Working Through the Past in Bosnia and Northern Ireland: Truth, Reconciliation and the Constraints of Consociationalism

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Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland represent difficult cases for theories of conflict resolution: the consociational structures of governance in each case reflect and, arguably, reproduce the segregation that characterizes everyday life. In each country, truth recovery and reconciliation processes have been seen as ways of overcoming the polarizing effect of ethnonational division. This article suggests that this faith is misplaced on two accounts: firstly, while the intent to reconcile erstwhile ethnic opponents is laudable and admirable, it ignores obvious and complicated practicalities – particularly, the lack of consensus over the past. More fundamentally, however, I argue that the truth and reconciliation paradigm is politically redundant: insofar as it is constitutive of its own reality, it answers questions contained within its own logic and defers consideration of alternative concerns. In other words, by attempting to reconcile ethnonational identities the truth and reconciliation paradigm starts one step too far ahead of itself and by failing to problematize those identities it ends by reproducing them. I suggest that "dealing with the past" becomes saturated with political and social significance.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, truth recovery, ethnicity, reconciliation, consociationalism

> *'… there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed' (Synge, 1963 [1907]: 227).*

Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) continue to reside in a kind of Faulknarian gloaming in which the past continues to haunt the present.[1] As such, despite their differences, both represent "hard" cases for theories of peace building and conflict resolution. While both countries continue to enjoy relative peace, the legacies of their divided pasts still hold a residual but important grip over contemporary politics. In part, the continued presence of the past is linked to the

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elaborate consociational structures of governance in each country. Designed with the purpose of moving Northern Ireland and BH away from their bloodied histories, the unintended consequence of these structures was to institutionalize the divisions of those histories by providing incentives to ethnic entrepreneurs to pursue exclusivist rather than integrative policy agendas.[2] In both cases, the consociational carve-up at the decision-making level of politics echoes segregation at other levels of society, including schooling and ideological outlook.

The backdrop of ethnicity in everyday life is in each case pervasive. It is underpinned and supported by the more craven aspects of professional politics. In Northern Ireland, for example, the debates over the politics of the past and contemporary societal needs recently fused in scepticism over a scheme to "regenerate" the "footprint" left by the removal of a British army barracks in north Belfast by building a new social housing estate on the site. The moderate nationalist grouping, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), objected that the original plans had been appropriated by the two main ethnonationalist parties, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to ensure that the houses allocated would reflect and maintain the current ethnoreligious status quo in the area. The SDLP complained that that allocation would be detrimental to the Catholic/Nationalist population of the city where greater social housing needs existed. The party claimed that a deal had been done between Sinn Féin and the DUP in which the latter gained guaranteed that houses would go to Protestants/Unionists (whose population has been declining in the area) in return for the former Maze gaol being turned into a 'Conflict Transformation Centre' – an initiative that the DUP had long resisted due to the belief that it would become a shrine for paramilitary prisoners.[3]

In the countries of the former Yugoslavia a similar ethnicization of contemporary politics is underpinned by the salience of discourses about the past – particularly, discourses over historical culpability and claims of victimhood. In a widely reported incident, for example, the new right wing Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolić, tapped into these debates by asserting that '[t]here was no genocide in Srebrenica, grave war crimes were committed by some Serbs who should be found, prosecuted and punished. It is very difficult to indict someone and prove before a court that an event qualifies as genocide.'[4] Flying in the face of the rulings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) Nikolić's statement was provocative and, given

his own history as a deputy prime minister under Slobodan Milošević in the late 1990s, most likely it was deliberately so. And while his position is, arguably, reflective of a general tendency to "debase" the term genocide[5], it is also reflective of what could be called a narrative of post-war weariness within Serbia: that is, a reluctance to continue to atone for the Bosnia war and a resistance to the commemorative impulse that surrounds the twentieth anniversary of that conflict. This is evidenced, for example, in the fact that Nikolić went on to complain: '[d]on't always ask the Serbian president if he is going to [the annual commemoration in] Srebrenica. My predecessor was there and paid tribute. Why should every president do the same?'[6]

While ethnonationalism represents the most distinctive feature of the political culture of Northern Ireland and BH, studies have shown that it is not reflective of people's everyday experiences (Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings, 2007; McGrattan and Meehan, 2012). Of course both societies experience high levels of segregation: schooling, housing, history and religion are exclusionary institutions and practices. However, in day-to-day interactions with the ethnic "other" or with ethnic boundaries people often respond in strategic ways, transgressing and transcending the binding and bonding imperatives and ignoring or subverting the totems and taboos. The disconnect between these everyday experiences and the politics of ethnic distinction raises an obvious question regarding the nature of peace – for, if settlement period politics continue to run along the same lines as those of the years of violence then it seems reasonable to fear a return to conflict. The presence of "spoiler" groups such as republican dissidents in Northern Ireland or right-wing ideologues such as Nikolić in Serbia only heightens those suspicions. The answer to this problem in Northern Ireland and in BH appeared to be a truth and reconciliation process which, following the South African example, would institute a new political dispensation and inaugurate a new moral order (Guelke, 2007; Subotić, 2009).

