Considering Forgiveness

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Times for Forgiveness: A Historical Perspective

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The title of this essay invokes an important program: the necessity to think of forgiveness as a concept with a history of its own, and a concept that at different historical moments had different meanings. The movement from what forgiveness might mean between persons, to what it implies within and between collectivities, is the underlying theme of this historical and sociological investigation. So is an inquiry into the social transformations that have given rise to what Jeffrey K. Olick terms the "politics of regret," prompted by, but not confined to, the experiences of the twentieth century.

In the world we occupy, stripped from the notion that suffering could still be subsumed under some divine plan, forgiveness faces atrocities of an enormous scale and scope, and with them an ultramodern, Levinasian, *useless suffering*. It is from this disjuncture that Olick casts his critical gaze on the humanist, Utopian desire to forgive misdeeds and repair breaches in the social order—on the contemporary universalist paradigm of forgiveness—and on its dissenters.

Like everything else, forgiveness has a history, both in the sense that there are exemplary moments of forgiveness in the past that serve as models for later ones, and in the sense that the social expectations, functions, and meanings of forgiveness have changed over time. It therefore seems strange how little the dominant ways of talking about forgiveness take this historicity into account.

Perhaps the most common way to talk about forgiveness is within religious frames, which provide both enduring pedagogical examples and timeless theoretical principles: in Christianity, the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), or the notion of *agape* (love); in Judaism the story of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25) or the idea of *teshuvah* (repentance). While the interpretation of these parables and principles might have changed, their narrative form is one that claims universality and permanence; Jesus' teachings are not seen as diminishing in relevance, nor is *teshuvah* posed as a temporary injunction appropriate only to biblical times.

In a similar manner, contemporary philosophical discourses address forgiveness as a general principle, rather than as a product of history. Forgiveness might, for instance, be seen as an implication of the categorical imperative to treat others as you would have them treat you or otherwise as a universal requirement. Forgiveness is commonly written of as a general duty for human beings, though with different grounds in different philosophical systems; but most philosophical discussions of forgiveness do not say that one principle is appropriate to ancient times, another to modern, one to the West, another to the rest of the world.

Although psychology is itself a peculiarly modern frame in which to talk about forgiveness, it too speaks in terms of the general requirements of healthy living and personhood, and in such a way that does not problematize the historical emergence of the persons whom it addresses.[1] Common understandings of therapy and the need for closure refer to generic persons, not specifically to modern, Western, or bourgeois ones.[2]

Sociology and anthropology have done a somewhat better job of relativizing different "norms of reciprocity" in pre-modern versus modern societies, and within different cultural frameworks (for example, Christian versus Jewish, capitalist versus Communist, "guilt" versus "shame" cultures). But here too there is a universalizing assumption: the norms of forgiveness may change, but that there will be norms of forgiveness seems a fundamental prerequisite of sociality. Some form of forgiveness, many sociologists postulate, is a functional necessity for all societies.[3]

But again, like everything else, forgiveness does indeed have a history. In Catholicism, for instance, one can no longer purchase "indulgences," but still must confess and repent. Interestingly, the requirement for confession came about around the same time and, as Peter Brooks has argued, for connected reasons as the requirement that criminals

"allocute" to their crimes before sentencing: forgiveness in the modern world is thus clearly connected to acknowledgment.[4] There have been transformations not just in the conditions for forgiveness, but in its very meaning as well. Following the sack of Rome in 1527, Charles V prostrated himself before Pope Clement VII, but he did so in his own name and out of political necessity, not in the name of his people (we did not yet have an idea of "the people") or on particularly moral grounds. The idea of a political apology as we have it today was as yet inconceivable; indeed, the very word "apology" meant something quite different from saying "I'm sorry," practically the opposite. An apology was often a defense of one's position—as in *apologia pro vita sua*, defense of one's own life—or the defense of an argument—as in the arguments for the existence of God in Christian apologetics.

In the modern world, in contrast to earlier times, states demand reparations rather than sacking and plundering the defeated. Contemporary politics are filled with examples of public apology, redress movements, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and sorry commemoration. We now live in an age of memorials rather than monuments. What is perhaps most surprising is that it is not always the victims, but often the perpetrators as well, who commemorate the misdeeds. Elsewhere, I have referred to this new universe of political accountability as "the politics of regret," and have argued that this has developed in the public sphere alongside and in connection with what Philip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic" in the private sphere.[5] A hallmark feature of "the politics of regret" is the propensity toward, and advocacy of, forgiveness not simply between persons—for instance in the idea of conciliatory or restorative justice, in which victim and perpetrator meet face to face in a ritual of reconciliation rather than putting the criminal on trial—but within and between collectivities as well. Forgiveness has become an issue *within* societies under the banner of "transitional justice," in which it is decided what conditions are most favorable to peace after civil conflicts, or *between* societies in the form of reparation, apology, or promises of future support.

