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The Politics of Forgiveness

There is a story, reputedly true, of a Sandinista minister of government in Nicaragua who was visiting the prisons which housed members of Somoza's National Guard, men who were responsible for the brutal killing of about 50,000 Nicaraguans. On one such visit, this minister came across the guardsman who had tortured him. The guardsman realized that the minister recognized him, and asked 'What are you going to do to me? What is your revenge?' The minister extended his hand. 'I forgive you. That is my revenge' (Amanecida 1987: 82-83).

For all its parable-like simplicity, this story reveals a number of complex dynamics. While the minister appears to have risen above the searing tendency for retribution, he is eminently aware of the power he wields over this prisoner. The very fact that he is in a position to offer his forgiveness is itself evidence of the shift in the balance of power between the two men. This offering is his revenge because it dually illustrates his moral and political superiority over his adversary.

Acts of forgiveness occur in political contexts. Who has the power to forgive, who must ask for forgiveness, and what is deemed forgivable, are questions which are inevitably, though not exclusively, political. Forgiveness is often portrayed as an interpersonal act (eg McCullough et al 1997), involving individuals operating in the private sphere, something which is largely determined by personal dispositions and situation-specific characteristics. Recently, however, discourses of forgiveness have infiltrated the public - and more explicitly, the political - domain¹, particularly as this term relates to citizens of former dictatorships now in transition to democracy

(Asmal et al., 1996; Biggar 1998; Boraine et al., 1994; Boraine and Levy 1995; Nuttall and

Coetzee 1998; Shriver 1995, 1998; Soyinka 1999; Weschler 1990). The story of the Sandinista minister cited above is not unusual in its structural elements: many one-time victims now find themselves in the role of judge, presiding over the fate of their former tormentors. The concept of forgiveness has much currency as a political topic in these post-communist times; indeed Garton Ash comments that 'comparative past-beating' has become 'something of a growth industry' (1998b:3). References to 'the responsibility of forgiveness' (Tarifa, Weinstein 1995/6: 73) and 'the test of forgiveness' (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1991) are typical of the literature which attempts to make sense of encounters between victims and victimizers in formerly totalitarian states.

Forgiveness, as it is used here, is the result of a process which occurs between an offender and an offended, who in dialogue with one another try to move beyond the stultifying hurt of past wrong. There are important ethical, philosophical and political questions relating to the inheritance of moral responsibility ("the visiting of the sins of the fathers on the sons"), but in this article the term forgiveness is used in its most limited sense: only those who have suffered can forgive, and only those who have committed a wrongdoing can be forgiven.

While it is only individuals who can forgive or be forgiven (in the sense that I am using the term here), they extend or withhold, accept or reject forgiveness as social beings. Who forgives whom, and what is deemed forgivable, are questions which are both enacted through and extend beyond the individual. Thus, according to this construction, states can offer amnesty to perpetrators of criminal deeds, but they cannot offer forgiveness. While the process of 'moral reconstruction' is in the hands of society, it is related to but distinct from 'the intimate pardon which only an aggrieved person can give' (Boraine et al., 1994:12). A widow testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa proclaims "No government can forgive - they don't know my pain - only I can forgive, and I must know before I can forgive" (Boraine 1996:41). Knowledge and acknowledgement are necessary preconditions for

forgiveness (Garton Ash, in Alban 1998b).

Shriver suggests four constituent elements of forgiveness. First, forgiveness 'begins with memory suffused with moral judgment' (1995: 7); there must be, according to Shriver, 'a preliminary agreement between two or more parties that there is something from the past to *be* forgiven' without which 'forgiveness stalls at the starting gate' (Shriver 1995: 7). Second, forgiveness requires the abandonment of vengeance, or 'forbearance from revenge' (Shriver 1995:8). Third, there must be 'empathy [as distinct from sympathy] for the enemy's humanity' (Shriver 1995: 8). This condition creates the possibility in the future of 'living [with one's adversaries] as fellow human beings' (Shriver 1995: 8). Finally, the fourth dimension of forgiveness identified by Shriver is that it 'aims at the renewal of a human relationship... forgiveness aggressively seeks to repair the fractures of enmity' (Shriver 1995: 8). This article will explore this multidimensional complexity that is the challenge of forgiveness.