The assumption that truth recovery and reconciliation processes can aid transitional societies in moving beyond violent and divided pasts is, of course, not new – indeed, it lies at the heart of the transitional justice approach to peace building (Teitel, 2000). This insight however forms only a narrow understanding of what transitional justice can achieve. Indeed, researchers have begun examining in much more detail just how transitional justice mechanisms affect processes of democratization. Just how do storytelling schemes, restorative justice initiatives, truth

recovery commissions and so on lead to a deepening of democracy within states? What impact do juridical inquiries, public apologies and acknowledgements, reparations, punishments or the naming of names play in increasing public engagement in politics and expanding levels of social responsibility and societal cohesion? What I wish to examine in this article, however, is one specific aspect of the relationship of truth recovery processes and democratic deepening: namely, the relationship between pre-existing and politically embedded structures of consociational governance to the debate over dealing with past injustices.

A point of departure is a recent article by Lauren Taylor and Alexander Dukalskis in the *Journal of Peace Research* on the relationship of truth commissions to democratization. Taylor and Dukalskis follow Robert Dahl's classic formulation of democratization being linked to participation and contestation; and they argue that truth commissions can deepen democracy by promoting scrutiny, accountability and openness among political institutions and between political elites and civil society (Taylor and Dukalskis, 2012: 673). I suggest that ethnicized democracies such as those in Northern Ireland or BH represent a problem for that understanding. In such societies, consociational power sharing structures have effectively institutionalized division: participation in terms of voting and civil society actors remains high, but contestation is reduced to sectarian referenda – parties of government are returned at each election and ultimate political responsibility lies with exogenous actors (sovereign nation-states and supranational organizations) (McGrattan, 2012). Taylor and Dukalskis, however, hint at an alternative to electoral stasis: namely, an emphasis on openness. Openness in approaching and running truth commissions can, they say, distinguish a new regime from its predecessors, underlining a new commitment to democracy. It can, secondly, 'create an environment of debate about conceptions of the past and visions of the future' (Taylor and Dukalskis, 2012: 674).

This article argues that procedural and ideological openness can only be guaranteed if there exists a commitment to avoid equivalency between perpetrator and victim. Of course, both terms remain deeply contested and are far from being stable concepts. However, I argue that the pluralist impulse inherent in hazy ideas about reconciliation carries with it a moral, juridical and political implication that everyone has a right to be heard and that all voices must be included. Naturally all voices must be included in any debate about how societies approach the issue of historic

injustices; however, that is categorically not the same as saying all voices are equal. Until that distinction is maintained then it seems absurd to speak of reconciliation.

I argue that while the strictures of consociational institutions can lead to a reification of identities, the building of reconciliation consists in the first instance of challenging exclusivist, insular ethnic visions by emphasizing how ethnicity in and of itself is no substitute for individual hurts and wrongs. In that understanding it is impossible to "deal with the past" as such; rather, the invocation of distinction between perpetrator and victim represents a return to Theodor Adorno's original formulation of working through or coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Adorno, for example, takes as his point of departure the idea that it is how we approach the past that is of vital importance. As such, he argues that we must be clear about what occurred. As Adorno argues, the muting of the experiences of victims of historic crimes within public spheres is less the result of societal amnesia than it is the result of a kind of wilful blindness: 'The effacement of memory is more the achievement of an all-too-wakeful consciousness than it is the result of its weakness in the face of the superiority of the unconscious processes' (Adorno, 1986: 117). Although governmental institutions can facilitate that 'wakeful consciousness', their very existence demonstrates the absences that they were established to defer: in other words, consociational structures exist only to ameliorate division, but in so doing constantly announce the absence of those who have suffered most from division and violence.

1. Trauma and memory

The memory of those who have suffered from violence and division is itself socially constructed, for while opportunities to initiate policy on issues surrounding the legacies of the past are constantly changing, the past itself remains a disruptive and disrupting influence on transitional societies. Psychologists and sociologists have, for example, examined the related phenomena of collective trauma and transgenerational transmission of trauma. Thus, returning to the South African case, it has been noted that:

> [M]emories of unresolved trauma are often perpetuated through stories told within the family and broader community. Memories continue to affect generations even when they do not directly experience the specific traumatic event. These "received" memories shape identities as well as fuel negative

perceptions and stereotypes of difference, often hindering reconciliation processes and perpetuating identities of continued victimisation.[7]

In other words, violent pasts may adversely affect younger generations who did not experience conflict directly or who may not be totally conscious of, or deliberately choose to ignore, recent history. The idea that received wisdoms about the past colour attitudes and beliefs in the present is, in some ways, an obvious point. But it is also, paradoxically, somewhat insubstantial: history by itself cannot mould identities; rather, its prime political function is, arguably, to lend legitimacy and authority. What is perhaps more consequential, though, again in subterranean ways, is the fact that trauma, politically speaking, can be constructed strategically. The psychologist Vamik Volkan, for example, speaks to this idea in his description of 'chosen trauma' – namely, the adoption of traumatic language and perception through the selection of particular historical reference points or interpretations. For Volkan, chosen trauma works itself out in a number of ways – division, victimization, guilt, shame, humiliation, helplessness – and, he argues, it can become particularly problematic when it becomes taken for granted; that is, when historical events become mythologized and psychologized to an extent that the perception and representation of events become more important than what actually happened.[8] The sceptic may respond that that is the post-modern condition: reality is mediated and the most persuasive rendition will win out; again, the pessimist may respond that that is so, but it is the person who can proclaim her version of reality the loudest who will prevail; a more sanguine observer (perhaps, even, a political realist) might reply that it all depends on how we approach the subject.