The question remains, however, why these new forms of political accountability have emerged now. What major transformations in social conditions have given rise to the politics of regret, within which forgiveness assumes new and heretofore unimaginable forms, proportions, and areas of relevance? And finally, who are forgiveness's dissenters, and why do they believe forgiveness might not be an unequivocally appropriate response in contemporary circumstances?

The most common way scholars and advocates have noted the historicity of forgiveness is in reference to the supposedly unprecedented brutality of the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust, and the so-called post-Nuremberg world, with its emphasis on universal human rights, trauma, and memorial culture. To be sure, the reckoning with the Holocaust is an important moment in the politics of regret, and I will return to the issues it raises at the end of this essay. But like any other historical development, post-Holocaust sensibilities emerged within a broader social, cultural, and historical process. In what follows, I highlight just two major aspects of the process, one temporal, the other relating to social structure.

First, because the concept of forgiveness necessarily refers to deeds that have taken place in the past, it is clear that the social situation of forgiveness depends on the broader understanding of time in particular societies. Forgiveness depends on regret, and regret is a form of historical consciousness. "Historical consciousness," however, is by no means a universal and monolithic phenomenon. While storytelling and constitutive narration have been important features of collective identity for as long as people have reflected on and symbolized their sociation, certain important transformations from the late Middle Ages through the modern era have effected a major shift in the experience of temporality and modes of reflection on it in the West. Broadly speaking, the acceleration of change and the standardization of time measurement associated with (indeed definitive of) the modern era produced a growing distinction among past, present, and future. Increased mobility, lengthened life spans, and greater social differentiation demanded new conceptual and existential frames for grasping this now extended spatiotemporal horizon. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a wide variety of new experiences and events produced an awareness of the "noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous," a perception that simultaneously existing places and groups could be relatively more or less "advanced."[6] This was tied up with the development of grand historical schemes, be they evolutionary (history is gradual improvement), revolutionary (history progresses through radical breaks), or devolutionary (history is progressively dehumanizing).

With these developments, the major moral frameworks, namely the redemptive eschatology of religious doctrine, made less and less sense as the political dominance of the Church declined. Where in religious worldviews redemption or apocalypse was always a potential part of the present, the secular experience of development created a sense of the human future. The future was understood not as immanent in the present—the pervasive possibility of apocalypse and final judgment—but as a long horizon of expectation stretching out beyond the space of present experience. Each individual moment is thus merely one in a long chain of becoming. Before the modern era, as Reinhardt Koselleck writes, "The future as the possible end of the World is absorbed within time by the Church as a constituting element, and thus does not exist in a linear sense at the end point of time. Rather, the end of time can be experienced only because it is always-already sublimated in the Church." In contrast, "the experience in a century of bloody struggle was, above all, that the religious wars did not herald the Final Judgment . . . this disclosed a new and unorthodox future." There is thus a stark contrast between a world of prophecy, in which "events are merely symbols of that which is already known," where "apocalyptic prophecy destroys time through its fixation on the End," and one of prognosis, which "produces the time within which and out of which it weaves."[7]

According to Lutz Niethammer,

> it eventually became apparent that there were worldly reasons to change the basic conditions of existence and to detach them from the cyclicity of nature. Once new discoveries burst the limits of the world, and trade, technology, and institutionalised relations of power freed part of society from direct ties with the sequences of nature, elements of total explanation of the world could be

> transferred from the jurisdiction of salvationist history to the
> scientific processing of experience... Out of the various histories
> through which men and women reached agreement over the
> origins and institutions of their group ... a new universal history
> had to come into being, with a perspective that would provide an
> understanding of the cosmos to replace the religious world-view.[8]

In the modern world, the past was thus no longer felt to be immediately present, but was something that required preservation and recovery, and indeed the assumption of responsibility and repair, not only before God, but among men. As philosopher Odo Marquard has put it, first God put man in the dock; then man put god in the dock. Now men put each other (and themselves) in the dock.[9] Judgment is no longer imminent; atonement thus needs to take place within history, not outside of it. New understandings of history (which nevertheless often existed side by side with old ones) thus implied new forms of responsibility for the past.

