

The New Struggle for Civility

Freimut Duve

'I bombed a building and people died. I tortured someone. I killed a person.' Under the heading 'Amnesty Deadline: 10 May 1997' this gruesome wording was put on top of a sketch of a white man and a black man. In early May, people all over South Africa could read this appeal to the amnesty request on a poster. The reason? 'Truth—the road to reconciliation'. All groups were asked to apply; those who had fought apartheid and those who had defended it. The principle assumed was that both sides had applied non-legal, non-democratic means and had violated basic human rights. 'You may' the poster said, 'qualify for amnesty if :

- there was a political reason for what you did,
- you tell the commission everything you know,
- what you did happened between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994'.

I had not been to South Africa since May 1961. Now that apartheid is banned and democracy is operating I was curious to find the new South Africa. I could not evade comparison, with all the other dramatic histories of transition I was confronted with during my life-time—as a German, as a writer, as a politician. What happens once the violent rule of the gun, the prison, the torture, and the secret services is over, and the rule of majority vote, the rule of democracy starts operating?

The question of the future is tied to the way new democracies deal with their past. The amnesty offer is a historic moment of

outmost importance, and not only for South Africa. It expressed in a human way two convictions:

- We have to accept our past as a common past of both sides,
- we have to design our future as a common future of one democratic, society.

Both are cornerstones to the future civility of any country. With the exception of Chile—where a ‘Truth and reconciliation Commission’ was first founded—it seems that South African democrats under the wise leadership of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu had fully understood the basic errors of other ‘victories’ of the oppressed. When the Algerian war ended, all people of French origin—a key element of the modern history of North Africa for more than a hundred years—were pressed out of the country. Today more Algerians live in France than French had lived in Algeria before the war of the fifties. The traumatic tragedy and the ferocity’s we hear of almost every day are only understandable in view of this basic error of expelling all Europeans in 1961 and thus eradicating the real history of the country.

The myths of all revolutions since 1789, that killing the past completely must be the *tabula rasa* for the new start—was demystified by Nelson Mandela. His friends agreed to his radical civil and democratic convictions. Friends who as leaders of the ANC had had seen non-civil authoritarian or totalitarian results of revolutionary success (they had been to Moscow, they had been to Angola, and they had seen what happened in Algeria).

Thus South African democratic winners opted for the path into peaceful civility by accepting the real history of South Africa: which is a cultural history of settlement, of migration, of culture of many different groups. There would be no South Africa without the Afrikaner, there would be no South Africa without the Zulu Nation, there would be no South Africa without the history of British settlers, Indian migrant workers and all the many other groups which

made today's South Africa.

The many risks, problems and chances of South Africa's first steps into the democracy will be important lessons to all of us, for our future of civility in the coming global electronic century—when homogenous ethnic societies will have no future, except for the use of terror to expel 'others'.