Collective or societal trauma must be differentiated from personal, individual trauma by virtue of the fact that it is imbued with particular political resonance: namely, it is involved with questions of power insofar as it determines whose voices are heard and whose are silenced, whose stories are given public acknowledgement and whose are muted. Thus, trauma is not only a silence but, politically speaking, it is an act of silencing. This silencing can be passive and active. It can, for example, take the form of uncertainty: with reference to the Balkan conflict, the political scientist Stef Jansen has claimed that obfuscation is internalized in order to abdicate historical responsibility: vagueness, he writes, 'was a crucial instrument of self-protection': it allowed for generalized accusations while, at the same time, it served to deflect

'probing questions' relating to individual responsibility (2002: 84). Fundamentally, what this construction of trauma gives rise to is a skewered representation of our own selves:

> If our common identity is shaped by its relation to the other, to silence the voice of the other is another form of repression within ourselves […] To be so vocal about one's past might in turn become a form of screening untold memories (Valensi, 2000: 195).

Lucette Valensi, writing about the Algerian War of Independence, argues that the war is not over since 'the other side' is effectively excluded from the collective memory of their erstwhile antagonists (2000: 190). In this way, memories become reified and take on the character of ritualized narratives, becoming both totems and taboos that ensure communal and ideological orthodoxy. A similar point was made in Primo Levi's final book in which he described how:

> […] a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallised, perfected, adorned, which installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense (2010: 11–12).

Commemoration has functioned to provide victims, groups and elites alike with a vehicle for dealing with the past. It is therefore a political act insofar as it involves a repositioning of the past in relation to the present. As such, the politics of commemoration involve a dual process of de-politicization and re-politicization. Commemoration is depoliticizing, firstly, because it is quintessentially a selective reading of the past: untidy narratives and unwelcome facts are conveniently written out of collective memory; historical facts and the memory of individuals are displaced, deferred and silenced. Commemoration is also an act of re-politicization: it involves the inscription of authority in the present by reference to the past; events are framed and narratives are created to inform current understandings and to rally supporters to the cause in the present. As Rebecca Graff-McRea explains in her recent study of the resonance of the 1916 Rising throughout twentieth century nationalism, commemoration is:

> [t]he construction and contestation of our past: it is intricately bound to discourses of the nation, the state, identity and opposition, and thereby decrees who is to be included, excluded or marginalized from both the group and history itself (2011: 4).

In constructing and contesting our past, commemoration embeds division and polarization with an interminable impression on the way that people think about future progress and relations. If the project of commemoration is intrinsically linked with the quest of an exclusionary nationalism, the progressive centrist parties and civic society function is glaringly discernible: to establish why and who we ought to commemorate, and in what manner. The potential for displacement, deferral and, ultimately, forgetting underlines the importance of that role. Collective memory is formed on absences and silences. Bonds are created by what is judged to be important to a community and for this to take place, memory must be circumscribed. The impulse towards commemoration stands at the beginnings of that creation and, as the American sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, explains: 'That which is not publicly known and spoken about will be socially forgotten' (1994: 115). Rescuing silenced victims and displaced historical narratives from that process is politically difficult since it involves rowing against dominant tides; however, it should be an ethical imperative, involving as it does questions of recovering forgotten truths and making those truths visible.

During the twentieth century policy makers have grappled with issues regarding post-conflict societal transitions.[9] The German case is illustrative: faced with the problem of how to move beyond civil war and revolution in Germany in 1919, Max Weber advocated adopting a responsibility to the future – raking over the past, the causes of the war, would be, he argued, detrimental to the debt that the survivors of the catastrophe owed to their children; again, on the eve of the Second World War, the Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, argued that our primary debt is to the dead, the victims of violence, and that the only sound basis of morality is to remember those who suffered and could no longer speak of their suffering, those who were rendered voiceless again by the march of progress.[10] The Nuremburg Trials instituted a bridge between Weber and Benjamin: a debt should be acknowledged and accountability be ensured in order to move forward and draw a line in the sand (Ricoeur, 2004; Rigby, 2001). Regardless of the Benjaminian approach, debates about how to deal with such contentious pasts tend to coalesce around one of two fundamental ideas:

1.   Unpicking the past may endanger fragile social cohesion in the present. The emblematic case in this instance is the Spanish *pacto de olvido*. The pact was

not so much a commitment to forgetting, but was rather an informal understanding reached in the post-Franco era among Spain's political elites to not talk about the past in ways that would create political capital in the present.

2. Leaving questions unanswered about what took place may lead to the festering of wounds and the deepening of division. Here, the paradigmatic example is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which ignored rape and gendered violence and awarded amnesties for cases of violence and human rights abuse that were judged to be politically motivated.

In each instance, peace and/or democracy becomes vouchsafed through the establishment of a process based on, in the first instance, wilful forgetting: potentially troublesome questions are left unasked and peace becomes linked to justice in a highly circumscribed manner. Both of these approaches to the question of dealing with difficult, divided pasts, to a large extent depend upon and proceed from an ideal of tolerance: we tolerate compromises in order to ensure cohesion; or we tolerate hurts in order to reach consensus. In so doing, they contribute to a negative conception of peace – that is, peace merely being the absence of war – and offer little in the way of a more maximalist notion where peace can be equated to beliefs in the importance of social responsibility, scrutiny and accountability, public deliberation, and popular engagement in the political process (Mendeloff, 2004). The English historian, Theodore Zeldin alludes to the limitations inherent in tolerance when he argues that 'toleration was adopted for largely negative reasons, not out respect for other people's views […] but in despair of finding certainty. It meant closing one's eyes to what other people believed.' Toleration however, is still a vital and necessary first step: 'The ideal of toleration […] is a stepping stone. Understanding others is the great adventure that lies beyond it' (1994: 272). In his survey of the twentieth century, which was first published in the same year as Zeldin's *Intimate History of Humanity*, Eric Hobsbawm makes a complementary point: 'What stands in the way of understanding is not only our passionate convictions, but the historical experience that has formed them. The first is easier to overcome […] it is understanding that comes hard' (1994: 5). In other words, we will always have an opinion on violent pasts – particularly if we have lived through them or if we have been directly affected by conflict – but an understanding, that is a communication and a conversation about

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what occurred, might just be possible. However it involves a study of the workings of the past in the present.

