Forgiveness in Politics

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Its origins referring to Thomas Hobbes' State Theory and its Importance within today's political Landscape

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1 Introduction

Forgiveness is as old as humankind. It is a highly complex topic that is still subject of recent research. It is not determined where its origin lies, but it is safe to say that we all come in contact with forgiveness and guilt during our daily lives. One can see how multifarious this topic is by taking a look at the different scientific fields studying it, such as philosophy, psychology, theology, jurisprudence and even medicine. All that are hints for how important the role of forgiveness is for individuals. It does not stop here though. Forgiveness is also very important in the political landscape. History teaches us a lot about wars that were fought between people, between races and between countries, but it also tells us about how those wars came to an end and how the people that were involved, learned to get along with each other again. My aim in this paper is it to show that forgiveness is one big key element that enables people and countries to live in peace again.

Therefore I will introduce Donald W. Shriver Jr., who is an ethicist and President Emeritus of Union Seminary in New York City, and his book *An Ethic for Enemies. Forgiveness in Politics*. In this book he argues that it is our capacity to forgive that allows us to recover from a war or another kind of deep conflict and to start co-existing peacefully again. Furthermore he extracts forgiveness from its traditional association with religion and morality and points out its importance within the secular political landscape. He also, and that is what I will adopt in the end of this paper, examines concrete cases in which acts of forgiveness have had essential political consequences.

I will start this paper by introducing Thomas Hobbes and his Social Contract Theory and his State Theory. On this base I will distinguish between religious, moral and political forgiveness and also try to show the origin and the function of forgiveness according to Hobbes and his work *Leviathan*. The reason why this work will be concerned with Thomas Hobbes is that he plays an important role regarding the development of human rights. He was the first who attributed a natural right to every man that can not be taken away from something or somebody else: the right to defend one's life. This thought inspired many other philosophers to work on stating a set of human rights. Another fact that makes it worth to talk about him is that you can still find basics of his state theory in today's states and countries.
2 Origin and Function of Forgiveness in Thomas Hobbes' State Theory

2.1 Thomas Hobbes and his State Theory

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher who became popular for his main work *Leviathan*. He is considered as the father of the enlightened absolutism and as one of the most known advocates of the social contract idea.

Hobbes' main work is the *Leviathan* and was published in 1651. In there he introduces the *state of nature*. It is a hypothetical state in which humankind is situated before any kind of government comes into being. So, the question Hobbes tries to answer is, what reasons are there to enter a state and become part of a social society? Following this question it leads to a debate about the legitimation of artificial rights and therefore, since these rights can get broken, about guilt and forgiveness.

For this paper's purpose it is sufficient to simply sum Hobbes' state theory up. That is what follows: As mentioned before the starting point is the state of nature, a hypothetical situation without any kind of government, laws or state system. Hobbes claims that men are selfish, brutal egoists by nature and have only three motivating forces: in a lawless environment they would fight a war of every man against every man. Since everyone is an egoist and always aims for his biggest benefit a war in which one has to fear everyone does not seem like a desirable situation. That is where Hobbes calls the social contract theory into play.

2.2 Social Contract Theory

In the strict sense the social contract theory is not a moral one, since every action is proceeded in respect to achieving personal goals, in other words, to maximize one's owns benefit. The contract-less environment is not necessarily without any benefit though, there are advantages such as strengths, intelligence etc. one can have to trick others or at least scare them away. However, the benefit can be maximized by mutual cooperation. There are several versions of the so called “prisoner's dilemma” that illustrate how to maximize one's own benefit by cooperation. Here is a very simple description originally worked out by Merrill Flood and Melvin Drescher in the context of the game theory:
This table contains two aspects that might need to be clarified. First, the origin of the ratios are results of (too complicated to explain them here) calculations, which may vary in their appearances but not in their results. So in the sense of this paper, they are regarded as justified and given. Second, the table indicates that if A cooperates but B does not, or vice versa, B's benefit is the biggest. That is, indeed, true, but it is only a short-dated benefit. The reason for that is, as mentioned before, the egoistical nature of men. If A cooperates and B does not, A will annul the mutual contract, since A does not benefit from it (anymore). At this point it becomes obvious again that the social contract theory is not a moral theory as A does not annul the contract because he rejects the injustice, but because he does not gain anything from it. However, most important is the fact that if A and B cooperate mutually, the benefit ratio equals 3/3 whereas it equals only 2/2 if they don't cooperate at all.

