

The Topic of the Issue

ESSAY ON APOLOGY

THE WORD THAT BECOMES THE DEED

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Can the apology really change something, or is it unnecessary, since it cannot annul the previous events. What are the foundations of the presumption of collective apology? How important is that what we pronounce?

Ever since Mr. Vojislav Kostunica has been officially representing the state in various high ranking functions, journalists from almost all countries with which Serbia prior to the fratricidal war was in a fraternity-and-unity hug, ask the today's Prime-Minister of Serbia the same question – when will he, on behalf of the people of Serbia, apologize for the crimes which were committed in their name? It seems that already the very fact that one and the same question is asked concretely and persistently, demonstrates that words are essential. According to the testimony of Paul Van Zyl, the Secretary of the South African Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, it was noticed that the victims of apartheid had different requests, which can mainly be grouped into a few major ones; some dreamed of personal revenge, the others found the truth important, the third ones demanded apology.

While a part of the Serbian public awaits the Prime-Minister to speak out correctly "this difficult, foreign word 'I am sorry'" (Balasevic, 1993), and lead by the logic that as citizens of Serbia they have the right to expect (and certainly also demand) from him to ask for necessary information, afterwards take a clear standpoint, disassociate himself and apologize on their behalf for crimes which on this very same behalf were committed a decade before, the apology was spoken out by Svetozar Marovic (President of the State Union Serbia and Montenegro) and Boris Tadic (President of Serbia), and there is the new little motive for the Serbian public to divide into "radicals" and the "civic society". Somewhere in between Tomislav Nikolic and the statement "I really do not know on behalf of which Serb did Tadic apologize and which Serb committed a war crime" (B92) and Zarko Korac who spoke publicly about the need to apologize also individually to his Bosniak friend (Radio Free Europe), the discussion on the issue of who has the right to apologize, and on whose behalf, and has all this any sense at all moved to the cyberspace where a vivid discussion is still going on in regard to the question who has the right to give the apology, on whose behalf, and does all this have any sense at all. And whilst some put forward Jasenovac and the history before Jasenovac, waiting that "first they apologize to us", the others think that the apology is a "civilized act" which would "separate us from the politics of Slobodan Milosevic" (comment on B92).

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Reciprocal Effects

Let us begin with the important presumption that we all are mutually linked on the level of society, and that we all share the basic human values. According to Howard Zehr, one of the founders of the concept of restorative justice, "many cultures have the word for the idea of centrality and linkage. For the Maors its "Whakapapa", for Navaho Indians it is "Hozo", while many Africans use the Bantu word "Ubuntu". (Zehr, 2002). "Sameness" on the human level we are inclined to describe as behavior which is "human" and "civilized". Hence, regardless of race and class, on the general human level, the apology is obviously asked for and given, and these activities have their social function, among which the most obvious one is reconciliation after conflict and a reestablishment of harmonious relations. Experience from South Africa shows that "by asking for apology we 'confirm' that we accept the 'ethical system of values' and that we 'belong to the human race'" (Jokic, 2001).

According to the psychiatric professor at the University of Massachusetts, U.S.A., Aaron Lazare, one of the few authors who have dedicated to the research of the mechanism of apology, it is equally important to both those to whom it is given, as to those who give it. To the victims "the apology signals that the perpetrator is sorry for his actions and wants to establish again the social ties", whilst the accepted apology "sends a signal to the perpetrators that they do not have further to fear of revenge, and liberates them from the feeling of guilt and shame". (Lazare, 2004). In this sense it is noticed also that

the apology stands upon a certain paradox. "Regardless of how sincere it is, the apology cannot annul what was done. And yet, in a mysterious way and following its own logic, exactly this is the effect of the apology." (Tavuchis 1991).

Unfortunately, it does not take more than a textbook for the primary school to conclude why the giving and accepting of apologies is particularly important within the former Yugoslavia. One of the readings of the history of the Balkans could be an endless story about violence which is being repeated and multiplied from generation to generation. Writing on the latest war in Yugoslavia Michael Ignatieff noticed that "past events continue to haunt, because they actually are not truly the past". That "the region seems to be living not in a successive time system, but rather in parallel times", and that foreign reporters who were reporting from the battlefields "while listening to the stories about crimes from time to time were not exactly sure whether the described events happened yesterday, in 1941 or 1841 or 1441." (Ignatieff, 1996)

And again, unfortunately, we feel by intuition (and the science confirmed this) that "people who went through trauma believe that revenge will bring relief, although in their fantasies on revenge there is a simple change of places between the perpetrator and the victim, and the victim remains captured in horror, degradation and the boundaries of violence committed by the perpetrator." Minow, 1998 Is it, then, not obvious that it is necessary to brake inter-ethnic relations in which murders generate revenge - which is the basis for new murders - which give rise to ideas on revenge... and on and on up to annihilation? Victims of wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and these are simultaneously and not only refugees from "Storm" and mothers of Srebrenica, and also those who lived and survived the years before the war, the war itself and the years immediately after the war, have the right to be free from destructive ideas. Exactly after the war it should be most obvious that life is too precious and that it should be filled in a constructive manner. In this sense, to give and to accept an apology is the first, positive step.