2. Ethnicity and the politics of reconciliation

How the past works in deeply divided societies ought to be a matter of some debate. Anthony Smith's classic definition of nationality points to the common way that history is treated in this regard. Thus, he defines a nation as *'a named human population, sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'* (1991: 14; emphasis in original). The danger in operationalizing this type of definition is to treat ethnonational groups as concrete and normatively justifiable entities: that is to say, ethnonational groups exist and because they exist they have a right to be heard.

I do not propose to argue that ethnonationalism is an illusion, some kind of false consciousness; rather, I wish to suggest that the very existence of ethnonational groups is inherently functional: it often serves not only to describe and define shared values but also to activate them as claims to marshal and control resources. The response of both liberal and deliberative democracy to these dynamics tends towards two options. On the one hand, consideration of ethnonational claims making is either deferred or pushed beyond the boundaries of "acceptable" political speech. On the other, an attempt is made to domesticate, subdue or completely sterilize the exclusionary impulses of ethnonational ideologies (Conversi, 2011).

The links between ethnicity and political outcome are never made clear in this understanding. Instead, ethnicity is seen as a pre- or de-democratic impulse that achieves its effect through psychological appeals to fear and suspicion or, even, emotive appeals to solidarity and community. As V.P. Gagnon points out, this reasoning misses the essential point that the study of ethnonationalism is not to describe what collective memories groups espouse; rather, he argues, 'the real question is what meaning is attached to them' (2004: xv). In Gagnon's analysis of the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the meaning and purpose of ethnonational entrepreneurs was actually to *de*mobilize their (potential) followers. This demobilization consisted in a reconceptualization of political space and the importation of violence into peaceful communities. The aim was to foreclose

discussion of meaningful alternatives to nationalist politics. For Gagnon, the dynamic was twofold: nationalist leaders actually reduced their resort to ethnicized rhetoric and sought to underbid opponents and leftist or civil society voices by advocating reformist programmes simply because they recognized that ethnic framings did not resonate with people's everyday experience of life in Serbia and Croatia (2004: 8). The second dimension of the tactic was the strategic deployment of violence that served to transform understandings of politics and helped to make particular ideas about the world more meaningful to people than others (2004: 26).

This happens through historical choices and through the framing of those choices within historical narratives. This is not simply a rewriting of the past or a form of history making; rather it involves a repositioning of history in relation to the present. Again, as Gagnon points out, historical decisions are not determinative of events but set the parameters within which political actors operate (2004: xvii). The idea of parameters echoes the understandings of J.G.A. Pocock who argued that 'tradition' gives shape to society. Tradition for Pocock was a historically situated concept: it arose from history but fed back into understandings about the past (2009: 188). For society's shared understandings to avoid becoming reified and 'traditional' they must become part of the fabric of institutions that shape and structure society itself (193) and it is this process of *institutionalization* that affords authority and legitimacy to political leaders and political ideas: legitimacy is appropriated from a resonant and somehow "valid" view about the past and authority is claimed through the vision and pledge of taking that view forward into the future. As Pocock explains:

> Institutionalisation tends to reduce, if hardly ever to eliminate the importance of myth; it replaces a mythic dream-time with a secular time of institutional continuity […] Our knowledge of the past is based on the presumption of transmission, and the subtleties of historical awareness which may arise in this style of thinking consist largely in awareness of how much more there is a continuous tradition of behaviour than we need or can know (197).

In this way, historiography – the transmission of ideas about the past – repositions that past and confers authority in the present. Or, put another way, historiography is the debate about authorizations of the present by ideas and narratives about the past (205). The importance of these considerations for studying ethnic politics is that they allow us to see ethnic groups and their collective memories and historical narratives not as concrete entities nor as myth making projects, but rather as politico-historical constructs: as ideas and discursive structures that are created through the very act of

articulation but whose articulation is itself contested and conflictual. I wish to suggest that *political* reconciliation necessarily involves a recognition of the constructed dimensions and character of ethnonationalism.

The first step in making that argument is to acknowledge that reconciliation creates its own temporal understandings. The recent Report of the Consultative Group on the Past in Northern Ireland, for example, suggested that the history of violence in the region demands a new future – as such, a 'shared and reconciled future for all' must be won by breaking the hold of the past over the present. As Stefanie Lehner points out, such a rhetorical construction evokes reconciliation as 'an overarching "*meta*-political" ideal that stands above, or could even transcend, the messy and conflictual politics of dealing with the past and, as such, conditions the ways and the extent to which the past *can* be engaged with' (forthcoming 2013; emphasis in original).

