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Reconciliation, Transformation, Struggle: An Introduction

Adrian Little and Sarah Maddison

Reconciliation is a concept and political practice applied in many different contexts, from the immediate aftermath of post-apartheid South Africa, to the settler colonies of Australia and Canada, societies fractured by deep historical division such as Northern Ireland, and many 'post-conflict' societies in between. Originally emerging in the context of 'transitional' countries where doing justice to past wrongs was seen as an important means of supporting the transition to democracy, over time the politics of reconciliation has migrated to established Western democracies as an influential framework for thinking about the continuing impact of historical injustice on oppressed and marginalised groups within those societies. In different settings, with widely varying histories, populations, and intentions, divided societies have experimented with a range of political institutions, mechanisms and processes intended to help them 'reconcile'.

Yet despite the pursuit of this now often taken-for-granted goal, many questions remain about what it is these societies are attempting to achieve and how they might do so. In this respect, the pursuit of the over-arching political objective of reconciliation has often taken precedence over recognition of continuing forms of struggle in analyzing these conflictual and 'post-conflict' societies. At other times, it has appeared as if reconciliation has become the ultimate goal rather than a substantive transformation of the conflictual social relations that give rise to its

articulation and political import. This special issue examines these trends and their ramifications for the politics of conflict transformation in divided societies.

Conceptualizing reconciliation

The goals of reconciliation are expressed in a vast body of literature from both scholars and practitioners, much of which emphasises ideas of unity and shared aspirations. Much of this literature reflects a tendency to oversimplify what is at stake, to establish and then contest a set of binaries: reconciliation requires truth or justice, vengeance or forgiveness, it is about unity or difference, race or class, recognition or redistribution. Yet of course, it is about all of these things, and all the messy, complicated, exasperating ways in which they overlap, complement, contest and discredit other points of view. While the scholarly debates have done a great deal to further conceptual clarity and even to refine the application of these ideas, they also tend to narrow the horizons of the observer, distracting and obscuring the view of the full picture.

For example, underlying debates about the relationship between reconciliation and justice lies a perceived tension between reconciliation and the protection of human rights. While human rights and reconciliation advocates share the goal of attaining and sustaining peace and transforming relationships within a divided society, in practice these advocates have often been at odds in their views of how these goals might best be achieved. Human rights actors strive for ‘principled’ outcomes in which justice and the rule of law are seen as critical to peaceful coexistence in the future. Reconciliation advocates, by contrast, emphasise processes aimed at generating a culture of human rights, seeing ‘mutual understanding and the capacity

to live together as the critical foundation for forward-looking justice and the rule of law' (Holkeboer and Villa-Vincencio, 2004: 108-9). The former see investigations of past wrongs that do not result in legal sanctions as a means of 'institutionalising impunity', while the latter are concerned that pursuing trials may in fact 'prejudice the democratic transition' (Sieder, 2003: 209).

The two concepts are, however, intrinsically linked. Stephanus du Toit (2009: 255) suggests that the paradigm of reconciliation provides an 'interpretative framework' for the 'inclusive implementation of human and/or constitutional rights.' Further, Mieke Holkeboer and Charles Villa-Vincencio (2004: 108) contend that human rights and reconciliation are in fact deeply interdependent, and insist that developing a culture of human rights, in the aftermath of conflict, is not possible 'without the active and engaging work of reconciliation', nor is reconciliation possible 'among human beings who disregard one another's humanity and continue to commit human rights abuses.' As Desmond Tutu argued in defence of the work of the TRC, any process of conflict transformation must 'balance the requirements of justice, accountability, stability, peace, and reconciliation' (Tutu, 1999: 23).

Like many others in the field, however, Martha Minow emphasises the need to 'attend to those who were victimised' insisting that these responses must 'invigorate remembrance of what happened and prevent any future dehumanisation of the victimised' (Minow, 2000: 254). Minow's approach to reconciliation falls into one of two common ways of classifying reconciliation, described as either 'thick' and 'thin', or 'maximalist' and 'minimalist.' The maximalist approach focuses on

interpersonal reconciliation, drawing on either a religious (confessional) or medical (therapeutic) paradigm, and is associated with language such as healing, forgiveness and apology. Maximalists assert that reconciliation takes place in those occasions when perpetrators are able to acknowledge responsibility, repent, and are subsequently forgiven by their victims (Verdeja, 2009: 14). Indeed, much of the reconciliation literature has focused on a vision of 'communitarian social harmony' achieved through collective acts of public apology and forgiveness so that the conflicts of the past are substituted 'by the "overlapping consensus" of community' (Hirsch, 2012b: 1-2). This approach has been criticised for its 'illiberal' aim of 'expecting an entire society to subscribe to a single comprehensive moral perspective' (Gutmann &Thompson, 2000: 32).

