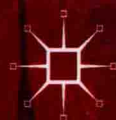


RHETORIC, POLITICS AND SOCIETY  
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# ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF POLITICAL APOLOGIES

Edited by  
Mihaela Mihai and Mathias Thaler



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# Illustrations

- 5.1 In the heart of Germany's capital in Berlin-Mitte: The view of the Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate, photographed from the site of the Memorial of the Murdered Jews in Europe (© SE)

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meanings to examples in criminal and civil law. Visit <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~nicks/> for additional materials, including interviews with Diane Rehm, Philosophy Talk, *Wall Street Journal*, *NY Times*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, NPR, BBC, CNN, Guardian UK and others.

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# Introduction

*Mihaela Mihai and Mathias Thaler*

In the last few decades, numerous liberal democratic states have offered public apologies for past violations of human rights<sup>1</sup>. A gesture formerly associated with weakness is nowadays perceived as a marker of moral strength.<sup>2</sup> Crimes such as enslavement, displacement, violation of treaties, war crimes, ethnic discrimination, cultural disruption and many other types of human rights abuses have led to public expressions of regret.<sup>3</sup> Whereas politicians have traditionally been unwilling, or at least hesitant, to offer apologies for historical injustices at the hands of the state, we are currently witnessing a veritable wave of apologies around the world. Academic research has rapidly picked up on these changes, so much so that the nature of state apologies has become a subject of inquiry for a number of key disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, including philosophy, political science, theology, history and sociology.<sup>4</sup>

Structurally, state apologies can be classified as ‘many to many’ or ‘many to one’. Whenever state officials offer an apology to another collective, we speak of a ‘many to many’ situation. This is the case even if the apology is uttered by an identifiable person – for instance, the Prime Minister – because this individual acts as a spokesperson for a greater community.<sup>5</sup> A ‘many to one’ situation obtains when a state issues an apology to an individual. As an example, consider the apology by the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2007 to Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen who had been abducted and tortured with assistance from Canadian intelligence services.<sup>6</sup>

Another way of classifying political apologies is according to the contexts in which they take place: domestic, international and postcolonial. In the domestic realm, political apologies address injustices committed

against citizens under the aegis of the state. Canada's apology and compensation to Canadians of Chinese origin for the infamous 'Chinese Head Tax' law and the US's apology and compensation to American citizens of Japanese descent for the witch hunt they were subjected to during the Second World War are relevant examples. In the international realm, political apologies are important diplomatic tools and usually address injustices committed during wartime. Consider here Japan's 'sorry' for the abuse of Korean and Chinese 'comfort women' and Belgium's expression of regret for not having intervened to prevent the genocide in Rwanda. Finally, one can identify postcolonial relations as a context, somewhere between the domestic and the international realm. Just think of Australia's and Canada's apologies to their Aboriginal communities for forced assimilation policies, Queen Elizabeth's declaration of 'sorrow' for Britain's treatment of the Maori community, and Guatemala's apology to victimised Mayans.

But the normalisation of apologies as a standard mechanism for addressing state-sponsored violence is not uncontroversial. Fierce public debates have accompanied their emergence and proliferation. The controversy in Britain surrounding the apology for its participation in the Atlantic slave trade illustrates the divisive nature of such practices. The facts are known: between the 16th and 19th centuries, Europeans traded approximately 8 million slaves out of Africa, 2.5 million of whom were transported on British ships.<sup>7</sup> The slave trade was extremely profitable for the colonial powers as it strengthened the economic interdependence of the territories bordering the Atlantic. The first country to officially make slave trading illegal was Denmark in 1792, but today Britain appears to be the most vocal in claiming credit for leading the way. In 1807, following efforts by a minority of intellectuals and members of the Quaker community, the British Parliament passed an act that abolished British participation in the trade of enslaved Africans.<sup>8</sup>

The conjunction of the bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, apologies by the Anglican Church, by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, and by the City of Liverpool made it impossible for Prime Minister Tony Blair to keep silent. In an article published in *New Nation* in November 2006,<sup>9</sup> and during subsequent commemorative events at the Elmina castle in Ghana,<sup>10</sup> Blair expressed 'deep sorrow' over Britain's participation in the slave trade, a practice he equated with a crime against humanity.

