10. History teaching and the Apartheid Museum

Teaching apartheid in the schoolroom is an exceptionally difficult challenge. There is probably no more central and formative part of South Africa's past and the subject has to be confronted in the syllabus. The question is, when and how? Too much scrutiny or revisiting risks assigning to the subject a similar status in the classroom to that previously occupied by the Great Trek. At the same time, like all difficult pasts, full exposure may create a sense of shame and an impulse to escape or avoid. The problem is compounded in South Africa's case by the short span of time that has elapsed between the epoch of apartheid and the present. In Japan to this day, Japanese atrocities committed in China, Korea and elsewhere in Asia prior to and during World War II are barely recognised and each new school book on the period creates a new controversy among its neighbours. In Israel the experience of Holocaust survivors was publicly silenced for nearly three decades because of a post-war Israeli Zionist sense of shame at the apparent passivity of the victims, which some critics registered almost as complicity.¹ (In Germany, the Holocaust represents an episode of national shame with which the nation has struggled to come to terms.) In India and Pakistan personal experiences of the communal violence that accompanied partition in 1947 were largely ignored or suppressed until the fiftieth anniversary of these events.² Like India and Pakistan, South Africa confronts one additional dilemma: members and descendants of the communities that both executed and suffered from apartheid policy continue to co-exist in the same national space. How can their motives and experiences be simultaneously engaged without perpetuating polarisation and re-igniting hatred? Are the more difficult and disturbing parts of this history not best left alone, as has been the case in so many other countries, until some point well into the future?

I will argue in this paper that evading or circumventing the subject is not a realistic option in South Africa. The legacy of apartheid still continues to disfigure South Africa and warp relationships among and between South Africa's various communities. This in turn continues to generate resentment, anger and fear among the members of these communities, not least among the youth. Individuals who personally benefited from the profits or endured the travails of apartheid are likely to have their own explanations of how the current situation came to be. Youths and students who are now separated by 12 or more years from this period are all too often startlingly and alarmingly ignorant of these events which so powerfully shape their present. This can be explained, at least in part, by an inter-generational silencing or breakdown of communication. It has become convenient to forget or repress shameful pasts. The unresolved questions and problems that confront today's youth can, I believe, be evaded only at a certain cost. As Edward Said has suggested, in relation to Israelis and Palestinians, peace and a measure of mutual tolerance can be achieved only once the respective groups are able to think their histories together.³ The same case, I believe, can be made for South Africa.

There are innumerable dimensions and experiences of apartheid. In my view three key aspects of the subject need to be understood. The first is how such an abusive and discriminatory system came into being. The second is how countless individuals
and groups enjoyed, accepted, or endured it for so long. The third
is how such an omnipresent and oppressive system came to be
overthrown. If the subject of apartheid is approached in this way,
some of the difficulties confronted by students and teachers when
engaging with the subject can at least be reduced to more
manageable proportions. One of the most daunting of these is
racial polarisations. A central lesson that can be drawn for
studying the origins of apartheid (and its predecessor, segregation)
is that these systems and their ideological underpinnings were
constructed; they did not simply arise naturally out of any
automatic sense of racial exclusiveness or superiority. This is not
to deny that those attitudes and sentiments did exist; merely to
assert that the opposite, namely racial and other kinds of mixings
and interactions, were as conspicuous a part of South Africa’s
history as racial separation and exclusions.

This understanding immediately illuminates the issue of why
apartheid was perceived by its creators as needing to be constructed.
Much recent writing concurs that economic and social
transformation arising from successive phases of industrialisation
and urbanisation was its chief propellant, producing new forms of
interaction and mixing in fast-expanding towns, notably between
poor whites and poor blacks, which presented profound threats to
existing structures of privilege and control. A new incarnation of
Afrikaner nationalism which was profoundly preoccupied with poor
whites emerged to grapple with these problems. Apartheid, which
emerged as a political programme only in 1942, was its carefully
fabricated solution, which was rejected for many years as
objectionable, not only by blacks but by the majority of whites.4
Teaching apartheid is akin to sailing between Scylla and
Charybdis. On the one side lie anger, shame and polarisation; on
the other tedium and boredom. To teach apartheid convincingly
and interestingly one must people the subject with faces, voices
and personalities. Apartheid came about, survived and was
challenged not just through social forces but also through
individual experiences, individual decisions and individual

