**The Politics of Truth Recovery and the Limits of Ethical Remembering, Or: Higgins Reading Ricoeur**

**For http://truthrecoveryprocess.ie/**

This paper explores the intersections of ideas about truth recovery (specifically, in terms of dealing with the past in Northern Ireland) and ethical remembering (applied to the *longue durée* of Irish history). I suggest that the two approaches ought to be read together, as barely analytically distinct, through the lens of a long-term backlash against the ‘school’ of Irish historical revisionism, which led to a radical deconstruction of nationalist myths and tropes, within and outside the academy during the 1980s and 1990s.[[1]](#footnote-1) The counter-revisionist impulse involves a reappraisal of nationalist shibboleths along an eschatological tangent – shaped by and concerned with the end-times of Irish reunification, a mode of thinking that is verifiable only after the fact.

The coincidence of truth recovery and ethical remembering gives way to two arguments, one broad and one more specific. Firstly, *although the truth recovery model enjoys a distinguished, yet, with at best, an* empirically and heuristically questionable, lineage, its promotion within elements of the Irish political classes is structurally biased in favour of nationalist ideological goals. In other words, the *politics* of truth recovery involve assumptions about what else, *outwith ‘truth’*, is entailed in truth recovery. When allied to an ethics of remembrance or a narrative hospitality – the tolerance for alternative ‘truths’ – the implications are clear enough: the model works to promote nationalist demands of transition and change while minimize unionist concerns about the direction or pace of travel. Secondly, more specifically with regard to the legacy of the Northern Irish conflict, the truth recovery model represents a condensation of Irish nationalist thought*.* Truth recovery, ethical remembering and the related concept of ‘reconciliation’, in effect, work to displace differences within nationalist thought and belonging towards the single goal of disarticulating unionist historical understandings.

**Truth-seeking and ethical remembering**

As David Mendeloff points out in a coruscating 2004 dissection of truth recovery, the idea of truth recovery is intellectually and morally loaded, standing as it does in a seemingly direct opposition to the kinds of nationalist mythmaking that inspire and perpetuate violence, division and exclusion.[[2]](#footnote-2) Truth recovery, or, in Mendeloff’s framing, ‘truth-telling’, then, is seen as an antidote to (ethno)nationalist propaganda and is, as such, crucial in promoting a peaceful and just society in post conflict situations. In part, this is based upon an upworking of Freudian insights from the individual to the societal level: truth recovery facilitates ownership of a traumatic past, fosters social healing and even reconciliation. Furthermore, it has a moral dynamic in that it allows victims and perpetrators to uncover previously withheld information and ascertain what exactly happened to set in motion acts of violence and terror. Truth recovery can be both educative but also provide a counter-memory to ‘official’ histories – and, relatedly, it is democratic: It fosters a belief in the legitimacy of the new legal order and it can bring about toleration and amplification of voice to the erstwhile marginalized and excluded. Finally, truth-telling can promote deterrence: By removing war criminals from daily and public life, truth recovery can assist in pre-empting a recrudescence of violence in the future.

The discourse on ethical remembering resonates with these sentiments. Drawing on the late work of Paul Ricoeur that discourse forms the basis of a series of interventions by President Michael D. Higgins on the subjects of collective remembrance and commemoration. Higgins’ approach echoes that of Ernest Renan in beginning with forgetting.[[3]](#footnote-3) A nation, Renan argued, is a ‘daily plebiscite’[[4]](#footnote-4) (p.19) in which amnesia is ratified for the sake of unity: ‘Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality’[[5]](#footnote-5). I wish to return to the second clause in Renan’s sentence, which tends to be ignored[[6]](#footnote-6) despite him immediately going on to explain that ‘historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial’.[[7]](#footnote-7) For his part, Higgins proceeds dialectically, defining ‘ethical remembering’ against forgetting as ‘a refusal of any kind of conscious or unconscious amnesia’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps aware of the impossible fate of Ireneo Funes, whom Borges depicts as being able to recall every single minute detail about his past but unable to think (as ‘To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions’[[9]](#footnote-9)), Higgins suggests a kind of negative ethics: ‘to reject important, if painful, events of the past, to deny those affected by them recognition of their losses and memories, would be counterproductive and may even be amoral’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Recently, Higgins has attacked what he sees as the opposite of his own journey of ‘engaging with our citizens in an exercise of ethical remembering’ of the War of Independence: namely, the ‘disinclination in both academic and journalistic accounts to critique empire and imperialism’. This (non-specified) tendency is particularly problematic, he avers because

