Gender and Political Apology: When the Patriarchal State Says ‘Sorry’

Emma Dolan (2021)

Reviewed by Weijia Shan and Dan Huang

Gender and Political Apology: When the Patriarchal State Says ‘Sorry’ is Emma Dolan’s latest insightful work on the analysis of political apologies. Although political apologies are usually viewed as a gesture of inclusivity (e.g. Nobles 2008) or geopolitical manoeuvres (e.g. Kampf 2009), Dolan sees them as a ‘gendered and gendering practice’ – a speech act bearing the gendered values of society. The book’s focus on the gendered characteristics of political apologies highlights the importance of this speech act for feminist research on international relations.

The book is composed of seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 7, which serve as the introduction and conclusion, provide a wealth of material by which readers can theoretically and methodologically grasp the broader goals of the book. Chapter 2 reviews previous studies on political apology alongside feminist work in international relations; whereas work on political apology has ignored the importance of gender, feminist work has ignored the importance of political apology. Chapter 3 illustrates a performative approach centred on how such apologies function in gender-related issues.

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Dolan argues that political apology is an ‘excitable’ apology (Butler 1997); in other words, it results in various unintended performative consequences, such as the reaffirmation of hierarchical gender norms. A central performative function of political apology is demonstrated in detail in Chapter 4; namely, the capacity to negotiate and (re)make embodied gendered identities through ‘victimhood legitimation’. Chapters 5 and 6 examine two authentic political apologies through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. The first case study (Chapter 5) is concerned with apologies made by Japanese officials to South Korea for forcing South Korean women to be ‘comfort women’ (or, in the conceptualization of the author, enforced sex slaves). The second case study (Chapter 6) is concerned with apologies made by US officials for the sexual abuse of Iraqi detainees. In the Japanese case, Dolan illustrates how official apologies recirculated utterances made by ‘comfort women’ themselves to reinforce traditional gender roles. In the US case, she illustrates how apologies made by authorities recirculated the gendered logics of the Global War on Terror, in that ‘gendered identities are performatively recognised in response to the performative violence enacted by the torture and the resulting photographs’ (103).

The book features several theoretical innovations. Critically, it provides deeper insight into the study of political apologies from the view of gender by taking a distinctly feminist approach. It does so by arguing that gender must be a salient element of political apology function analysis rather than a complementary one. For example, political apologies function to (re)empower gendered and militarist logics and thereby enable the emergence of gender-related sexual violence. They make particular forms of (gendered) victimhood visible while obscuring the prevalent unjust gendered values in society, as demonstrated by the Japanese and US examples. This view challenges previous work that bases the ‘success’ of political apologies in whether or not they meet the speaker’s intended goals. In contrast, Dolan shows that political apologies come with many unintended consequences, including the opportunity for victims to express their opinions, and so on. Furthermore, Dolan highlights the importance of dramaturgical and embodied dynamics to the analysis of political apologies.

Through a careful exposition of the two empirical cases, the book positions political apologies as a critical site for restoring the gendered logics of militarization (which ultimately enables gendered persecution). For example, official apologies for the Abu Ghraib and ‘comfort women’ scandals illustrate how gendered logics are restored in the repetition of militaristic logics that rely on distinctions between violable and inviolable women and therefore provide possibilities for the continuation of (sexual) violence. Although the specific gendered victims who are recognized by a political apology may become visible and intelligible, other kinds of gendered
victims are ignored. Hence, political apologies for actions related to gender can indirectly restore gender injustice. Political apologies are thus a novel research site for feminist scholars concerned with social justice.

Despite these shining theoretical innovations, the author’s choice of case studies exhibits a flaw that requires mention. Both case studies focus on political apologies for actions related to sexual violence, which may lead readers to ignore other forms of gender injustice that are not the focus of these apologies.

In sum, Dolan’s book opens the way for new conversations between scholars focused on gender and scholars focused on political apologies, illustrating the importance of conducting international relations research from a feminist point of view. The book persuasively demonstrates how gendered political apologies restore gendered logics, even while purporting to be apologetic. In its innovative application of theoretical ideas to the two empirical case studies, the book is highly recommended to students, scholars and researchers interested in gender studies, speech act studies of apologies and international studies of gendered violence.

References