After the journalist from Vjesnik insisted to get the answer to the question whether he is going to apologize for the sufferings caused by Serbia so as to make it possible for both countries to turn easier to issues of the future, Kostunica said he was convinced that problems of the two countries which were left by the war should be solved by concrete moves, and not by words. (Source: News B92, November 24, 2005)

National Pride And Shame

What, then, is behind the apology, i.e. what are its presumptions? If we leave aside the cultures of the Far East in which apologies have a ritual character (according to the American sociologist Tavachis, the Japanese for instance apologize also to the one who is stronger), in our region there are two basic reasons for which a person apologizes: "Due to strong internal feelings like guilt and shame, or due to strong external pressures, which influence the way in which others perceive of the one who is apologizing." (Lazare, 2002) It is interesting to note that exactly these are the two most frequent reasons for which a person is not capable of apologizing - the internal feeling of shame and guilt, as well as the fear how the surrounding will react to the apology, namely the fear that they will be laughed at, perceived as weak persons and the like.

What stands for the individuals, stands also for the nations (Lazare, 2002), where in the concrete case it is justified to ask whether also the citizen whom Milosevic's police was attacking with teargas or chased him with clubs, should feel guilty for the shelling of Sarajevo, hence for an act against which he himself protested, and was chased and beaten? If it is no collective guilt, will it be a shame? In the situation in which entire Serbia unanimously rises to feet and sings "We-are-ve-ry-strong", after the basketball representation of Serbia wins for the fifth time in row the gold medal, demonstrating thus the belonging to a collectivity, and to be more precise - demonstrating collective national pride. In case that there really exists a feeling that is easy to identify as - national pride, then it is fully justified to conclude that there also exists, and functions, the opposite feeling which we could characterize as - national shame. The existence of national shame could explain why after the question whether a politician should apologize on behalf of its people in internet discussions there is the reaction of a significant number of those whose commentaries can be reduced to "although I did not participate... I feel bitter-responsible-ashamed".

Although Prime-Minister Kostunica said he would not apologize because he wants to concentrate not upon "words" but rather upon "deeds", it seems that as formal as it may be - the apology still has its value and purpose. Or, as Lazare defined it, "if we believe that the "pragmatic" apology is less true or effective than the one which includes emotions, it is equal to attaching greater value to form than substance, because we then believe that the act of apologizing carries more value than the aim which we want to reach with the apology." Even more, since the apology requires integrity, courage and moral strength, it could be concluded that after it was spoken out it transcends the verbal level and becomes a

- deed. (Ultimately, we do also say to "give" and "accept" the apology, which implies that an act was committed).

A little more than a year ago Momir Nikolic confessed his part of the guilt for the massacre in Srebrenica... I do not know how long this lasted, but later I did really feel better; a few days later, I nonetheless understood that it was not over. I got the confession from Nikolic, but from you I want an apology: it was not he who betrayed me, it was you. His confession is sufficient because he is guilty. Your apology will mean that you are innocent - all the more so because you know that Nikolic is speaking the truth. (From "Pisma srpskom prijatelju"/"Letters to a Serb Friend" by Emir Suljagic, one of the rare survivors from Srebrenica.)

A Completely Personal Survey

Some ten years ago the author of these lines was in a convoy of journalists from Serbia who went to Sarajevo in the organization of UNHCR. As most of the colleagues, I too was reporting from Sarajevo before the war and many nice memories associated with the city. As most of them, I believed I knew everything about the war. I did not fall into the trap of official propaganda, I participated in all demonstrations, and I broke some friendships because people were not capable of accepting the existence of Serb crimes. But I was not among them. I knew about Markale, about the corridor and about the airport.

When we left the bus, I began to turn around, expecting to recognize the part of the city and maybe spot a known face. I was standing on the edge of the once very busy street, but the only thing I could see - for kilometers around, it seemed - were debris.

Probably already used to the impression which the city made upon the visitors, the man from the UNHCR escort friendly explained to me "you know, there was a war here". I pointed my hand in the direction where once there obviously were houses, and he shortly answered "the Serb army". I turned to the opposite direction and pointed at another group of ruined houses, but the answer once again was the same, "the Serb army". Wherever my sight could reach, the answer was always the same - "the Serb army".

Only then, when for the first time I was facing the effects of the war, I understood that although I knew everything about the war, I actually did not know a thing. And I felt that although blameless in the matter, I still am somehow guilty. But to whom, and how? I felt a certain relief almost ten years later, only after President Tadic apologized to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina on behalf of the people of Serbia.

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