The first element identified by Shriver, that of establishing a body of facts which together constitute a shared past between the wronged and the wrongdoer, is the principle which underlies the creation of "truth commissions." Hayner (1995: 225-226) identifies four characteristics of truth commissions: 1) truth commissions focus on the past; 2) they attempt to paint an overall picture of certain human rights offenses; 3) they have a temporary existence within a pre-defined period of time; and 4) they are vested with authority that allows them greater access to information, greater security or protection to dig into sensitive issues, and a greater impact with their reports. Truth commissions are usually 'created at a point of political transition within a country, used either to demonstrate or underscore a break with a past record of human rights abuses, to promote national reconciliation and/or to obtain or sustain political legitimacy' (Hayner 1995: 226). The primary goal of truth commissions is that of 'sanctioned fact finding' (Hayner 1995:227); they 'winnow out the solid core of facts upon which society's arguments with itself should be conducted' (Ignatieff 1994:113). Through them, societies document their pasts, and hopefully, in so doing 'prevent

history from being lost or re-written ... [and] prevent the a repetition of such violence in the future' (Hayner 1995:227).

The political philosophy which underlies truth commissions challenges the age-old dualism between justice and forgiveness, seeking a 'justice that is not only compatible with political forgiveness and reconciliation but one that is indispensable to [it]' (Shriver 1998:1). The Research Director of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Charles Villa-Vicencio, says that the TRC has been founded on the principle of '*restorative* justice' seeking to establish 'not only *what* happened, but *why* it happened (Villa-Vicencio 1998: 3). This is regarded as essential for the healing of the country. Restorative justice affirms the humanity of victim and perpetrator (Shriver 1998:13) and in doing so it is the agent through which communities can begin to rebuild themselves. Nelson Mandela explained to Bill Clinton 'without these enemies of ours, we can never bring about a peaceful transformation to this country' (quoted in Shriver 1998:2); these words are not only evidence of his magnanimous spirit, but of his shrewd politics. Hope for the future rests on the reassembling a fragmented community. As such, forgiveness is a vital component of the politics of transitional justice, and justice is 'an essential ingredient of social cohesion... the first condition of humanity' (Soyinka 1999: 31).

Between 1974 and 1994, fifteen truth commissions were established in countries around the world, ranging from Africa to Latin America to Eastern Europe. (This figure does not include perhaps the most well-known truth commission, the TRC of South Africa, which was not established until 1995.) The East German truth commission, the "Study Commission for the Assessment of History and Consequences of the SED Dictatorship in Germany," was amongst these. This commission had access to government records and Stasi files, and its main function, as described by a spokesperson for Helsinki Watch, was 'to investigate and provide an accurate record of the events and practices that took place in East Germany under communist rule' (cited

in Hayner 1995:241).

In the following pages I shall use the example of East Germany to examine the dynamics which govern this "truth-telling," exploring the dually social and individual nature of this process. Unless otherwise indicated, the data I am using are from in-depth interviews I conducted in East Berlin and Leipzig in 1992.¹ Although I do not use testimony presented at the commissions' proceedings (which were not accessible to the public), the central issues regarding the meaning and process of forgiveness in a politically charged context were evident throughout my conversations. Having arrived in Berlin three weeks after the opening of the state security, or "Stasi", files, I interviewed forty men and women who had been involved through the years in underground oppositional activities, people who had come to regard the Stasi as part of their daily lives. Naively, it now seems, I asked them if they were able to forgive those who had once spied upon them, people who were largely responsible for the difficult conditions under which they had lived their lives for so many years. I did not expect the answers which I heard.

Who Shall Forgive Whom?

I first became aware of the complexity of the situation when speaking with B., a long-time anti-state activist, and a leader in the East German women's movement. 'It's almost worse [the question regarding in which direction forgiveness flows.] They still can't forgive us [for] what they did to us... We are the living guilty conscience... We're still alive, we experienced it all. We are also still witnesses...' Later, she added to this comment: 'We were naive in extending too quickly our forgiveness. We had hoped that they would readily say "we were really wrong about this one" ... We imagined that they would also feel relieved when they finally were able to come out of this role.' Shriver (1995) comments on this phenomenon: 'alleged wrong-doers are [often] wary of being told that someone "forgives them." Immediately they sense that they are being subjected to some moral assessment, and they may not consent to it' (p.7).

B. and her comrades had believed that those who had worked for the Stasi would be aware of their wrong-doing, and that much in the way that the confessional functions in the church, they would welcome the opportunity to tell all and to be absolved. Instead what the oppositionals encountered was a very different mind-set. 'They still can't forgive us for what they did to us.' Beatty (1970) identifies the paradox of 'the offended offender' in which an offender, who does not contest the reality of his or her offense(s), nevertheless feels offended in the 'enumeration of grievances' (p. 249). The question of forgiveness then becomes inverted: can the offender forgive the offended for offering forgiveness, which has produced negative feelings in the offended? This is the situation in which many former oppositionals found themselves.

