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“I Apologize Before All People”

“I would like to convey to my dear friends Eda, Yasemin and Ferdi, each one of them an invaluable jewel, my deep regret for having unintentionally put them in a difficult situation, and apologize to them before all people.”

Hüseyin Gören, aged 34, who ran a car wash service in Trabzon had thought he had broken his friends’ hearts during a conversation, and regretting this, had placed a half page ad in a local newspaper apologizing to them with these words. He was saying that he would not forget in a lifetime that he had hurt his friends, but would do anything to win them back. According to the news story in the daily *Milliyet* dated January 31, 2008, Gören had received positive reactions from his friends, and one of them had called to thank him.

Should we perhaps seek the influence of the *Zeitgeist*, or to put it brutally, the fashionableness of it all in this naive incident? Could the car washer from Trabzon have been, albeit unconsciously, influenced by the gradually spreading political apology gestures throughout the world, as he decided to publicly apologize from his friends?

Federal Germany Chancellor Willy Brandt going down on his knees before the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes Monument in 1970 was a gesture of apology in the form of a singular case back then. As for the last ten to fifteen years, states have issued official apologies one after another. U.S.A. President Clinton apologized for slave trade, the Australian government apologized to the aborigines driven to extinction, and ‘even’ the Pope apologized for the crusades. A procedure and rituals of apology have come to be. The *ethics of apology* is being debated. We can speak of a *politics of apology*.

Is this politics of apology an apparatus of ‘meta’ politics, or is it an autonomous politics? Does it expand the space of political efficacy, open up new horizons for it? Or does it have the drawback of substituting politics with morality, circumventing political demands with gestures and symbolism? In Germany, where confronting the past to cleanse the cinders of the Nazi past assumes the function of reconstructing society and national identity –where confronting the past is even referred to as the “national sports” – there are those who have this concern. One of the theoreticians of political memory studies, also the author of the novel *The Reader*, Bernhard Schlink had underscored the point that while the insistence of not letting the Nazi past be forgotten, which was a cause of the 68 movement in particular, had ensured significant gains in terms of democratization, it had also been *turned trite* through over extension.

A few months ago, my 16 year old son had asked, “Are they going to ask Mongolians to apologize for Cengiz Khan one day as well?” The politics of apology have become so famous that it has to confront the cynical humor of adolescent nihilism.

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At the point where apology turns into blatant cynicism, these hesitations, this unease burgeons. In an exhibition he organized in 2009, the Chinese political activist conceptual

artist Ai Weiwei had put the Chinese government's apology from the 2008 Sichuan earthquake victims on the target board. His aim was to challenge the nonchalance of the dodging of the grave negligence that caused the death of 80 thousand people, 9 thousand of whom were children, with a dry apology. Ai Weiwei had named his exhibition, in which he exhibited nine thousand children's backpacks that spelled out the sentence "She lived happily for seven years in this world", "*So Sorry*". Could be read as "I'm so sad", or "Oops, sorry" ...

When it resembles contractors putting up a sign of "We are sorry for the temporary inconvenience we cause" and continuing to execute their demolition and racket with a clear conscience, yes, apology turns into an awful cynicism.

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But let us not immediately brush it aside as "fashion" and reject it based on its cynical bad examples. We cannot deny that confronting the past and politics of apology have become an issue throughout the world over the last 10-15 years. "The integration of the past into collective biography" is considered today as the duty of all democratic and "contemporary" states. It could be argued that a comprehensive and radical experience of confronting the past underlies the foundations of the European Union. A significant component of the effort to make Europe "an island of peace and security" –while simultaneously trying to wall it off- is the need to be relieved from the heavy burden of the past that led to wars and civil wars; a resolute determination of "never again!". This is the reason why files can be opened that could cause even those states deemed the "cleanest" of the old continent to bow down their heads; for instance why the image of the Netherlands as an Anne Frank country that has protected Jews so dearly can be debunked. The dissolution –at least to a certain extent– of cruel dictatorship regimes that were deemed untouchable for years in Latin America walks hand in hand with the digging up of the ghastly bloody past of these countries. Let alone the political public, even the average cinema and television viewer is aware of, or at least influenced by, this epoch.

