

“Rituals of Reconciliation”

A performance based approach to the analysis of political apologies for historic crimes

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Abstract

In recent years the phenomenon of political apologies for mass crimes has been increasingly discussed in the field of Transitional Justice. Some scholars and observers have criticized political apologies as ‘empty’ political rituals. Others have been more enthusiastic and conceived political apologies as meaningful reconciliation rituals. While both schools apparently agree on the ritualistic character of political apologies, they have yet failed to focus on the ritual itself as their analytic point of departure. The ritual of political apologies is therefore still a blind spot in the research on political apologies. This paper addresses this gap and sheds light on the ritualistic features of political apologies. It demonstrates that the analytical focus on the verbal utterances instead of the dramaturgical ritual practices of public apologies is restrictive and prevents scholars from important insights for the evaluation of political apologies. In order to be successful devices of reconciliation apologies must be dramatically staged. The paper illustrates its argument with an analysis of the Canadian issued to its indigenous population in 2008.

Introduction

There are many instances in which politics reveals its ritualistic character. Inauguration ceremonies for newly elected presidents or live broadcasted marriages or funerals for prominent political figures may be the most obvious examples for rituals in politics. The diplomatic custom to lay down wreaths on symbolic sites during state visits also reveals the ritualistic character in our international relations. But rituals can also be identified in less obvious political fields. The signing of peace treaties by politicians in front of cameras with handshakes and public embracements can be read as symbolic ritual performance just as the literal ‘bury of the hatchet’ in ancient times. In the field of transitional justice and collective memory several instruments and policies to address past atrocities bear a ritualistic character. I want to depict one of these instruments that have found increasing attention in the last years in the academia: the political apology for mass crimes.

Political apologies have been extensively discussed in recent years and numerous criteria for “good”, “humble” or “complete” and in the end “successful” apologies have been elaborated. I will not try to supplement the academic discourse with a more vigorous and detailed specification for the evaluation of political apologies, but instead I want to read political apologies from the perspective of ritual theory. The critical evaluation of the literature demonstrates that the analytical approaches to collective apologies are mainly content driven, instrumentalist and purely textual in perspective. Besides this, these analyses tend neglect the ritual quality of public apologies. Although several scholars have been labelling the public apology correctly as a ‘ritual play of reconciliation’ the *ritual itself* in public apologies has never been taken seriously. Philosophers and IR- scholars have either heralded the ritual of state apologies as a normative progress in international relations (cf. Barkan 2000; Barkan & Karn 2006) or busted these rituals as civil religious empty gestures (cf. Dundes Renteln 2008; Lübke 2001). None of them, however, has seriously analysed the ritual character of public apologies¹. Thus I want to sketch a different perspective for the evaluation of state apologies and a different explanation why apologies may fail or succeed. Instead of focussing on the *content* of public apologies, the approach presented here will draw on their *ritual convention* and their *ritual form* as an avenue of explanation. To exemplify the main argument: It is a totally different thing to post a public apology in a sterile document, in a printed interview or on the website than to issue it through a dramatic ceremonial

¹ An exception might be the studies of Bernhard Giesen in his edited volume *Tätertrauma* (2004) and the edited volume *Social Performances* by Jeffrey Alexander (2006).

declaration, on highly symbolic sites, in front of an audience. The current literature is still tilted to the analysis of texts and underestimates the ritualized practices in state apologies.

Rituals and Politics

Even though rituals have been disregarded for a long period of time and perceived as ornamental to ‘real’ and ‘substantial’ politics, the science of political anthropology has convincingly demonstrated that political rituals are not external to the political process but, in contrast, are constitutive for the creation of political reality (Kertzer 1988). I want to draw here on the example made by Judith Butler in reference to Althusser and Pascal that demonstrates the constitutive force of the ritual:

“Althusser ... invokes Pascal on religious belief at the moment he is called upon to explain the ritual dimension of ideology: ‘Pascal says more or less: «Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe»». The hollow gesture becomes filled in time, and ideation is produced in the course of this ritualized repetition of convention” (Butler 1997: 25).

The religious belief is not the basis of the ritual, but its effect. Pascal has turned our intuition upside down to see belief prior to the ritual and the liturgical procession (cf. (Durkheim 1981). Here, in this conceptualisation, the ritual takes precedence. The carrier, from this perspective, is the moving element and not the content. “The hollow gesture becomes filled” Butler states (Butler 1997: 25). She writes that the “ritual is ... productive [here: constitutive for the belief]...“ insofar as it “produces the belief that appears to be ‘behind’ it” (Butler 1997: 25). As Gregor T. Goethals writes in reference to Barabra G. Myerhoff, the ritual resembles a “container... . It is in part a form ... that gives its content a specific meaning” (own translation, Goethals 2003: 302). The morphological quality (form) takes logically precedence over the substantial quality (content) of the ritual. So, one might say that the ritual is not a product or reflection of social reality. The ritual is not external to the production of social reality. Through ritual the social reality reveals its realness. The ritual *produces* and *is* social reality.