reactions to moral dilemmas. It is primarily through the lens of
these experiences that the atmosphere of apartheid can be evoked
and understood, in particular the sense of disempowerment and
helplessness which pervaded those times, and which so few
people can now comprehend, and the way so many people, both
black and white, simply stood on the sidelines when apartheid
was at its height, neither actively supporting nor opposing it. The
ultimately elevating and inspiring story of the increasingly
nonracial struggle against apartheid can also be told in the same
terms: how the moral legitimacy and authority of apartheid was
found wanting by larger and larger numbers of individual whites,
and how countless individual blacks found the courage and self-
confidence to challenge the suffocating and apparently seamless
systems of oppression. It is ultimately these individual voices,
these individual personalities, which allow students to connect to
the past and which make history meaningful and alive. It is the
richness and multiplicity of these experiences and these voices
which are also perhaps most difficult to capture in the limited
confines of a history text book. It is here that museums, for all
their limitations, can have more scope.

Museums in South Africa have historically spoken in the voice
of a single community: white initially, but latterly in that of
marginalised communities.5 Elsewhere in the world, even those
which attempt to represent painful engagements and painful pasts
are sometimes patchy or even evasive in their treatment of some of
these issues. The Apartheid Museum represents one of the most
significant attempts in South African museum work to grapple
with a painful past.

The Apartheid Museum was not initially conceived of as
addressing these issues or remediying such shortcomings. It began
life as part of a bid to establish a casino at Gold Reef City in
Johannesburg, in terms of new legislation which allowed
Provincial Governments to license casinos, provided that those
securing the licence offered up some project of public worth. In
this case, the successful bidder teamed up with the Israeli
exhibition and museum designer, S. Grundman Limited. At that point (June 1997), the exhibition went under the name of the Park of Freedom. It sought to inspire a national process of reconciliation, to facilitate a therapy and healing process, and to provide a memorial to the fallen and a teaching experience for the young generation. Around the Mandela Circle would be situated a Hall of Roots, a Hall of Witnesses, a Hall of Memory, a Hall of Faith, and an international hall which would commemorate similar struggles elsewhere in the world. The Mandela Circle was designed as a tribute to the struggle and leadership of Mandela, where coloured mosaics and flowing water would produce a festive combination of cultural and ethnic features. In the Hall of Remembrance, sculpted eyes would create a presence of the fallen, gospel music would permeate the space and visitors would light a candle and pray and honour the memory of the fallen. In the Hall of Roots, artefacts from numerous tribes would be displayed to allow visitors to become familiar with the traditions and the heritage of South Africa. Animated television stations would trace the origins of the artefacts. The Hall of Faith was designed as a pavilion entirely dedicated to the life of Nelson Mandela, which would be described by pictures, movies, interviews, and speeches, including those he made in court. The Hall of Struggles was intended to contain full-scale dioramas of similar battles for freedom elsewhere in the world. Finally, the Hall of Witnesses would comprise a space where, with computerised equipment, witnesses would record their own experiences. The Park of Freedom underwent many re-incarnations thereafter, as South African architects, group representatives, and various professionals and academics were drawn in. Its next provisional name was the International Shrine of Freedom and Struggle Museum. Inputs were solicited from 13 ethnic and religious groups who were asked to document inter alia their group through history, community struggles then and now, significant heroes, cultural achievements and expressions, education of the young, militarism and/or self protection, and group characteristics and talents.

At that stage no coherent idea inspired the Museum. Eventually the one that emerged through the efforts of a number of advisors was to seek to present an explanation of apartheid – why such a system was able to survive for so long, and how it was overcome. The Museum views the history of apartheid through the lens of Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand. It projects Johannesburg as a point of gathering and congregation for individuals and groups from all over Southern Africa and the world. Such a conceptualisation seemed to offer three key advantages. Firstly, it attested to social and political behaviour largely ignored or overlooked in school histories or public monuments in South Africa – racial mixing and interaction, as opposed to racial separation and discrimination. Secondly, it offered a unifying focus to the Museum in the shape of Johannesburg, a common destination for a multitude of individual personalities whose journeys could be plotted, whose backgrounds could be scanned, and whose lives could be explored. Thirdly, such an approach could encourage a personalised engagement with the past. Thus, for example, up the ramp, heading to the Hall of Gathering, the grandchildren, and sometimes great-grandchildren stride, their photographs encased in glass obelisks, which also reflect the image of the visitors themselves, while in the hall of gathering itself, memory boxes contain other photographs, family possessions and life histories of the same people.