Perhaps what has seeped into the mind of the car washer from Trabzon, who apologized to his aggrieved friends with a newspaper ad, was the influence of this epoch. Did you notice how he formulated his apology in his ad? "I apologize before all people..." What a modest and powerful statement over a simple personal gaffe! The power of a public apology lies precisely here: you apologize not only before those you have wronged, but also address those who may have no idea about the incident or persons involved, you render your apology public. You demonstrate your cognizance of your mistake, misdeed, fault by conveying it also to those who are not aware of it, you recognize it by making everyone a witness. Thus you acknowledge a moral principle, and confirm a moral responsibility. In his book *The Question of German Guilt* (1946), Karl Jaspers says, "World opinion matters to us. It is mankind which so considers us- a fact to which we cannot be indifferent."¹ It is this simple. If when all personal interests, petty considerations, daily hubbub or international power balances, domination politics, geostrategic scores have been sifted out, there is a seed of "what do people in the world think of me/us?" that remains, and there always is, we are obliged to consider this. Jaspers states that this responsibility is the requisite of the human dignity.

Another philosopher who thinks about crime/guilt, -and also deliberates with Jaspers- Hannah Arendt, in her book *The Human Condition* (1958), underlines the *constructive* power of the apology-forgiveness dynamic. Realizing and admitting your crime is inadequate; according to her if people do not apologize for past wrongs and are not forgiven, they cannot

be free to look to the future. Apologizing is the expression of the desire to change your thoughts, what is in your mind, the will to make a new beginning. Arendt calls human beings' faculty to begin, to start *anew* "an incredible ability, an incredible power", she refers to it in the same breath with freedom. Apology and forgiveness is an act of starting anew.²

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Researchers who study experiences of apology find that in some languages there is no concept of apology and no verb for "to apologize". There are two different meanings that are used instead: One is to dispraise, blame yourself, instead of saying "I apologize to you", to say "I've done great wrong". The other is to wish the aggrieved patience and express appreciation of the tolerance s/he has shown. We learn that in some languages there are words that mean this: Instead of "I apologize", they say, "What tolerance you've shown and how patient you've been, I bow before you in shame, veneration and respect." This way of substitution for an apology also tells us something. In the first case, we see that apologizing and accepting that you've done wrong and assuming responsibly is closely interlinked. As for the second case, we see that apology implies respecting the pain of the aggrieved, recognizing their identity and 'situation', and venerating them. This is the precondition of an apology that can really change the lives of the aggrieved and the perpetrator, that can transform their perception of themselves and each other, and truly turn the wheel of a new beginning: To acknowledge a perpetrated wrong, to recognize that a wrong has been committed by the perpetrator –and acknowledge that personally or in the name of the perpetrator- and to name the deed; to convey awareness of the pain, patience and tolerance of the aggrieved and bow down before them. This is the condition for building a shared moral ground between the perpetrator or the party representing the perpetrator and the aggrieved. Prior to that, the perpetrator does not recognize the aggrieved as a moral subject anyway. S/he regards the aggrieved as an object that does not have any "rights", even as one that should be destroyed. Apology becomes a constructive act through ensuring the construction of a common moral ground.

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An apology that is made as beneficence, as if giving charity and thus turning into a spectacle of generosity, assuming the guise of admiration for one's own mercy, is not an 'authentic' apology. The apology that is expressed with the conditionality of "if someone was hurt, if we were misunderstood" thereby exonerating itself from fault and multiplying the vanity of power is not an apology. Because there is no moral confrontation in such an apology. Because apology is completed with forgiveness, only then can the opportunity offered by an apology be seized, only as such is a new beginning rendered possible. Apologizing is to aspire for forgiveness.