Indeed, these transformations in the frames of temporality and historical experience were part of profound transformations in social structure as well. These new understandings of time and history were matched at the personal level by an increase in the sense of one's own experience of change: A life begun in the cyclical temporality and relative uniformity of agrarian cultures could now end in the polyglot world of the industrial city. Generally speaking, in pre-modern societies, the space between individual and collective experience was easily bridged. In complexifying societies, however, people from different milieus congregate together in urban settings, leaving behind both their earlier contexts and to some degree their earlier selves; the labors of life are more highly differentiated than in rural households; classes and guilds and interest groups form. Hence, the bases of agreement, the bonds of commonality, are much less obvious, requiring vast new efforts and conceptual frameworks, which include strategies of repair like forgiveness, along with third-party justice and insurance.

Missing from many cultural accounts of collective regret is thus a sense of the social-structural transformations Emile Durkheim and other classical sociological theorists highlighted in their accounts of the rise of individualism, namely, that as the division of labor increases, so too does the sense of individuality: we no longer experience our lives as identical to those of our neighbors. As a result, Durkheim argued, modern complex societies experience growing functional requirements for contractual obligation and consistency in increasingly interlocked commercial systems; we can no longer depend on simple collective identity.[10] Indeed, the idea of reparations is strongly based on an extrapolation of tort law and other modern institutions for generating consistency in commercial relations. Forgiveness is thus substantially more consequential in modern societies than in previous ones for the maintenance of social order—forgiveness of debts, compensation for loss, insurance against risk.

A social-structural account such as this can describe more than just a commercial order (to which the current discourse on reparations is sometimes reduced). In Norbert Elias' account, for instance, increasingly dense networks of relations give any single action a wide and unforeseeable circle of implication.[11] As a result, actors need to temper violent outbursts, whose ultimate outcomes are impossible to predict.

We thus might explain the recent wave of apology and forgiveness as recognition of the long chains of consequences for our actions in contemporary societies. In fact this is exactly the kind of argument Hannah Arendt makes about forgiveness:

> Men ... have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian ... The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving ... Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover.[12]

Elias employs a similar logic, though highlighting the recentness of this condition. For him, court society, with its complexly stylized rituals, in which a subtle gesture can lead to social (or even real) death, is the paradigm of contemporary civilization. The actors who constitute (and are constituted by) highly complex orders of interaction by necessity have highly developed superegos, agencies of self-restraint.[13] Combining Arendt and Elias, one can see how apology and forgiveness become necessary parts of the modern interaction ritual.[14] This works close-up (personal regret) as well as at a distance (collective regret) because the same principle governs both, which in Elias' terms are merely facets of the same figuration. Forgiveness is a way of repairing harms within a historical frame of irreversibility. The linear time of modernity and its extensive networks of interaction thus make different demands on forgiveness than the cyclical temporality of pre-modern social organization and its more directly visible extent of consequences.

My intention has not been to present a complete theory of the origins of modern uses of forgiveness. Rather, I have wanted to offer a corrective to the mostly ahistorical accounts of forgiveness in contemporary political discourse as I surveyed it above. But why is such a corrective important?

First, much contemporary political discourse has been motivated by a belief in the universality of human rights. Arguably, this is a good thing. But the conditions for thinking universally are themselves far from universal. Understanding the existential and structural conditions for such thinking must be a part of political arguments if they are to engage intelligently with their critics. Even Christian universalists should be interested in the conditions for spreading their ideas successfully to politics.

More important, however, historical perspective helps us understand better the dissenters from the contemporary universalist paradigm of forgiveness. And this is where the experiences of the twentieth century form a crucial part of forgiveness's longer story. Already in the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche laid the foundation for a critical

argument against the universalist paradigm.[15] As is well known, Nietzsche saw Christian notions of original sin and guilt as a form of "slave morality," an inversion of honest values and the triumph of history's losers. The greatest danger that history—and with it the demand for forgiveness —poses is paralysis through the figure of "it was." Too much history, Nietzsche argued, can be the gravedigger of the present. For Nietzsche, monumental history—the celebration of heroes and earlier triumphs—was the greatest threat to action. On the flip side, others were paralyzed with the fear of repeating misdeeds; under that condition, the demand for forgiveness could appear extortionate.