The initial sections of the museum are designed to problematise legislated racial categorisations and racial separations. The first room the visitor enters before climbing the ramp displays passes and some of the paraphernalia of racial classification, at which point visitors are arbitrarily segregated according to a racial pass which they are given. The ramp provides a space for reflection on how this could come about. The next two rooms, including the Hall of Gathering, pivot around one organising idea, which most South Africans hitherto have not really grasped: apartheid means separation, and this need to separate presumes some measure of
former mingling; hence mingling is as an important theme in South African history as separation.

In the two rooms following the Hall of Gathering, the museum attempts to explain the movement from segregation to apartheid, both in terms of social forces and individuals. The union/segregation room constitutes a critical prelude to an explanation of apartheid, but is constricted by an architecture which was already decided before the narrative line had been devised. The maze section is also dense, depicting some familiar and some less familiar episodes of resistance to early apartheid, as well as daily black and white life at that time. This ‘daily life’ dimension of apartheid is a subject which the Museum still shortchanges, but improvements are contemplated. The following rooms plot a major change from practical apartheid to ‘high apartheid’, about which most South Africans are ignorant. They attempt through the photographs of Ernest Cole (never before shown in South Africa) to suggest the ‘hidden power’ of apartheid and the internalised subjugation and demoralisation it produced. The classic illustration here is the self-policing racial divide on the railway platform. Repression and reaction are the themes of subsequent rooms as well as of an as yet unexhibited section entitled ‘On the Sidelines’, which attempts to demonstrate that the majority of all sections of the population at this point were neither active perpetrators nor active resisters. Two of the few artefacts in the museum are found at this juncture, the nooses and the Casspir. Both make an impact on visitors.

Here the visitor reaches another central hinge in the museum, the 1976 youth rebellion. Henceforth, a new generation of students and workers take central stage. Opposition across racial lines follows. The edifice of apartheid shudders, cracks and eventually falls apart. Nothing is the same again. In the 1980s room and the 1980s film, the surging power of mass action comes vividly to life. This is followed by negotiations, the release of political prisoners, notably Mandela, and the era of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). A sense of the inside and outside of negotiations is powerfully depicted through enclosed small televisions set against a bank of external large screens. Final rooms include the 1994 elections, an unfinished TRC room, and a room which is designed to show that although in some senses the new South Africa is a miracle it is beset by numerous problems, generates innumerable individual doubts, and still requires ‘thinking our histories together’ if real progress is to be made.

The Apartheid Museum cannot hope to escape all of the limitations and pitfalls encountered by other museums. It does nevertheless attempt to confront a painful past directly and to do this through a combination of emotional impact and explanation. A major strength of the museum, and a major source of appeal to the youth, is that it relies heavily on static and moving images. As a result of an extensive process of research, a mass of images which have never entered the public domain before are displayed. These have a massive impact on school groups visiting the museum. Questionnaires completed by school children leaving the museum speak of over 90 per cent arriving expecting to be bored, but finding the reverse. This represents not only a strength but also a potential problem, since image can easily overwhelm text. This problem is compounded by the scale of the museum. It takes hours to engage with the exhibits satisfactorily. At certain points the museum is also difficult to navigate. However, new concise signage, which about to be introduced, should help remedy this problem. It is obviously desirable that the museum should evolve in other directions. It is intended, for example, that members of the public who lived through the period should be able to record their experiences of apartheid, and that these might then be woven into the exhibition. Such new developments will require new funding, since the museum is currently being constituted as a section 21 company independent of the casino. Symbolically, though, the close connection between Johannesburg, apartheid and money will remain a central feature of the museum.
Toward New Histories for South Africa
On the place of the past in our present

Editor: Shamil Jeppie
Foreword by Professor Kader Asmal, MP