

## Past imperfect

### Book review

Hamber, B (ed) (1998) **Past imperfect: Dealing with the past in Northern Ireland and societies in transition**. Londonderry: INCORE & University of Ulster.  
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**Past imperfect** is based on a conference hosted by the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity (INCORE) held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in June 1998, and gathers together chapters on managing historical conflict in South Africa, Guatemala and Northern Ireland. It explores the painful complexity, diversity and necessity of remembering and truth recovery in societies with violent pasts, and helps to establish a shift in understanding social conflict as an ineradicable opposition between two sides toward understanding it as an opportunity for constructive engagement.

The introductory chapter by Brandon Hamber provides an overview of the book and introduces the complex interplay between remembering and forgetting in different contexts. The second chapter, which will be of particular interest to South Africans, is by Mary Burton - one of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners. Burton outlines the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and provides a comprehensive account of how the TRC functioned in the two years of its existence. Her chapter traces the unfolding of events which led to the inception of the TRC and shows how these events impacted on the sharing of power and privilege, managing transition, shaping the future and dealing with a contested past. Features which contributed to successful transition are pointed out and steps in the process indicated, particularly those which attempt to overcome hatred, guilt, fear and revenge. Burton explains how the TRC came to be structured, its mandate and how it measured its success. The material covered will be of use to researchers, scholars, historians, human rights activists, social psychologists and anyone interested in the background to the South African TRC.

Robert Cabrera's chapter is similar to Burton's, but from the perspective of *The recovery of historic memory* project which he led in Guatemala, a project which ran for three years. It enables the reader to reflect on emotional patterns and violations that

emerge in different cultural settings and the ways in which remembering occurs not only of actual incidents, but also of lost dreams and foreclosed possibilities.

Kenneth Bloomfield, head of Northern Ireland's Commission for Victims, considers the way forward for Northern Ireland given the experiences of Truth Commissions in other countries. Although primarily of interest to those with some knowledge of the Irish "troubles", South African readers are again likely to find the chapter useful from a comparative perspective.

Marie Smyth's chapter is not linked to a particular country, but provides a general perspective on different motivations and purposes in truth recovery, each of which impacts differently on the democratic fabric of society. She also addresses the question of whether we are all victims and considers the functioning of victimhood in a social context. In analyzing the distribution of victimhood she finds an interesting dialectic between political and moral motives revealing hierarchies of responsibility and pain.

In the concluding chapter, Brandon Hamber explores the need of survivors to be heard, arguing that democracy rests on the principle of being heard, without which understanding or compromise can not become impossible. Remembering offers a road through and beyond silence, bringing unheard voices into the public domain, and in the chapter Hamber gives an account of the essential elements of the process of remembering.

Together these contributors offer first hand experiences and knowledge of the multiple factors and processes which play a role in truth and reconciliation and in constructing stable societal transitions. The book contextualises and illustrates different ways of thinking about transition and truth recovery, and particularly questions the relevance and means of applying a TRC process in Northern Ireland. It traces large-scale historical forces in South Africa, Guatemala and Northern Ireland but also touches on a fundamental reality of individual and social life that speaks on many levels. In a rapidly changing world where individual and collective identities are increasingly challenged and need to be re-invented, the writers undefensively contend with different ways of resolving the risks which threaten to precipitate intractable violence and inhumanity. Their arguments are storied, simply written, factually based and informative.

The book brings the reader to understand the need for creative and dynamic direction, in the complex task facing fractured societies in transition. Where institutionalised politics, economics, gender, ethnicity, class and educational differences generate unique and different gestalts in different societies, unique and creative solutions are required. Different truth recovery processes and contexts in Guatemala, Northern Ireland and South Africa make apparent the necessity for indigenous, inclusive and contextualised practices which can address the past. In truth recovery, remembering is an uneasy and painful process which requires (re)remembering of events, experiences and feelings for effective healing, because as Hamber (1996) poignantly points out - "Sleeping dogs do not lie".

The preface to the book unequivocally promotes an uncovering of truth from stories but also acknowledges a clear awareness that a spectacle of stories both liberates and

drains the humanity of which they speak, adding a broader frame of awareness which fits the contemporary post-modern debate. While Brandon Hamber's responsive acknowledgement is explicitly respectful of the profound fragility of survivors of human rights abuses, the authors also implicitly highlight the resilient texture of human social achievement.

Apart from offering some profound insight into the multiple layers of social truth, the book provides an appendix of questions to consider for societies in transition, reading material not directly referred to by the authors, internet resources on dealing with the past, as well as a wealth of factual information, for those interested in the complexities and challenges of dealing with imperfect pasts.

## REFERENCES.

Hamber, B (1996) Sleeping dogs do not lie. *Recovery*, 1 (3), 10-13.