

Reconciliation and Transformation: Lessons from South Africa?

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It was barely two weeks after the “Referendum” on the fate of the “Annan Plan” that Djelal Kadir and I shared a difficult platform in Nicosia created by the University of Cyprus. I must admit that on that evening we approached the theme from different angles: he, from the standpoint of an ecumenical scholar of literature and cultural formation; I, from the standpoint of a sociologist and a strategist. Both of us were born and raised on this island; both of us had been away for many years, but both of us quite naturally were deeply concerned about the prospects of redemption, resolution, reconciliation.

My contribution that evening titled “Beyond Racism: the Ethics of Reconciliation and the Reality of Reconciling”, tried to reflect on what lessons could be gleaned from the South African processes of transformation that might assist in the “post-Annan Plan” period. Djelal Kadir, circulated a response to this particular workshop that generously engaged and criticised some of my core ideas. It would be proper to engage with his critical insights.

What did I argue?

I firstly contextualised my South African experience as a scholar and as an anti-apartheid activist: I argued that the burden on my generation (black and white) in South Africa was to understand how a country could move from the brink of disaster towards reconciliation and peace, towards dismantling the last institutional vestige of racism and how a complex multi-ethnic society could reach symbiotic certainty through a substantive democracy. The negotiated revolution (as it has been called), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the country’s libertarian constitution have received wide recognition.

Could my imperfect experiences over there, make some sense over here?

I know that the South African experience is different from the experience and dilemmas that stare the people of Cyprus in the face. To be brief: the experience is different in five ways:

- There was in the South African “experience” a hierarchical and racial system of interdependence and exploitation – although whites and blacks lived in segregation and separation, white wealth was contingent on black

labour. Any polarisation struck at the heart of the country's socio-economic system. There is very little interdependence on this island and we can imagine a situation where the two communities exist and continue to exist separately for ever.

- The nationalism of the ANC, the leading force in the resistance period and the ruling party thereafter, was an open one – it was non-terminal, as it was based on a Freedom Charter that posited: “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, etc.” Although African in its substance it was a non-racial African-ness that defined its domain of action. The dominant nationalisms on the island were and are terminal: Greek or Turkish, they involve an either “this” or “that.”
- The possibility of a negotiated settlement was predicated on the discovery of a “third space” through which two significant processes occurred: firstly, one could abstract from history and its bloodied memories where claims of belonging were non-reconcilable: the one population's land was the other population's pained expropriation. Such a third space allowed dialogue despite history. Secondly, it allowed for a consensus that the past was regrettable. Reconciliation, forgiveness, regret and ownership of the past was facilitated in South Africa through a third-space that was created by an alliance of Christian churches, and their black and white congregations. I do not see such a space between the mosque and the church here having gained much ground.
- The negotiations and settlement, the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the constitutional work, everything that was created, was an endogenous process with the “outside”, only lending a helping hand. There was no exogenous mediation, no Annan Plan and no European or African Union. South Africans did the messy and emotive work themselves.
- There was a realisation that violence as a means to an end, was leading nowhere, in fact it tended to destroy the very ends that it was supposed to be aiming at. It was brutalising society. Dialogue at all levels in hundreds of peace committees involving all civil society organisations became the methodology of dispute resolution. Despite serious new interactions on the island, such processes do not have statutory legitimacy.

So if the differences are so great, what can be made of the South African experience? Why should such exotic idiosyncrasies be entertained even for a moment? I will start by delineating how a politics of Reconciliation locates itself within broader historical concerns, before I explore its meaning in South Africa.

I therefore argued the following:

What we call modernity has reached its ultimate political limits in the United Nations – that is, in a parliament of sovereign nation-states and an abstract declaration of human rights. Our categories can rarely think beyond that. However critical we might want to be of both, we have to admit that they were noble attempts to validate a post-colonial and post-war reality and to protect people from authoritarian rule. To the careful social scientist the only judgement possible is that neither sovereignty as a principle nor a human rights planetary code have settled the historical questions over (what a poet friend has described as the questions of) “Land, Bones and Money”. I say this knowing that it was precisely the recognition of sovereignty that gave Greek Cypriots a sense of recompense and justice after the invasion; and that it was the “human rights” charter that gave black South Africa a sense of recompense and justice when Apartheid was declared a crime against humanity. But neither institution nor declaration solved the pressing, crushing problems.

