

How Grassroots Truth and Reconciliation Movements can Further the Fight for Social Justice in U.S. Communities

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Across the United States, people in communities burdened by economic injustice and political marginalization, violence, and longstanding legacies of oppression are turning toward truth and reconciliation commissions as an innovative way to address persistent inequalities. Such commissions have been organized under government auspices in other countries dealing with the aftermath of terrible civil wars and ethnic violence. In the United States, the process is driven from the grass roots rather than by government officials. How does this mechanism actually work in American communities as a form of community organizing for social justice?

To find out, I undertook a study of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission in North Carolina. I explored archives and interviewed participants in the truth process as well as local and regional officials opposed to the efforts. My findings highlight conflicts and contradictions, as well as the potential of truth and reconciliation commissions in the United States for addressing difficult issues of inequality and violence in suffering communities.

Truth and Reconciliation Movements in the United States and Abroad

Internationally, truth and reconciliation commissions have been organized in the aftermath of periods of extreme violence amid oppression in countries such as South Africa and Uganda. These efforts usually occur in a broader context of political reconciliation between formerly warring groups and attempt to restore or improve community ties broken by violence and oppression. Restoring civil relations can involve orchestrating occasions for

public forgiveness, implementing steps to ensure full citizenship for oppressed minorities, and initiating efforts to create stronger democratic institutions. Peace-building measures are often central, but the path forward is anything but straightforward. Reconciliation commissions try to lay bare and address different understandings of “the truth” of past travails and injustices—as a prelude to helping conflicting groups in the community arrive at compromises grounded in evolving understandings of social reconciliation.

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The truth and reconciliation movement in the United States is distinctive, especially because such commissions are not officially sanctioned. Instead of being organized by government officials, truth commissions in U.S. communities are driven by local leaders who rely on grassroots organizing in places where government authorities are either uninterested in addressing conflicts and violence or are themselves complicit in such problems, including the use of overly violent police tactics. Grassroots supporters of truth and justice commissions try to get local citizens to explore the underlying roots of community tensions and coalesce to call for needed policy reforms (Inwood, 2012).

The Greensboro, North Carolina Truth Commission
In 1979, the city of Greensboro was the site of a violent confrontation pitting Ku Klux Klan and Nazi Party members against radical labor organizers associated with the Communist Workers Party.

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On November of that year, labor and anti-racist organizers gathered in a low-income public housing complex to host an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally and raise awareness about efforts to unionize local textile mills. Rally participants wanted to highlight ways the Klan had historically impeded unionization in North Carolina, and rally organizers pointed to increasingly militarized tactics used by the newly resurgent Klan in the area.

As rally participants gathered to prepare for the march, a caravan carrying approximately 37 Klan and American Nazi Party members drove through the community. In an armed confrontation recorded by several local news crews, Klan and Nazi members fired several rounds into a crowd of mostly peaceful protestors, killing five and wounding nine others. Despite video evidence showing Klan members and Nazis firing directly into a crowd of fleeing protestors, no Klan or Nazi agitators were ever held criminally liable for the five deaths. In fact, Klan and Nazi defendants were acquitted in state murder trials.

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Twenty years after these searing events in Greensboro, at the twentieth year anniversary of the shootings in 1999, survivors and local activists began advocating for a truth commission. Modeled after the international truth movement, the Greensboro effort was meant to focus on the deleterious long-term local reverberations of the events of November 3, 1979.

In an interview I conducted, the executive director of the voluntary Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation commission explained that the Greensboro community was still struggling to come to terms with what had happened back then, and memories of those events continued to divide people who

otherwise might work together on shared concerns. Recent political efforts had stumbled over divergent interpretations, with distrust festering in the community about who did what and what actually occurred back then. Issues of police accountability, poverty and low wages, and lack of employment remained unresolved. As the executive director explained, if the community was going to move forward, Greensboro had to come to terms with the events of November 3, 1979—and the grassroots push for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation effort was meant to further that goal and energize current movements for social justice.

Larger Implications

By engaging in the truth process in Greensboro, grassroots activists reworked historic divisions and expanded the participation of groups that have been excluded from the city's political process. Newly energized coalitions are energizing civil rights and labor struggles in Greensboro. In turn, the local truth and reconciliation process has helped inspire a broader national movement, because the "Greensboro model" has served as a template for reconciliation processes in several U.S. cities and states. This growing movement lays bare the unwillingness of government authorities to take responsibility for fixing entrenched practices that exacerbate inequalities and provoke conflicts. But in the absence of official action, grassroots activists have used truth and reconciliation efforts to deepen citizen understandings of social divisions and create new popular resolve to redress entrenched injustices.

References

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