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Ayse Betul Celik on The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past
edited by Mark Gibney, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Niklaus Steiner. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 333 pages.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Political science, International relations, Conflict, Apology

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The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past edited by Mark Gibney, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Niklaus Steiner. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 333 pages.

Over the last several years, “confronting the past” has become an important focus of scholarly work. For many scholars, apologies are crucial elements of establishing peaceful relationships between the parties of a wrongful action. Through such a mechanism, parties can seek to reconstruct social, political, and personal relations, and to heal societies; therefore, confronting the past and injustices means opening up a new page in the history of societies and states. However, the apology phenomenon has not been restricted to states. New actors such as religious institutions, international organizations and even business enterprises have started to issue their own apologies.

The Age of Apology applies a holistic approach to the study of apologies. It is a comprehensive study of apology from different perspectives including: political science, international relations, history, ethics, religious studies, law, sociology, and anthropology. Following the scholarly tradition of studying truth commissions, which the authors claim emerged as a “non-Western affair,” the book focuses on the phenomenon of apology since it “has become the West’s own version of truth commission” (1). By analyzing the recent Western apologies directed toward citizens, and to those outside the borders of Western states, as well as cases where the West failed to apologize, the authors of this work try to understand what political apologies mean and how they affect the West’s relations with the “Rest.”

The book is divided into five sections that provide a comprehensive analysis of different aspects of political apology such as law, ethics, theory behind apologies, internal apologies by the state, international apologies of the state, apologies by non-state actors, and the war on terror. These five sections also analyze the sincerity of apologies, intergenerational justice, the relationship between apology and justice, apology as symbolic politics, and political and legal repercussions of apologies. What is particularly interesting about the book is its focus on a less-studied aspect of apology: how it affects inter- and intra-state relations. In exploring this question, the authors explicitly question to what extent *realpolitik* dominates the states’ willingness to apologize and how other barriers such as hypocrisy, resentment, and cynicism prevent issuing apologies. Also, questioning what really constitutes the “West” categorically, the authors’ contributions point to the notion that countries with colonial pasts generally owe a big apology to the non-West. Thus, the book provides examples of different apologies, half-apologies, and non-apologies by the United States, Canada, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Belgium, and Holland, along with non-state Western actors such as the University of Alabama, the Pope, and corporate organizations.

The book offers several useful insights. First, the book’s overarching argument is that the way the West has confronted the past and its own injustices has been substantially different from practices elsewhere in the world, and that this difference affects the West’s relations with “others.” Second, it argues that the more remote the apologizer, and the higher the level of representation in the apology process (moving from individual to state level), the less meaningful the apology. Underlying these two arguments lies a core question that might attract the attention of scholars studying the role of the state as an actor in “confronting the past” processes, not only

in the “West,” but also in other countries where culturally different truth-seeking and transitional justice processes were adopted.

However, although it provides a unique and extremely informative guide, the book does not fully address how Western apologies are different from non-Western apologies at a theoretical level, and how apology in asymmetrical intra-state and inter-state relations can truly change the nature of relations between the states and between states and their citizens. It also fails to bring together these diverse views and methodologies for studying the phenomenon of apology. The fact that the book does not include a conclusion to pull together these different arguments reflects not only the book’s weakness but also that of the recently emerged literature on apology and reconciliation.

The Apology of the Past is a critical resource for those studying truth-seeking, confrontation of the past, and apology from an interdisciplinary perspective. It also provides crucial insights for scholars of conflict resolution, inter-civilizational conflicts, and the West’s relations with its colonial past. This book demonstrates that interdisciplinary approaches to the study of important concepts such as apology bears more fruit than studying them with a narrow disciplinary lens.

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