

Political Apologies

Concept: Political Apologies

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Description Apologies are methods of repairing fractured social relationships in interpersonal affairs. Not only individuals, but also professional and commercial organizations, religious organizations, spiritual leaders, governments, and heads of state can apologize. In national and international relations, apologies can be considered political apologies.

Political apologies can have positive results, with potential global implications. For example, apologies can recognize the suffering of those being apologized to, and possibly improve the relations between the offending and offended parties. As such, apologies are sometimes, although not necessarily, part of a larger reparations process for redressing past injustices. Apologies in this sense may be a stepping stone to a growing global movement towards recognizing past wrongs and promoting human rights, thus leading some to argue that we are in the "age of apology."

Political apologies can also be problematic. For example, if an offending party offers an apology for a wrong, the apology might leave the party open to legal or other consequences. There is also debate on whether, and how, an institution, like a nation state or an international organization, can make a sincere, sorrowful, or remorseful apology. Similarly, where political apologies are offered for historical injustices, there is some question as to whether present-day generations should be held responsible for amending these past injustices. While such considerations are sometimes an obstacle to political apologies, we see here again that apologies may carry global implications, especially insofar as apologies foster international cooperation and even the creation of new international partnerships.

Despite these barriers, numerous apologies have been made in political affairs. For example, Belgium apologized to Congo for not stopping the murder of its first President, Patrice Lumumba. Canada apologized in 1998 to its Indigenous peoples. President Clinton of the United States apologized to Guatemala for supporting the murderous dictators of the 1980s. Further, there is on-going debate about the possibility of apology and reparations to Africa for historical injustices perpetrated by the West against the continent. This is an excellent example of where an apology might lead to wide-ranging effects, such as the reconfiguring of global trade policies, as well as policies of international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Suggested **Brooks, Roy L. ed.** 1999. *When sorry isn't enough: The controversy over*

Reading: *apologies and reparations for human injustice*. New York: New York University Press.

Cunningham, Michael. 1999. Saying sorry: The politics of apology. *Political Quarterly* 70 (3): 285-93.

Political Apologies and Reparations website.

<http://political-apologies.wlu.ca> (accessed 24 October 2005).

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