
Stephanie Wolfe’s book explores how states come to term with their involvement in past atrocities and how they respond to demands for reparations. It discusses three particular cases, all dealing with atrocities committed during the Second World War: Germany following the Holocaust, the United States with regard to the internment of Japanese residents, and the question of Japan’s responsibility vis-à-vis “comfort women.” These case studies reveal attitudes and policies that evolve, generally, from denial to acknowledgment, statement of regret, apologies, and the provision of particular remedies to the survivors, next of skins, or affected communities more generally.

Through these case studies, Wolfe retracts the growing social expectation “that governments should admit to prior unjust or discriminatory actions and engage in negotiations with their victims” (at 51). Accordingly, this trend was initiated by the 1952 Luxembourg Agreement between Germany and Israel, and it culminated in 2005, when the UN General Assembly adopted the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law. Yet, as the author shows through the case study of Japan, there remains significant resistance to the implementation of this norm.

In addition, the author highlights some of the factors that explain why some redress and reparation movements succeed more than others, on the basis of her three case studies. She compares in particular Germany’s rapid efforts to provide some form of redress to Jewish holocaust survivors to its reluctance to acknowledge and redress the genocide of the Roma for several decades. Such differences, Wolfe argues, have to do with a state’s political openness to the victimized group and the victimized group’s access to elite allies (e.g. at 12).

The book contains fascinating discussions of states’ voluntary decisions to come to term with their past, sometimes through costly policies of restitution and indemnification. The three case studies reflect specific national (or regional) political dynamics, but it also shows how each national practice seems to give impetus for social demands in other countries, with expectations for reparation spreading from Europe to America and finally to Asia. One may however wonder how far this politics of reparation and apologies could, or should extend. On the one hand, Germany’s rapid negotiations with Israel were instrumental to the rapprochement of the two nations. On the other hand, increasing claims against Japan, in the context of Japan’s reluctance to recognize structural responsibilities for the “comfort women system,” has fuelled geopolitical tensions in Northeast Asia. It may be that the politics of reparation and apologies unfold differently with regard to different wrongs, associated with different degrees of shame, and in different cultures: what works best in Europe does not necessarily apply in Asia.

Despite its original contribution to the literature, this book suffers from certain inconsistencies in its theoretical framework. In particular, one may wonder whether the theory of “norm entrepreneurs,” which constitutes one of the theoretical threats of the book, is really relevant here. The redress and reparation movements identified in the case studies do not seek the adoption of a general norm on reparation for past atrocities, but only that of particular policies in a specific national context. A more solid structure to avoid certain repetitions, and a professional copy-editing would also have significantly improved the reader’s experience. Nevertheless, this book should be recommended to anyone interested in the field.