Tarifa and Weinstein (1995/6) comment that 'the revolutions of 1989-1990 have introduced "a new calendar" in the lives of the central and eastern European nations' (p.73). But even while the revolutions of 1989 may represent an unusual if not unique watershed period for country and citizen alike, nations, like individuals, are constituted by their pasts. In a letter to Jurgen Habermas, the East German writer Christa Wolf reflects on her own experience: 'I and many people I know do not at all have the feeling that we have "thrown the old baggage overboard and are standing at a new beginning." Quite to the contrary, our baggage is getting heavier and we are prevented from making a new start' (Wolf 1997:119). Making individuals accountable for their pasts has not been a straightforward process because of the politically-charged context in which it has occurred. Still, there are abuses of human rights which need to be documented. Unlike Holocaust victims, many of whom did not survive to tell their tales, victims of totalitarianism can give witness to that which they endured. Those at whose hands they suffered cannot deny their past, because there are survivors. This is why, as B. explains, they are regarded as the 'living guilty conscience.' The employees of the Stasi, and its informal collaborators, reject the forgiveness offered them, for to do otherwise would be to accept responsibility for a particular history from which they now distance themselves.

The East German scenario highlights a number of important questions regarding the character of forgiveness: are there situations in which one has a responsibility to forgive? Tarifa and Weinstein state that 'With the privilege of open access to the truth comes the responsibility of forgiveness' (1995/6:73). Is the knowledge of a past wrong sufficient grounds for granting forgiveness, or rather are there conditions which, if not met, necessitate its withholding? Must forgiveness, once offered, always be accepted? What does it mean to forgive, and what does it mean to receive forgiveness? Must forger and forgiven share a construction of forgiveness? What implications, if any, are there if their constructions of this act are at variance? Do forger and forgiven need each other to engage in this process?

The Rights and Responsibilities of Forgiveness

If there exists a responsibility to forgive, what is its nature? To what or to whom does one have such a responsibility? There are three possibilities regarding the object of one's responsibility. Firstly, one might argue that one should forgive because it helps oneself. In letting go of negative feelings one harbors towards another, one emancipates a part of oneself which has been held captive. Secondly, the responsibility to forgive might be constructed as an obligation to others which one inherits by simply being a fellow human being. Just as one acknowledges that oneself is capable of wrongdoing, and therefore in need of forgiveness in some situations, so then does one extend towards others that which one would like to be in receipt of. Studzinski states that forgiveness 'is a labour of love for the other and for oneself' (1986:20), conjoining self- and other- orientations. In the third possibility, the responsibility to forgive is directed towards something outside and greater than the forger and the would-be forgiven. Amongst the possible bases of such an appeal might be religion (eg replicating the forgiving spirit of a divine being) or loyalty to a wider community (be that a nation or even an abstract notion of humankind).

Let us now return to our discussion of B.'s initial forgiveness of her tormentors. Why was she so ready to forgive them, and why was her offering not accepted? Elsewhere, I have critiqued

models of unconditional, unilateral forgiveness - what I have termed 'positional forgiveness' arguing that an enduring forgiveness which is compatible with justice must be essentially dialogic, based on the interaction and ultimate negotiation between the wrongdoer and the wronged (Andrews, 1999). The unilateral forgiveness offered by B. was threatened by and ultimately withdrawn because of exposure to and contact with her real adversaries: what she had imagined to be their position was very different from the reality. She thought they would be relieved to come out of their roles, and through confession to emancipate themselves from their past. Instead, they were steadfast in denial. This, in turn, caused B. to effectively withdraw her forgiveness, explaining: "I can't hate, but I can't forgive."

An East German pastor investigating the role of the Stasi in the church, explains that 'the need to forgive is as great or greater than the need to be forgiven' and that indeed 'one partner needs the other.' But what is the basis of this need? B. was compelled to offer her forgiveness by a sense of responsibility, but a responsibility to whom or to what? I suggest that she, and others like her who are intimately engaged in the rebuilding of their societies, are motivated in their push for forgiveness by a concern to heal the rift in their broken worlds. B. may well have her own private motivations to forgive, for instance to relieve herself of the psychological burden which is sustained when forgiveness is withheld. She might also feel some responsibility to her offenders; indeed there is some evidence of this. One of the people who informed upon B. was someone who B. regarded as a close friend. After her informer's true identity became revealed, B. was hurt but she expressed a most poignant empathy for her spy, regarding her in her fullness of culpability and vulnerability, a victim of the hated security forces. B. explains:

... I strongly condemn the state for taking advantage of people like [her], you know. These were people ...[who] actually needed help, real help. ... the people in power used their psychological difficulties and their personal problems to exploit them for this double-life, to be friends with us and in reality to report to them. And all the time they knew that what they were doing was wrong.