What I called, “the ethics of reconciliation” have emerged from the cracks of the post-World War II status quo – they arose together with their opposite, the ethics of cultural relativism and fragmentation. The seemingly impossible situation of historical wounds, cultural entanglements and a sense of ethnic inequality have pressed consistently for the fragmentation of nation-states and the declaration of new states of independence. This process of fragmentation has been accelerated with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As a contrast, or a counter-point, there has been, from the sources of the same disquiet, an impulse, faint at first, but becoming more persistent as the years rolled on, that another world was possible and from it, a serious commitment to solve the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions confronting our contemporary period. The impulse has emerged into an ethical conduct through two sources.

It arose from a critique of violence, militarization and of all final solutions. There have been hardly any examples since World War II where the use of force has led to a morally acceptable socio-political solution. Furthermore, any such violence undermined the fragile balance between equality and freedom and has led to permanent forms of vulnerability.

It also arose from the struggle to overcome racism and derogation in all its forms. Remember, racism and derogation has taken three forms: that the “other” for inherent and unchanging characteristics is seen as expendable, as a non-person: therefore such an “other” could be exterminated, annulled and/or chased away. Problem: those who were supposed not to exist under this schema, survived. And in many cases, those non-people however small their numbers in some instances, are making claims.

Racism's second form was that the "other" for inherent and unchanging characteristics is seen as usable: therefore, enslaved and/or put to use in colonial systems and in labour repressive economies. Problem: the useful non-person, the black, rebelled. Finally for similarly inherent characteristics the "other" is seen as a "non-us" and therefore excluded. (This form has increased through the abolition of formal slavery and institutions of racial domination). Problem: contemporary global entanglements and migrations have made it impossible to merely exclude.

History, Walter Benjamin argued, is always written from the perspective of the victor. But does history have final victories? Does the defeated and surplus "other" ever become extinguished? I do not think so. I see no historical evidence to the contrary. The Jews survived the holocaust, the Palestinians refuse to disappear, Hutus and Tutsis continue to exist, Kurds and Armenians, refuse to be a historical footnote, first nations in the USA are still around to haunt the self-congratulatory majority, Aborigines are a reminder that Australia was never a "terra nullis" and so on. The world refuses to obey the will and the power of the powerful or the victor's narrations.

By implication, the ethic of reconciliation views the "other" either in a Gandhian sense as "wonder-full" or as an "autonomous force" and an equal. Through its nurturing it allowed people to say that conflict was regrettable, that co-responsibility must be taken, shared and that no "abstract" right operates until it is resolved in a dialogical framework.

It has a second element: that it is impossible to look at people as unchanging clumps. Everyone has become an "other" and every "other" has a historicity and unique forms of development.

The ethic of Reconciliation in its broadest sense is not about negotiation – it just makes the latter possible in a new way. It is not about cultural relativism and fragmentation, but an attempt to create broader and broader forms of civility.

If there is a problem with much of the analysis of South Africa's transition it is that it turns the process too pragmatic and too abstracted from the feelings and solidarities that have allowed it to occur. Discursive and ideological shifts cannot occur piecemeal, either instrumentally and/or by bargaining. This shift was facilitated by a remarkable emotive and cultural adjustment, a powerful shift in the subterranean belief systems of both the powerful and those who waited for their turn to power. True, there was a revolution within the revolution led by corporate interests that proved to be decisively influential during the South African transition; but the shift in the "national ontology" came from the robe and the cross, across denominations, from above and from below.

Transitions we have learnt, are not about economic crises and the process of violence and negotiation that stir them on – they cannot be reduced to the economic interest-level alone; they are profound events in the modalities of politics, ideology and culture. They are also moments that are liminal, between and betwixt, that create all kinds of interventions, all kinds of new status groups and status scripts.

To be more concrete: if the “nation” as constituted through modern states always involves five elements in that it combines an “epos”, a “topos”, a “genus”, an “ethos” and a “logos” that fixes its particularity and therefore in the same act, “includes” and “excludes” in order to constitute its “demos”, each side’s constitutive elements of belonging were and had to be in discordance and contestation with each other. It is very improbable that the new South Africa could have been imagined through negotiating committees, and although the “topos” was this “camp” without a name (Afrika Borwa? Suid Afrika?) – any act of the constitutive imagination exercised unfathomable repressions.

