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Apology, Confrontation, Mourning

For a country, just like for a person, an apology –with its eve, ‘the moment’, and aftermath- is a critical milestone. We will discuss countries further below, but let us first begin with individuals. I know it might sound a bit conventional, but first and foremost, an apology requires a familiarity with, an understanding of, and above all, a need for apologizing. One must accept that a wrong has been committed and that it is impossible to make amends for it, but that at least, or as a necessary precondition, an apology must be made for that wrong. In short, it all starts with understanding that it is we who have committed the ‘wrong’. This too is a process, which at times can be challenging. Probably, all of us -at some point in our lives- have surely apologized once or a number of times –about a serious case. The preceding process is not an easy one. This is what we call ‘confrontation’. Perhaps up until that moment, we think that actually we are in the right. But suddenly, we realize that our thoughts do not correspond to the life outside. Our friends and people around us do not think that we are right. Someone has been victimized. In brief, at some point we realize that something has gone wrong. And there we start the process of confronting our self. Before that, we feel restless. The restlessness of having wronged someone, the restlessness of knowing that we have wronged someone. That is how we begin to confront ourselves. Then, as the confrontation continues gradually we realize where we went wrong. We ask for the opinions of those around us and try to get a full grasp of the details.

At a certain stage the confrontation is completed. We have understood where we have done wrong. However, the process is not yet over. We have simply confronted ourselves, our circle, and understood what we have done. Now the time has come to express this to the other party. This too is a process. Because, in certain cultures, or let us say, in certain ‘worlds’, accepting one’s fault is regarded as a sign of weakness. Once you say ‘I was wrong’, once you make an ‘apology’, you might be putting yourself in a weak position. That is how it gets to be perceived; that is how it comes to be known. As such, in the wake of the confrontation, the eve, the moment and the aftermath of making that apology are all critical stages.

This anyhow is the most crucial part. Knowing that making an ‘apology’ is difficult, hailing from such a world, can sometimes force one to find other words to replace the apology. One has realized and understood that s/he is in the wrong, but may still be unwilling to make that apology. That is because, as we have said above, apologizing may be a sign of weakness, and accepting one’s fault may be tantamount to lowering one’s guard. If you view life as a war, a struggle, a field of conflict where you always have to be on top, in the lead, this obviously poses a problem. Then another way, a different formula must be found. But which one? One seeks a way out. For instance, one can say ‘What’s done is done’, and try to supplement it with a few gestures. Bowing one’s head, a gesture of the brows meaning ‘I am sorry’, curving one’s lips with sorrow, etc. Sometimes one might try to elude the subject in this manner. Sometimes this works, but in fact only quite rarely. What is expected is an ‘apology’, the recognition of the wrong doing. Therefore, the word ‘apology’ is important as a word. That is why our mothers tell us to apologize, with special emphasis on the word ‘apology’. The crucial issue here is to pronounce that word. Or at least, the ability to say ‘I was wrong’, and not ‘what’s done is done’...

Why? Why is it crucial to use the word ‘apology’ and why does the other party definitely expect to hear this word from us, instead of another word or another formula? Naturally, we all have some understanding of this issue; it is not my aim to reiterate things

that we all know. It is just that, I believe if we go over this subject a little, it will be easier to get to the issue of ‘states / societies’. So, why the insistence on ‘apology’?

For the following reason of course: we all know the lexical meaning of apology, but it also has another connotation: the apology dismounts us from our previous stand or position. It does not matter whether we enjoy the same status with or a superior/senior/stronger position than our interlocutor in terms of profession, age or family relations. No matter what our position is, the act of not apologizing is tantamount to seeing or continuing to see ourselves in a superior or stronger position than our interlocutor. Only by apologizing and thus saying that we have confronted and understand our wrong doing, we can climb down from that position. This is critical: In the first stage, we step down to a level not equal with but inferior to our interlocutor. In a sense, we kneel before him/her. Again, exactly with this reason, we sometimes physically kneel down before our interlocutor. Whether we kneel or not, what we are really saying is, ‘This is the only way I can be forgiven’. At that moment, we believe that we can make amends by bowing, or kneeling before that person. First we kneel down, so that later –of course, if the other party also finds it acceptable—we can reach an equal stand. Because this is the only way to compensate for some wrongdoings. In a sense, this is what Willy Brandt did in his visit to Poland by kneeling before the Warsaw Ghetto Monument.