In contrast, the minimalist approach draws more from a political paradigm and is associated with the transformation of sociopolitical institutions and processes (Borer, 2004: 25). Where the first approach envisages harmony and the overcoming of social division, the second accepts that conflict is intrinsic to politics and can be understood as a sign of a healthy society. As Tristan Anne Borer puts it, 'one approach to reconciliation requires people to get along; the other assumes they won't' (Borer, 2004: 31). In our view, the 'maximalist' or 'thick' versions of reconciliation is problematic for both practical and moral reasons, not least of which is the burden placed on victims who are expected to forgive the perpetrators of mass atrocity in order for reconciliation to be achieved (Crocker, 2000: 108, Verdeja, 2009: 16). The maximalist version of reconciliation remains imbued with religious connotations, particularly due to the focus on forgiveness, which is seen to undermine victims' justifiable anger or desire for justice (Hamber & Kelly 2009: 287). And although the

minimalist approach is often criticised for failing to sufficiently engage with the past, or for being too 'legalistic' to the neglect of relational efforts (Verdeja, 2009: 20), this is not the approach advanced here, nor is it a necessary attribute of political reconciliation. Any truly political reconciliation must engage with the past, not only for the sake of acknowledging the harm done to victims, but also in order to address current injustices arising from the institutions that perpetuate the uneven distribution of power and resources that continue to benefit past perpetrators (Verdeja, 2009: 14), an argument that will be further pursued in the following article.

A political conception of reconciliation must also take into account the question of subjectivity and reconciliation processes. Some processes such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission were highly focused on particular individuals and subject positions, especially 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. The risk with these particular subject positions is twofold. First, they can easily translate into particular emotions that we expect actors to have in reconciliation processes: trauma, forgiveness, guilt, remorse and so forth, which can raise expectations of specific behaviours from individuals placed in these subject positions. The difficulty here can emanate from these expectations and what happens when particular individuals do not behave in the 'right' way emotively according to the position they inhabit in reconciliation processes. This way of viewing reconciliation also struggles to deal with the overlap between the categories of victim and perpetrator and the fact that, in many conflicts, particular individuals can inhabit both categorizations simultaneously.

The second risk of highly agential accounts of reconciliation is the individualistic nature of their methodology and the challenge of the much more intangible process of translating individual forms of reconciliation into broader social groups and inter-group social dynamics. While, intuitively, it may seem appropriate to focus on those most severely affected by conflicts – 'victims' or 'the traumatized' - the extent to which forms of reconciliation at that level can be said to amount to societal reconciliation is much more questionable. One of the great challenges for political conceptions of reconciliation (as opposed to more psychological or theological interpretations) is to navigate the muddy waters of structure and agency and the means by which conflicts become ingrained in social and cultural practices over the course of time. This implies that political reconciliation requires awareness of the process of reconciliation – enduring and unrelenting – as opposed to approaches that are more focused on the process as directed towards the moment when reconciliation is achieved. This highlights the intersection of the issue of the subjectivity of reconciliation – the individual, the group, society as a whole – and the temporal process of reconciliation.

It is clear that the role of the past in contemporary reconciliation efforts is not a simple matter. There are, for example, concerns with regard to the relationship between present-day efforts at reconciliation, and the history of the nation in which these efforts are engaged. The roots of the concept in biblical language and texts, suggest restoration and wholeness in political relationships (Philpott 2006: 12). Many critics of reconciliation note that the word itself – *re*-conciliation – implies a desirable, prelapsarian state to which a nation might return, through a narrative of 'harmony, rupture, and eventual reunion' that risks ignoring ineradicable differences

and discouraging political dissent (Verdeja, 2009: 17). Such an approach also tends to obfuscate or erase the 'messy history' of the nation's contemporary conflict (Hirsch, 2012b: 3). As those involved in reconciliation efforts point out, however, in many (if not all) cases, this previous condition of harmony is mere myth, as in South Africa where it has been observed that 'there is nothing to go back to, no previous state or relationship one would wish to restore' (Krog, 1998: 143).

