UC Berkeley
2017 SURF Conference Proceedings

Title
State and Statement: The Political Apology

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zf6t682

Author
Milyavskiy, Kevin

Publication Date
2017-07-01

Undergraduate

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Kevin Milyavskiy[1]
SURF Conference Proceedings 2017
UC Berkeley
Session 3C

> *Speeches, it must be allowed, are veritable transactions in the human commonwealth; in fact, very gravely influential transactions. It is, indeed, often said, "Such and such things are only talk"; and talk enjoys the important privilege of being harmless. But addresses of peoples to peoples, or orations directed to nations and to princes, are integrant constituents of history.*
> *– Hegel, The Philosophy of History*

Today I am going to give a presentation on political apologies. I will begin by making a few introductory remarks and then will explain the theoretical and historical framework I engage with in order to analyze the relation between politics, language, and morality.

One my central questions about the political apology simply asks what it is. Scholars began to study the political apology only as recently as two to three decades ago, partly because of how often communities—national and subnational—*specifically* asked for, offered, or refused to apologize. States are also receiving domestic and international pressure to be more accountable for and transparent with their histories, which apologies help do. Thus apologies have become a method to resolve current political conflicts, and also help bring to light injustices that remain historically or publicly obscure.

In asking what a political apology is, one is asking a two-pronged question that asks both of the apology's form and of its purpose. We just briefly covered only a few purposes that an apology might serve, including resolving a conflict and exposing an injustice. We have yet to discuss *how* the apology is issued. What deeds or acts constitute a political apology, and why are such deeds or acts thought best fit to do so?

I came upon such a question after comparing two speeches François Hollande gave in 2012 within the same five-month period on two different, though not utterly dissimilar, matters. The first speech widely understood as an apology. The second other was not.

Hollande's first speech was given in Paris in July at the inauguration of a memorial to French Jews who perished in WWII. Referring to an event that is known as the *Vel d'Hiv*, Hollande's speech addressed how in 1942, while Germany occupied France, they ordered the French to round up all the Parisian Jews and deport them to German concentration camps. The French complied, but they were more than complicit. Because not one

---

[1] I would like to thank the Wishek Fund, Sean Burns, Melissa Griffith, and Justin Lopez for their support throughout the SURF program. I would also like to thank Professor Constable for her constant insight and encouragement.

German soldier assisted the round-up, the French seem to have collaborated with as partners more than they seem to have complied as subordinates. They were, one might say and as documents reveal, enthusiastically obedient. Hollande discusses and takes responsibility for the 72,000 Jews who were sent to their deaths by French hands and French trains throughout the occupation. He calls the deportations a crime of treason, committed in France, by France, against the French and against French values and principles. Hollande left practically no room for doubt as to if and for what France is sorry.

Five months later, Hollande gave a very different speech to the Algerian parliament in Algiers. A day before his speech, he announced that he had not come to Algeria to "repent or apologize." It is important to note that such a claim draws attention to the institution of the political apology, and that to refuse to take part in it adds to, rather than detracts from, its legitimacy and force.

When Hollande announced the refusal, he was referencing the turbulent history between France and Algeria. Algeria was a French colony from 1830 to 1962, when France officially withdrew and granted Algeria its sovereignty after a brutal war whose ending culminated in more violence in Algeria than at its beginning. In his speech, Hollande calls colonialism by name and recognizes the Algerian War *as* a war—both things some French refuse to do to this day. Though Hollande enumerates the genocides, the massacres, the tortures, and the deprivation of self-determinism throughout the War and the colonial period, he does not clearly state who subjected the Algerians to it nor by whose hands they suffered. It is also unclear whether Hollande makes any substantive statement of remorse or regret. These reasons, though not these alone, help identify Hollande's speech as a non-apology.

Although it may seem obvious, it is important to recognize that Hollande's apology and non-apology are issued through speech. As I mentioned earlier, Hollande's declaration of non-apology reveals his anxiety about politics and the institutional apology, but it also reveals something about language itself. Why did Hollande feel the need to preemptively declare that his speech would not apologize: could the speech not speak for itself?

Such questions may be best shouldered with the insight of speech-acts. Speech-acts are an approach to language that consolidates the distinction often made between speech and action. They help one understand what Hollande was doing, or was attempting to do, with words. With speech-acts, one proceeds not just with the premise that language is a form of action, but that it is performative and enables certain acts that *only* speech can perform. Is the political apology one of these acts?

Sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis in *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*, one of the first serious and most influential studies of the apology, seems to think so. For him, "an apology is, first and foremost, a speech act… [that] can be understood only in relation to its status as a speech act" (27). Although Tavuchis cites and clearly relies on J.L. Austin, the premier speech-act pioneer, one might get the sense that Tavuchis occasionally deviates—seemingly to his detriment—from certain speech-act tenets. For instance, Tavuchis writes, “the principal function of the apology—all collective apology, for that matter—has little, if anything, to do with sorrow or sincerity but rather with putting things on a public record” (117). Austin himself, along with other speech-act experts such as John Searle, would not dismiss “sincerity” in the way Tavuchis seems to. Although Tavuchis may not be as thorough on basing the political apology on speech-act tenets as much as one might hope, he contributes significantly to the understanding of the role of language within reconciliation, morality, and social cohesion.

In fact, I draw heavily from him. Through Tavuchis, I found that the political apology provides a group with the opportunity to articulate and apprehend unknown and unstated moral principles that cohere a community. That is, there are cultural—and presumably moral—assumptions, as Tavuchis cites and as Bourdieu says, which “go without saying because they come without saying” (128, footnote 9). With Bourdieu’s help, Tavuchis comes to understand that knowledge of such ubiquitous moral principles is “likely to be enhanced in the presence of disturbance or deviation” (12). In effect, the apologetic utterance broadcasts the morality that was violated by giving an account of the offense that breached that moral code. Tavuchis suggests that by apologizing for such a violation, both the morality and the offense that violated it is better known. In other words, the political apology voices silent assumptions about moral principles, as well as the type of acts that violate them. This is why the apologetic utterance reveals our morality to us in each celestial breath it breathes.

I would like to conclude with two points of tension within the study of the political apology. The first concerns language, the second concerns political theory.

The first point of concern appears when one remembers that language is conventional. To communicate, speakers must follow rules of grammar, syntax, and phonetics set out by language. In the case of the political apology though, one has to find the words to explain not only the inexplicable moral breach or the violence suffered for that breach; one also has to say what has never been said before. Performative utterances, which by nature rely on convention to be effective, have to overcome the theoretical hurdle to perform the apology that must defy the very convention that enables the apologetic utterance itself.

Second, the political apology seems is at odds with *realpolitik*. Realists assert that the international community is amoral and consists of actors who only follow their own self-interest. Some political scientists suggest that apologies must be unconditional to be successful. If so, the unconditional apology would leave a state vulnerable and at the mercy of the state or the community that it is apologizing to. If the realist discounts political morality, however, they must grapple with what they have yet to explain: if they deny morality, it seems they too must deny justice, for what is justice if it is not morally just? If both justice and morality are equally dismissed, what would a polity be bound by?

In conclusion, this project seeks to further explore the conceptions of morality that language offers us, as well as the status of French Universalism within the French apology.

Thank you all for listening.