



# The Perch Pod Episode 40 What's Happening in South Africa with Dr. Carolyn Holmes

**Jacob Shapiro:**

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**Jacob Shapiro:**

Hello listeners and welcome to another episode of the Perch Pod. As usual, I am your host, I'm Jacob Shapiro. I'm also the founder and chief strategist of Perch Perspectives, which is a human centric business and political consulting firm. Joining me on the podcast today is Dr. Carolyn Holmes who is an assistant professor of political science and public administration at Mississippi State University. Hail State, did I say that right? I don't know. Thanks so much to Carolyn for coming on the podcast to talk about South Africa. I thought this was a really terrific conversation and she offered a lot of insights that I think just aren't out there, aren't available in the mainstream media. Programming note, we recorded this on August 27th, a day or two before hurricane Ida supposed to make landfall here. So assuming that we are not all blown away and washed away with the hurricane, this will post in a couple of weeks.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

So a few of the things that we talk about in the first section of the podcast might be a little outdated, but I think for the most part this has good staying power. A reminder, check us out at [perchperspectives.com](http://perchperspectives.com), sign up for our Latin America geopolitics newsletter at [latampolitik.com](http://latampolitik.com). You can write to us at [info@perchperspectives.com](mailto:info@perchperspectives.com) if you have questions, comments, concerns about the podcast or the services that Perch Perspectives provides its clients. And as always, please remember to rate, review, send the podcast to your friends. Referrals are the best thing that you can do to help us keep going. So thanks so much. Cheers. Stay safe y'all and we'll see out there.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Carolyn, thank you so much for responding to a random message on Twitter and agreeing to come on the podcast. I really appreciate it.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

So listen, we're talking about South Africa today. And I do geopolitics in general, I will not pretend to be a South Africa expert. And when things went crazy in South Africa last month, you had a great article in



the Washington Post and I reached out to you and wanted to talk to you about South Africa in general. But the first question I sort of wanted to ask was, and I think this is indicative of our media environment in general, so much stuff was happening in South Africa in July and mainstream U.S. coverage at least stopped a month ago. There's been no basic updates since like, "Oh my God, the whole country is falling apart. The South African military is being deployed to restore law and order." And then it's like, crickets. If you're just looking at headlines, there's nothing out there. So where are we today? I know Jacob Zuma is now hospitalized with health issues, but help our listeners catch up on what's happened since whatever they saw top of the fold in July.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah. So top of the fold in July were a series of violent protests. I mean the language around it is a little contentious, right? Were they riots? Were they protest? Was it an insurrection? All of those are words that have been thrown around at one point or another. Jacob Zuma, former president got put in jail related to some corruption charges and that led to this sort of spike in violence. Since then the demands of the protesters to free Jacob Zuma have not materialized, but he is currently hospitalized, as you said. Most of the sort of continuing story has been into investigations of sort of leaders behind the protests, which were sort of evaluated to be relatively spontaneous at the time, but there've been accusations that they are this more sustained and probably more dangerous form of political mobilization around the sort of Zuma Camp of the ANC.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

But the main sort of South African story right now is in the unemployment numbers that have recently come out in South Africa where unemployment is the highest it's been since the independence period where official unemployment is somewhere in the neighborhood of about 34% for working age adults. So that's people over the age of 15 in South Africa. And that was in many ways sort of seen as one of the flashpoints for the violence, people are angry people are sort of up in arms partially because of the economic failings of the post apartheid government. So we're not just talking about the current government, we're talking about the government of the last 25 years. So that's sort of where we're at right now. Jacob Zuma is hospitalized, but he has not actually been released from state custody. And in many ways, the story is now picking up the pieces of the very geographically concentrated violence, which devastated parts of Durban, parts of Johannesburg and the sort of greater Gauteng state.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah. So there's a lot to unpack there. I just want to start with that headline unemployment figure that you mentioned is pretty striking. Do you have a sense of whether that's ... Is that figure worse if you look at it along racial lines or along regional lines, as you sort of alluded to with where the protests were, is it more of a class-based thing? Is there anything that tells us that certain parts of the population are experiencing worse unemployment's than other parts and is that feeding into what happened in July?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**



