



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

THE APOLOGY GAME

by Charles R. Kesler

APOLOGIZING IS RAMPANT THESE DAYS. HARDLY A WEEK goes by without some public figure (or unlucky private citizen, become a public figure) offering to apologize, usually at the demand of some group or other who has taken offense at something said or done. If extorting apologies were an interstate crime, the FBI's hands would be full fighting the crime wave spawned by the apology mafia.

"Taking offense" is certainly on the offensive in our highly sensitive age. For some people it is a living. What else does Al Sharpton do, exactly, except lie in wait for someone who utters a thoughtless or indiscreet remark that can be ambushed as "racist"? American universities employ squads of such thought police. These sensitivity thugs, on and off campus, seldom put away their cudgels until the offender recants and, of course, apologizes—publicly, tearfully if possible, and sometimes with the kind of shake-down side payment that acknowledges "I can never afford to do this again" and that Don Corleone could only envy.

Do I have to add that the tears needn't be sincere? Sincerity has very little to do with this racket. The apology game is about power, about bending or breaking the offender's will, about exalting the will of the "offended."

It's all done in the name of a sort of justice, to be sure—the kind that would make Karl Marx smile. For the "offended" substitute Marx's category of the "oppressed," and for "offender" substitute "oppressor," and the quasi-Marxist roots of the exercise will be plain. Whatever brings the bourgeois class down and the oppressed proletariat up, counts, for Marx, as just, no matter how vile the tactic may be. For the apology gang, led by the far Left, the analysis is similar though they like to think that America's racist, sexist, class-ist offenders can be humbled without a revolution. It's enough, for now at least, that the bad guys acknowledge who's in charge and admit that resistance is futile.

Oh, and if people who offend *against* the Left are themselves offended *by* the Left, that doesn't count. Don't expect any sympathy if you are revolted by, for example, Oliver Stone's version of American history or your local high school's version of sex education. That kind of grievance shows you deserve scorn, not an apology.

THE BUSINESS OF DEMANDING APOLOGIES RESEMBLES THE disputes over honor that preoccupied aristocratic societies, except that honor is typically rooted in an individual or social sense of inequality. By contrast, today's apologetics arise, nominally at least, from a festering insistence on ever more egalitarianism, rooted in the familiar race, class, and gender groupings that so dominate the contemporary liberal "self." Individual worth plays only a limited role, because in leftist theory group identity decisively shapes the individual. So only *public* apologies matter, and apologies to the supposedly offended group matter most.

Reason, which could be called on to judge the old disputes over honor and justice, is presumed now to be enlisted on the side of the oppressed or the offended. The with-it liberal's moral world is divided between offenders and offended; there is no possibility of a third-party view or an outside position from which reason could judge disinterestedly. It's not for offending against reason but for injuring people's feelings, actually their feelings about their feelings, that the guilty are now called to prostrate themselves.

As a result, the old meaning of "apology" as a speech of vindication is slowly dying out. This sense, derived from the ancient Greek *apologia*, remains recognizable from Plato's *Apology of Socrates*—Plato's version of his teacher's defense speech when he was on trial for his life before an Athenian jury. One thing the *Apology* is not is an apology in the contemporary sense. Socrates never said he was sorry he had offended the Athenian majority's feelings by philosophizing. On the contrary, he claimed their feelings deserved to be chastised! The majority ought to be ashamed, he argued, of miseducating their children, betraying the common good, and prosecuting a benefactor like himself.

Increasingly in today's culture, we're not interested in a person's reasons. What defense could possibly be given of racism or sexism, after all? The only possible trials are therefore show trials.

With the liberal vanguard on and off campus now effectively defining racism as "treating individuals equally regardless of race," you'd think there would be a lot of arguments the public should consider. But we'll never get to hear them if we keep playing the apology game.



Claremont Review of Books, Volume XIV, Number 2, Spring 2014. (Printed in the United States on May 16, 2014.)

Published quarterly by the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 937 West Foothill Blvd., Suite E, Claremont, CA 91711. Telephone: (909) 621-6825. Fax: (909) 626-8724. Postmaster send address changes to Claremont Review of Books Address Change, 937 West Foothill Blvd., Suite E, Claremont, CA 91711. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope; or may be sent via email to: crbeditor@claremont.org.

Send all letters to the editor to the above addresses.

Editor: Charles R. Kesler

Senior Editors:

Christopher Flannery, William Voegeli

Managing Editor: John B. Kienker

Production Editor: Patrick Collins

Assistant Editor: Lindsay Eberhardt

Contributing Editors:

Kathleen Arnn, Joseph Tartakovsky

Art Director: Elliott Banfield

Publisher: Brian T. Kennedy

Publisher (2000–2001): Thomas B. Silver

Price: \$6.95 per copy; \$27.80 for a one-year subscription; \$55.60 for a two-year subscription; \$83.40 for a three-year subscription. Add \$17 for all foreign subscriptions, including those originating in Canada and Latin America. To subscribe, call (909) 621-6825, or contact subscriptions@claremont.org.

Visit us online at www.claremont.org/crb. Opinions expressed in signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of the editors, the Claremont Institute, or its board of directors. Nothing in this journal is an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill or influence the election of any candidate. All contents Copyright © 2014 the Claremont Institute, except where otherwise noted.