

Episode 2, season 4 (27 October 2022)

## Historical Truth in the Nordic Countries

*Welcome to Justice Visions. The podcast about everything that is new in the domain of Transitional Justice (TJ). Justice Visions is hosted at the Human Rights Centre of Ghent University. For more information visit [JusticeVisions.org](https://JusticeVisions.org).*

**Tine Destrooper:** Welcome to Justice Visions this is our first episode of a short series on historical truth in which we'll be looking at formal and informal truth initiatives that have been set up in European countries to deal with settler and overseas colonial legacies. Today we'll be focusing on a number of initiatives that were taken in the Nordic countries, so in the context of settler colonialism, and we'll turn to those in a moment. But first I want to introduce my co-host for this miniseries and for today's episode, Cira Palli-Aspero, welcome!

**Cira Palli-Aspero:** Good morning, Tine. Thank you.

**Tine:** Cira you are a researcher at Justice Visions, and I'm introducing you as a co-host, but in a way, I feel you are also an interviewee, of course, in the sense that I have so many questions for you as well today. And, maybe, before we start, a first question would be if you could say a couple of words about where this whole idea of a mini-series came from and why we decided to focus a number of episodes on truth initiatives within the settler and overseas colonial context, and what the link is with transitional justice.

**Cira:** This miniseries on historical truth and the legacies of colonialism came about as a sort of response to the many initiatives that are currently taking place in different contexts. These initiatives are set up not only to address the legacies of the colonial past, but also their enduring harms in the present - which often take the form of social injustices or structural inequalities.

**Tine:** Demands to address historical injustices linked to colonialism are not new, right? Why are we talking about these initiatives now?

**Cira:** They are not new, no. However, since 2020 – coinciding with the latest protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, they have taken a renewed spotlight in the public and political debate. With this miniseries, we want to pick up on some of these debates to explore how different actors are engaging in different formal and informal truth-seeking initiatives and what does this mean for the domain of transitional justice.

**Tine:** Could you also say a bit more about how they relate to the domain of transitional justice?

**Cira:** I believe this relation is somehow still in the making. As a response to the demands to address the legacies of colonialism, the transitional justice paradigm is increasingly being used to think about historical injustices. Historical truth-seeking initiatives within the post-colonial context (both formal and informal processes) they are increasingly using the logic and rhetoric of transitional justice. A clear example of this can be found in the latest wave of state sanctioned historical commissions. We have talked about these commissions more broadly in a previous [episode](#) we will add the link to it to the show notes for our listeners. What we are witnessing with these commissions is a systematical reference to core objectives of transitional justice in their mandates.

**Tine:** Could you say a bit more about, in your opinion, what does that mean for the field of transitional justice? What are the implications does this has for TJ as a field of scholarship and as of practice?

**Cira:** To me, the most obvious one, is that this framing is broadening the field to consolidated democracies as *aparadigmatic* contexts which means that the normative objectives and goals of the field are transferred to a different landscape.

**Tine:** When these processes are framed as instances of TJ, of transitional justice, do we also observe a sort of embracing of, or at least engagement with, let's say the more, traditional goals of transitional justice? The truth dimension may be an obvious one, but also accountability, reparation, non-recurrence. I'm really interested maybe as one of my last questions to you Cira, if we look at the initiatives now, how do we understand that notion of accountability? In a way that notion is really foundational to the domain of transitional justice, which also hovers around these kinds of truth initiatives addressing settler and overseas colonial legacies? How, in your perception, can these historical commissions contribute to accountability?

**Cira:** This is the key question, not only for the work of these historical commissions, but also for the field of transitional justice more broadly. What does it mean to achieve historical accountability for colonial crimes? Is accountability even the right term to use in this context? Would it be more appropriate to talk about historical responsibility, for example, or even a historical obligation of the post-colonial state, or the settler states, to redress these historical injustices? I think the work of these commissions is kind of reviving these debates about what it is that they can achieve in terms of accountability and what it is that we understand as accountability within the field of transitional justice when this used as a framework to address historical injustices of the colonial past.

**Tine:** I agree, and I think we might have to accept that we are not going to find definitive answers to that question in this episode. But on that note, I do want to turn to the Scandinavian context which we will be talking about today. Because in the Scandinavian context there has actually been an evolution where we've seen the establishment of a set of commissions to inquire into the impact that assimilation policies of the Scandinavian welfare states - as it has been framed has had on indigenous peoples in those countries, right?

**Cira:** Yes, Finland, Norway and Sweden, all these three countries have established such commissions to examine the impact of these policies on different indigenous groups.

