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Public apologia, moral transgression and degradation ceremonies

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Citation: TILEAGA, C., (2012). Public apologia, moral transgression and degradation ceremonies. *Psihologia Sociala*, 30, pp. 67-78.

Additional Information:

- This paper was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Social Psychology (Revista de Psihologie sociala)*. The journal's website is at: <http://www.psih.uaic.ro/~revpsihsoc/>

Metadata Record: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/11599>

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Alexandru I. Cuza University of Iasi, Romania

Please cite the published version.

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Public Apologia, Moral Transgression and Degradation Ceremonies

Abstract : This paper discusses some socio-psychological aspects of reconciliation with the recent communist past in Eastern Europe using the example of a public apologia of a Romanian public intellectual on his alleged collaboration with the *Securitate*, the former communist secret police. The paper argues that public apologia for wrongdoing displays a double dynamic of degradation : personal *and* institutional. It is argued that public apologia serves a two-fold function : on the one hand, it is an attempt to manage a personal “spoiled” identity and provides the grounds for atonement. On the other hand, it is an attempt to (re)write biography by elucidating the influence of the wider social context relevant to identity transformation. By drawing on sociological work on degradation ceremonies and discourse analysis in social psychology, the paper shows how public apologia can be understood as a social product and discursive accomplishment.

Key words : biography, degradation ceremonies, discursive psychology, communist past, public apologia, reconciliation, moral transgression

Apologia

Public apologia coming from politicians, public figures, etc. is the quintessentially speech act in political life (*cf.* Abadi, 1990). As I have shown elsewhere (Tileagă, in press), contemporary researchers of apologia are interested more in its felicitous aspects (Simons, 2000 ; Kampf, 2009) or its role as image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1995) than in its situated discursive organization. For instance, speech-act theorists are interested in the structural features of apologies and their felicity conditions. According to Lakoff (2001), in order to be felicitous, apologies “require at least the *appearance* of contrition” (p. 203, italics in original). For Simons, apologists face “dilemmas of pragmatic nature” (2000, p. 442). Simons analyzes the Clinton apology of 1998 and concludes that the “force” and impact of political apologia come from sounding like a genuine apology. The apologist needs to make the most of the “rhetorical situation” in order to manage successfully a “spoiled” personal and political identity. Other researchers treat apologia as a complex of image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1995). They are interested in the effectiveness of certain image restoration strategies (for instance, denial). For image restoration theorists such as Benoit, “it is time to focus more on offering suggestions concerning when to use certain

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image restoration strategies” (1995, p. 29). For both speech-act and image restoration theorists one needs to understand first and foremost “what works, when, under what circumstances”. The most common assumption of apologia is that what lies behind it is a strategic motivation to save face. Apologia brings into the foreground the cultural norm of remedial work on social relationships through language (Owen, 1983). Apologies can manage threats to face (Goffman, 1971), restore or protect one’s reputation (Benoit, 1995) or reconstruct moral relations (Walker, 2006).

Public apologia can always be constructed by commentators as serving some ulterior, strategic motive of image restoration or reparation. One can always find problems with issues such as insufficient remorse, less penitent discourse, self-serving rhetoric. But saving face, image restoration or reparation are not the sole motivations that explain how public apologia is structured to accomplish social actions: displaying regret, mitigating guilt, making amends, and so on. It can be argued that this perspective on apologia downplays the idea that apologia is also an exercise of managing moral self-assessment that presupposes entering into a dialogical relationship of mutual orientation to “what it means to be moral”, “what it means to say sorry”, and so on. Public apologia, either as expression of a guilty conscience or an attempt to save face, is first and foremost a discursive performance. Apologia is a social activity, part and parcel of a *performative discursive order*. As Meier has cogently put it, apologia provides an “especially apt object of study for exploring the relationship between underlying cultural assumptions and linguistic behavior” (1998, p. 227).

