

## POLITICAL CULTURE OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

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*What was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it.*

Hannah Arendt

Over two hundred years ago Kant commented that if human history were destined to culminate in universal peace it would have to confront a serious dilemma: achieve peace by way of moral inspiration or through a process of boundless, catastrophic, violence. The proposal to create a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation is part of this moral inspiration demanded both for international and interpersonal conflicts alike. Humankind is now showing signs that it might be heading towards this direction.

It is particularly significant that a recent study by the United States Department of Defense speaks of the primacy of the social sciences over the military sciences, of the awareness of the limits of military power and of the cultural administration of sensitive risks and conflicts. It was surprising too that recently the Defense Secretary should have said: *“conflicts will be fundamentally political in nature. [...] Ultimate success or failure will increasingly depend more on shaping the behavior of others – friends and adversaries”,* and this *“implies a wrenching set of changes for our military establishment”*. In the new strategy, military interventions will become less and less useful, and the new status quo will require new leaderships and the development of non-military actions (Freier, 2009: 1-3). It would appear, then, that this moral inspiration is beginning to consolidate itself too in military scenarios.

The moral inspiration of a political culture of forgiveness and reconciliation is observable from different perspectives, since it offers the possibility to peoples who are searching for peace to develop moral values such as moderation, confidence, compassion, tenderness, caring, benevolence, moral sensibility and self-reflection. The suspicion expressed to the idea of forgiveness is probably connected to the idea that it denies self respect and dignity or that it suggests a process that ignores the responsibility of the perpetrators and of the importance of truth, justice and reparation<sup>1</sup>.

Traditionally, moral philosophy limited its examination of forgiveness to the resentment felt by the offended party and the guilt of the offender. In order to avoid this apprehension, forgiveness should be seen as an integrated whole, or unifying theme of moral values that are fundamental to living well, rather than a mere normative ideal.

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<sup>1</sup> This and some other ideas that appear in the Introduction are inspired by Alice MacLachlan (2007: 2-3).

We hope that the reflections that appear in this book will contribute to this process, offering a methodology that confirms the relevance and pertinence of a political culture of forgiveness and reconciliation in the sphere of interpersonal relations but that is equally applicable to overcoming political conflicts. Frequently the personal sphere is politicized and the political personalized. This is true in the case of amnesty, pardon and, indeed, requests for forgiveness and offers of reparation made by representatives of governments or other groups. The arguments are equally applicable to the question of the truth commissions that have been created in several countries over the last 40 years and which have, to some degree, generated collective changes and been successful in transforming anger and resentment into exercises of forgiveness and reconciliation.

But, what do we mean by a political culture of forgiveness and reconciliation, and how can forgiveness be categorized as a political exercise? Forgiveness has frequently been confined to the religious, emotional or therapeutic spheres, that is, to the personal or, at most, to the area of interpersonal relations. The chapters in this book are intended to sustain the thesis that forgiveness and reconciliation are fundamental to the *res publica* and, therefore, to politics.

Valuable inspiration is supplied by Hannah Arendt, who came to define forgiveness as one of the two essential political faculties characterizing human beings. First, the faculty to make and keep promises (pacts) with other people, and second, the faculty of forgiving and being forgiven. These acts, however private they may seem, are political in as much as they form the basis of the political will to live together with others, acting and speaking. Forgiveness is the basis of our ability to enter into and sustain political communities (1958: 246). In this sense, forgiveness is not only possible in the political sphere, it is essential. For Arendt, the political sphere is our shared and intersubjective world, characterized by a plurality of actors, whose value is that they are both human and vulnerable. Conflict is inevitable in a world where everyone is free to act but where the acts of the individual are not sovereign, since, in one way or another, they are influenced by others.

It is not a question of trying to forcibly introduce moral questions into the sphere of politics – a sterile exercise anyway – but to encounter sufficient lucidity to understand that forgiveness is in and of itself, a political issue. Its moral political value resides in the desire it generates to countermand the risk inherent in human actions, made possible by the disposition to forgive, make promises and honor them (Arendt, 1958: 245). In this way, forgiveness depends on plurality, that is, the multiplicity of agents and the conflicting interests and desires they display. Although forgiveness and the relations established as a result of its presence are always a personal matter, it is not necessarily an individual or private issue. Forgiveness is definitively a public action, and therefore a political one (MacLachlan, 2007: 284-311).

Even if punishment and forgiveness have the same function (to end the cycles of violence), forgiveness is a superior creative act that, although it does not deny that there is an agent responsible for the offence committed, avoids permitting the past to continue determining the present (as happens when anger is cultivated and revenge exacted). In this way forgiveness generates processes that free the individual from the past. It could be said that forgiveness is

a ritual that replace old narratives that work to paralyze the possibility of constructing a less painful future.

