

03/18/25 + 03/20/25

"We're Sorry" Notes

Thinking historically about historical Apologies and Justice - Dr. Lipsker lecture

Emily Schmitz

Image Analysis

- German chancellor (w Germany) kneeling @ inauguration of Warsaw ghetto uprising memorial inauguration
- moving, demonstrates what a big deal the ^{national} apology is, "unsettling" - Mya
- "burden of leadership" - Casey: 1 person takes on burden of apology
- image = "paradigmatic state apology" b/c well documented + taken as genuine
- what does it mean for one person to apologize on behalf of many?

Justice after Atrocity/systemic injustice

- commemoration, memorialization, edu, reparations, restitution, research, TRCS, criminal punishment
- and especially for today: national apologies
- # of national apologies has greatly increased since 1990 - age of apology = trend towards increased political apologies
 - spike following cold war
 - dip from 2005-2009, potentially because of Great Recession

Apologies as Speech Acts

- speech act: "act of speaker meaning that can (though need not be) performed by saying that one is doing so." - Oxford
 - ex. saying "I do" swear to uphold truth in a trial, making an apology
 - only successful if understood by others in the context it's made - constructed act
- from speech act perspective, apology = successful if understood

What Apologies Entail

- "particular kind of story being told"
 - actions/etc = wrong
 - recipient was harmed
 - speaker → responsibility / regret
 - speaker now disavows action - ^{recipient} deserves better
- usually also a forward-looking element
- need some kind of sorrow/affect to seem legitimate
- apologies = dialogical
- need to consider historical apologies as part of historical record + perception of nation's id

variations of historical apologies

- historical apologies: apologies for something that happened in the past
- statement of national leader, official, legislative body for public record - on behalf of larger collective
- marking official days
- geographic renaming
- monuments/memorials
- reparations (sometimes included w/ apology, sometimes sans apology)
- apologies from non-state figures, ex. nonprofits, corporations

Apology for Tuskegee Experiment

- Tuskegee Experiment: 1932-72: US public health service experimented w/ untreated syphilis in 600 black men (largely sharecroppers) Tuskegee, Alabama
 - false pretenses of medical treatment
 - didn't receive penicillin treatments once available
- 1974 survivors sued govt, settled out of court for \$10 million
- 1997 Clinton holds ceremony & offers apology w/ 518 survivors present
 - to kirk, feels completely non-genuine, doesn't offer justice
 - caird: is it meant to offer justice, or just another step in the process?
 - impossible to not feel formulaic in public context
 - yet, to survivors, monetary compensation wasn't enough
- last survivor died 2004
- raises questions: who cares about apologies? what do they accomplish?

National sorry day/national day of healing

- Australia
 - response to "stolen generation(s)" forced assimilation via boarding schools
 - like US & Canada
 - began in 1998 (May 26): performances by indigenous artists, candle symbolizing/commemorating taken children, Australians across the country expressing regret
 - leader @ the time expressed "regrets" but refused to say "sorry" in any legal document
 - argument against apology: Australians didn't deserve to feel sorry (for "sorry" ≠ meaningful)
 - apology finally issued in 2008, but criticized because it didn't come w/ material action
 - common criticism of national apologies!

* international perception: US = woefully failing + o grapple w/ slavery, colonial history, in counterpoint to successfully-reaching Germany

- if **apologies** = solely **symbolic**, why so much pushback?

• apology = theoretically, the **first step** towards more action

• individuals don't receive negative consequences from national apology, but national governments are expected to **follow up** with material action - motion for them to not apologize

- apology = **small change but better than no change**; flawed to say "not good enough" and do nothing instead

Civil Liberties Act (1988)

- example of apology w/ **material restitution**

- act signed by Reagan acknowledging/apologizing for **Japanese American WWII internment**, including \$restitution, \$for education issue

• also, goal to make US **condemnation** of other nations' atrocities "**more credible**", especially within context of cold war/USSR

crusades

- **1999**: 900th anniversary of **crusades**

- group of Christians **retraced crusades route**, apologizing to communities on the way

- year-right before **2000** - significant in millennial-grounded Christian thought

* **language** grounded often in sense of **human rights** - which began w/ **Wormburg trials**

H. Res. 194, 2008

- example of apology **sans reparation**

- apology in HoR for **Jim Crow abuses** of black ppl + **enslavement**

- widely viewed as utterly **insufficient**

Non-state Apologies

- **Aetna**: apology for insuring enslavers

- **newspaper** apology for slave ads

- **NFL**: apology for not supporting BLM earlier

- **APA** apology for not fighting systemic racism

- **Davidson College** apology (by 1st female president) for enslavement & defense of Jim Crow

• followed years of **denying** enslaved ppl's role @ Davidson

- statements (ex. Davidson in 2020) grounded in **external context**

MOTIVES & AGENDAS for apology

- reputation / lawsuit avoidance
- expressing **vergangenheitsbewältigung** - "struggle of overcoming the past" / "work of coping with the past" (-wiki)
- furthering state relationships / **diplomatic ties**
- pressure from activist groups, etc
- part of **transitional justice**

Backlash to "Age of Apology"

- is there an unprecedented **backlash** to apology?
- Trump: "not going to apologize for America," Mitt Romney: **No Apology**
- concern over **culpability/blame** for historic injustices, problem of responsibility/agency
 - who should have to apologize?

criticisms of
apologies

- should **"move on"** via looking forward; dwelling on past promotes divisiveness

- **forgetting** = as important as commemoration

- bad things happen during war, no need 2. apologize

- ex. **Hiroshima/Nagasaki** (note: apologizing for bombings would be a dangerous move if apology = historical record, as emerges from WWII as leader & unifier - what would it mean to upset that narrative?)

- **moral relativism**: how can we use modern **anachronistic** standards to judge past?

- apologies can conceal **present injustices** - ex. apologies for slavery don't affect current ^{racial} injustice

- **"meaningless gestures"** or seem **performative** - can prevent more meaningful redress of wrong

- sans mechanism to redress wrongs → especially hollow/performative

- ex. **Tuskegee apology**, at least, came w/ \$ reparations

↳ well-relieved @ the time - why not to us? Dr. Boyer wants us to double-check our

self-righteousness, our generic (genre-based) context, Dr. Boyer adds that "in terms of speech act, **performative** means it does something"

- why does **performative** = **perjorative**?

- note that this apology was pushed for by/meaningful to **survivors**

Do Apologies Matter?

- what role (if any) can historical apologies play for **recipients/society**?
- Are apologies capable of furthering **reconciliation** for historical **injustices**?

- **norm-generating discourse**

- make it **difficult to deny** past injustice - prevent historical amnesia

- opening for pursuing further **action** (ex. reparations)

★ there is **IMMENSE**, passionate **backlash** when an apology is requested but denied - suggests they do, yes, have value

"there's nothing authentic about Bill Clinton except his love of sexual harassment."
- Dr. Boyer

Historicizing Age of Apology

- commentators since 1990s (e.g. Boyer)

- have identified "age of apology"

- comes w/ theological impulses (ex. 2000)

- but primarily w/ post-war ending

- paradox: **secular history** (struggle = even as we've got is liberal capitalism)

- are we exiting the age of apology? what social/political/

economic/etc factors are at play?

reasons to
apologize