A feigned amnesia around the uncomfortable aspects of our shared history will not help us to forge a better future together. The complex events we recall and commemorate during this time are integral to the story that has shaped our nations, in all their diversity. They are, however, events to be remembered and understood, respecting the fact that different perspectives exist. In doing this, we can facilitate a more authentic interpretation not only of our shared history but also of post-sectarian possibilities for the future.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In what seems to be his most extensive treatment of these themes, Higgins foregrounds the phrase that he attributes to the Ricoeurian philosopher, Richard Kearney, ‘a hospitality of narratives’.[[12]](#footnote-12) What this means, he suggests, is a reflective approach to history based on ‘not the offering of a set of competing rationalisations of opposing violences, but a rather a set of contexts that need to be understood, whatever purposes may have been served by such rationalisations’; in more prosaic terms, this seems to mean the widening of historiography to include the stories of those identities who had been rendered liminal by previous research and political interest. Beyond a pluralization of empirical study, it is difficult to ascertain what precisely this might mean in practice. In truth, however, the point seems to be normative in intent rather than practical. Higgins goes on to cite theologians, Johnson McMaster and Cathy Higgins:

Remembering ethically is not just about remembering inclusively, honouring all the dead in the mystery of their humanness, it is about taking responsibility ourselves for the present and the future. We cannot afford to be controlled or dictated to from the grave, but as human beings, take responsibility ourselves for our own distinctive time, place and world.

Apart from ‘allow[ing] our children to share schools’, it is unclear what ‘remembering ethically’ actually means. Following Ricoeur, Higgins hints that it has something to do with more than simply being empathetic towards alternative interpretations of history and hints that it involves some kind of rigorous and methodological approach to the past.

It should be understood that we are concerned here with a very tentative horizon of completion, of a critical historical knowledge aware of its limitations, built on such a reconciliation of narratives as avoids binary opposites

Quoting from Ricoeur’s (2004) *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Higgins elucidates what he means by the need to avoid simplistic binaries: ‘Between history’s project of truth and memory’s aim of faithfulness is that small miracle of recognition [that] has no equivalent in history’[[13]](#footnote-13). Higgins is cited approvingly by Paul Doran in a recent intervention in the *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*; and his paper gives an indication of what this ‘small miracle of recognition’ might look like as regards to the ethno-religiously divided society that is Northern Ireland

the [Belfast/Good Friday] Agreement is understood as a structuring process – bringing the affective and the cognitive dimensions of consciousness and relationality into dialogue – and bearing forth the conditions of possibility for the emergence of an as-yet unimagined/nor fully articulated constitutional destination for the island that – while respecting the binary (‘either/or’) nature of referendums – valorises first and foremost a will to novelty and improvisation, and mutual constitutional co-authorship enabled by a politics of agonism. This scenario will require not only political and institutional forms but an affective turn, notably that which addresses and recognises the formative role of societal trauma and its implication in contested narrativity on the threshold of state formation.[[14]](#footnote-14)

For Doran, Higgins’ vision is an approach to the politics of history and memory that facilitates a navigation through divided and changing histories. To this end he adds (his own) sentence to the Higgins/Ricoeur idea about recognition: ‘That which must come to be shared lies beyond history or memory’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The point is revealing, because it is precisely the relationship between history and memory that Higgins fudges and which, as I hope to show, represents the limitations of the truth recovery approach.

It is perhaps understandable that the point is lost amidst 640-plus pages of Ricoeur’s circuitous, sometimes-repetitive and often-dense text. Matters are probably complicated by Ricoeur’s shorter reflections in Kearney’s (1996) edited collection, *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*.[[16]](#footnote-16) In particular, in the short paper, ‘Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe’,[[17]](#footnote-17) Ricoeur attempts to link ethics with historiography by outlining a series of ethical principles: Firstly, an ‘ethic of narrative hospitality’ involves ‘taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other’. Secondly, an ‘ethic of narrative flexibility’ is about the resistance to the dogmatizing and reifying tendencies of identity- and ideologically based narratives. This proceeds on the understanding that communal identity is a social construct and relatively fluid: it ‘is not that of an immutable substance nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story’. These stories can be recounted in different ways, giving rise to Ricoeur’s third principle, that of ‘narrative plurality’. Importantly, Ricoeur does not disavow the facticity, the absoluteness, of historical events, but he does go on to argue that it ‘is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honoured by the diversity of stories that are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise’. These sentiments are underpinned, he concludes, by an ethics of forgiveness – an attitude of ‘charity’ that, crucially, he argues, does not preclude or displace justice.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Structured Forgetting**