Yeah, so the problem partially with unemployment figures is that we have official unemployment, we have unofficial unemployment, and then we have breakdowns by age cohort, by region, by race. And it does seem to be that youth unemployment is one of the major sectors that keeps unemployment numbers so high. So people under the age of 35 and especially those with qualifications in the South African idiom, right? Those people who have degrees particularly professional degrees having trouble finding work in their preferred field. So youth unemployment is a big problem. Black Africans as a population group, if we're going to use, again, the South African idioms for population categories, do face higher levels of unemployment. Their household income is significantly lower than their white counterparts. And that's a persistent hangover since apartheid that has not been really made better in the post-apartheid period. So yeah, I would say probably the concentration of unemployment is going to be in young people and black people in South Africa.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Does the unemployment and sort of economic opportunity in general map onto where protests were most severe in July, or is there not a clear kind of alignment between where things are the worst economically and where the worst of the unrest was? I guess the real question I'm trying to circle on is, whether you think those protests had some kind of nefarious intent by them or whether that is some kind of political message that's being used to spin against them? Which is a difficult question. I know.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah. It's difficult to unpack because if you take the city of Durban where most of the sort of original protests in July started, we do see in Durban, those places that experienced the highest levels of unemployment were the places that we're most likely to see these violent protests. That doesn't necessarily map onto national trends. So we didn't see other cities with high levels of unemployment having similarly violent outbursts, but in the cities where protests happen, those protests were centered in places that are most economically disadvantaged.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah. That makes sense. So do you think there was any kind of sustained ... I have it on my mind because I've been watching that Netflix documentary, *The Great Hack*. So now I see conspiracy theories everywhere. Do you have any sense that there was some kind of nefarious organization behind the protest themselves, whether Zuma's camp or somebody other's camp? Or was it really more of a grassroots thing that just got out of control?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So I don't have a good answer to that, but I will say that the African National Congress, which has been in charge of South Africa by a none competitive margin, right? They've won every election without really a challenge to their power, although there are opposition parties in South Africa, has been in power since 1994. So what we have is one party winning again and again and again. So descent has sort of been internalized within that party. And so Zuma does command loyalty within the party organization. There



is a Zuma Camp of the ANC that does have organizational structures. He does have supporters both in the party infrastructure as well as outside of it.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So to say like, is there an organization behind the protests? I don't know, but there is an organization behind Zuma. And that includes major figures in talk radio in KwaZulu-Natal where the protests started. They were on air encouraging these outbursts as a sort of ... Well, let's delete that. They were on air encouraging people to get out and voice their dissent in more and less violent ways, right? Some of them were overtly condoning and encouraging violence. Some of them are just saying, "We need to have our voices heard." Which can be read in a number of different ways. So are there organizations behind the protests? Probably, but those are the same organizations that are already behind Zuma as a member of the ANC, as a faction within the ANC and as a sort of protest movement within the governing party.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

That makes sense. And I guess one of the other things that's been going on is that the current president Cyril Ramaphosa seems to be purging the ANC of factions that would be hostile to him, because he was Zuma's vice-president so it feels difficult to say that, "Oh, even though he has a technocrat that he's somehow clean, but Zuma is really the problem and they're going to scapegoat everything on to Zuma." Do you think that that factional struggle is also maybe a part of what's at least feeding into this underlying discontent underneath the surface?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah. I mean, the divide between Ramaphosa and Zuma runs deep, right? They were both part of the inner circle of Mandela's advisers in the immediate aftermath of the transition to multi-racial democracy. But from that point where their paths sort of converged, they came from very different places, right? Ramaphosa being an urban union organizer who was sort of part of the ANC in residence, although the ANC was officially abandoned or apartheid. He was still an organizer within the communist party and within other organizations during the anti-apartheid struggle. Jacob Zuma sort of fighter within the armed wing of the ANC, goes into exile, has military training in places like Zambia and Botswana.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So these two different factions of the anti-apartheid struggle under the umbrella of the ANC come into the Mandela Government. And from there, again, their paths have diverge where Jacob Zuma has drawn on his history and his sort of credentials as a rural person, as a fighter to gain popularity. Ramaphosa sort of exits the ANC after Mandela and he becomes a businessman. He sort of establishes himself within the business community under these black economic empowerment initiatives, makes a tremendous amount of money. So those Zuma loyalists would say, "Well, you tell us that our guy is corrupt, but Ramaphosa just took the windows of opportunity that were available to him because of how the Mandela Government set up this idea that we were going to make a black middle-class. We on



