

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Melissa Nobles, *The Politics of Official Apologies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 214 pp. \$US 24.99 paper (978-0-521-69385-1), \$US 70.00 hardcover (978-0-521-87231-7)

Government apologies fill the air these days, becoming, it seems, an endemic feature of modern political cultures. Even strident US regimes have entreated its victims over the debacle of Vietnam, the Abu Ghraib prison horrors, and locally, the botched relief efforts during Hurricane Katrina. “Grievance politics” in Canada has been no less prevalent, with official genuflections to various ethnic/racial groups (Japanese, Chinese, South Asian) for discriminatory immigration and wartime internment policies, including a very recent apology to First Nations for the culturally genocidal practices of Canada’s Native residential schools. Private corporations appear to be following suit, witness the president and CEO of Maple Leaf Foods, Inc. who printed a full-page newspaper apology to victims of tainted meat that had been packaged in one of its plants.

Only two expository books on the politics of apology were written between 1991 and 2004 (Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*, 1991; Aaron Lazare, *On Apology*, 2004), but it is fast becoming a popular topic in academic circles. The very word “apology,” which centuries ago meant a defence or self-justification, has long since referred to an expression of regret for past actions. It implies a dialogue or process of communication between offending and aggrieved parties that can lead to reconciliation; on a broader scale, apologies reputedly promote transition to democracy by rectifying past wrongs. Apologies, then, can be uplifting, cathartic, and assuage long-term conflicts, granting hope to all parties. But dredging the past can also be a grueling experience, unsettling whole communities of allegedly “blameless” descendants. At worst, governments may address past abuses as a pretext for ignoring present ones.

To this crucible of timely scholarship, Melissa Nobles has added a useful treatise that examines a segment of the official apology phenomenon. Viewing apologies as group attempts to advance rights based on historical claims — or more generally — as “platforms for announcing new policy directions and promoting societal reconciliation” (p. 114), Nobles presents the rudiments of a “membership theory of apologies.”

by examining the way organized groups and state actors in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States use apologies to revamp the terms and meanings of national membership. This is viewed as the chief purpose in pursuing and granting official apologies — the acknowledgment of historical injustices in order to justify fundamental reforms designed to redistribute economic resources and political authority. Nobles focuses on three groups of actors: mobilized minority groups, state officials, and public intellectuals, principally historians. All are seen as driven by reason, emotion and interest, although the meaning of “interest” is curiously unarticulated while the preponderant influence in the apology process is “tied to an overall determination of elites to change policy” (p. 35). This assertion however, would seem to undermine the impact of minority group mobilization in a mediatized global community capable of challenging the parochial “moral reflections” and hidebound ideologies of national politicians. The potential contradiction is not well-explored by Nobles.

The book’s thesis is detailed in three chapters that offer a brief history of government indigenous policies in the four countries, analyze the instances of the apologies themselves, and assess their outcomes. A concluding chapter compares apologies to reparations, which are equated with material recompense and regarded as less politically consequential than the former, creating perhaps a bolder distinction than is deserved.

The efforts by indigenous groups to resist assimilation or marginalization and move towards self-determination and cultural acceptance by the majority are described in some detail in these chapters. Nobles looks in particular at the effects of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report in Canada, the Waitangi Tribunal in New Zealand, the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, US Congressional resolutions on lynching and responsibility for overthrow of the Hawaii kingdom, and the Australian “practical reconciliation” policy, which sought to remedy Aboriginal disadvantage without granting an apology or recognizing special Aboriginal rights or autonomy. With greater reluctance in Australia, all four countries have shifted government policies away from a racist and paternalistic stance toward indigenous peoples, confirming, for Nobles, that “successful apologies can affect national membership in ways consistent with indigenous demands” (p. 37).

The Politics of Official Apologies is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship in this area. A lengthy Appendix of “Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century Public Apologies” provides a quick scan of the government and other institutional/organizational apologies offered over this period, and the twenty page bibliography will prove useful to other researchers. Nobles’s membership theory is not altogether convincing,

however. The account never rises to the level of a “theory” that fulfills the promise of identifying the “independent variables and causal mechanisms that lead to demands or offers of apologies” (p. 14). Too great a stress seems to be placed on apologies as a crucial factor in motivating and justifying policy changes, placing too much weight on the moral perceptions of elite political leaders. It might be more telling to view apologies as artefacts of internal economic and social struggles, and even, at times, as products of geopolitical pressures. Interviews with important political actors might have helped to put this issue in perspective, but little of that is included in the text. Furthermore, it would be helpful to examine instances where the meaning of national membership and its re-composition are achieved without the use of apologies — despite roughly similar grounds for such demands — and other instances where apologies are given and new interpretations of history are validated, yet the status of the aggrieved minority groups remain relatively unchanged.

Obviously, much more research needs to be undertaken to affirm or refute Nobles’s basic argument. After my own long research involvement in the British Columbia Aboriginal Treaty Process negotiations, I remain skeptical that apologies are pivotal influences on reconstructed national histories or memberships.

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

R.S. RATNER

Bob Ratner does research on social movements, genocide reparations, and critical criminology. With Bill Carroll, he published *Challenges and Perils: Social Democracy in Neoliberal Times*, Fernwood, 2005, and with Andrew Woolford, *Informal Reckonings: Conflict Resolution in Mediation, Restorative Justice and Reparations*, Routledge-Cavendish, 2008 (reviewed in this issue of *CJS*) rsratner@interchange.ubc.ca