Higgins, for his part, tends to emphasize the affective dimensions of Ricoeur’s thought – those passages and ideas that deal with plurality, openness, empathy, reconciliation. But, like Ricoeur, he is aware of the dangers inherent in the approach. Unfortunately, this aspect of Ricoeur’s thought only occurs in passing in Higgins’ reflections. The possibility of exclusivist, nationalistic and evasive memories are barely touched upon – outwith the criticism of persistent amnesia on the part of Britain, that is. Thus, Higgins states that

Paul Ricoeur refers to this in his suggestion of the tendency of such an abuse of memory to be justified as loyalty, or faithfulness, an approach from which history in the pursuit of fact has to distance itself. This indeed might suggest that there may be an unavoidable tension between history and memory.

This tension, which is ultimately resolved in Ricoeur, is left under-explored in Higgins’ speeches. And it is precisely that substitution of analysis or that shifting of the viewfinder that reveals the limitations of the truth recovery model. A close reading of Ricoeur’s text identifies his suggestion that memory and history are analytically and normatively distinct but warns against the temptation to ‘claim on behalf of memory in opposition to history’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Although he does not dismiss the possibility of a politics or a morality attached to historiography, this is in no way platitudinous or instrumentalizing. Indeed, Ricoeur would presumably resile at the type of depiction of an ethical remembering advocated by Higgins and the truth-recovery model. As he explains, in relation to the question of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust: ‘The moral judgment interwoven with historical judgement stems from another layer of historical meaning than that of description and explanation. Therefore it must not intimidate the historian to the point of leading him to censor himself’.[[20]](#footnote-20) In short, historical meaning is distinct from moral judgment. The linking of the two by the writers cited by Higgins misrepresents differing types of ‘truth’ – thereby eliding historical truth with the impulse towards healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The distinction between memory and history becomes transparent in the final pages of Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting*, when the two outer terms – memory and forgetting – come full circle around the pivot of history.Essentially building on Locke’s emphasis on memory as central to identity, Ricoeur’s treatment of forgetting places remembrance as related to but ultimately distinguishable from history – and indeed, this is made clear in the reflections that follow the passage cited by Higgins and Doran. There, on the following pages, Ricoeur explains that

History can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding the past; it cannot abolish it. Why? Because … memory remains the guardian of the ultimate dialect constitutive of the pastness of the past, namely the relation between the ‘no longer’, which marks its character of being elapsed, abolished, superseded, and the ‘having-been’, which designates its original and, in this sense, indestructible character. That something did actually happen, this is the pre-predicative – and even pre-narrative – belief upon which rest the recognition of the images of the past and oral testimony … [The events of the past] protest that they were and as such they demand being said, recounted, understood. This protestation … can be contested but not refuted.

Higgins notes a tension between the truths of memory and those of history but, because he is wedded to a concept of ethical remembering – the subjugation of history to a politics of peacebuilding – he is unable to go further. As such, the model of truth recovery and remembrance that he articulates opens the door for the manipulation and instrumentalization of history and memory.

Ricoeur is, in fact, well-aware of these tendencies and avoids the facile intellectual temptation of the truth recovery-societal healing Freudianism. It is in this regard, precisely, that he touches upon the work of the Egyptian-born French historian Henry Rousso whose 1987 book, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944[[21]](#footnote-21)* represented, together with the work of the American historian Robert Paxton, a critical interruption of the parenthetical narrative of French history – namely, the idea that a France existed before 1940 and continued to exist overseas in London during the years of Nazi Occupation before returning again with the beginning of the Liberation in June 1944.[[22]](#footnote-22) As Tony Judt points out, ‘the decades-long difficulty of acknowledging what really happened during the war and the overwhelming desire to block the memory or else recast it in a usable way that would not corrode the fragile bonds of post-war society – was by no means unique to France’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

