

THE NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
Law, Policy, & Society

To: Students and professors of INT3206

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Subject: Shame and forgiveness (follow-up to the discussion in the class)

During the reading of Ms. Williams book I had still in my mind the situation back in the Prague and my feelings I have got from my two years of life spent in the United States (so far). The Czech situation I have explained in the class, but I feel, that it is not all I would like to say to the theme of racism in USA.

First of all, I have to emphasize, that the whole idea of racism is somehow foreign to me. There were of course no blacks in the Czech Republic and although I believe that Czechs are quite racist, it is usually the result by ignorance of most of my dear fellow Czechs rather than by a long tradition of racism. Only group of "other" people present in the Czech society for the last thousand years were Jews, who were eradicated from our area in the Second World War.¹ Otherwise we used to live in racially rather homogeneous society. There have been only two racially related issues for the last ten years: relation with many Vietnamese (who were occupied as gastarbaiters before 1989 and some of them remained in the Czech republic) and especially the current very painful relations with Roma (Gypsies), who were totally marginalized by the Communist regime and kept as non-existent before 1989. However, although Czech have found after 1989 that they are terribly unable to cope with the fact, that they are not only people on the face of the Earth, the issue of racism does not seem to be so important as in the United States (mainly because, frankly speaking, the Roma and Vietnamese are much smaller minority in the Czech republic; approximately just around 3%). I am not saying that to excuse us from being racist, just to explain I have never thought about the issue of racism so much as probably an average American did.

¹Technically, there were Roma (Gypsies) as well in the Central Europe since the twelfth century, but their nomadic lifestyle kept them outside of society, so that only since the nineteenth century they were really present in the society, and their position in the society began to be really an issue in 1990s'.

Let me repeat the idea I have tried to explain in the class. I met many people in the former socialist Czechoslovakia, who were blaming their failure on the Communist regime and the general oppression of freedom. "If I could, I would be . . ." The Communism then provided simple excuse, why they were terrible failure and mess in the time. However, when the regime fell down in 1989, many of them have not begun to be successful either. Some members of this thought-to-be-victimized group then created "dregs of the society" (literally in Czech "sediment" or "mud"), current voters of the Communist Party and some other extremist parties (part of them voted for the Social Democratic party, now in power). Surprisingly enough, it seems to me, that majority of supporters of the Communist Party does not come from the former apparatchiks (who swiftly switched to support the biggest parties, where they expected biggest benefits for themselves now very much laissez fair entrepreneurs), but mostly from the old people and very strange group of middle aged middle management, engineers, academia, etc., who were too old to adapt to the changed environment and too young to be satisfied with not having career, bitter that they hopes for getting on the top have vanished, and that they are now overcame by the young people, educated after 1989 and earning much bigger money than they could even dream about.

Whenever I meet such person, I have to think again about the terrible mental trap they were caught in. The real persuasion that there is somebody who caused my failure, and against whose power I have no protection, leads to terrible passivity and despair, and subsequently to even bigger failure, despair, and envy. It seems to me that there is no other way how to get from this hellish ring than by forgiving to the previous regime (and its leaders) and letting the history to be just an history. Of course, it does not help to make revenge on the former perpetrators of authoritarianism in the country but sole accusing and trying to show the moral disaster of the former regime is not helpful either.

I have written about these people mainly because I found similar feelings in Ms. Williams book. There is very similar feeling present in the Czech society, the feeling of victims who were hurt and they are expecting somebody to ask for forgiveness and compensate them for their wounds. However, nobody comes and nobody offers satisfaction for all pain. We hope now that we will be made whole by our rich uncles from the Western Europe, but nobody can make these wounds healed than ourselves.

To make my point more understandable, let me make small personal remark. I participate this half-a-year in the group of people from my church, who try to overcome their wounds acquired during our youth in relations with parents, friends, etc. (of course, that these experiences were not crimes or something so terrible, but rather things which everybody acquires in some form from some-

times so not-perfect people around us). The biggest lesson which I learned in this group is the fact, that even when we were truly wounded and hurt by sins of others, what matters for us are not these wounds themselves but our reaction to them. Does a boy who was hurt by requirements of his perfectionist father accept demanding value scale of his parents or can he still love and accept himself even in time of his personal failure? Will he try to earn his father's acceptance and love even long time after his father is no longer physically present in his life? More important for his current situation is how he deals with his wounds and his previously wrong and sinful reactions to such wounds. Will he forgive his father so that he may begin in the new direction and hope that he will grow to better life or will he gradually turn sour into bitter and disappointed old man with a lot of explanations why his life was bad? Certainly that I draw here very simplified picture, but I hope you can get my point.

What is true for the individual is I believe true for the nation or racial group. Will the Czechs be able to accept their position in the world as honorable and worthy nation and will we turn to the new challenges standing in front of us, or will we seek revenge until we turn into atomized third world Banana republic with plenty internal conflicts and despair? Of course such question is again too much black-and-white and that there are many attempts in the right direction and on the other hand it is true, that in order to get on par with the rest of the European Community the Czech economy will need plenty of investment from abroad. And yes, before true forgiveness may happen, it is necessary to name the wound and guilt of those who caused it.

However, I am persuaded that the biggest damage to the wounded individual and nation as well lies in their bondage to their wounds and inability to decide freely. Therefore the value of such naming sin as a sin and sinner as such lies solely in the fact, that it gives an ability to stand up, forgive, and react well to future challenges.

After the long trip over the ocean I can get back to here to comment on prof. Williams book and our discussion on the last Wednesday. I believe, of course, that inhuman treatment of black slaves was terrible and it must be made known how terrible it was and how terrible racist resentments in the current society are. However, I am afraid that it is very bad service to African-Americans, if we stop here. And I am not talking about the affirmative actions or about another real attempts to compensate blacks for their past. I am talking about what I feel from the book as a kind of "racial unforgiveness" (if I may use such term), position of hurt victim who spends too much of his energy on persuading surrounding people, that he was hurt and *therefore* how much he *deserves* compensation for the past injustices. I do not see in her book a wish to get out from this position of victim. It of course seems like adding injury to

insult, when I am saying that there is something wrong with victim. I am not saying by any means that blacks are to be blamed for *traumatic experience* itself but I believe that very difficult stalemate situation of the interracial relation in America is at least partially the result of *their reaction* to horrible sins committed against them.

What is even worse is that the majority more or less accepts the role of victimizers given to them by the blacks. Unfortunately, it is much less painful to throw “away” big amount of money to the social security system and to programs of affirmative action (I do not know exactly how these social programs are exactly financed), than to begin honest and thorough process of “national repentance” and acceptance of blacks as truly equal partners in life of the American society not “immature children” who need always help because they are not able to help themselves. Unfortunately, without such reformation of the relations between African-Americans and whites I do not believe it is possible to lead majority of African-Americans to achieving self-sustaining life and to eliminate their current hopeless poverty.

I do not want to propose elimination of support to African-American communities and to those who are desperately poor. By any means! A human society has to help to those who are unfortunate and who need help of those who were more successful. However, what I would like to see, is reconsideration of this *help* as help and not as something what African-Americans *deserve* as compensation for their past hurts. Not because I would like to justify whites from the sins of their great-grandfathers, but because I believe that there is no other way how to really help to great-grandchildren of those who were enslaved.