the other hand have just stayed in government, so we have other opportunities to sort of make ourselves important."

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So yes, there is an effort under the banner of anti-corruption to eliminate much of the Zuma populist sort of faction within the ANC. Now the trouble is, of course, that there is a very real problem of corruption in the Zuma Administration, which lasted from 2009 to 2018, right? Hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars go missing from the public treasury. We have seen the enlargement of the Zuma family compound, building underground bunkers and helipads and pools and all of these sorts of things. And the people around him are also getting wealthy. So there is this problem where you have a very real issue of public money being misspent, but is the solution to that the purging of an entire camp of the ANC? And I don't know the answer to that, and that's not actually for me to decide, but there is a case to be made on both sides for the legitimacy of these voices within the governing party in South Africa in 2021.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah. Well, I've never liked the idea that power corrupts. I always liked the Robert Kara formulation, which is that power reveals, but it does certainly seem that when you get a populous leader like a broadcasting from Louisiana today. So Huey Long is the obvious example that everything starts virtuous and noble, and eventually they start taking whatever they want and they justify it because it's part of whatever they have to do. And Zuma does seem to have done that, but that really focuses on what I thought was the most important point in your Washington Post article, which I really didn't see elsewhere. It was a really good corrective which was, you were talking about Zuma as a populist and not as utilizing ethnic mobilization or capitalizing on some of these other divisions within South Africa itself. And I thought that was a really important message and I'd love for you to just riff on why thinking about Zuma, you should think about him in terms of a populist who was responding, however, imperfectly and corruptly, because he obviously has done some bad stuff, to real populist concerns that may be actually transcends some of the ethnic categories that mainstream media tries to throw South Africa into.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah. So the reason I think that a lot of people will sort of put Zuma's politics in the ethnic box is because he uses ethnic idioms a lot, He, for a while, had shirts from ... His supporters wore shirts when he was on trial for rape back in 2005, 2006, I don't know the exact date, that said 100% Zulu Boy. People are like, "Oh, so he's playing the ethnic card." And he also speaks in his first language a lot more than other South African politicians, his first language being Zulu. He didn't learn English until he was a young man because of where he grew up because of the schools he went to, all of those sorts of things, and people are like, "Oh, so he's making ethnic appeals." And I think that that is an oversimplification of what Zuma is doing, in the sense that he is speaking not to Zulu people as Zulu people when he's saying 100% Zulu Boy, or when he's using this very lyrical, deep, really beautiful Zulu if you can understand what he's saying.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

What he's doing is he's appealing to people that have been left behind by the cosmopolitanization and the urbanization and the anglicization of South Africa, right? Only, what is it? 8% of South African speak English as their first language. We have a proportion of South Africa and I don't have the exact figure off the top of my head, but about 40% of South Africans don't have a fluent command of English. They lived their lives in other languages. So when you have a president like Cyril Ramaphosa who to my knowledge has never spoken Venda, his sort of African indigenous language, in public, where he doesn't address himself in that idiom. And that's partially because he didn't grow up there. He grew up in Soweto. He grew up in a city speaking English and being an urbanite.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Zuma is speaking to people who are not that. And in fact, that's the majority of people in South Africa. It's geographically concentrated. It's economically concentrated. It's racially concentrated, but he is speaking to that population in a way that no other ANC leader has done since in some ways Mandela. And Mandela is a bit of a transcender of categories. He could speak in Xhosa and he could speak in English and he could sort of live in both of those worlds, having grown up in the rural areas, having been a young man and living his adult life in cities, and then the majority of his adult life, in fact, in prison. So he was sort of transcending these divides. But if we look at the leaders of the ANC since then, we have this primarily anglophone, primarily urban set of elites that have been in charge of the party. And in comes Jacob Zuma, this guy who knows what rural life looks like, who says that he likes food better when it's cooked over wood stoves, when he speaks like your parents do, when he practices certain kinds of culturally resonant rituals. It's not about him appealing to Zuluness, it's about appealing to a group of people that have not been represented in the South African mainstream.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