Authenticity and sincerity derive from the dramatic act and can therefore not be identified on a textual base or solely from verbal or textual utterances. Although I do not want to neglect the importance of policies that sideline an act of apology the focus lies here on the ‘apology moment’ and its emplotted nature and dramaturgy. I even content that the performed ritual may ‘beat’ the text through the physical enactment, ceremonial and sacred and emotional force that emanates from the ritual play. Let us consider one of the most famous apologies until now: The 1970 *Kniefall* of Willy Brandt in Warsaw. The gesture by Brandt is instructive and perplexing at the same time because it was a speechless apology. But the

symbolic act was clear and spectacular enough to exert performative power without a spoken word. The apology was embodied by the act of the German Chancellor. The force of this act lies in its minimalist form, its adequacy and its *mise en scène* in front of the memorial dedicated to the murdered Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto during the Second World War. The act made up for the revealing moment of the state visit and was reported as such by the international media. As Michael Marrus correctly affirms: “Silences or ambiguities can be useful. In Brandt’s case, the lack of specificity seems actually to have facilitated communication of the main message,With historic wrongs, form can count for as much as content” (Marrus 2007: 92). The German case provides a second very interesting and contrasting case showing that the physical enactment of texts may take precedence over the text per se. In 1988, the President of the German Parliament, Phillip Jenninger delivered a speech dedicated to the commemoration of the pogroms against Jews in Nazi-Germany 1938 in which he unsuccessfully used the rhetoric figure of reported speech, giving the impression to put the blame for the Holocaust on the Jews. Although the worded text for itself demonstrated a devoted notion for political atonement for the Nazi crimes the actual performance thwarted completely the message. Thus we see that speech is more than the utterance of words.

Rituals are sequences of condensed, conventional and “symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive” (Kertzer 1988: 9), formalistic, and extraordinary in character. This definition of the main characteristics must be analytically separated from the main effects and the function of ritual behaviour which is said to be the creation of emotional arousal, the structuring and ordering – thus marking transitions (Turner 1984). “Ritual effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other” (Alexander 2006: 29; see also Kertzer 1988: 15).

The ritual based approach helps us to grasp the category of ‘authenticity’ of the performative apology act. Rituals, like the ritualistic form of political apologies, do not need to meet as many preconditions as generally assumed in order to be successful. This means that the expression of apology by state representatives does not need to be *really meant*, be *genuine, wholehearted* (Gibney & Roxstrom 2001). The truth, in the sense of intrinsic truth, is not important, but what is important is a successful mimesis. It is what academics in the field of ritual studies perceive as symbolic gesture that has its meaning in the official realm and that has to be analytically separated from private and individual states to which the categories of genuineness, wholeheartedness allude to. As Susanne Langer put it once: “As soon as an expressive act is performed without inner momentary compulsion it is no longer *self-*

expressive, it is expressive in the logical sense. ... [Instead] of completing the natural history of a feeling, it denotes the feeling, and may merely bring it to mind, even for the actor. When an action acquires such a meaning it becomes a *gesture*.” (Langer 1963: 152) Social performances are “intrinsically effective” (Alexander 2006: 33), i.e. the ritual and the formalized corpus of the ritual speaks for itself. By turning to the illustrative case of the Canadian State Apology in 2008 the ritual quality of the commemoration performance in the creation of authenticity will be demonstrated.

The Canadian Apology

The 'apology-event' presented in Canada in 2008 was reported to be a 'turning point' for the relations between the indigenous community and Canadian majority. In a comment on Canada's state apology the Canadian author Stephen Marche stated that “Harper's apology... was distinctively theatrical, one of the best and most controlled pieces of political rhetoric produced in Canada in recent memory” (Marche 2008). In the eyes of Stephen Marche the power of the public apology laid in the “sparingly”, but by the same token “only for a maximum dramatic urgency” used term of “sorry” by the Canadian Prime Minister (Marche 14.06.2008).

There are 90, 000 so called survivors of the Indian residential school system (O'Neill 2008) and overall about 150,000 Metis and Inuit Indians that have been removed from their Indian communities over the years to forcibly attend the schools jointly run by the government and the Christian churches (Csillag 2008). The main ideology behind the residential school system was “to take the Indian out of the Indian” (Sinclair 2008) or to “kill the Indian in the child” (Gunter 2008), a motivation that has been termed as an attempted ‘cultural genocide’.

