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Title: Some Truth About Truth Commissions III: An Example from Poland

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Abstract. This article describes some unintended but predictable consequences of truth commissions impeding the consolidation of democracy in post-totalitarian and post-authoritarian states.

The pursuit of justice may be a fool's errand. Or so some political analysts might conclude about the development and implementation of truth commissions in the service of consolidating democracy in post-totalitarian and post-authoritarian political regimes.

Most often, significant controversy revolves around the issue of justice as revealed truth versus justice as just deserts--e.g., retribution, punishment, and/or rehabilitation. The former is championed by many who view the latter as largely continuing to fuel a never-ending, vicious cycle of aggression. They also seem to believe that only the truth can set a nation free from this cycle and set a course for democracy. Those seeking justice as retribution, punishment, and/or rehabilitation champion a consequence of injustice that is noxious in that even rehabilitation--as recommended by its champions--often involves techniques that are perceived by their target in an operant context of omission training or punishment. These champions seem to believe that the truth--far from setting a nation free and a democratic course--frees victimizers from a deserved and grim fate.

A controversy that is less frequently mentioned concerns the very problem of identifying the truth and how this problem can be exploited by the enemies of representative democracy. Stories of events can be confabulated or distorted. Documents and other tangible data seemingly supporting various stories can be created or modified accordingly. Innuendo stemming from stories and tangible data will surely arise with the result being a psychopolitical burden added to the fragile strivings of democracy.

A case in point is contemporary Poland. Truth procedures in this country require a political appraisal and vetting of political candidates--a process called lustration. Candidates can have collaborated with prior Communist regimes and still run for and hold political office as long as they admit to what they have done. However, they are banned from political office for 10 years if they are found to have lied by denying collaboration. The actual process of lustration is away from the light, however, and involves the confidential evaluation of information from informants and secret service files.

Recently, Aleksander Kwasniewski, the current Polish president, and Lech Walesa, a past president who is currently running for president, have been accused of collaboration with the secret police during Poland's communist era. Both have been legally cleared. But legal clearing is not psychological clearing. As Mr. Walesa has been quoted in *The New York Times*, "Now I see it (lustration and the process of legal clearing) has no point because the whole operation did not convince anyone." Or as to the psychology of morality, Piotr Naimski, an accuser of Mr. Walesa, has been quoted in *The Times* as stating, "The courts are not the best way to answer moral questions."

We might venture that a transparent lustration--i.e., letting anyone interested observe all details of that process--might attenuate such problems. However, shedding more light on lustration also guarantees that every shred of misinformation and disinformation becomes public. Moreover, truisms on truth in

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the political arena of life--that we can never know what really happened or (more likely) that we can never know for sure that we know what really happened even if we are sure about what we know--play right into the hands of democracy's subverters and those who, indeed, are lying about their pasts. Instead, we are left with competing narratives of fiction and mythology that intersect with only some of the many elements of Truth. Here it is public discourse and a nation's collective soul that is being punished and needs reform and rehabilitation. (See Bank, R. (1999). *Mythic perspectives and perspectives on truth: Approaching Winnicott by way of comparisons between Kohut and Freud*. *Psychoanalytic Review*, 86, 109-135; Erlanger, S. (August 21, 2000). *Polish watchdog nips at Walesa's heels*. *The New York Times*, p. A6; Hamber, B. (1998). *The burdens of truth: An evaluation of the psychological support services and initiatives undertaken by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. *American Imago*, 55, 9-28; Hocutt, M. (1994). *Some truths about truth*. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 22, 1-5; Ibanze, T. (1991). *Social psychology and the rhetoric of truth*. *Theory and Psychology*, 1, 187-201; Sarbin, T.R. (1998). *The social construction of truth*. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 18, 144-150; *Some truth about truth commissions*. (February 14, 1997). *IBPP*, 1(12); *Some truth about truth commissions II*. (September 12, 1997). *IBPP*, 3(7); Steinhart, E. (1994). *Analogical truth conditions for metaphors*. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 9, 161-178.) (Keywords: Kwasniewski, Poland, Truth Commission, Walesa.)