And I think that the best analog is when you hear, and I say this as someone living in Mississippi, you hear Southern politicians lean into their accents in some places and not in others. Those are not ethnic appeals per se, but that's saying, "I am like you." So when the governor of Mississippi goes and speaks at the Neshoba County Fair, which is always a big political event in the summer in Mississippi, he speaks differently than at the National Convention of Governors. Is that ethnic? No, but he is seeking to connect with the people that he's speaking to based on this commonality of experience and using that as a shorthand for saying, "I believe in the things you believe in. I value the things that you value. I'm from where you're from." And I don't think that calling that ethnic is a sufficient label for understanding the complexity of those kinds of appeals.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

No, I agree, it's not. And I couldn't have asked for a better segue to kind of zoom out and talk about ... Zoom out, my best puns are always the unintentional ones. To zoom out and talk a little bit about South Africa in general and your excellent book, which I believe you wrote it around 2012, 2013. Is that ...

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**



That's when I did the research for it. So that's when I was living in South Africa and doing my work. I wrote it in 2015, 2016 as a dissertation, and then did edits and made it into something other than a very long school paper to be a book up through 2019.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Well, it's great. And we'll have a link to it in the podcast. I've just been working my way through it the last couple of weeks. But the first question I wanted to ask you was, I mean, you did your research in 2012, 2013, what has changed since you were doing your research? Has anything happened in South Africa that has particularly surprised you or particularly challenged some of the ideas that you were developing there? Or do you feel like, "No, this stands up pretty well," and actually was even predictive of some of the things that have happened in the last decade?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Well, that's a good question. I do think that generally speaking, my book looks at how building democracies and building nations aren't the same thing. We can't necessarily say that in order to nation build, we're going to put in sort of competitive democratic mechanisms and then that's going to make people feel they belong together. And I think that the sort of increase in both frequency and intensity of violent mobilization in South Africa since I did my research is indicative of some of those fractures that I was observing in 2012, 2013, because ultimately, the argument of my book is that democracy itself doesn't necessarily make people cooperate with one another. And the extra institutionalization, because we can think about violent protest in a number of different ways, but one of the ways that political science tends to look at violent protest is when people don't have avenues through peaceful means, through democratic institutions to voice their dissent, they take them outside. So catch me outside type of mobilization. We go from standing in line and voicing your discontent by voting out an incumbent to voicing your discontent by setting a bunch of tires on fire on a highway to make yourself heard.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So in that way, I think, that there's some resonance to my book in the current moment. I think that there are some things that deserve updating, but those are mostly in the ways that Zuma's presidency was a particular moment rather than a generalizable moment in South African history. I was sort of there in the apex of Jacob Zuma's power because he was removed from power by the ANC in 2018. So in some ways I think the Zuma presidency looms very large in my book in a way that it might not in terms of the historical trajectory. And some of the things that sort of shaped the environment in which I was doing my research have changed. Ramaphosa does seem to be building a different kind of political coalition. He does seem to be drawing on different allies to get his point across. So in that way, yes, some things are very different.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah. And it also makes very compelling reading right now. I'm watching everything that's happening in Afghanistan and sort of closing the chapter on U.S. nation building abroad, because I mean, one of the great points you were making was that what you need to build a democracy is not necessarily what you



need to build a nation. And South Africa was one of these countries that was trying to do both at the same time. And sometimes, those are mutually exclusive things. And I mean, I think the U.S. kind of learned that the hard way in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Is that a fair comparison? And one of the remarkable things about South Africa is really despite the bumps along the way that it has emerged as a fairly viable democracy.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