A further concern relates to the role of 'truth seeking' in reconciliation efforts. Both religious and secular observers have emphasized the need to 'come to terms with the past' rather than attempting to forget or repress past wrongs. Through commissions and other truth recovery processes, establishing a 'shared truth' about past collective violence and human rights abuses is seen as 'a prerequisite for achieving accountability, meaningful reconciliation, and a foundation for a common future' (Chapman, 2002: 260-1). As a result of high profile institutions such as the South African TRC, the linking of truth and reconciliation has become something of a truism, such that 'the assessment of the contribution of any particular truth-telling process has become, almost by definition, the presence or absence of reconciliation'; reconciliation has become 'the *sine qua non* of assessing success' (Borer, 2004: 21). This is not to suggest that the recovery of truth and historical memory do not play an important role in reconciliation and conflict transformation processes, but it has become commonplace to take a reductionist approach to *truth and reconciliation* in ways that are profoundly unhelpful to understanding the far more complex requirements of conflict transformation in divided societies.

More helpful are the approaches to reconciliation that are explicit about its inherent complexity. Both scholars and practitioners have developed various schema for analyzing the component parts of these efforts. Hamber and Kelly (2005: 7), for example, suggest that reconciliation involves 'five interwoven strands': the development of a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society; a means of acknowledging and dealing with the past; the building of positive relationships; significant cultural and attitudinal change; and substantial social, economic and political change. Similarly, the South African Reconciliation Barometer has developed 'six complex hypotheses and indicators' for measuring the progress of reconciliation, namely: political culture, human security, cross-cutting political relationships, dialogue, race relations, and historical confrontation' (Lefko-Everett, Nyoka & Tiscornia, 2011: 8). The Australian Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (2000: 13) also defined 'eight key issues' as essential to the process of reconciliation:

- a greater understanding of the importance of *land and sea* in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies;
- *better relationships* between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community;
- recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *culture and heritage* are a valued part of the Australian heritage;
- a sense for all Australians of a shared ownership of our *history*;
- a greater awareness of the causes of *disadvantage* that prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from achieving fair and proper standards in health, housing, employment and education;

- a greater community response to addressing the underlying causes of the unacceptably high *levels of custody* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- greater opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to *control their destinies*;
- agreement on whether the process of reconciliation would be advanced by a *document or documents* of reconciliation

Schema like these emphasise the pragmatic nature of reconciliation work, even as the goals may remain somewhat utopian. Reconciliation can be seen in these schema as goal and process, balancing the tension between any number of important aspirations that open the space for political contestation about the nature of conflict transformation. Reconciliation seeks to anticipate the future while acknowledging and memorializing the past; it seeks to be politically inclusive while focusing on the needs and rights of victims (du Toit, 2009: 256); it is both discursive and normative (Renner, 2012: 55); it is 'at once political, legal, cultural, moral, psychological, and spiritual' (Kiss, 2000: 80); it incorporates 'psychological, structural and political elements' (Wale, 2013: 8); it is concerned with both institutional transformation and the restoration of trust (Mack, 2011: 450-1); and it operates at multiple levels, including the personal and the political (Quinn, 2009: 4). It is emphatically not a process of conflict resolution where this latter approach may be understood to delegitimize and repress important forms of political resistance and struggle (Schirch, 2008: 3). Indeed, such struggles are essential to political reconciliation, which, as Andrew Schaap contends, 'will not get off the ground' if a society must first establish 'a shared moral account of the nature of past wrongs' (Schaap, 2007:

9). Fundamentally, reconciliation is fuelled by the belief that 'things could have been otherwise' (Hirsch, 2012a: 80), and that it is still possible to transform the relations and structures that continue to divide societies, causing violence and insecurity.

