

Book Review

Truth commissions: memory, power, and legitimacy, by Onur Bakiner, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp. vi+315, \$65.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-8122-4762-6.

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Truth commissions (TCs) have become the major political mechanisms to promote peace and social justice in transitional justice systems in post-war societies. In the aftermath of conflict, numerous actors including victims of conflict put pressure on an existing or new government to investigate the atrocities of the past. Despite the global trend of TCs, only a small number of commissions seems to have been effective. What makes a TC effective? *Truth commissions: memory, power and legitimacy* seeks to answer this question, while diagnosing numerous aspects of TCs: truth seeking, memory narrating and the politics of the commission. This book contributes to our understanding of how TCs are formed, shaped, and effect the society. Using comparative case studies, Onur Bakiner analyzes 15 TCs with special attention to Chile's and Peru's commissions to understand the impact of TCs on politics and society.

The book consists of three parts. Part I is composed of three

chapters, and sets the conceptual and theoretical framework to understand the TCs' struggles for justice and truth. In the first chapter, Bakiner defines and conceptualizes TCs while placing them in a historical context. For Bakiner, a TC "is a temporary body established with an official mandate to investigate past human rights violations, identify the patterns and causes of violence, and publish a final report through a politically autonomous procedure" (24). Publishing a final report is the necessary component of the definition of a TC because "the failure to publish a final report simply violates the essential task of TCs" (24).

Chapter 2 offers critical assessments of TC processes. It explores their formation, mandates, engagement with civil society, and "the politics within the commission" (46). It demonstrates how similar TCs, due to their internal politics, produce different outcomes in terms of their effectiveness. This is followed by a further discussion on the type of truths, including forensic data and victims' testimonies that TCs pursue to be effective in Chapter 3. It theorizes strategies (adjudication, avoidance, giving voice and transformation) that TCs utilize to reconstruct the historical accounts of the past violence. For example, the Chilean commission avoided the portrayal of the conflict to reconcile the rival parties (72), whereas the South African commission gave voice to the victims of conflict by including their narratives into national memory (73).

Part II shifts its focus from theoretical to empirical studies of TCs' influence on politics and society. This section has four chapters. Chapter 4 conceptualizes TCs' impact on domestic policies and practices more vividly. By identifying several causal mechanisms including direct and indirect political impact through civil society mobilization, the author underlines the ways "TCs are likely to produce impact" (87). The degree of autonomy each commission enjoys varies according to its mandate. He knows the degree of pressure TCs experience. But, despite these constraints, they are often able to challenge those in power. The author underscores that the commissioners can utilize their independence to be critical to current power holders. Thus, he considers a TC more than a political tool in the nation-building process. Bakiner's ability to understand the degree of pressure that TCs face and articulated circumstances in which TCs promote justice is a definite strength.

Chapter 5 offers an in-depth comparison between Chilean and

Peruvian commissions to explain why some commissions generate direct impact, while others depend on the mobilization of civil society to produce impact. Bakiner argues that the balance of power during the commission creation process is influential, but the major factor that determines commissions' final success is "whether the commissions' establishment process is tightly controlled or highly inclusive" (146). Chapter 6 further investigates this argument analyzing 13 other commissions. The findings support the proposition outlined in Chapter 5, arguing:

Short-and long term commission impact can be conceptualized as a mixture of change driven by political will and change resulting from civil society pressure. In some countries one sense of change dominates the other, whereas in other cases political and societal forces reinforce each other to generate either high or low impact (147).

Chapter 7 investigates Chile's and Peru's cases to understand the conditions under which TCs promote comprehensive historical accounts. It explores how TCs include and exclude narrative strategies outlined in Chapter 3 to explain the causes and consequences of political violence. The findings demonstrate that the commission creation process (mandate and composition of TCs) shapes the agency. For example, the exclusionary Chilean commission, established under the control of the government "produced a limited account of the underlying causes of political violence" (202). In contrast, the participatory Peruvian commission produced a "comprehensive TCs narrative" (203).

Part III is a critical analysis of TCs' conditions of possibility, limitations and promises. This segment consists of one chapter. Chapter 8 examines Bakiner's studies of TCs' impact using theories from Hannah Arendt, Pierre Nora, and Jürgen Habermas. However, disconnected to the previous chapters, it underscores that TCs can recover factual and historical truth from the official dishonesty (victor's history) by opening a social space to contest biased accounts of the past. The book ends with a series of recommendations to enhance the efficacy of future TCs. Bakiner emphasizes the inclusion of local civil society to connect with local leaders and issues. He suggests that the commissioners must accept their responsibility, despite disapproval, to promote justice and accountability. He supports reduced criminal sentences for perpetrators, which should be

“conditional on the consent of individual victim-survivors and victims’ relatives” (235). The author strongly recommends that TCs should include a comprehensive approach to history while giving “voice to those persons and social groups that have been excluded” (236).

Bakiner writes in a clear way, and his use of charts is convincing. For example, the table presented in Chapter 4 helps readers to know the causal mechanisms to understand the ways TCs influence domestic policies. There are, however, certain limitations. First, the author contends that commissioners alone can entertain the pressure and work for better justice, but he doesn’t explain the consequences of bypassing politics and political actors on TCs’ functionalities. This lack of explanation may limit the degree to which his findings are applicable to future TCs. Second, this book misses the outlining of the impact of TCs at the level of individuals’ lives. Examples at this level would have been more convincing. In the end, the book will be a great resource for anyone interested to learn how TCs influence politics and society. The focus on everyday practices of TCs also offers valuable insights for political actors interested in creating TCs in the future.