

Atrocity, Avoidance, and Apology: Quasi-Religious Political Responses to Genocide in the Modern World.

This paper presents a comparative sociological analysis of responses by Western states and international organizations to gross violations of human rights. It focuses on the acts of apology which occurred in the aftermath of genocides in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda. It presents a model of the structure of response to genocide by the United States, several European countries, and the United States. My aim is to examine the response to genocide in a comparative way in order to develop a more general and theoretically powerful model of how modern institutions respond to genocide and other atrocities and the specific role of apology in those response.

Most analyses of apology focus on the functionality of apology for victims or for the reestablishment of social order more generally. While these are important considerations, this paper takes a different approach to institutional apologies. It focuses on the functionality of the rhetoric of apology for political institutions and elites. Apology is a form of political discourse, which follows institutional failure to prevent genocide, and which serves to symbolically reintegrate a political entity into the international “community of moral concern.”

The paper traces the response to genocide in terms of three distinct phases, of which the last phase – apology -- will be the main focus of the paper.

1. Recognition of Atrocity: In this first stage, information about actual and impending atrocities is brought to the attention of institutions through a variety of surveillance mechanisms. This information is filtered through bureaucratic structures and assessed in relation to the normative values and practices of the institution. In this stage, the primary goal of institutions is to forestall intervention on moral or human rights grounds in deference to practical interests. Intervention is generally unpopular both domestically and internationally. In addition, bureaucratic structures are slow to respond to genocide because the processes of genocide proceed faster than the bureaucratic structures which guide the institutions which may respond to genocide.
2. Redescription and denial: In the second stage, information about genocide is processed and redescribed in terms which favor non-intervention. A descriptive vocabulary which specifically denies genocide is developed and deployed and this vocabulary generally denies that the phenomenon under consideration is genocide. Generally, genocide is redescribed in more neutral or amorphous terms such as “civil war” or “age-old hatreds”, terms which deny causation or culpability to any one party, and therefore make it more difficult to take sides or to intervene. In addition, a specific rhetoric of “the complexity of the situation” and the demand for further understanding and the necessity of negotiation emerge. It is under the cover of such processes that the actual atrocities escalate and genocide occurs without intervention.
3. Apology and culpability: The third stage, which is the primary focus of this paper, is the stage of apology and culpability. In this stage, political elites deploy a rhetoric of apology

which acknowledges the errors and mistakes of institutional processes to prevent genocide. In some cases, apologies are presented with the promise of “never again.” These are highly symbolic events and seek to reintegrate institutions back into the moral universe of the global discourse of prevention and concern for human rights. Such apologies, however, seldom outline the exact political mechanisms and cultural processes which led to non-intervention in the first place. Thus, they are primarily rituals which work to reintegrate the culpable party for failure to prevent genocide. Yet, they leave unaddressed and invisible the very mechanisms which are likely to lead to a renewal of the pattern of atrocity, avoidance, and apology in the face of new gross violations of human rights.

The dynamics of how states related to ongoing acts of genocide (stages 1 and 2 above) are rather well known. This paper outlines previous research which establishes this pattern in the cases of US, European, and United Nations responses to genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda. The empirical focus here, though, is on close analysis of the “speech acts” and language of apology. I examine these acts from the standpoint of cultural anthropology as rituals which are functional for reintegration into what I call the “community of moral concern” which is increasingly important in a globalized world with a large presence of human rights NGOs and other moral actors. The apology allows states themselves, but even more importantly, non-governmental actors, to continue to have faith that the failure to intervene was anomalous and irregular and that, in the future, such mistakes will be avoided. Yet, the paper is decidedly critical of such apologies because they do not adequately address the concerns of victims or those who demanded intervention and were ignored. Apologies are functional for political elites and institutions in order to cover their errors and to gain the assent and support of transnational human rights actors. Yet, they leave unaddressed the basic social-structural and cultural mechanisms which led to the failure of political will in the first place. As a result, the stage is set by which future acts of genocide might occur in much the same way as those in Bosnia and Rwanda: without significant outside intervention. The model presented here may have predictive value for how states and international institutions respond to genocide in the future. Apology and promises of “never again” cannot in any way be seen as predictive of the ability of states or international organizations to prevent genocide.

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