

As Delivered

A Commendable Clash

Erik Doxtader

A Long Road to Redress –
Revisiting the TRC Recommendations
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To convince is to conquer without conception.

-Walter Benjamin

Let us speak as friends. Let us speak not as if we wish merely to tolerate one another or as if we abide in a timeless and forgiving harmony. But, how? How can I make this request without presuming too much? What do I risk doing *to* you when I propose *to* you that we speak as friends, especially if we are not friends, if we do not yet know one another, if we have not yet built the trust needed for us to tarry? Between us, do we lack the good faith needed to enter the realm of shared words? Do we yet have a road to travel before we can disagree and – as friends do and as they perhaps must do – tell one another a difficult truth?

Here and now, I can only speak in a recommending way, in a way that offers recommendation, an opinion in which I commend myself to you, that leaves you with the choice of what, if anything, to do with my proposal that we might speak not *to* one another but *with* one another.

Can I recommend to you that we enter into the difficult words of friendship? With this question, we must not turn away from the fact that friends are those who present us with challenging words. For no good reason, a friend abides with us and, at certain moments, tells us those things that we do not always want to hear but which perhaps we need to hear. It is with friends that we have our best debates and it is through debating that we perhaps find our best friends. In the caring exchange of friendship's contentious words, there is an opportunity to grasp our own limits and thus expand our sense of self. But, just as friends cannot be compelled to be friends, such words are not given. They are a rare and fragile gift. As such, we often hesitate to accept them. We worry that we will not be able to return them

in kind. We worry that we may not have the energy to make a new friend, to learn how to disagree with a stranger in an agreeable way.

The question of how to create the words that compose friendship. The TRC has recommended this question to us. It has recommended that we reflect on the question of how we might find the words between us, the words that enter into and perform the work of reconciliation that aims not for love but a deep civic friendship. That the TRC did so should not come as a surprise, even though it often does. From the first to the last, the Commission was quite clear in explaining how its premise and its work depended not on *the Word* but on those words that hold the power to invent and sustain new relationships. It was time to *tell and bear* truth. It was time to perform the work of *disclosure* and to undertake *testimony* that expressed the experience of suffering. It was time to come to term and *recognize* (acknowledge) the untold history of apartheid, *narrate* the cost of its experience, and *deliberate* about its repair.

Perhaps this time has not passed, and if democracy is an ongoing project, we might take time to reflect just a bit on the recommendation about which I have been called to speak. We should hear this recommendation, as best we can:

The Commission, believing that reconciliation is a process vital and necessary for enduring peace and stability, invites fellow South Africans to...encourage a culture of debate so that, together, we can resolve the pressing issues of our time.¹

In the name of reconciliation, there is a need to “encourage a culture of debate”. What does this idea entail? On first if not second reading, the idea may strike us as a vague truism. Yet, while very few deny the value of debate, the brevity and peculiar terminology of the TRC’s recommendation suggests that we may wish to read it quite closely. Very briefly, I would suggest that we can do so by pursuing four basic questions.

First, What do we mean by debate? While its form is context dependent, debate does have several general characteristics. For one, it is a purposeful activity that involves the

¹ TRC Report, Vol. 5, 304.

formulation and presentation of claims to others. With structure and spontaneity, debate stands in some distinction to dialogue, narrative, conversation, testimony, and polemic. The decisive difference between these important forms of communication and debate rests on clash. By clash, I mean the process whereby two or more parties advance competing arguments and then – this is the crucial bit – contend over the *relative* merits of their positions. In a debate, we seek to put our viewpoints into play in the name of comparatively assessing their integrity, virtue, and utility.

An additional and defining feature of debate is that it is risky. This is to say that debate requires that we be willing to change our minds about ideas and interests which we may hold quite dear. To put it bluntly, there can be no debate if we are not willing and able to test and alter own point of view. When this happens, when our own positions are found lacking or incomplete, we often say that we have lost a debate. This is an unfortunate characterization. It perpetuates the false notion that good debate is a form of verbal combat. It ignores that debate has the potential to produce collective change only as all “sides” are willing to listen and willing to remain vulnerable to the claims, insights, and criticisms of others.