On the other hand, we can also think of this issue of apology as a medallion with two sides. Because, there is also the act of making, forcing someone to apologize. Here, human relations and hierarchy come in the picture; this is about the position people place themselves or want to see themselves vis-à-vis their interlocutor. Here, we somewhat leave the process of ‘apologizing’, its passivity, and stages of confrontation and coming to terms with. Especially if the party awaiting an apology regards him/herself in a superior position, and wants to underline that superiority once again, the apology might turn into an imposition. In such cases, particularly if the party awaiting an apology is indeed in a socially superior position, if s/he is in a status of power like an employer or a politician, then that apology turns into something else. Because, here, the apologizing party does not perform the confrontation mentioned above. Apology has now become a course of conduct imposed on him/her. Not apologizing may lead to various problems, making his/her daily life or work very difficult. If s/he is in a position where s/he cannot cope with this, then s/he will make that apology. Perhaps here too there is kneeling down but it is rather a forced one. It only helps the superior party reaffirm its own position, and thus reproduces the hierarchy. And it serves no other purpose. We occasionally come across such cases in the relations among states. Yet this is not the apology we are talking about in this article; this is only our bad case in point on the matter of apology.

Lastly, let us focus on the party who awaits an apology. S/he is the victim, an indisputable victim. S/he has suffered a significant loss. This may be both a material and an emotional loss. S/he surely awaits its compensation –but of course accompanied with an ‘apology’. Merely a material compensation is not satisfactory. Why? Because, as mentioned in the beginning, the victim expects and wants the perpetrator to confront with the committed act. If the perpetrator cannot perform this confrontation then the compensation (here we assume an indemnity but sometimes this may not be on the agenda) will be left wanting. The perpetrator to confront what s/he did and to experience that process is as important or sometimes more important than the compensation. That is why victims might say, if need be keep the compensation the apology is enough. And of course, it is not mere confrontation. As I’ve mentioned earlier, the important thing is the perpetrator to pronounce the word ‘apology’. (Here, for instance, we might remember how the AKP government categorically refused to ‘apologize’ from the relatives of the 34 citizens massacred during an aerial bombing in Uludere, and instead said ‘We have taken many steps tantamount to an apology’. This categorical, insistent refusal to apologize, this manner of not using the word ‘apology’ is very

telling in the aforementioned framework with regards the subject of the state/society, and the central authority/Kurds.)

In certain cases -yes, we may now leave interpersonal situations and move on to those among societies- the perpetrator has done what it has done because it sees itself in a superior position. While placing itself in a superior position, it has anyhow refused to recognize its interlocutor as its equal, and in fact has acted with the aim of forcing its interlocutor to an even more inferior position. Its objective is to weaken, debilitate and perhaps destroy its interlocutor. This is the motive behind its act. In part this is why compensation is not enough. 'I have paid its due and gotten rid of the problem' is not the kind of confrontation we are talking about here. And it is precisely because the perpetrator acts with such an intention, that as long as it does not make an apology and continues to deny its wrongdoing, it actually continues to commit the same crime. As such, guess we can positively assert the following: in certain cases denial is in a sense the perpetuation of the crime.

So here, we have stepped into the arena of states and societies. To reiterate, denial is the perpetuation of the crime on another level. Of course we now come to Turkey, and to the 'language' of the official line. In Turkey, denial is what the founding authority and the official line do with extreme ease and most heedlessly. It establishes this denial first and foremost in the 'language' of course. And its performance in this regard is absolutely 'impressive' - in the truly negative sense. This language of denial is established in two areas: about the Kurds and the Armenians. This is significant, because in fact the Republic has been founded 'against' these two (if we include the Greeks, then three) peoples. We will not get into the story of this constitution process as it is not the subject matter of this article, however, even an impartial reading will reveal that the Republic has embraced the emphasis of the Union and Progress Party on the 'Turkish and Muslim character of the state', and in the very first Kurdish objection after its constitution (the Sheikh Said uprising), the Republic has cracked down also on the Kurdish and religious elements of this 'Muslim' constituency.