B.'s compassion for the woman who informed on her is evident. She understands why she did what she did, and this understanding in turn opens up the possibility of forgiveness. Still, it is the third category of responsibility which seems for K. the most compelling; her forgiveness is her offering to what was once her country. The motivation to forgive is born of the desire for communal healing.

I. is an East German psychologist who spent her fortieth birthday in the back of a police van, having been beaten up by the police in the riots that ensued during the so-called celebrations marking the country's own fortieth birthday. I. comments upon the victims' 'longing to forgive' their victimizers. They are all, she explains, from the GDR, and in this they are united against the colonialist "Wessis."² B. is so ready, too ready, to forgive, for to withhold her forgiveness might be to forestall the possibility her community's survival. This same motivation is what lies at the heart of the forgiveness by the Sandinista minister: he is fighting for his new nation, which desperately needs to heal.

In both of these stories, it is clear that the injured party has assumed a right to forgive. But upon what grounds? Are we all, by virtue of being human beings, bestowed with the right to forgive and the right to be forgiven? Equally, do we have the right to refuse another's forgiveness? In *David Copperfield*, Uriah Heep infuriates the young David, telling him that he forgives him. "You forgive me!" David exclaims. "I do, and you can't help yourself," replies Uriah. "...you can't help being forgiven.... I'm determined to forgive you" (cited in O'Shaughnessy 1967:348).

David is enraged because Uriah's (manipulative) offer of forgiveness implicitly places David in the role of wrongdoer, and Uriah as the wronged against. The only meaningful sense of

forgiveness must be one which is limited in its applications: it extends directly from victim to victimizer. To speak of X forgiving Y for something which Y has done to Z is to confuse forgiveness with some other form of empathic understanding. Forgiveness has a special meaning, quite distinct from pardon, mercy, condonation, excuse, justification, absolution, amnesty, reconciliation, and a whole host of other related concepts (Downie 1965; Enright 1991; Lang 1994; Murphy & Hampton 1988). Havemann and the Sandinista minister have the right to extend their forgiveness because it is they who have suffered at the hands of those they forgive.

But if that forgiveness is not sought - as with David Copperfield, as well as with some Stasi collaborators - does the would-be forgiven party have a responsibility to accept that forgiveness which is offered? In the case of *David Copperfield*, it seems absurd that David should have any responsibility to accept Uriah's forgiveness. One reason, of course, is because it is so obviously disingenuous. But another reason (related to the first, in that Uriah knows full well David has done him no wrong) is because David does not accept his role as one who needs to be forgiven.

B. has both the right (as one who has been wronged) and the responsibility (to herself, her victimizer, and her community) to bestow her forgiveness (as well as the right to withhold it); those who have wronged her have not only the right and responsibility to accept it, but also the right to reject it. In the case of positional forgiveness, actual encounters between wronged and wrongdoer will either strengthen or threaten the forgiveness. In B.'s case, it is the latter. Those who have offended her do not share her construction of events: they neither ask for, desire, nor accept her forgiveness. Ironically, their rejection of her forgiveness dramatizes the disparity between what she imagines to be their position and the reality, and ultimately causes her to rescind it. For the enactment of negotiated forgiveness, in contrast, each party needs the other to unbind them from their roles.

This was the intention of setting up the Tater/Opfer (Victim/Victimizers) talks throughout East Germany, which pre-dated and co-existed with the truth commission. The idea was for these two groups of people to come together on neutral ground and to discuss their shared past. Some meetings, like those which took place at what was once Checkpoint Charlie, were open to the public, while others happened behind closed doors. The talks, however, only met with partial success. Why?

The Atmosphere of Forgiveness

S., a key figure of the East German underground opposition, was a founding member of one of the most important groups organizing anti-state activities from the early 1980s onwards. He spent years in and out of East German prisons, and, following his involvement with the highly profiled Rosa Luxembourg demonstration, was finally exiled for a short period of time. When we met, he was a leading coordinator for disbanding the Stasi. People who now worked for him had in former times been employees of the secret police. He describes the bizarre situation he found himself in following the events of autumn '89:

Suddenly I was sitting at the Ministry for State Security [the MfS, or "Stasi"]. I had a body guard, and a secretary, all former MfS people... there I was sitting at this desk and ... thinking to myself: where were you two years ago? Then I was in this room being interrogated! And I visited the cell I was held in... I somehow couldn't comprehend all that had happened, such perverse events. In June '90, I fulfilled a boyhood dream ... [attending] a Rolling Stones concert, accompanied by my body guard, [and] five [other] MfS people, responsible for my safety!