2.3 Guilt and Forgiveness within the Social Contract Theory

The origin and the function of guilt and forgiveness within the social contract theory are very pragmatic and easily to comprehend. While guilt and therefore forgiveness do not exist in the hypothetical contract-less environment, since everything is allowed, one can incur guilt by breaking a contract. Here is way: If A breaks the contract he has with B, B has different possibilities to react. He could just tolerate the breach, considering that he is an egoist trying to maximize his benefit, this possibility is not very likely. So, B could also cancel the contract and stop cooperating with A, but that would mean going back to a contract-less state and have a smaller benefit again. Therefore the most probable reaction is to keep the contractual relationship to A but to add certain restrictions which ensure that A does not benefit from breaking the

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contract the first time, and which also ensure he will not have any motivation to break it again. In addition, according to the severity of the branch and the consequences, B might claim a redemption, e. g. what A obtained by breaking the contract.

Not to cancel the contract in general and imposing restrictions on the one who broke the contract and making sure that he does not benefit from doing it, is exactly what forgiveness within the social contract theory can be described as.

However, according to Thomas Hobbes, it is not possible to overcome the state of nature and the war of all against all only through social contracts.

And covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all. Therefore, notwithstanding the laws of nature [...] if there be no power erected, or not great enough for our security, every man will and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art for caution against all other men.⁴

Since words are not frightening and powerful enough to ensure the adherence of all contracts, there is still need for an superior, omnipotent instance that assures the adherence of common laws respectively prosecute the ones who break it. This instance is the state, or with Hobbes' words the commonwealth or The Leviathan.

The only way to establish a common power that can defend them from the invasion of foreigners and the injuries of one another, [...] is to confer all their power and strength on one man, or one assembly of men, so as to turn all their wills by a majority vote into a single will.⁵

Summarizing this chapter, it is to say that Hobbes not only shows how guilt and forgiveness come into being within the theory of state, but he also makes clear, why and that bigger groups of people need a government. At this point it seems important to emphasize again, that Hobbes' account of guilt and forgiveness is completely amoral.

3 Religious, Moral and Political Forgiveness

3.1 Religious Forgiveness

Religious forgiveness is an extremely complex subject that actually deserves its own
paper. Since it is not possible to do and include that into this paper, it is only an outline that I will offer here. Furthermore, religious is only referring to Christianity in this context, since it is the most common religion in the Western world and also, certainly, sufficient to approach to get an idea of religious forgiveness.

Since there are a lot of different accounts of religious forgiveness, I will only talk about the one that is presented in Karin Scheiber's book *Vergbung: Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*.6

In short, this kind of forgiveness only takes place between god or a representative of god and men, and also only in this direction. What can god forgive though? Surprisingly, there are parallels between religious guilt and guilt within the social contract theory. Becoming guilty in the theological context means to sin. This again means, according to Scheiber, to spoil the relationship with god, and that can be caused by disregarding god's will or by not acknowledging god.7 Thus, this account of guilt is not too different from Hobbes' account. Becoming guilty means to disrespect and to not acknowledge someone, by either not acting according to someone's (god's) will or by breaking a contract. However, the act of forgiveness is different here. God does not prosecute the sinner, and he does not force the sinner to believe in him again either. Quite the reverse is the case. God forgives by relieving the human will from the sins. Now, that the guilty person is without any sin again, he will turn back to god and restore the relationship, since this is the expression of a mind without any sin. So, basically forgiveness in the religious this means exactly that: restoring the spoiled relationship between men and god.8

3.2 Moral Forgiveness

In contrast to religious forgiveness, moral forgiveness takes place between humans. Unfortunately there is a lot of disagreement regarding to the definition of forgiveness. One encyclopedia entry reads s follows:

There is disagreement over the meaning of forgiveness, its relation to apparent cognates, the psychological, behavioral, and normative dimensions of forgiveness, and when and under what conditions forgiveness is morally permissible, required, or wrong.9

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6 Translated by the author: Forgiveness: a systematical-theological investigation.
7 Scheiber, Vergebung, p. 110.
8 Ibid.
However, it is fair to say that it refers to guilt, that means, A (or group A) does something one can hold him to account for and it has to harm at least one other person B (or group B). B then is the only person who can forgive A.\textsuperscript{10} It is controversial though, if A might not be able forgive himself as well. “More specifically, ‘forgive’ refers to the act of giving up a feeling, such as resentment, or a claim to requital or compensation. And the term ‘forgiveness’ is defined as the action of forgiving […]”\textsuperscript{11} It is safe to say that moral forgiveness is teleological, it aims on restoring the relationship between A and B that was spoiled by B and his wrong-doing.

In summary it can be said, therefore, that moral forgiveness is similar to religious forgiveness. The goal is to restore the relationship between the wrongdoer and the wronged person. It is also not about prosecuting, but rather about making clear, something wrong was done and giving the wrongdoer the chance to not do something similar again.