Built on this axis, the Republic gradually cemented two great denials: Denial of the Armenian genocide/massacre and the denial of the Kurds' existence. The witty remark made by a Kurdish politician a few years back is actually a concise summary of this situation: 'For years, Armenians have been trying to prove that they were killed, and Kurds have been trying to prove that they live'. The founding authority had decided on the following formula: There is no such nation as Kurds, and there is only a 'so-called' Armenian genocide/massacre. The choice of the word 'so-called' is a perfect summary of the Turkish Republic's view of the society that it is built upon. And in time, this formula of 'so-called' was started to be used not only for the Armenian genocide but to describe almost all the institutions and concepts that the official state line pitted against. Take for instance the news reports that read, 'The *so-called* Tunceli commander of the terrorist organization'. Sure enough this so-called organization was no other than PKK which the state would enter in negotiations with years later.

However, these other areas of usage are outside the scope of our subject at hand. Here we will rather focus on the use of the term 'so-called' in context of the Armenian genocide / massacre, because this is also closely linked to the issues of apology and confrontation. Once we lift our head above that bombardment of official discourse, with which they have buried the entire society and under which we have been buried throughout our lives, and take a fresh breath and look around, here's what we will see: An authority and certain elements of the 'majority' acting in line with this authority have subjected an ancient people of Anatolia to an ethnic cleansing. They have forced this people to migrate, massacred them, and confiscated a very large portion of their property. In the aftermath of this act, the population of that people was reduced to a symbolic fraction on the land it lived. After all these, a tension -naturally-

emerged between the victim and the perpetrator, and the wronged party, or more precisely the victim of this atrocity came to expect some sort of an 'approach' from the perpetrator.

At this point, we can touch upon the more concrete political issues. As is known, the year 2015 is upon us. Needless to say, it is the centenary of 1915. And it is very probable that not only the victims and their relatives, but also AKP -which has taken over the 'official line'- are in preparations for 2015. Indeed there are clues suggesting such a preparation. As a pragmatist political party, AKP seems to be taking steps towards finding a way out, without forcing the classical official line 'too much', so as not to be under the spotlight when 2015 comes. One of these steps was disclosed by the Minister of Culture Ömer Çelik in a recent interview he gave to the Armenian newspaper *Agos*. Let us first look at how he defines the issue:

I would like to state wholeheartedly and taking into consideration all the meanings of the word genocide, that I don't think it is possible to describe what happened here as a genocide. Here, mutual massacres took place at a time of intense turmoil and vacuum of authority. In this case, we will either construct a new future based on the fact that mourning is a great virtue which can help people mature to found the future. Or, stuck between the genocide lobby and radical political groups reciprocating it, we will continue this in a state of entrapment that continuously damages our common history, common mourning and common culture and renders it a toy of these radical politics.

According to Minister Çelik, what happened is not genocide. There were mutual killings in the absence of a strong authority. Here, there seems to be no new statement that goes beyond the official line. However, he does seem to be looking for a new formula, further below:

Confrontation and mutual forgiveness [helalleşme] are more important than an apology, in my view. During the republican era, peoples were turned into diasporas, even inside Anatolia, due to their beliefs, mother tongues and ethnic origins. When we are talking about confrontation and making amends we are also talking about all this as well. We should not entrap our future inside the brackets of a past. If we are to enter a process of coming to terms with, this will not be between Turks and Armenians, but rather between those among us who embrace the mentality of the Union and Progress Party on the one hand and the genocide lobby on the other.¹

This logic, this formula is indeed a forward step compared to the classical official line. And surely this is a positive step. At least it includes some confrontation. However, it stops precisely at that point. And the formula proposed is 'mutual forgiveness', which at first sounds quite good. The authority has realized that something has been done, it actually knows what has been done, and says 'Come on, let's forgive each other and make up'. However, a problem arises here. I had touched upon this in the beginning of the article while discussing 'individual' apologies. Sometimes one might take an easier way out so as not to use the word 'apology'. One tries to avoid using that word. It might be said that perhaps this is an apology

all the same, that it is also significant for Turkey to have reached this position, and that it may not be realistic to expect an ‘unqualified’ apology with regards the states.