Apologia displaces the (confessional) self into the “social”, opening a public space of judgment. The problem is less whether apologies are felicitous or not, whether they are composed of effective image restoration strategies, but what they *do*, what they *accomplish* in a space of public visibility. The simplest way of approaching public apologia is to consider it as some attempt at self-defense. That is, incidentally, the cultural meaning of apologia we get from Plato’s *Apology*. As such, apologia is a species of argumentative discourse. As Potter (1996) suggested, every piece of argumentative discourse necessarily can be described in terms of “offensive” (critical) rhetorical aspects in so far as it explicitly or implicitly seeks to undermine rival versions of events, and “defensive” (justificatory) aspects in so far as speakers attempt to “inoculate” their accounts from attack by rivals. One can go even further and argue that apologia is more than a special case of offensive and defensive rhetoric. What also counts is the rhetorical trajectory of accounts. When you apologize you start something – you start a rhetorical chain of explicit and implicit meanings, presuppositions, implications. Rhetorical claims can support, qualify or undermine earlier claims. Attack or defense can be rhetorically tailored to respond to cultural demands related to atonement, regret, morality, and so on.

Apologia is not a self-sufficient speech act; it opens a dialogical relation between apologist and “public”. Research has shown that public apologies are not “accepted” in the same way as personal apologies are (those in face-to-face conversation, for instance, see Robinson, 2004). For instance, in her analysis of perpetrators of extreme violence, Payne has shown how “paradoxically, the act of confession [and apology] makes perpetrators seem less, not more, trustworthy: that they could commit atrocity casts doubt on the earnestness of their subsequent remorse. Perpetrators only rarely craft the kind of remorseful confessions that convince audiences of their sincerity” (2008, p. 56). Apologia places a psychological and moral “burden” on both producer and recipient/audience (Lakoff, 2001). One needs to be able to analyze how this psychological and moral “burden” is managed, especially by apologists but also by audiences. We usually tend to assume that there is a “public” out there that is easily identifiable, that demands an apologia, that passes a judgment, and who

is coherent in its stance of indignation directed at alleged wrongdoing. It is usually assumed that the “public” embodies a unitary and coherent moral vision of society that informs decisions of who is (or not) decent or respectable (Goode, 2004). Yet, the moral vision of society is not unitary, as it can include different moral visions, can be quite diverse, heterogeneous, and including a variety of morality stances, on a continuum from absolutist to relativist stances (Tileagă, 2012).

Moral transgression and degradation ceremonies

Public apologia is in most cases the consequence of moral transgression. Indignation, outrage, disgust, disbelief are just some reactions to moral transgression. Moral indignation is perhaps the strongest of reactions. Moral indignation is expressed through public denunciation (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 421). Public denunciation brings with it various forms of identity degradation and transformation (see for instance, the McCarthy era in the United States or Stasi informers in East Germany). Once denounced, an individual’s identity is transformed, degraded. He or she has to justify the self to others.

The same applies to what one might call self-denunciations, self-confessions of wrongdoing. In this context it is perhaps more beneficial to conceive of public apologia as an identity demotion or self-degradation ceremony (*cf.* Garfinkel, 1956). The atonement rituals of politicians and public figures create a very specific form of moral justice based on the degradation of one’s self in front of others, a form of identity management whose consequences are sometimes very hard to predict. The chosen *method* of self-degradation can have different effects on successful spoiled identity management and successful reintegration, reconstruction of moral relations. In the context of coming to terms with the past in Eastern Europe, I am concerned with how public apologia as self-degradation ceremony constructs the subjectivity of the apologist and how it can offer a different perspective on social remembering not in terms of retrieval and storage, and generally, “representation” of the past, but rather as social practice that facilitates the creation of subjectivities, of different perspectives on the sources of self and context. As this paper will hopefully show, subjectivities are created and “spoiled” identities are managed by recounting different versions of the past through the mediation of other selves, material traces, narratives (*cf.* Brown, 2012).

What Garfinkel (1956) referred to as “degradation ceremonies” are exercises of identity management. Garfinkel insists mostly on the formal aspects of degradation ceremonies in settings such as courts of law, or the army. Formal settings are sanctioned by a set of strict rules – behaviour is judged against objective, organizationally relevant and ratified standards of behaviour. When describing degradation ceremonies, Garfinkel describes a process from which there is no escape, no loophole. It is a process that follows the formal sequence: disapproval > degradation > exclusion. The process of formal degradation insists upon fitting an identity of “total” deviance with a single, coherent set of motives, into a black and white scheme of things. As Erikson argues, degradation ceremonies “are almost irreversible” (1962, p. 311). You cannot go back to what you were. If you have been found to transgress the rules of an institutional community you will be demoted by that institution to a lesser species of identity or excluded. What happens when you extend the notion of degradation ceremonies to the public sphere? What happens when you have to deal with what one might call self-degradation?