### 3.3 Political Forgiveness

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), a German-American political theorist, once said about political forgiveness: “Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom.” Although this is a very short definition, there is a lot of truth behind it. Donald W. Shriver Jr. gives a more detailed definition in his book \textit{An Ethic for Enemies. Forgiveness in Politics}. According to him, political forgiveness consists of four steps\textsuperscript{12}:

1. \textit{Making moral judgments of an enemy's behavior}. That means, both sides have to come to some bilateral agreement on that, so that they can to determine what compensation or penalty the offender has to incur.

2. \textit{Abandonment of vengeance}. Forgiveness does not exclude punishment or prosecution, but it needs to spare vengeance. “Forbearance [from vengeance] opens the door toward a future that will not repeat the old crimes.”\textsuperscript{13}

3. \textit{Empathy for the enemy's humanity}. In order to forgive someone, it is important to

\begin{itemize}
\item Scheiber, Vergebung, p. 114.
\item “Forgiveness”, 
\textit{Stanford Encyclopedia}.
\item P. 7-9.
\item Ibid, p. 8.
\end{itemize}
acknowledge that the wrongdoer is also a human who has feelings, reasons a
history and so on. However, empathy is not the same as sympathy, it is not
necessary to endorse the offender's methods or acts. It is only indispensable to
understand the wrongdoer, especially if he or the group is part of another culture.
This step makes it easier to live with them and accept them as human beings.

4. **Aiming at the renewal of human relationship.** The act of forgiveness implies the
acceptance of the thought to live with the offender again. That either means that
they have to become friends not does it mean that everything that happened is
forgotten. However, especially in the political environment, it means to be able to
co-exist.

All those aspects together yield in a very positive and restoring account of forgiveness,
that Shriver resumes as follows: “Forgiveness in a political context, then, is an act that joins
moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and commitment to repair a fractured human relation.”14 Since
political forgiveness usually concerns countries, ethnical groups or other conflicting parties, it is
also to say, that it is usually an act of third-party-forgiveness because typically it is not the
victims/wrongdoers themselves but representatives.

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4 Summary up to here

So far, it became obvious that forgiveness is a really complex subject. After all this time, mankind is already dealing with it, it is still not possible to give an all-embracing account of forgiveness everybody would completely agree on. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that forgiveness has always to be seen as connected to relationships between two different, conflicting parties, and the attempt to restore this relationship as far as possible. Furthermore, one party has to have wronged the other one. As in this paper shown, there is a big variety of contexts the act of forgiveness can be placed in, and the contexts mentioned here, are not nearly all. However, a very interesting aspect is the fact that all of them are reducible to Hobbes' social contract theory. That, of course, does not mean that Hobbes' invented forgiveness, he was only actually able to trace forgiveness to its roots. So, it does not matter if it the religious, the moral or the political account, all of them function as a kind of insurance. If there would be no way of redemption, over time, people would find themselves back in Hobbes' state of nature or in other words, in war of all against all. Relationships that broke caused by wrongdoing would never get fixed or restored again. So, in order to avoid that, people forgive or make god forgive them.

There are lots of questions which are still waiting to be answered, such as: is it possible to forgive oneself, does the offender have to be sorry in order to be forgiven, is there a thing like third-party-forgiveness (outside of political forgiveness) etc. That does not mean though, that Hobbes is wrong. It only means, as mentioned before, that in its consequences and application, it is still very complex and vague.

Of course, other attempts to explain the origins of forgiveness exist as well, and, it is probably unnecessary to mention, not everyone does agree on Hobbes' social contract theory. Nevertheless, it is a very interesting approach and also a very fertile perspective on forgiveness.
5 Concrete Examples of Political Forgiveness: The United States and Germany

In this chapter I want to show that there are actual cases of political forgiveness that meet all the conditions and steps that were exposed in this paper before. Furthermore, I will show that is, again, possible to draw a line from this particular case of forgiveness to Hobbes' social contract theory. The following example will approach the relationship between the United States and Germany after World War II.

5.1 Before 1945

In order to understand why the Americans need to forgive Germany, why Germany wants to be forgiven and how the entire process took place, it is useful to give a short summary of what happened during World War II.

Everyone knows that Germany was dominated by Hitler and his Nazi regime between 1933-1945. Furthermore, it is a well known fact that World War II started in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Other countries, such as Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia and Greece followed. In all of these countries the Nazis killed over 5 million Jews, they also killed countless Sinti, Romani People and East Europeans. During WWII, over all, 63,523,704 people died. Among these were also 300,000 American soldiers.