Yes, this is one opinion, but it must be accepted that ‘mutual forgiveness’ is not a valid formula in such questions concerning states and societies either. At least, it cannot be the ultimate formula. For two reasons: Firstly, from the viewpoint of the victim, the ‘act’ remains undefined, and the perpetrator who actually recognizes the act chooses ‘not to fulfill’ the requirement that must logically follow from this recognition. In brief, there is no proper ‘apology’ to talk about. The perpetrator simply acknowledges that something wrong has happened, and describes it as a coincidental case that happened in a chaos without a perpetrator or actor. This, inevitably, keeps intact and reproduces the hierarchy between the authority and the victim. The authority, which has taken over the legacy of the perpetrator, sticks to the high-handedness of the official line.²

Secondly, the term mutual forgiveness has different fields of use. According to the first (and the most widely used/understood) meaning, the two parties must forget ‘whatever has been done’ until then, and ‘both parties’ must forgive each other and thus no longer keep the issue on the agenda. This is tantamount to telling the victim, ‘You did something too, just accept it’. Plus, we can see that this formula implies ‘dropping the subject’ rather than offering an apology or confrontation, this is the implication it will invoke for the victims and their relatives.

One last relevant point in Çelik’s words is his tendency to view ‘those among us who embrace the mentality of the Union and Progress Party, and the genocide lobby’ as equivalent actors on the same level. Here, sure enough, we remember how the official line has for years portrayed those who describe the events of 1915 as ‘genocide’ to be ‘Bad Armenians’. That mechanism is still intact. There are ‘Good Armenians’ who do not describe the events as ‘genocide’, and ‘Bad Armenians’ who do so. The latter are mostly members of the ‘diaspora’ and live abroad. Of course, it does not occur to anyone is to ask: Why couldn’t the Armenians living in Turkey ever characterize the events as ‘genocide’? Could they have done so? What happened to those who did? Or, was it and is it possible to discuss the confiscation of property and wealth that took place during and after 1915? Never mind genocide, what was the atmosphere that led to the killing of Hrant Dink, who had advocated ‘normalization’ and mutual therapy and devoted his life to it? Why was Hrant Dink turned into a target so easily; and through which paradigms? In what kind of a climate did Armenians live in Turkey, and still do? Unless we truly contemplate the answers to these questions, the dichotomy of Good Armenian / Bad Armenian will persist in this country. And naturally, the Union and Progress Party that is the ‘perpetrator’ will continue to be equated with the diaspora that is formed by the relatives of the victims.

In concluding the discussion on Ömer Çelik’s interview, one can touch upon a final point. It is of course impossible to foresee what kind of a political climate will arise before or during 2015. As such, it is not possible to claim that AKP or Turkey will assume the position implied in Çelik’s statements. We might see a softer tone or we might see a harsher one. However, his words are the most concrete clues we have at this point, therefore I have based my analysis on his statement.

Nevertheless, we are not talking about an area where everything is clear, unambiguous. There are questions. Right at this point, perhaps we can lend an ear to Marc Nichanian. His conferences on disaster, apology, forgiveness and mourning were collected in the volume *Literature and Catastrophe*, where he makes the following point with reference to Derrida:

For us to reach the level where we can jointly question what making peace reveals and conceals, the first step of making peace needs to be confession, a demand to be forgiven, a project for peace. In the last years of his life, Derrida had also shown interest in this topic. Over and over, he came back to the same questions: the globalization of the scene of forgiveness, the worldwide theatricalization of confession and testimony. We confess our sins and those of our fathers. We are culpable and make an apology. Or in another version: We make an apology, although we are not personally culpable. In the name of whom and what? In the name of the state? The civil society? Our fathers? Do we have the right to speak for our fathers? Furthermore, to whom is the phrase 'We apologize' addressed to? The nation? Individuals? The state, which is thought to represent these individuals or to incarnate the nation? A global court? Undoubtedly, there are a lot of questions which demand answers. Yet, each of these are critical questions which need to be answered urgently. Plus, there is yet another question which awaits us. Is the phrase to be enunciated "We apologize" or "I apologize"? It is usually translated to English as "I apologize", but not for example "I ask forgiveness". (...) Are these really phrases of apology? Can the interlocutor ask herself or himself whether she or he has the force to forgive? (...) 'While questioning the nature of making peace, Derrida clearly indicated that any project or process of making peace posed a threat. The confiscation of mourning begets scars, severe fragmentation, culpability: all of these bring about the risk of avoidance, negation or denial; the danger of surrendering truth to the will of the politeai or the sovereign state; in brief, once again, mourning is faced with the danger of being confiscated or manipulated.'³

These are all critical problems and questions, of course. In parallel with all these questions, the stance that I will propose on the political level is naturally to support all demands for confrontation and all steps towards 'making peace'...