The essence of a self-degradation ceremony is: *I call upon you (the audience) to bear witness that I am not what I appear!* To degrade someone is to declare that person “no

longer one of us” (this can take the form of exclusion or demotion). Self-degradation involves self-demotion. In the public sphere, degradation is not posited on some hierarchical structure (like in the case of military, courts of law), but rather is linked to the contingency of the public sphere, where different opinions can be held and ideological dilemmas exist (Billig, 1991). Demoting someone in the military can seem uncontroversial. Usually “one is found guilty” and brought to face the others (his/her peers). What happens when one finds himself/herself guilty? What happens when the apologist willingly diminishes his own community status?

The paper argues that public apologia as self-demotion, self-degradation ceremony opens and takes into account “multiple interpretations of responsibility” (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994, p. 146). I contend that public apologia (especially that related to alleged collaboration with the *Securitate*) can be considered a special case of self-degradation. In the context of alleged collaboration with the secret police, the apologist declares himself to be a certain sort of degraded person (a “snitch”, an “informer”). The broader question is how is self-degradation accomplished? Self-degradation is akin to an auto-ethnography where the “ethnographic exemplar” (Gergen & Gergen, 2002) is the “self”. Taking oneself as an “ethnographic exemplar” is a way to ensure that a deviant, morally transgressive, identity “does not become a master status trait that overwhelms other identities” (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994, p. 142). As the analysis will show, auto-ethnography cannot be accomplished without relying on a documentary version of reality (Smith, 1990; Prior, 2004). The self is bound by the formal archive of the *Securitate* and by *Securitate*’s work as professional degrader, as producer and user of “technologies of self” for control, oppression and manipulation, and surveillance of individuals. Such technologies of self have created diverse “moral careers”, to use Goffman’s term, for various individuals (both those directly participating to the system and those suffering the consequences of its implementation).

The *Securitate* as a “total” institution

The *Securitate* can be likened to a structure whose role is primordially to “degrade”, that is, to transform, constitute and reconstitute identities and biographies. As Garfinkel suggested, it is usually “organizational variables” that will “determine the effectiveness of a program of degradation tactics” (p. 420). The foremost degradation tactic of the *Securitate* was to ensure that no one was what he or she appeared to be! The essence of *Securitate*’s work was to transform an individual’s self-identity and replacing it with a range of “new” identities (from the apparatus of surveillance to the on-the-ground operatives or informal collaborators). Its method of “degradation” relied on an organizational ethic and pragmatics that constituted identities through the mediation of the *Securitate* “file”. The *Securitate*’s degradation work was directed towards transforming an individual’s identity into an identity lower in the relevant group’s scheme of social types. *Securitate*’s degradation work created moral categories. One of them is that of the “informer”, the “snitch”¹. “Informer” is a moral category that derives from a whole array of practices, ways of apportioning responsibilities, surveillance and reporting activities, etc. The *Securitate*, as a “total” (Goffman) or “complete”

1. Depending on the socio-communicative context in which it is used, in actual social usage or as an institutional label, the category “informer” can sometimes have a vague or a very definite meaning, and can be applied to people loosely or strictly.

(Foucault)¹ institution, was a world cut off from the rest, with its own rules, responsibilities, and serving the interests of social oppression and the ruling communist order. Its “totality” comes from subordinating individual subjectivities, needs, actions, and motivations to state bureaucratic and social control. The “total” institution of the *Securitate* functioned as a perverse social arrangement that personified a rational plan of social control that exercises power over all the spheres of an individual’s life – private and public life, sexuality, wishes, desires, motives, and so on.

As a “total” institution serving the interests of a totalitarian social and political order, the *Securitate* reproduced itself as a control system of creating subjectivities and identities for whoever was located in its documents (regardless whether you were an informer, or informed on). The *Securitate* created an “archontic infrastructure”² (Middleton & Brown, 2005), where categories of knowledge, memory and practice, but also individual biographical “durations” became collected, stored, in the name of an oppressive ruling, institutional/state order (Smith, 1999). The *Securitate*’s operational archive (files, documents, guidelines, orders, etc.) was such an archontic infrastructure. The “archon” (the *Securitate*) charged with the safekeeping of the archive constructed an authoritative version of reality that not only controlled, but also transformed the self-definition of whoever was indexed in the archive. Individuals were irretrievably attached and *defined* by this archontic structure.