For Rousso, the persistence of the myth of the parenthetical past – and all the suppression it involved, including the facts about collaboration, the involvement of French citizens in the deportations of Jews, the post-war reprisals in which French masculinity reasserted itself against ‘horizonal collaborators’ – in the main, single women – took place because of what he identified as ‘vectors of memory’: Namely, the channels and conduits in which memory is transmitted, communicated, re/presented in private and in public. This can occur directly, through state and nongovernmental groups which he points out ‘sometimes become attached to a rather static image of the past, which they then promote actively as well as passively’.[[24]](#footnote-24) But it can also take place at the more nebulous levels of ideas, culturally based understandings and the ideological and prejudicial ideas passed down through schooling and in families. Although the work of historians such as Rousso and Paxton together with the inability to ignore criminals at the heart of the French political classes such as Maurice Papon (who was eventually put on trial for the deportation of 1,690 Jews to the internment camp at Drancy in 1997 after litigation stretching back to the 1980s) precipitated some debate on the wartime experiences, it was only in 2017 that a French President openly tackled the historical distortions. Thus, during a visit by the Israeli Prime Minister, Emmanuel Macron stated that ‘[i]t is convenient to see the Vichy regime as born of nothingness, returned to nothingness. Yes, it’s convenient, but it is false. We cannot build pride upon a lie’. Going on to address the detention of over 13,000 Jews in the Velodrome d’Hiver before being transferred to Drancy and on to Auschwitz (also known as the ‘Vel’ d’Hiv’ Roundup’) in July 1942, Macron pointed out that ‘It was indeed France that organized the roundup, the deportation, and thus, for almost all, death’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**Pathological Memory**

As Rousso points out, the reason that such mythologizing can last so long – and, it was only through the dynamic relationship between changing memory ‘mediators’ and structural continuities within a. the French left and far left, b. the French right and far right, and c. between the right and left. Despite the gradual loss of importance of the French Communist Party, particularly after May 1968 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the resilience of the Le Penist far right, with high profile breakthroughs in presidential elections, continues to maintain the Vichy era as a pivot on which mainstream politics turns.[[26]](#footnote-26) In his reading of Rousso’s *The Vichy Syndrome*, Ricoeur describes the ‘obsession’ that Vichy exerts as being a ‘pathology of memory’. This is a peculiar interpretation that is more concerned with Ricoeur’s generalized concerns (at this point in his book) with the ethics of remembering than with the political explanation offered by Rousso:

The extent to which the proclamation of the duty of memory remains captive to the symptom of obsession makes it waver continually between use and abuse. Yes, the way in which the duty of memory is proclaimed can take the form of an abuse of memory in the manner of the abuses denounced … under the heading of manipulated memory. To be sure, these are no longer manipulations in the sense defined in terms of the ideological relation of the discourse of power, but in a more subtle manner in the sense of an appeal to conscience that proclaims itself to be speaking for the victims’ demand for justice.[[27]](#footnote-27)

It is precisely in passages such as this that Ricoeur’s philosophical impulses open the door for the rhetorical excesses of the Irish truth recovery model – and, as pointed out above, the privileging of victims’ testimony *outwith* historiographical source criticism, as contained in the third sentence of the extended quote, leads Ricoeur to posit a distinction between ideological power and testimony. This is circular and non-falsifiable: pathological remembering exists because the truth of memory is not heard, when truth is recovered memory will no longer be obsessive. In other words, if the ab/use of memory depends on its recovery and articulation there is no room for the counterfactual, ‘what if that is not the case?’ The self-reproducing logic of truth recovery therefore entails and necessitates a kind of superstructure of meaning in which truth recovery is never enough, it must always be joined on to other goals or promises, be they reconciliation or societal healing or the cultivation of peace. Without this discursive apparatus the ‘what if’ of truth recovery becomes clear: truth recovery is potentially about recycling received and under-examined stories about the past. In this way, truth recovery is akin to a flat-packed, Ikea-type approach to politics and is not far away from the Spanish novelist Javier Cercas’s definition of myth: ‘[a] popular story that is true in part and false in part and that tells a truth that cannot be told only with the truth’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Ultimately the distinction Ricoeur introduces between the ab/use of memory and ideology is untenable and unhelpful. As with the epistemological circularity of truth recovery, the implication that ethical memory is somehow above politics or even a kind of *meta*-politics displaces questions relating to where memory breaks with ideology and how that break is to be identified by both the witness and the audience of testimony. As pointed out above, the ambiguity runs through Ricoeur’s writings on memory and history; and, it is an ambiguity that echoes and indeed, in the case of Higgins, informs the truth recovery model – particularly as it is applied to the Irish context. Ultimately, the elision of history with truth recovery and the resultant *politicization* of history or the rendering of it to the notion of an ethical remembering creates the pathology of which Ricoeur writes. It does so by introducing a level of unreality into historical interpretation – a kind of magical realism where historiographical readings are placed in the service of political ends, whether they be societal healing, reconciliation, or peacebuilding. Furthermore, alongside this, but related to it, the truth recovery model refuses to recognize the reality that memory is ideological. In other words, the pathological distortion of reality works along two levels – the instrumentalization of historical interpretation and the presumption of a non-ideological, ethical remembering.

