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In recent years there has been an active dialogue on whether historic injustice has relevance in contemporary societies and, if so, whether an official “apology” accomplishes any beneficial purpose. Many scholars working on the topic of reparations have argued that an apology is largely irrelevant as a mere “symbolic act” unless accompanied by some material recognition of rights or transfer of resources that demonstrates a commitment to “repair” the injustice. This book, however, posits that the apology itself has value. Nobles proposes a “membership theory of apologies” that focuses on the ideological and moral value of apology rather than anticipated material gains. Within this view, apologies are not mere “symbolic gestures,” like monuments, but instead “publicly ratify certain reinterpretations of history” and also “morally judge, assign responsibility and introduce expectations about what acknowledgment of that history requires.” In this sense, although apologies focus our attention on the “past,” they also have implications for the “future.”

Nobles examines the role of official apologies as a mode of altering conceptions of national membership for minority groups within pluralistic democracies. She posits that “apologies are desired, offered, and given in order to change the terms and meanings of membership in a political community,” arguing that membership in
Nobles situates her argument within the politics of Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, concentrating her discussion on the relationship between Indigenous peoples and national governments. The book commences with a comparative analytical history of government policies toward Indigenous peoples in the four countries, which share a history derived from British colonial rule of lands formerly possessed by Native peoples. Each of the modern nation-states emerged as a pluralistic democracy that now includes Native peoples as “citizens.” The four countries also share a bitter history of suppression of Native rights to self-government through policies designed to “civilize” and assimilate the Native “wards” and dispossess them from their traditional lands, as well as a current commitment to honor separate group identity. Despite these commonalities, contemporary political identity and Native rights to self-determination look quite different in each country.

Nobles provides a detailed and fascinating discussion of the role of official apologies toward Indigenous peoples in each of these nations, identifying the relevant actors and examining their motivations and actions, as well as the course of events leading to offers—or lack of offers—of apologies. She finds that political actors use apologies when this will advance favored policies, and decline to do so when the opposite seems likely. Although the motivation for apology is consistent, the outcomes differ. According to Nobles, membership in a political community exists along three interrelated dimensions: legal, political, and affective. Apologies most often succeed, she concludes, in the area of “affective membership,” which involves the feelings of belonging and mutual obligation among citizens. She finds that apologies have no effect on the legal status of citizens and only indirect effects on political arrangements. Apology appears to be most influential in demonstrating a government’s stated commitment to self-governance, as in Canada, and least influential when it is disconnected from policymaking, as in New Zealand and the U.S. In nearly all of the cases, however, apologies generate public debate about national histories and the meaning of “reconciliation,” although this can have either a positive effect (Canada) or potentially negative effects (U.S.).

In the concluding chapter, Nobles differentiates “apology” from the concept of “reparations,” though contemporary international norms treat apology as an important part of the reparations process. She sees the two concepts as different in purpose though “mutually reinforcing” in that both “rely on and often lead to critical reexaminations of history.” While acknowledging the “positive value of symbolic acts, such as apologies, to minority group politics,” she concludes that the ultimate effect is contingent upon contemporary human interpretations of historical events. Under this pragmatic view, citizens hold “competing views about group rights, political communities, and moral obligation” which influence their appraisal of the significance of history. The “politics of apology” becomes an intellectual space in which to explore those competing views and ultimately determine whether tangible measures of “repair” might be undertaken.

Nobles’s approach is solid and well grounded, and her political theory of apology makes a useful contribution to the literature, while setting the stage for a normative understanding of “moral repair” and the agency of apology as a reparative act. Rebecca Tsosie, Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law, Arizona State University.