One of the reasons July was so shocking was because there is rule of law, There are institutions that seem to have a certain level of respect. And there is also some kind of, I don't know. Is there an identity building up? I thought the start of chapter two ask the question: Do South Africans exist and have they ever? I was going to throw that question at you too, although that would probably take you at least an hour to answer. But yeah, let's just do it, do they exist and do you think that that comparison to what's going on maybe in a place like Afghanistan is actually instructive to some of South Africa strengths and weaknesses?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

I will say the origins of the idea of this book are in Afghanistan and Iraq, because that was the era in which I was doing my undergraduate education where my graduate education was starting. And everyone kept saying nation building, nation building, nation building. And what they actually meant was get people to vote. But if you actually look at the literature on nations, what do nations actually involve? They involve all sorts of coercion. They involve sometimes sort of centuries of political development. They involve forgetting things very crucially. So we have Eugen Weber's great book called Making Peasants into Frenchmen, or Turning Peasants into Frenchmen. Where he basically says, "The reason that you have the sort of advent of French identity in the modern era is because people stopped speaking Breton and they stopped speaking all these different dialects and they started speaking French altogether. So they forgot some of the things that made them different."

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So the problem then is how do you get people to forget in the context of elections that constantly remind people why they're different. So what does the party system look like in Iraq and Afghanistan? Well, it looks very much like the divides of the conflict that proceeded the advent of these democracies. So if we look at the case of South Africa, you're absolutely right. They have been broadly successful in building institutions that have international and domestic legitimacy. The people vote, it's relatively peaceful, but what we've seen is this uptick in violent protest, especially in the last 10 years over things like immigration. In 2019, there was a series of extremely violent protests around immigrants, particularly from elsewhere on the continent. We see this uptake of violence in July around the arrest of Jacob Zuma.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So the question is, what do you do given that the state is strong to address the root causes of the things that are making protest violent? So do South Africans exist? The impetus behind that question was

essentially this book that I found in a used bookstore, I was in between interviews and I wandered into a used bookstore in Durban. And it was a book that was selling for about 15 rand, like a 1.50, it's a hard back from 1934. And the title was, There are no South Africans. And I was like, "Well, that's fascinating." Because that's sort of what I'm interested in. And if you actually look at how South Africans respond to the question, do you feel like you're South African? Which is one of the questions in my interviews. Most of them are like, "Well yeah, sure."

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

In your average everyday life, do you feel South African? "Yeah. Yeah, sure. Absolutely." But are there other things that command your loyalty more? "Yes." And I think we're seeing the pathologies of that problem of the sort of lack of community identification in a lot of places in the world, including the United States. Are you primarily American? Do you feel like your partisan identification commands more loyalty than your national identification? These are questions that tear the national community and make the functioning of democracy more fraught because you're not just fighting over policy preferences, you're fighting over who gets to win the state and therefore be in charge of everyone. So without a sense of unity, without a sense that you somehow have shared fate, that you owe things to your fellow citizens that are part of your national community. I think that it's difficult to sustain democracy, which is what we're seeing in these outbreaks of violent protest in South Africa.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Well, and to your point that amazing statistic you said about, I mean, only 8% of South Africans having English as a first language, that cuts directly against sort of the emergence of a nation. Is that something that the government has identified as an issue? Is that something that is going to improve over time? Or do you think that it's just going to be impossible for South Africa to get over these basic hurdles that they have within the current structure of the South African state?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Well, and to say that only 8% of South Africans have English as a first language, the majority of them have English as a second or third language. So there is a sort of urban lingua franca in English in schools and business and government. So it's not that there's not a common medium of communication, but there has to be a recognition that not everyone is part of that cosmopolitan, urban South Africa. In the same way that we have to acknowledge that not every American lives in New York City or indeed in this sort of "Heartland". No one gets to claim the political center without acknowledging the other side. So it is true that most South Africans have languages other than English, that they will often live most of their lives in, in terms of their family life, their faith communities, those sorts of things. But that's not to say that there's nowhere to build a common identity.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