Insofar as reconciliation mediates how the past can be dealt with, it is inextricably linked to notions about truth, narrative and time. Time, firstly, because reconciliation is both forward- and backward-looking: we reconcile with or about the past and try to move forward in a new relationship towards the future. The very term reconciliation therefore introduces a new temporal fluidity into political discourse and social relations: it detaches us from present-centred concerns and blurs the lines between the past and present and the past and the future. It is also about truth-telling because it attempts to recover facts about the past, to pinpoint hurts and injustices and make them visible to those affected. In so doing, it seeks to create and *authorize* a new truth, a new story that binds together the once-divided parties (Bevernage, 2008). Finally, it is implicitly about narrative: the truths and the stories about time are given meaning only insofar as they are articulated.[11]

Political reconciliation embraces this fluidity. Andrew Rigby, for instance, contrasts reconciliation with forgiveness. The latter, he argues 'is a personal process. It refers to the past and it does not require the involvement or even the knowledge of those who committed the perceived wrong' (2001, 12). Reconciliation, however, requires 'the active participation of those who were divided by enmity […] [and involves] the preparedness of people to anticipate a shared future' (*ibid*). Andrew Schaap makes a similar point when he argues that 'political reconciliation begins (rather than ends) with the invocation of a "we"' (2004: 9). He contrasts the 'political' aspect of reconciliation with the theological focus on 'restoration', which he sees as

proceeding from an imagined, prelapsarian community. Schaap, instead, places the emphasis on the paradox between reconciliation as resolution and politics as opening up (21). He negotiates this paradox by formulating the imagined community as one projected into the future rather than a mythical one of pre-violence unity: 'Faith in the possibility of community enables a collective reckoning with the past in terms of which former enemies might eventually arrive at a shared understanding of what went before' (9). Schaap underlines his point in a devastating dismissal of the restorative conception of reconciliation, which he argues involves not 'the restoration of the moral-political order but rather […] a fundamental reconfiguring of that order'. He goes on to argue that that reconfiguration must be based on the elision of the political and the moral and the simultaneous deferral of the fact that people hold different normative opinions. Thus, the restorative conception of reconciliation militates against the promotion of plurality within polities – and resonates conspicuously with ethnonationalist projects: '[i]t presupposes that the norms of the moral community are publicly known and bind all who belong' (14).

Political reconciliation depends therefore on a commitment to pluralism. As Ernesto Verdeja points out, that commitment itself must precede from the recognition of alternative points of view about the past (2009). Verdeja – along with Rigby and Schaap – emphatically emphasizes that that recognition does not lead to moral relativism. In arenas of ethnonational competition, victims' claims to recognition for example are instrumentalized in pursuit of political ends. As Timothy Kubal explains in an analysis of ethnic group competition within the United States:

> […] collective memory not simply as a thing – the partisan story of the past diffused across space and time – but also as a process, a process by which people gain status or power while attempting to institutionalise their partisan story of the past […] Producing collective memories may be the beginning of a symbolic ladder for the oppressed (2008: 170–171).

Of course, this is predictable: ethnic groups often perform like social movements in attempting to gain access to or control over resources and the framing of narratives to do with victimhood allows groups to develop a formidable armoury that reveals worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (Tilly, 2004). What it can lead to is, however, the type of ethical quagmire from which Tomislav Nikolić's thought obviously proceeds – and the kind of dangerous politics in which voices like his operate best: that is the type of politics where those with the loudest voices are the only ones heard.

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Following Nancy Fraser (2003), Verdeja argues that claims of victimhood 'should be honored to the extent that they promote […] "reciprocal recognition and status equality", a goal that is unachievable if victims continue to find themselves excluded, marginalized, devalued and forgotten' (2009: 52). Such recognition is, however, foreshortened by liberalism's commitment to toleration. Schaap explains that liberalism 'substitutes procedure for struggle, [and] economic competition and interminable discussion for political antagonism' (2005: 17). Within this worldview, politics is foreclosed in favour of the pursuit of mutual security. Schaap acknowledges the pragmatism incorporated within this vision but points out that the ethics of toleration on which it is based results in strategies of containment and deferral and ultimately works against the potential of *political* reconciliation: '[i]n order to keep a civil tongue, it is necessary to avoid asking the embarrassing but inevitable question that political reconciliation must address: namely, who are "we"?' (25).

As Schaap explains, the idea that a 'we' exists presupposes the existence of factual truths. Borrowing from Hannah Arendt's 'ethic of worldliness', Schaap describes how

> [a]lthough the world-disclosing potential of politics is predicated on the fact that the world appears differently to each of us, it is only to the extent that we are aware of perceiving the same object in common that this world might become more common to us (6).

The recovery of truths, the publicizing of them and the pursuit of justice are, as Rigby notes, preconditions for reconciliation (2001: 180). Schaap, similarly, takes care to note the linkages between truth and reconciliation. Truth, Schaap claims, is possible through the mutual recognition of the world. While it is often unwelcome in politics due to its limiting nature, without truth, 'no permanence or continuity would be possible in human affairs' (2005: 134). Truth therefore cannot be separated from reconciliation or political transition from violence and division to peaceful settlement:

> The stability afforded by the acknowledgement of factual truth is […] fundamental for sustaining a politics of remembrance among citizens divided by past wrongs. If deliberate falsehoods […] are treated with the same respect as political opinions, the possibility of reconciliation is doomed from the beginning. Without a shared acknowledgment of the brute facts of state violence, a polity lacks a common starting point from which to initiate political reconciliation (Schapp, 2005: 136).