Each one’s historicity was contested and their meanings clashed. Their discourses generated symbolic static, tension and non-negotiability. Unlike all other recent transitions to democracy where their national questions were more or less settled (and where such settlements were shifty they fragmented), the “national ontologies” here were insurmountable. To re-state the argument: South Africa’s democratisation was unique in that try as we may, to compare one transition to another and especially the South African one to others of the “third wave”, for example the Latin American ones, seems difficult on one residual and irreducible factor: that the “national question” was not in question in the latter, but in need for development in the former! The nineteenth and twentieth century constructions of nationhood in the Americas had settled the one special question: the ontology of belonging, i.e. the discursive (sometimes deeply ideological) construction of the indigene.

What permitted the negotiation to proceed was an “ideational” shift into a third space, possible only if brought onto the historical terrain by any party or movement that could abstract itself from the “historical”. That is, at a certain moment, a discursive shift does occur, a tangential space is opened and instead of the “material”, the “ideational” holds sway. A process that, allows a Mandela into the “turner of the other cheek / and when that finished / (the) turner of the other”. Of course such a third space cannot in its ideas throw a blanket over the entire terrain, but it did cover enough of the landscape to become the new “common ground” for a transformation of the competing versions of nationalism.

What provided for this shift was an ecumenical, normative and ecclesiastical conception initially pioneered by Christian churches from “both” sides: the

establishment of English and Afrikaans speaking churches, the SACC and the NGK (the Dutch Reformed Church), arriving at a consensus about the “regrettable past”, the role and actions of the Churches after the historic Rustenburg synod of the NGK and the declaration that bound them to a common project.

The ecclesiastical abstraction from history, this third space, could in turn facilitate the work of negotiations and their pragmatic shifts as long as atonement was ever-present: then, the negotiations could lead to the pragmatics of compromise over “Land, Bones and Money”.

So, without a third space that facilitates the dominance of an ethic of reconciliation, negotiations cannot proceed. Without the negotiations of the hard questions over land and prior dispossession, over who is a citizen and how resources are to be redistributed, the ethic remains a profound moral stand without substance.

Remember: despite “forgiveness” and its symbolic presentations during the Truth Commission, these rituals were performative, indeed sampled for public use. They were “tricky” in their own right, but reality was trickier still. Despite, the “third-space” of regret and sorrow, of emotion and tears, the “unquiet dead” were not vindicated. It is the necessary theatre for future generations, as the real stuff of earth, calcium and gold are negotiated, and re-negotiated, until there is a breakthrough.

We were blessed there with incredible forms of leadership but we were also blessed with unprecedented forms of popular participation from trade unions, community associations, youth and women’s organisations.

The harsh reality of forgiveness and reconciliation always involves an “erasure” – the unquiet dead are never reconciled with the living. Unfortunately it is the living, who reconciles issues, despite the dead. The latter haunt any settlement. As long as the living has enough moral and ethical ground to justify their actions, the settlement holds. As long as the living create frameworks that create conditions for a viable “being with others”, the relationship with the dead and the lost can, however, be haunting and difficult – a benign nightmare. What are those frameworks that allow that?

Cyprus is a tragic story – but the tragedy and loss, does not compare with Rwanda’s experience of genocide. The mention of the genocide and its memories, and I know this from first hand experience, makes people physically ill. But the country holds, and the people have made great strides beyond the tragic moment. European countries, despite the barbarism of their dealing with each other over two world wars, have managed to create a European Union.

From the perspective of a South African experience the question that immediately arises is whether there is such a third-space that allows conflicting claims to abstract themselves from a traumatic historical past on this island. Your answer might be, as it should be, that there is a movement of rapprochement, a strong bi-communal current that is gaining voice. That alone, from our perhaps, skewed angle will not be sufficient. Such a space should be a medium of that movement's realisation, not the movement itself. For many of you, and for the droves of international journalists I have been reading, Europe (the entry into Europe, that is) provides such a space, perhaps the only space that the contemporary moment is opening up for the island. Does this real artefact called Europe offer such a platform?

The second burning question that a South African scholar would ask is whether there is, within that space, a way of owning the past in its regrettable forms in both communities? Whether there is, behind the wagging fingers, a way that allows both sides to say that the past was regrettable and we are ready to own it, speak about it and find the courage to redress past perceptions and injustices? Without that, in our case, institutions like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would have been a farce.

The third question is whether there is a sufficient critical mass of people who have moved beyond forms of racism and ethnic derogation where, as I have mentioned above, the other is not "surplus" and removable, not "useful" for short-term goals and/or a "non-person" for inclusion? The response that I read from the press and from the scientific studies I have encountered is a forked one: I read a "yes" and a "no".

Fourthly, is there enough civil society participation in the bi-communal endeavour; enough to create an unceasing pressure towards a solution? The referendum's results, very superficially, seem to say that about 23 per cent of Cypriots said "yes" to the Annan plan. What did the "yes" mean and what, more importantly, did the "no" mean?