Of course, President Higgins’ assertion that an imperialistic ideological ‘mindset’ shapes Britain’s ‘feigned amnesia’ over Ireland suggests that the commitment to ethical remembering is far closer to Edna Longley’s notion of ‘remembering at’ than it is to Ricoeurian hospitality.[[29]](#footnote-29) But this bad faith is inherent in the truth recovery model – politically palatable truths are to be recovered in the service of reconciliation. Higgins’ point is emblematic of the *politics* of truth recovery and the *politics* of ethical remembering in that those politics circle around not simply a ‘What if?’ but also a ‘What to?’ In short, ethical remembering and truth recovery are saturated with political implications. To put this another way: reconciliation is seemingly asinine and harmless when it is understood as a noun – it is an end-goal, an achievement, something that can be measured: hostilities are ended and replaced by a new relationship. But, if reconciliation is understood as a transitive verb then it requires an object or an end-goal. In this second understanding, reconciliation means to restore anew a damaged relationship or to agree to behave differently in the future.[[30]](#footnote-30) In other words, reconciliation can be both a process and an event – but not both at the same time or in the same understanding. It is for this reason that the transitional nature of truth recovery and ethical remembering are so useful to Irish nationalism, posited as it is on a teleology – an end-goal of Irish reunification. And it is for that reason, then, that the truth recovery and ethical remembrance model acts as a site of condensation for political nationalism.

Again, to return to Freud who originally developed the notion of condensation (*Verdichtung*)

to apply to the ways that the subconscious displaces one or more ideas within one object – typically, how dreams compress or substitute a number of different elements into single figures.[[31]](#footnote-31) The concept was taken up by Marxian philosophers of the New Left in the 1970s such as Stuart Hall and Nicos Poulantzas, specifically to try to explain how the bourgeois liberal democratic state had proven to be so successful in fending off revolution. For Poulantzas, condensation spoke to the ways in which the state was both the repository of resources *and* class struggle – it was not simply the case that the state repressed subaltern classes but that, as the site of struggle, it was constantly in flux – ‘permanently disorganizing-dividing’. Thus, he explained, historically subaltern classes had access to certain parts of the state apparatus (schools, army, police) while others remained closed-off (judiciary, administration).[[32]](#footnote-32)

It is no surprise that the nationalist political class, north and south of the border, have congregated *en masse* around the ideas of truth recovery and ethical remembering: the model offers a conduit to pushing a transition from the status quo. The model allows for a banking-approach to politics: in conjunction with civil society groups (who seem to make not speaking about republican atrocities a point of policy) specific cases – such as that relating to Pat Finucane – are highlighted as evidence of collusion by political parties. ‘Concessions’ such as the Stormont House Agreement are ‘pocketed’. These are retained for gaining ‘interest’, despite becoming ostensibly redundant, when, for example, the British government takes them off the negotiating table as it did in March 2020. At the risk of mixing metaphors, this type of truth recovery politicking creates a pluperfect history: actions in the past are aggregated to give a semblance of a seamless trajectory in which the political direction is inexorable and clear.

