during working hours. The punishment many erstwhile enforcers now face is in their personal lives. More than one policeman has told me that his

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confession resulted in the breakup of his marriage, and numerous others struggle with the debilitating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Justice works in strange ways.

Victims by and large feel affirmed by the truth process. Father Michael Lapsley has told the story of his letter bombing to audiences around the world. But testifying before the TRC had unique value. "I felt that my own story was becoming a permanent part of the story of the people of South Af-

rica. The fact that [the TRC] is an official commission set up by the state, and the way in which the commission acknowledged the truth about what happened to me in a dignified way had a lot of importance for me."

Will reconciliation follow from all this truth? Even Archbishop Tutu is backpedaling on that now. He emphasized to me that the legislation creating the TRC is called "the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation [Act]*. It doesn't say their *achievement*. . . . We as a commission can do only so much."

Reconciliation is elusive because it may simply be too much to ask. That is because the foremost legacy of apartheid is poverty, which continues unabated for millions of South Africans. Unemployment hovers at 40 percent, soaring to 90 percent in some black townships. And the overwhelmingly white civil service looks much as it always has. As truth commissioner Mary Burton told me, "It's not good enough telling people to reconcile when they are still as poor and disadvantaged as they've been in the past."

The acid test of South Africa's commitment to the truth process will be in what it delivers as reparations. The TRC has called for a "wealth tax" to be levied on the numerous businesses that eagerly profited from the use of apartheid slave labor. It has also proposed that companies on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange donate one percent of their market capitalization "as a means of empowering the poor." None of these proposals has yet been acted upon. Meanwhile, estimates of what the new South African government will spend paying restitution to apartheid victims range from \$17 million to a \$500 million.

Those calling for a wholesale redistribution of wealth in South Africa will be disappointed. The ANC government is far too busy cozying up to capital to punish it; there is virtually no political will for enforcing any significant shift of wealth from rich to poor. Instead, President Mandela and his deputies have politely suggested that companies voluntarily "give something back to the community" as penance for profiting from apartheid. So the poor will

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continue to bear the brunt of their past exploitation.

The greatest value of truth commissions lies in the historical record that they leave for future generations. The TRC has succeeded in forging something South Africans have never had before: a common history. What hope there is that tomorrow's black leaders will not succumb to the brute repression practiced by their white predecessors lies in the lessons they learn from it.

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What good is truth?

The question still lingered as I prepared to leave South Africa. Then I happened to watch a Cable News Network broadcast on the South African evening news about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. These are the mothers of Argentineans who disappeared in the "dirty war" against students and leftists in the 1970s. Each week for the past 20 years the mothers have stood in grim silent witness, bravely trying to pry out the truth about the fate of their loved ones. They are a haunting symbol of what happens when a nation fails to reckon with its past.

The significance of this was driven home to me when mothers of victims of state violence marched in Guguletu, outside Cape Town. It was the eleventh anniversary of the killing of the Guguletu Seven. Bereft mother Cynthia Ngewu addressed the small crowd that gathered on the raw autumn day.

"I want to thank the Truth Commission because although it has opened up wounds, through that process we were able to know the truth," she said.

"Now we know the perpetrators. I am asking God to forgive those people." A black man then shouted from the crowd, "Long live the TRC!"

That's when I understood the value of this confessional process to a nation struggling to deal with its brutal past. In South Africa, there will be no Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Because in the place of apartheid's torturous secrets, there now is truth.