**Tine:** Right, and that's what we'll be talking about in today's episode. And so now I finally get to introduce Dr. Malin Arvidsson. She is a senior lecturer at Linköping University in Sweden, and she's currently working on a research project which is titled Truth and Reconciliation in the Nordic countries at the Danish Institute for International Studies. But most importantly, she's also been a member of the Swedish Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Tornedalians, Kvens and Lantalauset, which was set up in 2020. Welcome, Malin.

**Malin Arvidsson:** Thank you.

**Tine:** The first question that I wanted to ask you is about these- I think we can say - recently established commissions on settler colonialism in the Scandinavian countries. They've been long way in the making. What explains that we've seen this boom around 2020? Why now? What were, in a way, the key social and political aspects in that

Scandinavian context that explain that all, of a sudden, we see the establishment of these commissions?

**Malin:** I guess there's several different answers to that question. I mean, one main inspiration has of course been the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That's been a reference for several of the commissions in Sweden and other Nordic countries. Another, more maybe domestic, explanation is that there's been previously similar commissions that have not been termed 'Truth and Reconciliation commissions', but that have been dealing with, for example, abuse of children in out-of-home care or treatment of different minority groups, but not in this framework of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. But that's been aimed at redressing historical injustices within the Nordic welfare states.

**Tine:** I think that's super interesting that framing that you're referring to, right? Because that is something that we see in these more recent commissions that they are in a way, at least some of them, pretty explicitly framed as Truth and Reconciliation commissions. And so, in a way, really adopting that logic and that rhetoric of transitional justice and of human rights. Could you talk a bit about that as well? What you see as the reason why all of a sudden, these commissions are now framed as truth commissions and not, for example, as historical commissions or along the lines that you just explained.

**Malin:** I think we need to see this in a longer time frame. I mean, I've been looking for example previously at how the very term of Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been used in the Swedish Parliament. Early on there were some references to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to the Commission in Guatemala... and so it's been used as a way of asking for investigations, as a rhetorical tool to make the state look into its past. It's also been used for many years within debates about minority rights, etcetera. But it's only now that it's been actually used as a term officially for an inquiry, but the language of Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been around for much longer.

**Tine:** I think that that's really interesting that point you're making about a certain language or about the notion of TJ (transitional justice) being used as a rhetorical device, right? and that actually triggers a follow-up question in terms of what you feel the implications are of this TJ framing? Whether it's as a rhetorical device or otherwise, what the implications are in terms of how these commissions work? What they're expected to achieve? and maybe also about the implications in terms of the involvement of affected people?

**Malin:** On a very practical level, there has been seminars with practitioners who have worked, for example the in the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but also in other commissions like the one in Peru. So there's been some lessons about the practical work of a truth and reconciliation Commission in the preparatory work, for example, the recently set up Sami Commission in Sweden. More concretely, we can see, of course, in all of the Nordic commissions that are ongoing right now, the huge emphasis on using interviews as a way of documenting these rights violations, which is of course is in direct relation to the practices that has that have been developed in previous Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.

**Tine:** That's interesting, that point you raise about in a way lesson learning or sharing best practices across different, I would say, TJ contexts whether they're typical TJ contexts in a way, like Peru, or kind of the more *aparadigmatic* TJ contexts like the Canadian [Truth and Reconciliation] Commission. That makes sense. But then I also wonder, has that

lesson learning and even that label of TJ generally been perceived as beneficial? as a sensitive thing to do? Is there a lot of support at a political and public level?

**Malin:** There has been a debate, for example, whether it's wise to use the very term Reconciliation Commission or whether the naming should be a Truth Commission only, with the arguments being that we need truth before reconciliation, we need to see the results of the commission before further discussion on redress and reconciliation can be held. The very fact that it is, for example, the name of the Commission that I'm in, which is the first in Sweden to be named Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is evidence that the term and this framework has been influential and then of course, there's still debate about whether it's the right decision or whether one should use a different notion of redress.

**Tine:** I would actually like to return to a point that you just mentioned about interviews that were taking place at least in some of the commissions, because I think in a way and that process of investigation that the various commissions have embarked upon. The collaboration between the Commission and the indigenous peoples or communities is key and I wonder if you could speak a bit more about how that participation has shaped up in practice. Maybe whether you see any differences between the different commissions and whether that's been perceived as sufficient, or as a good thing?

**Malin:** If we take the Swedish context, which I'm more familiar with, the commissions that are now ongoing, are only one step in a much longer process, so they have been set up as a response to demands from minority representatives. Minority organizations have been preparing these commissions by making their own pre-studies, and both interviewing and making surveys etcetera about the both the potential outcomes of a commission and also fears and challenges that could be foreseen with carrying out these commissions. So, there's been a long anchoring process. But of course, as we can see, in many different countries, there's also been controversy around whether this is a good idea at all, whether it does more harm than good.