Any contemporary attempt at (re)writing or re-claiming biography from under the sway of the *Securitate* is required to take into account this structure (and its internal mechanism). Personal recollections, self-disclosures, stand in a *sine qua non* relation to an intricate “network of mediated activities” (Middleton & Brown, 2005, p. 147) around state control and surveillance. The *Securitate* archive is not simply a support to remembering biographical details, but mediates a complex rhetoric of identity and memory. The individual can place the *Securitate*’s documentary reality within “biographical” time, and use it as a resource to fill biographical “gaps” and manage a “spoiled” identity. At the same time, the individual is placed by the *Securitate*’s documentary reality within a semiotic sequence of surveillance practices and organizationally accomplished sense of identity.

Historians and social scientists have demonstrated cogently how an analysis of *Securitate*’s documents can reveal the inner workings of the *Securitate* (see for instance, Albu, 2008). They could demonstrate how *Securitate*’s central authority was subordinated to the state and party’s authority. They could show the ways in which the *Securitate* served the goals of “total” control and “total” incarnation of the guiding values of the socialist project. They could expose its ultimate goal: to produce disciplined and docile selves that would serve the reproduction of the communist social, political and ideological order. Although important in its own right, historical and documentary analysis focuses less on identity transformation itself, on how people are transformed once they are located, mentioned, in the *Securitate* “file” or descriptions accompanying documents. Identity transformation is a process linked to personal identity, memory, biography and an organizational accomplishment of accountability (see Tileagă, 2011). The public apologist is engaged in a process of understanding the social mechanism and social arrangements that have led to its identity transformation.

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1. On the notion of “total institutions” see Goffman (1961). On “complete” institutions see Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. For “degradation” linked to institutions, and on the humiliating organization, see Smith (2002).
 2. By archontic infrastructure I mean the use of formal classifications, and standards, and other “technical” ways of capturing subjectivities (cf. Middleton and Brown, 2005).

Public apologia and self-degradation

The example discussed here is that of a public apologia of a Romanian public intellectual on his alleged collaboration with the *Securitate* in an open letter sent to a national newspaper. The letter is divided by the writer into two parts: the “Essence” and the “Existence”. The letter is described by the newspaper as a “harrowing document”. It is placed under “Current affairs” (“Actualitate”) with the gist prefaced by the author’s name: “Am turnat la Securitate” (“I was an informer for the *Securitate*”). The letter (and apologia contained in it) is suggestive of an identity transformation (see Tileagă, 2009b for a discursive analysis of the “Essence”). From the outset the writer declares himself to be a certain sort of degraded person, a person of a lower identity in the relevant group’s scheme of social types – an “informer”, a “snitch”. As I have mentioned previously, in formal terms, degradation presupposes a process of demotion in terms of grade, rank, or status. It also entails undergoing certain stages or imposition of certain degrading postures. In Goffman’s terms, a person’s self is “mortified” by the dispossession of the person from previously held roles, dispossession of the person of cherished possessions, forcing the adoption of stances inconsistent with one’s notion of self, degrading postures or deference stances, exposure to humiliating circumstances, restrictions imposed on self-determination and autonomy. The subsequent examples taken from the “Existence” show how similar concerns can be applied to issues of self-mortification, self-degradation in public apologia.

In extract 1 one can see the writer engaged in an effort of “de-certifying” moral transgression by placing it within a self-reflexive stance that turns the self into an “object” of public and self-scrutiny. Notice the use of rhetorical questions that follow the opening sentence to frame the issue as one of genuine moral concern (on the use of rhetorical questions in discourse see Ilie, 1999). The questions are presented as genuine moral questions with a predictable psychological answer: “the stigma of duplicity”¹.

[1] The 1980-1982 phase of my collaboration with the *Securitate* was for me one of intense moral crisis... How did I live through that period? How is that period inscribed in my memory? With the stigma of duplicity. Nonetheless, as I have shown, I contend that I did not ultimately, in the last analysis, betray my friends and acquaintances.