After WWII Germany was considered guilty for the following aspects:

- **Crime against humanity**\(^\text{15}\)

Crime against humanity in this case, covers mainly the systematic killing of Jews, Sinti, Romani People, Eastern Europeans, handicapped people and all the others that were considered by the Nazis as “Untermenschen”.

- **War Crimes**

War crimes committed by the Wehrmacht were: the planning and execution of wars of aggression and extermination, mass murder of civilians and putative partisans, abuse and

\(^\text{15}\) The term “Crime against humanity” was first created in 1945 within the context of the Nuremberg Trials against the main characters of the Nazi regime. The definition given by the London Charter in 1945 reads as follows: “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against civilian populations, before or during the war; or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.”
murder of prisoners of war, crime during occupation and the participation at the Holocaust.

However, the United States did not do everything right either. Of course, you cannot compare their actions with the German ones, but nevertheless, this fact probably helped their willingness to forgive Germany, since it made them realize, how fast and effortless it can be to find yourself in a situation in which you did something wrong.

There were basically two things they might would do differently if they had the chance to.

1. They intervened quite late (8. December, 1941), since most of the Americans were of the opinion that they should not interfere in a war that does not really involve them. They sympathized with the idea of isolationism.

2. The United States' troops fought against the Germans with a “‘never again' determination”[16] and they killed many civilians when they bombed Dresden or Hamburg only to discourage the Germans.

5.2 Immediately after 1945

After the war came to an end, Germany needed to be prosecuted by the Allies. That sounds easier than it actually was. Since Nazi-Germany operated on the Führer-principle it was difficult to decide who can be held responsible and who should not be prosecuted. These kind of decisions were made by the Nuremberg Trials between 1945 and 1946. Most of the people outside of Germany agreed that all Germans which did not protest against Hitler were guilty. However, it is certainly not possible to speak an entire country guilty without distinguishing. So, during the Nuremberg Trials the Allies distinguished between leaders and mere collaborators of the Nazi Government and made symbolic retributions against the leading Nazis.[17] Also an important step, and that proves that the Allies abandoned the thought of vengeance, was to be very mindful of who they prosecuted.

The victors know whom to 'forgive' by knowing whom they need to run the industry, the government, the spy system, and the new alliances of their former enemies. […] balances between punitive, restorative, and distributive justice […]: changing the future behavior of enemies, not only punishing them for past behavior […].[18]

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[17] Ibid, pp. 80/81.
[18] Ibid, p. 82.
The Nuremberg Trials also imposed the Denazification on Germany, no one that was member of the SS, a Nazi-functionary or that was involved in war crimes was allowed to work as an official, such as a teacher, a judge or other public related jobs. The Allies also helped the new German government to prosecute more than 12,900 people that were somehow involved in the machinations of the Nazi regime.

Germany also did his part. After the war ended, the Allies made almost every German going to see an concentration camp. Most of them denied they knew that Jews and others were systematically killed in these camps. Either this is true or not, ever since then the realized what happened and what they have done (by maybe doing nothing, such as protesting). This can be considered as hour zero, the people accepted their shame and accepted the past, and at the same time they broke with it and decided to start over and to never happen something like that again. Also, Germany helped willingly to denazificate its country and accepted the prosecutions made by the Allies. They also wrote a new Grundgesetz excluding political parties “aiming to overthrow democratic society.”

Furthermore, the Allies occupied Germany to make sure the Germans accomplish the reconstruction of their country and their society and to make sure they do not do anything that could harm people or other countries again. Further on, they forced them to make reparations and to destroy all kind of industries that were able to support a new war.

5.3 The Process of Reconciliation

As this chapter's title points out, reconciliation is a process that includes a lot of work for the offender as well as for the offended. However, I think it is safe to safe, that Germany and the United States managed it.

Germany broke with its past and started over again. The Germans did not try to forget or to ignore what happened between 1933 and 1945, they wanted to remember and make sure, this could never again happen in their country or anywhere else. They officially accepted their common guilt, their role in history and stopped denying what happened and their participation. Germany was constantly attempted to fix the relationships to France, the United States and Israel.

19 Ibid.
and later joined the NATO. In 1950 Germany also experienced the so called *Wirtschaftswunder*, that helped the country to come back to life. Over all, they kept on showing their good will.