If these four questions can be answered in the affirmative, then there is the prospect of a significant ENDOGENOUS negotiation over what I termed, the issues of "Land, Bones and Money".

I am not an expert on the island's socio-political history and the differences between South Africa and Cyprus are stark. Nevertheless the choice is starker still: do you choose, and you have to choose because no-one else can choose, between the logic of reconciliation or fragmentation? The former is more difficult than the latter. The latter, however easy, will leave the Cyprus problem unsolved, even if Turkey joins the European Union.

Djelal Kadir's intervention is animated by an admirable impatience: "we must move the status quo beyond dialogue and into negotiation". And such a move has to be accompanied by the hard questions: "how much – where – when – whose – in what proportion – and, when – how soon?" He advocates an active process that demands and exacts pressure for the move to occur. It has to be, he asserts, international (not global, not engineered by the "big powers") and it has to be informed by the people of Cyprus who are far ahead of the politicians who rule over boundaries.

Furthermore, he responds and criticises some of my naïve assumptions. He explicitly criticises any notion of "reconciliation". Such a word, "lexically and politically" might have been apt for South Africa, but it is inappropriate for Cyprus. The notion of reconciliation has been "appropriated" and "corrupted" by "one of the interested parties in the conflict". He opts instead for words denoting phenomena: "co-existence, redistributive justice and co-governance".

Nevertheless, I think that my point was missed: as a "word" it is inappropriate for South Africa as well! My point was: that it was impossible to arrive at negotiations without a "third space" which allowed for what I termed an "ethic of reconciliation" to emerge. Such an ethic was and continues to be a product of struggles against domination and a way of looking at the "other", at "each other" and at "anybody" as "non-surplus" and as a contingent/eliminable factor.

Even if I win the first round of clarifications, his critique challenges my quandary as to whether a "third space" can be created in the context of the European accession of the island. Here, his insights are uncompromising: that Europe as a "noun" and European as an "adjective" in the context of Cyprus means "non-Asiatic". They are part of a racist lexicon. Europe itself has "already been imploded into the caldera of the political volcano you are trying to sort out".

Thirdly, the "public sphere", although necessary, cannot be like South Africa's: an endogenous political process because such a sphere on the island is "rotten"; it "exudes so much rancour" and breeds "so much suspicion". It has been made to rot by the "command cohort of (the island's) realpolitik."

I can only respond in three ways:

As a sociologist I would have to be convinced of some social facts. At first I would have to be convinced that there is a social movement – i.e. that there is a sustained upsurge of people (or some strata/classes etc., of people) – that is jointly challenging the status quo despite borders. Or, that it exists even in a weaker version – that there are two or more movements on either side of the "line" that are in search of a connection – a connection that might facilitate their "joining up"

through creative intermediaries. I cannot see many signs of that but, I stand to be corrected. Rather, the desire of people to cross borders despite the status quo that Kadir celebrates is about something important that we have to understand in a more comprehensive way. It is not, and again I stand to be corrected, about a new sociality.

Secondly, another social fact would be whether the “wonderful and like-minded people” that he evokes so well – mobile intellectuals, members of epistemic communities, professionals and dreamers – are robust enough in their shared visions to start a contemporary “cross-ethnic” (excuse the ethnocentrism) “Filiki Etaireia” for the re-unification of the island. The signs are not there for the robustness of such a rapprochement, but again, I might be mistaken.

As a South African sociologist and part of the new popular-democratic leadership in that country, I understand “fortress Europe” and its racist connotations all too well. It would be the height of hilarity if South Africa tried to accede to the European Union. But from the margins of the old colonial world I see the European Union as a significant new terrain: firstly, it is imperative that an anti-racist European Union prevails that is open to an egalitarian international agenda. Therefore, the accession of Turkey is of a profound ideological significance. Secondly, it is precisely (even if it is misguided, naïve or impure) the desire of Greek and Turkish Cypriots to be part of the European Union that might offer a “space” or a “third space” for an ethic of reconciliation to emerge. My question still stands: can this peculiar moment happen?

Finally as an ecumenical intellectual I find it hard not to strive against the logic of fragmentation. It would be the easiest path to leave the border where it is, only to worry about it later when Europe dismantles it; or, if Turkey is blocked from Europe, the Great Ottoman Union of 2020 keeps it. It comes down to agency, no matter what the objective constraints – this much the South African experience has taught us.