Perhaps the most significant example of such paralysis has come from the experience of the Holocaust, and the subsequent injunction, "Never again!" Indeed, for many commentators, the Holocaust challenges the humanist's desire to forgive misdeeds and repair breaches in the social order. As Emmanuel Levinas put it, the mass atrocities of the twentieth century were different from earlier atrocities, not merely because of their scale and scope, but because the suffering they produced was "useless."[16] This does not mean that earlier atrocities were done for some good purpose, merely that suffering was previously able to be understood as part of a divine plan: Christian theodicy had long taken refuge in just deserts and final judgment. But the historical conception of time and the end of eschatological frameworks outlined above made the Holocaust inassimilable for many contemporary thinkers, for its horrors could be grasped in neither eschatological nor progressive frameworks. It had happened in the most advanced modern society, not in some pre-modern context.

One of the most powerful examples of a post-Holocaust thinker who rejected the paradigm of forgiveness is Jean Améry who, annoyed by the uncontrite Germans he saw on the streets around him, wrote a famous essay in the 1960s rejecting the discourse of forgiveness in the name of resentment.[17] For Améry, the only appropriate response to his experiences in the Holocaust is a refusal to forgive and forget, which Nietzsche had previously condemned as a form of slave morality. As a Holocaust survivor and torture victim, Améry makes the point that "anyone who has been tortured remains tortured." Indeed, this kind of removal from progressive temporality is the very heart of resentment, which "nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past." For Améry, as for Nietzsche, "Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human condition, the future." Améry knows that "the time sense of a person trapped in resentment is twisted around, dis-ordered . . . for it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened." For this reason, Améry writes, "the man of resentment cannot join in the unisonous peace chorus all around him, which cheerfully proposes: Not backward let us look but forward, to a better, common future!"[18]

But for Améry, there is no other choice: his resentment is caught between the perpetrators' rush to forget and the victim's desire to forgive.[19] His personal task, Améry argues, is thus "to justify a psychic condition that has been condemned by moralists and psychologists alike."[20] To do so, he argues that lazy or cheap forgiveness is a form of self-subjugation. For critics of resentment and advocates of forgiveness—and indeed for Améry as well- -the special nature of traumatic suffering is its disjuncture from natural time, which is "actually rooted in the physiological process of wound-healing."[21] For Améry, submission to natural time under his special

circumstances is immoral: "Man has the right and privilege to declare himself to be in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about. What happened, happened. This sentence is just as true as it is hostile to morality and intellect." In these special circumstances, "the moral person demands annulment of time—in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed."[22] The message here is both therapeutic and political: This moral refusal to submit to time is essential for healing the victim's trauma, though there are surely some traumas that cannot be healed and that may in fact be exacerbated by premature forgiveness or by the demand for forgiveness at all; one recalls here as well Heinrich Heine's remark, cited by Freud, that one should always forgive one's enemies, but not until they have been hanged.

In this light, it is important to note the limits on forgiveness as a Utopian desire. Is forgiveness really possible in most cases of atrocity? Is there anything your children's killers could say that would induce you to grant the superhuman request for forgiveness? And in such circumstances, is the request itself not an unbearable presumption? Améry certainly thought so. If I thus don't quite count myself with Améry as one of forgiveness's dissenters, perhaps because I myself have never experienced atrocity, I do count myself as a skeptic, particularly when the language is ahistorical and unsociologically universal.

NOTES

1. Freud, a more historical theorist than he is given credit for in popular culture, is a major exception.

2. Though the concept of trauma is a recent one, trauma is not usually seen as specific to the modern world, though it might have reached epidemic proportions in the twentieth century. See Leys 2000; also Caruth 1996.

3. See, for instance, Gouldner 1960; Schwartz 1978; Reider 1984.

4. According to Brooks, the axial moment in the evolution of confession in Catholicism was the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. He writes, "It seems clear that the notion of confession, along with the introspection and self-examination that it implies, both creates and is created by a new sense of selfhood. Without a sense of the self and its narrative, there could be no confession; and without the requirement of confession, internally or externally mandated, there would be no exploration of this selfhood." See Brooks 2001, p. 97.

5. See Olick 2007, and Rieff 1966.

6. See Koselleck 1985.

7. Koselleck 1985, pp. 8-9.

8. Niethammer 1992, p. 135.

9. See Marquard 1998.

10. See Durkheim 1984.

11. See Elias 1994.

12. Arendt 1958, pp. 233-37.

13. Elias' sociological theory is founded on Freud's history of the super-ego in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. See Freud 1961.

14. See Goffman 1967.

15. See Nietzsche 1994.

16. See Levinas 2001.

17. See Améry 1986.

18. Améry 1986, pp. 68-69.

19. Here Améry is arguing against Primo Levi in particular. See Levi 1989, p. 136.

20. Améry 1986, p. 69.

21. Améry 1986, p. 81.

22. Amery 1986, p. 33.