I will be speaking this afternoon on political apology, and my presentation will be based on a chapter that I wrote with a colleague, Jibecke Jonsson, in the book that I co-edited with Mark Gibney, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, and Niklaus Steiner, under the title: *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*, and published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

This book is the product of a UNU project, conducted in the context of the UNU Peace and Governance Program, based, in Tokyo, Japan. In the 30 min or so that I have for this presentation, I will share my thoughts with you on 4 main issues:

1) I will briefly stress the contemporary importance and the current trend of apology in a political context.
2) I will touch upon a number of intriguing paradoxes that are at the very core of the dynamics of apology – paradoxes which at the same time give meaning to political apology, but which also make the very idea of apology extremely challenging.
3) I will show how these paradoxes are all the more intriguing considering what apology, especially apology in the political context, aims to accomplish.
4) Fourth and finally, as a way to conclude this presentation, I will outline what all this means for contemporary political culture, both nationally and internationally, as well for its present and future.

I -- Actuality of apology

So, let me begin with the contemporary importance of political apology and some recent instances of political apology.

As you probably have seen on TV or read in the newspapers, a few months ago, on February 13, to be precise, the newly elected Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, offered a formal apology for the past wrongs inflicted by successive Australian governments upon the country’s aboriginal population. Prime Minister Rudd apologized in the Parliament to all aborigines for laws and policies that “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss”. He singled out the “Stolen generations”, thousands of children forcefully removed from their families.
Also, in Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is set, on June 11th, to apologize on behalf of the Canadian government for a similar program which forced the removal of indigenous children from their families early last century.

These apologies are only some of the latest examples of a trend that has become an increasingly significant phenomenon in our political culture over the past 20 years or so.

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In this regard, the existence and the importance of apology go far back in history. Issuing an apology is a mechanism which, in one form or another, is closely associated with social interactions among human beings. It is an attempt to preserve these interactions. As a way to acknowledge that someone has been wronged, apology has been used over time to help rectify the lines of communication and civility within society. So it is nothing new.

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In the 20th century, the first state apology was offered by Germany when it signed the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I, although it was hardly a heartfelt apology, for a number of reasons. One generation later, in the aftermath of World War II, Germany again issued an apology, but this time the apology was more genuine, recognizing the damage that had been caused during the war. A handful of states came to follow in Germany's footsteps, regarding their own actions in World War II.

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But the need to somehow come to terms with the past has, if anything, heightened in the past twenty years or so. In particular, the problem of impunity has become more and more of an issue. As a result, in recent times, states and the international community have invested much energy and effort into developing mechanisms to better come to terms with abusive and criminal pasts.

In this context, apologies have become a key tool for addressing the past. And, of course, the growing importance of apology in the past 20 years, in combination with the evolution of the political context in which this takes place, cannot be understood independently from a growing recognition of the centrality of human rights, at home and abroad.

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II – Paradoxes of political apology

The newly found importance of political apology is all the more interesting, and intriguing to note, considering the paradoxes which lie at the core of the dynamic of, and the need for apology, and the challenges that these paradoxes lead to.
And I will limit myself here to list 3 of these paradoxes: One has to do with time. Another one has to do with what I call the “unforgivable”. A third one has to do with the relationship between apology and law.

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Let me begin with apology and the paradox of time.

We all experience in our own life that it is almost impossible to overcome the differences between the main stages of time – that is between the past, the present and the future. What is past is, by definition, past forever, and will never come back. It will never be retrieved.

Our consciousness of the present, in its own way, is almost as elusive of the past, since it is always in the danger of being pushed back to the past, or absorbed into the future. And, then, there is the future, marked by uncertainty and the unforeseeable, which, of course, we always try to limit and control.

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It happens that those who want to evade accountability for past wrongs call upon this disconnection existing among the major stages of time to reject apology and accountability.

It is, indeed, their constant refrain that the past is disconnected from the present and the future, that it is best to simply leave the past behind, where it has always been and where it will always be. In contrast, the possibility of apology, and the claim that it is needed, rests upon a unified understanding of time. The possibility and the need for apology presuppose not only that the past and the present are connected, that the past continues in and has a bearing on the present, but also that it shapes the future. And the more this continuum is denied, the more the past ends up as a lingering presence, as haunting the present.

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I should add here that the recognition of the need to come to terms with the past is, in a way, an implicit indication that human rights extend over time, presenting some sort of a-temporality. In this regard, of course, our understanding of what is not right, and therefore of what is viewed as a violation, evolves throughout history. For example, what is conceived as a wrong today may not have been conceived as a wrong yesterday, let alone the day before.