It is absurd therefore to debate with, for example, Holocaust deniers as it forecloses discussion by establishing the "discussion" itself on their terms. Factual truth is

mediated through narrative construction: events are named and a series of facts are woven together to give meaning and shape to experiences. In the first instance this process usually takes the form of oral testimony (Ricoeur, 2004). The importation of meaning in testimonies (and written historical narratives) is subtle – it involves only elements of pedagogy which are balanced with interaction with the listener or reader. Laurie Kain Hart alludes to these subtleties in a recent oral history of the Bosnia conflict:

> A testimony is not a record of facts, though it contains facts. A testimony in good faith, however, is a record of truth. In testimonies people talk about the heart of their experience, which is shaped by the moment in which they are speaking […] stories are not raw in the documentary sense. They [are] selected, condensed, and translated. The reader reads – should read – such accounts with an awareness of this individuality, partiality, and intentionality (2004: xxx).

While these sentiments allude to the essential constructedness of narratives and testimonies, they inadequately link the relation of those narratives to historical facts. In other words, while narratives are constructed, what makes them historical is the fact that they are not entirely constructed – they are historical insofar as they are constructs but not complete fabrications. Secondly, they are political insofar as they engage with and reconstruct reality – physical and imagined. Verdeja alludes to these notions by arguing that what he calls 'critical history' is that form of historiography that 'resists attempts' at the self-serving closure of stories about the past (2009: 77). In this way historiography follows from politics but also helps to perpetuate politics.

Paradoxically, but for that very reason, Schaap, following Nietzsche and Arendt, is sceptical about the totalizing impulse of historiography. Historiography can, in this view, never have final say: politics is open-ended and political reconciliation can never be fully achieved: 'far from avoiding prejudice, leaving history to be the judge of human affairs means that the implicit criterion of significance is success' (2004: 140).

3. Working through the past in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Given the ethnic articulation of the state in both Northern Ireland and BH, it is unsurprising to discover that attempts to deal with their respective divided pasts are marred by that criterion of success. In each case, success is judged in narrow terms that often equate to a straightforward zero-sum ethnic calculus. The result is a

perpetuation of the post-conflict gloaming and a deepening ethnicization of contemporary politics.

In Northern Ireland Republican terror groups – most notably, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) – hold the main responsibility for conflict related fatalities: almost 60%, compared to loyalist terrorists being responsible for almost 30%, and state forces almost 10%. Nevertheless, Provisional republicans consider themselves as victims of British oppression, and without wishing to denigrate the very real suffering and abuses perpetrated by the British state, their story is easily told and fits the decolonial paradigm: an imperial power thwarted legitimate self-determination claims, and PIRA reaction/defence followed repression. This historical narrative is not only true – the British state was responsible for sickening outrages, and more often than not, working class Catholics bore the brunt of its ill-advised adventures – but beyond that qualification, the Provisional republican narrative also represents the core conceit of the Troubles: the malingering lie that violence was inevitable, along its surrogate falsehood that everyone bears responsibility for what occurred. A cursory glance at the best histories of the civil rights movement or the origins of the Troubles, which have appeared in recent years, easily dispels any queries about the historical inaccuracy of the Provisional republican narrative; yet, the truth of Volkan's notion that perception, when it becomes entrenched, is more important than reality, is sadly demonstrated in the fact that that narrative has saturated the thinking of governmental elites. The Consultative Group on the Past makes this fact clear, for it was well aware that terrorist organizations' principal targets were their own communities; as Eames and Bradley acknowledged in May 2008: 'We also met families who suffered at the hands of paramilitaries from within their own communities and listened intently to their sense of helplessness and in some cases, hopelessness'.[12]

Despite this, the Group's Report represents a peculiar form of silencing as the focus shifts from the terror perpetrated by paramilitary organizations, to a focus on British state forces as the foundational perpetrators:

> The Group heard how [such communities] had to endure over many years the presence in their midst of their "own paramilitaries" and at the same time absorb the concentration of heavy military and police. The burden was further added to when their "own paramilitaries" acted as judge and jury in punishing anti-social behaviour […] Others were exiled because they were suspected […] of providing information to the security forces.[13]

The Report's silencing of such victims is a product of the assumption, derived in part from the transitional justice approach and, arguably, also from a theologically driven imperative towards reconciliation, that the past should be made to service the present. In other words, a line must be drawn between the (bad) past and the (good) future (McGrattan, 2009). While these sentiments are, at face value, laudable and unchallengeable, their particular ethical import is towards relativism and equivalence. This is made clear in the Report's understanding of how reconciliation should take place though a restorative process of storytelling. Again, when dealing with intra-bloc victims, the Report argues that '[t]hese communal stories must form part of the storytelling recommended in this Report […] Firstly, any storytelling project should involve listening to the stories of others as well as the telling of our own story.'[14]

The political culture within Bosnia and Herzegovina remains acutely reflective of its rigid consociational governance structures (Belloni, 2007; Buturović, 2004; Djokić and Ker-Lindsay, 2011). Attempts to deal with the past in the country, as in the region more generally, have, subsequently, floundered on the reefs of deep-seated identity politics. Thus, one recent analysis of the history of truth and reconciliation processes contains the damning conclusion that '[t]ransitional justice initiatives have not bridged the cognitive divisions that undermine reconciliation in the region' (Dragović-Soso and Gordy, 2011: 208). The creation of the ICTY has had a profound path-dependent influence on the debate. For example, efforts by the United States Institute for Peace to establish a reconciliation commission during the late 1990s and into the first decade of the new century resulted in deadlock: international actors preferred to see suspected war criminals pursued through the juridical auspices of the ICTY (Subotić, 2009). Some victims' groups were concerned with other avenues of legal redress – gaining official recognition and compensation, for example. Meanwhile the political will within BH to facilitate a reconciliation commission was virtually non-existent (that is, beyond vague platitudes). Although the intervention of the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, in recalling the commission investigating the Srebrenica massacre (after its first report was stymied by overt internal political interference), has been seen as cathartic – as forcing ordinary citizens to face up to the facts of the past (Vulliamy, 2012) – that intervention stalled: 'Among Bosnian Serbs, the [Srebrenica] commission was seen as imposed and it was not followed up by a distinctive change in policy towards the past' (Dragović-Soso and Gordy, 2011: 205).

