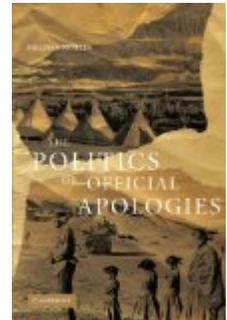




Melissa Nobles. *The Politics of Official Apologies.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiii + 200 pp. \$24.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-69385-1.



Reviewed by David Webster

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Last year, the British newsmagazine the *Economist* called Melissa Nobles a specialist in "apology." It noted too that "public kowtows are still rare compared with the manifold wrongs of the past." [1] In introducing her new work on official apologies, Nobles acknowledges journalists' skepticism toward the recent "swell of apologies" to wronged groups, but provides a compelling argument that official apologies matter (p. 4).

Nobles looks at official apologies made by and on behalf of governments in four countries--Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. The historical character of these countries as colonies of settlement has meant a focus on apologies--or non-apologies--to indigenous peoples in each country. Nobles also gives attention here to the question of a potential apology by the U.S. government to African Americans for slavery, a more limited 2005 apology by the U.S. Senate for its silence in the face of lynching, and a 1993 Senate apology to native Hawaiians.

Nobles argues that, even if apologies are symbolic, symbolic politics matter. Apologies are not simply "cheap talk"; they shape national identities and policies. Rather than presenting a simple overview of apology politics, this book advances a new theory of official apologies. They are "desired, offered and given in order to change the terms and meanings of membership in a political community," Nobles writes. Apologies "help to bring history into the conversation" and thereby to justify policy changes (p. x). This focus on the different understandings of the past by majority publics, governments, and marginalized peoples can be seen as a demand that historical narratives be brought into dialogue--that the dominant narrative of settler colonies make room for the historical understandings of indigenous people. Once that step is taken, it becomes difficult to resist changing policies that have tended to disadvantage indigenous or minority peoples. In other words, history can become about the future, rather than simply about the past.

Nobles rejects arguments that explain apologies in terms of hoped-for electoral gains, a desire to avoid reparations, or international norms, arguing instead that political elites issue apologies "to reshape the meanings and terms of national membership" (p. 36). If elites decide a situation requires reform and admit a sense of guilt for past injustices, they may issue an apology. Unlike reparations, apologies cannot easily be seen as "closing the books" (p. 140). More often than not, apologies come "precisely because historical injustices are at the heart of indigenous claims. It is not a big leap from acknowledgement and moral evaluation of historical injustices to an expectation that some attempt at repair be initiated" (pp. 28-29).

Nobles's "membership theory" asserts that both governments and apology-seeking groups are ultimately attempting to redefine the terms of membership in the national political community. An apology to indigenous peoples invites them to become part of the nation—a sharp shift from the past where the settler colonies defined indigenous peoples as outside national identities. This analysis works well for indigenous peoples in these four countries, but has to contend with ambiguities in the African American case, where inclusion and exclusion are more complex. The case studies, then, begin to illuminate issues of majorities, minorities, and marginalization in interesting ways. The shift since the early colonial days from racist to official multicultural policies in these four countries masks continued injustice and marginalization, which apologies may seek to address.

The comparative approach used here is valuable. Reading Canadian, American, Australian, and New Zealand experiences in parallel makes it possible to see how debates in these countries have affected one another (incidentally suggesting there may be some strength to internationally driven explanations after all). The comparison between Canada under Liberal administrations and

Australia under John Howard's right-wing coalition demonstrates contentions over ideas of individual and group rights. In a 1969 White Paper, the Canadian government adopted an assimilationist approach that tried to deny history, calling instead for equality of individuals with no special status (favorable or unfavorable) for First Nations. Seeing parallels to historical efforts to extinguish their group identity, First Nations rejected this. Afterward, Canada's government proved willing to move toward an apology, issued formally in 1998. Australian Prime Minister Howard, in contrast, rejected any apology or action to advance Aboriginal rights. This was grounded in rejection of what Howard called the "black arm-band" view of history (linked to the Australian Labor Party) that Australia was founded in part on dispossession of Aboriginal people. Howard's policy was an effort to cling to traditional historical narratives of progress and freedom as historians and Aboriginal claims were eroding them. Such an approach, however, makes reconciliation nearly impossible, since, in Nobles's words, "support of indigenous demands for self-determination requires engagement with history as their claims are made intelligible by it" (p. 153).

One danger in writing about fast-developing issues is that events can overtake the account. For instance, the UN draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is now completed, with Canada shifting under its current Conservative government from proponent to fierce voice of opposition. The Canada-Australia comparison might be reversed today, with Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology soon after his election to the "Stolen Generations" of Aboriginal children taken from their families. Rudd's apology echoed and inverted Howard's themes of reconciliation and Australian identity, arguing that the Australian penchant for the "fair go" meant squarely facing "the cold, confronting, uncomfortable truth."^[2] The change does not invalidate the comparison or the case for apologies being about

membership in the national community; indeed, it probably reinforces Nobles's theoretical point.

Limiting the scope of a study is always a struggle, as there are inevitably more connections than it is possible to write about in a single work. Nobles links campaigns for official apologies with campaigns for reparations to African Americans. The comparison is limited by her self-imposed geographical limits to the colonies of settlement. The reparations discussion, for instance, would have been stronger if it had included reference to the call for reparations to Africa.[3] This campaign is itself linked with "jubilee" campaigns for debt forgiveness, which raise themes in North American and Australian debates highlighted by Nobles. To make this link would be to internationalize the discussion, perhaps, but this is a discussion that is already international. The groups apologized to are also international actors, evidenced in the "fourth world" alliances forged in the campaign for a UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[4]

Another international comparison is with truth commissions, the chosen instrument of reconciliation and apology in post-conflict societies around the world. There are lessons here in the way societies imagine themselves and who is included in national communities. The recent creation of an Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada opens a space for truth commissions within the industrialized North. In this sense, the debates and methods in the industrialized North and the global South may not be all that different.

Notes

[1]. "Who's Sorry Now?" *The Economist*, October 2, 2008, http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12339527.

[2]. Kevin Rudd, speech to the Australian House of Representatives, February 13, 2008, http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0073.cfm.

[3]. One recent work examining this is Rhoda E. Howard-Hassman, *Reparations to Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[4]. Earlier international indigenous efforts from the 1920s and 1970s are explored in Akwesasne Notes, ed. *Basic Call to Consciousness* (Summertown: Native Voices, 2005).

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