In *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, where André Comte-Sponville attempts to construct a Spinozan virtue ethics, apology is not one of the eighteen virtues, forgiving is. According to him, "Mercy is the virtue of forgiveness, both its secret and its truth."³ Forgiving does not bring back the loss, does not give up the fight against evil, but ends –or diminishes- hate, in short it does good for the one forgiving. Apology should entail the awareness of this aspiration to kindness, the aspiration to the kindness of the other, -it would *be good* if it does-, in my opinion.

Morality philosopher Avishai Margalit forms a triangle between remembering-emotional commonality and ethics. Remembering what happened in the past must render us emotionally empathetic with those who experienced that past, that emotional empathy bestows us with a moral responsibility. Apology in relation to past wrongs, emerges as the cost of this moral responsibility.

Let us underline emotional empathy, *emotion*. The gesture of an apology, its symbolism must be a sincere expression of emotional empathy. Those who are apologized from must be able to see the solemnity and sadness there, “all people” should see the solemnity and sadness. This is a debt to be paid to the solemnity and sadness of the addressee of the apology. This is the secret why Willy Brandt’s momentary kneeling before the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes Monument still makes a knot in one’s throat as a dramatic scene: It is in the sincere sorrow of him suddenly going down on his knees, in the sadness on his face, in the solemnity of his state of being.

Hannah Arendt stands always alert in face of the *sentimentalizing* of questions of guilt-responsibility-apology, and politics in general. In the current discussions on politics of memory and forgetting, Dan Diner sustains this warning: According to him, the approach towards major traumas of the past that *anthropologizes pains, de-historicizes* them and *excludes them from history* in the public eye is gaining ground, whereas this is what should be avoided. Otherwise what will be left is merely the mention of suffering; of course people experiencing torment and pain is bad in each and every case, it saddens one; but this sadness should not forestall the political, legal and moral questioning of the reasons causing that suffering, and it should never substitute it. In Turkey’s socio-political culture, where legitimacy is forged by pitting grievances against grievances –the agitation that mobilizes families of martyrs, that *uses* the pain of losing a child is the gnawing example of this-, this warning has to be taken very seriously. This does not have to imply the revocation of emotions as in Arendt – it is also necessary to think about emotions, to *understand* emotions, to know how to address which emotion, in short, if you ask me, what we need is not sentimentalizing but rather a *politics of emotion*.

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Apology bears the potential of a reparation, a new beginning, a constructive act; it is a moral source. This moral source should not be wasted, should not be ill-treated. This is why the mode and manner of apology is important.

The conceited, cynic apologies of the kind we mentioned may hurt yet once again the aggrieved who have borne a suffering for generations. ‘Abstract’ apologies that are unclear in terms of what action they actually refer to, on whose behalf they are issued, and who is being addressed, remain or might remain as weak and futile gestures. And there you have wasted a moral source. You have buried the hope of a new beginning even deeper through alleviating the burden of the past.

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And we should approach Turkey’s apology agenda with this caution, this delicacy as well. Was, for instance, the apology of Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in November 2011 for the Dersim massacre a ‘genuine’ apology? The fact that it was issued “on behalf of the state”, that it virtually ended a denial gives this apology a certain authenticity.

However, the ideological discourse that places the political and moral responsibility of the massacre on the current political opposition of the Prime Minister's party, CHP, via the single party regime instrumentalizes this apology and makes it fragile. What essentially renders the apology fragile is the failure to fortify the apology with symbolic and physical gestures, compensations, foremost the restoration of Tunceli's authentic name (Dersim), and the fact that the apology most literally remains mere lip service. In the days when this article was being written, the apologies expressed by Kurdish politicians for their share in the Armenian genocide were being discussed. *Agos* Newspaper editor-in-chief Rober Koptaş embraces the inclination of Kurdish intellectuals toward a critical practice of remembering and confronting the Armenian genocide, yet also objects to the prevalence of "the Kurds were used" motif in this confrontation. According to him, Kurdish politics should not turn into an identity politics that takes the easy way to exonerate itself by placing the responsibility of the massacres and pillages on an "other."