Both BH and Northern Ireland experience high levels of popular engagement in the debate over their respective pasts. However, in both cases it would be a mistake to associate this with pluralism: rather, it is indicative of the central role that memory entrepreneurs play in trying to inscribe each state with specific ethnic narratives. In Northern Ireland transitional justice methodologies have been embraced by a nexus of local groups and colleagues and advisors within academia. Often the intention is to push an agenda of radical change in identities and with implications for the constitutional status of the Northern state. Recognizing an opportunity to advance their own political agenda, Sinn Féin in particular have embraced this tendency. The fact that the ultimate say in legislating for a truth and reconciliation process resides with Westminster means that the debate remains unresolved – the British government's position has been that any proposals would be too contentious and that it is not convinced any would meet with sufficient consensus across the divide. In BH meanwhile, transitional justice has been resolutely resisted by politicians who believed they 'had the potential to destroy mythologised interpretations of the past on which the nationalist elites had to depend if they were to remain in power' (Subotić, 2009: 156). Due to the lack of internal political appetite and the concern among external powers that it would conflict with the work of the ICT, a projected truth and reconciliation commission never materialized. Current debates circle around whether popular mobilization may be the answer to the impasse or whether BH should embark upon a Spanish-style pact of forgetting.[15] Neither proposal seems to be able to answer fully the problem identified by one transitional justice scholar:

> That Bosnia desperately needs justice and the type of acknowledgement of past abuses that brings dignity to the victims and lays the foundation for a just social order has always been clear. What is much less clear however, is who exactly will deliver justice to Bosnia in the absence of the state and the diminishing involvement and waning interest of the international community (Suboptić, 2009:164).

Of course, for all its commonsensical attraction, from an epistemological point of view, Suboptić's argument is unprovable. The introduction of transitional justice mechanisms into BH would not necessarily de-mythologize nationalistic ideology or undercut the attempted repositioning of the past in the collective imagination by nationalist ideologues; indeed, the transitional justice approach is itself saturated with politics and – as the Northern Ireland case demonstrates – is not exactly

incommensurable with nationalist or nationalizing projects (McGrattan, 2009; see also Humphrey, 2012).

An alternative conclusion to Suboptić's can be found in Franke Wilmer's (2002) research on everyday identity and violence in the Balkans. Wilmer pointedly argues that '[w]e have failed […] to examine the relationship between exclusionary ideologies and the political rationalization of doing harm to others, particularly because it may implicate the nationalistic foundations of the modern state itself' (2002: 242). In other words, the answer to the question of how we deal with divided pasts may not lie in overarching institutional projects that in themselves help to establish the narratives of new regimes (Grandin, 2005). This is perhaps even more so the case when those regimes are themselves predicated on managing division, as in the case of the ethnicized, consociational democracies in Northern Ireland and BH. Following Wilmer, we can argue that the answer to that problem does not lie in state-sponsored truth and reconciliation initiatives, rather, '[w]e must interrogate the relationship between violence and rationalizations that reference exclusionary identities wherever they are found' (Wilmer 2002: 243).

4. Conclusion: a Faulknerian gloaming

Subotić is correct, however, in alluding to the outcome of the ambiguity surrounding the issue of dealing with the past – namely, the continued marginalization of victims. While the idea of "justice delayed is justice denied" is compelling, its very compulsion makes it politically suspect – hastily composed, catch-all solutions risk revictimizing those individuals who suffered the most from ethnic conflicts. Yet, unless steps are taken to reintegrate not only the perpetrators of violence but their victims, post-conflict societies risk founding their transitions on ethically bankrupt ideas; likewise, unless there is a serious attempt made at interrogating the reasons for the historic violence, those societies risk enshrining the very ideas that drove the violence at the heart of their new states. While the idea of popular mobilization against the ethnicization of Bosnia is laudable, unless it is linked to institutional support (perhaps in the form of a truth recovery and reconciliation forum) then it risks becoming functional to the nationalizing project it seeks to undercut. Similarly, the Spanish case has been shown to be functional in very limited terms and, in the absence of a lack of nerve from political parties, civil society (spearheaded in the first

instance by Judge Baltasar Garzón) has stepped into the breach to literally try to unearth Spain's troubled past (Blakely, 2005).

Wilmer's emphasis on deconstructing identities offers an alternative to the truth commission/transitional justice approach advocated by Suboptić. Whereas the latter approach risks being harnessed to or simply bolstering the consociational institutions and the reality they impose on divided societies such as Northern Ireland or BH, an alternative approach to historic injustices must begin from a constructivist standpoint – and, importantly, one that offers alternative models of identification and belonging than the segregated vision provided by consociational governance. Again, this is not so much "dealing" with these realities but working with them to ameliorate and offset their divisive potential. As Aletta Norval (2009: 315) argues, 'any project of "national reconciliation" will have to come to terms with these divisions, not as something that need be overcome, but as constitutive of society before the reconciliation appropriate to a democratic, pluralistic society will be possible'.