**Tine:** Actually also just the very fact that you're saying that these commissions came about in response to demands by the communities is very interesting and it makes me want to ask about the fact that the commissions, , are investigating in a broad sense crimes that happened under the assimilation policy and the consequences for indigenous peoples as a whole, rather than questions of individual responsibility and questions of individual compensation for victims, for example. How is that perceived? Is that also a response to the demand by the communities themselves, or is there also a demand there for actual, say, individual victim compensation, for example?

**Malin:** Mainly it's been talk about different kinds of collective redress and less talk about individual compensation. As far as I know, and as you mentioned, I mean the commission I'm working in, we're not even allowed to look into individual responsibility.

**Tine:** Before when we started this bit of the conversation, Cira also raised some questions about accountability and what accountability means in these kinds of truth processes regarding settler colonialism and its legacies. How would you understand the notion of accountability in that specific context, given that we're really taking the whole debate about individual responsibility and accountability out of the out of the equation?

**Malin:** I would say that's an ongoing debate right now, something we need to relate to in our work and in the remit of our commission. The word that's used in Swedish is *ansvar*, and that's not necessarily translated into accountability in English. It could also be translated as responsibility. So there's some conceptual work going on. But what's

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interesting in this case is that we also need to think about, if you talk about historical injustices in this long-time perspective, what are even the actors that we are looking at, because for example, the state and the Church of Sweden has an intertwined history. So, there's some really difficult questions to handle there.

**Tine:** I want to ask you more about how the debate is shaping up. But maybe we can also just link to that in the show notes to some interesting resources on that point because it might be too much to go into that entire debate here [see initiatives undertaken by the Church of Sweden – [investigative work](#), [apologies](#), [further actions](#)]. For now, I think what I also still wanted to ask you is looking a bit more towards the future, because of course these truth commissions and historical commissions in a way that are operating in the Scandinavian context, they won't be an endpoint. They are kind of an accumulation of the process that was ongoing already and they're responses to certain demands. But then I'm wondering, in your perception, what's next?

**Malin:** Of course, it remains to be seen what the recommendations will be of these commissions that are now ongoing and what actions will follow. But I think we could already now see that the commissions, because they're temporary bodies, will not be able to follow up on their own recommendations. That's up to the commissioning bodies, the government in the Swedish case and the Parliament in the Norwegian case. But I mean what will remain is an archive of interviews, research reports that have been commissioned by the commission that can serve as a basis for further advocacy and claims-making.

**Tine:** And I think on that note, we're probably approaching one of the last questions that were always asking our interviewees is where they are looking for inspiration, right? And which best practices in a way that you're observing in the field, best practices that are making you hopeful.

**Malin:** Well, if I answer as a commissioner, I would say that we've been learning a lot from the Norwegian Commission that started earlier in 2017. When it comes to how they're carrying out interviews, analyzing interviews, etcetera. As a historian, I think I look to works that stress the long-time perspective because I mean, it's quite limited what a commission can do within two or three years. But if we see in hindsight, previous processes have led to follow up commissions, policy changes, etcetera, but maybe in a much longer timeframe than just a couple of years.

**Cira:** I would like to pick up on one of the latest points raised by Malin on the possibility of historical commissions countries to follow up on the implementation of their recommendations. We have seen in previous historical commissions investigating colonial crimes (for example, in the case of [Royal Commission on Aboriginal People](#) or the [Indian Residential Schools Truth Commissions](#)) that there is a disconnect between the recommendations proposed by the commissions and the foreseen reforms of the political and social landscape. Although the political "life" of the state may slowdown the implementation of the recommendations, in most cases, the sanctioning state focuses on the implementation of those symbolic measures that are less disruptive of the systemic structures threatening to transform these commissions in tactical concessions.

**Tine:** and that may actually generate questions about what the actual capacities of such commissions are?

**Cira:** Absolutely, I think going forward we must find effective ways translate their work into substantial change; to get the sanctioning states to fully commit to the process of redress of historical injustices and to tackle the enduring social injustices and systemic

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inequalities in the present. Nevertheless, I think we should not overlook the importance of the legacy of the investigative work of this historical commissions. As Malin was saying, they create vast archives that are key for future claims and advocacy work. I think this is a key aspect here, is that then, these commissions become platforms for an ongoing process of critical reflection about the past.

**Tine:** True, I want to thank you Cira for sharing these last thoughts and reflections on what Malin has already shared. And Malin, thank you so much for sharing your experience as a commissioner with us.

**Malin:** Thank you for inviting me

**Tine:** We will be back next month with another episode of this mini-series on historical truth in which we will focus on Portugal.

*This was Justice Visions. To relisten to this episode, or to browse our archive, visit our website, [justicevisions.org](http://justicevisions.org) or subscribe now via Spotify or Apple music. Justice Visions is made possible through generous funding of the European Research Council.*