The petition campaign "I apologize to the Armenians" that was launched in Turkey in 2008 was also subject to the criticism that this apology itself was wanting -and according to some even handicapped. According to the criticism, by saying "Great Catastrophe" this apology employed almost a euphemism as it were, while personalizing the apology it evaded/failed to recognize the guilty subject, and even entailed a concern for national interest that would enable Turkey to overcome this burden of responsibility with the minimum possible damage. As one of the signatories of the petition myself, I must say that I see a certain holier than thou nonchalance, a cynic tone in this criticism. Considering the weight of the accumulated taboo, prejudice, hate and denial it strives to deal with, I'd think this initiative warrants some compassion. On the other hand I would also think that this merciless criticism should also be faced. As part of that compassion apology necessitates... Openness to facing criticism -even when the criticism does not represent this- represents the openness to face the addressee of the apology. If the apology does not end with the apologizing subject, you can't claim 'I've said it and saved my soul.'

The experience of apology, as corresponds to the term, is an *experience*, it can move forward not with one sided operations, but with discussion and dialogue. Apology is not to put the full stop, but to erase it, apology is to move past not listening-not hearing and be all ears to new sentences. If it is a constructive act, it assumes meaning with the change it *initiates*.

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I had mentioned the debate between Arendt and Jaspers regarding guilt and apology. Arendt's objection to Jaspers was that the concept of criminality placed at the core of confronting Nazism was not a political category: "There is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done; one can be held liable for them. But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them." For Arendt, guilt is an emotion to be shaken off, that *can* be shaken off; it bears the risk of metaphysicalizing the issue. Didn't Adorno also point to the same danger: if guilt can only be identified internally, how can an objective crime be defined? Arendt also finds the masochistic, morbid, atoning attitude meaningless: "After 1945, "we are all guilty" that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty. Where all are guilty, nobody is. Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal." Arendt, -as those who know her philosophy would expect- is for proceeding with a concept of *responsibility* that enables political action, drives a

constructive experience. When she is interpreting the trial of the ardent high official of the Nazi genocide mechanism, Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, she will say that the ‘duty’ of the new generations who are certain that a crime against humanity has been committed in a past they did not live in, is not to feel guilty, but to *be driven to indignation* (and do something).⁴

“Where all are guilty, nobody is.” This warning of Arendt’s –this state that Dan Diner calls “guiltless guilt”- brings us back to the issue of ambivalence I noted earlier. Who will apologize to whom precisely for what? Philosopher Nick Smith’s book *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* that questions contemporary apology experiences revolves around these questions. He also emphasizes that for an apology to be an actually meaningful apology, first and foremost it has to avoid general ambivalent expressions.⁵ When states apologize they often speak ambivalently: Along the lines of “Bad things have happened in the past, we feel sorry”... Well, what exactly happened? What is the incident we feel sorry about? Besides it’s not as if it happened on its own... Was it an earthquake, a flood, a hurricane? Who did it? Who is responsible? I remember the example judge Alex Boraine, one of the architects of the South Africa Truth Commission, gave at the From the Burden of the Past to Societal Peace and Democracy. Coming to Terms with the Past: “Why? When? How?” conference organized by Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Istanbul in 2007. A black woman who was giving witness testimony in relation to the loss of her child was saying “I am ready to forgive, I am ready to forgive everything, everyone... But show me who I will forgive!” This simple demand that is in no way vengeful, to the contrary which is expressed with an extensive generosity of forgiveness simplifies one truth. Apology and forgiveness can attain “truth” not through evasive ambivalent generalizations, but only through the identification of concrete cases and specific responsible parties.