The Prime Minister's statements divided the British public. On the one hand, advocates of a more comprehensive apology found Blair's efforts wanting in terms of taking responsibility and making a commitment

to redress the derivative economic, political and cultural disadvantages. Blair's story left out many of the systematic atrocities committed by the British against Africans, focused on the pioneering role that Britain played in abolishing the slave trade, and asymmetrically celebrated white abolitionists while effacing the memory of Black resistance. Many felt indignant and disappointed.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, a series of vehement objections were raised against the idea of apologising for the past. Concerned with Britain's self-image, critics pointed out that an apology would focus attention on negative aspects of the country's history, to the detriment of its merits in eliminating oppression. Some groups, encouraged by the evasiveness and ambiguity of the Prime Minister's statement, highlighted the country's pioneering role in fighting slavery worldwide. They thought the apology tarnished the country's image and unnecessarily denigrated its achievements. In their eyes, it constituted an incomprehensible and dangerous effort to rewrite history and to portray the British Empire as an active force of injustice. Conservative commentators and public figures concerned about the state's remarkable tradition and history objected to the irrational degradation of its accomplishments. Sustained efforts were made to underline Britain's decisive role in the abolition movement and to promote a positive image of its history.

This case is illustrative of the normative and prudential dilemmas that political apologies pose for liberal democratic societies. Broadly speaking, the most heated controversies revolve around the collective character of such practices, their contestation of a glorious national history and the issue of sincerity. Let us briefly unpack each of these areas of dispute.

First, concerns have been raised about the very idea of a state (collective) apology. As one of our authors has aptly remarked, apologies offered by collectives add 'a few more coats of grey'<sup>12</sup> to a subject matter that, even on the individual level, cannot be sketched in strokes of black and white. What does it mean for a state to apologise? Can a state feel regret or remorse? Can the state as an institution be sincerely sorry for something that happened in the past? All these questions point to the thorny issue of collective and intergenerational responsibility.

Second, there is often a fear that discussing the past might distort and damage the community's self-image. Besides the case discussed above, two other notorious examples are Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the Armenian genocide and the US's problematic relationship with its long history of racial exploitation. Given citizens' strong attachment to a 'glorious' vision of their community's past, many doubt the capacity



of state apologies to effectively propose an alternative, more accurate account of history. Moreover, the fact that it is mostly liberal democracies that are inclined to say 'sorry' – at both home and abroad – has led conservative commentators to sneer at the 'tyranny of guilt': liberals should give up the obsession with self-flagellation and proudly celebrate their societies' historical achievements.<sup>13</sup>

Third, confronted with the current 'apology mania',<sup>14</sup> many observers have become suspicious of the bombastic rhetoric of many apologies. Thus, a cynical posture often prevails: apologies that exacerbate "gestural politics" awash in self-interest and crocodile tears [...] enable governments and leaders to defuse angry minority groups without committing any actual resources to the problems of injustice and exclusion'.<sup>15</sup> Sceptics see such official acts as nothing but a 'smoke screen'<sup>16</sup> that serves as a 'seductive, feel-good strategy contrived and promoted by governments'<sup>17</sup> to compensate for the lack of redistributive measures.

This book seeks to contribute to this growing literature and offer some answers to these difficult questions. Part I aims to enrich the theoretical debates on the nature and functions of apologies, and bring forth new insights from so far unexamined normative horizons. Several themes run through our theoretical inquiry: the validity conditions for state apologies, the functions they perform in a democracy, the issue of hypocrisy, as well as their place within broader projects of rectifying historical injustices and expanding the scope of citizenship. Alice MacLachlan's contribution opens the book with a bold statement: we should not think about political acts of regret on the model of interpersonal apologies. She argues that we require a normative theory of official apologies as political practice, and that crucial resources for this theory can be found in Hannah Arendt's account of meaningful speech and action. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt privileges political speech and action as the highest category of human activity, which she identifies according to the following features: (i) it can only take place with others; (ii) it forces the agent to risk something by disclosing him- or herself; (iii) it creates a meaningful narrative; and, (iv) it engenders a new relationship among those involved. According to MacLachlan, these features, taken together, are a very good description of a successful apology. It is only by simultaneously acknowledging them that we can overcome our theoretical fixation with interpersonal apologies.

In response to MacLachlan's optimism, Nick Smith raises a number of doubts. He takes up themes from his earlier work, and shows why collective apologies can never aspire to be what he calls 'categorical apologies'. He argues that the lack of consensus about what to do with