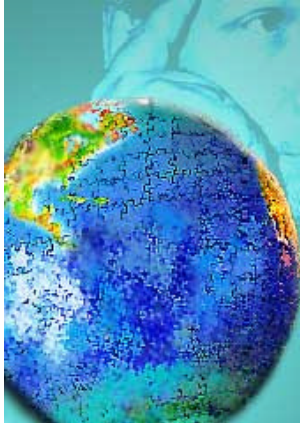


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Righting Historical Wrongs: The Global Politics of Apologies

By [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

A series of recent events on the world stage involving apologies and reparation payments by former colonizers to their erstwhile victims raises the question of whether there is a new global wind in favor of restitutive justice. As Sreeram Chaulia argues, doubts remain whether superficial apologies will greatly improve relations between the Global North and South.

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In one single calendar year, the government of Australia apologized to its indigenous people in February 2008, the U.S. Senate apologized for atrocities against Native American tribes in the same month, the U.S. House of Representatives apologized to African Americans for slavery and Jim Crow-era racism in July and the government of Italy apologized to Libya for colonial-era damages and offered monetary compensation in August.

Facing painful truths

Taken together, these events suggest a climate of remorse and self-reflection in some former colonial bastions of Europe and North America. Coming to terms with one's violent and exploitative past as a nation is an excruciating process because it requires collective soul-searching by a nation or state with such a history.

Doubts remain whether superficial apologies will greatly improve relations between the Global North and South.

The process can be painful, necessitating the abandonment of myths and the false comfort of convenient historical fabrications upon which consensus is built for nationalism and state consolidation.

For any nation faced with such a past, the ordeal of coming around to accepting guilt is a long process in which the national psyche gets bombarded by diametrically polarized versions of truth.

Separate histories

For example, Australia has witnessed "history wars." The arguments of aboriginal

activists and liberal writers — that British settlers on the island committed repeated massacres against natives — were challenged by conservative historians.

They claimed that the victims actually disappeared due to disease, ignorance and the “backwardness” of a hunting-gathering mode of existence.

A state of denial

Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002), did not leave the debate to academics and drew in the media and politicians to his revisionist interpretation that painted early British colonists in a more benign light and absolved them of genocide.

So powerful was Windschuttle’s appeal to the conservative spectrum in Australia that the then-Prime Minister John Howard awarded him the Centenary Medal for Services to History.

Howard was at the forefront of denying any wrongdoing by his forefathers and whitewashing the crimes that extinguished once-vibrant First Nation civilizations.

Revisiting the horrors of the past and admitting grave errors is imperative for healing wounds and bettering relations.

The new apologists

That Australia came around to issuing a formal apology this year owes a lot to the change of guard in the government and the election of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Likewise, the fact that sympathetic Democrats controlled the U.S. House and Senate at the time of the apologies to African Americans and Native Americans underscores the importance of domestic political factors.

How the West was won

As in Australia, the United States too has its share of apologists for colonialism and Europe’s “civilizing mission” in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Not all demands for apologies and reparations have consummated as positively as the Italian-Libyan saga.

As they see it, the rise to world dominance of the modern West was unrelated to its plunder of the treasures of Latin America, Africa and Asia — and was solely the outcome of the ingenuity of Western institutions like science, democracy and capitalism.

Their contention is that the West is being scapegoated for mismanagement and failures of developing countries that are entirely internal in origin.

Progressive minds needed

The fact that the U.S. Congress of 2008 paid no heed to such voices leads one to assume that formal apologies can only come about when progressive-minded political forces are in the driver’s seat.

Viewed in that light, the left-right divide in domestic politics is thus inextricably linked to how far a former colonial nation or state can cleanse itself.

The case of Italy and Libya

Having said this, the case of Italy’s apology and reparations to Libya seems to be an anomaly. Italy’s Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi certainly is a hard-line conservative.

And yet, his government offered a “moral acknowledgement of damage” for Mussolini-era crimes committed in North Africa.

The key to unraveling the Libyan-Italian puzzle lies in placing it

Hard-nosed calculations of self-interest and commercial

within the broader rubric of Colonel Gadhafi's rapprochement with the Western world since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

gain do matter when it comes to apologies.

Facing the past

Italy was one of the closest allies of the United States on the European continent and a prominent supporter of the Bush Administration's war on Iraq in 2003.

With the discord between Washington, London and Tripoli being overwritten by harmony and cooperation, Rome could not stand on the sidelines, owing to its sense of entitlement in its former colony.

No more special treatment

As Gadhafi warms up to other Western powers, Berlusconi's apology bears hallmarks of anxiety that Libya's lucrative oil and natural gas market might no longer be preferentially reserved for Italian companies.

The expression of contrition by former colonial countries is not merely a function of the balance of power in domestic politics between left and right.

The \$5 billion reparations package also comes with a promise from Tripoli to stem the tide of illegal Libyan migrants into Italy, an issue of importance to Berlusconi's conservative agenda.

Two key findings emerge from the Italian apology to Libya. First, the expression of contrition by former colonial countries is not merely a function of the balance of power in domestic politics between left and right.

The truth about truth

It is also a function of the international balance of opinion spearheaded by the foreign policy dynamics of great powers, as well as the international scramble for natural resources in an energy-insecure age.

Second, hard-nosed calculations of self-interest and commercial gain do matter in when it comes to apologies — and might even be the real causes that are masked by morally uplifting rhetoric about truth and reconciliation.

Still in denial

Not all demands for apologies and reparations have consummated as positively as the Italian-Libyan saga — or that of West Germany making up to Israel in 1952 for the Holocaust.

Armenia's quest for acknowledgement of the Turkish genocide during and just after World War I remains blocked due to the resistance of Turkey's ruling elites, even at the cost of risking admission into the European Union.

Despite the exposure of Belgium's genocidal policies in Central Africa, Brussels lives in a state of denial. France has obfuscated the heinous role of its leadership in abetting the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and is rejecting as "unacceptable" the August 2008 report of the Rwandan government that details Paris' culpability.

Coming around to accepting guilt is a long process in which the national psyche gets bombarded by polarized versions of truth.

Understated apologies

Japan has issued numerous apologies to China for military excesses committed before and during World War II, but the matter still lingers due to Beijing's dissatisfaction with the scale and consistency of Tokyo's regret.

Like China, a number of claimants for apologies and reparations around the world are

crying "too little, too late" with regard to the spate of admissions of past misdeeds.

Words are not enough

Australia's indigenous leader Noel Pearson reacted to the Rudd government's apology without financial compensation with sarcasm: "Blackfellas will get the words, the whitefellas keep the money."

The left-right divide in domestic politics is inextricably linked to how far a former colonial nation or state can cleanse itself.

Likewise, receptions of African Americans to the congressional apologies have been mixed, with radicals saying that talk is cheap compared to reparations.

Revisiting the horrors of the past and admitting grave errors is imperative for healing wounds and bettering relations between peoples and states. However, when apologies are diluted by domestic and international political considerations, questions remain in the minds of survivors and their succeeding generations about the sincerity and genuineness of the gestures.

Is apologizing enough?

Over and above the psychological burdens of previous colonial expropriation and violence, doubts remain whether superficial apologies will greatly improve relations between the Global North and South as long as the latter sees iniquities in present-day international exchanges.

Such an improvement, to be sure, is desirable not only for the sake of justice — but also for progress on multilateral trade negotiations at the WTO that are jammed along classic North-South fault lines.

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