The truth recovery model, then, works to usher-in a kind of post-nationalist era. It is perhaps accidental that one of Higgins’ favoured authors, the aforementioned Richard Kearney, is also an advocate of the type of extra-constitutional vision the SDLP used to describe as a condominium. A key step within this reasoning is to obscure repeated British government affirmations on the principle of consent – that the UK government is committed to enacting the constitutional preferences of the majority of the population in Northern Ireland. This effacing of historical realities is a kind of intellectual sleight of hand or misdirection: ‘the dual claims of absolute sovereignty exercised over the same territory by two sovereign governments are inevitably condemned to conflict. Unless, that is, the understanding of sovereignty is radically revised and superseded’. Within this (post)nationalist reasoning a democratic commitment to consent is replaced by conflicting claims-making and this framing or problematization gives way to the demand for a ‘pluralist’ Northern Ireland based on ‘the need (i) to separate the notion of nation from that of state; (ii) to acknowledge the co-existence of different identities in the same society; and (iii) to extend the models of identification *beyond unitary sovereignty* to include more inclusive and pluralist forms of association – such as a British-Irish Council or European Federation of Regions’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The truth recovery model follows the same logic: the substitution of lower-case nationalist division with floating signifiers. In so doing, it *transcends* and hollows-out constitutional questions by displacing them with a nebulous promise of peace, truth and justice – a rhetoric that, on the Reaganite logic of ‘If you’re explaining, you’re losing’, almost rules out debate from the off. Yet, the limitations of the model are perfectly obvious once the focus moves from bland acceptance of ideologically laden tropes to ideology and actions. Unfortunately, the process is made a little more difficult by the facts that on the one hand, the ideological implications of the truth recovery model are discernible in the traces around its edges, and, on the other, that the actions in question are often omissions.

The vacuity of the ethical remembering/truth recovery model has, however, been dramatically illustrated by the actions of republicans during the Covid-19 crisis: Actions, which, like Higgins’ words, reveal a commitment to ideological and nationalist truths despite the pleas for universalist-sounding ideas such as reconciliation and societal healing. Specifically, those actions (and words) have occurred in two phases: Firstly, the republican funeral of former Provisional IRA leader Bobby Storey in June 2020. At a time when funerals in Northern Ireland were still subject to severe Coronavirus-related restrictions, the *Irish Times*reported that around 1,800 ‘men and women, dressed in black trousers and slacks, white shirts and black ties, lined up along the black-flag draped Andersonstown and Falls roads in west Belfast’.[[34]](#footnote-34) Seemingly in contravention of the restrictions at the time, the funeral cortege consisted not only of family members but the Sinn Féin leadership cadre – including deputy First Minister Michelle O’Neill, party president Mary Lou McDonald and other senior figures such as Gerry Adams and Gerry Kelly.

An alleged PIRA ‘enforcer’ and intelligence director, Storey was also a close confidant of Adams and one-time chairperson of Sinn Féin. ‘If it is possible for one individual to embody the spirit, the dynamic, the duration and durability, the depth and complexity of the republican struggle over the last 45 years’, wrote the *Irish News*columnist and former Adams-advisor, Jim Gibney, ‘then it was Bobby Storey’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Others were markedly less positive in their assessment of Storey: ‘a notoriously violent thug’, for instance, was how the historian and *Belfast Telegraph*commentator Ruth Dudley Edwards described him.[[36]](#footnote-36) Writing in the *Irish Times*, the former Tanaiste, Michael McDowell argued that Storey’s funeral highlighted ‘much’ of what is often ‘left unsaid about the current state of the Provisional movement’ – namely, that it is directed by ‘an unaccountable politburo centred in west Belfast. That politburo regards itself as holding a mandate from history to exercise the powers of the Irish Republic proclaimed in 1916’.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The Public Prosecution Service delivered, what to many in Northern Ireland, appeared as a surprising decision at the end of March 2021: ‘Having carefully considered the available evidence and the advice received from Senior Counsel, it was concluded that there was no reasonable prospect of conviction in respect of any of the reported individuals…’[[38]](#footnote-38) Those individuals were senior members of Sinn Féin including the Deputy First Minister, Michelle O’Neill and the Minister for Finance, Conor Murphy. The First Minister and DUP leader, Arlene Foster immediately called for the Chief Constable of the PSNI to resign.[[39]](#footnote-39) The events were widely seen as contributing to the riots in loyalist areas ongoing at the time of writing.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The Assembly was recalled to debate a censuring motion on Sinn Féin on 1 April. During the debate Minister Murphy made a short statement:

[L]et me reiterate today that I regret the political division that the matter has caused in the Assembly and to the public health messaging that we, as a collective, worked so hard to develop and get an agreed response to this terrible pandemic. More importantly, however, I want to say sorry to the wider community, but, more particularly, to apologise fully and unreservedly to those families who were hurt in any way by my actions.

