
Review

On the uses and abuse of political apologies

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Are public apologies acts of ethics or politics? Modern political thought tends to understand the *res publica* as a domain that differs from the private: answering to particular reasons and demanding distinctive forms of action and association. In the public domain, political apologies appear as an eruption of a very personal transaction. This compels some scholars to look beyond the gamut of established political concepts to describe, explain and judge. These authors draw upon the roles and functions of apologies in personal, religious and communal ‘ethical domains’ and apply insights they derive to political apologies. By contrast, other authors suggest that the apology becomes very different during its transmutation from a private to a public thing, limiting the usefulness of ethical insights. The tension between ethical analyses of *politicised apologies* and political analyses of *apology politics* runs through the 11 chapters of this edited volume. Smith’s contribution sets up the division, as he identifies a series of challenges to understanding political apologies as extensions or variations of what he treats as paradigmatic practice – the account of the ‘categorical’ interpersonal apology. Although he identified those challenges previously (Smith, 2008), it is useful to have them restated to help frame the remaining chapters.

‘Ethical’ chapters that look to answer some of Smith’s challenges often draw from religious topics and themes to understand *politicised apologies*. Also building on previous work, Celermajer’s (2009) chapter concerns how the Catholic Church might respond to the systemic abuse of children. She advocates an apology by the Catholic Church itself – an apology issued in addition to those required from specific abusers or their immediate superiors. Such an apology would perform important functions in changing the identity of the Church. Celermajer argues that the Church can use the conceptual and ritual tools of religious penitence to rebuild itself and its external relations. Attention to the religious character of apologies encourages an interest in the public ritual. The chapter by Michel-André Horelt considers the behaviour of Polish and Russian leaders during Christian rites memorialising the Katyn atrocity. Horelt gives particular weight to connection between ritual and the body, describing how Polish and Russian officials stood, knelt and touched, as, in Horelt’s analysis,

their joint ceremonials ‘brought about a rapprochement between the parties’ (p. 92). Horelt’s discussion of elite behaviour resonates with Nina Schneider’s causal analysis of the political effects of a particular apology, the 1995 Presidential apology for state-sponsored torture, murder and disappearances in Brazil. Schneider’s chapter concerns the consequences of that apology and tries to trace some of its effects on elite beliefs and relationships. For Schneider, the Brazilian apology was ‘unauthoritative’ because many state officials were unapologetic and combined to stymie political change (p. 165).

Religious themes continue in the chapter by Stefan Engert, who deploys a ‘theological concept of contrition’ (p. 97) to analyse German Holocaust redress. There are, he says, three elements of contrition – remorse, public confession and penance. Engert reads the post-war history of German *Wiedergutmachung* as fulfilling those elements culminating in an ersatz *absolutio* bestowed by the Israeli Prime Minister (pp. 108–109). In a similar vein, Juan Espindola uses a Christian account of apology as oriented towards forgiveness in his critique of the exposure (lustration) of Stasi informants. Espindola describes an ‘exemplary forgiver’, the Lutheran Pastor Uwe Holmer, who sheltered Erich and Margot Honecker for 3 months in 1990. Holmer’s account of forgiveness as a personal unburdening of resentment is necessarily a private phenomenon that calls for, or responds to, a similarly private act of repentance (pp. 189–190). Apology and forgiveness thereby constitute a bilateral relationship between offenders and survivors. But, as Espindola notes, the economy of the political apology is not always bilateral. He suggests that when offered through the media to a public, and not directly to survivors, political apologies are likely to fail to create the equitable preconditions for an ongoing relationship.

The remaining chapters in the volume attempt to situate *apology politics* within ‘freestanding’ political accounts. Michael Cunningham looks at four political problems with political apologies. The first is familiar from transitional justice discussions and concerns the possibility that apology (justice) may conflict with other goods (for example, civic peace). The second is that some apologies require a political recognition of group identities that are at odds with the universal category of citizenship. The third concerns nationalist demands for positive historiography. The fourth considers the difficulties of apologetic representation. Who do state officials represent when they apologise to their constituents?

Alice MacLachlan’s chapter is among the volume’s best. MacLachlan criticises those who cross the public/private division carrying a ‘check-list’ of elements for the successful apology. The functions that apology serves are manifold and the salience of any function will depend on contextual factors. This does not prohibit descriptive theory from sketching the ‘minimal conditions of a valid apology’ (p. 14), but it prevents any ‘check-list’ account from providing much qualitative guidance. MacLachlan goes on to employ Arendt’s analysis of human action in an analysis of political apologies. This discussion is well worth reading, but confronts a problem analogous to those MacLachlan poses to ethical analyses. Arendt is concerned with



how individual humans act politically. It is less certain how the Arendtian framework applies to collective and institutional acts.

MacLachlan's critique of 'check-list' analyses raises questions about some criticisms canvassed in other chapters concerned with *apology politics*. Neil Funk-Unrau, Melissa Nobles and Cindy Holder offer critical reflections on Canada's 2008 apology for its systemically abusive residential schools. Funk-Unrau criticises the apology because it fails to commit the state to remedying the social and economic disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians. But why should we accept that as a relevant criterion? To my mind, Funk-Unrau is insufficiently persuasive in explaining why a failure of the state to commit to a particular policy suite is a failure for the apology. Indeed, Nobles' chapter argues that the 2008 apology needed to be consistent with 'Tory ideology' for the (then Conservative) government to apologise (p. 124). Nobles provides a causal explanation for an apologetic absence of egalitarian commitment: equality is not a characteristic concern for Canadian Conservatives. Nobles is interested in the Canadian case because it appears to undermine her 'membership theory of apologies' (Nobles, 2008). That theory claims that apologies depend upon elites accepting survivors as full members of the polity. The potential problem for Nobles is that Canadian Conservatives are not generally supportive of indigenous group rights (which is, perhaps, why the apology was not linked to a larger programme of inclusion). She resolves the apparent challenge through re-description: The Conservative government treats residential schools survivors as individuals who had suffered grievous abuse.

Cindy Holder's analysis follows a similar path to Nobles. People will not tend to apologise for acts they do not believe to be wrongful. Put that bluntly, the thought may seem banal. But it is not banal to trace, as Holder does, how the conceptual presuppositions of statehood limit apologetic practice. Where, as in Canada, the construction of the state is part of the relevant history of wrongdoing, and the state is thought to be, on the whole, a good thing by its officials, then the political apology will not confront wrongs done in the extension of sovereignty. That provocative claim is not obviously true. Holder pitches it as a causal thesis and as such it should be tested empirically using a broader dataset. It is interesting that Holder critiques the Canadian apology because it did not identify how the schools were 'part of a larger project to eradicate indigenous communities' (p. 203) on the grounds that a 'common identity' (p. 213) of citizenship is part of the Canadian state's operative principles. This claim is problematic in two ways. First, Canada's federal and multicultural state has negotiated significant identity differences since 1867 and the 2008 apology states that Canada's 'policy of assimilation was wrong' and specifically identifies the 'lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language' as a wrongful consequence of that policy (Harper, 2008). Second, like Funk-Unrau, Holder does not provide compelling reasons to believe that her apologetic *desideratum* is necessary to the success of Canada's apology.



In summary, this interesting collection of essays reflects common themes and problems that confront contemporary politics of apologies. A worthy addition to the literature, the chapters tend to restate or expand upon familiar points as opposed to breaking new ground. It is suitable for upper level undergraduates as well as more senior scholars.

References

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