

Book Notes: The Politics of Acknowledgement: Truth Commissions in Uganda and Haiti, by Joanna R. Quinn

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Book Note

THE POLITICS OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: TRUTH COMMISSIONS IN UGANDA AND HAITI, by Joanna R. Quinn¹

KIRSTEN MIKADZE

TRUTH COMMISSIONS AND SIMILAR MECHANISMS of transitional justice are now widely employed by nations struggling through the process of rebuilding after mass atrocity or conflict. They are used in the hope of propelling these weakened or destroyed nations towards a place where societal healing can occur. Truth commissions, despite differing forms, are generally motivated by the same central mandate: uncovering and reporting on the truth of past events. They stand in contrast to other approaches to dealing with atrocities, such as retributive justice, reparation, or restorative justice. But how precisely do they facilitate the recovery process? Which elements are crucial to their success?

Joanna Quinn sets out to establish a means of better understanding and to assess how truth commissions should operate. She argues that acknowledgement is an essential element of societal recovery and should therefore feature prominently in the outcome of a successful truth commission. With this in mind, she establishes a theory of practice for the successful operation of truth commissions and deploys this framework to evaluate the outcomes of truth commissions in Uganda and Haiti.

According to Quinn, acknowledgment of past events is a necessary process through which a society must go on its way to recovery. It is not, however, a sufficient condition for achieving this end. Rather, it is a preliminary step. Once acknowledgment has occurred, she contends, a society can undertake other necessary, discrete (though interrelated) steps in this process. For example, only once past events have been acknowledged are victims in a position to forgive perpetrators. In turn, forgiveness frees victims to trust again. When the ability to trust—

1. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010) 160 pages.

often badly compromised as a result of mass atrocities—is re-established, social cohesion and civic engagement can regenerate.

In Quinn's model, acknowledgement comprises at minimum three elements: coming to terms with the past, emotional response (particularly denial, mourning, and revenge), and memory and remembering. Although not an exhaustive list, in her view gauging the existence of these elements in the outcome of the work of a truth commission will reveal whether or not the commission has generated acknowledgement of the past among ordinary citizens.

After situating acknowledgement in the process of societal recovery and detailing its core indicators, Quinn provides some context for the Ugandan and Haitian truth commissions and describes the circumstances that led to their ultimate failures. The Ugandan Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (CIVHR) was created in response to the mass atrocities committed under the Obote and Amin regimes between 1962 and 1986. The Haitian Commission nationale de vérité et de justice (CNVJ) was set up to address human rights violations that occurred between 1991 and 1994.

Although born of different circumstances, Quinn notes several common factors that contributed to the ultimate failure of the CIVHR and the CNVJ. Chief amongst these factors were a dearth of political will and a lack of popular support of (or even outright opposition to) the work of the commissions. These influences in turn led to institutional constraints upon the commissions, categorized by Quinn as inadequate capacity, security concerns, lack of funding and resources, and time delays. As a result of these shortcomings neither the CIVHR nor the CNVJ was able to produce results capable of facilitating societal recovery; neither ended up engendering acknowledgment.

In her analysis, Quinn notes that although neither the CIVHR nor the CNVJ explicitly engaged the notion of acknowledgement in their mandates, both had the potential to offer their respective populations the opportunity to begin acknowledging past abuses. However, after applying the three indicators of acknowledgement to the ultimate results of the CIVHR and the CNVJ, Quinn concludes that neither commission succeeded in fostering any meaningful measure of acknowledgment.

Acknowledgement of past crimes is rarely easy. However, for a society transitioning from internal conflict to peace, there is immeasurable value in this exercise. In light of this fact, Quinn's normative framework provides a useful and valuable lens for evaluating the effectiveness of truth commissions and other instruments of transitional justice.