In her statement, Minister O’Neill claimed that her ‘attendance at the funeral of Bobby Storey was to support a family during their grief as he was laid to rest’. She went on to apologize for the extent to which

my actions have contributed to the grief or the heartache that has been felt and experienced by many people who have lost a loved one during the pandemic. That was never, ever my intention, and, for that, I offer my heartfelt and unreserved apology to the families who have lost a loved one.[[41]](#footnote-41)

It would be simplistic to argue that the events surrounding Storey’s funeral represented the truth recovery model – misleading too: Because it is O’Neill’s continued defence of her attendance in support of Storey’s family that is the crux of the limitations of the model. In short, truth recovery reaches as far as the ‘truth’ of the ‘Other’. The *politics* of truth recovery and ethical remembering are, however, much more far-reaching precisely because the limits of truth recovery sanction a public acceptance of the malleability of ‘truth’. In this regard, truth recovery and ethical remembering are less a call to democratic participation than an anti-politics of cynicism: Thus, it was grimly apt that the Assembly debate coincided with the Easter narrative and the sarcasm of Pontius Pilate: ‘What is truth?’ (Jn 18:38).

**Conclusion: The ‘truth’ of truth recovery**

Keith Lowe, when writing about the need to mythologize the past, stated that the point of nostalgia is to create an ‘illusion of unity’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Writing about the need for amnesia in the aftermath of World War II, Lowe points out that critical reflection of what occurred in the recent past is much more dangerous than easily digestible morality tales – or even wilful forgetting. The point is acceded by Ricouer towards the end of his *Memory, History, Forgetting* where he confronts the kind of nostalgic victim-outbidding of Sinn Féin’s political strategy:

[T]here is a privilege that cannot be refused to history; it consists not only in expanding collective memory beyond any actual memory but in correcting, criticizing, even refuting the memory of a determined community, when it folds back upon itself and encloses itself to the point of rendering itself blind and deaf to the suffering of other communities.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Liam Kennedy has written extensively about this kind of closed-off truth-making history in the Irish context (famously coining the term MOPE-ism to capture the pathology of the Irish nationalist truth that the Irish are the Most Oppressed People Ever). Indeed, Kennedy’s work, which focuses on Irish economic history, can be read as part of the dialect involving historically informed political scientists, historians and economists writing against the counter-revisionist backlash. Studiously avoiding the trite tropism of truth recovery, Kennedy reaches for the work of the Brazilian educationalist Paolo Freire at the end of his most recent treatment of the Northern Irish troubles. Whereas Freire coined the term to refer to his methodology of raising social awareness while facilitating adult reading classes,[[44]](#footnote-44) Kennedy uses it as a ‘cry for reflective conscience making’ – an idea, encompassing but going far beyond truth recovery and ethical remembering. Unlike the truth recovery model, Kennedy’s vision is empirically based and clearly practical and do-able:

The onus is on all of us to face up to the central realities of the [Northern Irish] conflict and the contradictions that cluster beneath the surface rhetoric. Irish nationalists were responsible for maintaining, year in and year out, the longest-running conflict in postwar Europe. It is time to understand the seriousness of the charge – I hesitate even as I write – and seek to undo some of the harm.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Kennedy’s hesitation is telling and contrasts with the certainty of Higgins and the theological and philosophical writers whom he quotes in support of ethical remembering – or with the outlandish claims of the truth recovery model. Indeed, the point is immediately conceded by Ricoeur: ‘It is along the path of *critical history* that memory encounters the sense of justice’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Rather than truth recovery, then, we should perhaps be asking what this critical history looks like. To do otherwise is to resign to the polite hospitality highlighted by Theodor Adorno: ‘in the house of the hangman one should not speak of the noose, otherwise one might seem to harbor resentment’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