This article has focused on how that appraisal can come about and has argued that political reconciliation can deconstruct ethnicity. But, in so doing, it has also highlighted the importance of being attentive to the intersections between reconciliation and ethnicity. As such it offers an implicit answer to the question posed by Robin Wilson in his recent study of the development of peace building models based on the Northern Irish and Bosnian cases. For Wilson, the conflict resolution processes in BH and Northern Ireland are characterized by a refusal to acknowledge a gaping hole: namely, although "peace" of sorts is present in each case, reconciliation is difficult to find (Wilson, 2010: 8). I have suggested in this article that in the place of "reconciliation" there has been an attenuation of social capital and cohesion by ethnonationalist forces: in the place of the pursuit of a future "community" there has, under the consociational structures in BH and Northern Ireland, been a pursuit of future "communities".

For reconciliation to be meaningful in such societies it needs to be invested with a political dimension (as outlined by Schaap and Arendt). As Taylor and Dukalskis point out, an essential component of that political dimension is a commitment to openness. Their point echoes the politics of J.M. Synge's exploration of truth, myth and community in his *Playboy of the Western World*. Having taken the "Playboy", Christy Mahon, with his tales of patricide to their hearts, the play turns when his supposedly dead father shows up in the small village community in which

the play is based. Following a second (off-stage) "killing", Christy is rejected by his sweetheart, Pegeen Mike, who is abhorred at the violence she has just witnessed. Although Pegeen and the villagers appear to be fickle in changing their loyalties and banishing Christy, the political ambiguity of the play contains the suggestion that it is not just the case that leaders always betray their followers – in fact, the brutal revelation of leaders' violence and desperation may inspire betrayal by their followers. The point being that if openness is to be taken as a part of truth and reconciliation then it must be enshrined as a fundamental principle. Although the past can never be "dealt" with, it may, if such a principle is adhered to, be worked with and worked through.

Notes

1. 'The past is never dead. It's not even past' (Faulkner, 1951: 92).
2. There is a wide critical literature on this point (see for example, Belloni, 2007: 43–72; and McGrattan, 2010, 156–180). Consociationalists and proponents of revised consociationalism argue that despite reflecting ethnonational divisions, consociational institutions need not reify them but can, over time, lead to greater integration and sharing (see, for example, McGarry and O'Leary, 2006; Bieber, 1999; Stroschein, 2003).
3. 'SDLP may Remove Support for Girdwood Barracks Development'. *BBC News Online*, May 27, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-18226294. Retrieved: Jun. 04, 2012.
4. 'Serbian President Denies Srebrenica Genocide'. *The Guardian*, June 02, 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/02/serbian-president-denies-srebrenica-genocide. Retrieved: Jun. 04, 2012.
5. See, Kanin, D.B. 'Genocide (2)'. http://www.transconflict.com/2012/06/genocide-046/. Retrieved: Jun. 04, 2012.
6. *Guardian*, 'Serbian President […]' (note 4).
7. Naidu, E. and C. Adonis. 'History on Their Own Terms: The Relevance of the Past for a New Generation'. 2007, 4. http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/99640/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/007e5625-1ed7-4b05-baee-a491beb31f8f/en/history[1].pdf. Retrieved: May 02, 2012.
8. For Volkan, a clear example of 'chosen trauma' was Slobodan Milošević's conjuring of the ghosts of the Battle of Kosovo to mobilize Serbian nationalism. See, for example, Volkan, V.D.. 'Chosen Trauma, the Political Ideology of Entitlement and Violence'. 2004. N.P. www.vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php. Retrieved: May 02, 2012.
9. Problems relating to transitions have, of course, longer historical pedigrees stretching beyond the twentieth century; see Elster, 1994; Ricoeur, 2004.
10. Benjamin's evocation of these sentiments finds its most elegiac expression in his contemplation on the Angel of History that he sees in Paul Klee's Angelus Nova: 'His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole that which has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into

the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress' (Benjamin, 1999: 249).

11. As Andrew Schaap points out, given that 'experience only makes sense to the extent that it is spoken about, the potential incommunicability of the memory of violence presents a grave challenge for political reconciliation, for it suggests that the failure to integrate the memory of offence into a coherent narrative, and thus to reconcile ourselves to the changed reality it has brought about, prevents us from acting anew in the present' (2005: 140).

12. Lord Robin Eames and Denis Bradley. 'Full Text of Speech given by Lord Robin Eames and Denis Bradley at the Innovation Centre, Titanic Quarter, Belfast, May 2008'. www.irishtimes.com/focus/2008/peace/index.pdf. Retrieved: May 02, 2012.

13. *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past,* January 23, 2009: 71. *http://www.irishtimes.com/focus/2009/troubles/index.pdf.* Retrieved: Dec. 12, 2012.

14. *Ibid*: 99.

15. See, for example D. Babic. 'The War of Narratives' May 23 2012. http://www.transconflict.com/2012/05/the-war-of-narratives-235/. Retrieved: Jun. 05, 2012. See also, J. Mujanović. 'Jim Crow in Bosnia and Herzegovina' June 5 2012. http://www.transconflict.com/2012/06/jim-crow-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-056/. Retrieved: Jun. 05, 2012.

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