Perhaps the strongest political justification for accepting forgiveness as political culture is the following: each action reveals who I am, and for this reason, a bad act can leave the person who has committed it marked forever, frozen in the moment. By forgiving, what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it. This forgiveness does not mean that the bad action disappears from public memory but that the revelatory act of forgiveness transforms its original meaning and announces a political relationship with the offender that goes further than the apolitical methods of vengeance and violence. It is as if forgiveness returns the actor and the act to the shared political sphere<sup>2</sup>. To forgive is a positive way to return the moral responsibility to the perpetrator, to make possible a new beginning where all seemed to be over, to generate the necessary confidence to inaugurate political spaces of respect and concern for others, spaces where the additional incentive exists that sooner or later the person offended against may also need to be forgiven. It is the acts of political forgiveness that enable humanity to keep on living.

The decision to value the actor more than the acts they commit becomes an exercise in the recuperation and strengthening of human dignity. That and much more: it is to exercise the right to hermeneutics, to engage in a structural unpacking, to create a new narrative, to see with new eyes; it is creative capacity, it is to assert the feminine in creation, the aesthetics of life; it is to live as evolved human beings, like unto the gods.

Paul Ricoeur (2004: 457-458) says that forgiveness eliminates the existential incapacity that affects the person who has been offended against but that affects the offender even more. Forgiveness has to do with accepting that both the offence and the guilt are the inevitable consequences of human limitations. It goes beyond the fact that the results of an offense cannot be repaired, beyond the fact that the offense can neither be prescribed by the criminal courts nor forgiven morally (2004: 465). This is what Jacques Derrida calls the hyperbolic ethical character of forgiveness, a concept he learned from Hegel, who he called the great thinker of forgiveness and reconciliation. Following to the Hegelian framework, Derrida underscores a fundamental fact: everything may be forgiven except a crime against the spirit – that is, a crime against the reconciliatory power of forgiveness (Derrida, 2001: 34).

Forgiveness frees the individual from the burden and redeems the debt. Arendt defined it as freedom from the “irreversibility of the past” while with great wisdom Desmond Tutu stated that “no future without forgiveness” (1999). Forgiveness breaks the paradigm of the logic of reciprocity and proportionality, installing in their place the paradigm of the logic of the freely-

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<sup>2</sup> According to Arendt (1958: 246), actions are political when something is revealed about an actor (self-discovery) they become audacious (assumes risk), produce significant narratives (contribute to the public record) and inaugurate new relations.

given. Forgiveness exists in the same way that happiness exists, or wisdom, or love. They are free. "Forgiveness belongs to the same family" (Ricoeur, 2004: 467).

It is a journey that starts in the extremes of the imputable, before passing through the fields of the legal, the political and of social morality, being touched on the way by the institutions created in each one of these areas. Forgiveness will only find refuge in actions that have not been institutionalized. It is a question of acts of equality, of generosity, of giving freely. Gifts can only be given in horizontal relationships, free of market relations or the profit motive. If by politics we understand the task of generating new worlds and societies, it follows that forgiveness and reconciliation are likely to be tools that have not previously been used. When an individual or a group of persons learn to forgive they generate processes of creation and liberation; new narratives are born; these are transformed into music, stories, art, dance, religion, and ultimately they return playfulness to daily life. People and communities no longer live shackled to their pasts, but are able to break the chains of their unpleasant memories and opt to build an entirely new future. Forgiveness is a replacement ritual.

Forgiveness is a public endeavor par excellence. When the victims of any form of violence make their pain public, each one is exercising their political rights and advancing in the construction of cities within.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are transformed into categorical imperatives for people living together; they are transformed into the aesthetic heart of existence. As Hannah Arendt would say, forgiveness is not only a religious resource, but – and above all – a political virtue. It frees people and groups from the temptations of totalitarianism.

This is a question of the ecology of the soul. It is a process of cleaning the house (the oikos) in order to invite in the other. It is the deconstruction of the other in order to reconstruct it. The narrative commonly offered in the world is one of separated beings. Forgiveness is what is known as organic solidarity, which replaces mechanical solidarity. It is the possibility to create a new individual! It is philosophy in all its power. It is calmness; it is aristocracy; it is the agora, the Pantheon. It is, perhaps, the maximum expression of spirituality. It is what Kierkegaard called the unity of the temporal and the eternal.

This is the philosophy that underlies the educational model employed by the Fundación para la Reconciliación in its efforts to promote the political culture of forgiveness as a sure path to the non-violent solution of the contradictions that are inevitable in human society. This is why the Fundación has dedicated itself to the construction and dissemination of theoretical and methodological tools in the form of the Escuelas de Perdón y Reconciliación -ESPERE. The Schools make it possible to generate alternative ways of telling the stories of hatred, rage and the desire for revenge felt by those who have suffered aggressions and violence. These experiences are presented in systematic form in a toolkit that enables those who read it to distinguish between the terms employed, and to apply the practices, proper to the controversial field of forgiveness and reconciliation.

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