Other countries slowly started to notice that and they, especially their citizens, started to forgive. One of the most symbolic events was probably Ronald Reagan's visit of a cemetery in Bitburg in 1985. The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl invited him as a symbol of their restored relationship. However, this was very controversial news for many Americans, Jews and other victims of WWII. Many of them were afraid this would be a step to forget what happened. Ronald Reagan assured: “Our national pledge is more than 'Never again'. It is also 'Never forget'”.\(^{20}\) And Elie Wiesel, who was a recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize told Reagan, in order to encourage him to go, this: “And I believe [...] that we can and we must work together with them [the Germans] and with all people. And we must work to bring peace and understanding to a tormented world that [...] is still awaiting redemption.”\(^{21}\)

Reagan visited Germany in the end and was of big symbolism. With this step and with his speech, he made the people all over the world realize that 1. reconciliation does not mean to forget, and 2. reconciliation instead of taking revenge means to liberate nations from the cycle of destruction and war.\(^{22}\)
6 Conclusion

But we also acknowledge that West Germany's forty-year reintegration with the West "was only possible because those nations—and not least the former concentration camp inmates and relatives of victims—reached out their hands to us in reconciliation." — Helmut Kohl (German Chancellor)

This quote is extracted from Helmut Kohl's speech he gave in Bitburg. For this paper's purpose it is actually a very good summary of what the root of political forgiveness is. It is a process; forty years after World War II it was still a current topic between the United States and Germany. Furthermore the victims and participating nations were willing to forgive and to give Germany a chance to make amends for what it had done. Another important part in the process of forgiveness is that the offender makes public that he is sorry and proves in every action possible that he is willing to accept the blame and to make up for all the wrong he has done.

However, at this point I would like to recall the four steps of political forgiveness:

1. Making moral judgments of an enemy's behavior.
2. Abandonment of vengeance.
3. Empathy for the enemy's humanity.

In the years after WWII all these steps were taken by the United States. They immediately made moral judgments of Nazi-Germany's behavior, mainly and officially through the Nuremberg Trials. They made very clear what all Germany did wrong and they tried, especially by prosecuting the Nazi-leaders, to take a stand against those crimes.

The United States, further on, abandoned vengeance. They could have taken everything away from the Germans. That even was the plan at one point. In 1944 Henry Morgenthau, the United States Secretary of the Treasures, proposed the so called "Morgenthau-plan", which aimed to eliminate enough of Germany's industry to reduce the country to an agricultural state, in order to destroy any possibility to wage war again. Fortunately, the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, new better: "Such methods do not prevent war, they breed it." Actually this was exactly what happened after World War I and all the restrictions the Treaty of Versailles included.

23 Cf., ibid, p. 99.
24 Ibid, p. 79.
for Germany. Germans had to make very high reparation payments, although they also had to deal with a reduced trading ability and with the loss of parts of their land to surrounding countries. As a result, people became very dissatisfied, angry and they felt discriminated. Hitler took advantage of this spirit in Germany and easily convinced the people to go and take back what should belong to them. This was the beginning of WWII.

The United States also showed empathy for German's humanity by not prosecuting an entire country, but by distinguishing between leaders and mere collaborators. They, as well, considered the Führer-principle, the fact people were “only” following orders. Although, the United States did not consider that as en excuse, they realized that is is actually not too different from the habits in their military, and in addition, they came to understand that they have never lived in a modern dictatorship. So, it is actually hard to answer the question: “What would I have done?”.

The last step, aiming at the renewal of human relationship, was also taken by the United States. Although the Allies made Germany pay reparation payments and reduced their industry, the United States supported Germany by lending the country money in order to reconstruct it again. They also ensured to give Germany enough freedom to build a democracy and also ensured that Germany governed its own foreign affairs by entering different international organizations such as the NATO. Furthermore, the United States pointed the way by forming a kind of political friendships between the countries' leaders, as happened before and in 1985 in Bitburg between Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan.

Although this process, as shown, is so enormously wide in all its aspects, it became obvious, too, that Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory still holds. Especially in the example of the United States and Germany it became clear, that, in the end, it is all about the own advantage. This is not to be understood as a reproach, quite the contrary, it is the core of human nature. Particularly the facts that the United States Troops fought the Germans with a never-again-determination and that they ensured, in every imaginable way, that Germany would never start a war again, are clear hints to Hobbes' theory. They know, they have to live with the Germans in future, and ideally, they do not want them to wage war against them or one of their allies.

In conclusion, it is to say, that forgiveness in general, but also political forgiveness are very wide-ranging topics that always have been and still are late-breaking, since they concern
every single human in the world. I am happy to have chosen to set this topic in relation to Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory, as it appeared to me as a golden thread that was and is to find in so many aspects of human behavior and actions. I am aware of the fact that I did not rewrite history or made an astounding discovery, but nevertheless: is it not interesting to see how simple our reasoning is and what our true motives are?
7 Bibliography