The rhetorical questions act as premises to a morality stance. The “stigma of duplicity” indexes a self-degradation move whereby, as Goffman argued, the writer can “split” himself into two parts, “the part that is guilty of an offence and the part that disassociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule” (1971, p. 113). The use of the psychological term “stigma” signals how duplicity was experienced: as degradation of self, as symbolic identity “mark” that one cannot “shed”, “get rid of”. “Duplicity” has the effect of lowering self-identity on the group’s morality scheme. Yet duplicity does not tell the whole story. The writer creates a symbolic pecking order of degradation, and is careful to distance himself from the lowest and despicable position on the group’s morality scheme: “betraying your friends and acquaintances”.

Depicting the writer as trying to “save face” would be too simple an explanation. What one notices instead is an intricate justificatory scaffolding that includes moral self-assessment

1. The writer seems to assume that the implied addressee knows what it means to experience an “intense moral crisis”.

and management of moral identity. In extract 2 the writer justifies his “silence” by pointing to an implicit paradox: the paradox of “freedom”. In order for a moral identity to be upheld, silence needs to be explained. The prolonged silence is construed as an opportunity to postpone the recognition of an undignified identity. Not confessing, not disclosing the details of a tarnished past, means breaking free of a subjectivity “regimented” by the bureaucratic and archontic infrastructure of the *Securitate*. Paradoxically, it is not confession that liberates the person, but silence. The writer can be seen as symbolically opposing the degradation work of the *Securitate*, one that restricts an individual’s autonomy and freedom of action. He points to a paradoxical situation where freedom is not actually “freedom” as everyone knew or experienced it.

[2] if I haven’t talked about these things not even after 1989, when my life wasn’t threatened by the “system”, it is because I wanted to be free for a while and to build myself a new life before the past would catch up with me. In this way I have gained a biography... a free biography for the first time, although, until today, sabotaged from the inside, and from today in the public space, by my silence. Anyway, all those who have had to hide anything serious from others will understand what I mean.

Implicitly, the writer points to the degrading power of the *Securitate*. Recounting and reclaiming his biography are conducted under the aegis and degrading authority of the *Securitate*. The writer finds himself in the position of having to “curtail” his own self and expresses a feeling of being “trapped” in the situation created by his own disclosure. He is reflexively aware that he lacks the freedom to defend himself, or the freedom he had before the disclosure. Rhetorically, the writer inoculates himself against being seen as having concealed the truth from some ulterior motive. He describes concealment as *forced* concealment rather than stemming from some hidden motivation. A “new life” and “free biography” are constrained both by inner resolutions as well external constraints.

In extract 3 one can see how the stance from extract 2 is further explicated through an account that testifies to *losing* one’s capacity to present a genuine self, image to others, due to “passage” through the institution of the *Securitate*.

[3] I hated the *Securitate*, the whole party-state and all its followers, with a double hate: for what they were doing to the country, and for what they were doing to me, from the privations that we were all suffering to the pressure that made me lower myself to the undignified condition of a snitch. All that remains is that all those who will judge me harshly not believing what I have to say in my defense – the defense of a person who recognizes his guilt – to take nonetheless into account *all* my life.

The reference to “hate” places the confession in the realm of a psychological and emotional relation to personal history. Hate is a psychological term for denoting an extreme emotional position, in this case describing a “total” ethical positioning. As Edwards (1999) noted emotion terms can be used to bolster a subjective view/position and support the factuality and plausibility of narrative accounts. The writer provides a basis for his relationship with the *Securitate* by placing it *inside* a strong subjective emotional stance. Hate is not an emotional stance from without; it needs to be justified through reference to self and the collective (“the country”), which are the two sides of the same coin. In another self-reflexive move the degradation operated by the *Securitate* and its “pressure” mechanisms is recognized as identity degradation to a lower condition, the “undignified condition of a snitch”.

What is interesting here is how the writer constructs his self-identity as the (inevitable) outcome of past and present subject positions and social practices (Wetherell, 2007). A variety of social practices (including especially those of the *Securitate*) have the power to demote the person to a transgressive, “undignified” category – the informer, the snitch. He describes and enacts a “deference stance” to the *Securitate*’s power of degradation. It is this deference stance which mortifies the self and forces it into an undignified posture. The indignity that the *Securitate* has placed upon himself is complemented by the indignity that he must suffer now, opening the self to the public, facing friends and acquaintances, and the wider public.