Suggesting that debate is not story-telling or the sequential presentation of ideas, this account of debate leads to a second question: why did the TRC recommend the creation of a “culture of debate”? The answer, I believe, has much to do with the fact that we do not always agree on the conditions, rules, and meaning of debate. Or, to put it more plainly, the definition of what counts as proper and productive debate is debatable. In the last years, for instance, many have claimed (correctly), that the DA’s vision of a ‘good debate’ rests on a view of opposition that denigrates the ways in which communalism – ubuntu – shapes South African political and cultural discourse. Closely related, the demands of transition have given rise to deep disagreements over which issues should be debated and which should be deferred in the name of stabilizing democracy. As evident in our discussions over the last days, particularly in the panel on the archive, there are important and heated disagreements about what kinds of evidence can legitimately support the arguments that we make during a debate. To which parts of the past can we appeal? Which moments in history must never again rationalize our decisions? Adding to the mix, we may disagree about language itself, the very real possibility that we need to debate not in English but in one or more of South

Africa other official languages. At a deeper level, we may find that we cannot agree on how to begin debate because we do not believe that others are capable of reasonable argument; it is all but impossible to debate with those whom we believe to be evil or interested only in manipulating us. To this, we can add the problem that debate takes time, energy, and a willing interlocutor. If we are alone, struggling only to survive, the cost of debate may remain beyond reach.

Individually and together, these problem stop debate before it gets started. They are moments in which we must build what the Commission called a “culture” of debate. Most simply, this means that there are some kinds of deep divisions that force us to step back and build the ground rules and common norms that can then guide our disagreements. This is arduous work. For many reasons, we do not much like to talk about the ways we talk. It risks paralysis; it smacks of pointless theorizing; in turning back to reflect on the limits of our own language, we are called to expose our interests and disclose our heartfelt assumptions both about how things should work and the conditions under which we are willing to change our minds about issues that matter to us. In short, debating about the process and norms of debate to which we are willing to commit leaves us vulnerable, open to the sense that we do not have all the answers and that our own ways of thinking have important limits.

This leads, quickly, to a third question: why should we accept the Commission’s recommendation about the importance of supporting a culture of debate? In many ways, the answer is obvious. In the midst of a transition that must be considered ongoing, there is a shortage of agreement about how best to debate and the ways in which debate can serve to promote collective interaction, collective action and reconciliation. For instance, the current controversy within the ANC and between the ANC and its critics has much to do with the ways in which the Congress’ definition of debate strikes some as an attempt to take on the roles of both player and referee. Although written some years ago, the ANC’s quite narrow view of what counts as productive debate can be found in an extended essay, entitled “The Sociology of Public Discourse.” It is crucial and timely reading.

At the same time, we might all gain from rereading the Democratic Party’s submission to the TRC, an argument that explains much about why it has been so hard to start a meaningful popular debate on what it means to be a beneficiary of apartheid. So too, and this is more

controversial, it may be time to reflect more systematically on the ways in which the TRC itself both offered us resources for debate at the same time that it responded to its critics in ways that narrowed the field for debate by defending –sometimes dogmatically – very particular and also very vague interpretations of reconciliation and its relationship to human language. For instance, we have come to accept the idea of “political reconciliation” as something that can be differentiated from other forms of reconciliation. While not necessarily inaccurate, what this view tends to miss is that reconciliation may itself be a mode of politics, a way of creating the unity of collective life through the production of disagreements that allow us to reflect how we want to understand and relate our differences. There is nothing perhaps so fundamental.

In closing, we might ask, finally, how far South Africa has come in making good on the TRC’s recommendation and how we might continue to work in the name of creating and encouraging a culture of debate. While there has surely been progress, it may be best to leave the question open, as a space in which to think about how ongoing efforts to promote democratic values and human rights may depend on increasing the number of forums in which citizens can struggle with one another over the ethics of argumentation and the ethos of debate. And, it is struggle; it is a call to reflect closely on how we might alter our reply to those words that we find disagreeable and to consider how we might begin to reply to those words that we cannot yet hear. In this respect, I would humbly suggest that it may be well worth refreshing our memory about the subtle dynamics of the negotiated revolution and the way in which its talk about talk served the process and the ends of reconciliation.

At a larger level, the TRC’s recommendation asks us to challenge our own language, to trouble our relationship to our own words, and to do so together. Rather than relying on laws that would define the rules of individual and collective existence for us, the TRC commends to us those words with which we can gather unity from within difference in the name of making history, constituting the meaning of freedom, and fashioning the terms of ethical life. Since antiquity and no less in the present moment, this work of words marks the ongoing beginning of reconciliation’s difficult but vital friendship.