Indeed, the changes of East Germany had happened at a remarkable speed, and doubtless no one, least of all S., would have thought that within two years of the time that he was incarcerated by the Stasi, he would be the boss of the very people responsible for his imprisonment. At the time of our interview, S. spent much time thinking about the process of forgiveness. "That has been

for me a very central question since I took up office as a government official... I have to ask myself what are the motives with which I approach this task... I had to be sure : were there any desires for revenge and feelings of hatred? [If so] I could not do this job.' He concluded that revenge did not motivate him, but rather a deep desire to understand why people had done what they had done.

S. describes a transformation in his feelings from the time he began his work dissolving the Stasi.

When he first took office, he says, I was much more tolerant then, because I took the view that, if we manage to create an atmosphere in which people relax and admit that they were spies then ... it need not be made public. It is sufficient if everyone is confronted with his counterpart and has a chat face-to-face. Then we have the situation where one can say, "Well, okay, maybe under similar circumstances I would have acted the same."

This is precisely what did happen in the case of historian Timothy Garton Ash. Ash describes in much detail his own experiences of confronting those who spied on him for the Stasi (Ash 1998a). At the end of these conversations, he explains 'I understood why these people had done what they had done, and I even had a great sympathy with [them] ... the question I came away with [was] "what might I have done if I were born in their shoes?"' (Alban 1998b).

Unfortunately, Ash's experience was not typical, and indeed one reason for his success might have been the privacy in which it was conducted. Although S. was hopeful that it would be possible to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which those who had been collaborators for the Stasi would be able to confess, this did not happen. From the outset, the atmosphere was politically fused, and informants were only forthcoming to the extent that the circumstances

dictated they must be: the degree of confessions largely correlated with informants' beliefs regarding the documentation of their past activities. S. explains:

Unfortunately, what I had expected from people did not happen, that they come clean about their actions. Of course they can only do so if they are without fear. And the atmosphere was and still is today not very conducive for that to happen. ... many people hope that their collaboration with the system will never be discovered. I think that this is tragic not only for their personal future development but for the inner peace of the country. In human terms, I find this reprehensible.

S. is saying several things here. First, forgiveness is predicated upon confession of guilt. Second, such confession will only be forthcoming if the surrounding atmosphere is right. Third, this confessional is important not only for the development of the individual spies, but more importantly for the moral redemption of the society. S. elaborates on his position:

if they [the spies] have to be unmasked bit by bit on the basis of the Stasi files, then any reasonable understanding ceases... I can forgive when people are honest... when I experience that somebody only admits what I confront him with... then my trust in him fades and with it the whole basis on which one can work together.

The willingness to forgive is enhanced by the ability to understand the behavior of the offender. This understanding both creates and is dependent upon some level of trust between wronged and wrongdoer. But the trust is jeopardized when the offended party feels that the offender is holding back; in this case the confession is only partial. This produces a negative spiraling effect: the offended party experiences not understanding, but rather a renewed anger and frustration with the offender, and the possibility of forgiveness recedes yet further. While W. blames the spies for

their lack of personal and social responsibility, he also acknowledges that the current atmosphere is not conducive to the soul-baring required of them.

What is it, then, about the atmosphere, which is inhibiting this process? This question can be addressed at both the macro and the micro level. First, the context of unification has diminished East German feelings of self-worth. All East Germans are guilty, if only of being East German. What, then, of the East German who actually has committed a wrong? The second level is the more immediate: East Germans are quick to point the accusatory finger at others to avoid examining their own culpability.

Christa Wolf, who was herself the subject of collaboration inquiries, writes that there are several people who 'say that indeed they would like to reflect about the past, only they do not want to confront it in the way that is dictated by the West, without sensitivity or the ability to discriminate' (1997:241). Wolf speaks of 'the manner and the speed with which everything connected with the GDR was liquidated, considered suspect... we are housed in a barracks under quarantine, infected with the Stasi virus (1997:241) A western triumphalism provokes defensive posturing amongst East Germans, who then retreat into 'GDR nostalgia that allows a person to gloss over what he or she said or did, or usually did not do, in recent decades' (1997:241).