The account ends with an implicit appeal to impartiality and thoroughness; to a type of judgment that includes the whole scope of biographical details (“all my life”). The emphasis is on “all”, as an indication of a total commitment to fair judgment. It is implied that only a *comprehensive* judgment can counter or oppose the identity degradation by status – or institutional “contamination”. Considering biography as a whole, and taking into account the formal degradation process of the *Securitate* is seen as the basis of a fair and moral judgment.

The writer can flexibly bring into play the “objective” and “subjective” features that are relevant to the trajectory of his account as showing genuine atonement. Public apologia involves a ratio of degradation as well as reintegrative meanings/orientations. Among the “subjective” features (see extract 4) are direct expressions of remorse (“I always felt culpable”, “I feel guilty today”) and recognition of the “sin” (“having lied to them through omission”). “Objective” features are linked to the loss of individual control over personal information, information and knowledge on (and of) the self, that is violated and relinquished to the formal archive (see extract 5).

[4] I always felt culpable, it was very difficult to see eye to eye with my friends. And I don’t know whether I would ever be able to do it. I feel guilty today, as I did then, mostly for having lied to them through omission.

[5] Only the re-finding of my *Securitate* dossiers (or theirs) from that time will bring a little emotional balance. Until then, only penitence and persistence in a sentiment of culpability is left for me, one that I had always experienced towards them.

The loss of an individual’s control over personal and biographical evidence compels the writer into a deference stance to the “archontic” power of the *Securitate*. This is a context where self-assessment and self-defense is almost impossible. By virtue of being indexed in the *Securitate*’s dossiers, he is continually exposed to status-contamination (until otherwise proven, he is a “snitch”, he is like the other despicable “informers”). The lack of evidence stemming from the *Securitate* archive denies the writer the right to defend himself and distinguish himself from others. Social actors display and put together their own “truth-finding engine” (Lynch & Bogen, 1996). The writer’s method goes through the *Securitate* archive. Self-degradation is placed in the context of the “success” of the institutional degradation ceremony (that of the *Securitate*) and the perverse effect of the *Securitate*’s transformation of identity.

Displaying atonement does not absolve him, but rather places him in a paradoxical situation. He can affirm his side of the story, but he cannot fully defend it. Apologia is usually accompanied by a “plea for closure”, yet the writer is unable to close the hermeneutic circle opened by the “archive”. Knowledge (as yet undisclosed) of a person’s deeds has the power to demote the person to a lower moral type (Garfinkel, 1956) and “keep” it there.

Concluding comments

In all the examples presented here, one can see the writer engaged in a struggle against an imputation of a deviant moral essence. Reflexively, accounts are framed as a self-dialogue or self-interrogation. The writer is the “interrogator” who is trying to get himself to make admissions about his own past and biography. The writer dramatizes, he “stages” the story of his own self-degradation. The moral of the story is that passage through institutions (like the *Securitate*) can have both dramatic and subtle effects. These effects continue, perniciously, even long after the institutions lost their active force as manipulators of subjectivities. As professional degrader, the *Securitate* can extend its reach even after it ceased to fulfill its function as a control and disciplinary mechanism of an authoritarian state.

As a consequence, the writer’s moral self-portrait (and associated moral implications) is unfinished. Deviance, transgression, guilt, though expressed and justified, are paradoxically undecidable. Individual memory needs to be complemented by organizational memory; individual subjectivity, experiential biography needs to be complemented by “subjectivity” as a product of organizational processing. Organizational memory is potentially available there to confirm, use, erase, or deny the identity degradation “record”, to promote a different version of identity, one that may bring absolution. The personal (personal biography, personal identity) and the institutional web of the *Securitate* are not separate dimensions of social life but rather stand in a complex relationship. The perverse effect of the *Securitate*’s degradation of identity is complemented by a move of self-degradation and attempt at reintegration (when the confessor/apologist faces the public). What I referred to as a process of (re)writing biography (see Tileagă, 2011) is not simply a process of re-claiming identity from under the control of the *Securitate* archive. (Re)writing biography is mediated by a double dynamic of degradation. Any public moral judgment or social scientific analysis has to be sensitive to this double dynamic of degradation.