I was also thinking, originally the bricks were just the BRIC countries. It was Brazil and India, Russia, and China, and South Africa sort of gets tacked on there at the end in the 2010s. But I was thinking about the BRICS in general because they all sort of share that same problem that South Africa faces and are



dealing with it in extremely different ways. In India, in some ways is maybe the best analog, former British colony, has an English lingua franca, but very, very intense factional divisions, ethnic divisions, religious divisions. Brazil seems also fairly similar, I mean, just a massive country with a lot of different interests, a very, very young democracy, Bolsonaro is testing it for just about everything it's worth right now. And it seems to be holding up okay. And then on the flip side, you have Russia and China, which are and were large and diverse countries, but where a national identity really has emerged. And where authoritarianism has really served to sort of cement, "Okay, you are Han Chinese." Or, "There is a Russian national identity and we're all going to pile in on this."

**Jacob Shapiro:**

And I was also thinking of it because I was telling you before we started recording, I grew up in Atlanta. When I was a kid, and I'm Jewish too by the way, some I'm in the Atlanta Jewish community, a fairly insular community. And in the early 1990s, we got a huge influx of South African Jewish immigrants who were leaving South Africa after apartheid to come in. And I was a kid, I didn't really understand what was going on at the time, but looking back, a lot of those people and some of them were my friends and some might even be listening, they were some of the most nationalistic patriotic people I'd ever met in my entire life. And it was all about South Africa. They loved South Africa. They identified in a very, very deep level with South Africa, but they also weren't there and they're not going back. And there was this sort of strange disconnect where I couldn't quite understand the depth of the identification.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

So I don't know. That was a little bit rambly, but pick that apart as you will. How do you respond to that notion of South Africa trying to build some kind of identity that can transcend the complications of the past? And is there a good analog? If it's not in the BRICS, is there another country in the world that we can compare South Africa to? Or is it really it's South Africa and it's completely unique and unto itself?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So I'm a comparative political scientist, I can't. In good faith of keep my job and say that South Africa is unique among all other countries. I do think that there are interesting analogs. But I think it's interesting that you point out, that in the BRICS we have basically three democracies or pseudo-democracies with India recently being downgraded to a hybrid state by certain democracy indexes. And then we have Russia and China, these sort of unapologetic authoritarian regimes that have a national identity. And I think that, I mean, if you asked a Tibetan do they have a national identity in China? The answer would probably be no. I mean, I'm not going to speak on behalf of Tibet. But the same might be true of Tatars in the Russian Federation, that sort of thing.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So do they have a national identity or have they silenced everyone else? And I think that there's a good case to be made, that there is a significant silencing of non-Han Chinese voices in China. So, I mean, the interesting analog there between both South Africa and Russia and China is the U.S. South. The idea that southerners are white group, despite the fact that that's not the actual demographics of the South. And