However, by asking for accountability for wrongs committed, at times very far in the past, the mechanism of apology recognizes and gives a certain a-temporality to the idea of what is right in key-areas of human rights.

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As I said earlier, a second paradox of apology has to do with issuing a political apology in regard to what I call the “unforgivable”. And much has been written on the topic, at least in the context of the Holocaust. As we all know, not all wrongs are equal. Some are graver than others.

Now, and not surprisingly, the level of difficulty of apology, of issuing an apology and of accepting one, varies with the degree of gravity of the wrong. And, here, we have to say the following: the greater the wrong, the more difficult the apology becomes. And, interestingly enough, that is where the paradox kicks in. For, in the end, the greater the wrong, the more valuable the apology. But, the more valuable the apology, the more difficult it becomes to issue and to accept.

Hence, we are left with the following predicament. It is when an unforgivable crime has been committed that an apology has the greatest value. However, it is also when an unforgivable crime has been committed that to accept an apology, for the victim, and to issue an apology, for the perpetrator, are the most difficult. And, of course, crimes against humanity represent the ultimate unforgivable.

Crimes against humanity are indeed unlike any other crimes, homicide included. Crimes against humanity attack and deny the right, and even the essence of being human, of targeted people. The unforgivable nature of crimes against humanity is, precisely, that they challenge the humanity of being human. As such, the question is: Is it possible, is it even decent, to issue an apology for crimes against humanity?

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Indeed, in a way, the sheer inhumanity of the crime makes the offering of an apology absurd, if not obscene. After all, an apology presupposes that the person who issues it is not disconnected from the person towards whom the apology is directed.

In addition, an apology seeks to help the perpetrator to reintegrate into the human community, if only at the margins, and to recapture his or her own humanity.

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A third paradox of apology has to do with the relationship between apology and law. On the one hand, apology is less than law, inferior, so to speak, to what law can do. Surely, there are many cases in the context of which the exercise of justice (for instance: sentencing) includes the author of the crime issuing an apology to the victim, or to the family of the victim. But, very often, especially in a political context, an apology is asked for by the victims, and issued by the perpetrator, because law is not an option.

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And law may not be an option, notably for two reasons. First, it may be simply because law cannot bring genuine repair due to the horrific nature of the crime. Here, one could say that the horrific nature of the crime transcends law. But law may not be an option also because relations of force make it impossible to prosecute people.

Let me give you an example to illustrate my point. And, here, let me refer to South Africa’s experience, with the legacy of apartheid in the 1990s. Indeed, the scope of apartheid, which structured the whole old South African society, and the relations of force among South African actors, with the impossibility to disregard or prosecute the entire white community, partly because its role was going to be important to preserve the future of the country, called for a compromise. As a consequence, perpetrators were not prosecuted in South Africa, as long as they were willing to apologize.

So, on the one hand, apology is less than law because the crime transcends law, or because law is unable to implement a system of justice.

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But, on the other hand, apology is much more than law. For, if law is about sanction and reparation, apology goes beyond this. Apology, to a large extent, is about reconciliation. And, in this regard, the impact of law on the possibility of reconciliation is quite limited.

Indeed, a third-party, which is what a justice system is, does not possess the right to forgive on behalf of someone else. It is the victim, and only the victim, who can decide, whether or not he or she can forgive. In other words, as one of my colleagues told me yesterday, as I was preparing this presentation: a justice system can punish, but it cannot forgive. One the other hand, apology cannot punish, but it can open the road to forgiveness.

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This is exemplified by a woman testifying in front of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission about her husband’s torture and assassination by policemen. As Desmond Tutu recalls in one of this books, this woman made clear that no commission or government could forgive on her behalf. In her own words, “only I, eventually could do it. And I am not ready to forgive or for forgiveness”.

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II – Values of apology

Against this background, it seems to me that these paradoxes and the challenges that they represent for apology are all the more intriguing, considering the importance of what apology is trying to accomplish.

And the importance of what apology is trying to accomplish has to do with its envisioned benefits. These benefits take place both at a personal and a social level.

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Regarding the benefits on the personal level, we have to distinguish between the interpersonal aspect and the intra-personal aspect. The inter-personal benefits, from people to people, come down to the following:

When an apology goes forward successfully, that is to say when the perpetrator offers an apology in good faith, and the victim, or the family of the victim, accepts it, the relationship between the wrongdoer and the victim is improved. Indeed, an apology tries to allow some sort of accommodation between the perpetrator and the victim.

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This being said, while successful apologies are about reconciling the wrongdoer and the victim with one another, they are also, and ultimately, more about reconciling with oneself.