Time, scale, resolution, transformation

Over the last two decades it has become evident that there is a substantial gap between the normative promise of ideals of reconciliation, and the empirical observation of the multiple ways in which these ideals have failed to be realised. This special issue confronts this gap with a suite of papers that reflects on the promises and practice of reconciliation. In this sense, the articles collected here are very timely. Two decades after the South African transition from apartheid it is appropriate for political scientists to take stock of the 'reconciliation industry' that the changes in South Africa spawned. Not only have we seen the emergence of a much more critical literature on truth and reconciliation as it was experienced in South Africa, but we have also witnessed the implementation of other transitional models in various conflict scenarios around the world. While some of these alternatives have been deeply flawed, many have proceeded by deliberately eschewing elements of the truth and reconciliation model. Yet the rhetorical reach of reconciliation remains highly potent - it continues to be deeply relevant to the discipline of political science as we grapple with conflict transformation processes around the world and consider the potential role of external actors in intervening in these processes of transition.

Much of the literature in the area of peace and conflict studies has taken the pursuit of conflict *resolution* as an uncontroversial objective. While a little ground has been given in discussions of alternative conceptualisations of conflict *transformation*, these approaches remain heavily grounded in psychological theories that understand the main problem as one of getting the conflicting parties to agree. This often has taken the form of advocacy for mediation and peace-building as a way of building sufficient trust to enable political co-operation to take place, thereby facilitating modes of reconciliation. This special issue analyses these ways of conceptualisaing the problem as a problem in themselves and make the case for 'bringing politics back in'. As Andrew Schaap suggests, 'If we are to understand reconciliation as a political concept, then we must consider not only how politics might be conciliatory but how reconciliation might be politicised' (Schaap, 2005: 9). Where the peace and conflict studies literature is too focused on agential understandings of the relationships between conflictual parties, a political approach should be one that takes the structural constraints to agential engagement more seriously. This entails avoidance of simplistic or reductionist understandings of what the problem is in a particular context and awareness of the temporal and scalar dimensions of multi-faceted disputes that contribute to the reproduction of conflicts.

Contributors to this special issue examine a range of contexts in which reconciliation has been debated including South Africa, Australia, Canada, and Northern Ireland. The articles bring to light the multiplicity of contested issues that are invoked in the politics of reconciliation and the further conflicts and struggles that they engender. The collection of articles highlights the dynamic nature of conflict transformation and the ways in which political processes are closely entwined with emotions,

expressive social practices and cultural beliefs that often compromise or complicate attempts to achieve reconciliation. The articles also highlight the complexities of time and scale that provide deeply contextual inflections to any effort towards reconciliation.

In terms of temporality, reconciliation processes are complicated by contested understandings of the passage of time. Temporality is concerned with interpretations of how time is passing and the conflicts that ensue from disagreements about the tempo of change. This is a significant factor because it goes beyond a simple focus on the objective passage of time and straightforward understandings of past, present and future. Temporality focuses on the human dimension of how time elapses and the implications of different interpretations of the speed of change. In situations with contested histories, a potentially dangerous present, and an uncertain future, the passage of time and pace at which it takes place is fertile ground for further strife, disagreement and, potentially, violence. Temporality is important for reconciliation because it highlights the interpretive dimension of whether change is taking place too fast or too slow and the political implications of this interpretation for reconciliation. Moreover, it also has fundamental ramifications for how we consider the timescale of reconciliatory processes – not only when they should start but also when they should end – and the effect this has on how we imagine the political institutions that need to be constructed to enable reconciliation processes to take place.

Temporality has played a significant role in framing one of the more dominant approaches to periods of ‘post’-conflict. In recent years, popular understandings of

reconciliation associated with periods of regime change and democratic transition have increasingly come under the banner of 'transitional justice.' Understood as 'both practical tools and discursive project', transitional justice mechanisms are both constituted by and construct new regimes aiming to enforce liberal norms and do justice for past wrongs (Miller, 2008: 266). In practice, transitional justice 'tools' include trials, truth commissions, apologies, reparations, and institutional reform – all practices that can equally be associated with ideas of reconciliation in various timescales. As a concept, however, transition implies a far more limited temporal frame, with a beginning and an end that can be observed in the move from war to peace, or from authoritarianism to democracy (Quinn, 2009: 3).