While many East Germans complain that West Germans look down upon them, incredulous that a people could be capable of such behavior and offering no signs of self-critique - and therefore no empathy or compassion - there is evidence that this polarization between good and evil is not limited to national borders. Just as West Germans claim a posture of moral superiority over their neighbors to the east, East Germans turn against themselves, their voices of indignant outrage concealing their own quiet shame.

I Forgive as I Ask for Forgiveness

Studzinski (1986) describes forgiveness as an essentially empathic activity, whereby one who has been wronged recognizes parts of him or herself in that person who has caused him or her harm. In the creative act of remembering the forgiver recalls the person who was responsible as the injurer but then proceeds to change in memory the other's identity from injurer to his or her deeper identity as a valuable human being like oneself despite human weakness and limitation (p. 17). This empathy is similar to that identified by Shriver earlier: one accepts oneself and others in all their fallibility. In acknowledging one's own shortcomings, one is less disposed toward condemnation of others; there is a recognition of a shared humanity.

It is ironic that, at least at the level of public discourse, it has been those persons who were historically most engaged in underground oppositional activities, who now identify culpability in themselves. This is not only true in East Germany. In Czechoslovakia, for instance, 'the more severely persecuted an oppositionist had been under the old regime, the less adamant he was likely to be about lustration [Communist cleansing]' (Weschler 1992:82) Although the cultural narrative is often framed in terms of victims and victimizers, S. rejects this construction.

I refuse to accept a polarization of victim/victimizer, although I personally use these terms too in a careless way... I am not able to draw a clear line. I am very cautious with this categorization. Do I know in how far I, as a so-called 'victim' who was in prison and so on, contributed in a certain way to a stabilization of the system? Because the Stasi strengthened this apparatus, could only strengthen it by constant referral to the opposition. That is how the system legitimized itself. In that respect I belong to the criminals, who ensured that the Stasi found more and more reasons to expand. Who can judge this?

S. simultaneously accepts and rejects this black and white construction of himself and his fellow citizens into heroes and villains; while he says he rejects this polarization, at the same time he uses it. Indeed, his own inconsistency reflects a wider ambiguity of the society surrounding who is blameworthy and who can cast blame. During my six months in East Germany, the language of victim and victimizer permeated not only newspapers and television, but it was the conversation which occupied people most in their private lives. The sense of betrayal and shame was both public and private, and produced in many an attempt at personal exculpation.

But the GDR needed more than the employees and collaborators of the Stasi to operate with such a high level of proficiency for forty years. S. feels that people look for scapegoats to blame for what happened, all the while never examining their own lives, their inaction as much as their action.

People are only too eager to point a finger at the other person, to the guilty one, 'that was him, the Stasi' in order to disguise their own shame of not having been able to - even only in a very minute way - show resistance. This simply must happen, but at present does not, that people ask themselves, 'how far have I contributed to make this system function, if only by my silence.?' This is an exceedingly difficult process.

Some people cannot forgive others because they cannot forgive themselves. M. is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor and an actress at one of Berlin's best-known repertoire theaters. She says that everyone must look deeply into their own selves, and assess their actions and inactions with

uncompromising judgment. And yet, ultimately, they must also forgive themselves. 'If you don't forgive yourself,' she explains, 'you can't continue to live.' And so this self-forgiveness is a necessary but insufficient precondition for the forgiveness of others. Studzinski comments that 'Preoccupation with the guilt of the other also can be an effective way of preventing awareness of one's own guilt in other relationships' (1986: 20). There is much investment in holding on to the construction of other as injurer, for it functions as a defence against seeing oneself as one who must also repent.

There are other important, dissenting voices in this debate, however. Some, like U., feel that the distinction between victim and victimizer is both real and morally imperative. F. is one of the key persons responsible for setting up the East German truth commission. He is a man of the church, but since 1989, he is also a politician: a founding member of one of the leading opposition groups in autumn '89, and subsequent to that, a representative in Bonn. While he speaks of the importance of 'investigating ourselves,' he strongly asserts 'if you look into Stasi files you see there are spies and there are those who are spied on: there is a very clear borderline between those.' Perhaps all or most share some responsibility, but not equally so.

Still, in his own life, his actions have not been so uncompromising. In our interview, he tells a story of being denied permission to go visit his dying mother on the other side of the wall. After she died, he was again denied permission to travel to her funeral. He wrote down the names of the people who were responsible for this decision, and years later, when he became a member of the government, he could have taken his revenge. Instead, he explains, 'I have forgiven them and this means to me that [although] I have the names, I will never talk about this affair. This is a personal decision.' He elaborates on his position: 'Of course what they have done is against human rights, even those acknowledged in the GDR... It was a special hardship against my person and much more against my mother. [But] we can't let affairs stay as they are.'