This has implications for how we study identity, especially when focusing on social practices of reconciliation with the recent communist past. Public apologia is a social practice whose effect is to constitute a “psychology, formulate a mental life” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 668) and a distinctive identity for the apologist. It is sometimes too easily forgotten that public apologia is a performance, ritual, ceremony, which opens a space for “dignified restoration of the harm resulting from wrongdoing” (Braithwaite, 2000, p. 129). The repentance rituals of politicians and public figures create a very specific form of restorative justice (Braithwaite, 1999) where the apology is the necessary (and sometimes, sufficient) condition for successful degradation and successful reintegration. Analyses of public apologies tend to focus less on their restorative properties and ways of discursively managing moral identity and moral accountability (Tileagă, 2009b; 2011).

Analyzing apologia as a *social product and discursive accomplishment*, researchers can also draw attention to the various sources of subjectivity and identity. Identity can be sourced from the *inside*, the outcome of a self-reflexive exercise (the narratives people tell about themselves reflect on their own selves), as well as from the *outside* (the way individuals or groups are situated by other people’s stories or institutions of social regulation and control). Individuals are involved in the construction of “usable” pasts (Wertsch, 2007) which rely on constructing some version of “usable” identities – acceptable to self and others. The interplay between inside and outside sources or constraints on identity construction can help us understand the vagaries, ambivalences of personal and social positioning, the difficulties and ambiguities of personal and social memory in Eastern Europe.

The process of degradation (personal and institutional) discussed in this paper can be seen as encompassing both inside and outside sources of identity construction. Social actors can use degradation, in its various forms, as a moral resource for re-thinking personal and social identities. In order to do so, social actors need to engage with a textually mediated reality (Lynch, 1999 ; Tileagă, 2011). In the context of public apology for wrongdoing, individual self-degradation is the creative practice that provides the possibility of resisting the “archontic power” (Derrida, 1997) and the institutional degradation operated by the communist state and its secret police. Social actors’ own identity demotion, their thoughts, personal recollections or material archives act as “memory devices” (Featherstone, 2006) and identity sources, means of resisting or opposing the “success” of past institutional degradation.

Apologia publică, transgresiunea și ceremoniile de degradare

Rezumat : Acest articol se oprește asupra câtorva aspecte psihosociale ale reconcilierii cu trecutul recent în Europa de Est aplecându-se asupra unei apologii publice a unui intelectual public român pe tema colaborării sale prezumtive cu Securitatea, fosta poliție secretă comunistă. Articolul sugerează că apologia publică pentru greșelile făcute în trecut ia forma unei dinamici duble de degradare : personală și instituțională. Apologia publică îndeplinește două funcții : pe de o parte, e o încercare de a „negocia” o identitate personală „pătată”. Astfel, oferă justificarea necesară răscumpărării păcatului. Pe de altă parte, e o încercare de (re)scriere a biografiei prin elucidarea influenței și rolului contextului social mai larg relevant al transformării identitare. Folosindu-se de rezultate ale cercetărilor sociologice asupra ceremoniilor de degradare și analiza discursului în psihologia socială, articolul arată cum apologia publică poate fi înțeleasă ca produs social și realizare discursivă.

Cuvinte-cheie : biografie, ceremonii de degradare, psihologie discursivă, trecut comunist, apologie publică, reconciliere, transgresiune morală

Excuses publiques, transgression morale et cérémonies de dégradation

Résumé : Cet article présente certains aspects psychosociaux de la réconciliation avec le passé récent dans l’Europe de l’Est en s’appuyant sur une apologie publique d’un intellectuel public roumain sur le thème de sa collaboration présumptive avec la *Securitate*, l’ancienne police secrète communiste. L’article suggère que l’apologie publique pour fautes commises dans le passé prend la forme d’une double dynamique de dégradation : personnelle *et* institutionnelle. L’apologie publique a deux fonctions : d’une part, est une tentative de «négocier» une identité personnelle «tachée». Ainsi, elle offre la justification nécessaire pour la réparation du péché. D’autre part, est une tentative de réécrire la biographie en elucidant l’influence et le rôle du contexte social plus large lié à la transformation identitaire. L’article souligne l’apport des recherches sociologiques sur les cérémonies de dégradation et l’analyse du discours en psychologie sociale comme moyens de comprendre l’apologie publique comme produit social et accomplissement discursif.

Mots-clés : biographie, cérémonies de dégradation, psychologie discursive, passé communiste, apologie publique, réconciliation, transgression morale

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