So we arrive at a critical point at the end of this article. Let us conclude as follows: What does the wronged party, the victim expect? Although this has changed from one period to the next, from one interlocutor to the other, the main theme has remained unchanged: recognition. That is, for the perpetrator to recognize and describe what has happened in a just manner. This is the victim's most fundamental right, in fact it is beyond a right. It is a mode of existence, because without this recognition the victim cannot a) mourn, and b) satisfy his/her sense of justice. Let us begin with mourning. I will leave aside genocide and massacre, and take a different example. In the 1990s, gangs inside the Turkish state wreaked havoc in Southeastern Anatolia and Istanbul, where many people were disappeared, abducted by these gangs. State officials apprehended Kurds and other dissidents at their homes and they were never heard of again. They were probably killed and buried somewhere –probably in a mass grave. We were not living under a military coup, but these were the classical acts of a military junta. Occasionally vague testimonies were gathered (the victim was seen in a police station, he was forced to get in a civilian car, etc.); however, the investigations and lawsuits did not yield any result. It is very difficult to grasp or describe the trauma caused by these

‘disappearances’ in the victims’ families. Only years later, human bones were found as a result of certain investigations or confessions made by certain officials. Then, the families of the disappeared spoke up once again. Among the many things they said, probably the most significant one was, ‘Now, we can mourn’. They could do so now, because, before, by not giving that body, those bones to the family, by refusing to disclose their location, by ‘loosing’ them, the state had deprived the family from the very humane process of mourning. For long years, hundreds of people were denied the right to mourn for their children, husbands or fathers. For the rest of us, it is probably not possible to imagine or understand this. However, we can still see how cruel the ‘authority’ can be.

In a sense, it is the same affect created by the politics of denial, the culture of denial, and the use of the ‘so-called Armenian genocide’ formula in all official statements and correspondences. The Armenian society has been denied the right to ‘mourn’ through this denial, by being described as ‘so-called’, by this contemptuous attitude, and the loud repetition of the argument ‘We are the real victims’. This is tantamount to concealing the location of the bones of the ‘disappeared’. The difference being that here the historical gap is not yet closed, it is ongoing since 1915. This is an extremely long period to not be able to mourn.

Secondly, we suggested that the victim would not be able to satisfy his/her sense of justice. I guess, this does not require too much of an explanation. Individuals and societies expect justice. The primary precondition here is the recognition of the victim as a ‘victim’. That is the first step. However, the official and widely accepted line (this is a more precise description since the official line is not simply official but is also shared in the public space and accepted by a significant part of the society), which is an extension of the politics of denial, has not recognized that the victim is indeed a ‘victim’. And again as an extension of this politics they have claimed that they are the true victims, and in fact imposed this view upon the Armenian community in Turkey. In summary, victims have not only been denied their ‘mourning’, but ‘truth’ has also been confiscated from their hands and through the official statements repeated over and over again for years on end the ‘victim’ has been replaced.⁴ As if all this was not enough, the word ‘Armenian’ has been used as an insult, an opprobrium, and all the time accompanied with the argument ‘there is no racism in our culture’. So the truth of the matter is that, if it so happens that someday a political authority comes around with intentions of initiating a confrontation, it will first have to break down this concrete wall, which itself has built or helped build.

Only after this wall has been demolished can confrontation and apology take place. And only then can the mourning begin.

1 Interview with Ömer Çelik, *Agos*, April 25, 2013.

2 Right at this point, it may be appropriate to recall a third event: Let us remember why the AKP government stated that it expects an ‘unqualified’ apology from the Israeli government due to the latter’s attack on the ship Mavi Marmara, and why it declared that bilateral relations could not go back to normal until the word ‘apology’ was uttered. And let us make a comparison between Ömer Çelik’s statement of ‘mutual forgiveness is more important than apology’, and Prime Minister Erdoğan’s words ‘what we did is bigger than an apology’ in the context of the Uludere massacre.

3 Nichanian, Marc, *Littérature et catastrophe*, translated to Turkish by Ayşegül Sönmezay, p. 207 ff, Istanbul: İletişim Publications, 2011.

4 This of course does not mean that I consider the losses of the Turks or Muslims at the time to be unimportant. They, too, have suffered losses and this is a suffering that needs to be shared and taken into consideration. Nevertheless, it cannot be considered a fair approach to pit this suffering against what happened in 1915, and gradually play down the latter by highlighting the former to the point of nullifying 1915.