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1. See Cillian McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History* (Bassignstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.55 ff. For the intervention of the Irish post-colonial paradigm, inspired in part by the work of Seamus Deane, Edward Said and the Field Day company, into Irish revisionist historiography, see Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Mendeloff, ‘Truth-Seeking, Truth-Telling, and Postconflict Peacebuilding: Curb the Enthusiasm?’, *International Studies Review*, 2004, 6: 355-380. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Higgins has seemingly not cited Renan directly despite Fintan O’Toole identifying the link as early as 2021. See Fintan O’Toole, ‘What kind of a country is this?’, *Irish Times*, 3 November 2012. Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/what-kind-of-a-country-is-this-1.547160>; accessed on 7 April 2021. The 1882 Renan lecture ‘What is a nation?’ [*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* ]Is reprinted in Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), pp8-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Renan, ‘What is’, p.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For instance, by O’Toole, in theory, if not in practice, see O’Toole, ‘What kind’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Renan, ‘What is’, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael D. Higgins, ‘President Higgins: Openness to others must be at the heart of remembering’, *Irish Times*, 1 July 2016. Avaliable at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/president-higgins-openness-to-others-must-be-at-heart-of-remembering-1.2705750>; accessed on 7 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Funes the Memorious’, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.94. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Higgins, ‘President Higgins’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Michael D. Higgins ‘Empire shaped Ireland’s past. A century after partition, it still shapes our present’, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2021. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/11/empire-ireland-century-partition-present-britain-history>; accessed on 7 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michael D. Higgins, ‘Of centenaries and the hospitality necessary in reflecting on memory, history and forgiveness’, 4 December 2020. Available at <https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/of-centenaries-and-the-hospitality-necessary-in-reflecting-on-memory-history-and-forgiveness>; accessed on 7 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The original quote, which occurs towards the end of Ricoeur’s text is, arguably, a little clearer than Higgins’ rendition: ‘The major fact made apparent by the comparison between history’s project of truth and memory’s aim of faithfulness is that the small miracle of recognition has no equivalent in history’. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.497. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Peter Doran, ‘Navigating Complexity and Uncertainty after the *Belfast-Good Friday Agreement: The Role of Societal Trauma?*, *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, 71 (4) (2020), p.630. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, p. 631. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Paul Ricoeur, ‘Reflections on a new ethos for Europe’, in Ibid, pp.3- 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ricoeur is clear on the distinction between charity and justice, but in a foreshadowing of Doran’s addition: To the degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus …’ Ibid, p.11. See also McGrattan, *Memory*, pp.17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ricoeur, *Memory*, p.87. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. p.257. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See for instance François Mitterrand’s defence of the French Republic in 1994: I will not apologize in the name of France. The Republic has nothing to do with that. I believe that France is not responsible’. Cited in Jim Wolfreys ‘How France’s Vichy Regime became Hitler’s willing collaborators’, 7 October 2020, *Jacobin*. Available at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/07/vichy-france-holocaust-nazi-hitler-world-war-ii>; accessed on 8 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: William Heinemann, 2005), p.808. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rousso, *Vichy*, p.220. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Emmanuel Macron, ‘Speech by the President of the French Republic at the Vel d’Hiv Commemoration’, 16 July 2017. Available at <https://newyork.consulfrance.org/Speech-by-the-President-of-the-French-Republic-at-the-Vel-d-Hiv-Commemoration>; accessed on 7 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See, for instance, Wolfreys, ‘How France’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ricoeur, *Memory*, p..90. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cited in Cillian McGrattan, *The Politics of Trauma and Peacebuilding: Lessons from Northern Ireland* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Higgins, ‘Empire’; see also Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See McGrattan, *The Politics*, pp.85-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. One early (1916-17) definition offered by Freud was that condensation referred to how ‘latent elements which have something in common being combined and fused into a single unity in the manifest dream’; Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Available at <https://freudianassociation.org/en/wp-content/uploads/Sigmund_Freud_1920_Introductory.pdf>; accessed on 8 April 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Lars Bretthauer, ‘Materiality and condensation in the work of Nicos Poulantzas’, in *Reading Poulantzas*, edited by Alexander Gallas, Lars Bretthauer, John Kannankulam and Igno Stützle (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2011), pp.72-88; Poulantzas cited therein, p.83. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
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