Yet as the articles in this special issue make clear, the process of conflict transformation is more layered and complex than a 'transition' might suggest. Both countries such as South Africa and Northern Ireland, which experienced such transitions through episodes of rapid political and/or regime change, and countries like Australia, which experienced no such transition, have utilized 'tools' from the transitional justice 'toolbox' in efforts to reconcile the past. Yet the politics of deploying these tools often seems inclined towards an unhelpful simplification of history, time, and past injustice. The idea of transition allows complex histories to be reduced to the most recent past conflict, and contest over the future to be delimited by the promise of a more civilized form of democratic society (Hinton, 2010: 7). An emphasis on 'transition' as 'a moment of discontinuity and rupture' allows newly created transitional institutions to in fact set the 'chronological parameters' for the conflict and its transformation, generally limiting the focus to specific forms of direct violence thought to have ended with the old regime (Miller, 2008: 270). Thus,

although the field of transitional justice is intended to ensure that political choices do not come at the expense of accountability for past wrongs, this accountability—and indeed the wrongs themselves—tend to be limited in scope. It is in light of this that the articles in this special issue tend to take a critical stance on the framework of transitional justice, particularly with regard to the institutional spaces this paradigm now dominates.

A further concern in the development of political institutions for reconciliation processes is the issue of scale. The scalar concerns of reconciliation operate in two registers. The first concerns demographic scale, or how the relationship between minority and majority populations may influence reconciliation and conflict transformation efforts. In Australia, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only 2.5 per cent of the total population, meaning that the attitudes of the non-indigenous majority to indigenous claims is a hugely significant political factor that shapes reconciliation efforts. Indigenous claims tend to be portrayed as less consequential 'minority' complaints requiring recognition from the state, rather than a radical restructuring of the framework of the state as happened in South Africa where the black majority ensured that such transformation (eventually) occurred (Short, 2005: 270-1). In South Africa, however, the demographic scale is reversed, with around 80 per cent of the population belonging to one of several Black African ethnic groups, and the remaining 20 per cent comprised of White, 'Coloured', Indian and other populations. This inversion of demographic scale, which was essential to the South African economy, contributed to shaping both the regimes of colonialism and apartheid (in order to maintain the economic exploitation of a majority by a minority) and the struggle against them (MacDonald, 2006: 49).

Scalar concerns also demand greater consideration for the porous, overlapping and interlinked socio-political domains in which reconciliation effort should be directed. As Sarah Maddison outlines in her article in this issue, a multi-level approach to conceptualizing reconciliation reveals the need to take a broader perspective on a range of structural, institutional and interpersonal transformations that promote democratic values and contestations. This is a dynamic view of reconciliation, acknowledging tensions between short-term stability and compromise on the one hand, and long-term aspirations towards economic justice, political equality, and the redress of structural violence on the other. Such an approach also encourages political actors to resist the desire for 'closure' in favour of broad and deep social and political reforms.

Underscoring this view of the complex, open-ended nature of reconciliation efforts the five other papers in this special issue traverse at least two of the socio-political levels of reconciliation that Maddison outlines. Specifically, several of the articles explore the connections between the institutional and relational aspects of reconciliation. Fanie du Toit provides an illuminating view of some of the lesser-known institutions that played a role in the South African transition to democracy and related reconciliation efforts, emphasising the need for these institutions to be inclusive and credible if they are to be effective. Ravi de Costa considers this challenge in the context of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, questioning the transformative potential of this fundamentally discursive institutional approach in terms of its reach to broader publics that have otherwise remained unengaged from political debate about that country's traumatic colonial history.

Adrian Little draws on experiences in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Australia to consider the role of emotions in the practice of reconciliation and conflict transformation. Paul Muldoon also elucidates the significance of emotion in the politics of reconciliation, contending that the desire to feel good, rather than to do good, which he describes as the 'narcissistic impulse', has proven 'toxic' to reconciliation efforts in Australia. And finally Ernesto Verdeja explores the implications for contemporary political reconciliation of 'inherited responsibility' about historical wrongs.

Together these articles provide insight into the scale of political complexity that reconciliation entails, in a variety of contexts. They also provide some clues as to how a more intrinsically political reconciliation might be advanced. The optimism of the 1990s, when 'miraculous' reconciliations seemed within reach in any number of countries, has long passed. For actors on the ground the intervening decades have proven disappointing and demobilising. For scholars of these processes the challenge is to re-examine the successes and failures of past reconciliation processes in order to find alternate ways to respond to enduring conflicts and persistent inequalities.

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