



## SYMPOSIUM: USING WORLD-HISTORY TO INFORM WORK FOR REPARATIONS

### Choices in Implementing Reparations<sup>1</sup>

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It seems increasingly likely that reparations, in some form, will actually be paid in compensation for the racialized oppression of people of African descent. The insistence of the demand and the growing recognition of its validity are each growing in the year 2020. In particular, it is now easier to understand that the social need for reparations is more than a set of national issues – it is a need throughout the world-system. Yet the choices in how to allocate reparations are not easy. This brief essay, updated from its original 2009 form, addresses some of the choices.

Occasionally, victors in wars have forced losers to pay reparations for damages or evils done. After World War I, the Allies, especially Britain and France, required the German government to make payments, arguing that Germany was to blame for the conflict's destruction. British and French colonial authorities in Africa burned rebellious villages and then required the inhabitants to pay back taxes and the cost of the expeditions that subdued them. Following World War II and

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the Holocaust in Europe, East and West German governments agreed to compensate the state of Israel for Jewish loss of life.

Sometimes the victors have been forced to pay. Decades after it won independence, Haiti paid France twenty-five million gold francs – a huge sum in the mid-nineteenth century – to compensate French planters for their losses. Parallel notions of reparations at an individual level accompanied the end of slavery. Former slave owners demanded recompense for their property loss and they received it from the British government in 1838 and in other cases. Freed slaves demanded payback for their loss of freedom and the theft of their labor. In the American South, victorious Union armies distributed land to thousands of Black families, but in 1866, the federal government revoked these land titles and expelled the ex-slaves: their call for “forty acres and a mule” echoed for years thereafter. Frantz Fanon, in 1961, laid out a brilliant, complex restatement, demanding reparations for the victims of slavery and colonialism – and for their surviving offspring (Fanon [1961] 1968:95–106). In recent decades, with the renunciation of the heritage of slavery and racism, Black groups on all continents have called for reparations for the descendants of those enslaved and compensation for Black societies that have suffered racial discrimination (Henry 2007; Salzberger and Turck 2004).

While the hope for reparations is simple, implementing a workable plan is highly complex. Since it is impossible to grant payments to victims long dead, should support go to their descendants? Are the reparations due to descendants of slaves only in the diaspora or in Africa as well? To the degree that Africa as a whole was weakened by slavery, should general payments be made to the continent? Who should make the payments? Should compensation be demanded only from the descendants of slave owners? Should payments be made by all white people? Should everyone alive today make payment, given we have all benefited in some measure from the past exploitation of slaves? These and many more questions make clear why it has been difficult to proceed practically with the idea of reparations.

Despite its complexities, the notion opens the door to a more general concept: compensation for the past as a way of ensuring a better future. There is no way to undo previous inequities. Neither is there a way to compensate satisfactorily for past oppression, though some recompense may be better than none. Yet it seems worthwhile to think of more ways to respond in our own time to past discrimination, since any attempt to “forgive and forget” serves in practice to continue old divisions.

*Creating memory* is one device that can help make up for past oppression. To establish and strengthen memory of past events and processes, one may rely on songs, images, and stories. The formation of memory is as contentious as any area of history: governments rely on monuments and official textbooks to create historical memory. But the monuments and textbooks are usually made by and devoted to the victors: the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris was built to commemorate Napoleon's military victories. Nevertheless, some countries have designated holidays to celebrate

the emancipation of slaves and as a reminder of past oppression, and memorials to slaves are being constructed and are opening for view all around the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup>

A much more specific compensating device is *affirmative action*. With this policy, a society attempts to adjust the appointment of individuals for employment, education, and other benefits in an attempt to ensure that previously disadvantaged groups do not suffer exclusion. Affirmative action exists today in quite different forms in such countries as India, Canada, the United States, South Africa, and Malaysia. Here too the complications are considerable. Deciding which groups need or no longer need extra help is a difficult, contentious issue for any society and more so for humanity as a whole.

Meanwhile, the old inequities continue. A policy of “benign neglect” might appear to some as a neutral approach that neither adds to past oppression nor interferes with the social order, but in fact it necessarily continues to facilitate inequality.<sup>3</sup> Those people today who live in part on wealth created from the proceeds of past oppression need bear no individual guilt for their ancestors’ actions. They do, however, bear particular responsibility for ensuring that new inequities are not propagated. The narrow considerations of profit, in the hands of unrepresentative bodies of decision makers, continue to cause discrimination in educational access, inequitable wages and prices in international trade, and, sadly, inequitable health services to the groups hardest hit by the HIV epidemic.

While the ideal of social equality requires action from all, each community must ultimately heal itself. This is another contentious issue. In public debates about inequality, one often hears calls for Black communities in Africa and the Diaspora to take more responsibility for self-improvement. One often hears the proverb, “Physician, heal thyself.” The danger in such calls is they tend assume that Black people have no record of successful self-improvement. The history of the African diaspora shows, in marked contrast, how Black communities have healed and rebuilt time and again. The list of such campaigns is long: recreating African culture in the diaspora under slavery, gaining freedom from slavery as individuals and in groups, gaining land and building independent communities with emancipation, pursuing education relentlessly despite the consistent lack of governmental support, developing neighborhoods and community organizations for urban and industrial life, and creating cadres of highly skilled lawyers, bankers, and other professionals.

Up to the twentieth century, the economic productivity of slaves generated growth in the Americas and helped sustain the economies of Africa. Nevertheless, the economic construction of

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<sup>2</sup>Slave-trade museums include those at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (Liverpool), Cape Coast Castle (Cape Coast, Ghana), the Mariners' Museum (Newport News, Virginia), and an exhibit based on the slave ship *Henrietta Marie* at the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society (Key West, Florida). In addition, there are projects for slave-trade museums at Goree, Senegal, and at Cartagena, Colombia. An exhibit in Nantes, “*Les Anneaux de Mémoire*,” was in place from 1992 to 1994; a website survives it.

<sup>3</sup>In the United States, sociologist (and later U.S. Senator) Daniel Patrick Moynihan took up the term “benign neglect” to propose that the best policy a government could follow to improve the condition of poor and Black families was to do very little at all.

Africa and of diaspora communities in the twentieth century, though substantial, failed to make up the ground lost to other communities. One cannot be sure, but it may be that complaints about economic inadequacies of Black people today are parallel to the complaints about cultural inadequacies of Black people a century ago. At the height of racially constructed colonialism, rulers of empire stigmatized the culture of Black people as uncivilized. Yet today's extraordinary achievements of Africans of the continent and the diaspora, in transforming both popular culture and elite culture, shows the error of that judgment. Meanwhile, in economic and social affairs, the advances of Black communities have been steadily undermined by the persistence of racialized structures and attitudes. Especially if reparations can provide some compensation, the twenty-first century might bring transformations as big as those of the twentieth.

Regardless of these points about the past, there surely exists a widely shared responsibility to ensure that inequities are not propagated purposefully or unthinkingly into the future. Arguably, the world as a whole does owe something to Black people of Africa and the Diaspora – partly out of concern for equitable distribution of the benefits of human society and partly as recognition of the unfair price paid by Black people in constructing the modern world. Today's response to the inequalities of race and slavery provides one great test for humanity. How well we perform on this test is fundamentally relevant to the more general problem of protecting our species and the environment in which we live.

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