that's a history of basically authoritarian rule making sure that certain voices are heard and certain voices are not. I think that to understand South Africa right now, you can draw from India, you can draw from Brazil, you can draw from the United States where a lot of back and forth has happened over the course of the last 100 years about things like white minority rule and how to reform it without abandoning it under Jim Crow in the United States South and apartheid in South Africa. So I think that there's a lot of back and forth because South Africa doesn't exist in a vacuum. No country obviously does. And there's this constant push and pull between international norms of democracy, international sort of trade agreements centered around forms of government and domestic governance.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah. Another aspect of your books that was really thought provoking for me as well, was in the title of the book is when you talked about this rainbow coalition, but there's this great political cartoon where the rainbow is just black and white and sort of neither the twain will meet. And then you were talking about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which I feel like gets a lot of and rightly so, it gets a lot of respect in the United States. But it almost seems like South Africa got truth, but didn't necessarily get reconciliation in the end. And that there are still whether it's land or education or a lot of these hot button issues, that all those issues are still operative. And that the idea that if everybody says what they did, we'll be able to move forward. That forgetting you were talking about it, there was a phrase I think, social entropy was one of the great phrases I think you picked up on in the book. That just doesn't seem to be there. And I wonder, do you think the trajectory for South Africa is good? Do you think it's more on the lines of an India or a Brazil imperfections and all, or should we look to Zimbabwe as sort of a cautionary tale for what's going to happen here and how South Africa is going to develop or not develop a national consciousness going forward?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah, I mean, the interesting thing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is that it was assumed that that was a causal chain. There'd be truth and then reconciliation. And all of the surveys that have been done, so work by people like James Gibson who did large scale survey work from people who participated in the TRC, as well as those who just watched it either in-person or on media. Essentially what the TRC did was it reminded a lot of people why they were angry in the first place. So how do you reconcile? And this is actually one of the quotes from my book, "How do you reconcile with the people that you now have a face to put with who killed your parents?" How do you reconcile with that? There is some constellation in having official acknowledgement of the pain that you have suffered. But if you basically live in the same circumstances in semi-formal housing, and now you know who killed your family, the state agents, you have a face to go with the violence that you know already has happened, but your life otherwise is unchanged. I think that there's a very real problem with the idea that you're going to then make peace based on that truth. And that's what South Africans sort of reported to me when I asked them about it.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**



So those people who were disadvantaged under apartheid have not seen the material advantages of democracy. And that's why we have 34% unemployment still in South Africa. That's why black household income is less than one sixth of white household income, even twenty-five years into democracy. There haven't been material changes that accompany that truth. So you have an official acknowledgement. Yes, the pain you suffered is real. Yes, the things that the state did to you were wrong. And yet, there are no other changes. And I think that people have struggled with the idea that democracy hasn't resulted in more material forms of justice. And the person to read on this is Elke Zuern who wrote a book called *The Politics of Necessity*. And her book is fantastic. It's from Cornell Press I believe.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

I love a good Cornell reference on the podcast.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

There you go. So is South Africa ... What is the trajectory of it? Well, that's a really interesting question, but I think that there is an unignorable fact that in less democracy results in people's lives being better. There's very little reason for people to buy into it because what you have is one party that's been in power for the entirety of multiracial democracy and the racial inequality in the aggregate growing. And I think that that's a tough sell. Now, whether that means that they're on a path like India, a path like Brazil, I don't think either of those are particularly good analogs only because of the recency of the South African transition. It's not just in history books, it's in the living memory of the majority of people in the country. So I think that there is an immediacy to the kinds of demands for recompense that maybe has faded somewhat in the countries that experienced these transitions to domestic rule or multiracial democracy earlier.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah. It's also difficult ... So, I mean, in India, I mean the Hindu nationalists, they're not so much forgetting as trying to remember something or resuscitate something, that is real. I mean, Hindu nationalism has been a thing for a long time and there is a framework there that goes back hundreds, if not thousands of years for the Modi government to capitalize on. And you have this built in other of the Muslim population there already. And then in Brazil to your point, I mean, Brazil like the rest of the new world, so much of the native population was simply wiped out. So Brazil becomes this melting pot of a lot of different things. Whereas to your point in South Africa, the natives didn't go away, they're still there. And there's no even history or narrative that you could try and appeal back to because of how recent everything is. It really is white and black right next to each other, the rainbow is right there, you are looking people in the face who a generation ago did things to you or thought things about you that seem completely terrible.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Well. And in addition, not to interrupt, but in both India and South Africa, what we have are state sponsored registration programs to put people into the categories that are now the sort of vectors of conflict. In South Africa, you had people sticking pencils and combs into kids' hair to see if they fell out