When I ask if this forgiveness comes at the expense of justice, he replies 'There is no opposition between forgiveness and justice because forgiveness does not exclude but affirms justice.'

Interestingly, from the point of view of the argument presented in these pages, F. does not confront the people who have wronged him before forgiving them. He feels that he cannot do so without abusing his position of power. At the time of our interview, he is in the midst of establishing the truth commission; it is through such a body, he believes, that individuals and the society as a whole can attend equally to claims of justice and forgiveness.

P., another leader of the church in East Berlin, suggests a more opaque boundary between victims and victimizers than that outlined by F. His parish includes both well-known oppositionals as well as Egon Krenz, Honnecker's brief successor; not very long before trying to present himself as the great new reformer, Krenz had been in China to express the East German support for the events which took place in Tian'anmen Square. P. tells the story of visiting Krenz at his home on the Christmas Eve of 1989. This once powerful man was now a lonely and frightened shadow of his former self, beseeching his pastor to visit him should he should go to prison. (It took nearly ten years for Krenz's nightmare to become reality: in 1997, he was given a 6 1/2 year prison sentence, the highest ranking East German politician to be jailed for communist crimes). P. is both philosophical and practical about who is to cast the first stone. Yes, of course, Krenz was responsible for some very terrible things, but 'everyone who lived in this system was in some sense guilty.' Before too harshly condemning others, it is important first to 'find guilt in yourself.'

But even amongst those who might quite easily 'find guilt in [themselves],' the story is not simple. In these post-communist times, there is a tendency amongst many to see themselves as victims, subjects of fate. Marianne Schultz, East German sociologist, wryly comments that after the changes of 1989, the East German population (of sixteen million) consisted of sixteen million victims, as well as sixteen million freedom fighters (Schultz 1992). Everyone came to see themselves (or at least presented themselves to others) as a pawn of circumstances larger than

themselves, who nonetheless offered their resistance in their own small, quiet ways. Even employees of the Stasi point to their superiors: "I was only following orders." K., a Stasi employee, echoes this in our interview: 'I am not ashamed of my life. I have a special biography.

[Q: Would you say you were a victimizer?] I think both are true, if I have to use these terms.'" Both parts of this last sentence are interesting. By responding 'I think both are true' to a question in which there are not two items for consideration, his answer reflects, perhaps intentionally, an ambiguity. Does he mean that he is both a victimizer and not a victimizer, or rather that he is both a victimizer and a victim? His use of the phrase 'these terms' implies the latter. Implicitly he rejects the construction which is offered to him. He is not ashamed of his life or of his 'special biography.' In subtle ways throughout the interview, K. asserts a similarity between himself and those who would accuse him of being a victimizer.

This recognition of a common humanity, marked by its imperfection, between offended and offending parties is one cognitive strategy deployed in forgiveness (a forgiveness which, significantly, K. does not seek and might not accept.) This strategy rests upon 'the exploration of the insight that the injured party needed forgiveness from others in the past... If the injured sees the self as imperfect, he or she may more easily explore reframing, empathy, compassion, and absorption of pain' (Enright et al., 1991: 145). This position echoes that of Studzinski, cited above. The point made by F. and P. is slightly different, for it focuses on the apparent victim's culpability not only (nor necessarily even) in the past, but in the present situation. In contrast, Enright's equation is transitive: if people can identify themselves as having needed forgiveness in the past, so then might they find it in themselves to forgive others for a present wrong (for which they do not necessarily share any burden of guilt.) Both constructions, however, share a general premise: if one can see own's own imperfections (in the past and/or present) then one might be more disposed to accept the fallibility of others.

The questions raised here are moral as much as they are political. Is there a marked distinction between victims and victimizers, or rather are there degrees of both in everyone? Does a denial of absolutes compromise moral perspective? S. strongly emphasizes the importance of what he calls a 'differentiated inquiry.' One must resist the temptation to people the world with heroes and villains; individuals are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. What is important is to establish the precise nature and extent of each person's culpability. In S.'s construction, no one is let off the line, not even he and others like himself who, in offering their resistance might also have helped the GDR to present an image of respectability to the rest of the world. Those who sat by quietly, afraid or simply unwilling to challenge the abusive authority of the state, were also responsible, for the effective machinations of the state depended upon the passivity of a cowered citizenry. And finally, those who were actively employed by or collaborated with the Stasi were responsible in a more direct fashion, although even amongst them, not all are equally implicated. The extent of culpability must be commensurate with the level of participation in wrongdoing. No one escapes judgment. But who is to judge?

