

On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies. Edited by Mihaela Mihai and Mathias Thaler. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. Pp. 246.

This collection of eleven essays provides a well-rounded exploration of that distinctively modern political phenomenon: the public apology. Contributors ask, in different ways, the questions: What distinguishes political from private or interpersonal apologies? Are there generalizable criteria we can use to determine whether apologies will be effective? And: what are the reasons why apologies may not be effective practices for achieving justice and reconciliation? Most chapters focus on apologies by the state for historical injustice, but some also examine those made by the Church and by individual perpetrators who worked for now-discredited states.

The opening chapter by Alice MacLachlan, 'Beyond the Ideal Political Apology' is more insightful than the title suggests: it offers a philosophical analysis of the distinctive nature of political apologies which must, she argues, be assessed not by analogy to private, interpersonal apologies, but as public speech acts which fulfil political purposes. MacLachlan draws on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the political as that which is the domain not just of the state, but of the public sphere and common life of citizens. Arendt argues that public speech expresses our will to live together in society, and creates and reinforces civic relationships. Public apologies in this context must be understood and evaluated differently from private apologies – perhaps most importantly, they cannot be reduced wholly to an instrumental goal; rather, they open up new political relationships and help to reshape the public sphere. They are also, it follows, embedded in their distinctive contexts, and MacLachlan points out that there can be no single set of criteria for determining the best or ideal apology.

Nick Smith takes a very different approach in his 'Political Apologies and Categorical Apologies' (chapter 2), identifying a check-list of questions to ask in evaluating apologies. Smith is quite skeptical of political apologies for many reasons, an important one being that those responsible for the injury are not usually those apologizing. He asks: has the political apology accepted blame for the offense? Does it recognize victims as moral interlocutors? To what extent does it demonstrate reform? These are important questions to ask, and they can only be answered by examining the historical distinctiveness of each apology, as MacLachlan recommends.

Political apologies are often criticized for being 'mere speech,' unless they are accompanied by other, more substantive reforms. The difficulties entailed in assessing apologies by the constitutional reforms they lead to are revealed in the evaluation of the 2008 Canadian government apology to the indigenous victims of the residential schools system. This is the focus of three chapters, all of which find it to be unsuccessful. Melissa Nobles has previously argued that governments apologize to bring a previously excluded group into the political community – ie, to demonstrate their support of group rights and claims. Here (chapter 6) she

explains the fact that no change in support for indigenous Canadian political autonomy has followed the apology by arguing that it was only addressed to the residential school victims for that specific policy, rather than the broader history of colonial dispossession and maltreatment of indigenous Canadians. Similarly, Neil Funk-Unrau (chapter 7) criticizes the Canadian apology for not leading to reparation and formal changes in the status of indigenous peoples in Canada. He finds the reasons for this in the fact that it did not denounce colonization more generally. And Cindy Holder's analysis of the Canadian apology (chapter 11) asserts that an apology implies a normative theory of the state. When a state official apologizes, he or she repudiates one theory of the state, and replaces it with another. The Canadian apology, she argues, did not repudiate the value of fostering identification between indigenous peoples and the overarching state. Integration into the state continued to be assumed by the apologizers. Apologies will not be successful, Holder argues, where the operative theory of the state is not transformed. We might argue that all of these chapters underplay the specific meaning and value of the apology to residential school survivors, and its relationship to the compensation program now in place.

The value of the public ceremonial dimensions of apologies is emphasized by Michel-Andre Horelt in his discussion of the Polish-Russian commemoration ceremony of the Katyn massacre, in 2010 (chapter 4). While the commemoration was not a verbal apology as such, its enactment was interpreted as at least a move towards this by the Polish side. Horelt analyzes state apologies as transitional rites, in which new social meanings are constructed. This was particularly relevant in the Katyn case, where the commemoration ceremony was followed a couple of days later by a tragic plane crash, killing several high-level Polish officials including the President. The physical exchange of sympathy between Polish Prime Minister Tusk and Russian President Putin has been interpreted as part of the process set in train by the earlier ceremony. Public acts of contrition are also emphasized by Stefan Engert in his discussion of Germany's apologies over time for the Holocaust (chapter 5). He analyzes these as acts of the Catholic sacrament of penance, although it does not seem likely that, as Engert suggests, theological concepts might guide apologies in other states, where civic religion (oddly defined in this chapter as 'politics') is much more divorced from theological principle. It is the absence of public ceremony in apology that seems significant in the case of Brazil's passing of the 1995 Law of the Disappeared. As Nina Schneider shows (chapter 8), many state officials undermined the 'apology'. Perhaps a factor in this was the very low-key and non-public nature of this apology – it occurred in a closed Cabinet ceremony. We might conclude that this understatement was both a sign of and contributed to the lack of support for the apology in institutions of the state. Michael Cunningham focuses on the problems that apologies produce when they do not enjoy wide popular support in the hegemonic society (chapter 9). They can be interpreted as challenges to a republican conception of citizenship, and to nationalism, as they highlight shameful aspects of a nation's past. This reinforces the importance of an apology reflecting – and actively shaping – a broader social discourse about historical responsibility, and a popular commitment to providing restitution.

Two chapters deal with apologies by non-state actors. The first of these offers an alternative to the model of political apologies: in her chapter on a reparative apology from the Catholic Church for sexual abuse (chapter 3), Danielle Celermajer argues that rather than looking to states' apologies as a model, the Church should draw on its own long-standing practices of confession and repentance. These are, she argues, not only concerned with individual wrongdoing and repentance, but also with collective responsibility and 'social sin'. The second, Juan Espindola's discussion of the apologies made by informers to the Stasi – the former East German security police – to their victims (chapter 10), points to a problem often identified with state apologies, especially as they viewed like private apologies: that they are monological rather than dialogical, and do not require a forgiving response from victims.

This is a broad-ranging collection which will be accessible to students, but offers challenges to scholars of political apologies to consider them both as public speech acts and as embedded historical and cultural practices.

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