As such, apology is a form of intra-personal accommodation. It is about accommodation with oneself. In other words, successful apologies, crucially, are about inner benefits—and inner benefits both for the victim and the perpetrator.

I will add here, that at the intra-personal level, like at the inter-personal level, a successful apology does not have the power to rewind the clock, so to speak, and to make it as if nothing had happened.

Yet, it is a crucial opportunity to heal the wound, at least partially. The gain attached to this healing is not to be underestimated. For the victim, in particular, this can help to provide a certain sense of self-acceptance. It can also include removing the sense of guilt that he or she may feel about what has happened to him or her.

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This brings me to the second type of benefit of a successful apology, the one existing on a social level. And, of course, in the UN context, we are more familiar with this type of benefit.

Here, the social benefits from a successful apology include the following: helping society to free itself from the past; helping the pacification of the social present; helping to secure the future of society. So, let us review quickly each of these social benefits.

First, similar to the fact that apology helps the victim, and the wrongdoer, to not be exclusively defined by the roles and identities imposed upon them by the wrong committed, an apology contributes to freeing the social environment from its own past, and thus, contributes to leaving the past behind. Without this, the social environment

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remains a prisoner of the past, possibly condemned to repeat it without progress, without ever going beyond the original traumatic event.

Second, the positive impact of leaving the past behind has a pacifying effect on the social present. It allows the society not to evolve strictly within the antagonism assigned by the wrong.

Finally, we can see how the benefits regarding the past and the present, translate into future social benefits. Apology can prevent society from becoming what we could call a succession of “cycles of hatred” —a situation in which victims and perpetrators can change roles, with the victims becoming perpetrators, and perpetrators, victims.

We see this happening all the time in traumatized societies, sometimes to the point that the very possibility of living together disintegrates. More often than not, UN peacekeeping operations have to deal with these situations, in Africa, the Balkans, and elsewhere.

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IV – Concluding thoughts

I will conclude by saying a few words on what the state of apology means for our contemporary political culture and its future. It is true that in recent years, apology has mainly been a Western phenomenon.

Compared to the relative willingness of states from the West to apologize for their past crimes, domestically and internationally, non-Western countries tend to appear reluctant, with some exceptions, such as South Africa, to come forward and admit their own wrongs. What does this tell us about the state of the world and its political culture? What does it tell us, also, about the relationship between the West and the non-West — a relationship which has become rife with conflicts in the past years?

The first point that I would like to make here is that Western powers hold no high moral ground in issuing apologies. Indeed, while it is a good thing that Western powers are able to issue apologies, let us not forget that these laudable apologies come about after, and only because of, the massive crimes that they have committed. As such, the inclusive and humanistic values associated with apology cannot be dissociated from the exclusionary and predatory behavior that they try to redress.

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In addition, Western apologies are very selective, tackling only the cases that the West estimates it can afford to address. Beyond this, many remain out of reach.

This applies to the past, and even more so to recent events.

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For instance, while most Western powers involved in it have yet to apologize for the transatlantic slave-trade, they are even further from apologizing for colonization, in particular colonization in Africa and Latin America, let alone from neo-colonialism. Ultimately, this shows that Western apologies amount to a low form of accountability.


Does this exonerate non-Western countries for what I think is their reluctance to issue political apologies for their own crimes? The answer is no. The fact that non-Western countries have often been on the receiving end of Western power in modern history is no excuse for them not to be forthcoming about their own criminal record, within and beyond borders.

Second, although, historically, apology is frequently traced back to Western Christianity and humanism, it is by no means an invention or a monopoly of the West. Non-Western, home-grown apology mechanisms exist, which have specific characteristics, and their importance cannot be mistaken.

Finally, I will add here that non-Western countries have no excuse not to view apology as an option. After all concerns for human rights are also part and parcel of non-Western traditions. Therefore, cultural diversity cannot be used as a justification for non-Western countries to refuse to apologize for their own human rights violations, when it could be good for them to apologize.


In summary, and to conclude, I will say that apology, a small part of justice, not a sufficient one, not even a necessary one, is still an important part of justice. Surely, there can be justice without apology. Yet, if well conducted (that is to say, when it takes place for the right reasons and in the right ways), apology can also be a significant conduit for justice.


So, once again, apology cannot and does not represent the whole picture of justice. Also, we should never overlook the challenges and the possible trappings of the use of apology in a political context. For instance, apology can be used politically as a way to fake and, ultimately, evade responsibility. But, at the same time, the value of apology, which I have insisted upon today, calls for encouraging and promoting the culture of apology as much possible.

I will stop here.

I thank you for your attention.

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