East Germany is unique amongst Eastern European countries in that it is the only one in which de-communization has not been 'the domain of home-grown democratic forces confronting their former oppressors' but instead 'it is West Germany putting the East on trial - West German laws, West German courts, West German standards, East German defendants' (Kritz 1995b: 595). O., another clergyman who offered the roof of his church to those who sought communion with others engaged in anti-state activity, reflects much on the problem of culpability and forgiveness. He explains that in his view it is important that 'the judgment of the past should only come from those who have experienced it.' But it is precisely those with this experience who have no voice in the present situation. Their judgment of the past holds no power, reflecting their social position. Rather, the stories of the citizens of the GDR are out there for everyone to read and to judge, and this they do. Ironically, the collapse of socialism has introduced a new realm of collusion between the public and the private spheres. The details of many people's pasts are widely accessible, not only in

the form of the Stasi files, but in the overly enthusiastic media coverage of their contents. This has several implications. First, this detracts significantly from the possibility of private repentance. Employees and collaborators of the Stasi have lost the 'ownership' of their pasts, and indeed of their sins. This has the paradoxical effect of dispersing their responsibility while rendering them more culpable. Second, this public access to the wrongdoing of others facilitates a digression away from self-scrutiny of the reader of these accounts. The only judgment of the past with any real implications will come from those who are in positions of power. Many East Germans feel that they are victims of a zealous western German witch-hunt, masquerading as healthy self-purification, whose ultimate intent is to promote feelings of inadequacy and mistrust among eastern Germans and to remove them from positions of power and authority (Kritz 1995b:597). Only if these conditions are changed, will there be a possibility of realizing a genuine forgiveness between relevant (marginalized) parties.

Understanding as the Key to Peaceful Co-existence

Forgiveness occurs not only at the intersection of the public and the private, but also at the intersection of past, present and future (Amanacida 1987: 103). In the present, those who have been wronged come together with those who have wronged them in a collaborative attempt to confront and to release themselves from the pain of the past. When Mandela says that he needs his enemies to help build the future, he is right. As the Research Director of the TRC states 'Coexistence is essential if South Africa is to survive' (Villa-Vicencio 1998:12). Unless and until victims and victimizers can face one another, the society will remain fragmented. Such a confrontation may or may not result in forgiveness, but it is the first step toward reconciliation, toward finding a means of peaceful co-existence. Forgiveness is something for torn societies to strive toward. Timothy Garton Ash emphasizes the point that many victims may not be ready to forgive, and nor can they be made to. Rather, he says, 'the time scale of reconciliation is measured in generations rather than months or years, and it is dangerous to try to force the

process along...' (Alban 1998b). Still, forgiveness is 'a necessary goal to reach if [a wounded nation] is to grow into a community of people who belong together' (Villa-Vicencio 1998:12).

The post-amble to the Act that established South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission identifies a 'need for understanding but not for vengeance' (Ntsebeza 1998: 4). But understanding, which lies at the core of forgiveness, depends upon the recognition of a shared humanity. Perhaps this is why Soyinka writes that "forgiveness is a value that is far more humanly exacting than vengeance" (1999:33-34), for it requires that one acknowledge one's own fallibility.

Meeting the challenge of balancing the claims of justice and forgiveness is important not only morally, but politically, if communities are to begin the long task of rebuilding themselves. Through open discussion these claims can, as F. suggests earlier, affirm one another, and it is in their meeting that lies the promise of healing, both for individuals and the societies in which they live.

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1. A related recent phenomenon has been that of the retroactive public apology by world leaders for historical events involving their nations: Bill Clinton apologized to Africans for slavery, Tony Blair apologized for the role of the English in the Irish potato famine, the Japanese prime minister apologized for the treatment of prisoners during the Second World War. These are all instances of an apology from "the Many to the Many" (Tavuchis 1991:98), or collective apology, whose main function is both political and symbolic. Collective apologies are voiced through individuals, acting as representatives. The relationship between apology and forgiveness is an assumed one; apologies are often taken to be requests for forgiveness, which they may or may not be. The collective forms of apology and forgiveness are, however, distinct from the present focus.

1. All of the persons who participated in my research in 1992 have granted me unqualified permission to use extracts from the transcripts of our interviews for the purposes of publication.
2. Jens Reich, co-founder of the leading opposition group Neues Forum, comments that since unification, East German identity has become for many 'eine Trotzidentität,' an identity of defiance (cited in Le Gloannec 1994:142).