to classify them in terms of racial groups. In India, you have the classification by the state so that you know which personal law codes you're subject to. So the state sponsored programs to put people in categories, even if they're for relatively innocuous purposes, or even beneficial purposes. In South Africa, the reason that some of these racial categories from apartheid persist as a matter of state policy is because you can't redress past injustices without saying, "These are the people that were wronged in the past." Black African is still a category in South Africa because those are the people that should be the targets of state assistance programs, because they're the ones who have been unjustly done by, by the state in the prior regime.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So I think that these state sponsored categorization regimes then give sort of an architecture for political dissent in those two cases that isn't there in Brazil. Brazil has been willfully blind to the impact of racial categorizations in their political development. They have erased the idea of race in many ways from their public discourse, their state discourse. So in that way, it's actually sort of hard to get a grapple on how to achieve sort of reconciliation justice in Brazil because there is not the language or the structure to build on to sort of oppose those injustices.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Yeah, no, that's a terrific point. I mean, in some ways the only real analog would be if the Confederacy had won, the American South you could imagine developing maybe along the same sort of path that South Africa has developed along now. But other than that, it's harder to find an analog. But that leads into one of the last questions I wanted to ask you, which is just, both you and I are in the American South, are there lessons for Americans to learn from what's happening in South Africa and from your research in particular on South Africa? What would you say listeners should take away from what you've been able to glean from your thinking on this subject?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that the conversation over what to do with history is one that is very pressing in both places. What do you do with monuments to people that were the protectors and advocates of minority government? What do you do with the Forrest High Schools in Mississippi named after Nathan Bedford Forrest of the KKK? What do you do with the Jan Smuts avenues in South Africa? What do you actually do with the physical objects of those histories? What do you do with the descendants of those histories? How do you deal with the idea that you're not just talking about academic matters when you're saying, "The Confederacy perpetrated grave injustices, you're also talking about people's individual histories". So I think that the lessons to be learned, if there are simple ones are that you have to grapple not just with the structures, but also with the people.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So this is the quote that haunts me most from one of my interviews was from a young woman who I asked what she remembered about the transition from apartheid, and she said, "Well, there's nothing I really remember. I was too young for that." But her mother made this analogy to a bride on her wedding



night. So for your whole life, growing up in a conservative religious community, you're told that sex is dirty and bad and wrong and don't do it. And then you have this ceremony that lasts for an hour, maybe two hours, and then you drink and you dance with your family. And then afterward, the entire moral universe around the idea of sex has changed, but you haven't. What do you do? How do you live in that new space?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

If you're thinking about, say white people in the American south who grew up under segregation. If you're talking about white people in South Africa that grew up under apartheid, how do you make the transition to the new moral universe where those people that you were taught to hate and that did terrible things to you. In the case of South African black Africans, in the case of African Americans and black people in the United States South that have been the subjects of state repression, how do you then, after a relatively brief interlude, transition into this new moral, social, political universe? And attending to that shift in a way that is humanizing, in a way that is personal but also addresses the structures is a challenge. And I don't think that any country has figured it out, but it is something that both the United States and South Africa are grappling with in this moment.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Not exactly uplifting, but insightful I'll say. Before I let you go, what are you working on next? What's the focus of your research right now?

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

So I was hoping to go to South Africa over the course of the past summer, with COVID and thing, obviously that's not been possible. So my current project is on the exchange between the United States and South Africa over the course of the 20th and 21st century in technologies and strategies for the maintenance of segregation. So going back to the philanthropists of New York and Washington D.C. that funded these research expeditions like Andrew Carnegie in the early 1900s to South Africa to study the poor white's problem that was supposedly the analog to the United States South. What do you do with these former Confederates who we should uplift because we have a racial duty to them. So this dialogue about the maintenance of white supremacist governments that has persisted even as the governments themselves have toppled. So we see, for example, the exchange between South African white nationalists and the Trump Administration White House over the protection of white rural landowners and that sort of thing. So that's my current work is on the exchange between basically white supremacists in the United States and South Africa over the course of the last 100 years.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

Great. We'll have to have you back on once you've gotten a little further down that rabbit hole. And in the meantime, thanks so much for making the time. I really appreciate it.

**Dr. Carolyn Holmes:**

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.



**Jacob Shapiro:**

All right. Cheers.

**Jacob Shapiro:**

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**Jacob Shapiro:**

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