The major danger of general and ambivalent expressions of apology is that they bind collective subjects. Grand generalizations such as “Germans have committed genocide”, “Turks have committed genocide” no longer address the concrete act, but shift the discussion to one subject, one identity. Thus you feed one of the most significant obstacles before confronting the past, the nationalist mentality: You confirm the nationalist automatism that attributes eternal-perpetual adjectives to the “Turks”, the “Jews”, the identities. In the genocide discussion Rober Koptaş warns against the reference to *identities* (“Turks”, “Kurds”...) as accomplices, and insists on distinguishing between politics and peoples.

In context of Germany and the *Holocaust*, that is the Jewish genocide, this is an issue that has been and still is widely debated. Who is guilty? Is it the core leadership of the Nazis: only a lineage we could enumerate as Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, Heydrich? An elite comprised of the party, SS, the government and army officials? Is it broader; the cadres of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party? Or is it the entire German society who has been party to this by turning their heads aside one way or the other, feigning ignorance – all the “Germans” who have not objected or at least displayed aversion? These are meaningful questions not only in terms of avoiding slander, unjust accusations or for conscientious consistency. They are also meaningful for constituting trial practices that are capable of creating the permanent awareness of “Never again!” in an even tempered manner. Yes, in order to identify the guilty in a concrete manner, it is essential to go into detail, to trace, to form a *memory archive* - and to *discuss*. You can make public what is precisely a crime, a subject of apology by presenting that memory archive and opening it up to debate.

Nick Smith proposes to consider the issue over a small collective in order to be able to design the intricacies and means in the confrontation of a moral crime that entails a collective

crime or necessitates a collective apology. He envisions the philosophy department of a university as a case study. Let us say some students have filed a petition that there is gender based discrimination in the department and the department is expected to issue a formal apology. We also assume that there are certain strong indications that gender based discrimination is being practiced. In this hypothetical case, a professor thinks women can't be philosophers and there haven't been any women philosophers worth reading throughout history and that the female students in the department don't have a vision beyond finding a husband and declares this openly. There are also two or three faculty members who wouldn't say such things, but might bluster along these lines after a couple of drinks. On the other hand, there are also faculty members who exhibit an awareness against sexism and strive for the department to practice positive discrimination. Some of them have protested the attitudes and behaviors accused of sexism, others have not really raised their voice due to concerns for promotion. The rest of the department is not interested in the issue. Nick Smith asks: In such a community, who will apologize? On behalf of whom? Once again let us not forget the questions of "What exactly happened? Who did it?" Is there a case of harassment in question? Is there a concealed discrimination that reflects in the exam questions? Is there mobbing in daily relations executed with seemingly sweet derogatory jokes, small simple exclusion tactics? Even in this small universe composed of 14 teachers and 30 students, Nick Smith underscores the necessity of identifying the concrete offense, action and responsible party. He argues that a healthy apology can only be grounded on this.

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Apologizing "before all people" is a challenging task, a trying test of moral courage. What a 'grand' endeavor... It means to make amends with all people, with humanity. A saying of Mevlana: "If you don't know how to apologize, you can't be a friend." Here friend is both friend as we know it, and it also means member of a community... Since the beginning of this article we have been comparing and sometimes mixing personal apology with political apology -because there is a common denominator. Not knowing how to apologize excludes the human individual from being qualified for friendship, and the collective-legal entity from being qualified for the human community of the world, for the circle of civilization. "If you don't know how to apologize, you can't be a friend"...

1 Karl Jasper, *Die Schuldfrage (The Question of German Guilt)*, New York; Fordham University Press, 2001).

2 Hannah Arendt, *İnsanlık Durumu (The Human Condition)*, trans. Bahadır Sina Şenel, İstanbul: İletişim Publications, 2012.

3 André Comte-Sponville, *Büyük Erdemler Risalesi (A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues)*, trans. Işık Ergüden, İstanbul: İletişim Publications, 2012.

4 Hannah Arendt, *Kötülüğün Sıradanlığı (Banality of Evil)*, trans. Özge Çelik, İstanbul: Metis Publications, 2009.

5 Nick Smith, *Hatalyım, Özür Diliyorum (I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies)*, trans. Kıvanç Tanrıyar, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Publications, 2010.