Several involved institutions that have been running the residential school system have publicly expressed their regret for the crimes. After apologies by church representatives the Canadian government issued its first statement of regret “for past actions of the federal government” in 1998 and a \$ 1.9 billion compensation package was announced by the federal government in 2005 (Csillag 14.06.2008). But indigenous Canadians continued to pressure for a collective symbolic gesture by the State. After long negotiations Prime Minister Stephen Harper presented a collective apology on 12 June 2008.

The apology was carefully planned but nevertheless several issues of contestation remained between the government and representatives of the First Nation organizations. A central issue of contestation arose from Prime Minister Harper's announcement not to consult Indian representatives in relation to the exact wording of the apology. Harper's renouncement

to negotiate the wording triggered harsh reactions by aboriginal representatives who threatened to reject the apology beforehand.

This renouncement by the Canadian Prime Minister had the effect that the addressees of the apology were held in uncertainty and thus the overall performance was deliberately exposed to the possible danger of non-acceptance by the representatives of the First Nations. It involuntarily fostered the creation of suspense and when presented the effect of risky unexpectedness. It was part of the dramaturgical plot to increase the tension in the forefront of the event.

The stage was set for the ‘apology event’. The television networks reported live from the event on Parliament Hill and “more than 30 events were staged across the country so the apology could be viewed live” (CBS News). The setting was even more extra-ordinary, as the ceremony was supposed to be a special session in Parliament. The five invited high representatives of the indigenous population were centrally assembled on chairs in a semi-circle in the middle of the chamber between the ranks of the government and the opposition. Compared to ordinary sessions where the space between the ranks remains empty in order to underscore the spatial separation and confrontation, the configuration during this special session was unwittingly inclusive. It is all the more perplexing to note that this arrangement was the unintended product of the struggle of the natives to be represented on the floor of the House and speak.

The speech of Minister Harper used special rhetorical devices that aimed to increase the forcefulness of the message and some rhetorical figures put special emphasis on the almost liturgical words of “we are sorry”. Harper used the rhetorical figures such as *anaphora* and *epiphora*, the repetition of the words or phrases at the beginning and end of several clauses, to convey the message of apology with great pathos (Dupriez & Halsall 1991: 40, 169, 444):

... [The] *Government of Canada now recognizes* that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes, and *we apologize for having done this*.

We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions that it created a void in many lives and communities, and *we apologize for having done this*.

We now recognize that in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and *we apologize for having done this*.

We now recognize that far too often these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and *we apologize for failing to protect you*.

Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, *and for this* (small pause) *we are sorry.*”

This pathetic style culminated in the phrase “we are sorry” that breaks with rhythm of the preceding clauses and thus is especially accentuated. Repetitive rhetorical figures are commonly known for their forcefulness and frequently figure in religious sermons or biblical texts. And finally Harper used five languages to apologize towards the victims of the residential school system. Harpers apology was hailed as “nothing less than the achievement of the impossible”, according to the chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Phil Fontaine.

What did the Canadian apology demonstrate? It showed that, apart from the ‘completeness’ of the presented verbal apology, a critical part of the apology had an inherently ritualistic character. Beginning with the lieu of the ceremony in the Canadian Parliament, the way the position of the speaker and the audience was configured, down to the rhetorical figures that were used during the speech in order to create pathos, moral gravitas and in the end authenticity. It thus shows that the ‘success’ of apologies does not solely depend on the completion of an abstract textual content but calls for a variety of ritual components that has to be included. The working of an apology essentially depends on the form in which the words are presented. And the words themselves like the “we are sorry” can thus be perceived as a liturgical expression in this ritual play. The Canadian case also demonstrates that this seemingly well orchestrated public presentation was the (partly unintended) product of strong contestations. The Canadian case thus shows that the audience of the apology ceremony is a crucial component for the success of the apology and not only a passive recipient. One can hardly imagine the same power of the apology in front of vacant ranks. And finally, even though the specific historical genealogy of the apology presentation was not the issue of the empirical analysis here, the Canadian apology was presented within the context of an era in which the “politics of regret” and public *mea culpas* for past atrocities became increasingly fashionable. But the widespread media coverage and the event character that accompanied the ceremony in Canada similar to, for example, to the apology issued by the Australian state to the Aborigines, also demonstrates that the ways in which public apologies are presented today converge more and more. The ‘mimetic’ character of the ritual becomes increasingly visible. And thus it also demonstrates that ritual analysis provides crucial insights for the understanding of how collective apologies exert reconciliatory power.

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